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The Great War Seen Through the Comparative Lens

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Why Comparative History? A Unity of Difference

So much has been published on the First World War that it might be more worthwhile to ask, why the Great War again? A new call for a reevaluation the war seems to be most trifling, and probably met with an occasional yawn: surely someone has developed an adequate interpretation by now. However, recent efforts by numerous historians in Europe, such as Jay M. Winter, Annette Becker, and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, have shown that this assertion would be quite wrong. Since the end of the war in 1918, there have been numerous historical paradigms, each focusing on different "configurations" that were believed to be important in remembering the war. The aim here is to argue that to fully understand the First World War we must examine the collective response of the national communities that fought it. Naturally, as the war dragged on, and as the cost in life and material rose, the representations of the national communities changed to adapt to the situation of the times. It can even be said that this is the beginning of the change of the nationalist narrative from the cultural to the political: after all, words such as "threat", "security", and "sacred" all belong to the conservative political camp. The origins of totalitarianism, whether fascist, Nazi, or communist, can be directly traced back to the Great War and the

development of the integrated national community. There is something to be said of Martin Heidegger's concern about the totalizing and enframing processes that occur in the twentieth century, although he would find different sources for this. Whatever the origin, the fact is that since the beginning of the Modern Age, the issues of identity, both for the individual, and for his connection to society, has been of primary concern. It is therefore essential to examine the cultural modes of representation used by the peoples of the past which they used to aid in making sense of their own world, and not to merely trace the notions of "progression", whether if it is a supposed progression of technology, political systems, economics, or liberty. Henri Bergson was correct that time is duration. However, in order to come to express the actions, feelings, ideas, and emotions of our predecessors, we must examine it one expression at a time, and hopefully, just hopefully, a larger picture will become clear.

In a sense, this paper is an exercise in cultural history, in which it examines what Jay Winter calls "representations." To Winter this is merely a part of the shifting paradigm in First World War studies, corresponding to the third historiographical configuration: cultural history.[1] To Winter, "cultural history is a history of the intimate…It is a history of signifying practices; it studies how men and women make sense of the world in which they live."[2] These signifiers can be found in the many ways that collective national communities represented their world through art, literature, media, music, toys, games, monuments, etc. What makes the First World War so important in the terms of the national community is how the populations that made up these communities responded to the war and the sacrifices made during it: "Social identities are legitimized through commemoration. Here is one of the major characteristics of contemporary cultural life: identity is value."[3] However, the historian must be cautious so as not to overstep these cultural signifiers, for the war itself may be given too much precedence and itself reified. In his own

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[1] Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 25-31.
[2] Ibid., 29.
[3] Ibid., 27-28.

argument, Winter maintains that the shift to cultural history was made in response to the fall of the Marxist paradigm, where histories today do not make sense because of their objectivity, "but precisely [because of] their subjectivity, and the question of how representative are they is now deemed meaningless."[4] The search is not for all-encompassing histories that provide universal explanations; rather it is for a history of everyday life, what the Germans call the *Alltagsgeschichte*. The study of the representations that national communities used to define their world during specific points in history is called "*mentalités*." It is what Winter has called "the mental furniture of populations" in the past: "*Mentalité* in this discourse means visceral commitments rather than ideologies, unspoken assumptions rather than political or social programs."[5] With the decline of historical materialism, the turn is made towards the ideas and representations that make up the human condition. For all intents and purposes, this is the era of a new historical idealism.

This shift to cultural history has been closely aligned with the First World War, and with warfare in general. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau coined the term "war culture" (*culture de guerre*) alluding to the conceptual mental framework men and women draw on to make sense of their world at war. In a series of studies on childhood, war atrocities, and mourning practices, Audoin-Rouzeau showed the way this war culture seeped into every area of domestic life.[6] He goes so far to argue that war strips man down to his barest essentials, allowing the historian to see visibly his ideas and beliefs:

> The violence specific to warfare is a prism that refracts many otherwise invisible aspects of the world. Entire societies can be seen anew, but one must be willing to *look* closely. In paroxysms of

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[4] Ibid., 27.

[5] Jay Winter, Foreword, in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men At War, 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War* (Washington D.C.: Berg, 1995), ix.

[6] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men At War, 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War* (Washington D.C.: Berg, 1995),164.

> violence everything is stripped naked - starting with men, their bodies, their fantasies and desires, their fears, passions, beliefs hatreds…the motivations that allow them to kill their fellow men and endure the terror of confrontation - these pertain to something essential - something we shall call their 'representations'.[7]

Audoin-Rouzeau falls in line with the work of British military historian John Keegan, in challenging the Clausewitzian notion that "war is politics by other means", both stating a deep truth: war is first and foremost a cultural act.[8] However, the inseparable character of the nation and the people brings merit to this argument that war is the creation and unification of culture by other means against external "enemies." After all, had Clausewitz not also said "The passions which break forth in war must already have a latent existence in the peoples"?[9]

The Discourses of the National Community

In an essay entitled, "Of Men and Myths: The Use and Abuse of History and the Great War," Holger H. Herwig examines five case studies in which myths about historical events were created, and elaborated upon.[10] Herwig uses the term myth, not "in Joseph Campbell's sense, whereby myths are designed to teach us how to search for meaning, to seek the essence of being alive, and to feel the spiritual potentialities of life," but in the "classic Greek sense, in which the myth, for all its inconsistencies and absurdities, when accepted as truth, represents the learning and wisdom of a

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[7] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 16-17.
[8] Ibid., 18. Cf. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1976).
[9] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* Vol. 1, trans. Colonel J.J. Graham (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Company, 1908), 26.
[10] Holger H. Herwig, "Of Men and Myths: The Use and Abuse of History and the Great War," *The Great War and the Twentieth Century*, eds. Jay Winter, Geoffrey Parker, and Mary R. Habeck (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 299-330.

society."[11] Myths are an essential part of modern political culture. They constitute that web of shared meaning by which the members of a complex society form and sustain their association, providing the unity as something natural, self-evident.[12] The narration of these myths becomes important, for the names that are given to the objects in the narration, as well as those who are either telling the story or those who the story is being told to, creates identities, and the narrative myth becomes a part of identity. Names therefore are important in the telling of a story, in that, as Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out: "Names - define a world, a world of names - the cultural world. This world is finite because in it the number of available names is finite."[13] These stories of narration fill the gaps between these names, and in the case of a myth, according to Herwig's usage, they are placed in the particular gaps of a story that are unique to the experience of a society.

To expand on Herwig's example, the historian at times provides a helping hand in creating and developing narratives that can be taken as either/or truth and identity creation. This is particularly so when the historian belongs to a specific community that has for a long time accepted a myth as an integral part of national identity. Indeed, after Hayden White and the linguistic turn, and after Alain Corbin and Roger Chartier and the history of representations, it is impossible to even take eye-witness accounts at their face value without raising questions as to how they were formulated, constructed, and prefigured by their author's views. Ernest Gellner states that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist."[14] However, there must be a distinction made: Gellner supposes that all nationalism masquerades as a falsity, and does not consider its creation. Benedict Anderson places his emphasis on the "imagining" of the national community, in which it is

[11] Ibid., 299-300. Cf. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1988).
[12] Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.
[13] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Explained* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 45.
[14] Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), 169.

imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[15] More importantly in terms of the narration, as Anderson points out, is that "communities are to be distinguished…by the style in which they are imagined."[16] This places the emphasis of study on the narrative itself, as it is the acceptance of the narrative as truth that becomes part of the creation of identity.

It is again Jay Winter who points out two kinds of narrative discourses that were in use in Europe during, and before the First World War. The historical tradition, influenced by Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, which focused primarily on the British war poets, argued that the war had swept away a set of literary conventions and gave us a new and deeply ironic voice. This was a point in human history where mankind attacked the abstract notions that had been followed blindly: it was the break of tradition, and the creation of the Modern. As Fussell writes: "the Great War was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful 'history' involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future…the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable."[17] The argument that the Great War represented a break in history, and discontinuity with the past and with the Modern has been well commented on. Kenneth Silver's *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-garde and the First World War* writes that after 1914, "self-control, self-abnegation, and self-denial of so many kinds became a national *modus vivendi*" and that this mood dominated the visual arts as it did the rest of social life. It was only after the war had ended that artists could again begin to "invent the world" without

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[15] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.
[16] Ibid., 6.
[17] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1976), 21.

the shackles of war-related constraints.[18] Thus, the war was for Silver, a step backwards: modernity was regressive not progressive. Modris Eksteins presents us with another view of Modernism in his *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*. Speaking from a distinctly German perspective (although Eksteins deals with Britain and France, the main drive of the argument is clear), the author echoes the birth of Modernity as a creation born of chaos, quoting Elias Canetti: "the banging of windows, and the crashing of glass are the robust sounds of fresh life, the cries of something new-born."[19] Eksteins' argument follows that the questioning of traditional values, indeed the Nietzschean "transvaluation of values" of violence, power, aggression, that denote Nazi culture can be traced back to the war enthusiasm felt by Germans in August 1914. This is the reason why Eksteins sees profound links between facets of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," the theatricality of the Great War, and the primitive choreography of Nazi "culture."

In response, Jay Winter argues in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*—based on the "collective remembrance" of the Great War—Modernity was not solely the only form used to make sense of the time. For Winter, "Modernism was a cultural phenomenon," for sure, but at the same time "a set of what may be called 'traditional values'—classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas widely disseminated in both elite and popular culture before and during the war," remained.[20] For Winter, the war did not represent a clear break from the Modern and the traditional, as both "forms of imagining the war were evident long before the armistice. Furthermore, the distinction was at times more rhetorical than real. Modernists didn't obliterate traditions; they stretched, explored, and reconfigured them in ways that alarmed conventional artists, writers, and the public at large."[21] Winter notes quite correctly that Modernism follows its own teleology,

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[18] Kenneth Silver, *Esprit des Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-garde and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 388-389.
[19] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1989), 55.
[20] J.M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2-3.
[21] Ibid., 3.

that is always dependent on the past:

> 'Modernism' - more of a temperament than a set of fixed beliefs - left behind as neatly and surgically as some scholars suggest a host of images and conventions derived from eighteenth and nineteenth-century religious, romantic, or classical traditions…it is the very teleology of this position - the search for precursors or exponents of what later critics have admired or rejected - which makes the 'modernist' hypothesis about the cultural history of the early twentieth century just as misleading as other tendentious interpretations of recent or not so recent history.[22]

It is interesting here to compare Winter's work with Anderson's conception of the temporal trappings of nationalism. For Anderson, the narrative of nationalism follows a conception of simultaneity, in which time, is "an idea of homogeneous, empty-time, in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar."[23] The age of nationalism is represented by the connection of past and future, which is what gives a national community its distinct identity, and culture. This is not merely a "Modern" mode of interpretation and criticism, but one that was in play ever since historical consciousness was awaken in Europe at least by the fifteenth-century; after all the dialectic of ancients and moderns in history dated as far back as Machiavelli.[24]

The Great War was a culmination of the traditional modes of cultural representations coupled with the discourses of the Modern being played out on the battlefield. Although there had been wars between nation-states in Europe before, the First World War marked the first conflict that encompassed the whole of every national community involved. Even the neutral nations, as far

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[22] Ibid., 4-5.
[23] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24.
[24] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, ed. David Wootton, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 1994), 159.

away as the United States, would not be left untouched. There is no discontinuity in the twentieth century between the traditional and the Modern, surely the romantic images of war were lost by 1918, especially once the war poets and novelists got their hands on them, but the men and women of the generation of 1914, the masses that made up the armies and workers, went to war that year based on the ideas and representations that composed their national identities - the war for all belligerent nations was justified by defense of the common, collective identity. However the Great War was such a traumatic event, it left many aloft and devoid of meaning. The huge excesses in killing and destruction, even after the war, made people feel at the time that the war did offer a break with the past. After all, how could Europe go back to the way things were after such a catastrophe? And although has Jay Winter as pointed out, "Auschwitz was not Verdun", it still must be remembered that the "lost generation" of 1914 were executioners as well as victims.[25]

The Nation at War: Singularity and Universality

Most historians would maintain that the nationalist narrative began in France. The Great Revolution had created both internal and external concerns, which made it necessary for the numerous revolutionary governments to promote the idea of not only the nation, but also of the "Republic" in order to maintain what had been gained. There were of course movements against this: one can only think of the slaughter of the Vendée, and the alienation of the clergy. However, for the most part, the nationalist zeal that overtook France and Europe was quite successful. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen declared: "The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body, no individual can exercise authority that does not expressly emanate from it" (article 3). The nation was to be the collective representation of "the general will" that Rousseau had argued should be the basis of political government. As for Rousseau: "What causes human misery is the contradiction…between nature and social institutions, between man and citizen…Give him over

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[25] J.M. Winter, "Catastrophe and Culture: Recent Trends in the Historiography of the First World War," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Sept. 1992): 532.

entirely to the state or leave him entirely to himself, but if you divide his heart you destroy him."[26] In this sense, as a Republic, France had chosen to be a nation of citizens, one of civilization, not of barbarism.

The problems that this causes, argues Tzvetan Todorov is that "Legitimation via the nation instead of God has been viewed as inseparable from preference for one's own country at the expense of universal principles, membership in a culture - which is undeniable and unavoidable - has come to justify the requirement that cultural and political entities should coincide."[27] However, Todorov has pointed out: "the 'internal' nation proceeds from the idea of equality, while the 'external' nation implies on the contrary a preferential choice in favor of one's own country over all the others, thus implying inequality."[28] This is the narrative of national community that had formed in the "external" idea of France, the geographical construction, which was legitimized by the "internal," cultural France. Once this distinction between the French national community from its neighbors, once the cultural and political had been overlapped, the idea that "The French have become the foremost people of the universe", proclaiming one deputy in the National Assembly, was created. This notion of liberating the beleaguered peoples of Europe from the tyranny of monarchical government and despotism grew into the idea of "*mission civilatrice*." This was based on the moral notion that once free, and once they had obtained the rights of man and citizen, it was now the duty of the French people to be the beacon of reason to the rest of the world, still under the grip of tyrannous kings. Durand-Maillane wrote in 1791 that the new constitution "has to make the people of France happy, and by imitation, all people."[29] However, as Eugen Weber points out, it was the rural areas of France, and those regions and populations that were hardly "French" in the sense of Parisian "civilization," that were made the

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[26] quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 180.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 253.
[29] Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 187.

object of this “civilizing mission.” Weber makes the point that “the people of whole regions [of France] felt little identity with the state or with people of other regions” even by 1870.[30] It seems that France during and after the Revolution, made a greater effort attempting to acclimate the French people to the “civilizing process” than external peoples. A student in Paris, Georges Valérie, wrote in 1901 that “Conquest is a necessary stage on the road to nationalism…[A nation should] bring in larger unity groups without a clear cultural identity, to draw in, to enrich, to enlighten the uninstructed tribal mind, this is the civilizing mission we cannot renounce.”[31] It was necessary to assimilate rural populations for the simple fact that they were generally conceived to have no culture of their own; they were still reliant on antiquated ways. These communities could therefore only benefit from their integration into the larger French community. Weber suggests it may be easier to see the integration of peoples into national communities in the light of colonialism. Throughout Western Europe this process was hugely successful, mostly because of the growth of nationalist education, mainly through the teaching of history.

Schools taught potent lessons of morality focused on duty, effort, and seriousness of purpose. This had been the goal of François Guizot as early as 1833, when he defined the instruction that schools were intended to provide: reading, writing, and arithmetic to furnish essential skills, the teaching of French and of the metric system to implant or increase the sense of unity under French nationhood, moral and religious instruction to serve spiritual and social needs.[32] The history of France before the Great War was presented in a continuous chain, extending back to Roman times, one text declaring “Here we are, more than two thousand years ago, in the period when France was still called Gaul.”[33] France here appears less a nation and more an essence projected backwards, invoking the idea of *la France éternelle*.

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[30] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*: *The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 486.
[31] Quoted from Ibid, 486.
[32] Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 331.
[33] Quoted from Ann-Louise Shapiro, “Fixing History: Narratives of World War I in France,” *History and Theory*, Vol.36, No. 4, (Dec., 1997): 114.

French soldiers and statesmen became heroes; French culture and style was made primary, the very expression of high art; class conflict was completely excluded. In all this, France became a nation, indeed a spirit that was eternal and undying. Increasingly, French nationalism re-emphasized the differences between France's "*mission civilatrice*" and Germany's *Kultur* and *Weltpolitik*; two distinct teleological narratives, each giving divine meaning to the community on opposite sides of the Rhine. These kinds of narratives are what Etienne Balibar call "the two symmetrical figures of the illusion of national identity": where history articulates both a national personality and a national mission.[34] The comparison with Germany fundamentally shaped the French national community before the war, and these assumptions had a profound effect on how it responded in the early days as the Germans invaded France herself.

Germany for its part saw not only an external difference with France, but also to the east of her borders, to the lands of Russia. The Prussian victory in 1870 had led most in the German military and government to dismiss the French threat to the West, fearing only the possibility of a two-front war. Russia's huge army and vastness of territory provided the Germans with an immediate concern and also the opportunity to realize its own historical mission. For many Germans, Russia provided the opportunities of dynastic expansion, but also an exoteric calling of spirituality. *Sturm und Drang* movement members Klinger and Lenz discerned in Russia and its people a spiritual breadth, and even Rilke considered Russia his spiritual homeland. Artists, musicians, and philosophers from Wagner to Nietzsche, from Spengler to Thomas Mann reveled in the exotic imagination of the East.[35] However, this feeling also was coupled with the imperialistic designs of many Germans, concluding that the Eastern peoples provided a *tabula rosa*, where the people were still young, and nobly savage, for which provided the opportunity for German *Kultur* to cultivate.

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[34] Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," *Becoming National*, eds. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 132.
[35] Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

It became a fixation of the German imagination to "Drive to the East" (the *Drang nach Osten*) which had developed by at least the 1860s. This became a commonly held assumption of Germany's ultimate destiny in the ascension of *Weltpolitik*.

If history provided access to the new temporal conceptions of nationalism, then geography and its teaching offered the same for the spatial. With the learning of sciences and of cosmography, the intake of general terms of geographical landscapes that are codified in a descriptive language, presenting pupils with a universal reference system, complete with uniform rules.[36] Geography provides names and legitimizes space, it was necessary for the nation to move towards the resacralization of one part of space – the national territory in the teaching of geography. Germany told its students of the "special relationship to the landscape" and incarnated a collective myth to conquer Russian lands.[37] In France, the concept of the "Hexagon" was created. For school students the geometric figure of the hexagon allowed them to conceptualize the image of France as they learned the geography of their country. They were also taught the *départements* as well; learning to recite the departments' names as well as their prefectures and sub-prefectures. Of course, regional boundaries did not always follow natural boundaries created by climate, weather, rivers, and mountains. The Republic made great efforts in trying to integrate these natural geographic realities with the abstract boundaries of administrative units. School geography was successful in implanting national identity and making this national identity the property of every Frenchmen.[38]

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought all these totalizing principles to the forefront of daily life. Years of nationalist sentiment and collective identity now spread over in all spheres of cultural life. Furthermore, this was not merely a development left to one nation, but was a phenomenon experienced by every nation that entered the war, including America, usually presented by historians as wanting to avoid the war. Ideological battles between

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[36] Antoine Prost, "The Republican Primary School and French National Identity," *Republican Identities in War and Peace: Representations of France in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, NY: Berg, 2002), 74.
[37] Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 170.
[38] Ibid., 77.

the academia of the belligerents were fought just as viciously as the war on the battlefield. In October 1914, virtually the entire German academic profession - over 4,000 names, including almost every professor at almost every German university - endorsed a declaration entitled "*An der Kulturwelt*" (To the World of Culture). Numbered among them were closet socialists, future pacifists, and skeptics, including Max Weber and Alfred Einstein.[39] Their list of denials concluded with two assertions: first, that the future of European culture rested on the victory of German so-called "militarism"; and secondly, that in defining this militarism there was no distinction to be made between Prussia and the rest of Germany, or between the German army and the German nation: "both are one."[40] "Our belief," the declaration continues "is that the salvation of all European culture depends on the victory for which German 'militarism' is fighting, the discipline, the loyalty, the spirit of sacrifice of the united free German people."[41] German *Kultur*, which embraced concepts that began with the community but were defined nationally, the idea of *Geist*, was taken in contrast to "civilization." Rudolf Eucken, the German philosopher and Nobel Prize winner published on "the world historical significance of the German spirit," asserting that Germany could not be defeated while it remained truly united and stood fast in its inner strength.[42] Hew Strachan argues that the war of 1914 had led the Germans away from previous advances in culture, and placed them on a new path:

> The clash between civilization and *Kultur* took German thought back to its late-eighteenth-century roots. In condemning civilization, the philosophers of 1914 were reflecting the rationality of the Enlightenment and the consequences of the French Revolution. They argued that, following what was

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[39] Hew Strachan, *The First World War: Vol, I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1122.
[40] Ibid., 1122, Cf. Bernhard Vom Brocke, *Wissenschaft und Militarismus* (Darmstadt WBG, 1985), 649-664.
[41] Ibid., 1129.
[42]Hermann Lübbe, *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland: Studien Zu Ihrer Geschichte* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974), 176-84.

> essentially an alien, French track, philosophy had elevated the rule of law and the rights of the individual, and so had promoted selfishness and materialism. At one level, therefore the summons of 1914 was a call to rediscover the ideas of the *Aufklärung* and to refurbish the memory of 1813.[43]

It was yet another clash between the discourses of the traditional and the Modern.

This declaration by the German academic profession only legitimated the claims of their French counterparts. The French responded with their declaration on November 3. It contained the names of 100 members of the French literary and artistic world, including Gerorges Clemenceau, Barrès, Debussy, Gide, Matisse, and Monet. Declaring that "the intellectual and moral richness of humanity is created by the natural variety and independence of all nations' gifts," it was clear that it was a statement of the kind of universalizing principle that the Republic had always claimed as the self-anointed beacon of civilization.[44] On December 12, Bergson told the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* that German philosophy was "a translation into intellectual terms of her brutality, her appetites, and her vices." Germany's actions were merely "barbarism reinforced by civilization."[45] The image of the barbarous German enemy was not merely used to legitimize the war cause. It also offered an opportunity to be directed towards particular ends, such as war loans or military recruitment, and to solicit the support of foreign neutrals.[46]

As the ideological battles were being fought with words and documents, the realities of war were being experienced by ordinary soldiers and civilians in the front-lines and in the occupied territories. Few had to be read rhetoric about the brutality of war in 1914. However, many used the nationalist discourse to make sense of what was happening around them. As the Germans

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[43] Strachan, *The First World War*, 1129-30.
[44] Ibid., 1121.
[45] Henri Bergson, *Meaning of War: Life and Matter in Conflict* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1915), 33.
[46] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 292.

approached the city of Lille, Madame Delahaye-Théry, witnessed the retreat of the French army, and wrote that "The Germans are coming. It's the end. The end for us."[47] It must be remembered that although most of the stories of German barbarization were exaggerated, horrible events did take place. As Modris Eksteins put it:

> If babies were not systematically snatched from mothers' arms and smashed against brick walls, if nuns were not deliberately sought out for sodomy, rape, and slaughter, if old people were not made to crawl on all fours before being riddled with bullets, considerable numbers of hostages were shot, including women and children and octogenarians.[48]

It must also be remembered that the "atrocities" committed by the Germans, while both real and definite, the representations used by the French and Allies to designate the German enemy were also a manner, and John Horne and Allan Kramer point out: "To find a language for the realities of the German invasion."[49] However, taken further, it could also, and should be said that it was the attempt at elucidation of the realities of warfare in the age of national communities and total war. The Germans were certainly not alone in perpetrating brutal acts in 1914, and the equivocal use of imagery, such as myths of the *franc-tireur* and the French with the severed hands, reduced a complex and emotionally charged situation to an emblematic person or action.[50] Naturally, women and children were for the French the most readily accessible link to the imagery of a peaceful France forced into war by the German aggressor. The image of raped women and severed hands became the signifier to the cause of the national community. The myths provided accessible justifications for the continuation of the war, and outlined a purpose for the unity now obtained by the state. In

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[47] Helen McPhail, *The Long Silence: Civilian Life Under the German Occupation of Northern France, 1914-1918* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 19.
[48] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring,* 158.
[49] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914,* 225.
[50] Ibid., 204.

this way, the national community, the state, and the war were forged into one mentality, one experience, and one representation that made the conflict seem as a fight to death, initiating a fatalism and grim determination that only helped to totalize the war further.

Rudolf Binding, a German soldier serving on the Western Front during 1918, wrote in his diary on August 12, expressing that what he was experiencing during the war was something that was a part of “uncontrollable movements and forces”:

> In the end, even if an individual nation does not get its deserts, humanity will. This generation has no future, and deserves none. Anyone who belongs to it lives no more. It is almost a consolation to realize this. All that an individual can do to get out of the wrack is to find some way of hewing out blocks of stone wherewith to found a new structure which to this generation will be nothing, and leave it as a legacy to others.[51]

Binding’s prophetic words would indeed become realized: the legacy of the First World War would surely be remembered in stone, but the largest exposition of the legacy of the “lost generation” would be expressed through history itself. The mistakes made prior to and during 1914 would be repeated again and again to this very day. The language of the national community, although apparently held to be singular to the specific community, is in reality a universal logic aimed at totalizing. This is how we must look at the First World War when attempting to understand how and why this war, and the rest of the twentieth century became the horrible blood-bath that it was.

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[51] Rudolf Georg Binding, *A Fatalist at War*, trans. Ian F. D. Morrow (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1929), 243.