

World War One: A War of Nerves

著者	MACPHERSON Jeff
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Jeff MACPHERSON

Abstract

21st Century wars and terrorism naturally attract media attention for their impacts on society and the psychological effects they have on modern societies. The Great War is often overlooked though, due to perceptions of it being a war that was conducted in a gentlemanly and honorable way, with civilian populations being sheltered and somewhat disconnected to the wars waged on distant fronts. Not only was the carnage witnessed on the battlefronts unparalleled in conflicts before or since World War I, but the impacts on society as whole were substantial and challenged the very foundations of modern European society.

要 約

21世紀に入って勃発した戦争やテロ活動は、社会へ与えた衝撃や現代社会への心理的影響力によってメディアの必然的関心となっている。一方、第一次世界大戦は、一般市民は戦争から隔離され、遠く離れた戦線で行われた戦争とは直接的関与がないままに遂行されたこともあり、紳士的かつ良心的戦争であるという認識がある。そのため一般的に軽視されがちである。しかし戦史上未曾有の戦線での大量殺戮、さらに第一次大戦がもたらした社会的影響は見逃せないものであり、近代ヨーロッパ社会の根幹を揺るがした戦争として注目に値するのである。

The Great War gave Europe its first real taste of conditions close to total war, and it also illustrated the ease at which modern weapons could devour an opponent's army without much actual territorial gain.¹ Politicians and statesmen felt the impacts of the Great War, as they had to hold their nerves and pursue policies that required military victories.² They also had to provide the unprecedented requirements of the military for its costly campaigns, both in terms of men and materiel.³ The attrition and mutilation experienced at the fronts was something that the high command of all powers had to endure, and in turn, the men fighting in the front lines had their masculinity and sanity tested in previously unheard of conditions. The home front was not spared the horrors of war, and it also became a severe test of nerves for women left to fill the void made by men fighting the war.⁴ The Great War was a war of nerves with unimaginable ramifications and devastating shockwaves that were felt all throughout European society, by men and women of all ranks and roles, both on the war front and at home.

Even prior to the outbreak of fighting between the major European powers in the summer of 1914, the machinations of war were creating a tense atmosphere and testing the nerves of politicians, statesmen and royal family members.⁵ The desire to prevent war shown by Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, the Russian czar Nicholas, the Austrian emperor Franz-Joseph, and the French premier Viviani, unfortunately gave way for the more

aggressive plans of each state's respective generals and military leaders.⁶ John Turner claims that the generals were often able to assert their desires and strategies with their superiors, and at the same time remain somewhat insulated from the pressures faced by their ruling parties; they 'manipulated popular opinion, the press, and parliamentary factions to their own ends, and protected the mystique of military insight from a skeptical civilian gaze.'⁷ Such manipulation coupled with growing nationalism, feelings of righteousness and morality – not to mention the romance and excitement supposedly on offer as an escape from the mundane – led to a general feeling of joy, opportunity and optimism.⁸ This however, proved to be a blatant underestimation and miscalculation of what a major European war would entail.⁹ Robin Higham asserts that it was the failure of the political and military leaders in 1914 to understand the full ramifications and costs of a continental war on their societies, ideologies and economies that ultimately led to the carnage known as the Great War.¹⁰ The nerves of each belligerent state would be soon tested more so upon the onset of combat operations, as the *war to end all wars* illustrated the ghastly effectiveness of modern military and technological advances pitted against armies with outdated tactics and misconceptions about the longevity of such costly campaigns.¹¹

Military strategies employed by the major powers in 1914 were underpinned by a 'will to conquer', but failed to recognize or account for the lethality of modern weapons.¹² Massive troop build-ups on both sides to bolster offensive capabilities were withered away in no time. By the end of 1915 there were over one and a half million dead or wounded.¹³ New weapons such as bolt-action rifles, machine guns, and more accurate breech loading artillery, combined with technological advances in gunpowder and explosives, decimated armies with devastating accuracy. Furthermore, production techniques were such that arms could be produced at a rate and quantity that 'produced a type of war with no precedent.'¹⁴ In light of such formidable weapons, defensive lines, trenches, and casualty rates, attrition became a tactic - a deadly waiting game - with the victor the one not necessarily moving forward and winning precious ground, but merely the one that stood numerically superior at the end of the battles, and ultimately the war.¹⁵ One such British campaign infamous for its wanton waste of life, lack of flexible tactics and contingency plans was the Gallipoli campaign launched on April 25, 1915. Sir Winston Churchill, the first Lord of the Admiralty, saw this amphibious assault on steep rocky cliffs adjacent to beaches, which gifted the entrenched enemy soldiers atop a full view of most of the battleground as 'a legitimate war gamble.'¹⁶ Is it no wonder that the men on the fronts were subject to the ultimate test of nerves.

The Central Powers however, were not immune to the carnage and waste of life experienced by the Entente. According to John Terraine, the German high command was 'no less appalled than the British or French at the deadlock produced by battles and offensives as early as autumn 1914.'¹⁷ In late 1914 Chief of Staff von Falkenhayn advised the German chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg 'Germany is finished and victories can no longer be guaranteed',¹⁸ and the war 'could not be won militarily.'¹⁹ Likewise, Britain's failures to make headway into German lines to overcome the stalemate, combined with the Gallipoli debacle, ushered in murmurings of peace talks and ceasefire negotiations.²⁰ Peace would not be forthcoming though, as by the time Germany and Britain had started to fathom the magnitude of the horror being unleashed upon their armies and citizens, it was too late for either side to put the carnage behind them and attempt to make peace.²¹ The French parliament was also

succumbing to infighting and divisions in the ranks by the end of 1916.²² World War I quickly became a war of nerves for the politicians as they not only had to deal with the generals, the public, and their political allies and foes, but also the death and destruction being witnessed on the fronts for seemingly no gains or rewards. John Morrow described the war as ‘a desperate race to see which army would collapse first.’²³

Criticism of the British high command - and of General Haig in particular - arose regarding tactics, as out of all of the major powers on the Western Front, the British were initially the least flexible and unable to learn from the disasters experienced since the onset of the war.²⁴ For example, the Germans and the French both adapted more defensive tactics, choosing not to ‘roll the dice’ and test flesh against metal unless necessary.²⁵ When they did engage in offensive actions, tactics became more fluid and open to input from military commanders on the front. Gone were the days of infantrymen burdened by heavy packs marching shoulder to shoulder across open ground headlong into the withering fire of enemy machine guns and artillery fire.²⁶ The British, on the other hand, were still using tactics better suited to the *Crimean War* or the *Napoleonic Wars*.²⁷ Nationality aside, ‘going over the top’ was still a test of nerves for all men upon whom fate had bestowed such a gruesome and unromantic end. Accordingly, John Terraine writes that, ‘heroism became a dubious asset, multiplying the mortality with little visible reward.’²⁸

There was to be little respite for any of the combatants. As the war proceeded, the massacres continued to reach new lows and unleash further horrors upon the nations involved. Even after two years of intense fighting and sacrifice, the Entente powers were still not willing to compromise on anything less than the total defeat of the Central Powers.²⁹ In 1916, new offensives were launched by all sides in the hope of breaking the deadlock and bringing the war to an end by military means. Perhaps the most infamous battles - the battles for *The Somme* and *Verdun* - resulted in little territorial gain for the cost of over one million dead, and convinced all sides that the war could not end quickly.³⁰ The first day of the Battle of the *Somme* alone accounted for 20,000 British dead, becoming the greatest one-day losses in the history of the British Army.³¹ Likewise at *Verdun*, such was the devastating effect of German artillery, that *Hill 304* was lowered by 20 metres. Trevor Wilson and Robin Prior succinctly summarize the folly of the *Great War*:

Huge encounters between rival armies were prepared and executed, great numbers of lives were extinguished, but no decisive results ensued. Bits of territory might change hands, but usually not large bits or of any strategic significance. And each great battle was not the culmination of anything. It was only a prelude to another great battle.³³

Soldiers became ‘meat for the grinder’, but manliness, loyalty, victory, and mateship became motivations for men to accept their fate and ‘do their bit’.³⁴ George Mosse refers to the notions of ‘doing one’s bit’, which he says equated to the ideals of the nation.³⁵ In turn, the nation supported the war through connecting it to societal norms and religious beliefs. Service in the name of the nation became a test of faith and a display of willingness to commit to a higher duty that ultimately tested the resolve and nerves of a soldier, whilst simultaneously

illustrating one's masculinity and courage.³⁶

The nerves and courage of military personnel serving on or near the fronts was sorely tested or broken by the frighteningly efficient killing capabilities of the antagonists. Bernd Hiippauf claims that even though some of the actual weapons and tactics employed in World War I were witnessed in earlier wars, what was different was the 'disproportion between political ends and technological innovations for destruction.'³⁷ Weapons were now being produced in large-scale numbers to levels of reliability and workmanship unheard of in previous wars. Not only were they being produced at such high quality, but the output of weaponry due to advances in industrial processes and machining techniques meant that armies now had access to almost inexhaustible stockpiles of weapons. Coupled with conventional weapons such as small arms and artillery, were weapons that changed the face of the battlefield forever: light weight machine guns, chemical weapons, airplanes, barbed wire, tanks, and flamethrowers. Of all weapons though, artillery was responsible for the most carnage and devastation, by dismembering the most bodies and fraying the most nerves.³⁸ Nearly 60% of all casualties were inflicted by artillery, and its kill ratio compared to bullets was *3 to 1*.³⁹ Roger Chickering described such weapons as 'unclean', due to their ability to twist corpses into unrecognizable chunks of flesh.⁴⁰ The battleground itself also became an enemy to troops due to the destruction caused by continuous pounding by high explosives. Many battle zones resembled what John Terraine called 'lunar landscapes', but there was to be no undoing of the massacres and devastation.⁴¹ Constant exposure to these horrors led to the mental and nervous breakdown of personnel known as *shell shock*.

War was the supreme test of manliness, and the victims of *shell shock* had failed this test.⁴² *Shell shock*, a term accredited to an English physician Charles S. Meyers, originated in the early stages of the war as a blanket term for anyone suffering psychiatric wounds.⁴³ Meyers was initially hesitant to apply this term, as he viewed it in connection to hysteria, a trait commonly found in women, not British fighting men.⁴⁴ George Mosse claims that such was the fear of the implications of British soldiers not being 'man enough for the job', that shell shock was a 'disgrace' - even in the words of an English Brigadier-General.⁴⁵ Thus in an effort to get men physically and psychologically prepared for a return to combat, sufferers were often treated as such.⁴⁶ Victims of shell shock gradually became less stigmatized as the term itself connoted notions of fierce combat and extreme hardships experienced in the line of duty. Diagnosis also enabled a medical distinction between combat sustained injuries and the idiosyncrasies of a woman.⁴⁷ John Terraine connects shell shock with the inescapable reality for soldiers of always being on the cusp of great battles of attrition, of which the outcomes were often a foregone conclusion.⁴⁸ Joanna Burke suggested that support troops were more susceptible to shattered nerves through their perceptions of an inability to defend themselves when in susceptible positions not immediately on the front.⁴⁹ Jay Winter sees shell shock as 'a metaphor for the nature of industrialized warfare', that implies the severe physical and emotional stresses that military personnel were subjected to throughout the Great War.⁵⁰ Shell shock and stresses brought on by the war were not just restricted to the war zones; they also had significant impacts upon the home fronts.

The scale and severity of World War One required so much wealth and effort from the belligerent states. As a result, the demands made by governments on their civilian populations bore testament to this.⁵¹ Roger Chickering observed that ‘the war mobilized vast resources for purposes of destruction. It commanded, in other words, the destruction of vast amounts of wealth.’⁵² Gerd Hardach claims that by the closing stages of the war it was consuming up to half of the major belligerents’ national output.⁵³ Wealth was not only destroyed though, it was also created and made more abundant, and consequently wealthier states found some citizens enjoying increased standards of living.⁵⁴ With modern technology and production techniques, these wealthier states were not as affected by the manpower losses required by the war effort.⁵⁵ Technological improvements and war industry demands also equated to the strengthening of the working classes through wage increases and higher employment rates.⁵⁶ The demands of military production also created tensions, though. Price rises often nullified any wage gains and strikes became the obvious method of demonstration.⁵⁷ The British Parliament responded by passing the *Munitions Workers Act* in mid-1915, limiting strikes and workplace transfer opportunities.⁵⁸ Moreover, manpower strains and industrial strife were overcome through superior technology and through the utilization of female labour.⁵⁹

As the men departed for war, increased opportunities and freedoms for women arose, causing substantial changes to gender and roles in society, especially in Britain.⁶⁰ The inclusion and eventual dominance of women in some traditionally male dominated workplaces and industries resulted in transference of masculinity, ‘blurring the lines between sexes.’⁶¹ Along with heightened fears of female masculinity, notions of what constituted appropriate behaviour for women impacted upon society.⁶² One such example of behaviour that resulted in fears about declining morals was *khaki fever* – the feverish behaviour of groups of young men, and particularly young women or *flappers* – flocking to men in uniform, high on excitement about the adventure and expectations of a short yet victorious war.⁶³ Angela Woollacott claims that young women caught up in such hysteria ‘threatened a subversion of the gender as well as the moral order.’⁶⁴ The morals of good Christian family life and the patriarchal order - the cornerstone of British society - were brought into question by the increased opportunities for women to become more financially and emotionally independent. Increased sexual liberty and promiscuity amongst women also caused nervous reactions from the moralists and religious pillars of society.⁶⁵ *Khaki fever* and women’s behaviour on the home front also affected returning soldiers or soldiers on leave. Roger Chickering concludes that ‘visits home often became occasions of more discomfort than solace, and they left soldiers yearning to return to the front. Soldiers found loud, arrogant patriotism repugnant, for it no longer provided an adequate interpretive framework for the experience of the front.’⁶⁶ Such behaviour illustrates one example of the war distorting society and that ‘millions of men and women at war had been pushed to the limits of human endurance and beyond.’⁶⁷

Prior to the outbreak and during the initial period after World War One had started, crowds of patriotic people were milling on the streets in major European cities.⁶⁸ Their excitement and optimism were soon replaced by distress and pessimism though, and the consequences and repercussions of the Great War pushed most European societies to the brink of collapse and beyond. World War One illustrated what some consider total war, and a

modern war aided by science and manufacturing advances, that somewhat discarded the need for time honoured notions of a soldier's skill, bravery and wits.⁶⁹ Romantic visions of quick and glorious victories had no place in the trenches, or on the home front for that matter. Deadlock, confusion, massacre and attrition exemplified *the war to end all wars*.⁷⁰ Even though extreme carnage and losses were typical throughout the war, it was still fueled by public and political devotion to achievement of outright victory.⁷¹ World War One was a war of nerves because it penetrated into all aspects of society, and challenged the morals and will of all participants like never before. Military failures were common, if not endemic, death and injury rates were unfathomable, and the distortion of gender roles and concepts of masculinity amongst the populations of the belligerents truly tested the nerves of all.⁷²

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