Introduction

The following work is not the result of weeks or months spent in dark bunkers and damp cellars, leafing through old documents page by mildewed page in the hope of coming upon a remark that will throw an entirely new light on the subject and supersede all previous knowledge in an instant. In that sense it is not an original work. So what exactly is it? This book is an attempt to bring together in a single readable volume all the diffuse knowledge available in primary and secondary literature on the subject of war, and more specifically the military casualties that result from it and the medical treatment they may or may not receive. At the root of the book lies the question of what can happen to a soldier between the moment he steps onto a train or ship bound for the theatre of battle and the point at which he is evacuated wounded or, whether dead or alive, buried in the ground. I have attempted to provide an answer in five chapters – Battle, Body, Mind, Aid and Death – drawing on experiences from the Western Front of a vast conflict that the French, British and Belgians still today refer to as the Great War.

The photo book *Krieg dem Kriege!*

In 1917–18 Wilfred Owen, the most famous of all British war poets, collected photographs of the dead and maimed, intending to publish them when the war was over. By telling the truth about the war he was fighting, he aimed to warn against any possible repeat.[1] Owen had quickly come to see war as an absolute evil, but he was convinced that only as a fellow combatant could he give voice to the sufferings of the soldiers.[2] He was prevented from fulfilling his self-imposed task by his death shortly before the armistice, and it was left to the German anti-militarist Ernst Friedrich to publish a collection of the type Owen had been planning. Friedrich's book, *Krieg dem Kriege!* (*War against War!*) appeared in the 1920s. The photographs portray the dead and wounded of a disastrous conflict that remains even now the archetype of modern, total war. People responded by saying the photographs were repulsive, but that only proved they were good photographs;[3] Friedrich had chosen them precisely because they were repulsive, and in any case the entire 1914–18 war had been repulsive.

Many people, including the historian Jay Winter, have argued that since the photographs in Friedrich's book were 'almost unbearable to look at' they

1 Verdoorn, *Arts en Oorlog*, 377
2 Day Lewis, *Collected Poems*, 27
3 Holmes, *Firing Line*, 59

inevitably missed their target to some degree. They were unlikely to convince anyone of the horrors of war; at best they might reinforce the views of those who no longer needed any convincing.[4] There is undoubtedly some truth in this, but *Krieg dem Kriege!* prompts us to contemplate how terrible the reality must have been if even its portrayal was unbearable. Reprinted at regular intervals, most recently in 2004, the book unquestionably helped to foster the peace movement, or perhaps more accurately the anti-war mood, of the 1920s and early 1930s. Between the wars many pacifists were convinced – wrongly, as soon became clear – that if people were shown the horrific side to war often enough, humanity would instinctively abandon it as a means of resolving conflict.[5] In the inter-war years in the Netherlands, which had been neutral in 1914–18 yet whose peace movement was the largest in Europe relative to its population, the organization *Jongeren Vredesactie*, or 'youth action for peace', made regular use of the photographs in *Krieg dem Kriege!*, along with a 1929 book derived from it called *Nie Wieder Krieg* (No More War), to underline the revulsion its members felt. The editors of a British counterpart to Friedrich's book, *Covenants with Death*, published in the early 1930s, likewise reasoned that revulsion would translate into aversion. Against the background of a decomposed corpse, T.A. Innes and Ivor Castle wrote on the front cover:

> The purpose of this book is to reveal the horror, suffering and essential bestiality of modern war, and with that revelation, to warn the nation against the peril of foreign entanglements that must lead Britain to a new Armageddon.[6]

The peace activists of the inter-war period endorsed Friedrich's view that his photographs showed people the truth about war. But was that in fact the case? Do photographs of men maimed in battle give the lie to all our stories about the heroism of military combat and the eternal comradeship born out of it? Simply showing the gruesome results of warfare, concentrating our attention solely on its victims, gives a distorted view. Indeed war has so many faces that any single image is a distortion. It is perfectly possible to select war photographs in which nothing is happening, with no sign of conflict at all. Behind such pictures, however, lies another story: an abandoned, totally empty battlefield – so typical of modern warfare but especially of the First World War, in which many men killed or were killed without ever seeing an enemy combatant[7] – is a horrifying sight to a fighting man, a contributory factor in the psychiatric problems suffered by soldiers.[8] The mental suffering and physical pain of men in battle, which come to the fore in this

4 Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 161; Liddle & Cecil, *Facing Armageddon*, 861

5 Addison & Calder, *Time to Kill*, 32

6 Innes & Castle, *Covenants with Death*, front cover; Van Bergen, *De Zwaargewonden Eerst?*, 353–5

7 Holmes, *Firing Line*, 146, 149–50

8 Holmes, *Firing Line*, 66

book, are only one aspect of modern warfare, but it is an important aspect, and one that has received less attention than it is due.

Heroism alone

Owen and Friedrich were reacting against the time-honoured story portrayed in battle paintings, with occasional exceptions such as Goya's *Desastros de la Guerra*. It is a story told in our own time by the vast majority of war films,[9] in which the heroism of war is magnified while the horrors are deliberately veiled. Should anyone die – a film's leading characters are rarely killed – and should he afterwards appear on screen, he is likely to be fully intact in death. Headless or castrated corpses, burned or putrefying bodies, intestines hanging out of stomachs and severed arms or legs are notably absent from war films. The single leg suspended high in a tree in Mametz Wood, 'with its torn flesh hanging down over a spray of leaf', which Wyn Griffith saw before him for the rest of his life,[10] will not be encountered in most war films. Neither will the putrefying corpses prostrate in a trench in a First World War photograph with which, to the great displeasure of his sergeant, a friend of mine decorated his locker during his military service in the 1960s. The same goes for boots with feet still in them, described by both the Englishman Edmund Blunden and the German Hans Schetter.[11] Although categorized as war films, war is not their subject. A wounded character is likely to have suffered nothing worse than a bullet in the shoulder or leg. Apply a sling or a splint and the action can continue.

To a second, less numerous category belong films like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Full of extremely realistic images, they nevertheless help to revive the myth that wars are fought to combat tyranny and oppression, and that those who go into battle – in this case Americans to a man – sacrifice themselves willingly on the altar of freedom. Spielberg's film belongs to the same disagreeable tradition as, for example, *Stoßtrupp 1917* (Germany, 1934): realistically filmed; mythological in content.

This intermediary form brings us to a third category of films, those that present a far more realistic image of war, showing the filth, the destruction, the madness, the lies, the overblown pathos. They are called anti-war films, although some deliberately leave open the possibility that other wars may have been largely heroic or humane and so might more accurately be described as 'anti-this-particular-war films'. After listening to their parents' stories and watching successful movies like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, soldiers of the Second World War were able to anticipate the technological horrors that awaited them, yet most were convinced

9 Holmes, *Firing Line*, 62–3, 67

10 Holmes, *War Walks*, 141; Winter, *Death's Men*, 249; Holmes & De Vos, *Langs de Velden van Eer*, 141

11 Blunden, *Undertones of War*, 71; Macdonald, *To the Last Man*, 142

– perhaps in a defensive reflex – that ‘their’ war would not, indeed could not be anything like as bad as the war of 1914–18.[12] They refused to acknowledge that since the advent of mass conscription, since the collapse of the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, since appeal was first made to nationalism and other ‘-isms’, since the military deployment of the industrial complex, in other words since the end of the eighteenth century, no war had been either heroic or humane. All modern wars are horrific, both to those with a duty to fight them and to anyone else directly affected. The horrors may be different in each case, but death and destruction have been the main feature of war from Austerlitz to Iraq.[13]

We may be prompted to ask why the young men of the 1930s once more, en masse, rushed to join their national armies.[14] Aside from the fact that conscription left them with no other option, part of the explanation no doubt lies in the fact that they, like the generation before them, felt a duty to fight the ‘Great Evil’. Yet we should remember too that just as stories of comradeship and adventure are hard to resist, the stories of horror that evoked such dread and disgust had their own power of attraction. War fascinates. The children of veterans of Passchendaele dreamed of heroic roles in a battle their fathers told them had made any kind of heroism impossible. Take Philip Toynbee, a former peace activist who fought in the Second World War. In *Friends Apart*, published in 1954, he wrote:

> Even in our Anti-War campaigns of the early thirties we were half in love with the horrors which we cried out against, and, as a boy, I can remember murmuring the name ‘Passchendaele’ in an ecstasy of excitement and regret.[15]

Among a surfeit of wartime horrors from the late eighteenth century onwards, the First World War is unique only in that it was the first in which great industrial powers fought on both sides. The individual was lost in a maelstrom of modern, industrialized warfare. The war of 1914–18 was the first in which machine-guns, tanks, gas, aircraft and flame-throwers were deployed on a massive scale. It was also the first in which the telephone, although it often failed at crucial moments, allowed senior officers to operate from safety behind the lines. The proverbial bond

---

12 Addison & Calder, *Time to Kill*, 36; Hynes, *Soldiers’ Tale*, 108; Kester, ‘Het (on)gewapend oog’, 5–25, 6

13 Whether it is possible to speak of humane or even heroic military exploits before the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars of the nineteenth century depends of course on how we define these terms. But with the possible exception of religious conflicts, the misery inflicted by the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was vastly greater.

14 An army is the largest unit of the armed forces. It is composed as follows: a section consists of 15 men; a platoon of 60; a company, led by a captain, of 250–300; a battalion (major) of 1,000; a regiment (colonel) of 2,000; a brigade (brigadier-general) of 4,000; a division (major-general) of 12,000; an army corps (lieutenant-general) of 50,000; and an army (general) of 200,000. In theory, that is. In practice, and especially if a conflict is lengthy, the numbers may well be smaller.

15 Hynes, *Soldiers’ Tale*, 110

between the foot soldier and the high command was broken, indeed transformed into something close to animosity.[16] For this reason too, and despite the availability of a range of new, mechanized equipment, the First World War and the industrial wars that followed placed even greater demands upon soldiers than previous conflicts, especially in a psychological sense.[17] A 1918 issue of the French trench newspaper *Le Filon* described the soldier's lot:

> Fighting in a modern war means digging yourself into a hole full of water for ten days at a time without moving, it means watching, listening, gripping a grenade in your hand, it means eating cold food, sinking in the mud up to your knees, carrying your rations through the black night, going round and round the same spot for hours without ever finding it, it means being hit by shells coming from heaven knows where – *in a word, it means suffering*.[18]

War and the individual

One slogan that has caught on in the more radical wing of the peace movement is that every war is a crime against humanity. Whether this can possibly hold true for all wars ever fought is doubtful at best; in some societies war, far from a crime, was a way of life. But when the First World War began it soon became clear that modern warfare in the West involved the dissolution of the individual human being. This began with drill, the tough, regimented exercise that preceded front-line duty, which army leaders regarded as essential for effective performance in battle. The deliberate attempt to strip soldiers of their individuality was to a great degree successful. In his novel *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (reissued only many years later but quickly published in a bowdlerized form as *Her Privates We*), British soldier Frederic Manning observed that soldiers no longer possessed anything, 'not even their own bodies, which had become mere implements of warfare'.[19] Manning's account deals with his own adventures during the First World War, and in writing about that war, fought mainly by very young men, historian Robert Weldon Whalen goes so far as to describe soldiers as children rather than adults. 'Like children, soldiers were totally subordinate to the will of their superiors, and took a childish delight in simple physical pleasures, like warmth and food. The soldier-child was not an autonomous, responsible adult, but a passive and helpless waif.'[20]

It is striking that in the years 1914–18 the disciplining of Commonwealth troops – Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders – did not assume anything

16 Fussell, *Bloody Game*, 29
17 Addison & Calder, *Time to Kill*, 378
18 Audoin-Rouzeau, *14–18. Les combattants*, 46
19 Manning, *Her Privates We*, 205
20 Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 188

like the drastic forms devised by the British. Yet soldiers of the Dominion forces were no less effective, in fact they are famed for their courageous, not to say reckless and daredevil performance.[21] If Julius Caesar had been born two thousand years later he would have proclaimed them, rather than the Belgians as in his *Commentarii De Bello Gallico*, the bravest men of all. Their armed forces were in fact more modern and democratic than the British army, whose roots lay deep in the nineteenth century, although their excellent record of service did not prevent the British from looking down on them to some degree.[22] We could be forgiven for wondering why these countries joined the war at all. They were no longer colonies. Only Newfoundland, now a province of Canada, was still technically a British colony in those years, and it had been granted self-government. Canada, Australia and New Zealand nevertheless decided to enter the war as soon as their former motherland, whose king was also their king, declared war on Germany.

The dissolution of the individual reaches its ultimate extreme during battle, as mental and physical catastrophe descend upon the soldier and increasingly upon the civilian. The First World War still provides the starkest examples of this kind of catastrophe. Even today it is used as a reference point, alongside the Second World War, in any discussion of contemporary conflict. In his book *First World War*, historian Martin Gilbert quotes a British journalist's description of the trenches in Bosnia in late 1993. They were reminiscent of the First World War, 'complete with mud'. The accompanying photograph shows a trench with very little mud, but ever since 1918 all trenches have been reminiscent of the First World War, and all trenches are supposed to be muddy.[23]

This book focuses on the individual soldier, so strategy and tactics receive less attention than in most accounts. The names of prominent generals and field-marshals like Von Falkenhayn, Von Hindenburg, Ludendorff, Haig, Plumer, Joffre, Nivelle and Pétain are conspicuous by their absence. Heated debates have arisen about their strategic and tactical thinking. Were they butchers who deliberately sacrificed human lives? Or did they feel genuine compassion for the men who died as a result of the tactics their leaders were forced to adopt? Some regard the generals as fools responsible for an endless series of blunders, men who refused to have any empathy for, or did not even bother to inform themselves about, the circumstances in which men had to carry out their orders. Others regard them as capable military leaders who, from a military point of view, made proper use of the means at their disposal and took decisions which, for all the consequent bloodshed, were necessary for the achievement of final victory.[24] These questions are of little importance to the subject under discussion here. Neither the generals, nor ordinary soldiers, nor 'the circumstances' were primarily responsible for the debacle. The blame lies with war, a more or less autonomous process that never

21 Winter, *Death's Men*, 48, 118

22 Brants & Brants, *Velden van weleer*, 125–6

23 Gilbert, *First World War*, XXI

24 Murray, 'West at war', 266–97, esp. 286–7

submits to human decision-making but forces decisions upon us. Human beings cause wars, people declare war, but at some point war itself becomes an active participant in its own drama, I am tempted to say the main participant. War does not allow those engaged in it to change its nature or direction as they see fit, let alone to make it stop. In the First World War this meant that the circumstances of the time – the massive firepower on both sides and the huge armies, impossible to protect during an advance – inevitably led to butchery. The mass slaughter would have taken place no matter which generals were in charge and no matter what decisions they made (and they made a great many different decisions).[25]

This book focuses primarily on the sick and wounded, but it also tells of the stretcher-bearers, nurses and doctors whose fascinating stories about the men they struggled to help have been indispensable sources. I hope it will become clear that no matter how admirable their efforts, their contribution often seems like the proverbial drop in the ocean. Indeed it often amounted to medical aid in name only. Men who survived artillery fire all too frequently fell victim to the scalpel.

Who was the enemy?

Most ordinary soldiers had firm opinions as to whether senior officers were butchers or competent military leaders. Books like *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*) by Louis Ferdinand Céline and the war diaries of Corporal Louis Barthas make plain that not all officers were held in fond regard and staff officers behind the lines were often profoundly hated.[26] As time went on the average soldier began to wonder who his real enemies were. The men facing him from beyond no man's land? The well-fed generals in their spacious accommodation miles from the front? The politicians who allowed the war to continue? The industrialists, lining their pockets with the profits of war? Or civilians, who seemed incapable of understanding what war actually meant?[27]

There was undoubtedly much hostility towards senior officers, but as Peter Simkins points out in his *World War I: The Western Front 1914–1918*, anyone who blames Haig and Foch for the bloodletting of their 1916 campaigns must give them credit for the advance of autumn 1918 (although it too cost hundreds of thousands of lives). Aside from the fact that the reverse also holds true – Trevor Wilson remarks in his *The Myriad Faces of War*[28] that those who rightly give Haig some credit for the successful offensive of 1918 cannot excuse him his share of the discredit that attaches to the calamities of the Somme and Ypres – there are two further aspects that cast doubt on Simkins' assertion: the remarkably long-delayed

25 Keegan, *First World War*, 315–16, 337–42

26 Barthas, *Carnets*, 360; Ellis, *Eye-Deep*, 197–8; Wilson, *Myriad Faces*, 358; Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 146

27 Brants, *Plasje bloed*, 9

28 Wilson, *Myriad Faces*, 483

economic collapse of Germany and the collapse in morale that accompanied it,[29] and the deployment of fresh and well-nourished American troops, even if their initial effect was psychological rather than purely military. These factors were far more important than any brilliant incursions devised by the Allied military leadership, and plans for the advance were in any case modelled to a great degree on the German spring offensive of 1918. This was not just a war between two armies. It was also, some renowned commentators would say primarily, a battle between two economies. The Allies had taken the lead economically and once the United States entered the war it was impossible for the Germans and Austro-Hungarians to catch up. In his *History of Warfare*, British war historian John Keegan claims that the *Materialschlacht* (battle of munitions) known as the Great War could just as easily have ended in a German victory had the United States remained on the sidelines.[30]

Simkins goes on to say that those who look only at the horrors do an injustice to those who fought, endured great hardship, and ultimately gave their lives.[31] I would question this, but as I have said I am fully conscious that the war was characterized not just by suffering but by comradeship and courage. I am conscious too that by concentrating on death and destruction I am not presenting a definitive picture of war in general, not even of the 1914–18 war. If we concentrate exclusively on the horrors of any war, our general impression will be no less distorted than if we focus disproportionately on comradeship, for example, which Joanna Bourke, incidentally, in her excellent book *Dismembering the Male* unmasks as an illusory idealized image, the product of hindsight.[32] There was much heroism in the First World War and, of course, importantly, humour.[33] Charles Edmund Carrington, writing under the pseudonym Charles Edmonds, quite deliberately ended his *A Subaltern's War* with the words:

> It is important ... to remember that not only unpleasant emotions have thus been shared. If we have known fear and discomfort we have also felt courage and comfort well up in our hearts, springing from the crowd-emotion of our company, for even Active Service brings moments of intense happiness.[34]

29 Murray, 'West at war', 266

30 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 210; Keegan, *History of Warfare*, 313, 365

31 Simkins, *World War I*, 219

32 Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 151–3; Also relevant here is Sebastian Haffner's tirade against comradeship, even though he wrote it in connection with the experiences of 1933. Comradeship does not merely mean that soldiers fight on, it is needed to get them to fight in the first place; it is fatal to any form of individualism and has nothing to do with friendship, is perhaps even incompatible with it. Haffner, *Geschichte eines Deutschen*, 265–72

33 Holmes, *Firing Line*, 74–5; Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 105–7; Hynes, *Soldiers' Tale*, 53–4

34 Hynes, *Soldiers' Tale*, 280; Liddle & Cecil, *Facing Armageddon*, 824–5

There were some sectors of the front where, although life may not have been pleasant, it was a good deal quieter than at Verdun in 1916, the Somme in the summer and autumn of that year, or Ypres at any time during the war. Sometimes there was even what was known as a 'live and let live system'.[35] Barthas gives a number of examples, with obvious approval, and according to Blunden it was one of the few sensible things about the war. Their soldierly satisfaction should not disguise the fact that this system, understandably, was a thorn in the flesh of the army leadership, which put an end to it despite the inevitable physical and psychological consequences for the troops.[36] Burial truces, and ceasefires for the retrieval of the dead and wounded, were held fairly regularly until unilaterally banned by the British high command in the spring of 1917 on the grounds that the enemy was treacherous by nature. The army leadership's success in enforcing the ban suggests that the live and let live system was not based on empathy for the opposing side. Hatred of the enemy, which arose soon after the outbreak of war, was strong and vibrant in these sectors too. The importance of the system, if it was ever truly that, should not be exaggerated. Before 1914 it was more the rule than the exception for the enemy to be given an opportunity to collect its wounded, but in the First World War casualties were deliberately shot at, and stretcher-bearers who tried to save them were by no means always spared. The truces that occurred from time to time were therefore less a sign of fraternization between men on opposing sides than the consequence of a shared wish to reduce, for a while at least, the generally astonishing level of violence.

The often cited fraternization between German and Allied front-line troops should be seen as a generalization based on isolated instances. There was certainly respect for the skill and courage of the enemy, along with recognition of and empathy for his sufferings and privations, which were similar on both sides. But respect, recognition and empathy are not the same as friendship. Enmity that often grew into frank hatred was the norm; fraternization was the exception that proved the rule, and however often friendly contact occurred, the dominant feelings towards the enemy remained abhorrence and fear. Most truces seem to have arisen in the absence of any direct threat. A reduction in danger meant a reduction in hatred. When the threat level rose, the dying and killing resumed, with just as much physical and psychological ferocity as before.[37]

The much vaunted Christmas and other truces should not distract us from the main feature of the First World War: its level of violence. In his generally excellent *The Soldiers' Tale*, Samuel Hynes writes that books full of endless suffering, the works of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon for example, do not describe the war. Rather they are personal attempts to come to terms with a conflict the authors

---

35 Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, passim; Keegan, *First World War*, 357–8; Glover, *Humanity*, 159–60

36 Barthas, *Carnets*, 355–7, 361; Blunden, *Undertones of War*, 154; Binneveld, *Om de geest*, 69–70

37 Ellis, *Eye-Deep*, 171; Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *'14–'18*, 47, 77, 151–2

had experienced at a personal level, so they describe the hangover after the war rather than the war itself. Although he is of course right to point out that not all soldiers were victims who suffered endlessly and passively before returning home bitter and disillusioned,[38] this is a slightly unfortunate remark, not least because a hangover is usually the consequence of an enjoyable, perhaps somewhat too enjoyable evening. Nevertheless, a hangover does not arrive without warning, however much fun went into getting it, and Graves and others describe suffering that undoubtedly originated in the realities of war. Graves certainly did not come to hate war. He was always proud of his years with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and extremely surprised to find his book, *Goodbye to All That*, categorized as 'anti-war literature'. A similar ambivalence emerges when we look at other supposedly anti-war writers: they criticized the war, but at the same time they were part of it and would not have had it any other way.[39]

Personal accounts by Graves and others did not prevent the thousands of anonymous soldiers who implemented the generals' strategy and tactics, the men who suffered as a result of the plans of the high command, all too often being forgotten amid a wealth of detail about the machinations of named staff officers, just as in many war documentaries the features of a weapon are treated as if they were an end in themselves, its qualities extolled at the expense of any consideration of its effects on the human body. To overstate the importance of strategy and tactics, comradeship and courage, and understate the horrors by giving a quick summary of the numbers of dead and wounded in a few final paragraphs, quite often leaving the sick out of account altogether, is likewise to do an injustice to those who fought and died.

No wonder Simkins' belief that to look only at the horrors is to fall prey to distortion is not shared by all historians. John Ellis, for example, wrote in a book to which he gave the expressive title *Eye-Deep in Hell* that we must never forget that this war was unparalleled in its cruelty and suffering, no matter how heart-warming its comradeship, how admirable its deeds of courage and self-sacrifice, how impressive its literary testimony. Books must indeed be written about these uplifting qualities, he says, but the soldiers will have died for nothing if we fail to emphasize that the Western Front was a four-year nightmare 'of filth, decay, noise, blood and death' such as had never been seen before. It was a war in which men fought 'for reasons they hardly understood, for a future they almost ceased to believe in, and which offered nothing when it came'.[40] Dutch battlefield expert Chrisje Brants writes in the introduction to her *Een plasje bloed in het zand* (A Pool of Blood in the Sand), 'They were years in which hope and idealism turned to despair and disillusionment, in which tens of millions of civilians were to discover for themselves what modern war meant and among soldiers alone tens of millions

38 Hynes, *Soldiers' Tale*, 105

39 Liddle & Cecil, *Facing Armageddon*, 821, 829

40 Ellis, *Eye-Deep*, 204

lost their lives.'[41] Perhaps influenced by Dalton Trumbo's novel *Johnny Got His Gun*,[42] she calls into question words that are often used without any real thought: 'honour', 'courage' and 'glory':

> What is honourable about drowning in mud or choking on your own saliva after a gas attack? What is courage and what is cowardice if modern artillery bombardments can reduce healthy young men to incontinent nervous wrecks? Where is the glory in being torn to unrecognisable shreds without ever laying eyes on the enemy?[43]

Jay Winter and Blaine Baggett, in their *1914–18: The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*, wholeheartedly agree. 'There was nothing sacred about asphyxiating after a gas attack at Ypres, or being buried alive at Verdun, or being riddled with machine gun bullets on the Somme.'[44] Roger Chickering writes that the word 'hero' does not properly characterize the men. Soldiers 'were more aptly portrayed as the proletarians of industrial war, or as animals that burrowed into muddy labyrinths for shelter until they emerged – in what were called offensives'.[45]

Some commentators have gone so far as to compare the First World War with the Shoah: the same endless lines of people plodding towards almost certain death; men confined to a small stretch of ground surrounded by barbed wire, plagued by lice and disease. Keegan points out that accounts of the Somme produce much the same range of emotions as descriptions of how Auschwitz was run, and historian Omer Bartov said in his lecture 'Industrial Killing: World War I, the Holocaust, and Representation' that the Shoah, the foremost example of 'militarized killing', cannot be explained without examining the 'industrial killing' of 1914–18 that preceded it, 'the mechanized, impersonal, and sustained mass destruction of human beings, organized by states, legitimized and set into motion by scientists and jurists, sanctioned and popularized by academics and intellectuals'.[46] Perhaps these writers have in mind the words of one British poet on the eve of the Somme: 'It's going to be a bloody holocaust.' But this merely demonstrates that the word Shoah is a better term for the murder of six million Jews in the Second World War. There are even those who, consciously or unconsciously, regard the First World War as the more terrifying of the two, since those transported to the slaughterhouses were

41 Brants, *Plasje bloed*, 8

42 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 109–10

43 Brants, *Plasje bloed*, 9

44 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 382

45 Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 96

46 Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 255–6; Bartov, 'Industrial killing', 1; World War I, the Holocaust, and representation', http://www.anti-rev.org/textes/Bartov97a/index.html, 'Jahrhundert der Kriege', 112, 114, 115; Addison & Calder, *Time to Kill*, 353

not ‘the enemy’ but the nation’s own sons.[47] The latter commentators in particular are clearly wrong. From any perspective, the soldiers of the First World War died in battle, the victims of the Shoah were murdered.

The soldier as ‘Hero’

During the war, of course, courage and honour were generally treated with great respect, at least when spoken of in public. The Battle of Langemarck on 22 and 23 October 1914, in which thousands of German boys with hardly any military training were mown down by rifle fire from highly skilled British professional soldiers, became the subject of mass propaganda in Germany. The students’ deaths were proof of the noble, self-sacrificial, heroic character of the German people. They were said to have marched to their deaths singing ‘*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*’, later to become the German national anthem, which seems unlikely on account of its tempo and rhythm alone. They may have sung some other German song, if only, as George Mosse suggests in his book *Fallen Soldiers*, to avoid coming under fire from their own troops. The fervour was not universally shared, however. With their sceptical attitudes towards courage and honour, Brants, Winter and Baggett are in fact following a line taken at the time by an ordinary German soldier, Herbert Weißer, who in March 1915, two months before his death, wrote that the impression given in history lessons, in stories told by parents and in books was thoroughly misleading. Every soldier was given the honorary title ‘Hero’; soldiers stopped being ordinary people, they were Heroes who performed Heroic deeds, spilled Heroic blood, died Heroic deaths and were buried in Heroes’ graves.[48] A Hero’s death should not be mourned, he had been told, since the *Volk* lived on through the death of each individual soldier, and the community was more important than the individual. A man died in a bodily sense, but his spirit, his courage, his deeds remained to inspire future generations. This was the soldier cult, the cult of the warrior who, even when wounded, looks fiercely into the distance, firmly clasping his rifle, determined to resist the enemy that threatens his home, his wife and children. The cult gave a man’s demise on the battlefield a significance above and beyond mere death, an attitude that can also be seen, for example, among Flemish men whose comrades fell at the Yser. Their deaths would give new life to the battle to make Flanders a nation equal in status to Wallonia (the French-speaking part of Belgium), perhaps even an independent state. ‘Through your death we are great! Through our struggle you shall live’, wrote a fellow villager after the death of stretcher-bearer Lode de Boninge in May 1918.[49]

47 Koch, *Het begin van de barbarij*, 7 (column 4); De Schaepdrijver, *Taferelen uit het Burgerleven*, p. 70

48 Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 24; Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 70–71

49 De Schaepdrijver, *Taferelen uit het Burgerleven*, 97

But, asks Weißer, were heroic deeds really the hallmark of warfare, were they truly its most prominent and characteristic feature?

> How much of a contribution is made to these heroic deeds by momentary, instinctive excitement, perhaps lust for blood and unjustified hatred? ... There are also very quiet, unrecognized acts of heroism. (Really so much more rare in times of peace??). And there are alcoholism, aesthetic and ethical brutalization, spiritual and physical laziness. When do people ever write about those in their war reporting?[50]

As already noted, hatred soon became a central feature of the war. It may even have been one of the main reasons why the vast majority of soldiers, despite the privations later accorded so much prominence, continued to approve of the war and doggedly fought on. Their hatred resulted in brutalization in battle, which developed no less quickly, fuelled in part by the increasingly ferocious written commentary published in all the belligerent countries, even prior to 1914. It was a process of brutalization completely at odds with a process far more frequently emphasized as characteristic of modern times: civilization.[51]

Anything that creates an impression can later lose its effectiveness. The hollow nature of war propaganda would be a constant theme of pacifist-tinted war literature, or rather literature labelled pacifist, after the conflict was over. Ernst Johannsen, author of *Vier von der Infanterie* (*Four Infantrymen on the Western Front*), on which the film *Westfront 1918* was based, claimed that during the war many soldiers regarded the term 'hero's death' as a mockery. In *Der Mensch ist Gut* (Man is Good) by Leonhard Frank, a woman tries to imagine what the 'altar of the fatherland' must be, on which she is told her son has been sacrificed. She cannot.[52]

Protest was naturally forbidden during the war, but how could the soldiers fail to speak out against all this, in some way or other? They had every right to protest, as they saw it, because it was they who had to endure the privations, they who were forced to kill or be killed. No amount of censorship and regulation could quash their protests, any more than it was possible to prevent 'sheep bleating at the gates to the abattoir', in the eternal words of the trench newspaper *Le Bochofage* on 25 June 1917.[53]

Nevertheless, there was no mass revolt in all ranks, at least not in the form of open protest. There were men who thrived on war and would always regard it as the best of times; some enjoyed it from the start,[54] while others were so deformed

50 Witkop, *Kriegsbriefe*, 82

51 Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 162–33; Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *'14–'18*, 49–56, 139; Meire, *De Stilte van de Salient*, 32–3

52 Johannsen, *Vier von der Infanterie*, 36–7; Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 30

53 Audoin-Rouzeau, *14–18. Les combattants*, 71

54 Wilson, *Myriad Faces*, 755–6

by the war that they adapted to circumstances and began to find it pleasurable. Niall Ferguson, author *The Pity of War*, claims that this sense of pleasure may in fact have been the most important reason the war, despite all its misery, lasted so long.[55]

None of this should surprise us. War does not involve acts alien to human nature, and the aggression, the tendency to violence, which we probably all have in us to some degree, becomes, as Manning put it, an impersonal and incalculable force, a blind and irrational movement of the collective will, which cannot be controlled or understood. It can only be endured. War is a product of the characters of individuals. It distorts and exploits their personalities until eventually individuals no longer recognize themselves in the deeds they have performed, at the same time knowing that the war is part of them. As Manning wrote, 'a man might rave against war; but war, from among its myriad faces, could always turn towards him one, which was his own'.[56]

This does not alter the fact that only a few had fun, just as only a relatively small group hated the war with a passion. It has often been said that the vast majority felt neither joy nor rancour. Historian Denis Winter, author of *Death's Men*, says we should attribute this in part to the fact that most recruits were so young. They were not mature enough to assimilate their thoughts into a clear opinion about something as complex as war, with its endless torrent of sharply contrasting impressions. Bourke regards this middle group as the normal group, but she adds her own gloss. Most men felt guilty about killing one moment and intense pleasure in it the next. It was not 'normal' neither to hate the war nor to be having the time of your life. The normal reaction was both. A normal man both enjoyed the war and hated it; the two feelings existed side by side within him.[57]

Victims and perpetrators

It will be clear by now that discussion of the dead, sick and wounded of the Great War has not been entirely lacking. The casualties appear in a number of books, some extremely perceptive, although in the bulk of accounts they are mere statistics, numbers that cannot speak.[58] There are only a handful of exceptions[59] to the general rule that where historians write about the victims of war they do so in a fragmentary way,[60] or briefly in a separate chapter,[61] or as one aspect of a

55 Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 360

56 Manning, *Her Privates We*, 182; Wilson, *Myriad Faces*, 681

57 Bourke, *Intimate History*, 373; Winter, *Death's Men*, 226; Liddle & Cecil, *Facing Armageddon*, 823, 826–7

58 Verdoorn, *Arts en Oorlog*, 375

59 Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*

60 Winter, *Death's Men*; Brants & Brants, *Velden van weleer*

61 Ellis, *Eye-Deep*; Keegan, *Face of Battle*

study of the work of doctors and nurses.[62] They deserve better. The dead, sick and wounded are an integral part of any war, although not always to the same degree, if only because some wars are too short to produce the huge number of casualties seen in 1914–18. In the First World War, with its vast armies marching in serried ranks towards the machine-guns, military men, politicians, even ordinary men and women learned to see soldiers as units of calculation, as numbers rather than as human beings. This led to the notion, which soon found practical application, that whichever side proved able to take the highest losses would emerge victorious. This was to give the concept of 'victory' a meaning impossible to capture, even with reference to Pyrrhus.

At the same time we should not think of soldiers purely as victims. People occasionally speak of the 'innocent' army, but this is a reference to the generally non-belligerent middle class, the social stratum that produced the writers. Middle-class men joined up in their hundreds of thousands and had absolutely no idea what they were letting themselves in for. They learned very quickly, losing their innocence for ever, and in this sense it is right to describe them as a 'lost generation'. The twentieth century was the first in which soldiers could see themselves as victims rather than as agents or perpetrators. This was a consequence of the total helplessness of the individual in modern warfare.[63] In that sense they were indeed victims. But innocent, unwitting victims or not, the soldiers were also, indeed primarily, the active party. The shot precedes the wound. Although men caught in gunfire and shelling are central to this book, not dying but killing, sanctioned killing, is the main feature of war.

Most of the soldiers of 1914–18 went to the trenches voluntarily and those who recovered from physical or mental wounds often returned to front-line service, mainly out of solidarity with their comrades. After returning to the front in 1918, Owen wrote to his mother that he had gone 'to help these boys – directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can'.[64] It was solidarity like this which caused men to follow orders that meant almost certain death, rather than fear of punishment, patriotism, or loyalty to commanding officers. The vast majority obeyed, aware that refusing orders meant betraying fellow soldiers by making their task even harder, and firmly confident of their own immortality.[65] Nevertheless, when faced with a chance to save their own skins, 'every man for himself' was an even higher command.

Solidarity with other men was not the only reason. Soldiers also fought out of a vague sense of duty, or simply because they had said they would fight, for

62 Van Bergen, *Waarde generaal*; Van Bergen, *De Zwaargewonden Eerst?;* Binneveld, *Om de geest*; Eckart & Gradmann, *Die Medizin*; Gabriel & Metz, *A History of Military Medicine*; MacDonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*; Verdoorn, *Arts en Ooorlog*

63 Hynes, *Soldiers' Tale*, 128

64 Howorth, Shell-Shock, 8

65 Wilson, *Myriad Faces*, 681

fear of the consequences if they stopped and, despite everything, faith in the military leadership.[66] Understandable as this kind of loyalty may be, we cannot ignore the fact that without it the slaughter would have been impossible to sustain, and therefore that they called it down upon themselves to some extent. Whatever happened, they were willing to carry on fighting, and that willingness kept the war going.[67] Men were not merely wounded and killed, they wounded and killed in their turn and, as will already be clear, not always with a heavy heart.

The dead of the Eastern Front and the civilian victims

This book deals only with soldiers who died as a direct result of military violence. The dead on all fronts, for the full duration of the war, are estimated at between eight and ten million. In his book *Heeresbericht* (*Higher Command*), published in 1930, Edlef Köppen wrote out in full the number he reached by adding up the final totals per army: 'eight-million-two-hundred-and-fifty-five-thousand-five-hundred-and-thirty-four'.[68] A further limitation of this study is that I look only at the Western Front. One of several reasons for this is the entirely practical consideration that more facts are available about medical aspects of the war in the West. Furthermore, as medical historian Mark Harrison writes in 'The Medicalization of War – The Militarization of Medicine', since the nineteenth century, military doctors had gradually extended 'their influence within the armed forces by promising to improve morale and manpower efficiency', and it was on the Western Front in particular that 'medicine became an integral feature of military planning'. The French, British and German armies all 'developed sophisticated systems for the evacuation and treatment of the wounded' and 'severe manpower shortages and fear of a public backlash meant that governments and military commanders gave a much higher priority to the medical care of their troops' than in previous wars or at other battlegrounds.[69]

I also needed to consider whether research into the theatres of war in the Dardanelles and the East, in Italy and Africa, would produce much that was really new about sickness, death and injury to add to what could be gathered from the Western Front, apart from a huge increase in the bare statistics and a few relatively rare diseases specific to the East. It is important to add that at no stage did the war in the East reach the absolute impasse that characterized the Western Front for so long. The artillery played a smaller role and the cavalry a larger one, the use of gas was more significant in both military and human terms, and because of the racial

66 De Schaepdrijver, *Taferelen uit het Burgerleven*, 72

67 Andriessen, *De oorlogsbrieven van Unteroffizier Carl Heller*, 105–6; Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 176; Wilson, *Myriad Faces*, 361

68 Köppen, *Heeresbericht*, 462; Vondung, *Kriegserlebnis*, 264; Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 15

69 Harrison, 'The Medicalization of War – The Militarization of Medicine', 272

aspect the battles were often even more merciless and barbaric than in France and Belgium. Although in the war as a whole there were more deaths in the West than in the East – leaving aside other theatres of conflict – the Eastern Front was the most lethal in percentage terms, certainly in the first year of fighting.

Disease in particular took a heavy toll in the East. Epidemics, including malaria and typhoid (blamed, incidentally, on working-class Polish Jews) wreaked far more havoc than in the West. They were the main reason why deaths in the Serbian army reached 40 per cent and in the Romanian army around 30 per cent. Prisoners of war were not immune: 70,000 Austrian soldiers died in camps that lacked sanitation of any kind. The sufferings of prisoners continued long after the armistice. Spanish influenza tore through the camps like a scythe through dry grass and in early 1919 an epidemic of typhoid followed. Prisoners of war in the East were appallingly underfed, especially in Russian camps and – partly because of the blockade – those of the Central Powers. French and British prisoners received food parcels that alleviated the worst of their hunger, while the Romanians and Italians starved in their thousands.

In the armies of the Western Front, the mortality rate was considerably lower, at around fifteen per cent, but in the East the number of deaths fell after the first year, in absolute as well as percentage terms, whereas in the West the trend was upwards, until ultimately more blood flowed in the West than in the East. By the end of the war, more than half the men who had fought in France and Belgium were dead, wounded or missing.[70]

The desert war of T.E. Lawrence and the Arabs, the only First World War battle on land that is at all reminiscent of nineteenth-century warfare, with hand-to-hand combat and the cavalry as the deciding factor, is simply too small in numerical and geographical terms to be of any real significance to an investigation of this kind, and the same goes for the jungle warfare of the colonies.

All these are factors that would not apply were a book such as this to be written about the Second World War, for example. The differences between the Yser and Gallipoli in climatic, geographical and other conditions, and therefore in the nature of the fighting and the sickness and injury it produced, although considerable, are insignificant compared to the contrasts between Normandy and Iwo Jima, Leningrad and Hiroshima, Kursk and Midway, Arnhem and Stalingrad, El Alamein and Grebbeberg. A book along the same lines as this one but focusing on the Second World War might be impossible to write. The huge diversity of experiences of combat in the 1939–45 war makes it impossible to settle upon a single image, just as there is no single theatre that could be described as decisive. In part this may be a result of the fact that no arena of battle produced books

70 Holmes, *Firing Line*, 371; Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 77, 362–3; Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 40; Townshend, *Modern War*, 104; Vondung, *Kriegserlebnis*, 122, 129; Eckart & Gradmann, *Die Medizin*, 228, 234–5; Eckart & Gradmann, 'Medizin' in *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, 213; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, 224, 270; Keegan, *First World War*, 215; Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *'14–'18*, 112

and poems like those of Ernst Jünger, Erich Maria Remarque, Ernst Toller, Henri Barbusse, Louis Barthas, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen. The portrayal of the Western Front by these writers has become fixed in our minds as an image of the 1914–18 war as a whole. But maybe it is simply the truth. Perhaps the First World War was a trench war above all and the Second World War has no Tollers or Owens because it was too large for them, too varied and complex, possibly also because it was the *Second* World War. This is not to say that we have no single established impression of 1939–45, only that it is cinematographic and photographic in nature rather than literary, and what we recall most powerfully are images not of the conflict itself but of the death and destruction it caused, and the racial murder that was integral to it.

This is one more powerful factor that persuaded me to limit my study to the Western Front. Even had the various theatres of war differed substantially in the type and quantity of sickness, wounding and death, it would still remain the case that our image of the First World War is defined by the Western Front. For many, myself included, the First World War means the front in Belgium and France. It means Ypres, the Somme and Verdun, not Tannenberg. It was in the West that the war began, was won and lost, and came to an end. The First World War is Versailles, not Brest–Litovsk.

One of the major differences between the two world wars is that it is perfectly possible to write a book about the victims of the First World War without considering civilian casualties. For the last time, far fewer civilians than soldiers were killed as a direct result of military operations. Leaving the Spanish ’flu out of account, one in five of the dead were civilians. If we look solely at the direct casualties of the violence, the proportion is one in twenty.[71] Were we to ignore civilian victims in any study of the Second World War, essential aspects of the story would be missing, even should we decide to exclude the Shoah on the grounds that it was not an act of war.

Nevertheless, millions of civilians became casualties of the 1914–18 conflict, some directly, most indirectly.[72] Among those directly killed were some 15,000 civilians lost at sea when their ships were torpedoed.[73] Belgian civilians were executed in revenge for the alleged activities of *francs-tireurs*. I say alleged, because it was frustration in the face of unexpected military resistance that led the German high command to terrorize the Belgian population in the early days of the conflict, rather than outrage at sniping by civilians, which was merely an excuse. Civilian snipers were rare and in many places unknown. Every stray shot, every instance of ‘friendly fire’ between German companies – which occurred quite regularly in the confusion – was attributed to *franc-tireurs*, and many people came to believe in their existence as a result. Perhaps the ‘*franc-tireur*-psychosis’, as Luc Schepens calls it in his *België in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Belgium in the First

71 Bleker & Schmiedebach, *Medizin und Krieg*, 261

72 Gilbert, *First World War*, XV

73 Vondung, *Kriegserlebnis*, 122

World War),[74] was fostered by the fact that the Belgian army was inadequately equipped and aided by a uniformed militia – which was quickly stripped of its uniforms for this very reason. Yet the terror did have its *raison d'être*; it was intended to enable the Germans to adhere to their strategic plan. The German high command wanted to avoid a recurrence of the armed civilian resistance seen in the Franco-Prussian War. Many of the atrocities attributed to the Germans may have been exaggerated, but the stories had some basis in fact. Villages were burned to the ground, hundreds of local people were deported, and dozens, sometimes hundreds at a time, were summarily executed or killed by other means. This resulted in at least 5,500 civilian deaths in Flanders, fifteen hundred more than that in northern France. Tens of thousands were forcibly evacuated. The *furor teutonicus*, which would make itself felt so much more violently twenty-five years later, became a familiar concept.[75] It was not only German military action that cost Belgian lives; Belgian civilians were among the casualties of a British gas attack at Nieuport in early October 1916. Nor should we assume that the Germans had a monopoly on furor, which arises from a lethal combination of power and fear that can take hold of soldiers from any country in the world, making them thirst for blood.[76]

The Belgians suffered civilian casualties in the bombardments of Liège and Antwerp, as did the French during the bombardment of Reims in mid-September 1914.[77] Dutch journalist Alexander Cohen wrote of that bombardment, 'It was terrible and overwhelming. I watched as a poor man, a labourer, was mortally wounded before my eyes. His thigh was torn off, half his skull blasted away. Appalling.'[78] For the first time in history, bombardment was not limited to the maximum range of artillery. In the aerial bombing of London, for instance, a nursery school was hit and twenty children killed.[79] In Germany 768 civilians died as a result of Allied air strikes.[80] In the autumn of 1914, hundreds of citizens of Ypres were killed by German artillery fire, including one young girl whose leg was found several metres distant. Her other leg was smashed. Treatment at a French first-aid post could not save her and she bled to death, while a priest tried to keep her mother away to prevent her from seeing the condition in which her child was dying.[81] Injured civilians who were lucky enough to receive some kind

---

74 Schepens, 'België in de Eerste Wereldoorlog', 19

75 De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog*, 78–85, 90–91; De Schaepdrijver, *Taferelen uit het Burgerleven*, 64–5; *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Deutsche Juden*, 105; Riemann, *Schwester der Vierten Armee*, 128–9; Townshend, *Modern War*, 17; De Vos, *De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 35, 38; Heijster, *Ieper*, 57–61; Keegan, *First World War*, 91–3; Tuchman, *Guns of August* 173–4, 314–32; Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *'14–'18*, 82–6; Billstein, 'Gashölle Ypern', 105–8; Kammelar, Sicking & Wielinga, *De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 47–57, 120

76 Richter, *Chemical Soldiers*, 145; Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *'14–'18*, 70–71

77 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 64–6; De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog*, 93

78 Spoor, *Tegen de Hollandse kleingeestigheid*, 31

79 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 130–32

80 Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 100

81 Macdonald, *1914*, 374–5

of help and found themselves in military ambulances were often taken not to the most appropriate hospitals but to the closest, whether or not the doctors there had the time or inclination to treat them. They simply had to be got out of the way as quickly as possible. Civilians could not expect much empathy or compassion from soldiers either. The British tended to regard the Flemings as pro-German, while local people saw their allies' stubborn determination to hold on to Ypres as the cause of the destruction of the city and region they loved.

In 1914 American nurse Ellen La Motte began to write a book about her experiences nursing tuberculosis patients. She had moved to Paris in 1913, so she was one of the first American nurses to care for the war wounded. She joined a front-line surgical unit near Ypres run by Mary Borden, under French command. Borden was another of the thousands of American volunteers, but unlike La Motte she was not a professional nurse. Borden published an account of her war experiences in 1929 under the title *The Forbidden Zone*, but La Motte's book, no less dark and certainly no less valuable and well-written, appeared in the thick of it all, in 1916, as *The Backwash of War: The human wreckage of the battlefield as witnessed by an American hospital nurse*. She described the case of a Belgian boy taken by a British ambulance to a Belgian hospital, so that he would not take up valuable space in a British military infirmary, and in doing so she makes clear that the relationship between the people of Flanders and their British allies was not always particularly warm.

> As soon as he came out of ether, he began to bawl for his mother. Being ten years of age, he was unreasonable, and bawled for her incessantly and could not be pacified. The patients were greatly annoyed by this disturbance, and there was indignation that the welfare and comfort of useful soldiers should be interfered with by the whims of a futile and useless civilian, a Belgian child at that.[82]

Bombardment was not the only danger faced by people in towns along the front such as Ypres, those who had not already fled. The local population near the front line suffered repeated epidemics of diseases including typhoid, the result of poor sanitation and the shortage of clean drinking water, made worse by the presence of masses of refugees. Medical aid was scarce and often reserved exclusively for soldiers.[83]

We should remember too that violent deaths occurred even when there was no fighting. Working parties had to be sent out to collect weapons left behind after a battle and to clear unexploded munitions from the territory that had been gained. About a thousand men a month died this way.[84]

---

82 La Motte, *Backwash of War*, 63–4, 67; Cardinal et al., *Women's Writing*, 159; Higonnet, *Nurses at the Front*, Introduction, ix, xiii; Meire, *De Stilte van de Salient*, 63, 66

83 Macdonald, *1915*, 177–8; Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, 86–7

84 Macdonald, *Somme*, 193

There were casualties on the home front too, where women performed war work. Explosions in munitions factories – for example at Fürth in the spring of 1917 and shortly thereafter in Cologne – killed dozens.[85] Many women suffered the physical consequences of extremely unhealthy working conditions. Some became infertile. Graves saw the corpse of a man who had gone down to inspect the sewers near a weapons factory and was gassed by accidentally released chemical vapour.[86] Women in weapons factories should not be seen purely as victims, however. The remarkably perceptive Wilfred Owen wrote several days before his death, at the time of the British and American advance that would finally lead to the armistice, that at that very moment, shells made by women in Birmingham were burying small children alive not far from where he stood.[87]

The fact that work in munitions factories and other tasks were performed by women, who replaced men as they left for the front, was one reason why many of them welcomed the war despite the death toll among husbands, sons, brothers and friends. At last they could put their talents to use. They finally had a chance to play a full part in what they called an 'All man's land', a place that during the war they sometimes seemed happy to experience as a 'No man's land' or 'Herland', populated entirely by women.[88]

The majority of civilian casualties were caused indirectly. Some thirty million European civilians died of starvation and disease in 1914–18.[89] It is important to bear in mind that not all deaths from hunger or sickness in wartime were a result of the fighting, but many were. The privations suffered by German and Austrian civilians were partly caused by the Allied sea blockade. In Vienna the poorer segments of the population began dying of hunger in 1917. Towards the end of the war, state support for families left without an income by the absence of a breadwinner amounted to less than two slices of bread per day. In Germany few died from starvation as such – most who did were hospital patients not expected to recover, who were therefore of no further use to the war effort – but within about a year of the start of hostilities, German civilians began to succumb to illnesses linked to malnutrition, among them more than 140,000 psychiatric patients. The impact steadily increased. In the last winter of the war, around three-quarters of a million German civilians died as a result of wartime privations, barely fewer than would be killed by Allied bombing in the Second World War.[90]

---

85 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 130; Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 116

86 Graves, *Goodbye*, 217

87 Day Lewis, *Collected Poems*, 177

88 Higonnet, *Behind the Lines*, 204, 214, 216, 225

89 Winter, *Death's Men*, 204

90 Gilbert, *First World War*, 256, note 2; Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics*, 145; Horne, *Price of Glory*, 190–91; Toller, *Jugend in Deutschland*, 75; Townshend, *Modern War*, 13–14; Keegan, *First World War*, 344; Glover, *Humanity*, 65–6; Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics*, 281; Hofman, 'Oorlog aan het thuisfront', passim; Lerner, *Hysterical Men* (2003), 129

Pre-war Germany imported a large proportion of its food. Much came by ship, so a blockade was an extremely effective weapon. Food supplies immediately fell by a quarter. The quantity and quality of the food available were drastically reduced and the prices of staple foods rose dramatically. Harvests failed when artificial fertilizers could no longer be supplied and livestock numbers fell for lack of concentrates. Then there was the fatal *Schweinemord*, a huge reduction in pig stocks by mass slaughter, based on the argument that pigs were consuming all the grain. Pigs in fact ate hardly any of the grains intended for human consumption, and they did produce manure. For a short time there were plentiful supplies of pork, but in the longer term food production was reduced to even lower levels. The amount of food reserved for front-line soldiers was disproportionate, which indicates that the blockade, regarded by the Germans as a war crime and proof of the inhumanity of the French and British, was not solely responsible for the misery that cost an estimated 1,000,000 Germans their lives. The German war economy too, devoted to an even larger extent than the British and French to the production of munitions, played an important part in their deaths.

The German government concluded in 1917 that each citizen needed an absolute minimum of 45 marks a month to buy sufficient food. Many incomes were already falling short, and the war would last another year. In 1918 the average German adult lived on only 1,000 calories a day, half the basic requirement. Female mortality in 1914 was 11.2 per thousand per year; by 1918 it had risen to 17.8. For French males aged 59 or under in the years 1914–17 (which excludes the year of the Spanish ’flu), what are known as ‘excess deaths’ – in other words the actual number of people who died in a given year minus the number of deaths that would have been expected – were 6.5 per cent, 7.5 per cent, 0.5 per cent and 1 per cent respectively. For German males they were 3; 0.5; 8 and 21. The figures for French females were 5; 8; 3 and 2.5, whereas in Germany they rose relentlessly: 2.5; 4.5; 11.5 and 30.5. Pneumonia, tuberculosis and other illnesses associated with cold and hunger took a massive toll.

It is striking that mortality among babies did not rise in the war years. Perhaps the falling birth rate made it possible to reserve just enough for infants to eat and drink. Children aged between 5 and 15, however, became chronically sick and died in droves, perhaps partly because in a war economy the health of children was regarded as the responsibility not of government but of private charity. If we set the rate of childhood deaths in Germany in 1914 at 100, then by 1918 it had risen to 190 for boys aged 5 to 10 and 215 for boys aged 10 to 15. For girls aged 5 to 10 it was a little over 207 in 1918 and for girls aged 10 to 15 almost 240. This demonstrates that the shortages hit some harder than others. A similar imbalance can be seen between rich and poor, and between urban and rural populations. Those who had money or lived on the land did not go hungry, but the women and children of the poorer urban classes, with husbands or fathers at the front, were unable to cope. Towards the end of the war the problem became so acute that soldiers at the front saved food, from their own extremely meagre rations or from captured Allied stockpiles, for relatives at home. The armistice brought no

respite. The Germans had made the lifting of the sea blockade a condition of their capitulation, but the Allies refused to comply.[91]

This kind of suffering among the civilian population was not confined to Germany. In the final months of the war especially, when the German high command regarded Belgium purely as conquered land to be exploited for the war effort, the privations of the Belgians became acute. Hunger and cold claimed many lives in the last two winters of the war, largely because it became almost impossible to import food. This was partly the result of unlimited submarine warfare – several ships were sunk despite flying flags reading 'Relief for Belgium' – and partly because the British refused to lift their blockade even to help the Belgians. Hunger marches were common. The periodic famines of the nineteenth century had returned. The deportation of men who met minimal medical criteria – and even those who did not – caused further suffering. Many would return with wrecked constitutions, if at all.[92]

In the Balkans there was a huge exodus of Serbian refugees in 1914 and again in late 1915. Many died. Dutch doctor A. van Tienhoven, who would later serve on a committee set up to investigate Austrian war crimes, wrote an account of his medical work for the Serbs. He included photographs that would not have been out of place in *Krieg dem Kriege!*, published ten years later.

> The starving wretches trudged on day and night, and fell to the ground exhausted. How many children must have died on this *via dolorosa*? The parents would dig a little pit and mark the grave of their loved one with a cross of two tree branches. I've seen hundreds and hundreds of them, those simple twig crosses, like so many indictments of the horror of war.[93]

Within six months of the outbreak of war, more than 200,000 Serb civilians succumbed to typhus. And of course we should not forget the Armenians, victims of the first genocide of the twentieth century. The massacre may not actually have been caused by the war, but the war was the impetus for it and made it possible. Up to a million and a half Armenians are thought to have been killed.[94]

---

91 Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 71–3, 77–8, 97; Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 40–43, 102; 140–46; Heijster, *Ieper*, 100; Keegan, *First World War*, 344, 448; Macdonald, *To the Last Man*, xxiii; Holmes & De Vos, *Langs de Velden van Eer*, 118; Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics*, 288–9; Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *'14–'18*, 88

92 De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog*, 219–22, 228–30, 233; De Schaepdrijver, *Taferelen uit het Burgerleven*, 84–5

93 Tienhoven, *Gruwelen van den Oorlog*, 98

94 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 144–53; Verdoorn, *Arts en Oorlog*, 364; Tienhoven, *Gruwelen van den Oorlog*, 98–107; Heijster, *Ieper*, 157; Eckart & Gradmann, *Die Medizin*, 228

Then there were the millions who lost their struggle with Spanish influenza, an epidemic that cost more lives worldwide than the war itself.[95] The Spanish 'flu meant that for many soldiers who had survived the conflict both physically and mentally, the suffering did not end on 11 November 1918. They arrived home to find that people they had been forced to leave – wives, girlfriends, children, parents, brothers, sisters, friends – had died of influenza. Corporal O.W. Flowers said later: 'To think I'd gone the four years without a scratch except a bit of gas, and got to the end of the war and then to lose her. … By the time I got home she'd been buried three days.'[96] This raises questions about the connection between the influenza epidemic and the war, which we shall deal with later.

The voracious requirements of the medical services responsible for treating wounded and sick soldiers had a disastrous effect on civilian health care. Many civilians died of diseases they could just as easily have contracted in more prosperous times but which they might have survived had adequate help been available. To take Germany as an example: of the 33,000 doctors available on the eve of war, 26,000 (1,300 of whom would not live to see the end of the conflict) were sent to serve in military hospitals, along with some 12,000 dentists and pharmacists. Of those 26,000, only about 2,000 were serving as army doctors when war broke out. Even if we leave aside those who were medical officers in the reserve, 17,000 doctors were removed from the general health care system – or in many cases removed themselves from it, since doctors believed that in wartime their place was at the front and in military hospitals. This resulted in a ratio of one doctor per 5,800 civilians, whereas before the war there had been roughly one per 1,500.[97]

The same picture emerges with regard to the more than 200,000 nurses who came to the aid of the German armed forces. Some were volunteers, men and women who had not been active in the medical sector before the war, but many others came from civilian hospitals and medical institutions. This assumes even greater significance when we consider that they all focused their attention on men aged eighteen to forty, a social group least likely to visit a hospital in normal times. Perhaps this helps to explain why many medical practitioners have such vivid memories of their time in war hospitals. Not only were the wounds new to them, they were dealing with patients of a quite different type.[98]

Germany was not alone in this. In Britain the problem was less urgent, since 'only' 45 per cent of doctors joined up, resulting in a ratio of one doctor to 2,350 inhabitants where the norm had been 1,300, but in France no fewer than eighty per

95 Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, 287

96 Macdonald, *1914–18*, 316–17

97 Eckart & Gradmann, *Die Medizin*, 11–21 (article: Ingo Tamm, 'Ein Stand im Dienst der nationalen Sache'); Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics*, 283; Jenssen, *Medicine Against War*, 16

98 Bleker & Schmiedebach, *Medizin und Krieg*, 15, 262; Winter, *Death's Men*, 200–201

cent of doctors went to the front or to military hospitals, so that of a total of 22,000 only 2,500 were left to serve 35.5 million civilians, an average of one to 14,000. Naturally they were not evenly spread, so whole regions had to manage throughout the war without any professional medical care at all. Where medical services were available they were often useless. The pharmacies were empty. Medicines had been removed along with the doctors. The health of the civilian population was clearly less important than that of the troops, as illustrated by the battle against tuberculosis. From the outbreak of war almost the entire bed capacity of France's TB clinics (desperately inadequate to begin with) was reserved for soldiers. No beds at all were available for women and children.[99] In 1917 America too began to deplete its civilian medical services, and those doctors and nurses who neither volunteered nor were forced to join the army tended to be the least competent.

This left a final total of around forty million deaths among soldiers and civilians, and many millions more suffered permanent physical or psychological damage.[100] To this day there are occasional fatalities as a result of explosions caused by First World War munitions, with dud shells, bombs, mortars and grenades still hidden in fields and woods all along the front.[101] It is even possible that without the First World War the war of 1939–45 might never have taken place, if only because the peace negotiations at Versailles were a triumph of hatred over reason, retribution over reconciliation, and power politics over idealism. No one studying the causes of the Second World War can afford to ignore Versailles. The treaty was not really a peace treaty at all. It was the prelude to a new, terrible and even more spectacular symphony of death,[102] although in recognizing the legitimacy of German resentment at the *Versailler Diktat* we should not forget that the treaty made by Germany with Russia in March 1918 could hardly be described as any more fair and just.[103]

Animal suffering

The sufferings of cavalry horses, for example, were almost indescribable. The pain caused to animals is not the subject of this book, but it undoubtedly contributed to the mental sufferings of soldiers. The sight of a wounded horse, and perhaps even worse the *sound* of a wounded horse, was harrowing in the extreme. Alan Hanbury-Sparrow described the order received during the retreat from Mons to give wounded horses the *coup de grâce* as 'perhaps the most senselessly savage order ever issued by the staff'. Graves grew used to the sight of human corpses,

99 Eckart & Gradmann, *Die Medizin*, 343–64 (article: Lion Murard & Patrick Zylberman, 'The Nation Sacrificed for the Army?'); Barry, *The Great Influenza*, 143

100 Keegan, *History of Warfare*, 50; Winter, *Death's Men*, 204

101 Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 205

102 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 321, 338–41, 347–8

103 Murray, 'West at war', 288

but he was shocked every time he saw a dead horse or donkey. For Lieutenant J.W. Naylor the most depressing image of the war was of six horses, startled by an explosion, veering off the road and down into the mud of the Ypres Salient, that bulge in the front line where the British faced German troops on three sides. They sank faster and faster, wagon and horses disappearing within minutes. Norman Gladden heard one horse bellow horribly with pain as it ran across the battlefield with its entrails hanging out of its gashed stomach. He was more shocked by that sight, by that 'protest against man's inhumanity', than by all the other images of that afternoon's nightmare that burned themselves into his memory.

Martin Gilbert calculates that in the years 1914 to 1918 more than half a million horses died violent deaths, drowned, or succumbed to sickness and exhaustion. This may be a conservative estimate. At St Jude on the Hill in Hampstead stands a monument to the 375,000 horses that died in the war on the British side alone.[104]

Horses were even killed by biological warfare. Germany sent glass vials of plague bacilli, packed in soap, to Argentina, Spain, Romania and the US to infect the horses and mules intended for sale to the Allies for war service. This was a perilous business in terms of international law, since Spain and Argentina were neutral countries throughout the war, and Romania and the US for a good part of it. On the Eastern Front biological warfare against animals was waged directly. But although Russian units were depleted by drinking water contaminated with cholera, in 1914–18 human beings were spared deliberate bacterial infection. The head of the section involved in attempting to infect animals advised against it, and a certain Dr Winter, who suggested to the German war ministry in 1916 that plague bacilli should be scattered across London, was reprimanded. 'With all due respect for your patriotism, if we take such a step we will no longer deserve to exist as a nation.'[105] The question will always remain: might the chemical horrors have been accompanied by their biological counterparts if someone had been able to convince political or military institutions that biological weapons could be aimed solely at the enemy, without infecting friendly soldiers and civilians, and lead to final victory?

Atrocity propaganda

The British, for example, felt no particular hostility towards Germany, indeed rather more towards France, and the effort to change this gave rise to what became known as atrocity propaganda. This is another aspect of the war that will not be dealt with here, at least not explicitly. Crucified Canadians and Germans, children

104 Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, 188; Graves, *Goodbye*, 173; Dearden, *Medicine and Duty*, 153; Holmes, *Firing Line*, 106; Gilbert, *First World War*, XX; Dyer, *The Missing*, 44–5; Frey, *Pflasterkästen*, 249–50

105 'Rotz und Milzbrand', 55; De Vos, *Van Gifgas tot Penicilline*, 19; De Vos, *De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 107

with their hands chopped off, raped nuns or impaled pregnant women have no place in this book. Nor do such documents as a letter published in the British periodical *Comic Cuts*, supposedly written by a German soldier, in which he writes to his wife Greta that he has 'bayoneted seven women and four young girls' in the space of five minutes.[106] It is important to add that there was not in fact any 'propaganda' in the strict sense of the word. No fabricated stories were distributed by the military and political authorities with the aim of fuelling hatred for the enemy and thereby strengthening the will to fight. Propaganda consisted of stories that arose among the ranks of soldiers and civilians, and were sincerely believed by them. Perhaps such tales had a greater and more subtle impact for this very reason, but although neither distributed from above nor deliberately invented, their effect was nevertheless to deepen the gulf between the two sides, increasing the hatred and making the fighting even more horrific.[107] In other words, the victims featured in propaganda were mythical, but the victims of propaganda were all too real.

The war at sea and in the air

One final lacuna in this book concerns the casualties of the naval and air wars. In some ways the dilemma here is similar to that already discussed in the context of the many different theatres of the Second World War and the focus on trench warfare that characterizes so many accounts of the 1914–18 conflict. In contrast to the Second World War there were relatively few dead and wounded at sea and in the air. Of the more than two million German men in the armed forces who died, only about 35,000 were sailors. This is of course partly due to the fact that the navies of the First World War were tiny in comparison to the land armies, but sailors were also fighting a totally different kind of war and had a comparatively good chance of surviving. Whereas around one in eight soldiers died and one in four were wounded, in the navies the mortality rate was one in sixteen and in the air forces one in fifty. The proportion of sick and wounded was a tenth that of the ground forces.[108] This last statistic is easy to explain. The lives of sailors and airmen were not particularly unhealthy, and where should we look for the wounded? If a ship was torpedoed and sank, the passengers and crew were drowned, save for a few extremely fortunate individuals; if a plane was hit, the pilot died.[109]

Aerial battles and desert warfare provided the First World War with its handful of individual heroes. In the post-war years the cult of the hero underwent a transition. It no longer applied to every soldier, the anonymous soldier, the unknown soldier,

106 Winter, *Death's Men*, 209; Heijster, *Ieper*, 59; Holmes, *Firing Line*, 389; De Schaepdrijver, *Taferelen uit het Burgerleven*, 66

107 March, *Company K*, 115–16; Winter, *Death's Men*, 211–13; Liddle & Cecil, *Facing Armageddon*, 226–7, 326; Guéno & Laplume, *Paroles de poilus*, 46

108 Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 41; Vondung, *Kriegserlebnis*, 122

109 Winter & Baggett, *1914–18*, 134–8

but to a few famous characters whose names were known to all, like Canada's Billy Bishop and Germany's Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron. These were names that made hearts beat faster and after the war men longed to emulate them. The anachronistic nature of the desert war and the futuristic nature of the air war, in which the enemy was known by name and honoured in death by friend and foe alike, meant that even after 1918 warfare was still bathed in an aura of romanticism. An airman could look his opponent in the eye. If he won, it was down to his own courage and skill. If he lost, it was because his opponent had outclassed him. Air 'ace' Cecil Lewis writes about the ground war with a sense of horror. At least he did not have to sit in a muddy trench 'while someone who had no personal enmity against you loosed off a gun, five miles away, and blew you to smithereens – and did not know he had done it!'[110] Lewis, and many others like him, believed that because modern warfare did not fit the myth of the personal, heroic battle, bound by rules and dominated by horses and bayonets, it was not war at all, it was murder.[111]

Just how far removed the world of the airman seemed from that of trenches and battlefields was illustrated by Billy Bishop, who sat in his plane watching an attack on Arras in early 1917, across territory covered in virgin snow.

> No-man's-land, so often a filthy litter, was this morning clean and white. Suddenly over the top of our parapet a thin line of infantry crawled up and commenced to stroll casually towards the enemy. To me it seemed they must soon wake up and run; that they could not realize the danger they were in. Here and there a shell would burst as the line advanced and halted for a minute. Three or four men near the burst would topple over like so many tin soldiers. Two or three other men would come running up to the spot from the rear carrying stretchers, pick up the wounded or dying and slowly walk back with them. I could not get the idea out of my head that it was just a game they were playing at. It all seemed so unreal. … It seemed that I was in an entirely different world looking down from another sphere on this strange, uncanny puppet show.[112]

The misery was universal

Another point that may occur to the reader is that this book places a slightly disproportionate emphasis on British suffering. This has nothing to do with any personal bias on my part; it is a straightforward consequence of the material available. More has been published about the British and their Great War than

110 Hynes, *Soldiers' Tale*, 87; Keegan, *First World War*, 386–7, 435; Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 25; Bourke, *An Intimate History*, 59; Meire, *De Stilte van de Salient*, 75

111 Bourke, *An Intimate History*, 67

112 Winter, *Death's Men*, 185

about the French, Belgians or Germans. It was not at all my intention to make British suffering more apparent than any other. I focus on all those who suffered in the war, irrespective of nationality. Moreover, the surplus of British material means not only that the British dead and wounded appear slightly more frequently than others, but that the less attractive side of the British war effort receives additional emphasis, its 'friendly horrors', to paraphrase one of the euphemisms with which military jargon is replete. I am thinking, for example, of the much more frequent occurrence in the British army than the German, or even Britain's 'own' Dominion forces, of death sentences passed for actual or supposed cowardice.

Ultimately the imbalance in the quantity of material available seems of little importance. When Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) was published, many British soldiers exclaimed, 'That's what it was like!' (although a few unimpeachable individuals such as Edmund Blunden fiercely disputed this).[113] The experiences of British subjects described in the following must surely have closely matched those of soldiers in other armies, no matter in which section of the front they were fighting: French or Austrian, Russian or Turk. After the war, contrasting political, social and economic circumstances led to sharply contrasting reactions, but that is a separate issue. While admitting that he could never fully explain, even to his own satisfaction, why it was so, Bartov wrote that although they may have fought similar wars on the Western Front in 1914–18, French and German responses to it in the post-war period were vastly different.

> At the risk of somewhat over-generalising a highly complex phenomenon, I would suggest that for large sectors of the French population, coping with the traumatic memory of the First World War was only bearable as long as it remained in the past, never to be re-enacted; while for a growing number of Germans, the unbearable memory of defeat and socio-political upheaval could be overcome only by re-enacting, and thereby 'correcting' it in a future confrontation. ... In Germany, we might say, the dead increasingly *scolded* the living for giving up the fight, while in France they constantly *warned* the living against thinking of ever repeating it.[114]

In this book I describe a small part of the total, horrific experience of soldiers who served on the front line between 1 August 1914 and 11 November 1918, voluntarily or not. I see their sufferings as illustrative of the horrors confronted by all those exposed to war. To paraphrase Owen: my subject is war, and the horrors of war. All a historian can do is describe, and yet, as Paul Fussell remarks in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the suffering of the trenches and battlefields of 1914–18 was more horrible than any description provided then or in

---

113 Liddle & Cecil, *Facing Armageddon*, 814

114 Addison & Calder, *Time to Kill*, 353–4

the decades that followed could suggest.[115] Private Daniel J. Sweeney wrote to his fiancé Ivy: 'I cannot tell you the horrors of this war.'[116] German Lance-Corporal Gotthold von Rohden noted in mid-1915, two months before his death, that attempts to enumerate the losses suffered by various battalions amounted merely to a naked depictions of events, 'and what terrible perceptions of the human soul they contain! Things all the books in the world have not the power to convey.'[117] They are right. I am fully aware that I have not succeeded in conveying even a small part of the horror.

Leo van Bergen

115 Fussell, *Great War*, 174

116 Fussell, *Bloody Game*, 49; also: *J'accuse*, 297

117 Witkop, *Kriegsbriefe*, 121