

# Un-representing the Great War



# Un-representing the Great War:

*New Approaches  
to the Centenary*

Edited by

Mariavita Cambria,  
Giuliana Gregorio  
and Caterina Resta

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## INTRODUCTION

The most important results of historical studies in recent years can probably be summed up with the idea that the Great War was essentially so ‘absurd’ as to be incomprehensible.

The destructive and nihilistic power of technology was doubtlessly the most innovative and striking element during the war, as it provoked a not-to-be-reconciled break between the now and the before. It also sharply showed the fragility—even the failure—of the founding values of European “civilization”. The silence of many veterans unable to narrate the experience of the front is a sign of the impossibility of using shared and known categories to describe what had happened. The hypothesis behind this volume is that the main consequence of this incomprehensibility lies in the fact that we do not or, more likely, cannot know the ‘essential’, that is the extent of the fracture that this event represented and continues to represent. The Great War is, above all, an incredible breach within and of history, the entrance into that form of unknown which is, primarily, the deadly complication between technical progress and the industrial destruction of humans.

The ‘unrepresentable’ shows itself as a border, a liminal edge around which we attempt to understand how the past century began its sort of ‘descent into hell’. Questioning and investigating the ‘unrepresentable’, its menacing, shocking and inconceivable violence, and in return allowing it to raise questions vis-à-vis our lives today, is the only way to understand our present and face the future.

The hypothesis behind this proposal shows that the primary outcome of such an absurd event challenges our understanding both of its motivating force and of the extremely high number of victims. It will thus be important to investigate the unprecedented nature of this event, which made it a sort of fracture in the course of history, starting with the extraordinary/unconventional contortion of the destructive and devastating power of technology and the sunset of humanist values, to the extent that soldiers became ‘human material’ assigned to a serial and anonymous death.

From a methodological standpoint, this book welcomes the idea that the case of the First World War requires a kind of departure from the traditional criteria of historical-cultural research. No historical phenomenon

can be considered an isolated event; one has to unravel the threads of the more or less profound historical implications which have incorporated individual events into a series of multiple stories. This general methodological principle, almost obvious a hundred years later, seems inadequate to capture that essential feature of the ‘cracking’ of history that characterizes the Great War, describing it as the event that brings history out of the sphere of influence of history itself. This is also due to the fact that the traditional categories used to understand human events collapse in the trenches and on the battlefields of this war, calling for a new and radically different conceptual repertoire.

Issues strongly related to the 100th anniversary commemorations of the Great War constitute the macro hypothesis behind the research book, i.e. the sacralization of past time, the obsessive listing of the frightening number of victims, the attempt to sublimate the catastrophe through the celebration and not through the remembrance of the European tragedy. All this triggers a sort of simplification of the carnage, as if it were delivered to a space-time universe which is different from ours. The common aim of the various papers in this volume is somehow to establish a safe distance from the commemorative emphasis and rhetoric that has fed and continues to feed the “myth” of the Great War.

The ‘epoch-making’ break embodied by this event is neither to be dispelled nor dismissed through the rituals of memory. It has to be faced for what it was: the catastrophic collapse of the “world of yesterday” and the beginning of a time that thrusts itself into the unknown without direction or the orienting help of a compass—an epoch constantly exposed to risk and uncertainty. The First World War may be considered the trigger of questions that are still in need of answers, questions regarding the turbulence of the Weimar Republic, the rise to power of National Socialism, the Second World War and subsequent Shoah, the Cold War and the nuclear threats, and the disorder caused by globalization. For the above-mentioned reasons, WWI does not talk about past events but questions our present.

Therefore, if this is a field nowadays covered mainly by professional historians, whose research activity culminates in a micrological philology/geology, it thus implicitly renders the hundred-year-old catastrophe as having nothing to tell us.

We need to tackle WWI from the perspectives offered by several areas of knowledge. Different fields of humanities are called to join forces, in order to offer a wider appraisal of the topic, a gaze covering different angles—a scrutiny which is essential to shed light on issues and questions that have not previously been explored. There is a great and undeniable



responsibility when dealing with and discussing the Great War, from a non-historical perspective, especially when the standpoint is not that of a historian. From a non-historic perspective, the Great War does not embody a past object but a radically contemporary theoretical issue. Due to a short-circuit of history, this implies that we have a responsibility towards the massacre. It is necessary to point out that in this framework the main point is not the number of dead, the immense number of dead. The main issue has to do with a different kind of responsibility, a responsibility that has nothing to do with ‘moral’ issues. This last statement provokes the key issue of this volume: what really took place a hundred years ago in Europe and still influences (in a direct way which cannot be formalized only in historiography) the culture of our time?

This entails the need to focus on the Great War not only as a historical or military event but as a symbolic one. Therefore, interdisciplinary research is needed to explore not only the ‘consequences’ of the Great War, but also what comprises its philosophical, aesthetic, literary, linguistic, social, anthropological and, more broadly, cultural premises. The book thus follows several complementary trajectories, which include philosophy and anthropology, linguistics, literature and film studies.

In order to make the essential crux of the book clear and pertinent, it is divided into two main sections: the first provides a cultural and philosophical framework on ‘unrepresentability’ by exploring issues such as absurdity, the absence of meaning, a complete rupture with the past and a continued influence on the *Zeitgeist* of today. It contains the essays of Caterina Resta, Sandro Gorgone, Giuliana Gregorio, Pierandrea Amato, and Mario Bolognari. The second section goes into the details of specific linguistic and literary issues by exploring the language/s, the silence/s and the meaning-making strategies of some texts, cotexts and contexts. It includes the essays by Mariavita Cambria, Fabio Rossi, Giorgio Forni, Gianluca Miglino, Luca Salza and Alessia Cervini. An afterword by Enrico Terrinoni concludes the book.

The book takes its name from the international and interdisciplinary project “Representing the Unrepresentable: The Great War” funded by the University of Messina (Research & Mobility 2015), with the Universities of Yale (USA), Heidelberg (Germany), Kent (UK) and Lille (France) as co-partners. Specifically, the scholars involved in the project are: Pierandrea Amato, Mario Bolognari, Mariavita Cambria, Alessia Cervini, Giorgio Forni, Stefan Goebel, Sandro Gorgone, Giuliana Gregorio, Anton Koch, John Mac Kay, Gianluca Miglino, Caterina Resta, Francesca Rizzo and Luca Salza.

We need to finish this introduction by thanking Simon Tanner for carefully and passionately translating from Italian into English the essays by Pierandrea Amato, Mario Bolognari, Alessia Cervini, Giorgio Forni, Gianluca Miglino, Caterina Resta, Fabio Rossi and Luca Salza. He has also patiently revised the entire volume. Thanks for uncomplainingly coping with the constraints of our schedule.

Mariavita Cambria, Giuliana Gregorio and Caterina Resta

Messina-Yale, Summer 2016-2018

# **PART 1**

## **A CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK TO UNREPRESENTABILITY**



# CHAPTER ONE

## METAPHYSICS OF WAR<sup>1</sup>

CATERINA RESTA

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.

F. Nietzsche (1968)

### 1. The enigma of war

War has always been in some ways mysterious, enigmatic. Beyond the motives or the contingent causes that determine their outbreak from time to time, wars have always remained, fundamentally, something incomprehensible, inexplicable. And the more war increases and intensifies its work of devastation and death, the greater the number of victims and the less valuable the ‘spoils’ of the victor, the more the real stakes become nebulous and elusive. Similarly, the real motives and objectives that combatants aim to achieve through war become ever more random, obscure even. Tolstoy had already noticed this, in a perceptive passage of *War and Peace*:

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<sup>1</sup> This essay and all quotations taken from texts unavailable in English have been translated by Simon Tanner.

Why did millions of people begin to kill one another? Who told them to do it? It would seem that it was clear to each of them that this could not benefit any of them, but would be worse for them all. Why did they do it? Endless retrospective conjectures can be made, and are made, of the causes of this senseless event, but the immense number of these explanations, and their concurrence in one purpose, only proves that the causes were innumerable and that not one of them deserves to be called the cause (Tolstoy 1942, 1359).

In many ways the Great War represents an exemplary case of the senselessness which, in the final analysis, is inherent in every war. Faced with the large number of deaths, the exhausting length of the conflict, the causes, largely implausible, which lit the fuse, in the face of the contagious enthusiasm that did not spare even the clearest and most balanced minds of the century and dragged millions of people to slaughter, today we seem to be able to say that there was no plausible or sufficient *reason* to justify the raging of such a fire throughout Europe.

Everything has been said, everything has been written about the First World War<sup>2</sup>. Yet, beyond the archives, beyond the memory sedimented in them, beyond the historical facts and their reconstruction, beyond the numerous testimonies and a vast literature, there is a gap, something unrepresentable that resists, in spite of everything, all attempts at full understanding. More than for WWII, there is something in it that tenaciously resists understanding, that remains impenetrable. The *experience* of this war (Amato, Gorgone and Miglino 2017), recounted in a flow of images (posters, postcards, photographs, film) and words, expressed using all kinds of writing (letters, diaries, novels, essays, reports, medical records, statistical data, military dispatches, strategic plans, military maps), and now widely musealized through a rich collection of exhibits, refuses, in spite of everything, to be wholly *represented*. Something in it remains unrepresentable and challenges every attempt to grasp, conclusively, its meaning. The Great War, in spite of everything, seems to maintain something inexplicable, refractory to any possible symbolization. It is as if no kind of language could truly represent the absolute catastrophe, the disaster, the horror of those “last days of humanity”, to use the effective expression of Karl Kraus. This is what

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<sup>2</sup> In the face of a now vast, constantly growing bibliography, I will mention only some texts that, for their attention to the history of ideas and cultural and social transformations, I consider essential: Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker (2000), Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker (2004), Fussell (1975), Gentile (2008), Gibelli (2007, 2015), Keegan (1976), Leed (1979), Mosse (1990), Traverso (2007), Winter (1995).

Benjamin also noted, mentioning the silence of the veterans, their inability to *recount* what they had experienced at the front (Benjamin 2005, 2006). It is precisely this threshold of unrepresentability that I would like to question, well aware that it overlooks an unfathomable abyss. Questioning this “unrepresentable” and, above all, letting oneself be questioned by it, means having to stop before an irreducible wall of resistance, which challenges language, every language, acknowledging its *absolute* impenetrability. On this threshold, however, it is possible to outline the contours of the “metaphysics of war”<sup>3</sup> which, in the Great War, offers, alongside symbolic elements recurring in all wars, also new motifs, which are its own. Despite the huge amount of studies, mainly historical, despite the centenary bringing with it a renewed interest in the Great War, leading to new initiatives and opportunities for in-depth analysis, what happened in the years between 1914 and 1918 continues to remain, in many ways, tenaciously inexplicable.

It is now well established that certainly the most unprecedented aspect of this war was the discovery of the destructive and annihilating power of technology<sup>4</sup>, which decreed the definitive eclipse of the myth of the hero. Not only did the war assume for the first time the nature of a technological conflict and a *total* organization that was a prelude to the political totalitarianism of the Thirties, but it was technology itself that showed for the first time its *intrinsic* military potential. Not only did the war *exploit* an unprecedented deployment of technical *means* compared to the past, but also technology revealed its own warlike essence, the fact that it could not be reduced to a set of neutral tools. Not only is war technology, but technology is also war, a direct expression of an unlimited *nihilistic* will to power.

The incomprehensible, that which escapes every possible representation, is not so much the overwhelming irruption of the technical means employed in this war, but the effects, even unforeseen, that they produce, provoking a real transformation of the status of the human. The war is transformed into an endless, all-pervasive, repetitive process of *work*,

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<sup>3</sup> To understand the metaphysics of war and its rich symbolic universe, see at least Caillois (1963) and Hillman (2004).

<sup>4</sup> It was undoubtedly Ernst Jünger, the highly decorated heroic fighter of the *Kaiserreichsheer* assault troops, who was able to grasp, with greater philosophical acumen and descriptive abilities, the absolute innovations introduced in this war on the ontological plane by technology. To him we owe not only the “philosophical” use of the expression *Totale Mobilmachung*, taken from military language (Jünger 1998), but above all the identification and understanding of the metaphysical life-war-technology nexus, at the heart of his masterpiece of 1932 (Jünger 2017). The essay by Sandro Gorgone in this volume focuses on these aspects.

whose sole purpose is to produce Nothingness, namely destruction and death. The incomprehensible that the Great War exhibits consists precisely in the rapid production of this Nothingness that absorbs all efforts, all energies and uses all available means. The significance of death is also profoundly changed: exposed to the thundering fire of the machine guns and the shower of grenades, the assaults launched against the adversaries result in “technological massacres” (Traverso 2007) and death, from *principium individuationis*, becomes anonymous, “serial”, *industrial*. The new anti-hero of this mass war is the unknown soldier, who will be entrusted with the collective memory of the fallen. In a prelude to what would happen in the Auschwitz death camps, on the battlefields of the First World War, one did not “die”; according to Heidegger’s famous distinction, men simply “perished” like beasts, because even before dying, at the front they became no one, an animal led to the slaughterhouse or, worse, a spare part ready to be replaced as soon as it was damaged or destroyed.

With the enormous technological development of armaments, the old-fashioned war of movement after a few months gave way to another war, to the war of position, which obliged troops to dig underground trenches in which to hide and defend themselves. The enemy, although not far away, however became invisible, as, between the opposing fronts a few hundred metres from each other and subjected to a hammering rain of fire, there lay the chilling space of “no man’s land”, a small lunar expanse, devastated by the craters of shells and scattered with bodies, often torn to shreds or disfigured by grenades, abandoned to their indecorous rotting, whose sinister gurgling could even be heard. The face of warfare changed (Keegan, 1976), and now showed all its cruel, chilling inhumanity. Paradoxically, precisely the automatic and mechanical nature of technology transformed war into a *natural* catastrophe. Technology, which had become a form of life and struggle, transformed war into a gigantic machine of death. Millions of men were called to the front not so much to fight, but to be exposed to death, to be “employed” as mere “cannon fodder” in the factory of war. It is in the face of the irruption of this unprecedented form of unnamed violence that words fail and that images fail to sustain the inexpressible horror that emanates from them. Perhaps only psychoanalysis<sup>5</sup> and great art, at least art that has had the courage to

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<sup>5</sup> Starting with the analysis of the traumas induced by the Great War, Freud would begin his investigation into the roots of human aggression, arriving at the hypothesis in 1920 in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* of the existence of a death drive. I focused on the reflections that Freud dedicates to war, starting in the years of the First World War, up to the threshold of the Second in Resta (2015).



venture into the silence imposed by this catastrophe without violating it, has managed to approach this “unpresentable”. The trauma, which ushered in the twentieth century, caused an irreversible break between a before and an after<sup>6</sup>, showing in a striking and definitive way the fragility, if not the failure, of the founding values of European culture, starting with its vaunted “humanism”. The Great War, in fact, as we know, not only marks the beginning of the “short century” a few years later, but also represents a break in history, a turning point, an abrupt departure from the “world of yesterday”. On the battlefields and in the deep ditches of the trenches, in the incessant roar of the cannons and in the roar of the artillery, in the flashes of the grenades and in the bodies torn to pieces by explosions, in the mud, in the breathless air saturated with gas and in the nauseating odour of rotting corpses, in the horror and in the daily terror of being touched by death, a new world was born. Nothing could ever be the same again, after having crossed the *unknown* territory of that small desolate space of “no man’s land”, where humanity itself lost its way. *Before* there was blind trust in endless progress, in the civilizing virtue of European culture, in its sacred values that everywhere in the world affirmed the idea of the superiority of Western man, of his lifestyle, of his economic well-being. *After* there were only the ruins of this superb illusion, the tally of deaths too innumerable to count, the rubble scattered over a vast, deeply disturbed territory, which offered the bleak spectacle of a lunar landscape. The West was forced to acknowledge its own sunset.

Never, as in the case of the First World War, has a war appeared so *senseless* from every point of view. Its official ‘sense’, insistently reiterated during the years of the conflict, flaunted by all the powers in the field, could be summarized in the patriotic ideal of the defence of the nation, in the values of courage, honour, in the mystique of the mother country, for which one’s life must also be sacrificed. But, while these ‘noble’ nineteenth-century ideals were proclaimed, every day on the battlefield this “war of matériel” (*Materialkrieg*) and mass anonymous death took steps to destroy them. Of that world now reduced to rubble there was nothing left but a deep feeling of hatred for the enemy, whose very belonging to the human race was questioned, fuelled by propaganda, which in this war showed for the first time all its ‘military’ potential as a

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<sup>6</sup> The disruptive character of the fracture introduced by the outbreak of the First World War had not escaped Hannah Arendt: “It is almost impossible even now to describe what actually happened in Europe on August 4, 1914. The days before and the days after the first World War are separated not like the end of an old and the beginning of a new period, but like the day before and the day after an explosion” (Arendt 1979, 267).

weapon of mass persuasion. An enemy, therefore, to be annihilated. A new sacralisation of the war revived the crusader spirit; the *union sacrée*, which strengthened national communities, was accompanied by a true mysticism of the war, which saw in the sacrifice for the homeland, in warrior heroism the founding values of a new national *religion*, which fed on the myth of regenerative violence, as a necessary rite of passage for a *renovatio*. Faced with the boredom of bourgeois security, the war seemed to offer the unrepeatable opportunity for a more intense life, because one was exposed to danger. Influenced by this quest for adventure, with enthusiasm and exultation, the flower of European youth would dive into this enterprise, eager to fight for ideals that were already threadbare, exhausted. The mysticism of war, celebrated in patriotic rhetoric and confirmed by the Christian motif of the redeeming sacrifice, cloaked the ferocious thrill of combat with noble heroism, the unconfessable pleasure of giving death that was experienced in the impetus of the assault. The symbolism of blood, constantly evoked, made it possible to transform the unclean carnage into a purifying baptism. Blood represented the same lymph that flowed in the veins of the Nation, of its people who had taken up arms to defend it. And like a vampire, the Nation fed on the blood that war scattered copiously everywhere; it was the perfect symbolic element to show the constant reversibility between life and death. Only through the blood shed by the combatants could the Nation purify and regenerate itself. The bio-spiritual symbolic power of blood exhibited an ideologically decisive trait of this war, the indissoluble link binding *nationalism*, *vitalism* and *death*. It was above all the youngest (and most inexperienced) fighters who threw themselves into this vain sacrifice: they did not have time to understand that, in reality, this was the first act of a real tragedy, of a “European civil war” (Traverso 2007), of a “world civil war” (*Weltbürgerkrieg*), in which Europe’s suicide was taking place, a catastrophe destined to culminate in the furnaces of Auschwitz.

But this war marked the end of an era also because it confirmed, as Carl Schmitt had perceptively realised, the definitive sunset of the *Jus publicum Europaeum* (Schmitt 2006), the illusion of being able to continue to regulate war, at least on European soil, despite the destructive potential of the new technological weapons at the service of a *Machtpolitik* no longer with any restraints, due to exasperated nationalism. With the Great War, the previous concept of war, whereby the enemy was an opponent against whom to measure oneself (*justus hostis*), but not to hate and annihilate, came to an end. While Clausewitz (1982) had spoken of “absolute” war, recognizing as the inherent law of every war the progressive abandonment of every limit and the trend to extremes,

culminating in annihilation of the enemy, on the other hand, he still trusted in the ‘external’ force of politics, to be entrusted with the task of moderating it. With the First World War, however, not only did the war no longer appear to be the (contingent) continuation of politics by other means, according to the well-known Prussian general (“Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln”), but politics and war increasingly tended to coincide. In addition to being absolute, extreme and without end, the Great War was also the first “total” war (Ludendorff 1935), involving Total Mobilization (Jünger 1998) that involved, in addition to all sectors of military organisation, also the non-military sectors of the economy and industry (not just armaments), communications (propaganda) and all aspects of social life, in order to constantly fuel and raise the level of confrontation between the opposing sides. *Total* war, which was already pre-announced in the First World War, but which found its full and complete realization above all in the Second, not only involved an intensification and expansion of the conflict, but for the first time required the *total* employment of *all* energies, both material and ‘spiritual’, which had to be channelled and directed *solely* for war purposes. There thus ceased to be the fundamental distinction, which for the whole of the Modern Age had contributed to *limiting* conflicts, between the military and civilians, fighters and non-combatants, along with the distinction between the front and behind the lines, between the trenches and the city. Although different spaces, in which the war was fought in different forms, remained, the same organisational process affected all the energies mobilised everywhere, involving every aspect of existence and penetrating every place, which therefore became a battlefield. The war’s becoming “total” was thus nothing other than the further passage of that trend to extremes<sup>7</sup> which Clausewitz had already recognized as a law inherent in every conflict, and which the nationalistic policy of the European states, far from opposing it, clearly fuelled.

## 2. In the shadow of Nietzsche

Like a huge black hole, a chasm opens at the beginning of the twentieth century, an immense slaughter in which the sacrificial victims were especially the young, the “lost generation”, those who, like the very young Jünger, who had just turned 19, enthusiastically signed up as volunteers

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<sup>7</sup> On the growing impossibility of stopping the trend to extremes of the war, identified by Clausewitz as its fundamental law, see the important, highly topical reflections of Girard (2010), from an apocalyptic perspective.

for the front in search of adventure and the unknown, scornful of danger. After all, “live dangerously” had been the motto with which Nietzsche had challenged his spiritless contemporaries to shake them out of their bombastic and reassuring bourgeois routine. Completely unprepared for the harshness of this war and the rigours of military life, they were the first to fall like leaves in the wind in the bloody fighting of the first months of 1914, before the conflict was transformed into a weary war of position and trenches, immobilising the fronts until the final cessation of the fighting. Although the enthusiastic adhesion to war was a phenomenon characteristic more of the urban than rural masses, its symptomatic value should not be underestimated. The gloomy contagious ardour that pushed the younger ones especially to go to the front, impatient to fight against the enemy, though cloaked in virile and patriotic noble ideals, led to the emergence of violent, archaic impulses, which betrayed the premonitory signs of that incipient barbarity, which would soon take place at the front, capable of transforming the most cultured and civilized men in Europe into ferocious beasts. It was as if an overflowing *excess of life* was unable to find any other outlet, like a torrent in flood, and was transformed into an immense *power of death and destruction*. As if this overflowing life, which wished to assert itself at all costs, breaking the banks and overwhelming every obstacle encountered on its path, revealed its own obscure and deadly reverse side, no less intoxicating and exalting than the *vital* one, fuelling an *excess of death*. While it was Sigmund Freud who revealed the inseparable link between the life and death drive, it was the *Lebensphilosophie* of above all Nietzschean inspiration that affirmed the idea of an exuberant life which did not want to be preserved, but only to increase its power, beyond any limit. This is the keystone that supports the metaphysics of this, as of every war: the *unconditional affirmation of the power of life is reversed in the unconditional power of death*, the *absolute* affirmation and defence of oneself is transformed into the *absolute* negation of the other, according to a relentless “immunitary” reaction of rejection. It would therefore be a grave mistake to see war only from the viewpoint of death. Between *Life* and *War* there is a relationship of *identification*, as, on the basis of Nietzsche and starting with Heraclitus, Jünger also reiterated in the early 1930s: “Just as war does not express a part of life, but life itself, in all its violence, in the same way, life is fundamentally warlike” (Jünger 2001, 597). The war would reveal the intrinsically polemical, warlike, combative nature of life itself.

It is therefore in the shadow of Nietzsche that this war found shelter and, not surprisingly, his books were often kept in soldiers’ backpacks. They were necessary companions to understand the “*vital force*” that

produced so many millions dead. Not only was Nietzsche the prophet of the catastrophe that would strike Europe, but he was also, in many ways, its inspirer, the one who, wrongly or rightly, exerted an enormous charm and profound influence in every field of the cultural and artistic life of the early twentieth century, beginning with the avant-gardes, constituting an essential reference point for the “ideas of 1914” and for what has been called *Kriegsideologie*<sup>8</sup>. For this reason, it is quite appropriate to state that “the century was Nietzschean” (Badiou 2007, 144). Not only had Nietzsche, more than anyone else, foreseen with extraordinary foresight the imminent convulsions that would have shaken Europe; he had also provided the key to the door of the “uncanniest of guests”, which for some time had been undermining its foundations, that nihilism that precisely in the first “world civil war” showed the immense power of nothingness at work. By placing *life*—understood as the will to power that constantly wants to grow—at the centre of his thought, Nietzsche had also offered the generation of the front the indispensable coordinates to greet the war as an obligatory passage to overthrow the already decrepit old world and allow a New Man to assert himself. Even before Freud, he had also recognized, freeing himself from every sense of guilt, the unconfessable enjoyment that accompanies the eruption of violence, the festive joy that springs from massacres, the intense pleasure procured by cruelty.

By choosing Dionysus and Ares as his tutelary deities, Nietzsche showed to the next century the tragic way of a more intense life, the exuberant excess of life, which constantly clashed with *opposing* forces, fatally destined to cause destruction and death. As Alain Badiou has clearly seen, in the twentieth century fresco that he masterfully traced in the pages of *The Century*: “The main ontological question that dominates the first years of the twentieth century is: What is life? [...] What is the true life—what is it to truly live—with a life adequate to the organic intensity of living? This question traverses the century, and it is intimately linked to the question of the new man, as prefigured by Nietzsche’s overman” (Badiou 2007, 13). But, according to Badiou, in addition to being characterized by the ontological question of life, the twentieth century is also “the century of war. This does not simply mean that the century is full—up to the present day—of brutal wars, but that it has unfolded *under the paradigm of war*” (Badiou 2007, 34). Moreover: one

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<sup>8</sup> With this expression, coined by Thomas Mann, it is customary to indicate that composite ideological aggregate linked to the experience of the front from which also that “Conservative Revolution” derived various elements, within which, between the two wars, National Socialism found fertile ground (see the essay by Giuliana Gregorio in this volume). Cf. Losurdo (2001).

can say that war represents the *fundamental* passion of the twentieth century, what Lacan called “passion for the real”, so much so that it can be called “the century of destruction” (Badiou 2007, 54).

The metaphysical link that the Nietzschean century places between Life and War could also be clarified in these terms: what does it mean to live when life is identified in the will to power and in the constant tension of relations of force? When, therefore, must life, to be *fully such*, always *want* to go beyond itself? These are the same prophetic Nietzschean questions through which Badiou interrogates the Century, first of all this: “The century is that of the human animal, viewed as a partial being transcended by Life. What kind of animal is man? What is the vital becoming of this animal? How can it be more profoundly attuned to Life or History?” (Badiou 2007, 14). It is on the battlefields and in the trenches of the First World War that these questions became inescapable and, becoming even peremptory in the death camps of the Second, were consigned to the twenty-first century. Like Nietzsche and Freud, Badiou also sees the terrible truth that the Century revealed to us: “a sort of reversal between life and death, as if death were nothing but instrument of life” (Badiou 2007, 15). That the twentieth century nourished a genuine *passion* for war means that it did not only put itself at the service of death, but was also functional to life. The unrepresentable it exhibits, albeit without being able to represent it, is the enigma whereby *the most powerful affirmation of life puts itself at the service of a work of death and vice versa*.

Again in the shadow of Nietzsche, Foucault also questioned himself, at the end of the 1970s, on the link between Life and War, when, as in the First World War, mass armies appeared: “Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital” (Foucault 1978, 137). It was especially in the 1975-1976 course held at the Collège de France that Foucault tested what he called “Nietzsche’s hypothesis”<sup>9</sup> (Foucault 2003, 16) and the “relations of war”, i.e. the possibility of interpreting the relations of force, through which power relationships are determined, through the paradigm of war, as an *extreme* case in which their maximum tension occurs. With the term “war” Foucault, in fact, intends “an extreme [case] to the extent that war can be regarded as the point of maximum tension, or as force-relations laid bare.

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<sup>9</sup> On this theme, so decisive in the Foucauldian investigation of power, and yet so elusive and evasive, as well as devoid of further developments, see Zancarini (2000) and Pandolfi (2002).

Is the power relationship basically a relationship of confrontation, a struggle to the death, or a war?" (Foucault 2003, 46).

The "relation of war" thus appoints the fundamental and *elementary* law of life as of war, an *immunitary* law: "In order to live, you must destroy your enemies" (Foucault 2003, 255). In this Course, which actually followed a broken path, Foucault intended to sketch out in Nietzschean terms, in the guise of a genealogical research on state-sponsored racism, an ontology of War which was, at the same time, an ontology of Life and Power. Therefore, *war* did not only have a military value in this investigation, but was understood above all as a clash of antagonistic forces. Since the first introductory lesson, Foucault announced that he wanted to address the issue of Power not from an economic or even legal point of view, but starting with "Nietzsche's hypothesis", according to which Power consists of a warlike and incessant clash of opposing forces. From this follows the intrinsically *polemical* and conflictual nature of the Political, by virtue of which, starting with the *discourse* of the war of races, then prolonged in that of the class struggle, it is identifiable with the war:

Power is war, the continuation of war by other means. At this point, we can invert Clausewitz's proposition and say that politics is the continuation of war by other means. [...] Inverting Clausewitz's aphorism also has a third meaning: The final decision can come only from war, or in other words a trial by strength in which weapons are the final judges. It means that the last battle would put an end to politics, or in other words, that the last battle would at last—and I mean "at last"—suspend the exercise of power as continuous warfare (Foucault 2003, 15-16).

The contiguity with the concept of Political, theorized by Carl Schmitt since the late 1920s (Schmitt 2007), supported by the very gesture of "inverting" the relationship between war and politics posed by Clausewitz, should not be surprising, considering the consensus that this concept has met with—and continues to attract—not only on the right, but also on the left, above all for its *antagonistic* and *conflictual* nature. However, while Clausewitz assigned to the Political the task of *limiting* the trend to extremes of the war, for Foucault, who followed "Nietzsche's hypothesis", the Political itself was nothing but war conducted by other means, a continuous and *interminable* struggle: only a *final* war could have the *strength* to decree the cessation of hostilities.

Still making explicit reference to Nietzsche—a Nietzsche reinterpreted through the fundamental interpretation of Deleuze—behind the apparently "pacifying" surface of political power, Foucault glimpses war, the

inexhaustible clash of forces that tend to predominate over one another<sup>10</sup>. In this war, often underground and not clearly visible, he recognizes “the principle and motor of the exercise of political power” (Foucault 2003, 18). Calling the always rising social antagonism “war” has the meaning of highlighting both the degree of *intensity* of the conflict, its *extreme* character, and the elemental (one could say “vital”) force from which it derives its energy. Continuing to follow “Nietzsche’s hypothesis”, at the origin of history there would be nothing other than “different degrees of force, vigor, energy, and violence” (Foucault 2003, 60), “a fundamental and permanent irrationality, a crude and naked irrationality” (Foucault 2003, 55). This unconfessable origin of history, in which passions, violence and chance are stirred, in which an “elementary brutality” imposes, from time to time, an inevitably partisan truth, leaves no doubt: wars will *never* be fought for noble ideals, but only at the bidding of forces that want to impose themselves. This “perpetual war” among men would destroy *ab origine* any ideal of constructing “perpetual peace”, as well as any *dialectical* attempt at reconciliation. To what extent “Nietzsche’s hypothesis” of the clash of *vital* forces such as *war* has fuelled both revolutionary and reactionary discourses, it is Foucault himself who admits it. What interests us most is how it can provide a crucial key to understanding that marriage between Life and War that provoked the carnage of 1914-18.

Even before assuming in the twentieth century the connotations of biological and State racism of the Third Reich, the “relation of war” had a clear bio-thanato-political value in the extent to which it appointed the immunitary law that lies at the basis of every war and makes it appear “healthy”, if not actually “salvific”. The protection of life *requires* giving death: “If you want to live, you must take lives, you must be able to kill” (Foucault 2003, 255).

It is therefore necessary to recognize how “Nietzsche’s hypothesis” of the “relation of war”, which Foucault soon set aside, not only recognizes in the mere clash of forces the origin of the war and of an irrepressible conflict that would permanently characterize society, but above all, cannot

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<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Hobbes, according to Foucault the state of nature of the war of everyone against everyone else is *unsurpassable* and the conflict is permanent: “In the smallest of its cogs, peace is waging a secret war. To put it another way, we have to interpret the war that is going on beneath peace; peace itself is a coded war. We are therefore at war with one another; a battlefield runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefield that puts us all on one side or the other. There is no such thing as a neutral subject. We are all inevitably someone’s adversary” (Foucault 2003, 51).



conceal what Clausewitz had already discovered: the trend to extremes as a constitutive law of the “relation of war”. To show it in its radicality means admitting that every war tends, *by its very nature*, to the *annihilation* of the enemy, since, when the life of a collectivity, as well as of an individual, is at stake, there is no other way to defend it and to defend oneself other than giving death.

The metaphysics of war thus reveals the secret and inflexible law of life and death, from which comes an irrepressible trend to extremes, culminating in the annihilation of the other. After two world wars, European nations do not yet seem to have understood that whenever we hear the imperative “*Il faut défendre la société*”, there is always a “relation of war” lying in ambush, an immunitary defence that not only leads to the killing of the alleged enemies of the moment, but also to self-destruction. A hundred years after the end of the first European civil war, Europe seems to have forgotten the fatal trend to extremes that pushes us in a spiral of endless violence to the annihilation of the other; it seems to have forgotten how precisely nationalisms—a word which ironically derives ultimately from the Latin *nasci*, ‘to be born’—are the worst promoters of death. It seems to have forgotten how only the law of hospitality and not that of hostility is able to counteract old and new “relations of war”.

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# CHAPTER TWO

## THE BATTLES OF MATÉRIEL: WAR, TECHNOLOGY AND WORK IN ERNST JÜNGER

SANDRO GORGONE

Ernst Jünger's writing in the period after the end of the First World War offers a crucial and penetrating interpretation of the terrible, huge and revolutionary event of the Great War that marks an epochal turn in world history; according to Jünger, its "significance is superior to that of the French Revolution" (Jünger 1993, 126).

We will first analyse the new nature of the war that Jünger identifies with "total mobilization" (§ 1), then we will examine the anthropological aspects connected with the dominion of technology consecrated by the war (§ 2) and finally we will consider the figure of the "Worker", introduced by Jünger in his well-known book of 1932 *The Worker. Dominion and Form*, with special regard to the philosophical meaning of 'form' (*Gestalt*).

### **1. Total mobilization**

Jünger's famous memoir of experience at the front *Storm of Steel* (1920), his lyrical descriptions of the spiritual significance of war contained in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (*The Battle as Inner Experience*) (1922), and the retrospective analyses of the outcome of the Great War presented in the essay *Total Mobilization* (1930) present not only an original and fascinating narration of the military event but a philosophical interpretation of the unique character of the First World War. For Jünger, this is to be found in the fact that the essence of the War no longer lay in the military strategies of the conflict but in the capacity to mobilize the energies and recourses of society as a whole, whereby the new "army of work" revealed itself as crucial for the result of the war: "Alongside the armies that encounter each other on the battlefield arise the new armies of transport,

food, armament industry—the army of work” (Jünger 1993, 16)<sup>1</sup>. The War becomes a “giant work process” and the connected escalation of potential energy turns the warring industrial States into “volcanic forges”.

This deep ontological process triggered by the war has an extraordinary anthropological effect: it produces a “growing conversion of life into energy” (Jünger 1993, 125); this process of activation of all spheres of human life and at the same time of volatilization and—with reference to our actuality—increasing of the functional/media-character of each material relation is expressed by Jünger with the term “total mobilization”. Jünger believes that already in the characteristic experience of the trenches of the Great War, the nature of total work of the coming era can be seen, to the detriment of all traditional concepts of courage and heroism:

In the past, war was waged on days when dying was a joy, days which stood above time like shining monuments of human courage. The trenches, meanwhile, made war a profession and soldiers assembly-line workers of death, worm down by a bloody daily routine. [...] Trenches leave no room for lyricism, for the veneration of one’s own greatness (Jünger 2014, 40)<sup>2</sup>.

A few weeks after his enthusiastic voluntary enrolment in 1914 the romantic illusion of participating in the great trial of the war, in which the spirit of individuals and peoples was forged, was indeed dramatically frustrated. The enormous firepower of the two sides left the opposing armies blocked on their respective lines and obliged the soldiers to lead an exhausting mouse-like existence in the trenches: “Instead of the danger we’d hoped for, we had been given dirt, work and sleepless nights, getting through which required heroism of a sort, but hardly what we had in mind” (Jünger 2004, 13).

With extraordinary lucidity Jünger recognizes in 1930 that the crucial characteristic of the “great catastrophe” of this conflict lay in the close relation between the spirit of war and that of technical progress, that in the nineteenth century revealed itself as the “great popular church—the only

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<sup>1</sup> “The increasing of potential energies in each sector of social life is the clearest announcement of the work-age. In this unlimited marshalling of potential energies we perhaps find the most striking sign of the dawn of the age of work [*Arbeitszeitalter*]. [...] In order to deploy energies of such proportion, fitting one’s sword-arm no longer suffices; for this is a mobilization that requires extension to the deepest marrow, life’s finest nerve. Its realization is the task of total mobilization” (Jünger 1993, 126). On Jünger’s interpretation of the Great War see also Fiorentino (1993), Alessio (2001), Figal and Knapp (2013).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations taken from texts unavailable in English have been translated by Simon Tanner.