
The Uninteresting War

by Max Eastman

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Sketches by K.R. Chamberlain.

The principal impression I bring from Europe is that the war is not interesting. I had felt an element of strain in all the correspondence we were served with; unconsciously I knew that as a drama the world war was not fulfilling journalistic expectation. But until I got near and saw the disillusioned millions reading their monotonous little communiques every afternoon, and trying to find food for passion in the fact that this or that number of yards were gained or lost on a 500 mile front, and a daily 5,000 or more undistinguished heroes killed gaining or losing it, I did not realize to what depths of boredom the course of European history had sunk.



Battle used to be a word to rouse the blood with. A charge of bayonets, the bombardment of a city, the assault with hand grenades,

the desperate encounter of gigantic armies — these were things that left a date and monument. War had black and crimson moments hung with fate.

Here the battle charge, bombardment, hand-to-hand encounter, all the crisis and catastrophe, everything in war that gave an eminence of meaning to some phase or instant of it, is dissolved and run together in untold unapprehended quantities, spread over a space that cannot be brought into the imagination, and kept flowing through time in an absolutely uninterrupted monotony of noise and carnage.

They shoot and kill 5,000 Frenchmen every day. They shoot more Germans, and kill more Russians. All these men die in bombardments, battles, assaults, reconnoitres, charges, that old-fashioned historians would leer over and detail with expert delight. But when there is an absolute continuum of such things all over a continent for a year, and substantially nothing lost or gained by either side, how can you find anything to call interesting, and when you do not find it how can you tell it from the rest?

It is startling, and indeed appalling, to have a ton of metal dropped on you from 26 miles away after describing a trajectory seven miles high. It has a flavor of the gigantic miraculous — it suggests the Hippodrome. But as a mode of human conflict it lacks the dramatic elements of an ordinary fist-fight.

One newspaper story of this war has made a real sensation, and that is Will Irwin's account of the battle of Ypres, which has endeared him to the heart of the British Island forever. And Will deserves all the fame he got, for he made the battle of Ypres. Considered by old-fashioned standards of war correspondence it wasn't a brilliant feat of journalism to go over there two months late and be the first one to find out there had been a battle involving hundreds of thousands of men and marking a crisis in the history of four nations. Formerly we should have thought this was a little slow. But really it took something better than a journalist to do it, because it was an act of creative expression. Will Irwin had to go in and see that battle, as a single entity, in the middle of an absolutely fluid mass of warfare in which nobody had been able to see anything but his own gun before. The battle was there all right, and so are any God's million of other battles, but you'll never hear of them, because generally speaking, they're too common to be worth polishing out.

I don't know how they feel at the front. One man told me the last thing they ever think about, or talk about, is the war. But I have a

distinct impression that the people who are not at the front, or whose loves are not at the front, are dull about it.

Even in France I find this true, though the French are fighting in full faith that they are saving their country from the possession of barbarian hordes, and though there is no murmur or reluctance. The war is to the French simply inevitable — a dull job as well as a tragic, but a job they will do, and are doing, to the gods' taste.

Perhaps some of them were glad to fight in the beginning — the old inherited instinct is so strong. The Italians are still in that mood. In Paris, whenever a batch of them were accepted for enlistment by their consul, they would hire a taxicab and a girl and decorate them with flags, and sail along the boulevards yelling and arm-waving in that rather hollow extreme of glee. The instinct of belligerence is strong in all the European peoples. They love to fight. But France has had time to learn that this is not a fight, this killing industry, and her will to it is disillusioned.

I never saw a sadder thing than those troops of young new soldiers leaving the *caserne* opposite my window, starting off with some small plaudits and some tears from those that love them, each a flower in the muzzle of his gun — but oh, so serious! I saw them three miles out, too, the flowers fading then, or fallen, and solemnly unwelcome business written in the eyes of every soldier. That is what the war is, as I saw it, to all France.

And this disillusionment, this want of interest, is much more evident in England, although England has but one foot in the war. London is completely papered with unconvincing posters telling England's sons of the glories of military service. The dullest fool would answer: "You protest too much." I wish I could remember them all. "It is better to face bullets at the front than be blown up by a Zeppelin at home," seemed to me the most doubtful.

"Who dies if England lives?"

"Young men of Britain, the Germans said you were not in earnest — give them the lie!"

"Play the greater game — join the football battalion!"

"Women of Britain, say 'Go!'"

And then that little patriotic strip which reads: "It is YOUR duty to enlist!"

It is pasted on the windshield of every taxicab in London, and behind it usually to be found the huskiest, heartiest big piece of soldier-meat that ever escaped from an army.

“It is *your* duty to enlist!”

England is having a hard time. She will see conscription if the war lasts. That is what the free people think of the war.

I suppose that the German state is fighting in a relatively exalted condition, which infects the great number of her people. But I believe the fervid interest of men in the fortunes of war, as it once existed, is no more active there than elsewhere.

When we used to kill a bull on the farm, it was a great thing. John would go and put the head on the sledgehammer and get his coat off, and the bull would be led into the barn by the nose and tied two ways, and everybody was both sad and breathless. (This is not a pleasant simile, but it's true.) When you go into the beef factories in Chicago, and see them drive steers up into a narrow chute by the five thousand, and a man on a platform drops his hammer every so many seconds, and the steers roll out to be switched away, and shoved along, like mere material — why, the business of killing a bull loses every bit of drastic quality it had.

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I had written that much of this article when the postman came in with a card from John Reed in St. Petersburg, and this is what Reed says. (He doesn't know that I have been to Europe.)

Dear Max:

I have some stories for you later — God! In the meantime if you are coming over on the assumption that this bazarre [*sic.*] is interesting, don't come, that's all.

Don't come!

Reed.

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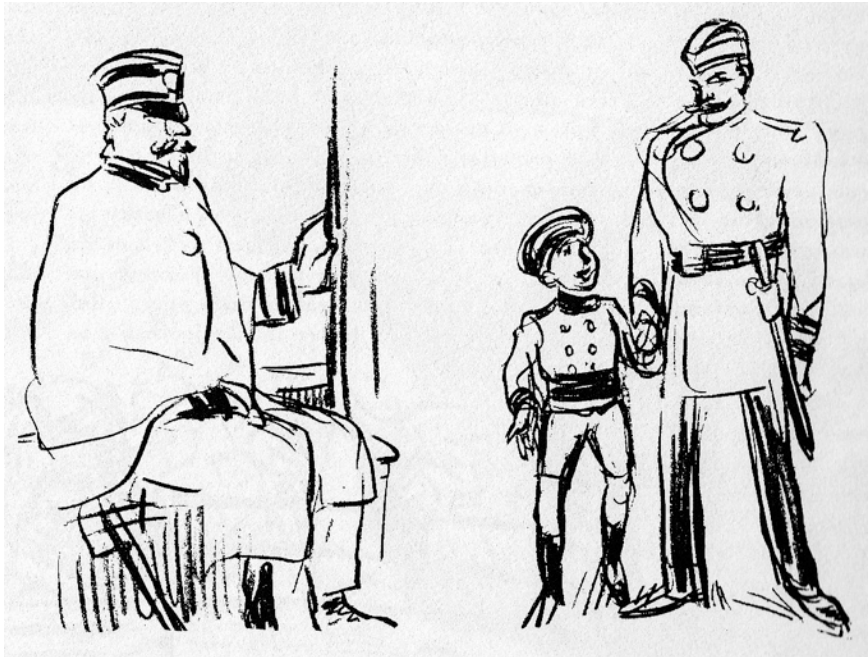
When I was in Paris, I was more interested in the relics of the Napoleonic Wars and the revolution than I was in the daily reports of the final military climax of all European history, which was in suspension not a hundred miles away. And I am no archeologist.

I gathered that either the French or Germans could break through the line anywhere for a gain of a mile or so, by massing enough men for the sacrifice, but that Germany could not afford it while she was

attacking Russia, and the Allies thought it wasn't worthwhile. They could gain more by just letting the armies steadily slaughter each other in equal quantities all along the line, because in the long run there are more Allies than there are Germans. Certainly nothing sportsmanlike about that. But what can you do? This war has no more sport in it than it has dramatic action. It is merely a regular businesslike killing and salting down of the younger men of each country involved — 20,000 a day, perhaps, all told.

I am not doing justice to submarines. I suppose that potting ocean liners from a submerged and highly delicate war canoe several hundred miles from home in hostile waters, is a way to spend one's leisure that might be called princely sport. And as for the fishing expedition — I learn that 32,000 kinds of hook and bait have been suggested to the British government, and I found the island literally breathless with rumors about what is happening to those "tin fish" around the shores of England. If the people who are in these expeditions love them as much as the people who stay at home and tell you all about it, there could be no sadder victory than to deprive them of their sport. It is the only thing in all the war that England has a bit of her old gallant bellicose taste for.

But, again, I do injustice to the aeroplane. A man told me about standing in a German field where a gun on an automobile was trying



to bring down a French aeroplane five miles away. The gun was firing shells, and you could see the little puff of white smoke where the shell would crack in the vicinity of that soaring bird. Sometimes the shell would miss it by two miles. The man who told me this was a neutral — one of those neutrals who favor the Allies. But he told me that his instinctive zeal to see that bird-of-prey winged in mid-air at that distance was so great that after the shooting was over he could hardly hold himself up. So there is another grand sport the world has found. Let us be fair to that.

When the Zeppelins appear over Paris the entire fire department turns loose and careers through the black streets, tooting horns and yelling to the people to dive for their cellars. And with one accord the people rush to the streets, and out into the open squares, where they can get a good view of the fun. It is always a black night, and startling searchlights play back and forth on the clouds, and heaven is bombarded with shrapnel from all the high domes of the city. It is their one great taste of adventurous war, and the Parisians love it. They call it “Taube Day.”¹ No wonder, for it flashes a little of the old color of risky and romantic life across a dull, long, weary labor of death.

There is little risk for the French soldier. He goes to the front expecting to be shot, and his family mourns him, more or less, as soon as he is gone. There’s always the hope, of course, that only a part of him will be shot off, and he will come back, and sit around, and *be there* for a little lifetime afterwards.

I went through the American Red Cross Hospital in Paris — a strict, clean, sunny, up-to-date but not very enjoyable place — a place conducted (if a swift impression did not mislead me) by the transient or expatriated snobs of American society in Paris. I was informed by my gracious guide that all the young men who run automobiles for the hospital are gentlemen! And when I took that rather quietly:

“You understand they are real *men*, young *men* — gentlemen!”

“And there is always a *lady* present in each room all day!”

The efforts of a true American aristocrat to signify the US peerage, although the language has no word that does not hold a vulgar reference to the real cause, is always appealing. But here especially, because the peerage is actually doing work. And one must have a subtle grasp of history, or etiquette, to know that work which has to do with war, is honorific, and does not soil the hands of noblemen like useful labor.

¹ *Taube* is German for “pigeon.”

You can see there in that hospital, with its afternoon teas for the elite, and its young and elderly daughters of the first families of New York, patting the pallid cheeks of the French proletariat in humble solicitude — you can see a picture of what Veblen outlines in the preface of his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. The old, old title to aristocracy, prowess in the pursuits of war, mingles here — somewhat pitifully, to be sure, and as a poor relation — with the proper title of our time, hereditary wealth. And let me add that many a stern old French revolutionary lies there, moving only with his eyes perhaps, but adequately saying all that you would have him say to that new-found solicitude.

Such things are interesting, if you chance upon them. And the wounded, when they are picked out and separated from the daily pile, as here, and just the miracles of surviving life are shown to you, they too are all that war should be — a ghastly bludgeon shock of agony and human heroes laughing through their teeth, so that with horror at the gore and wonder at the soul of man, you want to fight or sing. I never saw that famous soul of man before, and when I came away from there I wrote a poem. Here it is:

At The Red Cross Hospital

Today I saw a face — it was a beak,
That peered with pale round yellow vapid eyes
Above the bloody muck that had been lips
And teeth and chin. A plodding doctor poured
Some water through a rubber down a hole
He made in that black bag of horny blood.
The beak revived; it smiled — as chickens smile.
The doctor hopes he'll find the man a tongue
To brag with, and I hope he'll find it, too.

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But that is not the war — that is an isolated instant, which had horror in it for my eyes, who came there. When you kill some 15,000 youths a day, and rip the limbs or faces off how many thousands more nobody counts, the individual mangled hero is no longer characteristic. The color runs. There are no longer heroes — there is just the common fighting stuff of human nature, one continuous scam-

bled homogeneous jelly of that brave stuff. And that itself, when once it's apprehended and you've made yourself believe that you too are a part of it, is not profoundly stimulating.

There are deeper reasons why this war is dull. One is that although it may have mighty consequences for the world, they have no connection with its causes or the conscious purposes of those who fight. A greater or a less degree of freedom and democracy for Europe will be the result of a victory for the Allies or for Germany. There is no doubt of that. But that is in a matter accidental, a by-product. It is not what the war is about.

I am not saying that anybody knows what it is about — that would be too interesting. "There is a thirty years supply of causes of war on hand," as Kropotkin said some thirty years ago, and I suppose a dozen or two of these must have been at work. But whatever started it, and whatever may result, this war is not a war of people struggling against a tyrant for their liberty. It is a war of national invasion and defense — nationalism, the most banal of stupid human idol-worships. And the fact that liberty is more or less at stake is adventitious. One has to be historical to see it. One has to know that Prussia's despotism was the iron heart of feudal things in Europe, that the German people, never having had their Bourgeois revolution, are peculiarly behind the march in freedom, though they lead us in so much. Or one has to remind himself, as we have tried every month to remind our readers, that there were, and are, at least 400,000 revolutionary socialists in Germany who opposed and will oppose their rulers' war; and that they form the nucleus of a future revolution that will bring at least political liberty to the German people. And that revolution will come soon if their rulers are defeated in this foreign war, and late if they are victorious. That consideration makes us tense in awaiting the result, but it is not as though the war were being fought for that.

Another consideration stirred me too in France, when I found myself traveling one day in the same coach with a royalist. We take the republican form of government so entirely for granted over here, where we never had any other form established, that we have small realization of the peril of reckless little France, a republic there in the midst of royal Europe, with clericals and feudal reactionaries working in her own heart, ready to pounce the moment her representative political institutions prove their military weakness. A little while ago a caustic royalist wrote a book on "The French Republic Before

Europe,” in which he ridiculed the figure France has cut among the nations with her changing ministers and fickle foreign policies. He quoted and made more than much of a saying by Anatole France, “We have no foreign policy, and we never can have one.” To this book the Socialist leader Marcel Sembat replied with another, entitled *Faites un Roi si non Faites la Paix. Establish peace or else establish a king* — granting as an argument for internationalism the royalist contention that a French republic cannot conduct war and military diplomacy in Europe. The titles of those books give some suggestion of a state of things in France that we, her friends in another hemisphere, little appreciate. No one would say that royalty and the church will reestablish themselves if the republican army is defeated. But the fact that the army *is* republican, that Joffre is a rough-hearted democrat, that no anti-republican has a hand in the campaign, is the most vital fact of the war to the internal history of France. A brilliant record and a victory of her arms will set back the forces of feudal and clerical reaction in France, as much as a victory of Prussian arms will set them forward in Germany.

France holds more of what is dear to us than any other country of Europe. And so for that, as well as the hope of the long-deferred political revolution in Germany, we want to see the Kaiser’s army smashed.

But that is not what the soldiers fight for; the passion of the war has none of that; that is an aside, a footnote — till its own day comes. this is a war of nationalism.

The only way for an internationalist to become deeply interested in such a war is to lay aside his judgment altogether and entertain wild and fearful prophecies, and see one side or the other as the center and the soul of all things divine and sure, and the other as barbarity unveiled. That I cannot do. I earnestly desire to see the Kaiser fail, I desire this for other reasons than those rather technical revolutionary ones I have mentioned. I know, for instance, that France has not only freedom but the arts of life more nearly won than any other country of Europe. Her culture is one of superior happiness, the habits of her people are more poetic, they realize more, live more, and with all that are more spontaneously intelligent than the Germans. They are at home among ideas. An American correspondent expresses surprise at hearing a Frenchman in Paris say:

“I think the Germans are altogether right about the Lusitania. They do not put their case well, but their main position is unas-

sailable. In the present state of sea war they must sink on sight a ship loaded with enemy munitions.”

That did not surprise me at all, because it is quite the character of the French people to abstract from their personal passions in making intellectual judgments. They have the rare gift of thinking with their minds. They feel with their hearts. And this is not the way of the Germans, as a glance at their great literature and philosophy, and their boobish diplomacy, reveals. If they knew how to use abstract ideas — which are the part of a discussion that is common to both parties — then they would “put their case well.”

Obviously, then, I value the culture of France high above that of Germany. And as for England — I know that England, though on the whole a land of snobs and servants, holds more people who stand up alone and unmolested, thinking and saying what they wish to think and say, than any other place on earth. England has freedoms that France lacks. Her navalism is just as military as Germany’s militarism, but its service is not compulsory. She has to pay her soldiers silver money. And what the English people have of liberty, they will hold, too. Yes — England has more of what we love than Germany.

And Russia — somehow Russia seems to have a great many people like the French. I think a Russian Tsar will always have a lot to do at home. At least Russia has had her revolution, though it failed, and feudalism is less solid there, exactly because it is not linked fast with the industrial and scientific and social reform progress of the highest kind, than it is in Germany. Russia is a vast quantity that, at the very worst, must appear in our calculations as unknown.

In all these points, then, I agree with those whose wishes are for German failure in the war. And more — I think that Germany is in a sophomoric stage of national egotism that in an individual, a young kid, we should call “intolerable.” Her pseudo-religious, half-grown, sentimental self-worship is disgusting. It is even worse than England’s suave and hypocritical self-righteousness (speaking now of nations and the average tone their nationalism takes, as though they were individual characters). I agree to that.

Moreover, I believe the German soldiers were so trained to mere obedience that when victory let them loose they did not know how to control themselves quite so well as well-bred warfare demands.

And finally, I agree that the German war party played a larger part among those thirty available causes of war than any other. I think the immediate opposition of four to five hundred thousand German So-

cialists proves it. Anti-militarism was far stronger in France than it was in Germany *before* the war — but in France there is hardly an anti-military murmur since the war began, whereas Germany has had her insurrectionists to suppress from the very beginning. That is more significant to me than all the many-colored diplomatic papers put together. And thus I am in accord, to some degree at least, with those who decry “German militarism” as the arch-incendiary.

But does that commit me to a monomania? Must I turn my deliberated opinions and wishes into an absolute fixation which allows *no judgements of degree*? That is what the mood of wartimes invariably demands. That is what public opinion in this country, and its leaders, have almost unanimously done. They have made a choice between two absolutes. It has never occurred to them that they had anything else to do. But why should we have anything to do with absolutes — in war any more than in religion?

Because France is more advanced in liberty and realistic life than Germany do we have to say that France *is* civilization and Germany is barbarism, and German victory would put out the light of naive idealism forever?

The civilization of France would conquer that of Germany, whether she was defeated in arms or not, because of the greater degree of happiness and human fun there is in it.

Because the French behave among ideas as among friends, while the Germans are prone to fall into silly soulful attitudes about them — do we have to conclude that truth, as well as liberty and life, are doomed if the Kaiser’s army stays across the Rhine?

Because Anglo-Saxon bullheads have a way of insisting on their individual rights that is foreign to the bullheaded German, do we have to think that the whole world is going to submit to the yoke of metaphysical paternalism if this war goes wrong?

Because Germany’s nationalism has barely reached the age of puberty, and the older nations have passed that a little — do we have to think that all the world will go beneath the German yoke if the Allies do not reach Berlin?

Because the Germans, being the invaders, were atrocious, do we have to book the fact that every invader in all history has been atrocious, and the atrocities of certain German soldiers probably were but a shade or two more numerous than ours would have been in like case?

And even if the facts convince us that the German princes, more than any other factor, perpetuated war, need we ignore all other factors, and need we lose our memory that it was their last chance; that their power was already doomed by their own people; that if the Allies succeed in driving them to their borders, and preventing the indemnities they count on, the German princes will probably never perpetuate war again?

I think it must be a desire to become interested, or rather the inability to stay out of a fight, that leads so many intelligent Americans to renounce all quantitative estimates, all judgements of degree, and make an absolute, on one side or the other, of the issue in this war. It is the one way to remain enthusiastic about so stupid an affair.

And even that way, the task grows more difficult with each month that passes. For time, it seems is not going to make an absolute of the issue between the Germans and the Allies. It grows ever more likely that the war will see no signal victories. Serbia, indeed, has won — she is, so far, a victor. I take what joy I can from that, and I hope she will hold all she has got. But my visit to Europe has made me doubt exceedingly whether the plain folks of Russia and France and England have enough enthusiasm for this war to do much more than fight to a draw with Germany. And, on the other hand, I do believe that England would surprise us all, and Germany not least, if she once go backed up on her little island and began to fight. She'd never quit. And that means the Kaiser cannot win.

So viewing it in the friendliest way I could, I failed of interest in the European war. There's more for me in Mexico or Bayonne, or any of these barbarous places where the people fight in battles, and for something I can want.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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