

Précis

“I Believe We are Lost:” The Worst Casualties of the Great War

By

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If one wishes to understand the origins of the totalitarian movements that arose in the 1920s and 1930s and presented the main political problem of the past century, he/she must look to the generation that preceded the war and drove these movements. To understand this generation, it becomes necessary to analyze the formative experience that defined them: the First World War.

The crises after the First World War were linked not only politically but also through the society, culture, and psychology that grew out of the first war and gave rise to the movements that plunged the world into chaos. It is therefore necessary, as Hannah Arendt asserts in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to inspect and characterize the “front generation” in order to recognize the essential experiences and attitudes that served as catalysts for later events.

Although Arendt outlined these qualities in detail, specific experiences and accounts are highly beneficial in quantifying and demonstrating such developments. Erich Maria Remarque, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, provided a compelling example of Arendt’s theory. By tracing the wartime experience of German soldier, Paul Bäumer, one may easily observe his development from a hopeful and free youth to the broken and superfluous remnants of a man who had lost his faith in everything.

Three major losses defined Paul’s experience: loss of faith in his country, loss of faith in his education and upbringing, and finally loss of his comrades, which resulted in his utter loneliness. He became disillusioned in the cause for which he was fighting, recognizing the pointlessness of a war fought for the aggrandizement of an empire but at the expense of its individual inhabitants. This discovery forms part of a larger disaccreditation of the entire prewar culture. Its education, social structure, politics, and religion became meaningless to Paul in the face of the terrible destruction of the front.

As shocking as these revelations are, they did not break the soldiers. The soldiers’ camaraderie and friendships supported them through these hardships. Therefore, it was all the more destructive when death finally terminated these connections. At the close of the war, with all his friends slain, Paul felt the full impact of the war. Bereft of all ties to what came before, he perceived no way in which he could proceed. Society at large and individual connections within it

had been eliminated, leaving him lonely, disillusioned, disinterested, and displaced from his society. It is no coincidence that these characteristics are precisely the same as those Arendt set forth in the third section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in her other writings, including “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government.” The experiences and destruction of the Great War gave birth to a lost and disillusioned generation that soon dissolved into totalitarian masses. A careful analysis of *All Quiet on the Western Front* reveals how these characteristics came about, and therefore allows insights into how the totalitarian movements came to power, and the sort of appeal they presented to individuals of the post Great War generation. This paper traces these horrific developments through the eyes of a soldier, revealing how the war exacted its terrible cost on the individual and all of society.

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