What’s at stake: September 28, 2014, is the centenary anniversary of World War One (1914-1918). Let us not allow that brutal, catastrophic war to be white-washed and glorified. Let us not allow Sgt. York to be again elevated to Hero. Already the British are refurbishing the headstones of the Commonwealth’s killed. Already England’s Prince Michael of Kent has attended a ceremonial reburial of a soldier, recently unearthed. Already the language of “honor” and “glory” ring out in preparation for September 28, 2014, when it should be a day for lamentation, or condemnation, or silence.

And the wars are now ongoing, permanent war.

My blog:
War Department/Peace Department
http://jamesrichardbennett.blogspot.com/

Newsletters
http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/

Index:
http://www.omnicenter.org/omni-newsletter-general-index/

See WAR: Anti-War, Causes, Consequences, Costs, Crimes, Dissent, v. Human Needs, Imperialism, Memorialization, Militarism, Mythis, Prevention, Profiteering, Recruiting, Shell Shock (PTSD), Victims, WWII

Feel free to forward to friends and lists.
Contents World War I Newsletter #1
StopWar WWI Centenary, Google Search
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Preparing for the 100-Year Commemoration
Google Search, StopWar WWI Centenary, April 17, 2014

- No Glory in War
nogloory.org/
From First World War machine guns to Obama's drones: 100 years of mechanised ... A canker of ignorance and bigotry infects the First World War centenary.

- How the government is using next year's centenary to justify ...
stopwar.org.uk/.../how-the-government-is-using-n...
Stop the War Coalition
Nov 11, 2013 - The pro-war voices on David Cameron's first world war committee coordinating next year's centenary events are .... Stop the War Coalition 86 Durham Road London N7 7DT email: office@stopwar.org.uk Tel: 020 7561 4830.

- Anti-war activists battle to get their voices heard in WW1 ...
stopwar.org.uk/.../anti-war-activists-battle-to-get-t...
Stop the War Coalition

Sep 8, 2013 - Anti-war activists battle to get their voices heard in WW1 centenary events ...

the centenary of the first world war with an alternative range of activities, .... Road London N7 7DT email: office@stopwar.org.uk Tel: 020 7561 4830.

Campaign group calls for support after criticising Centenary ...

Posted on centenarynews.com on 21 May 2013 ... The website of the campaign group, ww1.stopwar.org.uk, encourages members of the public to add their ...

Government pledges £50m to commemorate WWI centenary

Oct 11, 2012

£50m allocated for WWI centenary ... Play Ukraine must 'stop war on own people' .... Ukraine must 'stop war ...

BBC News - Worcestershire WWI centenary events appeal

May 8, 2012 - An appeal is made for ideas of how the centenary of the outbreak of World War I should be ... Mrs Taylor said: "The problem with WWI war memorials is that they were all funded by .... 6: Ukraine must 'stop war on own people'.

My Dad and my Uncle were in World War One - YouTube

Sep 24, 2013 - Uploaded by StoptheWarCoalition

... £50 million on commemorating the centenary of the first world war. ... Tony Benn - Never be afraid of ...

Honouring those who tried to stop the first world war ...

The Guardian

Jan 16, 2014 - First world war 100 years on .... Germany's low-key plans for first world war centenary criticised. No plans for Angela Merkel to attend events as ...

Wandsworth Stop the War Coalition to host debate on how ...

Mar 16, 2014 - Prime Minister David Cameron's desire to mark the centenary of the First World War with a celebration similar to the Diamond Jubilee ... on Stop the War and No Glory in War visit stopwar.org.uk and noglory.org respectively.

[PDF]

The body of British Lt. John Pritchard was found accidentally recently in a field in northern France “that saw some of humanity’s worst bloodshed.” Despite this fact, the article is upbeat: Four generations of Pritchard relatives gathered for the ceremony, and they sang songs from Pritchard’s choir scores; Pritchard’s sword is returned by the present owner from the US; Prince Michael attended. “Crossing the Bar” was sung. The etching on his stone says: “Lost for many years. Your battle is won.” The metaphor seems a macabre whistling in the dark for those present. --Dick

DON MELVIN (AP). “WWI GRAVESTONES GETTING 100-YEAR TOUCH-UPS.” ADG (same).

Tyne Cot Cemetery, we are told, the largest Commonwealth cemetery in the world, contains nearly 12,000 headstones and on a stone wall are the names of 35,000 British servicemen declared missing after Aug. 15, 1917. Nearby the Battle of Ypres is remembered by the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, with the names of 55,000 who disappeared in that battle. “Ten million people are estimated to have died.” The West Flanders tourism office expects a 10 to 15% increase of tourists during the centenary years. At Tyne Cot, overlooking Flanders Fields, scene of “some of World War I’s worst carnage,” the stones are being realigned and the stone etchings re-ground “for the crowds expected to visit” during the “World War I centenary commemorations that will take place between 2014 and 2018.” --Dick


Poems about WWI
Carol Dine, “The Trench, 1923.”


In Flanders Fields
Then Conscription Began, for the British Troops

By Dick Bennett

The soldiers cheered “God and Country!”
for victory over the enemy.
God with us. The enemy, Gott mit uns.
Over five foot eight the volunteers came,
cheering right and honor.
They walked tall to kill the enemy,
into the wire, into the guns.

After the Battle of the Marne
over five foot six the volunteers came
drank their rum to cheer their fear.

After the Battle of Ypres
five foot four the volunteers came
steeled by Cross or mother, wife, and kids,
by rum, comrades, fears and tears,
they crept toward wire and guns.

Back home conscription had begun.

Christmas truces - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

As well as joint burial ceremonies, several meetings ended in carol-singing. ... In the early months of immobile trench warfare, the truces were not unique to the ..... Turkish War of
Independence including the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1923) ...

CHRISTMAS TRUCE WORLD WAR ONE, 1914

British and German soldiers meeting in No Man's Land during the Christmas Truce of 1914. 
*Picture courtesy the National Army Museum.*

- Christmas Song
- Christmas Time
- Christmas Carols
- History of Christmas
- Christmas Music

Though World War I had been raging for only four months, it was already proving to be one of the bloodiest wars in history. Soldiers on both sides were trapped in trenches, exposed to the cold and wet winter weather, covered in mud, and extremely careful of sniper shots. Machines guns had proven their worth in war, bringing new meaning to the word "slaughter."

In a place where bloodshed was nearly commonplace and mud and the enemy were fought with equal vigor, something surprising occurred on the front for Christmas in 1914. The men who lay shivering in the trenches embraced the Christmas spirit. In one of the truest acts of goodwill toward men, soldiers from both sides in the southern portion of the Ypres Salient set aside their weapons and hatred, if only temporarily, and met in No Man's Land.

Digging In

After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, the world was plunged into war. Germany, realizing they were likely to face a two-front war, attempted to defeat the western foes before the Russians were able to mobilize their forces in the East (estimated to take six weeks), using the Schlieffen Plan.

Though the Germans had made a strong offensive into France, French, Belgian, and British forces were able to halt them. However, since they were not able to push the Germans out of France, there was a stalemate and both sides dug into the earth creating a large network of trenches.
Once the trenches were built, winter rains tried to obliterate them. The rains not only flooded the dug-outs, they turned the trenches into mud holes - a terrible enemy in and of itself.

It had been pouring, and mud lay deep in the trenches; they were caked from head to foot, and I have never seen anything like their rifles! Not one would work, and they were just lying about the trenches getting stiff and cold. One fellow had got both feet jammed in the clay, and when told to get up by an officer, had to get on all fours; he then got his hands stuck in too, and was caught like a fly on a flypaper; all he could do was look round and say to his pals, 'For Gawd's sake, shoot me!' I laughed till I cried. But they will shake down, directly they learn that the harder one works in the trenches, the drier and more comfortable one can keep both them and oneself.¹

The trenches of both sides were only a few hundred feet apart, buffered by a relatively flat area known as "No Man's Land." The stalemate had halted all but a scattered number of small attacks; thus, soldiers on each side spent a large amount of time dealing with the mud, keeping their heads down in order to avoid sniper fire, and watching carefully for any surprise enemy raids on their trench.

Fraternizing

Restless in their trenches, covered in mud, and eating the same rations every day, some soldiers began to wonder about the un-seen enemy, men declared monsters by propagandists.

We hated their guts when they killed any of our friends; then we really did dislike them intensely. But otherwise we joked about them and I think they joked about us. And we thought, well, poor so-and-sos, they're in the same kind of muck as we are.²

The uncomfortableness of living in trenches coupled with the closeness of the enemy who lived in similar conditions contributed to a growing "live and let live" policy. Andrew Todd, a telegraphist of the Royal Engineers, wrote of an example in a letter:

Perhaps it will surprise you to learn that the soldiers in both lines of trenches have become very 'pally' with each other. The trenches are only 60 yards apart at one place, and every morning about breakfast time one of the soldiers sticks a board in the air. As soon as this board goes up all firing ceases, and men from either side draw their water and rations. All through the breakfast hour, and so long as this board is up, silence reigns supreme, but whenever the board comes down the first unlucky devil who shows even so much as a hand gets a bullet through it.³

Sometimes the two enemies would yell at each other. Some of the German soldiers had worked in Britain before the war and asked about a store or area in England that an English
soldier also knew well. Sometimes they would shout rude remarks to each other as a way of entertainment. Singing was also a common way of communication.

During the winter it was not unusual for little groups of men to gather in the front trench, and there hold impromptu concerts, singing patriotic and sentimental songs. The Germans did much the same, and on calm evenings the songs from one line floated to the trenches on the other side, and were there received with applause and sometimes calls for an encore.4

After hearing of such fraternization, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, commander of the British II Corps, ordered:

The Corps Commander, therefore, directs Divisional Commanders to impress on all subordinate commanders the absolute necessity of encouraging the offensive spirit of the troops, while on the defensive, by every means in their power.

Friendly intercourse with the enemy, unofficial armistices (e.g. 'we won't fire if you don't' etc.) and the exchange of tobacco and other comforts, however tempting and occasionally amusing they may be, are absolutely prohibited.5

BOOKS ON WWI

*To End All Wars*—2 Reviews: Wendy Schwartz, Andrew Motion

*Johnny Got His Gun*

*To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914–1918.* By Adam Hochschild

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, 448 pages


*The battle at Passchendaele*

Although non-pacifists might attempt to justify some wars because their intent is to save lives or protect freedoms, no reasonable person could justify the carnage produced by World War I (WWI). In his masterful history of this almost-forgotten war, Adam Hochschild demonstrates
vividly and painfully how four years of fighting produced nearly 1 million deaths, 20 times that many young soldiers with grievous injuries, and more than 1,000 incarcerated resisters. These war victims came from a dozen fighting countries, many of which suffered ruined farmland, destroyed cities, and a bankrupt economy.

Hochschild, a well-credentialed journalist and historian, provides a fresh account of “the war to end all wars.” To End All Wars is not the gung ho play-by-play account found in yawn-inducing history texts. Rather, Hochschild provides cogent portraits of the military planners, explains their decisions and the consequences, and describes some key battles, primarily the resulting carnage (this is not a book to read around mealtime). His primary focus, though, is on the civilians—jingoist and socialist pacifist alike—who commanded international attention. The story of WWI, Hochschild writes, is about “clashing sets of dreams”: on one hand, the desire “to rejuvenate the national spirit and the bonds of empire” and, on the other, to prevent the “workingmen of Europe” from fighting each other by inducing soldiers to desert. The ultimate goal of some WWI activism was to demonstrate that the Russian Revolution “was a shining example that other nations would soon follow.”

A particularly vociferous supporter of England’s involvement in WWI and the country’s simultaneous imperialist efforts in Africa was Rudyard Kipling, a Nobel Prize winner for literature. The death of Kipling’s son John in 1915 only propelled him to issue even more determined exhortations to fight harder, and his skill and fame as a writer gave him outsized credibility with the public.

Kipling’s intellectual equal on the antiwar side was Bertrand Russell, a recipient of the same prize, a logician, and Britain’s best-known philosopher. Most famous among the anti-imperialist activists, Russell was nevertheless conflicted by his desire for the defeat of Germany and his love of England and his innate pacifism, which ultimately proved strongest. Hochschild quotes him: “As a lover of truth, the national propaganda of the belligerent nations sickened me. As a lover of civilization, the return to barbarism appalled me…the massacre of the young wrung my heart.” In 1918, Russell served six months in prison, convicted for his published assertions that U.S. soldiers would come to Britain to serve as strikebreakers; a judge believed Russell’s statement would have a “diabolical effect” on relations between both countries.

Emmeline Pankhurst under arrest

The famed Pankhurst matriarchy overloads the narrative of the war with every stripe of moral outrage. Although all the family members united to found the impressive movement for women’s suffrage in Britain—and served harsh prison sentences and endured forced feedings in response to their hunger strikes—different family members reflected all sides of those disparate dreams for WWI. Here are the Pankhurst family highlights: Mother Emmeline ended her involvement with suffrage in order to spend her time militantly promoting the war. She later ardently supported Russia but, disillusioned by Bolshevekism, joined the Conservative Party and remained a member until her death. Daughter Christabel, who also morphed into a vocal WWI proponent, ultimately became an evangelist in California. Emmeline’s other daughters were staunch pacifists and became estranged from their mother and other sister. Sylvia toyed with communism but settled on anti-fascism as her post-suffragette passion. Adela, even more disconnected from the family, moved to Australia to become involved in its Women’s Peace Army.

These brief snapshots only hint at why To End All Wars is a fascinating book. For decades I
have devoured leftwing history books, and this is by far the liveliest, least dogmatic, and most nuanced book I’ve encountered, especially considering that Adam Hochschild did not have the benefit of interviewing the key figures whose stories he presents. But the book’s importance transcends its value as a good read. Because many historians—cited by Hochschild, who shares this view—have called WWI the most senseless war ever fought, it is critical for pacifist activists to understand the reasons for every decision made by its architects so we can knowledgeably refute similar arguments for current and future wars. Although proponents of a particular war may find ways to justify it, and say that it is different from and more compelling than every other, the essence of all wars is the same. And WWI provides more examples of the futility of fighting than any other war. We would also do well to study anti-WWI tactics so we can adapt the most effective for our current peace activities and avoid repeating the errors that instigated a backlash.

Wendy Schwartz, a pacifist activist, is the granddaughter of a WWI veteran who never fully recovered from his wounds. She is proud to have been the friend and colleague at WRL of two courageous yet humble WWI resisters: David Berkinghoff and Prafulla Muterj.

To End All Wars by Adam Hochschild – review
http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/08/all-wars-adam-hochschild-review

Has dissent in Britain during the first world war been exaggerated?

- Email
  - Andrew Motion
  - The Guardian, Friday 6 May 2011
  - Jump to comments (5)

The lost generation ... British troops approach the trenches near Ypres during the first world war. Photograph: © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

Adam Hochschild opens and closes his history of the first world war with a couple of questions. The first asks "Why does it bring a lump to the throat to see words like sleep, rest, sacrifice [written in a visitors' book at a cemetery on the Somme], when my reason for being here is the belief that this war was needless folly and madness?" And the second: "If we were allowed to magically roll back history to the start of the 20th century and undo one – and only one – event, is there any doubt that it would be the war that broke out in 1914?" Either one of these would give a pretty clear idea of the attitude Hochschild takes to his narrative. Put together, and combined with the subtitle of his book, they promise a powerful controlling argument. To End All Wars, we suppose, is a history of dissent, an account of pacifist movements, conscientious objectors and deserters who (we also suppose) created much more difficulty for the authorities than we are generally led to believe.

1. To End All Wars: How the First World War Divided Britain
2. by Adam Hochschild

Top of Form
Does Hochschild deliver on the implications of his questions? Yes and no. On the one hand, his strong feelings about the war (foolish and mad) provoke him into writing with a sense of personal commitment to its myriad tragedies – and this makes his book feel charged and moving. His attention to refuseniks of one kind and another is striking, too: the story of fighting in France is punctuated at regular intervals, throughout its long and winding course, with well-furnished accounts of people who challenged Kitchener's assertion that their country needed them to fight: Bertrand Russell and Emily Hobhouse; Keir Hardie and Charlotte Despard; Stephen Hobhouse and Sylvia Pankhurst.

On the other hand, Hochschild's ambitions to write revisionist history are hampered. One problem (if that's quite a sufficient word for it) is the facts themselves: despite the horrific slaughter of 1914-18, instances of loyalty to the cause, and of unwavering bravery in the face of impossible odds, remain vastly more numerous and often more compelling than the occasions of dissent. This is not to imply the objectors themselves didn't show extraordinary courage in their own way. They did – and, as proof, one of the most affecting passages in the entire book deals with a soldier named Albert Rochester, who was given the task of clearing up after the execution of three Bantam soldiers in early 1917 (“I helped carry those bodies towards their last resting place; I collected all the blood-soaked straw and burnt it”).

But for complicated and interesting reasons the army held its shape, and the country kept its faith, right through to the bitter end of the war. The objectors were brave and sensible and far-sighted and (it's reasonable to argue) right. But they can hardly be said to have "divided Britain".

The other obstacle that stands in the way of Hochschild's argument is also to do with the facts of the war – but in a different sense. Although the well-known protesters (Russell et al) have their own drama and charisma, and the less well-known ones (Rochester) have their deep poignancy, our sympathy for them is continually being deflected, or reorganised, or even to some degree sapped by the monstrous experience of the soldiers at the front. The suffering of these men cannot help being the main focus of any history of the war – especially one so good at marshalling statistics as this one.

It is an irony, of a sort. Hochschild meticulously assembles details in order to fuel his own and our dismay at the pointlessness of so much suffering – and the details are so appalling they quickly seize and dominate our interest: six million sandbags were being shipped to France every month by May 1915; 224,221 shells were fired by British guns in the last 65 minutes before the first attack on the first day of the Somme; 47,000 tons of meat were sent to the bottom of the ocean inside ships sunk during the first six months of unlimited submarine warfare; between September 1914 and November 1918 722,000 British soldiers were killed and 200,000 from the empire. "If the British dead alone were to rise up and march 24 hours a day past a given spot, four abreast, it would take them more than two and a half days."

Very few of these facts will be new to war experts, of which there are a good number. Several of them are now common knowledge – so great is our national preoccupation with the war. Given this, and despite the new angles Hochschild opens in his book, it's impossible to avoid the killer question: do we really need another account of this sort? The easy answer is no – because the standard histories are reliable, and even include a decent amount of material that Hochschild foregrounds. Instead of a rehash, however well-written, what we need is a book that builds on existing work to reveal more comprehensively than has yet been done the
experiences and voices of "ordinary soldiers". That would be a memorial worth erecting, when we commemorate the centenary of the conflict in three years' time.

Yet for all that, Hochschild has done his work well. The book is thoroughly researched, wide-ranging in its curiosities, and always compassionate and sympathetic. It is also significant as the latest in a long series of books that prove a melancholy point. During the first few decades after the war, despite (or because of) the large number of important first-hand accounts that appeared, the majority wanted to shift their attention away from thinking in public about loss and suffering.

In the last couple of generations, thanks in part to the canonisation within the curriculum of the poets of the first world war, the scars of the trenches have been identified as our national psychic wound. Hochschild, being American, might feel some distance from this, but the experience of reading his book suggests not. He suffers the same compulsion that we do: to remind ourselves afresh, several times every new generation, of the generation that was lost.

Andrew Motion's *The Cinder Path* is published by Faber.

**REVIEW BY BILL GRIFFIN of TO END ALL WARS** in The Catholic Worker (Aug.-Sept. 2014). [On Sept. 26, 2014 I was not able to find an online copy of this excellent review. –Dick]

**JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN**, Google Search, Sept. 30, 2014

1. **Johnny Got His Gun** - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Got_His_Gun

Wikipedia *Johnny Got His Gun* is an anti-war novel written in 1938 by American novelist and screenwriter Dalton Trumbo and published September 1939 by J. B. Lippincott ...

*Plot* - *Characters* - *Title and context* - *Publication*

2. **Johnny Got His Gun (film)** - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Got_His_Gun_(film)

Wikipedia *Johnny Got His Gun* is a 1971 drama anti-war film based on the novel of the same name written and directed by Dalton Trumbo and starring Timothy Bottoms, ...

*Synopsis* - *Cast* - *Production* - *Reception*

3. **Johnny Got His Gun (1971)** - IMDb
www.imdb.com/title/tt0067277/

Internet Movie Database

Rating: 7.9/10 - 9,975 votes

Joe, a young American soldier, is hit by a mortar shell on the last day of World War I. He lies in a hospital bed in a fate worse than death --- a quadruple amputee ...

4. Images for *Johnny Got His Gun*Report images
5. **Johnny Got His Gun** 1971 Full Movie - YouTube

[►105:58► 105:58]

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDEkev-4hgo

Nov 6, 2013 - Uploaded by dianying hao

**Johnny Got His Gun** 1971 Full Movie. dianying hao. SubscribeSubscribedUnsubscribe 107. Subscription ...

6. **Johnny Got His Gun** the movie

www.johnnygothisgunthemovie.com/

Please join us in the campaign to donate a copy of the new feature film version of Dalton Trumbo's **Johnny Got His Gun**, starring Ben McKenzie (Southland, The ... 

7. **Johnny Got His Gun** Movie Review (1971) | Roger Ebert

www.rogerebert.com/reviews/johnny-got-his-gun-1971

Roger Ebert  Rating: 4/4 - Review by Roger Ebert

Jan 1, 1971 - Dalton Trumbo’s "**Johnny Got His Gun**" smelled like that kind of anti-war film. It came out of the Cannes Film Festival with three awards and a …

**MODRIS EKSTEINS, RITES OF SPRING**

**Publisher:**
Mariner Books

**Author:**
Modris Eksteins

**Format:** Paperback
**ISBN-10:** 039593758

Dazzling in its originality, **Rites of Spring** probes the origins, impact, and aftermath of World War I, from the premiere of Stravinsky's ballet The Rite of Spring in 1913 to the death of Hitler in 1945. Recognizing that “The Great War was the psychological turning point for modernism as a whole,” author Modris Eksteins examines the lives of ordinary people, works of modern literature, and pivotal historical events to redefine the way we look at our past and toward our future.

Books of The Times; Modernism: Rites of Spring, Rites of Destruction
In "Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age," Modris Eksteins takes a dim view of modernism. His is not a novel attitude, of course. For instance, in a recent book, "The Modern World: Ten Great Writers" (Viking), Malcolm Bradbury made the disturbing suggestion that Dostoyevsky's murderous student, Raskolnikov, could be seen as a herald of the modern artist.

But in Mr. Eksteins's impressive cultural history of World War I and its aftershocks, the argument goes much further. The author cites as his avatar of the modernist not some fictional character but instead the typical soldier who fought in the trenches. And he calls this soldier "not just a harbinger but the very agent of the modern aesthetic, the progenitor of destruction but also the embodiment of the future."

Mr. Eksteins intends this generalization to be as negative as it sounds. He goes on to point out how one of these trench soldiers eventually led Germany into World War II. Does this suggest a connection between modern art and Nazism? Absolutely, argues Mr. Eksteins, who teaches history at Scarborough College of the University of Toronto and has written several books on the Weimar Republic. "Nazi kitsch," he writes, bears "a blood relationship to the highbrow religion of art proclaimed by many moderns."

WHY ARE WE SHOCKED BY THE HOLOCAUST — BUT NOT BY THE FIRST WORLD WAR?

The Holocaust cannot be understood as an event separate from German history and Western civilization. The Holocaust grew out of the calamitous German experience of the First World War, and how Hitler interpreted and responded to this event.

When people learned of the death camps, they were horrified and appalled. "Incomprehensible" was a common reaction. Indeed, the event called the Holocaust is nearly beyond imagination. It is difficult to believe that human beings could bring something like this into existence. The event is so disturbing that some people deny it occurred.

When I became aware of the First World War, I was shocked, horrified and appalled. This event too is nearly beyond imagination. It's difficult to believe that the leaders of "civilized" nations could ask men to get out of trenches for four years to be ripped apart — killed and maimed — by machine gun fire and artillery shells.

Here is a summary of the results of the First World War:

65 million men mobilized
8.5 million dead
21 million wounded
7.7 million POWs and missing
37 million total casualties

Although I was bewildered when I first began to read about the First World War, historians are apparently not. Perhaps they have become accustomed to this war. Whatever the reasons, historians — and people in general — rarely express surprise or amazement. The term “incomprehensible” is never used.

MASS-MURDER: INTENTIONAL VERSUS ACCIDENTAL

In spite of the monumental carnage, the First World War is viewed as a “normal” dimension of history. We’d prefer not to put the First World War — or any war — in the same category as the Holocaust. Why? Because we view the Holocaust as an instance in which a nation intentionally engaged in mass–murder, whereas the 52-month episode of mass slaughter called the First World War is conceived as an event that occurred accidentally, or at least unintentionally.

It wasn’t that nations actually wanted to destroy large numbers of people. Rather, no one comprehended what they were getting into. The magnitude of killing was not expected. Things got out of control and went far beyond what anyone anticipated. It wasn’t as if anyone wanted what happened to happen. No one was responsible.

WILLINGNESS TO DIE

Hundreds of books have been written seeking to fathom why some Germans were willing to murder Jews. Controversies have arisen. Were the murderers simply following orders — manifesting a universal human tendency to be “obedient to authority”? Had these people been so thoroughly indoctrinated with the anti-Semitic ideology that they believed that their actions were necessary and virtuous?

Rarely are similar questions asked about participants in the First World War. Soldiers are expected to kill. When they murder, they are simply doing their duty. No explanation is required. Regarding the First World War, we want to know — not only why soldiers were willing to kill — but why were they willing to die. This issue is glossed over. Do we imagine that it is natural for soldiers to go into battle — and to die when leaders ask them to?

One historian has posed the question of why soldiers continued getting out of trenches for four years — running into machine gun fire and artillery shells — when they knew that the results of this behavior were often fatal. In Rites of Spring(2000), Modris Eksteins asks:

What kept them in the trenches? What sustained them on the edge of No Man’s Land, that strip of territory which death ruled with an iron fist? What made them go over the top, in long rows? What sustained them in constant confrontation with death?

The question of what kept men going in this hell of the Western Front, Eksteins says, is “central to an understanding of the war and its significance”:

What deserves emphasis in the context of the war is that, despite the growing dissatisfaction, the war continued, and it continued for one reason: the soldier was willing to keep fighting. Just why he kept going has to be explained, and that matter has often been ignored.

Political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain (in Women and War, 1995) observes that the First World War was the “nadir of nineteenth-century nationalism.” Mounds of bodies were
sacrificed in a “prolonged, dreadful orgy of destruction.” “Trench warfare” meant “mass, anonymous death.” Elshtain observes that we “still have trouble accounting for modern state worship”; the “mounds of combatants and noncombatants alike sacrificed to the conflicts of nation-states.”

I pose three fundamental questions.

• Why, during the course of the First World War, did national leaders continually ask young men to engage in battle strategies that caused a great number of men to be wounded or killed?

• Why did men in the great majority of cases follow orders — going like sheep to the slaughter?

• Why have historians rarely interrogated the suicidal battle strategies of the First World War?

HOW MAY WE ACCOUNT FOR THE RECURRENCE OF GOVERNMENTAL MASS- MURDER?

Carolyn Marvin’s theory of warfare, presented in Blood Sacrifice and the Nation (1999), helps us to answer these questions. Marvin hypothesizes that “society depends on the death of its own members at the hands of the group,” claiming that the underlying cost of all society is the “violent death of some of its members.” In short, one’s nation or society “lives” insofar as members of one’s society die.

War is a ritual performed by nations — in order to claim sacrificial victims. Society, Marvin says, “depends on the death of sacrificial victims at the hands of the group itself.” The maintenance of civilization, society and the nation-state, according to Marvin, requires blood sacrifice in war.

What an unpleasant theory. However, is it less pleasant to reflect upon the 200 million plus human beings killed by governments in the 20th century? It is not a question of this instance of war, or that; of this instance of genocide, or that. Rather, the slaughter of citizens by nations is a consistent theme — a prominent feature — of twentieth century history.

Do we have theories to account for these recurring episodes of governmental mass murder? Of course, each historical event is unique. However, do we really wish to claim that each episode of societal killing has a separate cause?

Marvin’s theory arose out of her study of United States history, yet works perfectly to explain the phenomena I have studied. The First World War may be understood as a massive, collective ritual of blood sacrifice. Societies acted to cause the deaths of young men — in order to keep their nations alive. In some instances (for example, Australia and Canada), blood sacrifice gave rise to the nation.

THE DESIRE NOT TO KNOW

Marvin’s theory explains why wars recur — their function for societies and human beings. Just
significantly, her theory seeks to explain the fact that we don't want to know the truth: that warfare is sacrificial ritual. The occurrence of war — and the denial of warfare’s purpose or function — are part of the same dynamic or complex.

According to Marvin, knowledge that society depends on the death of sacrificial victims at the hands of the group is the “totem secret”; the “collective group taboo.” While we enact warfare as a sacrificial ritual, we simultaneously don't wish to know that we are enacting this ritual.

Throughout the twentieth century, governments have been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of millions of human beings. Did each war and episode of genocide occur because of reasons unique to each given event? Perhaps a more parsimonious hypothesis is that episodes of violence generated by societies and governments represent the fulfillment of a collective desire.

Warfare is not forbidden. Indeed, we take it for granted that nations will wage war. It's what they do. This is what I mean when I say that people believe that Nations Have the Right to Kill (Koenigsberg, 2009). We are not forbidden to wage war, but up to now we have been forbidden to know why we wage war.

The sacrificial meaning of warfare once was a secret — but no more.

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