"I Believe We are Lost:" The Worst Casualties of the Great War
by
Paul F. Weisser
Saint Vincent College
Latrobe, PA

One of the most challenging problems recent history has produced is the so-called

totalitarian movements that originated in the 1920s and 1930s. These movements shocked the

world with their brutality and disregard for all the previous norms and accepted rules of human

behavior. Their novel and destructive forces have caused ceaseless inquiries into how it was

possible that an entire society of apparently rational and normal individuals could submit to

totalitarian rule and participate in its atrocities. Though many have provided answers, Hannah

Arendt's exploration of totalitarianism (*The Origins of Totalitarianism)* remains. one of the most

compelling. Central to Arendt's explanation is an analysis of the populations in which these

movements arose. To comprehend their political convictions and actions, one must first confront

the attitudes and experiences upon which that society was founded.

The First World War loomed large as the formative experience that defined the rising

generation who returned to their homelands after the war and played a significant role in

changing European society. The war's indelible effects may be observed in the life of a single

individual in Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. German soldier Paul

Bäumer's experiences as described in Remarque's novel almost perfectly quantify the mass

characteristics Arendt describes. An analysis of his development as a character will reveal how

the war destroyed an entire generation, implanting in them attitudes and convictions that

prepared them for totalitarianism. The precise nature of this transformation is of the utmost

importance and its progress must be carefully tracked and understood. Arendt asserts that

totalitarian regimes are the result of unique and unprecedented developments in human

interaction and politics that remain a danger to the present day. Hence, the events of the First

World War and the years that followed are not merely relics of the past. Taking careful note of

the pivotal elements of both the war and the society it generated is necessary for grasping

modern political conditions as understood by Arendt, and the problems to which they lead.

  To understand the trajectory to be examined, its ending point must be briefly considered.

Totalitarianism as Arendt understands it is a "novel form of government and domination."[1]

Though it shares many features with tyrannies and authoritarian governments, one finds in it

elements that no human governments have previously incorporated. According to Arendt, this

paradigmatic shift indicates a crucial change in the society as a whole. Any political organization

must be derived from a common experience; therefore the appearance of a new form of rule must

represent the presence of a new type of community upon which it is founded.[2] The terrifying

novelty of totalitarianism responds to a mass society rather than a class society. Classes must

here be understood in the broadest terms. They are any sort of group connected by a

"consciousness of common interest...that specific class articulateness which is expressed in

determined, limited, and obtainable goals."[3] These include economic classes, but also voluntary

associations, political parties, and any organization in which members are bound together by a

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[1] Arendt, Hannah. "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," p. 303.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 326. Arendt claims that "loneliness...has become an everyday experience of the ever growing masses of our century." As this condition defines them as individuals, it will also define the way in which the political structures of society take shape.

[3] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 311.

common pursuit. In the pre-totalitarian society, these have largely dissolved. Rather than being

united by interest, a lack of interests permeates all as individuals fade into a mass.

The mass man is the essential feature of the totalitarian regime because his type

constituted the majority of postwar society; it was his condition that was instrumental in

informing the totalitarian system. The masses are the material cause of totalitarianism, absolutely

indispensable to this form of rule.[4] The paramount term for defining the mass man is

superfluous; he is uprooted and alienated even among his supposed fellows. In this context, "to

be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others. To be

superfluous means not to belong to the world at all."[5] He is completely isolated and alone.

Although he interacts with those around him, he does not know them, he shares nothing with

them. Strangely enough, this complete atomization results in a complete uniformity. Differences

of class, education, personal interest, even nationality become meaningless and fade away once

the categories they create fail to unite men.[6] This is the mass: an uncaring, listless, formless

aggregate of humanity that can no longer associate over common interests or features because

they simply do not exist.

Having identified the unique features of the masses, their political activity in the form of

participation in totalitarian movements can now be considered. As the response to the conditions

of the mass, totalitarianism had to respond to their experience and requirements. These can be

concisely stated as a desire for destruction of both the world from which the mass emerged and

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[4] *Ibid*, p. 306.

[5] Arendt, Hannah. "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," p. 323.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 325.

particularly the social boundaries that defined individuals.[7] Totalitarianism attended to these

attitudes with a total and universal ideology. The movements' all-encompassing ideology

provided a means for "the self-willed immersion in the suprahuman forces of destruction," the

forces of Nature or History. This willful subjugation "seemed to be a salvation from the

automatic identification with pre-established functions in society and their utter banality, and at

the same time helped to destroy the functioning itself."[8]

Totalitarianism therefore responded to the twofold desire of the front generation: it razed

the hated society and provided a sort of escapism in which the individual was lost in his

dedication to the movement and the grand forces it represented. In this way it also addressed the

second characteristic of postwar society: "concomitant loneliness."[9] In his isolation the mass

man was consumed by a "yearning for anonymity, for being just a number and functioning only

as a cog, for every transformation...which would wipe out the spurious identifications with

specific types or predetermined functions within society."[10] As the classes, religion, parties, and

structures that had organized Europe for centuries crumbled, the differences that delineated

categories of men became obsolete and disappeared. Sinking into a mass rather than a society of

classes, men became a unit, an aggregate, rather than individuals. The war certainly had such an

effect on its participants; among the armies of both sides,

> Distinctions, breeding, education are changed, are almost blotted out and hardly
> recognizable any longer...It is as though formerly we were coins of different provinces;

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[7] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 327-333.

[8] *Ibid*, p. 331.

[9] *Ibid*, p. 317.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 329.   Page 4

and now we are melted down, and all bear the same stamp. To rediscover the old distinctions, the metal itself must be tested. First we are soldiers and afterwards, in a strange and shamefaced fashion, individual men as well.[11]

This insecurity of one's individuality is characteristic of the mass man. Without a community founded upon common traits and interests, he begins to lose his sense of self and is ultimately reduced to little more than an automaton. Although Remarque's character Paul Bäumer speaks of a unity among soldiers, he also recognizes their loss of self to the routine and ~~the~~ necessities of war. The army and the trenches have burned away their individuality, leaving them with only their instincts, their knowledge of killing, and their loneliness.[12] Wounded, isolated, disillusioned, and disinterested: these terms describe perfectly both Paul Bäumer and the mass man. *All Quiet on the Western Front* described with great detail and emotion the events and conditions that created such a deplorable and ruined generation. In this account, one observes how the brutal, dehumanizing experience of meaningless slaughter tore down those unifying pillars upon which society rested and transformed classes into masses that all too easily fell to totalitarianism. Paul Bäumer's account demonstrates his gradual loss of faith in the old culture, particularly the nationalism for which the war was fought, and finally the loss of his comrades, resulting in utter loneliness and superfluity.

One of the greatest results of the First World War was its explosion of the myths that had driven the conflict. The nationalist climate and fervor rampant in Europe in the prewar era was perhaps the quintessential cause of the whole war. But rather than fomenting nationalistic fervor, "the First World War, somewhat paradoxically, had almost extinguished genuine national feelings

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[11] Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 235-236.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 228-229. "Our knowledge of life is limited to death." All the soldiers knew previously is erased and replaced by the murderous knowledge of the trenches.

in Europe."[13] Paul Bäumer's military experience certainly confirms this assertion. Through conversations with his comrades and interactions with the "enemy," Bäumer realizes the essential similarity between the combatants on both sides, a discovery that illustrates to him the pointless nature of the war and the corruption of the status quo.

During the initial phase of Bäumer's experience, the enemy soldiers are distant. Mostly viewed from across No Man's Land, they only encounter each other at close quarters while in combat, where the savage animal instincts overwhelm them and allow them to kill without thought. But the anonymity of the enemy is not preserved; Paul Bäumer has several interactions with foreign soldiers in which their obscurity is replaced by a piercing level of humanity. He first encounters this in a group of Russian prisoners whom he guards. Rather than finding strange, hostile devils, he observes meek, almost pathetic men much like himself. Paul notes that they "ought to be put to threshing, reaping, and apple picking. They look just as kindly as our own peasants in Friesland."[14] They are not alien but all too familiar, a fact that disturbs Paul. This disconcerting thought follows him back to the front and is intensified by his experience with a French soldier. After mortally wounding the soldier at close range, he is forced to lie alone with the Frenchman's dying body for hours. Overcome with guilt and regret, he begs,

> [F]orgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us...forgive me comrade, how could you be my enemy? If we threw away these rifles and this uniform you could be my brother...Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up-take more, for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now."[15]

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[13] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 329.

[14] Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 167.

[15] *Ibid*, p. 195.

Searching the soldier's wallet and discovering pictures of his family, his profession, and his name only cement this guilt. This French soldier, a printer named Gerard Duval, was not substantially different from Paul or his German comrades. What Bäumer realized due to his experience with the Russians is driven forcefully home by this second encounter: the men fighting this war, regardless of nationality, are essentially the same. Though they may come from different regions and speak different languages, their lives and concerns are incredibly similar.

This alarming revelation, concealed by prewar nationalism, presents to Paul a new question: for what purpose is war being waged? Several conversations with his comrades reveal their growing understanding of its pointlessness. It is evident to them that as individuals they profit nothing. Experiences with enemy soldiers confirm this suspicion; the common folk fighting in the trenches are mostly indifferent about the stated war aims. They have no quarrel with the Frenchmen, or vice versa; "a word of command has made these silent figures our enemies; a word of command might transform them into our friends."[16] Bäumer's observation concisely states the disinterest of the common soldier and their subjection to a higher will. If anyone benefits from the war, it is the high command or the Kaiser who have mobilized the whole nation for their benefit alone. Ordinary men, like Paul and his comrades, or their French counterparts, have no stake in the conflict and are forced to fight a war that becomes wholly meaningless to them. Having recognized the ultimate pettiness of the war, in which the stated war aims are revealed to be a duplicitous guise for the interests and pride of national rulers, the soldiers became disillusioned. They discarded their faith in the nationalism, which had shaped the prewar years and the nature of the conflict. More importantly, this deception along with the

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[16] *Ibid*, p. 170.

suffering of the trenches, served to embitter them in regard to the status quo. They came to hate

the system that sent them to war and the whole culture in which these murderous travesties were

feasible.

Paul Bäumer's reminiscences clearly illustrate this loss of faith, culminating in hatred of

the prewar world and all it contained. Early in the novel one realizes Bäumer's former

commitment to his education in this old order; he speaks of his love of books and his own

personal writings back at home. It seems logical to assume that he once entertained dreams of

teaching and writing, so great was his dedication to his intellectual activities. But the remarks of

his comrades with whom he went to school reveals their newfound scorn and disappointment:

"we remember mighty little of all that rubbish...it has never been the slightest use to us," they

declare, "how can a man take all that stuff seriously when he's once been out here?"[17] Practical

necessities and harsh experience drove it from their minds and rendered it ridiculous; the army

and the war soon "[had] more authority over us than had formerly our parents, our teachers, and

the whole gamut of culture from Plato to Goethe."[18] All that preceded had been replaced, proven

foolish and useless, superseded by the iron law of survival. Paul acknowledges this transition:

"the idea of authority," that both their teachers and Western culture represented,

> was associated in our minds with a greater insight and a more humane wisdom. But the
> first death we saw shattered that. We had to recognize that our generation was more to be
> trusted than theirs...the first bombardment showed us our mistake, and under it the world
> as they had taught it to us broke in pieces.[19]

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[17] *Ibid*, p. 79, 80.

[18] *Ibid*, p. 25.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 16, 17.

Despite the shock this reeducation provided, Paul and his classmates initially welcome it. Viewing it as their coming of age, they discarded the culture and guidance of previous ages and were prepared to strike out on their own path and reshape the world. But the horrors that accompany this process quickly became evident, as Paul laments, "we distinguished the false from true, we had suddenly learned to see. And we saw that there was nothing of their world left. We were all at once terribly alone; and alone we must see it through."[20] They fled from the ruins of the old order into a wasteland of trenches, left on their own to understand, to find meaning, to escape. That they were not entirely successful in this endeavour becomes clear as one notes the terrible toll this loss of guidance and connection takes on Paul. Lying wounded in a hospital and taking note of the massive suffering the war impinges upon all of Europe, he despairs:

> how senseless is everything that can be written, done, or thought, when such things are possible. It must be all lies and of no account when the culture of a thousand years could not prevent this stream of blood being poured out, these torture-chambers in their hundreds of thousands.[21]

Although Paul condemns his teachers and the culture they represent, his profound love for the material, for thinking and writing, persists in his poetic descriptions and reflections on the war. But it is the maintenance and depth of that love which crushes him once he realizes how inaccessible its object is. While at home on leave, he attempts to return to his books and plays, to appreciate their beauty and perhaps add something of his own. As he desperately leafs through them, he cries, "a terrible feeling of foreignness suddenly rises up in me. I cannot find my way back, I am shut out though I entreat earnestly and put forth all my strength."[22] His experience at

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[20] *Ibid*, p. 17.

[21] *Ibid*, p. 228.

[22] *Ibid*, p. 152.

the front has made the culture and tradition of the past unattainable, and has stifled his ability to

create. He limps away from a beloved past now foreign, and confesses, "Words, Words, Words-

they do not reach me...Nevermore."[23]

That these sorts of experiences were necessary for totalitarian rule Arendt clearly

addresses. Part of the terrifying novelty of totalitarianism is its desire and goal to raze everything

that preceded it, placing itself as the sole authority. Instrumental to this process is a discrediting

of the old order. The old order's politics, religion, art, music, philosophy, even its science, must

be demonstrated to be obsolete, inefficient, useless. Though they once held the allegiance of

men, these influences must be rendered meaningless. They can no longer have the power to

motivate men and bind them together, or the wisdom to guide their lives. Disillusionment and

disbelief, critical to totalitarianism, was easily provided by the Great War. One sees in Paul

Bäumer and others a complete loss of faith in their elders and the world they embodied, creating

"an atmosphere in which all traditional values and propositions had evaporated…[and making] it

easier to accept patently absurd propositions than the old truths which had become pious

banalities, precisely because nobody could be expected to take the absurdities seriously."[24] These

"patently absurd propositions" were the ideologies of totalitarian movements, which purport to

understand the laws of History or Nature. Emptied of the thoughts of previous generations, Paul

and many others were susceptible to whatever new ideas presented themselves because the old

views were so obviously erroneous. Without the past to lean upon, they fell victim to a new

horror that appeared to offer some solution to the problems of a new, postwar world.

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[23] *Ibid*, p. 153.

[24] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 334.

Had the war's destruction been limited to the culture and beliefs of the prewar world, perhaps it could have been born. But its swath of annihilation reached and enveloped interpersonal relationships, reducing the combatants to lonely, forlorn ruins which no longer belonged to their society. Paul recognizes this isolation most acutely while home on leave. Speaking with anyone is difficult due to their lack of shared experience and their differing perspectives on the war. He cannot bear to hear schoolmasters and old men prattle on about how the war must be won and the postwar political situation addressed. Even his family is alienated; "a sense of strangeness will not leave me, I cannot feel at home amongst these things," Paul mourns, "there is a distance, a veil between us."[25] His father wants only to hear military stories, and Paul soon confesses, "I no longer have any real contact with him."[26] His sick and likely dying mother is just as painful to confront. She reminds him of the youth to which he cannot return, for Paul's new experiences have removed him from the realm in which she may console him. Faced by a familiar atmosphere made alien, Paul "prefer[s] to be alone, so that no one troubles [him]."[27] This terrible isolation grips him as he mourns, "I ought never to have come on leave," and longs to be with his comrades again.[28]

Forced away from the world they knew, Paul and his classmates find some solace in their fellowship. The contrast between his sorrowful leave and his often joyful escapades with his comrades emphasizes the strength of the bond forced on them by the army. Paul in fact

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[25] Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 142.

[26] *Ibid*, p. 146.

[27] *Ibid*, p. 149.

[28] *Ibid*, p. 163.

recognizes it as "the finest thing that arose out of the war-comradeship."[29] The men's common though dreadful experience has made them more beloved to each other than their biological families; they share "a more complete communion with one another than even lovers have."[30] It was these connections that mitigated the horror and disillusionment of war to a point at which it could be survived; without them the soldiers would be wholly lost. "I am no longer a shuddering speck of existence, alone in the darkness; I belong to them and they to me; we all share the same fear and the same life," an intimacy which preserves some part of them against the storms of steel.[31] Though their experience is horrific, it is still common, allowing it to be blunted and endured. United in the desperate struggle for survival, "we are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial—I believe we are lost."[32] This aimlessness is manifested in an apprehensive doubt of the life which follows the trenches; knowing the impossibility of a return to what was, they cannot foresee their fate. The youngest of them, including Paul, are particularly unsure. All they knew was their childhood and their education, both of which have been torn away. They question themselves, "what do they expect of us if a time ever comes when the war is over? Through the years our business has been killing...our knowledge of life is limited to death. What will happen afterwards? And what shall come out of us?"[33] Though they attempt to formulate an answer, no satisfactory conclusion is

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[29] *Ibid*, p. 29.

[30] *Ibid*, p. 87.

[31] *Ibid*, p. 186.

[32] *Ibid*, p. 111.   Page 12

[33] *Ibid*, p. 229.

reached. Instead, Paul's assertion, "the war has ruined us for everything," seems an accurate summary of their deplorable situation.[34]

The war's destruction and alienation reach their pitch at the close of the novel as the saving grace of comradeship is annihilated. Although Paul loses friends throughout the war, its final months exact a particularly heavy toll. One after another they fall, to shells and bullets and gas, each death more horrific and sorrowful than the last. It is the loss of Kat, Paul's closest friend, that leaves him entirely isolated, finally breaking his spirit. As he tends to Kat's wounds in an attempt to save him, Paul despondently reflects, "the anguish of solitude rises up in me. When Kat is taken away I will not have one friend left."[35] After this death Paul retains no hope and his complete ruin becomes apparent. He limps through the final months of the war emotionless, remaining unsure of the future yet entirely listless and apathetic. Cognizant of all he has lost, all the war has taken, he desperately tries to recover something, crying,

> it cannot be that it has gone, the yearning that made our blood unquiet, the unknown, the perplexing, the oncoming things, the thousand faces of the future, the melodies from dreams and from books, the whispers and divinations of women; it cannot be that this has vanished in the bombardment, in despair, in brothels.[36]

All he knew was gone, but its eradication was not followed by the creation of something new. Nothing remains to him; the war crushed his life by removing memories, former joys, even the camaraderie that was imposed by the trenches. Observing these empty prospects Paul

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[34] *Ibid*, p. 81.

[35] *Ibid*, p. 249.

[36] *Ibid*, p. 254.

challenges the world, "let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear."[37]

When one considers this deterioration and final annihilation of the front generation in light of Arendt's observations, it is evident that the experience Paul relates was essential in paving the way for totalitarianism. As tradition collapsed, a new system was needed to replace it. But the experiences of this new generation were incomprehensible to the older one, founded in a far darker and more vicious common experience. The postwar survivors, as compared to their predecessors, "had been more deeply touched by misery…[and] were more concerned with the perplexities and more deadly hurt by hypocrisy than all the apostles of goodwill and brotherhood [of the late 19th century] had been."[38] Previously, society had been critiqued in order to discover its silver lining; now it was marked for elimination and condemned as wholly evil and corrupt. It is certain that the crushing years in the trenches effected this result; where individualism once reigned, men were now filled with a "yearning for 'losing their selves' and the violent disgust with all existing standards, with every power that be."[39] Having discovered the apparent hypocrisies of the state, religion, the whole culture of a thousand years, they desired nothing more than to tear these down. "The 'front generation'" in their anger and disillusionment, "were completely absorbed by their desire to see the ruin of this whole world of fake security, fake culture, and fake life."[40] Paul is acutely aware of these deceptions, and echoes the cry for their

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[37] *Ibid*, p. 255.

[38] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 331.

[39] *Ibid*, p. 327.

[40] *Ibid*, p. 328.

destruction. On leave, he cannot bear the shallow and fatuous society he encounters. Though he confesses "an irresistible attraction to it...to be here too and forget the war," he quickly turns on these thoughts and concludes, "it repels me, it is so narrow, how can that fill a man's life, he ought to smash it to bits."[41] These sentiments are perfectly synonymous with the totalitarian elimination of all prior authorities to establish a new world in response to the changed atmosphere and experiences of the generation and the world birthed by the war.

It is certainly no coincidence that the two phases of loss recounted in *All Quiet on the Western Front* correlate perfectly with two essential prerequisites of totalitarianism. By repudiating almost all the notions of the prewar world, it created a state of chaos and disbelief. Because "the things that existed before are no longer valid, and one practically knows them no more," anything, even the most ridiculous, has become possible.[42] If this were all the war accomplished, it might have been closely followed by a revolution in culture as the Old World was replaced and renewed. But its second blow struck this possibility fatally, eliminating the ground on which it could be accomplished by destroying the connections between men. Paul personally addresses this process, in which the original world-changing impetus is rendered impotent by the total loss the war imposes, as he sighs,

> Had we returned home in 1916, out of the suffering and the strength of our experiences we might have unleashed a storm. Now if we go back we will be weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope. We will not be able to find our way any more.[43]

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41 Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 150.

42 *Ibid*, p. 235.   Page 15

43 *Ibid*, p. 254.

The disillusionment and pain alone were not mortally wounding; they in fact may have driven that generation forward on a wave of progress as they rebuilt and improved what was lost. But loneliness and isolation did what these could not: without association, without fellowship, these dreams turned to dust. Lacking the connections that enabled survival and progress, they returned home as pariahs rather than revolutionaries. Understanding this fate, Paul laments, "we will be superfluous even to ourselves, we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some others will merely submit, and most will be bewildered; the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin."[44] Disillusioned and lost, this is the only end left to them. The years and events following the war become far more comprehensible in light of this experience; one knows that *All Quiet* tells the story of "a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war" and turned into cannon fodder for the coming totalitarian assault.[45]

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[44] *Ibid*, p. 254.

[45] *Ibid*, p. 5.

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