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The Image of World War I in British Poetry

Zdeněk Musil

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Student se ve své bakalářské práci zaměří na období 1. světové války ve Velké Británii a zejména konfrontaci veřejného mínění soudobé společnosti s reálnou zkušeností frontových vojáků, kterou bude v této práci reprezentovat vybraná poezie válečných básníků. Kromě obecné historické a kulturní charakteristiky tohoto období se student zaměří na vnímání válečného konfliktu britskou veřejností, zpracované dobovou propagandou. Dále bude charakterizovat skutečné podmínky frontových bojů, a jejich odraz v poezii tzv. válečných básníků. Srovnání historického a básnického obrazu 1. světové války bude těžištěm literární analýzy. Student vytvoří analytický akademický text založený na dostatečném množství kvalitních primárních a sekundárních zdrojů.

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Vedoucí bakalářské práce:

Mgr. Olga Roebuck, Ph.D.

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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prof. PhDr. Petr Vorel, CSc.
děkan

L.S.



Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D.
vedoucí katedry

V Pardubicích dne 30. listopadu 2012

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Zdeněk Musil

ANNOTATION

The main purpose of this paper is to portray selected features of World War I as they appear in the British war poetry and put them into context with the text-book knowledge of the war. The subsequent analysis offers an insight into the minds of British civilians on the Home Front and British soldiers on the Western Front. It chronologically maps the change of attitude towards the war as well as the process of alienation between the soldiers and the general public. World War I is presented as a milestone for Britain because it altered some of its traditional stereotypes and ways of thinking, both in treating their own citizens and other nations.

KEYWORDS

World War I, British society, war poetry, trench warfare, propaganda, disillusionment

ANOTACE

Hlavním cílem této práce je zobrazení vybraných jevů první světové války tak, jak se vyskytují v britské válečné poezii, a jejich uvedení do souvislostí s učebnicovými vědomostmi o této válce. Následná analýza poskytuje náhled do myšlení soudobé britské veřejnosti a britských vojáků na západní frontě. Chronologicky mapuje jejich změnu postoje k válce a proces odcizení mezi vojáky a společností. První světová válka je pro Británii prezentována jako důležitý milník, protože změnila některé tradiční stereotypy i způsob myšlení, jak ve vztahu ke svým občanům, tak i k ostatním národům.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

první světová válka, britská společnost, válečná poezie, zákopová válka, propaganda, deziluze

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Introduction

The first half of the 20th century witnessed some of the greatest events that played a significant role in the recent history of humankind. The technological progress brought about opportunities to change the face of the world. Hand in hand with the inventions, the psychological impact was immense and laid the foundations of modern societies. It is stunning how many human lives were wasted to achieve this evolutionary process.

The aim of this bachelor paper is to analyse excerpts of war poetry, the poetry written during and/or about the war, and compare them to the text-book realities of the Great War (1914-1918), also known as World War I. Despite that the fighting went on in many parts of the world, the main focus is put on the battles on the Western Front (mainly France and Belgium) and the socio-political situation on the Home Front (the British Isles).

It is important to point out that at the time of the war the British Empire comprised its dominions such as Canada, India or Ireland, therefore some authors from these countries are referred to as British. Most of the analysed war poems were written by soldiers who directly witnessed front line battles and were affected by this experience. Some other authors are mentioned to illustrate social issues that the general public in Britain had to face as the consequence of the war.

The opening chapter briefly outlines the historical setting leading up to this global conflict. It is followed by a description of the situation in Britain preceding the war and the subsequent progress towards some of the crucial changes in British society. The political context is also provided as the link between the government and the public was essential to maintain effective control by using law and propaganda. The third chapter depicts real conditions on the front and their influence on the emotional state of soldiers. The final part is based upon the confrontation between the two previous chapters. Striking differences in perception of the war by the general public and the trench poets are highlighted as well as other elements that originated on the front and remained in the post-war Britain.

Poems are featured in all three major parts alongside the theoretical content and commented on as they appear. There is very little additional information provided about their authors or the background surrounding their creative work in order to proffer wider variety without subjectively favouring any of them at the expense of others. Furthermore, the interpretation of some excerpts is rather generalized, even though it contains specific pieces of information e.g. proper names, to avoid going into superfluous details.

The purpose of this analysis is to discover how the artistic form, in this case poetry, contributes to the overall understanding of the events that are mentioned by historians. Both types of sources present invaluable evidence of peoples' behaviour during the Great War. They can exist independently from each other, appealing to individual tastes of those who seek knowledge in them. But when combined, the message gains more perspectives, providing deeper insight into the chosen topic.

1 Historical background

A premonition to an upcoming conflict, with both sides defined, can be traced back to late 19th century. In 1882, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy formed the Triple Alliance (or Central Powers), a supposed defensive act of military support to each other in case of war. The reaction came from Russia and France, who signed a similar treaty, with Britain who joined them later, forming Allied Powers. This trend of forging alliances spread across Europe, sometimes even secretly because they contradicted one another (BBC “Causes of the War”).

The unstoppable outburst of technological revolution emerging in 1860s, with its introduction of mass production, brought about possibilities to expand military power on unmatched scale. Most of the states, intoxicated by their own national pride, participated in the arms race to outmatch other countries. The Alliance was an effective mean of intimidation against the smaller states, especially those on the Balkan Peninsula, whose territories both Italy and Austria-Hungary desired (BBC). The recent crisis of these states’ struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire, resulting in Balkan Wars (1912-1913), provided a very inviting opportunity to provoke the European conflict.

Violent anti-Austrian attitude in Serbia, emerging since the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, was soon about to reach its climax (BBC). The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo, and the subsequent war declaration of Austria-Hungary on Serbia, triggered the widespread military campaign, the Great War (or World War I).

Despite its naval superiority, Britain, ruled by King George V (1910-1936), had to abandon its policy of isolation from continental Europe and take part in the land war. According to the treaty signed in 1867 to protect Belgium’s neutrality, in reaction to the commencing invasion, Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, dispatching its troops in France a few days later and engaging in the first British battle on 23 August on the Western Front.

The end of the war, announced on 11 November 1918, marked dissolution of the great imperial powers – German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires. Their newly formed successor states mostly lost some of their territories to the victorious Allied Powers, as well as their colonies in Africa and the Pacific. According to the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had to accept responsibility for causing the war, pay reparations and was put under

military restrictions (BBC “Outcomes of the War”). Also the subsequent foundation of the League of Nations was supposed to prevent any future conflicts.

The statistics say that nearly a million British soldiers died in the war and another two and a quarter million were wounded (Baker “British Army statistics”). A comparison by André Maurois shows that the British wartime expenditures were ten times higher than those of the twenty years of the Napoleonic Wars (445).

The progression of the war, as well as its aftermath, left British society gravely affected in various aspects of human life. Economic, political and psychological impact was tremendous and the consequences were far more difficult to overcome than it had been imagined before the peace was restored. British mentality was irreversibly stripped off its isolationist politics and positive attitude prior to this conflict. This transformation will be chronologically traced out in the following chapter.

2 British society and the Home Front

After Queen Victoria's death in 1901, her vast lineage of descendants spread across the Europe and influenced the political situation in the pre-war period, especially her son Edward VII, heir to the British throne (1901-1910), and her grandson Wilhelm II., German Emperor (1888-1918). Maurois points out that their mutual antipathy, caused by Edward's typically English calm certainty, played a particular role in European politics (437). The subsequent arms race for naval superiority between Britain and Germany was a foremost evidence of the forthcoming tensions.

However, even with such a great fleet at its disposal, the British Empire would not have been able to defend simultaneously its homeland and colonies in North Africa or India in case of war. Thus, finding an ally was necessary. Russia was at the time weakened by the ongoing war with Japan so the negotiations with France were another option on the list. Maurois agrees that despite the ancient rivalry between these two nations since the Norman conquest of England, the old grievances were put aside and the new ones, concerning the colonies in Asia, Africa and Newfoundland, were solved in favour of both participants (438). This treaty, the Entente Cordiale, was signed on 8 August 1904 and later incorporated Russia in 1907.

Despite that the British foreign affairs seemed to be well maintained, the political situation at home was at the brink of a possible crisis. The expenditures consumed by the armament industry soon started to affect general public by the lack of funds spent on social welfare. Trade Unions organized strikes for higher wages which forced the ruling Liberal Party to accept legislative provisions to give them certain benefits and insurance. This was opposed by the House of Lords, but the re-election of Liberals in 1910, with the support of Irish Nationalists, helped to settle the disputes with the revolting workers (Trueman "Home Rule and Ireland").

The Irish were in return promised the Home Rule Act, granting them the possibility of self-government. However, the Ulster unionists immediately took actions to prevent this Act from being assented. They recruited volunteers and threatened the government with the use of force if necessary. As BBC confirms, these threats were far from plain bluffing. In 1914 the Ulster Volunteer Force enlisted 90,000 men, who were armed with rifles smuggled from Germany and organized by strong leaders ("1916 Easter Rising"). The King and the Liberal government were under pressure and no consensus seemed possible to prevent the civil war. These conflicts partially ceased due to the outbreak of the World War; the Act was postponed and the Irish uprising delayed.

Additionally, the end of Victorian period brought another voice of discontent that started to be heard louder and louder. The obsolete idea of a woman, sitting at home taking care of her husband and offspring, could not withstand the progressive tides of social changes. Chris Trueman estimates that about 90% of all women employed in 1900 were domestic servants (“Womens Rights”). Apart from demanding more qualified jobs or the same wage as men, the idea that united women of all classes was the request for the right of suffrage (right to vote). The foundation of Women’s Social and Political Union (known as the Suffragettes) in 1903 at first did not incorporate violence in their actions. Since 1905 they started to disrupt political meetings by shouting at the politicians and wielding banners. Later they attacked them on their way to work, vandalised streets or chained themselves to railings. The beginning of war made the Suffragettes’ founder, Emmeline Pankhurst, announce the end of hostilities and proclaim their support to the government (Trueman “Womens Rights”).

The events occurring between the assassination of Franz Ferdinand on 28 June and the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August 1914, better known as the July Crisis, caught the British people off guard. Majority of the public and politicians were enjoying summer holidays. According to Michael Duffy even the German Emperor was unsure of the Britain’s reaction to the continental war and was rather to believe that she would try to maintain the isolationist neutrality as long as possible (“The July Crisis”). The general public paid little interest to the impending conflict and the elite called against direct intervention.

Finally, with the German mobilisation and the subsequent ultimatum delivered to Belgium, the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey (1905-1916), announced that they would aid Belgians. Both Grey and the Liberal Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Herbert Henry Asquith (1908-1916), threatened to resign if even then would Britain remain neutral and thus they became the main figures of the first years of the war (Maurois 443).

The British Empire benefited from the loyal support of its Commonwealth nations, strengthening its position and supplying troops. BBC claims that many rushed voluntarily to join the war against Empire’s enemies because of the strong pride of being British (“Causes of the War”). Such patriotic feeling with remarks to English positive approach towards colonialism can be sensed in one of the early sonnets by Rupert Brooke:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed; (“1914 V: The Soldier” Lines 1-4)

He presents a distant land that is enhanced by the remains of an English soldier dying upon it and thus it should be perceived as the English land. This sacrifice for benefits to one's country supports the theory that one of the possible reasons for the countries to enter the war was their own territorial gain.

To strengthen the government's power over civilian population during wartime, the Defence of the Realm Act was passed by the parliament on 8 August. The Act, with its latter amendments, mainly imposed censorship and restricted freedom of speech and movement. It was forbidden to discuss military topics and the opening hours of pubs were reduced together with the alcohol consumption. Requisition of land or factories for the war effort was allowed. Furthermore, supported by the Aliens Restriction Act, citizens not born in the UK had to register themselves and obtain permits while traveling; otherwise they would face incarceration or even repatriation (Bourke "First world war").

Asquith appointed Lord Horatio Kitchener, veteran of the Second Boer War (1900-1902), as the new Secretary of State for War. He soon became the iconic figure in raising the biggest volunteer army ever seen. From his former plea to boost the army with half a million soldiers, by the end of 1914, the number of voluntary recruits exceeded one million. The famous poster depicting as he points out his finger at the reader with a caption that reads "[Lord Kitchener] Wants YOU. Join your country's army!" (F.W.W.P. Digital Archive "Kitchener") has since been incorporated, slightly altered, by many other nations. John Terraine argues that such a massive campaign contributed to destabilization of British society, because the volunteers consisted mainly of well-educated and morally conscientious men, who would have done better service by staying at their jobs than on the front ("Britain In War").

It is questionable to say whether the volunteers rushed to the army because of the patriotic feel of duty or there were other reasons. Bruce Robinson offers a plenty of possibilities ranging from a break from the hard daily work in mines or factories to the opportunity of travelling overseas. He also mentions a temporary escape from poverty as the army offered a regular pay, food, clothes and accommodation. Moreover, there was a general opinion that the war will be quickly won, granting only limited time to earn some kind of heroic credit to bolster own social status ("Pals Battalions").

The technological progress, sped up by the need of new developments to outmatch the enemy, brought attention to an emerging rise of the media. Cinema, wireless telegraphy and photographs were suddenly a part of everyday life to many citizens, contributing to the already widespread influence of the press. Such a vast coverage served as a tool to sway the

opinion of public by propaganda and generated a steady flow of recruits to the army in the early years of war.

The campaign promoting so called 'Pals Battalions' also proved to be effective. Not only that it appealed to men by joining in whole groups such as workmates, sportsmen or relatives, who were promised to serve together on the front, it also encouraged competition between whole cities for a higher number of recruits (Robinson "Pals Battalions"). The idea of fighting side by side with the people they had already known seemed to be very attractive.

The War Propaganda Bureau, established in early August 1914, introduced another way how to unite the public and provoke action towards common cause. Alleged demonization of the opposing nation dates back to the medieval ages and served well in most of the consequent wars. In connection with the Great War, Kimberley J. Searle recognizes two main myths upon which the early foundations of British propaganda were based – "The rape of Belgium" and the "Bestial Hun" ("British Society at War"). As the titles suggest, the stories derived from the early invasions of Belgium and France. Some of the examples depicted civilians, especially women and children, being intentionally mutilated, sexually exploited or used as human shields, portraying the enemy as diabolical savages and perverts. The psychological impact on public was tremendous as the xenophobic anger transformed into moral obligation to safeguard the innocent.

German high officials were often targeted by political satire accompanying the news. The following rhymes were used by the British humourist to dishonour the German Emperor by claiming that:

He killed the doves and broke the chairs,
And threw the grey cat down the stairs,
And, oh! far worse than all beside,
He hurt his Mary till she cried.

(Lucas "The Kaiser" lines 3-6 quoted in Vansittart 50)

David Blamires recognizes that these lines were taken from the popular German children's book, which was translated into English in 1848, but were slightly altered as well as the character it originally described ("Telling Tales"). Despite that the former rude boy, Cruel Frederick, is replaced by Cultured William, his actions remain the same, only gaining new meaning. Blamires explains that 'the grey cat' refers to Sir Grey, British Foreign Secretary, and 'Mary' is the personification of Germany ("Telling Tales"). I would add that in this version where 'the doves' appear, the original uses only the general term 'the birds'. This

specification was applied for the sake of the common symbolism where the doves represent peace. Thus it is implied that The Kaiser literally killed peace when he declared war on others. The rejection of calm resolutions is suggested by throwing Sir Grey out and the cry of German nation underlines that, despite they were regarded as enemies, their civilian populace was suffering no less than the British.

Additionally, naval bombardment of the British coastal towns since November 1914, followed by the air raids in early 1915, served propagandist purpose splendidly. In spite of negligible life or material losses caused, the impact on general public was significant. The idea of bringing war to the Home Front was unbearable and the apparent solution how to prevent it was to enlist (The National Archives). But the most despicable act against civilians that turned the attention of the world towards Germany was yet to come.

On 7 May 1915, the British passenger liner *Lusitania*, returning from New York to Liverpool, was sunk without warning by the German submarine. 1201 passengers died, out of which 128 were Americans, which later brought the United States into the war (BBC “Home Front”). Violent anti-German hysteria erupted in many British cities, most notably in Liverpool and London. People were rioting in the streets, destroying businesses of non-British sounding origin (Bourke “First world war”). More down-to-earth reaction can be found in the poem by Edward Thomas *This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong*, where he states “. . . I hate not Germans, nor grow hot / With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.” (lines 3-4). Its title and his refusal to do what the press wants, indicate his awareness that people were expected to act to such news like they did. He is criticizing the extreme display of patriotism of British citizens and hatred towards Germany, which he finds to some extent exaggerated and wishes that people would be more rational in their actions. They have to realize that the world is not just black and white, in spite of that this is exactly the way the propaganda makes it look like.

However, even such a large number of fresh recruits would not form an army overnight, so in the early months of war the British were highly dependent on its Regular Army. It consisted of ten divisions (about a quarter million men), but in comparison to 70 French divisions, deployed by the end of 1914, it was still unsatisfactory (Terraine “Britain In War”). It was not until the April and May 1915, that the members of Citizen Army, combining Lord Kitchener’s volunteers and the Territorial Army (volunteers from overseas), began to participate in real combat on the Western Front.

Incredible amount of letters from the battlefields was delivered to Britain every day and censorship ensured that only the good news was reported. It was for obvious reasons that

the troops' location or details of operations, they were involved in, was deemed confidential and thus erased. But also any sign of poor morale, dissatisfaction with the conditions or losses was not favourable for the cause. The press was allowed to publish only reports issued by the government, accompanied by pictures from authorized photographers. Any unofficial photograph taking on the front was punishable by the death penalty (Spartacus Educational). But some of the scandalous proofs of British high ranking representatives' incompetence could not have been kept secret for too long and were soon about to shake the political scene.

Since March 1915, soldiers on the Western Front were experiencing munitions shortages and some of the failed offensives in northern France were supposed to be the result (Duffy "The Shell Scandal"). Political instability and mounting casualties affected also the public perception of the war. The significant decrease of volunteers began to trouble the government and innovative measures had to be applied, while avoiding mandatory military service as long as possible. A new set of recruitment posters was issued, aiming at women and children to help stimulate the patriotic guilt in men who were reluctant to volunteer. The most famous examples bore writings such as "Women of Britain say - GO!" (W.W.1 Propaganda Posters "Women") or "Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?" (W.W.1 Propaganda Posters "Daddy") and numerous campaigns were carried out in forms of public meetings or door-to-door advertising. Paul Fussell discovered that even the notoriously popular war poem *In Flanders Fields* could be regarded as the subtle product of propaganda with its imperative call to arms (248-250):

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The Torch; be yours to hold it high!
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep. (McCrae lines 10-14)

It appeals to conscience of the readers, suggesting that if they do not replace the fallen on the front; their comrades had died for nothing and could not rest in peace. Nevertheless, the National Registration Act passed in July 1915 showed that there were still almost five million men of appropriate age who had not joined the army (Baker "Derby Scheme"). The newly appointed Director-General of Recruiting, Lord Derby, came up with the scheme to register volunteers who will be sent back home and called to service later only if necessary. These were sorted into groups according to their age, marital status and occupation. They were also given an armband to mark them as volunteers and distinguish them from people who

completely detested any form of participation. Baker emphasizes that even though the Derby Scheme managed to enlist nearly two and a half million men within three months, majority of them held important jobs, making them unfit for early drafting, and the rest still kept avoiding all means of recruitment. The scheme was abandoned by the end of 1915 and the introduction of forced conscription seemed to be inevitable.

While men were departing to fulfil the compulsory military service since January 1916, women had to replace them in various jobs that were required to keep the war machine operational. Being a female herself, Jessie Pope's poetry enthusiastically motivated her fellow kin to seize this opportunity and assure the public of their capabilities:

Strong, sensible, and fit,
They're out to show their grit,
And tackle jobs with energy and knack.
No longer caged and penned up,
They're going to keep their end up
'Til the khaki soldier boys come marching back. ("War Girls" lines 5-10)

In addition to common occupations they had been used to, such as dressmakers, waitresses and clerks, women took up manual labour in munitions factories or conducted means of public transport. However, they were not greeted cordially in the heavy industry by their male colleagues. Bourke explains that in spite of many emancipatory appeals, they were still paid about half less than men as their new tasks were deemed only temporary, but it was still more than what they had previously earned as domestic servants ("First world war"). Furthermore, their patriotic attitude was disturbing because they started giving out white feathers to the men who were not wearing uniforms, indirectly labelling them as cowards (BBC "Home Front"). Siegfried Sassoon dedicated them a poem *Glory of Women* which ironically criticizes their shallow pro-war enthusiasm: "You worship decorations; you believe / That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace." (lines 3-4). Women were generally attracted to men in uniforms from the very beginning of the war. They almost idealized them as heroes in shiny armour going out on a quest to save them from impending evil. But by this time the soldiers already knew that the front was not a place for heroic deeds as it had been imagined and found this comparison rather annoying.

Men could still avoid being drafted by appealing to the Military Service Tribunal, presenting various reasons ranging from employment in important business through medical unfitness even to conscientious objection. The objectors mainly claimed that the war was in conflict with their moral or religious beliefs as it is mentioned by S. Gertrude Ford: "His

crime was that he loved Peace; followed her / For Christ's sake, in His name. . ." (7; lines 1-2), but this did not spare them their duty. They were sent either to work in the home-front industry or to perform various non-combatant activities on the fronts, such as cooking or medical assistance. Those who refused to contribute to the war effort by any means were sentenced to imprisonment and lost their right to vote (Duffy "Conscientious Objectors"). Though they were mostly seen as shameful beings in the eyes of the public on one hand, they were also praised by individuals for their humanistic ideals on the other hand. The following excerpt is about a conscientious objector, who gets hurt by the lynch mob for being a messenger of peace:

They bound him, mocked, maltreated; wounded sore
They left him, crying "Coward". So once the rude
Cries of the crowd rang round the Tree that bore
Leaves for the healing of the nations strewed. (Ford 7; lines 9-12)

He is compared to the Tree of Life whose leaves (arguments) are aimed at re-uniting the strewn nations. The author calls for peaceful resolutions of the war and is against the unnecessary use of violence.

The rising anti-war voices and the armed suppression of the civil unrest in Ireland in April 1916, also known as the Easter Rising, contributed to the decreasing flow of fresh recruits just when they were needed the most. The unsuccessful Somme offensive from July to November 1916 cost Britain about half a million casualties. Also with the death of its iconic figure, Lord Kitchener, the ruling government was about to collapse (Trueman "Liberal Party"). In December, supported by the Conservative Party and appointed by the King, David Lloyd George became the new Prime Minister.

The first major difficulty he had to overcome was the renewed unrestricted submarine warfare by German U-boats, sinking supply ships, and the ensuing food shortages in Britain since February 1917. He forced the adoption of convoy system which proved to be effective against any additional cargo losses, while successfully urging the United States to enter the war (Encyclopædia Britannica). But the prices of certain commodities, especially sugar, butter and meat started to rise. The ironic remark at the expense of the entrepreneurs who started to push the price up was delivered in response:

Apparently guiltless of personal greed,
They hasten to succour their country in need;
But private returns in their little top shelves

Show it's one for the country and two for themselves.

(Pope "Profiteers" lines 5-8 quoted in Vansittart 174)

Fortunately, reaction of the government came soon enough. The establishment of food control committees seemed necessary to keep fixed retail prices of these articles in order to prevent profiteering (Hughes "Food Shortages"). Also the propaganda promoted fuel saving and voluntary food rationing, putting the Royal Family as the prime example.

The King himself gave up drinking alcohol and practised food austerity in his own house. He also proved to be a person of humanitarian support as he visited hospitals and bombed areas to cheer up the victims on the Home Front. He made efforts to discourage bad treatment of German prisoners and to mitigate the general public's anti-German attitude because some of the high ranking officials or Members of Parliament had been forced to resign due to their German origin (Svidová). It had gone as far as the German Shepherd dog breed was renamed to Alsatian Dog (Fussell 176). The King eventually succumbed and in July 1917 changed his family name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to the more British sounding Windsor.

To avert the possible food crisis, Lloyd's government with the power granted by Defence of the Realm Act, seized 2.5 million acres of land for agricultural purpose. The workers were gathered mainly from the ranks of women, conscientious objectors or immigrants from the war stricken countries (Trueman "Rationing"). Nevertheless, rationing was introduced in early 1918.

In response to German Spring Offensive (March – July 1918) the Military Service Act was extended to enforce conscription in Ireland. The immediate rise of opposition came from the Irish clergy, who proposed peaceful resolutions, and from the Nationalists who were not afraid to take direct actions against the rule by threats of strikes or communication breakdowns. Dave Hennessy proposes that continuing in the struggle would have caused more harm than good to the British war effort ("The Hay Plan"). Furthermore, the former question about Ireland's autonomy was brought to attention again.

With the armistice signed in November 1918, the pre-war disputes could be resumed. While British women were rewarded with the right to vote for their willing contribution to the common cause (Martin "Women and WWI"), the Irish problem seemed to evolve right in the opposite direction and led Britain into the civil war only two months after the global peace restoration.

This chapter figured out that the evolution of public's attitude towards the war directly derived from what was happening on the front, even though the propaganda attempted to delay its impact as long as possible. The incorporation of conscription was presented here as the imaginary dividing line between two very distinct images. Formerly there were volunteers, the idealised heroes "Riding in armour bright, serene and strong" (Sassoon "The Poet as Hero" line 6) into the war. They ended up as forced conscripts, ". . . who die[d] as cattle" (Owen "Anthem For Doomed Youth" line 1). How they perceived the Great War will be described in the subsequent chapter.

3 Soldier's experience

The first things that a man needed to become a soldier were training and equipment. Barracks and training camps established in Britain could not accommodate the crowds of recruits that volunteered in 1914. Churches, halls and warehouses were confiscated and turned into additional training facilities. The basic drill involved maintaining discipline, accepting orders, weapons handling and practicing first aid. Soldiers would later specialize in their role of choice e.g. machine-gunners, grenadiers or scouts. After passing their preparatory courses they were sent overseas to France, where more intense training in the safe areas was carried out (Baker "Training"). Only then they were sent to the fighting front, but no previous training was efficient enough due to the differences in how this war would be waged.

The newly introduced aspects of so called modern warfare made most of the ground advancements very difficult. One of the foremost typical features of the Great War was the extensive use of trenches. Former simple dugouts to repel retaliatory attacks and prevent losing ground soon developed into a complex defensive system. Fussell shows the pattern of three parallel trench lines that ensured periodical circulation of fresh troops and material on the front line (41). Following the usual design, trenches were about ten feet deep, muddy floor covered by duckboards, crumbling walls supported by sandbags, metal suspensions or branches. Sandbags were on some spots piled above the ground level to form a 'parapet', allowing the person to look through crevices in it (Duffy "Parapet"). Who would dare to look over the edge anywhere else, risked a direct hit by the artillery shell or sniper's bullet. This basic mistake by the novice soldiers is recalled in one of Rudyard Kipling's epitaphs, mocking at their infantile behaviour:

On the first hour of my first day
In the front trench I fell.
(Children in boxes at a play
Stand up to watch it well.) ("The Beginner")

Fussell mentions that during the day it was possible to observe the 'no man's land'¹ only through carefully hidden loopholes or with the help of special periscopes (42). Only at night or if there was a poor visibility it was relatively safe to raise head above the edge.

¹ The unoccupied ground between two enemy trench systems.

From the trench there was hardly anything to be seen on the other side during daytime as both belligerents shared their common duty of waiting which side would first receive the order to attack. There was no face to be spotted, no exact image that would characterize the enemy in human features; there was only some unknown driving force behind all the incoming bullets and shells (76). Many rumours of how the Germans looked like circulated, majority of them depicting stout barbarous savages, originating from the widespread propagandistic myths of their atrocious deeds. Robert Graves goes even further and pushes his imagination of the confrontation with a German soldier to a biblical context. However, his allusion to the fight between David and Goliath is reverted and their struggle ends like this:

“I’m hit! I’m killed!” young David cries,
 Throws blindly forward, chokes ... and dies.
 And look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim,
 Goliath straddles over him. (“Goliath and David” lines 44-47)

Young David, impersonating the brave British soldier, cannot stand a chance against the brutish might of the German Goliath, identified only by the spiked helmet and grey uniform. In modern war, especially on the front line, there is no place for heroes anymore among ordinary soldiers. Cunning and resourcefulness are no longer valid attributes to outsmart your foe, it is the raw firepower and strength in numbers that determine who will stand and who will fall.

The opposite analogy can be found in Herbert Read’s work, telling a story about the British soldier who captures the German prisoner, engaging with him in a conversation as they walk into the British trench:

he told me he had a wife and three children.
 In the dug-out we gave him a whiskey.

 In broken French we discussed
 Beethoven, Vietzsch and the International.
(“Liedholz” lines 11-12,16-17 quoted in Vansittart 140)

In contrast with Graves’ depiction, this is a much more idealized meeting of the two adversaries. The combination of family background, a gift of whiskey and the discussion about German art, all create the feeling of regained humanity. Kieron Winn explains that this kind of anarchistic protest is typical for Read, as well as the free verse form he used. He

emphasizes that the absurd content of this poem ironically stresses how the war fragmented the world into individual alienated nations (“Poetry of H.R.” quoted in Goodway ed. 16).

The initial British attitude that the war will be quickly won was reflected in the construction of their trenches. They were originally built only as the temporary measure with a very little attention paid to comfort (Fussell 43-44). Damp conditions and the stench of rotting bodies began to attract various vermin and parasites. Rats were feasting on the dead while lice were irritating the living. Duffy in his article describes that it was nearly impossible to do anything about it. Dead bodies or high water could not be removed during daylight as it required leaving the trench. Soldiers tried to kill the rats by their guns or bayonets, but they would multiply at faster rate. And finally, washing or cutting hair would not solve the problem with lice as their eggs remained in the clothes (“Life in the Trenches”). Appalling sight of all this happening at their very feet and the spreading of diseases demoralized the troops. The unceasing enemy fire only intensified their utter hopelessness. Sassoon presents a story of a soldier who under these circumstances suffered an emotional breakdown:

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again. (“Suicide in the Trenches” lines 5-8)

Not every division was lucky enough to have rum issued. Those who had the pleasure were rationed about one or two spoonful twice a day. More was given out to boost courage when it was about to commence the attack or some were given it as a reward (Cook “Rum in the Trenches”). As for the suicide itself, there is hardly any source to be found confirming that it actually occurred. One could get killed easily just by reckless behaviour. And if somebody really shot himself, the last line suggests that the evidence of such action (if there was any) probably never got out of the trench due to efficient censorship.

Night was the only time when it was relatively safe to do any work that concerned walking out of the trench. Being it the repair of parapets or lines of barbed wire, delivery of supplies, mail and material or acts of reconnaissance. Lifelessness of the day transformed into swarming activity when it got dark (Fussell 47). Despite that the process was every now and then interrupted by a shot or lit by an explosion, the workers had to carry on. Sassoon describes such a night scene:

Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;
I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,
And leaning forward from His burdening task,
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine. ("The Redeemer" lines 13-18)

The officer observes one of the soldiers who is burdened with the load of planks, imagining him as Jesus Christ carrying his cross. The job has to be done, but in these dreadful conditions, which make him likely to get killed during his task, he is suffering as a martyr who has to go through hell, eventually sacrificing himself in favour of the rest.

In one of his other poems, Sassoon explicitly denominates what he perceives as hell. It is suggested by the memory of a dead squire who states ". . . I died in hell / (They called it Passchendaele). . ." ("Memorial Tablet" lines 2-3). The Battle of Passchendaele, or the Third Battle of Ypres, was fought in France between June and November 1917. Its setting took place in the former marshlands, which French farmers over the years managed to cultivate by the system of drainages. However, as historian Basil Liddell Hart points out, ten days of preliminary shelling accompanied by heavy rains turned the ground into a swamp, the state probably even worse than it had been ever before (330-331). Weapons often jammed in these awful conditions. In some places the mud was so deep that the shells did not explode on impact and only sank harmlessly (335). Both the infantry and the tanks got stuck in the mud not far from their starting line and it is estimated by BBC that only five miles of ground was gained by the British while suffering more than 300,000 casualties during this unfortunate campaign ("Battle of Passchendaele").

Being trapped between two muddy walls of the trench with all the filth lying everywhere around, the only direction that would allow the eyes to turn away from these atrocities was to the sky. Stillness of the air or parades of passing clouds could have been observed with soothing effect anywhere, but not on the front. Suspicious calm could not bring any joy to soldier's mind, only menacing suspense as described by Owen:

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,
But nothing happens. ("Exposure" lines 11-15)

Nevertheless, the exact opposite seemed no better when the sky above was spoilt by the flight of an airplane. A significant employment of aircrafts for reconnaissance purposes was vital in monitoring the trenches and targeting reinforced positions for tactical bombardment. Their presence mostly foretold a subsequent shower of shells.

East then and west false dawns fan-flashed
And went, and came; false thunders clashed.
Who stood and watched
Caught piercing horror from the desperate pit
(Blunden "Trench Raid Near Hooze" lines 13-16)

Roaring of enemy guns and flashes of explosions were potent enough to imitate natural phenomena such as thunders and dawns. It lent the artillery almost divine supernatural powers which had been in ancient times attributed to gods. The desperate victims could only wonder where the next blow will land. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide away from the gods' fury.

Sunrise and sunset are often granted some special qualities in poetry and to the soldiers it was the time when the offensives were most likely to be initiated. The daily routine of morning and evening 'stand-to', the time when the assigned guards had to watch through the parapet whether the enemy was about to attack, became soon a loathed chore (Duffy "Stand-To"). One was most likely to be killed during this defensive duty and therefore a negative connotation associated with dusks or dawns was soon perceived by many. Edmund Blunden shows how it spoilt any artistic impression they had been attributed to before the war:

The dawn but hangs behind the goal,
What is that artist's joy to me?
Here limps poor Jock with a gash in the poll,
His red blood now is the red I see,
(“Come On, My Lucky Lads” lines 21-24)

The red in the sky above as a metaphor for the bloodshed of men on the earth below is self-explanatory and was incorporated in many poems about the war. Not only during stand-to but also when waiting for orders to attack, the ominous heavens predicted that the time of offensive would inevitably come sooner or later. A wonderful example of being thoughtfully aware of such a day drawing nearer was written by William Noel Hodgson who witnessed “A

hundred of thy sunsets spill / Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice” (“Before Action” lines 19-20). While counting the sunsets to the bloody massacre, the author seems to have given up any hope of survival. Such a pessimistic view of upcoming events marks the shift of attitude towards the war during the Somme campaign of 1916, where this poem takes place. The epitaphic content of the last stanza where he utters his prayer “Must say good-bye to all of this; / . . . / Help me to die, O Lord.” (lines 22,24) furthermore intensifies its authenticity, because it is believed that the author died only two days after writing this poem, during the British assault.

Another very common allusion to blood comes through scarlet flower petals, especially those of poppies. This is not exclusively connected to the trench warfare as it had been incorporated in poems about earlier wars. Fussell traces origin of this trend to the fusion with 17th century pastoral elegies of John Milton² (166). Trench poets applied this floral element to draw the idea of death in a rural setting. Flanders fields in Belgium, where bloodiest battles of the Great War occurred, had been notoriously famous for its vast lawns of poppies that were mentioned in poetry. However, Blunden argues in his poem, which is also set in Belgium, that the colour of blood and poppy is not absolutely equal:

Such a gay carpet! poppies by the million;
Such damask! such vermilion!
But if you ask me, mate, the choice of colour
Is scarcely right; this red should have been duller.

(“Vlamertinghe: Passing the Chateau” lines 11-14)

His argument that the bright scarlet petals of the poppy are not exactly of the same colour as the darker shades of blood seems partially valid. Only the oxygenated blood in human body is of lighter colour and even this will turn dark when it gets absorbed into clothes or soil. So the dried up stains marking the bodies of the fallen and the colour of poppies, which are used to symbolically commemorate them, do not match.

Blunden himself often used pastoral elements to highlight beauty of the rural countryside. Soldiers in his poems marvelled at the yet unspoilt parts of the landscape and revelled in the caressing embrace of nature. A mere presence in the open gained on importance as the conditions in the trenches were becoming intolerable. It offered a kind of escapism from the rueful reality of war:

² English poet (1608-1674) best known for his extensive poem *Paradise Lost* (1667).

Round the still quadrangle of the great farm
The company soon had settled their new home;
The cherry-clusters beckoned every arm,
The brook ran wrinkling by with playful foam,
And when the guard was at the main gate set,
Surrounding pastoral urged them to forget. (“The Guard’s Mistake” lines 7-12)

Their surroundings remind them of their ‘old’ homes in Britain where the land is still untouched by the war. Everything seems so pristine and safe here as if this was a land of bliss, where soldiers were being sent to relax rather than attend to their duties. The guard mentioned in the title gets so absorbed in his contemplations that when he is roused from his dreaming by the enemy, he realizes that he had abandoned his rifle. The weapon just did not seem necessary in such an idealized setting.

Nevertheless, the unavoidable influence of war would find its way even into these peaceful corners of the country. Soldiers marching through the woods, while adoring the sight of a five miles distant scenic agricultural village, are suddenly caught by the artillery fire in the poem *Rural Economy* (1917):

In sight, life’s farms sent forth their gear,
Here rakes and ploughs lay still,
Yet, save some curious clods, all here
Was raked and ploughed with a will.
The sower was the ploughman too,
And iron seeds broadcast he threw. (Blunden lines 13-18)

The same terms to describe the scenery are used to depict the attack as well. Shells are sown, ploughing the landscape by their explosions. Damage done to the nature seems to be put on the same level as human casualties. Nothing can justify the wake of destruction that is accompanying wartime conflicts and it is foreseen that this harvest will not be beneficial for the prosperity of humankind as it should be. In the end, the attacker is seen as a farmer, who by the use of his tools reaps the lives of his enemies.

The fallen are not forgotten by the poets and the form of elegy serves a useful purpose. Nature did not share only the physical pain, as it was implied by Blunden, but it could also feel sadness through given human qualities. Author’s grief over the death of his friend gets blended with many features of an ordinary natural setting, which not only commemorate the loved person, but also bring their presence back to the world of the living:

Walking through trees to cool my heat and pain,
 I know that David's with me here again.
 All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
 Caressingly I stroke
 Rough bark of the friendly oak.
 A brook goes bubbling by: the voice is his. (Graves "Not Dead" lines 1-6)

The narrator seeks serenity in the forest and the recurring scenic motifs seem to impersonate the deceased comrade. A tree can hardly be referred to as friendly in a literal meaning, but here, the oak can resemble a man, indeed. Standing tall, stout and firm, with branches spread as if longing for a hug.

The pastoral ancestry lays also in the origin of one feature, which largely contributed to the stillness of the fronts, the barbed wire. The former invention of an American farmer in the 19th century for fencing cattle was now used to restrain whole armies of men. Even though that the wire had been used in earlier wars, during the World War I it became a mass produced article and its version was upgraded to have more barbs, both in amount and density (Payne "Barbed Wire"). Such a simple, yet terribly effective, obstacle sowed fear into the minds of those who were instructed to cross its tangles. But when the Colonel Cold arrived, embodying the winter in Edgell Rickword's poem, the spectacle was altered as he "turned the wire to fleecy wool, / iron stakes to sugar sticks / snapping at a pull." ("Winter Warfare" lines 10-12). Its deadly purpose, now covered by the thick layer of snow, seems not only harmless but almost as if tempting one to touch it. But this was only a deceitful illusion.

Despite it was possible to overcome the wire on foot; it was a very dangerous and painful endeavour. The belts commonly laid around the trenches were at least ten yards (9 metres) wide and three feet (1 metre) high (Payne "Barbed Wire"). The person crossing it had to walk slowly and erected which made him a very easy target. Ivor Gurney recognized his friend among the unfortunates who found death while entangled:

Who died on the wires, and hung there, one of two -
 Who for his hours of life had chattered through
 Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:
 Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went
 A noble fool, faithful to his stripes - and ended. ("The Silent One" lines 1-5)

Poor Buck blindly obeyed an order to attack, but the gruesome entanglement lying in his path was vastly underestimated. Precautions should have been taken into consideration if the offensive was meant to succeed. The most common method of destroying the wire was by

using explosives, either carried by infantry or delivered by artillery from afar. However, this solution was not flawless and failed in some cases, especially in later years of the war when more durable metals were used for its manufacture (Payne "Barbed Wire").

One of the tactics to overcome the stalemate caused by the trench warfare was the employment of gas, dispatched inside artillery shells to enemy lines. The first experiments began as early as 1914 with non-lethal substances, but they were mostly of minor annoyance, it rather only irritated the soldiers. The first large-scale gas attack was executed by the Germans in April 1915 during the Second Battle of Ypres. The wide yellow-green cloud creeping across the no man's land was at first mistaken for the smoke cover of the impending attack (Duffy "Poison Gas"). Owen describes a similar scene with the soldier caught within the cloud "As under a green sea, I saw him drowning." ("Dulce et Decorum Est" line 14). Effect of the poisonous chlorine was immediate and the defenders fled in terror. However, the advancing Germans were also caught unaware by the unpredictable nature of gas warfare and suffered some casualties themselves because the gas did not dissipate but lingered on the ground. Similar unfortunate turn of events, on a significantly larger scale, happened to the British when they tried to implement this feature during the Battle of Loos in September 1915 (Duffy "Poison Gas"). Thousands of British soldiers were surrounded by their own cloud due to the sudden change of wind.

As more and more efficient gas countermeasures were being steadily developed, by the end of the war, gas masks or respirators became a standard issue found in the trenches. If soldiers were caught without their masks in the field, they could still cover their faces with cloths drenched in water or urine for protection as the early substances were aimed at respiratory organs, causing sneezing and coughing fits (Duffy "Poison Gas"). However, this became useless against more toxic gasses, such as the infamous mustard gas used since September 1917, which additionally caused damage to exposed skin.

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs

(Owen "Dulce et Decorum Est" lines 19-22)

The most notable symptoms were blisters filled with yellow fluid and expectoration of blood (Briggs "Mustard Gas"). It is estimated that during the whole war period only about ninety thousand soldiers (eight of them British) that were ever exposed to gas attack died directly as

a consequence (Duffy "Poison Gas"). However, this does not cover those who died later or were incapacitated, most often blinded, by this experience.

The aforementioned conditions on the front which the cheerful volunteers encountered personally over the course of the war obviously did not meet their initial expectations. It is no wonder that many of them felt betrayed by the government and were angry with the society. Owen sent a message to the audience on the Home Front stating that if they witnessed these horrors ". . . [they] would not tell with such high zest / . . . / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori³." ("Dulce et Decorum Est" lines 25, 27-28).

The forthcoming ultimate chapter is aimed to underline some of the discrepancies in perception of the war by the soldiers and the civilians, as well as highlight war's influence on the post-war world.

³ The Latin phrase 'dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' is translated into English as 'sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country'. (Dictionary.com)

4 When worlds collide

The war veterans were not alone to undergo the process of blinding. When the gas was used on the front, it was immediately condemned for its inhumanity and associated only with the enemy. When the British started to incorporate it themselves, speaking about the use of gas had to be concealed from reaching the public. The manufacturing companies in England were forbidden to refer to their products other than simply as ‘accessories’ (Duffy “Poison Gas”). The use of words such as gas canisters or cylinders, which they actually were, became punishable.

Photographs of the trenches, where soldiers spent most of their time on the front, were also subjected to censorship. Exemplary trenches were dug in London, offering almost idealized display of modern warfare (Fussell 43). Soldiers on their leaves who witnessed these exhibitions were astonished by the view they had never experienced. So clean, dry and well-fortified structure of the trench was incomparable with their, as well as Sassoon’s, vision of “. . .foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats, / . . .ruined trenches, lashed with rain” (“Dreamers” lines 9-10). Rumours of these spectaculars, when they reached their real counterparts, produced numerous bitter jokes about the blindfolded society.

The information provided by the propaganda on the Home Front erected a solid barrier of incomprehension between the world of soldiers and the world of civilians. An example of growing alienation can be traced in Sassoon’s *Blighters* where the people in a music hall are amusing themselves with remarks how Kaiser ‘loves’ the British tanks. His reaction is the following utterance:

I’d like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or ‘Home, sweet Home’⁴,
And there’d be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume⁵. (lines 5-8)

Tanks, hybrids of the previously designed armoured cars and agricultural machines, offered a limited protection against standard bullets and grenade fragments at the cost of low mobility and highly unpleasant conditions for the crew (Trueman “Tanks”). They played only a supportive role as they had not been employed in combat situations earlier than in late 1916

⁴ A 19th century English song.

⁵ A city in northern France.

and in very limited numbers. Their reliability was also disputable due to the harsh terrain on the front. The author's disgust with the public's petty behaviour is consoled by the imagination of how they would love the sight of a tank, crushing through their seats. He is sure that both their blithe spirit and frivolous patriotism would be gone if the reality was brought to their doorstep in all its vivacity.

Fussell finds the above mentioned scene ironic because some of the toughest battles occurred less than a hundred miles from the British coast, where the explosions were distinctly audible (68). Thus the inhabitants of southern regions of England could have been undeniably aware of how close the war actually was. This short distance offered an analogical possibility of bringing a concert from the music halls to the Western Front. In *Concert Party: Busseboom*, while the soldiers are enjoying the performance, another 'act' is about to begin beyond the horizon:

We heard another matinée⁶,
We heard the maniac blast.

Of barrage south by Saint Eloi⁷,
And the red lights flaming there (Blunden lines 15-18)

This scene suggests that on the front there was a similar kind of entertainment already present. Battlefield was a dance floor where men were moving to the conducted symphony of explosions. Individual stages such as preliminary shelling, the commencing attack and the subsequent advance or retreat could be regarded as the acts of a play.

The advantage of being close to home was the ability of quick travelling between these two destinations. Soldiers were able to receive parcels from their beloved in several days, some containing consumables that would arrive sooner than they were spoilt. Letters and newspapers were delivered with only one day's delay so the news could spread quickly. Especially during the most costly battles when casualties mounted by tens of thousands a day and the mail to relatives of the wounded, killed or missing had to be sent. Terraine stresses what a shock it must have been to see the postman handing letters of condolence to almost every house in the same street, because of the Pals Battalions the men that had enlisted in one neighbourhood together, they together also vanished ("Britain In War").

⁶ A French word for a theatrical performance.

⁷ A place in France.

The most significant battle that was so hardly felt not only on the front, but also at home, was the Battle of the Somme. During the opening attack on 1 July 1916, the British suffered 60,000 casualties within a single day and Bruce Robinson estimates that some of the Pals, for example from Leeds or Sheffield, lost around 50% to 80% of their members and had to be disbanded (“Pals Battalions”). This disaster gravely affected the communities as the people at home had been simultaneously acquainted with more people whose death was reported at the same time. Resulting chain reaction of grief and anger released the wave of disillusion across the Home Front. Robinson confirms, that however effective the Pals experiment might have been for the initial recruitment, it failed badly when put into practice and was not repeated again (“Pals Battalions”).

Sincerity of the obituary notices sent by the military officials was to be doubted because the censorship would not allow disclosure of any particular details. Soldiers themselves preferred writing about rather encouraging news, not causing distress to their relatives. This is what Sassoon calls the ‘gallant lies’ in his poem *The Hero* where the mother receives an announcement about her son’s death:

He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy. (lines 8-12)

In fact we are told in the end that he was a coward who wanted to be sent back home and nobody will mourn for him but the old lady. Statistically he was a loss for the army and it would have been superfluous to raise disputes in that already uneasy time. Furthermore it might have brought unwanted attention in case that the deceased died by the firing squad and a plea for further investigation would have been submitted. Fussell attributes origin of this lie to the social activist Sylvia Pankhurst, daughter of the Suffragette leader Emmeline, who claimed that dying of wounds would be more euphemistic than acts against military discipline (176). Indeed, several hundred cases of desertion or cowardice were brought to martial courts and punished shortly after, some of them being death penalties (Trueman “W.W.O. executions”).

While the armistice was declared on 11 November 1918, the soldiers’ struggle for survival was far from over. They were greeted back home by a great rise of unemployment

and cost of living. Trade Unions organized strikes and people were rioting in the streets (BBC “Outcomes of the War”). That was definitely not what they had been dreaming of to find upon arrival from the fronts as illustrated by George Willis: “We thought if we ever came home alive they would fall on our necks half mad, / And turn their hearts for us inside out and load us with all they had” (“Two Years After” lines 4-5). On the contrary, war veterans, especially those physically or mentally disfigured, met with little sympathy from the general public.

Memorials were erected and thousands of graves dug to commemorate the fallen across the countries, even in smaller villages and towns. Fussell concedes that the designs of war cemeteries, the endless rows of headstones lined into precise patterns, were only to create an illusion of the separately buried bodies (6). Thomas Hardy in his sonnet observes the mourning women who are arguing which grave belongs to whose son and makes a remark “But all their children were laid therein / At different times, like sprats in a tin” (“In the Cemetery” lines 7-8), which reveals that it is probably a mass grave anyway.

Memories still remained among those who survived, but were not able to recover and adapt to the new way of living they found back in their former homes. Finding it difficult to share their experiences with those who had not been present on the front, numerous war veterans associations were founded to group them together. Some of the stories and features inspired by this ‘Lost Generation’⁸ were immortalized in various forms of art and by the authors, who were also the war veterans themselves.

Majority of them have been haunted by the war’s impact most of the time ever after. Apart from physical injuries, the mental health was sometimes beyond the point of restoration. The constant stress of being shelled or shot at, with only limited space for protection and hardly any chance of retaliation, had deeply corrupted the minds of men with the sense of utter hopelessness. Wilfred Owen artfully merges both of the physical and psychological symptoms into a single body of an unfortunate:

Sit on the bed; I'm blind, and three parts shell,
Be careful; can't shake hands now; never shall.
Both arms have mutinied against me - brutes.
My fingers fidget like ten idle brats.

I tried to peg out soldierly - no use!
One dies of war like any old disease.

(“A Terre” lines 1-6)

⁸ The generation of men and women who came of age during or immediately following World War I. (Dictionary.com)

The last line precisely summarizes that the aftereffect of war will remain to plague its victims with dire consequences.

Sassoon, with a fair amount of cynicism, comments on how the afflicted would be greeted back in the society. The rhetorical question in the title *Does It Matter?* is repeated throughout the poem with various issues that had been already explored by Owen, and the author also provides his sarcastic answers. On the matter of blindness he responds that: “There's such splendid work for the blind; / And people will always be kind” (lines 7-8). He is aware that the disabled will not fit in as regular civilians anymore and the initial compassion will dissipate very soon. One would rather forget about the war, but this living evidence could not be kept away from all the rest.

The social gap was even wider, when the veterans were those who matured during the war, being drafted around their twenties, having no other experience with the world of adults than the life on the front. Lack of skills and ill health contributed to the rise of unemployment and misunderstanding. As Peter Vansittart describes his sight of these disposable heroes; they were ragged, appalling to sight and left to roam the streets begging or selling junk (ix). The more poetic, but no less disturbing, equivalent is provided by Gurney: “Where are they now on State-doles, or showing shop patterns / Or walking town to town sore in borrowed tatters / Or begged. Some civic routine one never learns.” (“Strange Hells” lines 11-13) Its title refers to the fact that even though they had been through hell on the front, their situation at home hardly seemed to be any better. The war did not make them heroes, nor did they find any dignity in the field for which they would be glorified. They had to realize that they were not the part of any professional army which would house them forever.

Coming from very individual social backgrounds, the soldiers had to rely on each other no matter what differences were between them. Initial formalities soon developed into a solid friendship or even admiration for higher ranked officers. While Herbert Read mourns the loss of his comrades: “I know that I'll wander with a cry: / "O beautiful men, O men I loved, / O whither are you gone, my company?” (“My Company” lines 32-34), Fussell emphasizes that this loss is not necessarily connected with dying as the soldiers also got separated by the dissolution of their units (164). He compares this situation to the group of schoolmates who are about to graduate from the school and part their ways. However, not all the relationships were so warm and for example Sassoon can be found “. . . cursing [the general's] staff for incompetent swine” (“The General” line 4).

Another victim of the war, the landscape where the battles were fought, had to recover as well. Blunden reports: “I have seen a green country, useful to the race, / Knocked silly with

guns and mines, its villages vanished, / Even the last rat and the last kestrel banished” (“Report on Experience” lines 5-7). The long process of restoration began immediately after; trenches and craters were filled, buildings rebuilt on their original foundations, remnants of ammunition destroyed. People of the war stricken countries, driven away during the conflict to seek refuge, started to resettle their former homes and cultivate the fields. But the former joy of their work never returned (Fussell 69). They sardonically carried their burden of bringing back life to the wasteland abandoned even by the fowls. Every piece of rusted metal uncovered by the plough was a reminder of what had taken place there. Some of the sites became tourist attractions, which only turned the locals more hostile to strangers.

The attitude of people in Britain was also influenced and for example pub closing hours or playing the anthem in the theatres remained for decades. So did the eggs and chips become a part of the daily dish, because meat was scarcely eaten due to rationing (316). Foreigners in Britain were still treated with suspicion and the press hardly regained its credibility.

In order to recollect the war in reports and memoirs, the vocabulary had to be accordingly adjusted. Fussell gives examples of the previously unknown collocations, e. g. machine gun (24) or lousy with enemy (49), which entered the common usage. The insufficient supply of convenient idioms and associations, Fussell argues, occurred because the professional writers, who provided the literary norm at the time, were not present on the battlefields in person (174). Words alone could not express experience of the eye-witnesses efficiently enough; therefore the soldier poets had to rely on what they had been familiar with. The use of alliteration or assonance, for instance, was meant to stimulate imagination of what was happening in the message: “. . . monstrous anger of the guns. / . . .stuttering rifles' rapid rattle” (Owen “Anthem For Doomed Youth” lines 2-3) (‘r’ sound resembles shooting) or “. . .flints flame out fire’s tongue,” (Blunden “La Quinque Rue” line 15) (‘f’ signals flashes of explosions). Onomatopoeic verbs in Owen’s *The Sentry* “And thud! flump! thud! down the steep steps came thumping / And splashing in the flood, deluging muck” (lines 14-15) were used to create a vivid picture of the soldier wading knee-deep in the mud.

Not only the various techniques concerning the poems’ content were explored but also some experiments with the form emerged. Anne Aufhauser points out that the references to biblical themes and pastoral imagery of the pre-war world to compare and contrast their contemporary versions employed sonnet⁹ as an intermediary. She admits that some poets

⁹ A verse form of 13th century Italian origin consisting of 14 lines in iambic pentameter with rhymes arranged according to a fixed scheme. (Dictionary.com)

might have used this form only by coincidence of their previous reading background, but has no doubt that Sassoon had been doing it on purpose, crediting him for being a part in the modernist poetry evolution (“Sassoon as a Modernist”). He reinvented the traditional pattern to emphasize the borderline between the old and the new. It served him well to strengthen his satirical anti-war attitude he assumed since 1917, criticizing even his own former naivety: “Of my old, silly sweetness I’ve repented - / My ecstasies changed to an ugly cry.” (“The Poet as Hero” lines 3-4).

But this was not just the cry of people who were directly affected by the Great War who mourned the loss of humanity. The uncertainty among the population, derived from the haunting images of how modern wars were going to be fought, remained. The ever-present sense of danger lurking in the air is suggested by Isaac Rosenberg:

Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering our upturned listening faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song

(“Returning, We Hear the Larks” lines 8-11)

Despite that people were no longer crawling in the trenches, the lingering premonitions kept troubling their minds. Nobody should feel safe after this world-wide dismal experience. Silent aerial bombers and long range artillery could strike anytime anywhere without warning. The air would be filled with shrieking bullets and false thunders, instead of the birds’ song, once again.

5 Conclusion

The technological progress did not push the human race forward; it rather stuck it in place. Heavy artillery, aircrafts, tanks and automatic weapons predestined the nature of modern warfare. World War I was unlike any of the previous large-scale conflicts. Comparing it to those that occurred a century earlier, e.g. Napoleonic Wars with its colourful uniforms and precise troop formations observed from a hill by their commanders, we can no longer see such spectacular images because the soldiers were firmly dug-in, assuming rather defensive positions. Impersonality of the war, fought at long range from hidden spots, caused the sense of loneliness and hopelessness. The soldier was suffering emotionally, being aware that he was only a pawn about to be sacrificed; evoking the idea of martyrdom and allusions to the journey through hell.

Moreover, the technology also severed relationships between people. The misuse of mass media for propagandistic purpose aroused the hatred of foreigners. It contributed to the rise of alienation not only between the fighting nations, but also citizens in their own countries. For the British, the events surrounding the incorporation of conscription, as well as the consequent political changes, could be regarded as a turning point from the initial cheerful attitude to the subsequent sober disillusionment. The illusory sense of patriotism inspired by the recruitment campaigns was frequently subjected to criticism. The incomprehension between soldiers and civilians, which became most apparent after the war, was one of the major setbacks that emerged due to the extensive employment of censorship and propaganda.

On the contrary, the bond between men and nature seems to have improved. The undamaged rural setting was a desirable change from the muddy battlefields and induced homesickness. Nature, symbolizing both life and death, was the poet's companion with whom he could share a deal of his wartime tragedy. The soldier was a solitary creature, lost in the chaotic world fragmented by the war. Pastoral themes offered an opportunity for the escape to an imaginary land where the nature was still intact by human folly. Some of the poets used the landscape to commemorate personal qualities of their deceased friends and mourned its destruction.

Despite that the information in poems may be biased by authors' individual perception of the war, being it Pope's enthusiasm, Owen's pity or Sassoon's cynicism, credibility of the preserved documents might as well be inaccurate due to the influence of propaganda. While the common knowledge basically offers processed data and statistics, the war poetry provides

more expressive portrayal of similar situations. Most of the poems are based on personal experiences and could be considered truthful testimonies. Some of them are fictional, but they can still express reality as they reflect the author's thoughts and feelings. Art definitely makes a worthy contribution to the emotional insight into the conflicts triggered by the Great War. However the historical and artistic sources may seem different from each other, when put together, they create a compact image of the scrutinised subject.

Resumé

Předmětem této bakalářské práce je zobrazení první světové války nejen jak ji popisuje odborná literatura, ale i tak, jak ji zvětšili ve svých verších tzv. váleční básníci. Vybrané úryvky z básní vztahující se k určitému tématu, jsou vždy zasazeny k odpovídajícímu historickému pramenu popisující danou problematiku. Práce si klade za cíl ukázat, jakým způsobem může poezie přispět k hlubšímu chápání souvislostí, které jsou s válkou spojovány.

Úvodní kapitola datuje předzvěst války ke konci devatenáctého století. Průmyslová revoluce odstartovala závody ve zbrojení, a to především o námořní nadvládu mezi Británií a Německem. Dalším příznakem budoucího konfliktu bylo podepisování smluv o vzájemné vojenské pomoci mezi evropskými státy. Politická nestabilita na Balkánském poloostrově a úspěšný atentát na následníka rakousko-uherského trůnu v Sarajevu, jsou obecně chápány jako podnět k válce, která neměla dosud ve světě obdoby. Porušení belgické neutrality ze strany Německa bylo pro Británii signálem k vyhlášení války, jelikož podle smluv byla zavázána Belgii pomoci. Výsledek války změnil územní mapu světa. Rozpad německého, rakousko-uherského a ruského císařství, stejně jako Osmanské říše, daly vzniknout novým státům. Vítězství přineslo na stranu Dohody zisky ve formě evropských území i zámořských kolonií. Porážené Centrální mocnosti naopak musely uznat vinu za způsobení války a platit reparační. Pro Brity znamenala válka především ztrátu téměř milionu životů a ohromné ekonomické výdaje.

Kapitola druhá nejprve popisuje politickou situaci, v jaké Británie do války vstupovala. Nejenže byla nucena o spojení jednat se svým odvěkým nepřítelem, tj. Francií, ale ještě musela čelit vzrůstajícím nepokojům v Irsku, jejichž předmětem bylo usilování o vlastní samosprávu. Na domácí půdě se navíc ještě potýkala s různými hnutími, které požadovaly zrovnoprávnění žen ve společnosti. Další překážku tvořil jeden z tradičních britských stereotypů, který radil nevměšovat se do kontinentálních rozepří a držet si odstup. Ani sám německý císař, který byl potomkem krevní linie anglické královny Viktorie, nedokázal předvídat, jak se Britové nakonec zachovají. I přes všechny komplikace vstoupila Británie do války s velkým odhodláním a podporou svých koloniálních území.

Prvními válečnými opatřeními tehdejší vlády bylo posílení vlastních pravomocí a sestavení válečného kabinetu, v jehož čele stanul hrabě Kitchener jako ministr války. Británie v té době měla jen malou profesionální armádu, protože neměla dosud zavedenou povinnou vojenskou službu, tak jako ostatní evropské státy. Pro posílení vojska bylo nezbytné verbovat dobrovolníky z řad civilistů, a byl to právě Kitchener, kdo se stal ústřední postavou

náborových kampaní. Státisíce nadšenců se v prvních měsících hrnuly do armády, což předčilo veškerá očekávání. Ať už jejich motivace pramenila z osobních důvodů nebo z patriotického cítění k vlasti, většina z nich hrubě podcenila délku a hlavně průběh, jakým se bude válka vyvíjet. Nicméně propaganda dělala vše pro to, aby zástupy dobrovolníků stále proudily na frontu. K tomu sloužily jak zvěsti o údajných hanebnostech, které páchali nepřátelé na civilním obyvatelstvu ve válkou zasažených oblastech, tak i přímé útoky německých ponorek a vzducholodí na Britské ostrovy a námořní cíle. Přestože to způsobilo silnou vlnu nenávisti vůči Němcům, a to i těm žijícím v Británii, zástupy dobrovolníků začaly řídnout.

Zhruba od poloviny roku 1915 byli i neprofesionální vojáci naplno nasazováni do ostrých bojů. Čekalo je ovšem veliké zklamání o způsobu vedení války, než který si sami vysnili nebo o kterém se mohli dočíst ve vládou kontrolovaném tisku. Zvěsti o neúspěšných taženích, nedostatcích munice a otřesných životních podmínkách na frontě se jejich prostřednictvím začaly dostávat k uším britské veřejnosti. I přes mnohé snahy cenzury a inovacím v náborových postupech se nepodařilo již déle oddalovat nevyhnutelné, tj. zajistit přísun vojáků zavedením branné povinnosti. Ženy se značným odhodláním převzaly role mužů a aktivně se podílely na činnostech, které jim zakořeněné viktoriánské stereotypy dosud upíraly. Muži ovšem válečné nadšení již déle nesdíleli a protiválečné ohlasy byly stále častější. Ve sledu dalších událostí a neúspěchů britské armády došlo i k obměně na politické scéně. Vstup Američanů do války během roku 1917 sice státům Dohody situaci ulehčil, ale vysoké ztráty na životech a válečné výdaje se pro Británii stávali neúnosné. Ke konci války se začaly opět projevovat odložené předválečné spory, které následně vyústily až v irskou válku za nezávislost, pouhé dva měsíce po vyhlášení celosvětového příměří.

Třetí část popisuje podmínky, v jakých se nacházeli vojáci na frontě. Po úvodním výcviku nejprve v Británii, byli posláni do Francie, kde po dalším tréninku byli vysíláni do skutečného boje. První z prvků této války, se kterými přišli do styku, a které se staly jejich novým domovem, byly samotné zákopy. Tyto chátrající zablácené díry byly pod téměř neustálou palbou a nebylo radno se dívat přes jejich okraj na místech, než k tomu přímo určených. Pokud střelba utichla a bylo bezpečné pozorovat nepřátelský zákop, nebyl vidět byt' jen obrys nepřátelských vojáků. Z toho vycházely mnohé dohady o tom, jak vlastně nepřátelé vypadají a zdali jsou to vůbec lidé, jelikož propaganda se o nich zmiňovala spíše jako o divokých bestiích. Nelidské podmínky ovšem panovaly i ve vlastních zákopech. Vlhko a rozkládající se mrtvá těla lákaly mnohé parazity, z nichž nejhorší byly všudypřítomné krysy a vši. Vojáci prakticky neměli v těchto stísněných podmínkách šanci se jich efektivně zbavit.

Jedině po setmění, kdy pod rouškou tmy bylo možné opustit zákop, se dalo relativně bezpečně pracovat.

Střídání dne a noci se stalo velice důležitým prvkem v životě vojáků a znamenalo předěl mezi aktivní prací a zoufalým bojem o vlastní přežití. Tyto aktivity se ovšem často prolínaly a noční výprava se snadno mohla rovnat mučednické pouti na jistou smrt. Stejně tak mohly být vnímány některé bitvy, jejichž úspěch byl téměř doslova pohřben v hlubokém bahně. Přímý pěší útok byl často velen za úsvitu nebo soumraku, takže tento jev byl postupně více a více nenáviděn, protože předznamenával velké riziko vystavení smrti. Rudá obloha se brzy stala symbolem krveprolití, stejně jako květy vlčího máku, který kvetl na polích, kde se bitvy odehrávaly. Obecně byla přírodní symbolika často používána v básnických dílech k zobrazení utrpení, které vojáci s přírodou sdíleli. Pokud se dostali do krajiny ještě válkou nepoznamenané, žasli nad její krásou, která jim připomínala jejich domovy v nezasažených částech Británie. Jejich žal nad ztrátou svých bližních byl zaznamenáván pomocí různých přírodních motivů, ve kterých byla jejich vzpomínka uchována.

Dalším prvkem zákopové války bylo rozsáhlé použití ostnatého drátu. Tento zdánlivě prostý vynález přispěl velkou měrou k znemožnění územních postupů. Jeho odstraňování bylo zdoluhavé, nespolehlivé a nebezpečné. Experimentální použití chemických zbraní mělo už spíše psychologický dopad na již tak zdecimované vojáky a častěji než usmrcení způsobovaly dlouhotrvající fyzické následky.

Poslední kapitola staví do kontrastu vnímání války ze strany vojáků a veřejnosti. Mluvit o použití plynu bylo zakázáno, stejně jako zveřejňování údajů, které by mohly negativně ovlivnit morálku obyvatel. Výstavní zákopy v Londýně měly hodně daleko k těm skutečným a užití nových vynálezů proti nepříteli bylo značně zveličováno. První tanky jen stěží mohly ovlivnit průběh války, vzhledem ke svým omezeným možnostem. Tyto příklady ilustrují, jak moc měli civilisté zkreslené představy o válce.

O to víc ironická byla skutečnost, že válka neprobíhala nijak daleko od jejich vlastních domovů. Z toho pramenily nejen další nářky na zaslepenost veřejnosti, ale i výhody v krátké časové náročnosti na cestování mezi frontou a Británií. Pošta mohla proudit s jen malým zpožděním a zprávy se rychle šířily. Úmrtní oznámení byly doručovány ve velké míře, vzhledem k některým taktickým neúspěchům britské armády, a jejich obsah se také mnohdy lišil od skutečných událostí.

Konec války však neznamenal šťastný konec pro všechny zúčastněné. Dobrovolnická armáda byla rozpuštěna a váleční „hrdinové“ se mohli, nebo spíše museli, vrátit domů. Jejich zklamání, že je nikdo nevíta s otevřenou náručí, o které roky snili v zákopech, bylo způsobeno

právě naprosto odlišným chápáním průběhu války. Slova nedokázala popsat hrůzy, kterých byli svědky na frontě a jejich zubožený psychický, a mnohdy i fyzický, stav jim jen snižoval šance začlenit se zpátky do společnosti. Váleční veteráni se vzájemně sdružovali, protože ten, kdo si válkou přímo neprošel, nemohl pochopit jejich situaci. To bylo ještě umocněno rozdíly ve výpovědích vojáků od zpráv, které byly šířeny oficiálními médii.

V básních se objevují různé postupy jak dodat jejich svědectvím živější výraz. Uspořádání a pečlivý výběr slov, stejně jako netypické užití formy sonetu, jsou důkazem toho, jak se básníci snažili přiblížit své výpovědi realitě nebo posílit satirické prvky ke kritice společnosti. Samotný jazyk byl po válce obohacen o některá nová slovní spojení a termíny, z nichž se některé používají dodnes.

V závěru je válečná poezie zhodnocena jako hodnotný zdroj informací o první světové válce. Na rozdíl od výčtu holých faktů, které se můžeme dočíst v učebnicích, vyjadřuje pocity lidí v různých situacích, jak se skutečně odehrály, nebo mohly odehrát. Z jejich řádků lze vyčíst myšlenkové pochody, které nám mohou blíže objasnit chování lidí za války i příčiny vzájemného nepochopení po jejím konci.

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