

Essay on betrayal of faith nationalism and the hollowness of ideology in all quie...

[Parts of the World](#), [European Union](#)



Erich Maria Remarque's classic novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* effectively eulogizes the sacrifice of Old World values and sensibilities on the killing fields of France and Belgium. Traditional European notions of chivalry, honor and patriotism were obliterated by industrialized, mechanized war and the trivializing of human life. Remarque's story is, among other things, a scathing indictment of nationalism and the manipulation of human emotion. Fired by nationalist fervor, Paul Baumer, the story's main protagonist, goes to war expecting glory and victory but is soon disillusioned by the horror of trench warfare and the aimlessness of the slaughter. Remarque, who served in the German army, translated this experience into a bleak commentary on human nature, alienation and existential angst. Remarque's perspective finds approximate parallels in the French film *J'accuse!* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, stories of disaffection which confirm that the dehumanizing nature of modern war is a phenomenon that transcends geographical boundaries and ideologies. *All Quiet on the Western Front* asks a stark philosophical question: how can human life be worth less than a socio-political creed? For Paul Baumer, the unsettling answer to this question comes at the end of a tragic journey.

The novel's pivotal scene unfolds during Baumer's return home on leave from the front, during which he feels utterly alienated from the nationalistic pride and once-cherished values that his old schoolmaster instilled in him. Baumer is likewise disaffected from his family,

whose inane talk and questions about the war only reveal how utterly soldiers are isolated from people who have no concept of the violence and

terror that the men at the front endure on a daily basis. Paul's father asks him about the war, which only frustrates Paul and underscores how little the people at home understand what is happening at the front. Civilians do not understand the almost farcical moral ambiguity at work at the front, an ambiguity to which Kropp alludes in contemplating the motivations for war. "It's queer when one thinks about it," he muses. "We are here to protect our fatherland. And the French are over there to protect their fatherland. Now who's in the right?" (Remarque, 35).

As their comrades fall around them, and with soldiers dying in the thousands every day, this question of moral relativity begins to consume Baumer. It undermines the very nature of faith, love and patriotism in a world where human life itself seems bereft of meaning. One is reminded of Philip J. Caputo's consideration of these issues in *A Rumor of War*, an account of the Vietnam War in which the author, who sees mangled corpses pass by every day, begins to doubt that there could be a divine spark in human beings, who are so physically vulnerable and yet so given to mindless killing (Caputo, 1996). Baumer and his friends want to be assured that there is some deeper meaning to the killing and the physical and emotional suffering that they sustain on behalf of an idea - the mere notion that their country is somehow "better" and more worthy of victory than their enemies, whose soldiers suffer the exact same hardships and loss as the German troops. The fact that the novel's characters love their country makes them all the more determined to seek answers to the philosophical doubts that nag at them. Surely the same could

be said of the French and British troops, who also loved their countries. If that is true, then what is there to fight over? Seen in this light, the older generation that had clamored for war suddenly seemed to have done so out of habit, or expectation. Baumer's schoolmaster had spoken of duty to country as a responsibility and a privilege, but did one not also owe a deeper responsibility and duty to one's fellow man, regardless of language, religion or creed? Baumer explains that " We loved our country as much as they; we went courageously into every action; but also we distinguished the false from the true, we had suddenly learned to see. And we saw that there was nothing of their world left" (Remarque, 64). Whatever national virtues that war had once affirmed were gone forever; the brave cavalryman's sword and lance, once the very emblems of courage and faith on the battlefield, were gone forever, and nothing remained but lines of sputtering machine guns and howitzers spewing mass death.

Having thus " suddenly learned to see," the soldiers' fear of, and respect for, the authority of their superiors erodes. Corporal Himmelstoss symbolizes the fundamental hollowness of this authority, which he readily abuses during training, doling out sadistic punishment to Baumer and the other trainees, an ordeal that serves the purpose of turning them into hardened killers. Yet it is just this indoctrination of mindless violence that perpetuates the culture of death. Stanley Kubrick's classic film *Full Metal Jacket* offers a similar representation of this ethos, in which marines are brutalized by a ruthless drill sergeant bent on creating killers - which he does, but is ironically killed by a trainee whose humanity has been scoured from his soul (Kubrick, 1987).

Like the drill sergeant, Himmelstoss, though German, appears to be more of an “ enemy” than the French and British troops his one-time trainees have been taught to hate on sight. Himmelstoss

is easier to hate, so much so that Kropp “ reveled in the thought of how he would grind him. It was this that made it impossible for him to crush us altogether - we always reckoned that later, at the end of the war, we would have our revenge on him” (Remarque, 62). But when Himmelstoss joins Baumer’s unit later in the story, one is not surprised to find that the fierce corporal they once feared is in truth a coward, whose own fear of death leads him to shy away from battle. Authority, it seems, is no guarantor of courage; another disillusionment that the young soldiers discover to be a myth.

In a real sense, *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a story of delusion, disillusionment and discovery. Baumer learns that the schoolmaster who assured he and his classmates that there is nobility in offering one’s life for one’s country is himself deluded, the promoter of a deadly ideology echoed today by jihadists who promise eternal reward for those willing to martyr themselves for the purity of their religion. Many have claimed that World War I was the beginning of the end for the heedless nationalism that inspired millions to confront certain death at the Somme, Paschendaele, the Marne and many other catastrophic battles. And yet the dangerous mindset which holds that one’s country is always in the right is still with us. It is a conceit that can be found anywhere, at home or abroad. Thus, the most important lesson that Remarque’s cautionary tale imparts to us is that patriotism is a pale substitute for conscience. Having the courage and the will to employ

reason and logic in the face of emotionalism is, after all, the highest duty that one can perform. Like war, it requires great courage. Unlike war, it holds the promise of lasting change.

Works Cited

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Full Metal Jacket. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Warner Brothers, 1987, film.

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