



Disenchanted: Violated  
Bodies, Black Humor, and  
Despair in WWI Literature

An Obscene Number of Men Die and/or Write Poems  
For Reasons That Historians Still Can't Quite Explain.

# Causes of World War I

- Your guess is as good as mine
- Common answer: While in Bosnia, Archduke of Austria-Hungary, Franz Ferdinand, was shot by a Serbian nationalist.
- The most powerful countries in the world decided that, to prevent war, they should construct two great blocs (Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey vs. Allied Powers: France, Great Britain, Japan, Russia and Italy) that would keep each other in check. There was obviously a little flaw in this plan.
- Everyone in these two great blocs wanted to expand their empires.
- “It was too much effort NOT to have a war.”

# Brief Overview of WWI

- June 28, 1914: Franz Ferdinand assassinated by Serbian Nationalist
- July 28, 1914: Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia
- August 1914: All the countries declare war on each other
- August 4, 1914: Germany invades Belgium
- End of 1914: Everyone on the Western front nicely settled in trenches
- July-November 1916: The Somme Offensive
- April 6, 1917: USA enters the war
- December 1917: Russians exit the war
- November 11, 1918: Armistice
- June 28, 1919: Treaty of Versailles signed

# Some Significant Battles of WWI (Western Theatre)

- August 16-September 6, 1914: Battle of the Frontiers (Bloodiest engagement in the world at that time)
- September 5-September 11, 1914: First Battle of the Marne (French counter-attack, German retreat)
- October 12-November 11, 1914: First Battle of Ypres (German retreat at heavy loss to the Allies)
- February 21-June 23, 1916: Battle of Verdun (Significant German advances)
- July 1-November 18, 1916: The Somme Offensive (British attempt to reclaim territory from the Germans; first use of tanks by the British; massive failure; heaviest loss of life in a single day of the whole war occurred on July 1)
- August 8, 1918: Battle of Amiens (Significant victory for the Allies; Central powers begin to foresee defeat)

# New Technologies for Killing People

- Machine gun
- Rapid-fire field artillery gun
- Poison gas
- The tank
- Airplanes with guns
- And what success! 8,500,000 soldiers died of wounds or disease.

# Life in the Trenches

- Total length of all trenches roughly 25,000 miles
- “Protected” by barbed wire that had to be mended just about every night
- Bottom consisted of wooden duckboards, which were often submerged
- German trenches infinitely superior to French and British trenches
- Plenty of lice and very large, wet, black rats who grew fat on cadavers
- Dead and rotting bodies of horses, friends, comrades, heroes

# Irony in War

- “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends.”—Paul Fussell
- Fussell writes that WWI was the most ironic war in human history because
  - The ostensible cause is so laughably insufficient to produce such a result
  - The war reversed the Idea of Progress so beloved in modernity
  - The beginning was so innocent
  - Whether a battle was won or lost, there were always shocking casualties on both sides
  - This was the last war perceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful “history” with a meaningful arc marching towards a better future
  - Fighting men on both sides couldn’t figure out why they were fighting

# Development of British Black Humor

- The ironies of the war created and succored a black humor that persists in Britain to this day
- The more revolting, horrifying, iconoclastic, or simply *wrong* something is, the more people shout with laughter (such as Graves's anecdote about the severed hand)
- Publications, literature, and trench rituals assert that the soldiers are having SUCH an amusing time (e.g., kicking a football while going over the top)
- Blackadder: Field Marshal Haig's battle plan is to "climb out out of the trenches and walk very slowly towards the enemy."



# The Wipers Times

- Begun February 1916 in the British-held trenches at Ypres (4 editions at Ypres)
- Edited by Captain Fred Roberts and Lieutenant Jack Pearson
- April 1916 became the *New Church Times* (4 editions)
- Also called the *Kemmel Times* and *Somme Times* (1 edition each)
- Finally became *B.E.F. Times* (11 editions)
- Many editions composed and printed under heavy fire
- “Price” changes frequently, fluctuating from 200 francs to 50 centimes
- Editorials and letters to the editor bewail the tendency of the fighting soldier to compose poetry

“Having managed to pick up a printing outfit (slightly soiled) at a reasonable price, we have decided to produce a paper. There is much that we would like to say in it, but the shadow of censorship enveloping us causes us to refer to the war, which we hear is taking place in Europe, in a cautious manner.”

“[S]hould our efforts come to an untimely end by any adverse criticism or attentions by our local rival, Mssrs. Hun and Co., we shall consider it an unfriendly act and take steps accordingly.”

# Wilfred Owen

- Born March 18, 1893
- Attended the Shrewsbury Technical School and London University
- October 22, 1915: Joined the Artists' Rifles
- June 4, 1916: Commissioned in Manchester Regiment
- December 29, 1916: Sailed to France
- 1917: Wounded twice, spent time at Craiglockhart, composed "Dulce et Decorum Est"
- October 1, 1918: Awarded Military Cross
- November 4, 1918: Killed in action
- 1920: "Dulce" published

# Erich Maria Remarque

- 1898-1970
- 1916: Volunteers to join the German Army
- June 12, 1917: Arrives at Western Front
- July 31, 1917: Receives shrapnel wound in the leg, arm, and neck; returns to Germany
- 1929: Published *All Quiet on the Western Front* (in German, of course)
- May 10, 1933: Nazis publicly ban and burn his books
- 1938: German citizenship revoked
- 1939: Moves to the United States
- 1947: Becomes naturalized American citizen

# *All Quiet on the Western Front*

- Paul Baumer: protagonist; volunteer in the German army; on the Western Front; has small, tight group of friends; dies in October 1918
- Fredrich Mueller: Inherits Kemmerich's boots; bequeaths them to Paul when he dies from a gunshot in the stomach
- Franz Kemmerich: Dies of leg wound (amputated) early in the novel; Gives his boots to Mueller
- Kat Katczisky: Expert scavenger; leader of the group; Paul's idol; Sustains shrapnel wound to his shin, and Paul carries him to the hospital only to learn that a stray piece of shrapnel has killed him; Last of Paul's friends to die

“This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war.”

# Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 1929

“The objects of this autobiography, written at the age of thirty-three, are simple enough: an opportunity for a formal good-bye to you and to you and to you and to me and to all that; forgetfulness, because once all this has been settled in my mind and written down and published it need never be thought about again; money.”