

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS

The Excitement and the Reality of War

The incredible outpouring of patriotic enthusiasm that greeted the declaration of war at the beginning of August 1914 in many European countries demonstrated the power that nationalistic feeling had attained at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many Europeans seemingly believed that the war had given them a higher purpose, a renewed dedication to the greatness of their nation. That sense of enthusiasm was captured by the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig in his book *The World of Yesterday*.

The reality of war was entirely different. Soldiers who had left for the front in August 1914 in the belief that they would be home by Christmas found themselves shivering and dying in the vast networks of trenches along the battlefield. Few expressed the horror of trench warfare as well as the German writer Erich Maria Remarque in his famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, first published in a German newspaper in 1928.

Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*

The next morning I was in Austria. In every station placards had been put up announcing general mobilization. The trains were filled with fresh recruits, banners were flying, music sounded, and in Vienna I found the entire city in a tumult. . . . There were parades in the street, flags, ribbons, and music burst forth everywhere, young recruits were marching triumphantly, their faces lighting up at the cheering. . . .

And to be truthful, I must acknowledge that there was a majestic, rapturous, and even seductive something in this first outbreak of the people from which one could escape only with difficulty. And in spite of all my hatred and aversion for war, I should not like to have missed the memory of those days. As never before, thousands and hundreds of thousands felt what they should have felt in peace time, that they belonged together.

What did the great mass know of war in 1914, after nearly half a century of peace? They did not know war, they had hardly given it a thought. It had become legendary, and distance had made it seem romantic and heroic. They still saw it in the perspective of their school readers and of paintings in museums; brilliant cavalry attacks in glittering uniforms, the fatal shot always straight through the heart, the entire campaign a resounding march of victory—"We'll be home at Christmas," the recruits shouted laughingly to their mothers in August of 1914. . . .

A rapid excursion into the romantic, a wild, manly adventure—that is how the war of 1914 was painted in the imagination of the simple man, and the younger people were honestly afraid that they might miss this most wonderful and exciting experience of their lives; that is why they hurried and thronged to the colors, and that is why they shouted and sang in the trains that carried them to the slaughter; wildly and feverishly the red wave of blood coursed through the veins of the entire nation.

Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*

We wake up in the middle of the night. The earth booms. Heavy fire is falling on us. We crouch into corners. . . . Every man is aware of the heavy shells tearing down the parapet, rooting up the embankment and demolishing the upper layers of concrete. . . . Already by morning a few of the recruits are green and vomiting. . . .

No one would believe that in this howling waste there could still be men, but steel helmets now appear on all sides out of the trench, and fifty yards from us a machine-gun is already in position and barking.

[Finally the attack begins.]

The wire-entanglements are torn to pieces. Yet they offer some obstacle. We see the storm-troops coming. . . . We recognize the distorted faces, the smooth helmets: they are French. They have already suffered heavily when they reach the remnants of the barbed wire entanglements.

I see one of them, his face upturned, fall into a wire cradle. His body collapses, his hands remain suspended as though he were praying. Then his body drops clear away and only his hands with the stumps of his arms, shot off, now hang in the wire.



According to Stefan Zweig, why did so many Europeans welcome the outbreak of war in 1914? Why had they so badly underestimated the cost?

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