ORIENT-INSTITUT ISTANBUL

Pera-Blätter

Orient-Institut Istanbul

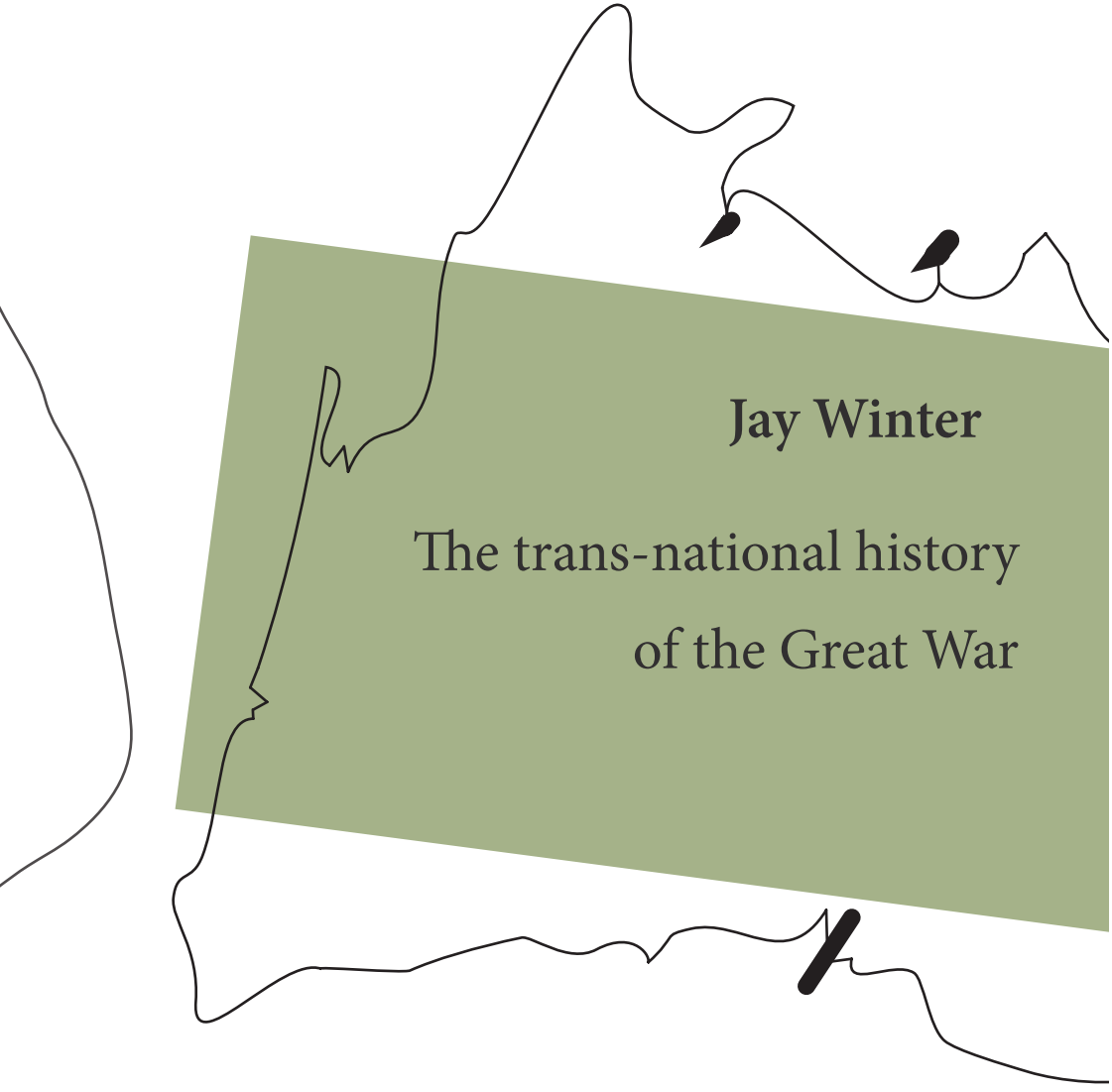
Heft 29

2015

Thyssen Lectures II

The Great War Beyond National Perspectives

Ulusal Perspektiflerin Ötesinde Harb-ı Umumî



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The trans-national history of the Great War

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Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung

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http://www.oiist.org/?q=de/node/33

Erscheinungsort: Bonn
Herausgeber: Max Weber Stiftung – Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland, Bonn
Redaktion: Orient-Institut Istanbul (Dr. Zaur Gasimov)
ISSN (online): 5291-2192
ISSN (Print): 6816 -2192
Cover Design: Dorothea Nold

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The transnational history of the Great War

1. Trans-national history

Trans-national history is the narrative of the Great War written by trans-national historians. To understand what this means, we need to provide a sketch of three previous generations of historical writing on the Great War.

The first was what I will term "the Great War generation." These were scholars, former soldiers, and public officials who had direct knowledge of the war either through their own military service or through alternative service to their country's war effort. They wrote history from the top down, by and large through direct experience of the events they described. The central actor portrayed in these books was the national or the imperial state, in its *dirigiste* forms at home or at the front. The most voluminous of these efforts was the 133-book effort to write the economic and social history of the war, sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Most of these tomes were penned by men in essential positions, insiders who ran the war at home or at the front, and who had to deal with its aftershocks.

Ahmet Emin Yalman, prominent journalist and editor of *Vatan*, the official newspaper of the Committee of Union and Progress, wrote the volume on *Turkey in the Great War*, published in 1930. The Austrian series, for instance, was edited by Friedrich von Wieser, who in 1917 was named a member of the Austrian House of Lords and granted the title of Baron. He was also appointed Minister of Commerce in the Austrian Cabinet, which post he held until the end of the First World War in 1918. However, he came into conflict there with Rich-

ard Riedl, Energy Minister, who was on the editorial committee Wieser chaired. These well-placed men had vast administrative experience. They were characteristic of the authors of all the national series of the Carnegie project. They were authorities, who know what they were talking about, and also knew what they did not want to talk about – their own mistakes or blindness or responsibility for the manifold disasters on both the winning and the losing sides.

This is evidently a literature of self-justification, a posture adopted in virtually all official histories of the armed forces, many of which were written by former soldiers for the benefit of the various national staff colleges, trying one at a time to frame "lessons" for the future. These works were frequently highly technical and so detailed that they took decades to appear. The delay diminished their significance for planning the next war in more efficient ways.

The second generation may be termed the generation "fifty years on." This group of historians wrote in the 1960s, and wrote not only the history of politics and decision-making at the top, but also the history of society, defined as the history of social structures and social movements. Of course the two kinds of history, political and social, went together, but they were braided together in different ways than in the interwar years. Many of these scholars had the benefit of sources unknown or unavailable before the Second World War. The "fifty year rule" enabling scholars to consult state papers meant that all kinds of documents could be exploited by those writing in the 1960s, which threw new light on the history of the war.

In the 1960s, there was much more use of film and visual evidence than in the first generation, though in the interwar years battlefield guides and collections of photographs of devastation and weaponry were produced in abundance. After the Second World War, the age of television history began, and attracted an audience to historical narratives greater than

ever before. This became evident in the size of the audience for new and powerful television documentaries of the war. In 1964 the BBC launched its second channel with the monumental twenty-six-part history of the war, exhaustively researched in film archives and vetted by an impressive group of military historians. Many of the millions of people who saw this series had lived through the war. In 1964, the young men who have fought and survived were mostly between above the age of seventy, but what made the series a major cultural event was that the families of the survivors, and of those who did not come back, integrated these war stories into their own family narratives. The Great War thus escaped from the academy into the much more lucrative and populous field of public history, represented by museums, special exhibitions, films, and now television. By the 1960s, the Imperial War Museum in London had surpassed many other sites as the premier destination of visitors to London. It remains to this day a major attraction in the capital, just as does the Australian War Memorial, an equally impressive museum and site of remembrance in the Australian capital, Canberra.

There was more than a little nostalgia in the celebration by survivors of "fifty years on." By 1964, the European world that went to war in 1914 no longer existed. All the major imperial powers that joined the struggle had been radically transformed. The British Empire was a thing of the past; so was *Algérie française*, and the French *mission civilisatrise* in Africa and South Asia. The German empire was gone, and so were most of its eastern territories, ceded to Poland and Russia after 1945. Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia were small independent states. And while the Soviet Union resembled Czarist Russia in some respects, these continuities were dwarfed by the massive transformation of Soviet society since 1917.

The nostalgia of 1964 was, therefore, for a world which had fallen apart in the Great War. For many people, the blem-

ishes and ugliness of much of that world were hidden by a kind of sepia-toned reverence for the days before the conflict. "Never such innocence, / Never before or since," wrote Philip Larkin in a poem whose title referred not to 1914, but to the more archaic "MCMXIV." This poem was published in 1964.

In much historical writing, as much as in historical documentaries, the dramatic tension derived from juxtaposing this set of pre-lapsarian images with the devastation and horror of the Western front, and with the sense of decline, a loss of greatness, which marked the post-1945 decades in Britain and France, not to mention Germany and Italy. Whatever went wrong with the world seemed to be linked to 1914, to the time when a multitude of decent men went off to fight one war and wound up fighting a much more terrible one.

Decencies were betrayed, some argued, by a blind elite prepared to sacrifice the lives of the masses for vapid generalizations like "glory" or "honor." This populist strain may be detected in much writing about the war in the 1960s, and in the study of social movements which arose out of it. The fiftieth anniversary of the Gallipoli landing provoked a surge of interest in the Great War in Australia and New Zealand, where the loss of the battle was eclipsed by the birth of these two nations. Similarly heroic were narratives of the Bolshevik Revolution, celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 1967. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many scholars told us much more about the history of labor, of women, of ordinary people during the conflict than had scholars working in the interwar years.

The third generation may be term the "Vietnam generation." Its practitioners started writing in the 1970s and 1980s, when a general reaction against military adventures like the war in Vietnam took place in Britain and Europe as well as in the United States. This was also the period in Europe when public opinion turned against the nuclear deterrent, and when the 1973 Middle Eastern war had dangerous effects on the

economies of the developed world. The glow of the "just war" of 1939–1945 had faded, and a new generation was more open to a view that war was a catastrophe to both winners and losers alike.

This was the environment in which darker histories of the Great War emerged. There were still scholars who insisted that the Great War was a noble cause, won by those who had right on their side. But there were others who came to portray the Great War as a futile exercise, a tragedy, a stupid, horrendous waste of lives, producing nothing of great value aside from the ordinary decencies and dignities thrown away by blind and arrogant leaders.

The most influential works were written by three very different scholars. Paul Fussell, a veteran of the Second World War wounded in combat, produced a classic literary study, *The Great War and Modern Memory* in 1975.[1] He was a professor of literature, who fashioned an interpretation of how soldiers came to understand the war they found in 1914–1918 as an ironic event, one in which anticipation and outcome were wildly different. It was a time when the old romantic language of battle seemed to lose its meaning. Writers twisted older forms to suit the new world of trench warfare, one in which mass death was dominant and where, under artillery and gas bombardment, soldiers lost any sense that war was a glorious thing. Fussell termed this style the "ironic" style and challenged us to see war writing throughout the twentieth century as built upon the foundations laid by the British soldier writers of the Great War.

Sir John Keegan produced a book a year later which paralleled Fussell's. An instructor in the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, but a man whose childhood infirmities ensured he would never go to war, Keegan asked the disarmingly simple question: "Is battle possible?" The answer, published in *The*

1 Paul Fuseell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York 1975).

Face of Battle in 1976,[2] was perhaps yes, long ago, but now in the twentieth century, battle presented men with terrifying challenges. The men who fought at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 could run to the next hill to save their lives. Foot soldiers converging on Waterloo four centuries later could arrive a day late. But in 1916, at the Battle of the Somme, there was no escape. Given the industrialization of warfare, the air above the trenches on the Somme was filled with lethal projectiles from which there was no escape. Mass death in that battle and in the other great conflict of 1916 at Verdun, pushed soldiers beyond the limits of human endurance. Nothing like the set battles of the First World War followed in the 1939–1945 war, though Stalingrad came close to replicating the horror of the Somme and Verdun. Here was a military historian's book, but one whose starting point was humane and to a degree psychological. The soldiers' breaking point was Keegan's subject, and with power, subtlety, and technical authority, he opened a new chapter in the study of military history as a humane discipline.

In 1979, Eric Leed, a historian steeped in the literature of anthropology, wrote a similarly path-breaking book. *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War* I[3] borrowed subtly from the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner. He had examined people in a liminal condition, no longer part of an older world from which they had come, and unable to escape from the midpoint, the no-man's land, in which they found themselves. Here is the emotional landscape of the trench soldiers of the Great War. They were men who could never come home again, for whom war was their home, and who recreated it in the years following the Armistice. Here was the world of shell-shocked men, but also that of the Freikorps, militarized freebooters of the immediate postwar period, who prepared the ground for the Nazis.

2 John Keegan, The Face of battle, (London 1976).

3 Eric Leed, No man's land: Combat and identity in World War I (Cambridge 1979).

In all three cases, and by reference to very different sources, the subject at hand was the tragedy of the millions of men who went into the trenches and who came out, if at all, permanently marked by the experience. They bore what some observers of the survivors of Hiroshima termed the "death imprint"; the knowledge that their survival was a purely arbitrary accident. Here we may see some traces of the antinuclear movement, putting alongside one another Japanese civilians and Great War soldiers. The moral and political differences between the two cases are evident, but the wreckage of war, so these writers seemed to say, is at the heart of the civilization in which we live. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that these three books, alongside others of the time, helped create a tragic interpretation of the Great War, one in which victimhood and violence were braided together in such a way as to tell a fully European story of the war, one to which the founders of the European Union clearly reacted. From the 1970s on, European integration was an attempt to move away from the notion of the nation-state as that institution which had the right to go to war, as Raymond Aron put it. The result has been a progressive diminution of the role of the military in the political and social life of most European countries. James Sheehan asked the question in a recent book *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?*[4] The answer is, they and most (though not all) of their leaders have fled from the landscape of war so devastatingly presented in the works of Fussell, Keegan, Leed, and others.

Now we are in a fourth generation of writing on the Great War. I would like to term it the "transnational generation." This generation has a global outlook. The term "global" describes both the tendency to write about the war in more than European terms and to see the conflict as trans-European, trans-Atlantic, and beyond. Here was the first war among

4 James Sheehan, Where have all the soldiers gone? (Cambridge 2008).

industrialized countries, reaching the Middle East and Africa, the Falkland Islands and China, drawing soldiers into the epicenter in Europe from Vancouver to Capetown to Bombay and to Adelaide. Here was a war that gave birth to the Turkey of Ataturk and to the Soviet Union of Lenin and Stalin. Demands for decolonization arose from a war that had promised self-determination and had produced very little of the kind. Economic troubles arose directly out of the war, and these were sufficiently serious to undermine the capacity of the older imperial powers to pay for their imperial and quasi-imperial footholds around the world.

A word or two may be useful to distinguish the international approach, common to many of the older histories of the war, from what I have termed the transnational approach. For nearly a century, the Great War was framed in terms of a system of international relations in which the national and imperial levels of conflict and cooperation were taken as given. Transnational history does not start with one state and move on to others, but takes multiple levels of historical experience as given, levels which are both below and above the national level.[5] Thus the history of mutiny is transnational, in that it happened in different armies for different reasons, some of which are strikingly similar to the sources of protest and refusal in other armies. So is the history of finance, technology, war economies, logistics, and command. The history of commemoration also happened on many levels, and the national is not necessarily the most significant, not the most enduring.

The peace treaties following the Great War show the meaning of the transnational in other ways. Now we can see that the war was both the apogee and the beginning of the end

5 For some discussions of the emergence of trans-national history, see: Akira Iriye, "Transnational history", *Contemporary European History*, xiii (2004), 211-22; John Heilbron u.a., 'Towards a transnational history of the social sciences', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, xliv, 2 (2008), 146-60; C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational history", *American Historical Review*, cxi, 5 (December 2006), 144-164.

of imperial power, spanning and eroding national and imperial boundaries. Erez Manela's work on "the Wilsonian moment" is a case in point. He reconfigures the meaning of the Versailles settlement by exploring its unintended consequences in stimulating movements of national liberation in Egypt, India, Korea, and China. Instead of telling us about the interplay of Great Power politics, he shows how non-Europeans invented their own version of Wilson in their search for a kind of self-determination that he, alongside Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando, was unprepared to offer to them. Who could have imagined that the decision these men took to award rights to Shandung Province, formerly held by Germany, not to China but to Japan would lead to major rioting and the formation of the Chinese Communist Party?[6]

Historians of the revolutionary moment in Europe itself between 1917 and 1921 have approached their subject more and more as a transnational phenomenon. After all, both revolutionaries and the forces of order who worked to destroy them were well aware of what may be termed the cultural transfer of revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) strategy, tactics, and violence. In recent years, these exchanges have been analyzed at the urban and regional levels, helping us to see the complexity of a story somewhat obscured by treating it solely in national terms. Comparative urban history has established the striking parallels between the challenges urban populations faced in different warring states. Now we can answer in the affirmative the question as to whether there is a metropolitan history of warfare. In important respects, the residents of Paris, London, and Berlin shared more with one another than they did with their respective rural compatriots. These experienced communities had a visceral reality somewhat lacking even in the imagined communities of the nation.

6 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (New York 2007).

Here we must be sensitive to the way contemporaries used the language of nation and empire to describe loyalties and affiliations of a much smaller level of aggregation. A journalist asking British troops on the Western front whether they were fighting for the Empire, got a "yes" from one soldier. His mates asked him what he meant. The answer was that he was fighting for the Empire Music Hall in Hackney, a working-class district of London. This attachment to the local and the familiar was utterly transnational.[7]

Another subject now understood more in transnational than in international terms is the history of women in wartime. Patriarchy, family formation, and the persistence of gender inequality were transnational realities in the period of the Great War. Furthermore, the war's massive effects on civilian life precipitated a movement of populations of staggering proportions, discussed in volume 3. Refugees in France, the Netherlands, and Britain from the area occupied by the Western front numbered in the millions. So did those fleeing the fighting in the borderlands spanning the old German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. One scholar has estimated that perhaps 20 percent of the population of Russia was on the move, heading for safety wherever it could be found during the Great War. And that population current turned into a torrent throughout Eastern Europe during the period of chaos surrounding the Armistice. What made it worse was that the United States closed its gates to such immigrants, ending one of the most extraordinary periods of transcontinental migration in history. Thus population transfer, forced or precipitated by war, transformed the ethnic character of many parts of Greece, Turkey, the Balkans, and the vast tract of land from the Baltic states to the Caucasus. Such movements antedated the war, but they grew exponentially after 1914. This is why it makes sense to see the Great War as having occasioned the

7 Jay Winter, "British popular culture in the First World War", in: R. Stites and A. Roshwald (eds), *Popular culture in the First World War* (Cambridge 1999), 138-59.

emergence of that icon of transnational history in the twentieth century, the refugee, with his or her pitiful belongings slung over shoulders or carts. The photographic evidence of this phenomenon is immense.

The cutting edge history of the Great War is trans-national in yet another respect. We live in a world where historians born in one country have been able to migrate to follow their historical studies and either to stay in their adopted homes or to migrate again, when necessary, to obtain a university post. Christopher Clark was born in Sydney, studied in Berlin, and finished his studies in Cambridge, where he still teaches. John Horne was born in Adelaide, trained at Oxford, and teaches in Dublin. Sean McMeekin studied at Berkeley and teaches at Koç University; Norman Stone was trained at Cambridge and now is at Bilkent University in Turkey. Fifty of the 70 authors of the three-volume Cambridge History of the First World War, which I edited, are trans-national scholars, practicing history far from their place of birth, and enriching the world of scholarship thereby. Seeing the world in which we live at a tangent, in the words of Kafavy, opens up insights harder to identify from within a settled world. The world of scholarship today may be described in many ways, but the term 'settled' is not one of them. This unsettledness is a major advantage, one which will enable more trans-national histories to emerge alongside national histories, and for each to enrich the other.

It is important to repeat that these new initiatives in transnational history have built on the work of the three generations of scholars that preceded them. The history of the Great War that has emerged in recent years is additive, cumulative, and multifaceted. National histories have a symbiotic relationship with trans-national histories; the richer the one, the deeper the other. No cultural historian of any standing ignores the history of the nation, or of the social movements which at times have overthrown them; to do so would be absurd. No military historian ignores the language in which commands

turn into movements on the field of battle. War is such a protean event that it touches every facet of human life. Earlier scholars pointed the way; we trans-national scholars acknowledge their presence among us, in our effort to take stock of the current state of knowledge in this field.

2. The Historial project

There is a French dimension to the emergence of trans-national history to which I would like to draw your attention. Its origins may be located in the 1920s, when Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre came to Strasbourg to rekindle French scholarship there, and founded the *Annales* school of historical interpretation. Named after the journal they founded in 1929, this school practiced trans-national history from the outset. Following in their footsteps, Fernand Braudel wrote a history of the Mediterranean, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote on the history of climate, neither of which is in any sense comprehensible within a national framework. Others pioneered work in population history and economic history, which are no respecters of national borders either.

While those in the *Annales* tradition focused on the medieval and early modern periods, others in the 1980s and 1990s turned to the First World War. The occasion for one such fruitful initiative was clearly trans-national. In 1986, local politicians in the Département de la Somme in France were encouraged by a retired Minister for Veteran Affairs, Max Lejeune, to fund the construction of a new museum of the Battle of the Somme there, where it happened, in a department which had no other tourist sites within many kilometres. The Battle was the most massive encounter of the British army in the war, and it engaged millions of German and French soldiers for six full months of futile combat, yielding little gain for the allies, but over one million casualties. Having a British, a French, and a German dimension suggested the need to

create a multi-national museum of the battle, a rarity at the time. They approached me to offer a British perspective, not because I was British -- I was born in New York but studied and taught at Cambridge for 25 years -- but because I was the only historian of the Great War in Britain who would work in French. This brought me together first with Jean-Jacques Becker, the distinguished French historian of the war, and Gerd Krumeich, from Freiburg, then Düsseldorf.

My contribution was both to help design the museum, and to persuade the *élus* and the *fonctionnaires* of the *Département de la Somme*, that to avoid early atrophy, a museum had to have an organic link to the academy. Otherwise it would turn dusty and cold. The necessary link could be provided, I argued, by creating a research centre on the history of the First World War, before the museum was opened. Thus historians could help design the museum and then carry on the necessary work of locating its activities within the wider community of scholarship developing all over the world. In a parking lot in the French provincial city of Amiens, Max Lejeune, whose father fought in the war and came back a broken man, heard my plea, and to my immense surprise, accepted it. He included as a line item in the budget of the museum the existence of a research centre, to be funded annually on the provincial level. It retains this status to this day.

My French colleagues were amazed that I had gotten that far, but were still not convinced that I could get the finest scholars from all over the world to join in the work of this centre. The *fonctionnaires* said there is only one way to find out. They gave me the money to run a meeting in Amiens, and low and behold, 40 eminent First World War scholars turned up. At this point, French skepticism and cynicism gave way, and I persuaded two young and very promising scholars, Stéphane Audoin-Rouseau and Annette Becker, to join the team, and to take over running the research centre when the museum opened in 1992.

Between 1989, when the research centre was launched, and 1992, when the museum was inaugurated, in the presence of Ernst Jünger, guest of honour, who had fought in Péronne 76 years before, the research centre designed the museum, with the full support of the *Département de la Somme.*

This was a transnational project from the start. There were two innovations in design. The first was the placement in the showcases of artefacts purchased in the vast antiquarian market selling real First World War memorabilia, organized on parallel shelves, first German, then French, then British, Dominions and Empire. This spatial contiguity of objects showed how similar were the cultural artefacts produced during the war across national boundaries. Already, this was daring, in that equating French and German propaganda stripped each of the label 'good' and 'evil' so universally accepted at the time. What came to be termed 'cultures of war', signifying practices enabling men and women to endure the cruelties and hardships of war, emerged visually in planning the museum. This is a theme Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau have made their own, and I am sure that they would agree, that working with objects in the construction of the Historial de la grande guerre, changed the way they wrote and still write history.

The second trans-national aspect of the construction of the Historial is one I know well. In 1986, just when starting the project, I took my family to Switzerland from Cambridge. Walking in Sils Maria was and remains one of the great pleasures of my life. Getting there from Cambridge is a two-day drive. We always stopped in the same village in Alsace just north of Colmar. And from there we took a bit of time to see the *Kunstmuseum* in Basle. There I saw a painting that almost knocked me over. It is Hans Holbein's *Christ in the Tomb*. (Fig. 1)

What is amazing about this painting is its overwhelming horizontality. There are no angels, no Marys, no Joseph of

Aramathea, no human or celestial figure accompanying the body of the dead Christ. This is a dead man, so realistically rendered that Holbein has shown the dislocation of his index finger in his crucified hand. Here is the purest painting of the Protestant Reformation; it is only through faith alone that you can hold to the view that this dead man will rise in a day. Mantegna (Fig. 2) had opened this engaged with horizontality, but Holbein took it one step further. In the twentieth century Käthe Kollwitz (Fig. 3) explored the horizontal axis in her treatment of the grief of a widow in 1922, and it was at a time I was writing about mourning in the Great War that Holbein's image struck me with such considerable force. Here was the way the museum we had just begun to design would be seen: in a downward vector, since horizontality is the language of mourning, and verticality the language of hope.

Over the next years, that horizontal axis became the guiding principle of our work on the Historial de Péronne. In the first room, there were separating points of conflict horizontally displayed with points of amity and commerce vertically displayed across national boundaries. (Fig. 4). Here is what we term 'the hall of portraits', with ordinary civilian life rendered vertically, and Otto Dix's shocking series Der Krieg rendered horizontally behind it. (Fig. 5) Turning to the first large exhibition room, covering 1914-16, we chose to use horizontality to portray the world of trench warfare as virtually identical for French, German and British soldiers. We did so by designing shallow dug-outs, *fosses* in French, which resemble both archeological digs and shallow graves. We placed real artefacts in stylized poses, to avoid even the slightest trace of pseudo-realism, the sense that you can 'really' see what the trenches were like. (Fig. 6)

Fosses dominate the third room, covering 1916-18. At the entrance, there is a visual syllogism: three *fosses*, one showing fire power, a second showing the frail defensive cover soldiers had, and a third showing the outcome – surgery and medical

repair. (Fig. 7) In this third *fosse* are the surgical kit of the French surgeon and writer Georges Duhamel, and the flute which kept him sane between long bouts of surgery.

There is much more to say about the museum, the design of which won significant recognition, but for our purposes, two points stand out. The first is the relentless trans-national approach to the design, and secondly the way in which the use of the horizontal axis – unique among war museums, I believe – provided a visual language of mourning, which after a conflict which took 10 million lives, created a trans-national cloud of bereavement which covered many parts of the world after 1914.

3. The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century

The second step towards constructing a platform for transnational history grew directly out of the Historial project. At the opening of the museum in 1992, an American television producer saw what we had done, and was determined to take our approach and turn it into a television series on the First World War. I joined him in this effort as co-producer and co-writer and the result was 'The Great War and the shaping of the twentieth century', which was broadcast in 1996, and a year later won an Emmy award for the best television documentary of the year.

In this series, there is an extended discussion of shell shock, showing in one instance how transnational history profits from the existence of the vast visual archives of the war. These images, taken from British and French medical training films showing doctors what shell shock looked like, simply explodes any idea that you can write the history of psychological injury in wartime from a national perspective. I will return to the question of the incidence of this condition in a moment, but it is blatantly absurd to differentiate between a

German, a British, and a Turkish soldier driven mad by the war.

4. The Cambridge History of the First World War

Since the appearance of the BBC/PBS series, I have been involved in two huge projects in trans-national history. The first is a history of capital cities at war, focusing on Paris, London and Berlin. Here we identified a level of war experience – the metropolitan experience – in which inhabitants of these three cities had more in common with each other than they did with their compatriots in farms a few hundred kilometres away. Exploring the vast archives of this sub-national population enabled us to show with fine detail how the Central Powers lost the war on the Home Front, by failing to distribute goods and services effectively as between military and civilian claimants. In Paris and London, the well-being of the home population was roughly maintained, and in some cases improved, where after early 1916, Berliners faced increasing shortages of food and other vital commodities, and had to break the law to stay alive. A thriving black market showed the failure of the state system of distribution. It was not the Allied blockade which destroyed the German home front, it was the irrational system of military dictatorship which brought the home front to its knees in the summer of 1918 precisely at the moment the German army was beaten in the field. Thus there was a stab in the back at the end of the war. The knife was wielded by Hindenburg and Ludendorff and the German military elite whose remobilization of the German war economy ruined it, and ensured that when the March 1918 offensive came to a halt, that Germany would lose the war. Seeing this process on the local level went well beyond previous national histories, which conflate too many local variations to provide a sharply defined picture of what went wrong. The German war effort was destroyed from within.

Only by comparative and trans-national work, has this become clear.

This finding has been reviewed and confirmed in the latest project in trans-national history – the *Cambridge History of the First World War.* Let me introduce you to the structure of the work, and then indicate some of its significantly new findings. The first point to make is that there is not a single national chapter in the three volumes. All chapters are trans-national in character. Thus we have a chapter on war crimes, but not on German atrocities in 1914; we have a chapter on the maltreatment of civilians and the spread of detention camps straddling the globe, but not one on the Russian pogroms of 1915; we have a chapter on the Spanish influenza epidemic, but not one on its incidence in Britain; we have a chapter on shell shock, but not one on the British way of handling it.

The first volume is entitled Global war, introducing the second dimension of trans-national history – the escape from a sole focus on the Western front, or from treating the war as simply a reflection of the Franco-German or Anglo-German antagonism. The images used in a visual essay I did in volume 1 provided photographic evidence of what global war looked like.

Much of trans-national history focuses on population movements, refugee flows, and the transport of labour around the world. The Great War was probably the largest moment of displacement to date in global history, and it occurred over a short time and after a 30 year period of out-migration from Europe to the Americas and the Antipodes numbering perhaps 30 million people. The numbers on the move in the 1914-18 conflict were greater still. There were 70 million men in uniform fighting usually at a considerable distance from home, and assisting them were millions of non-white labourers.

The ethnic, racial and national mix of war was staggering in its dimensions. The illustrations show Africans from all

over the continent in a German prisoner-of-war camp, with their nationalities displayed as a key (Fig. 8). The encounter between this wounded Senegalese soldier and a German medical orderly on a French battlefield shows what imperial and trans-national warfare was all about. The need for medical care brought together this Egyptian doctor and a Vietnamese labourer suffering from beri-beri. (Fig. 9) The African contribution to the defence of France was saluted in popular culture too, sometimes in racial stereotypes, but at other times, (Fig. 10) with literally a touching affection.

The unlikely juxtapositions of war were captured by soldiers themselves, some of whom produced photo albums for their families and perhaps also for their own reminiscence. One French physician, Docteur Beurrier captured his time on the Isle of Vido, dealing with the sick and wounded opposite the town of Corfu. His self-portrait opens his portfolio of photographs, many of which show dying or dead Serbian soldiers, with whom he had to deal daily. (Fig. 11 and 12). One he entitled 'Charron's barque'; it shows the steady gaze of the physician on our frail remains. A thousand miles away, in Volhynia on the Eastern front, a Jewish Viennese physician found himself in contact with a very different group of his co-religionists. The poor Jews of the Pale of Settlement had little in common with Doctor Bernhard Bardach, a painter as well as a photographer (Fig. 13). He photographed them at prayer from a cultural distance. Examining Jewish prostitutes for venereal disease in this remote part of what is now Western Ukraine was an unlikely destination for a Viennese doctor. (Fig. 14) Note the woman in the window on the right looking at prostitutes shielding their faces from the camera.

The second facet of the world war which photographs highlight is the sheer variety of landscapes of battle soldiers and sailors faced for 50 months of combat. If we shift our optic away from the Western front at first, we can see vastly different topographies. In Fig. 15, we see a Hungarian moun-

tain corps unit scaling the sheer cliff faces of the Italian front. The freezing terrain of 'the white war' is evident in Fig. 16. It shows Monte Pasubia, south of Roveretto, where intense fighting took place in 1916. Evacuating the wounded from this terrain was extremely difficult, as Fig. 17. shows. The Eastern front was huge; to describe its variety is impossible, since its length would describe a line extending from Scotland to Morocco. Still Doctor Barbach gives us some sense of its endlessness in his photographs (18), and also of the devastation which attending fighting in villages and towns all over what is now Poland and the Ukraine (19).

The air war created new possibilities and new vistas in which fighting took place. Bardach caught the mix of old and new in his photograph of horses of the Central powers dragging an airplane to a destination on the Eastern front. (Fig. 20). And Londoners would not have much difficulty in identifying the cigar-shape and huge size of the Zeppelin, which established civil defense as one of the prerequisites of states at war. The global reach of the naval war was truly extraordinary. H.M.S. Inflexible started the war in the Mediterranean, helped sink two armoured cruisers during the Battle of the Falklands in 1914. In Fig. 21 we see her rescuing German sailors after the battle. In 1915 she shelled the Dardanelles, but was damaged by enemy fire. Back in service in 1916, she took part in the Battle of Jutland in 1916. Nothing could better illustrate the global war than Fig. 22, showing a Japanese cruiser in protective duty off the coast of Vancouver.

Mud was the colour of much of the combat terrain of the Western front, and mud was the colour of the men forced to fight there. In photographs we can see the odd character of a landscape resembling the dark side of the moon after a celestial flood. Horses sunk to their chests and men dwarfed by mountains of mud described a kind of war difficult to convey and even more difficult to endure. The 'puncta' in photographs of the Western front arise from uncanny mixtures of

the ordinary and the surreal. Fig. 23 shows a half a horse in a tree, and in many instances, the suffering of animals brought out the humanity of soldiers, who could express emotion about horses more easily at times than about men. (Fig. 34) It is not at all surprising that there were charitable events at home to collect money for sick and injured horses; they were an integral part of the most industrialized war in history. Not at all made redundant by the selective appearance of the tank, more readily accepted in Allied armies than in the Central Powers.

The third way in which photographs can introduce us to the radically new character of the First World War is by showing the extent to which the deployment of new weapons and new tactics challenged the laws of war. Flame-throwers were chemical weapons, but much more radical weapons were introduced early in the war. Under pre-war international protocols, the use of poison gas weapons was deemed illegal. Starting in 1915 all armies developed stockpiles of such weapons and deployed them. First came chlorine, then phosgene, and then mustard gas, and they all added to the horrors of the battlefield, without changing the strategic balance in any sector. Their effectiveness depended more on the wind than on gas masks and other counter measures hastily adopted for men and animals alike. Medical photographs showed the ravages caused by these weapons, and helped outlaw them after 1918.

The treatment of civilians was just as worrying, in that they seemed to tear up the laws of war. They certainly were trampled on in the case of the abuse and murder of the Armenian population of the Ottoman empire. Photographic evidence – some gathered by outraged German officers in Turkey – enables us to see the aftermath of the horror. Photographs also open up the world of humanitarian aid throughout Eastern Europe and the Middle East, which was another element of the global war. Trans-national generosity extended to

many groups of refugees, those who had lost everything and were on the move by the millions during and after the war.

There are visual essays accompanying the learned studies in volume 2 on the state, and volume 3 on civil society at war. They all illustrate the absurdity of approaching the history of a global war through national optics alone. It is not that national history is dispensed with; on the contrary; my claim is that by moving outside national boundaries, but taking account of regional, continental, and trans-continental facets of war, scholars will write better national histories.

5. What are some of the new findings?

1. Total war deaths have been significantly underestimated. This finding was possible only by investigating the premises on which all national studies of war casualties were made. Once we do so, we can see the omissions and errors which led many scholars (including the present writer) to miss roughly one million war-related deaths never before included in national accounts.

2. Approximately one in five men wounded in the war suffered from psychological injuries. Disclosing this underestimate fundamentally changes our understanding of the extent to which the war created an army of disabled men whose disabilities were not disclosed, treated, or compensated by pension payments. Perhaps 500,000 men in Britain case and 6 million world-wide suffered from lingering psychological or neurological damage in the post-war decades. This hidden army of the wounded was treated by families, like those of Pat Barker and Doris Lessing, whose writings about the war generation are fundamental sources for the extent to which women's lives were disturbed profoundly by the need to care for men broken by the war.

3. Germany did not lose the war because of the Allied blockade or due to the strength of the Royal Navy, but due to its catastrophic domestic management of the war economy. This finding of several chapters in the Cambridge History shows that hunger in the Central Powers arose from within, but was exacerbated from without. This is a reversal of older interpretations – German and British – which saw the blockade as strangling the Central Powers. To a degree this was true, but only after the Armistice, and when the blockade continued until June 1919, it constituted a war crime – war against the old and the sick at the time of the worst influenza pandemic in history. In effect, as Paul Kennedy argues, compared to the Napoleonic Wars and the Second World War, sea power was a marginal force in the Great War. He will not win friends in the Admiralty with that argument, but it will stand nonetheless.

The fourth finding worth noting is that the Armenian genocide is a central part of the narrative of the Great War. Once we escape from focusing solely on the Franco-German or Franco-British embrace, we can see the war as producing disasters all over the world, not least among which was the murder of over one million Armenians.

What made it part – indeed an essential part – of total war is that a dictatorship at war used the occasion to take a long-standing ethnic conflict and to finish it, just as the Nazis sought to finish the Jewish problem in the 1940s. Murderous violence happened before the First World War in Anatolia and before 1941 in Europe, but in 1915 and 1941, both the Ottoman Turks and the Nazis aimed and successfully carried out a programme of extermination to finish off the enemy within.

The fifth finding worthy of note is that the war did not end in 1918, but the violence it unleashed in what has been called the

‘shatter zones of empire’ carried on well into the 1920s – in Ireland, in Palestine, in Turkey, in India, in China, in Egypt. The most important trans-national feature of the period of the Great War was its porous boundaries; no 1815 or 1945 here; not even a 1989. Ethnic, national, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence went on and on, describing the landscape of what Pasternak termed the ice age.

Has that ice age vanished? Yes and no, as John Horne shows in his accounting chapter in volume 3. What was thinkable, tolerable, in the sphere of violence was transformed by the Great War, the first fully industrialized war in history. Verdun and the Somme transformed what we understand by the term ‘battle’, and the sheer weight of bereavement and of the care of the mutilated transformed what we mean by ‘victory’. The British poet Ted Hughes put it many years ago that the Great War was a defeat on whose neck someone placed a victory medal. I would adjust that phrase slightly to say that the Great War was a common catastrophe, a trans-national catastrophe, the consequences of which we live with to this day.

List of the illustrations

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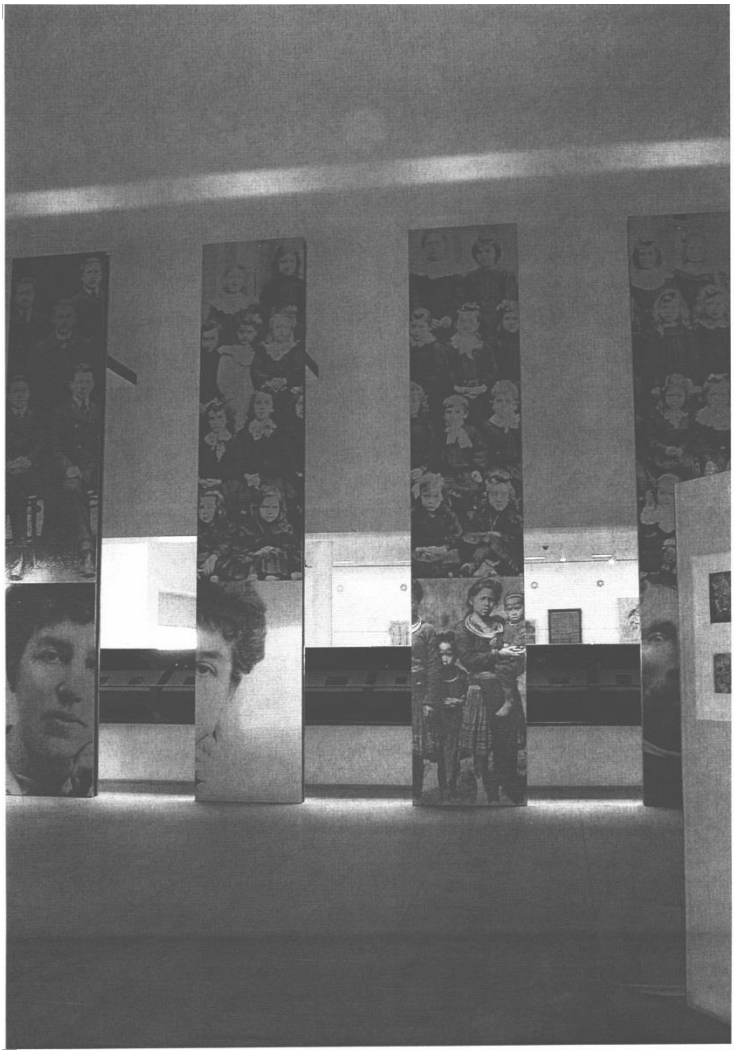
2. Andrea Mantegna, The Lamentation of Christ (c.1480).

3. Käthe Kollwitz, The Widow (1922) Rights: © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

4. Hall of Portraits, Historial de la grande guerre, Péronne, Somme.



5. Otto Dix, ‘Der Krieg’, print 23, Historial de la grande guerre, Péronne, Somme.

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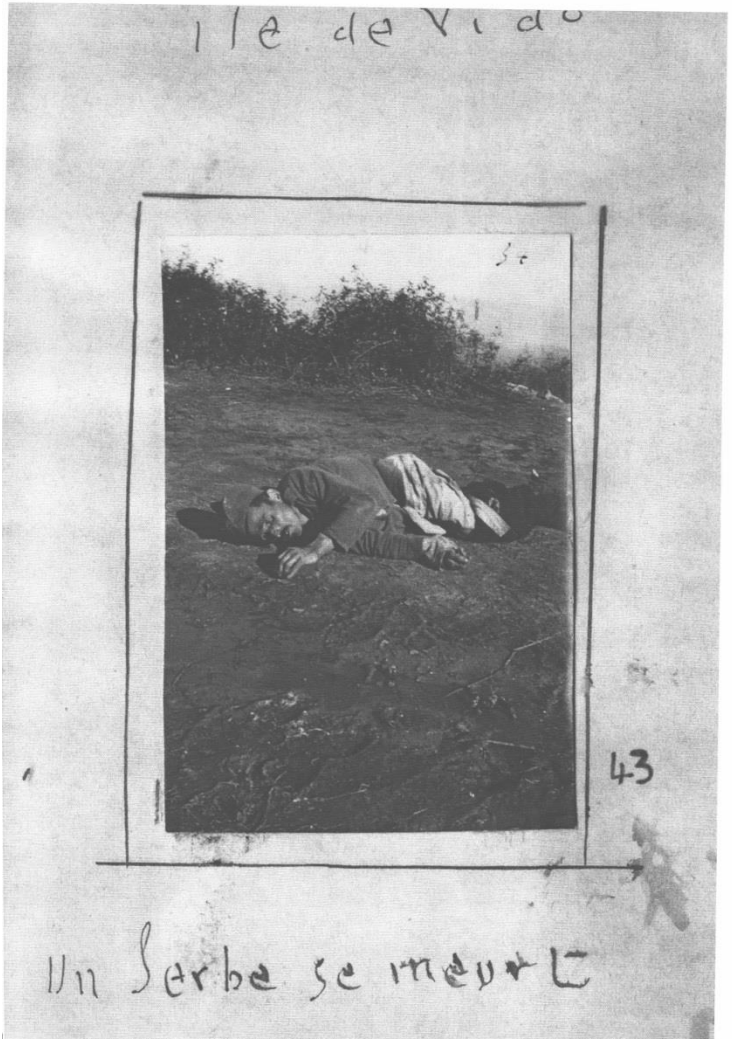

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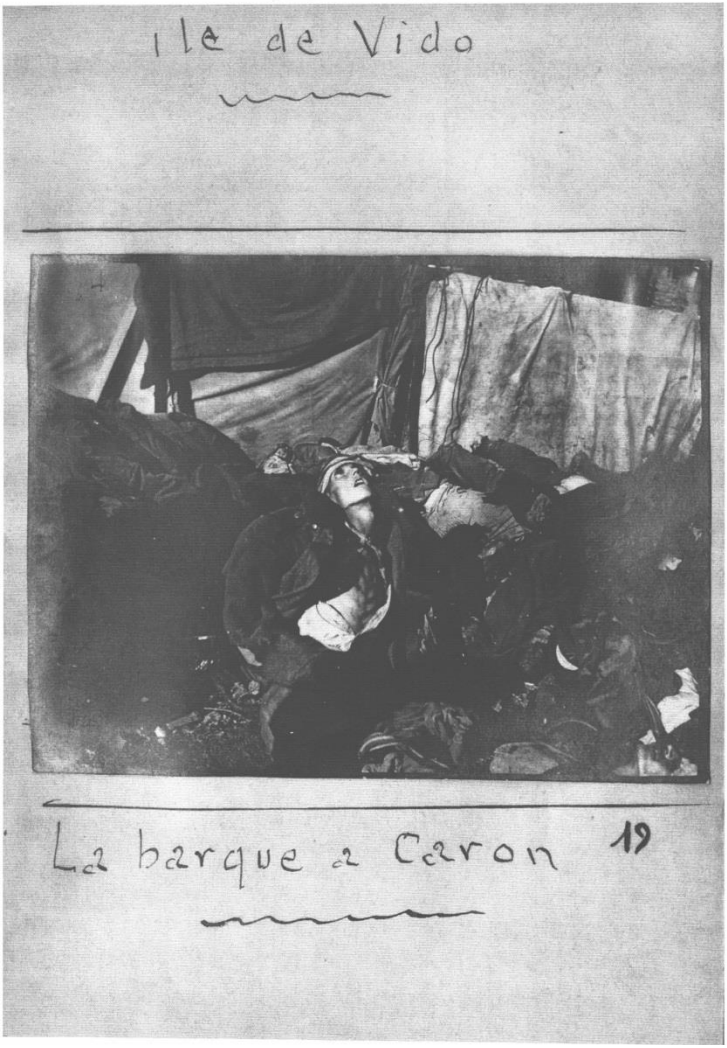

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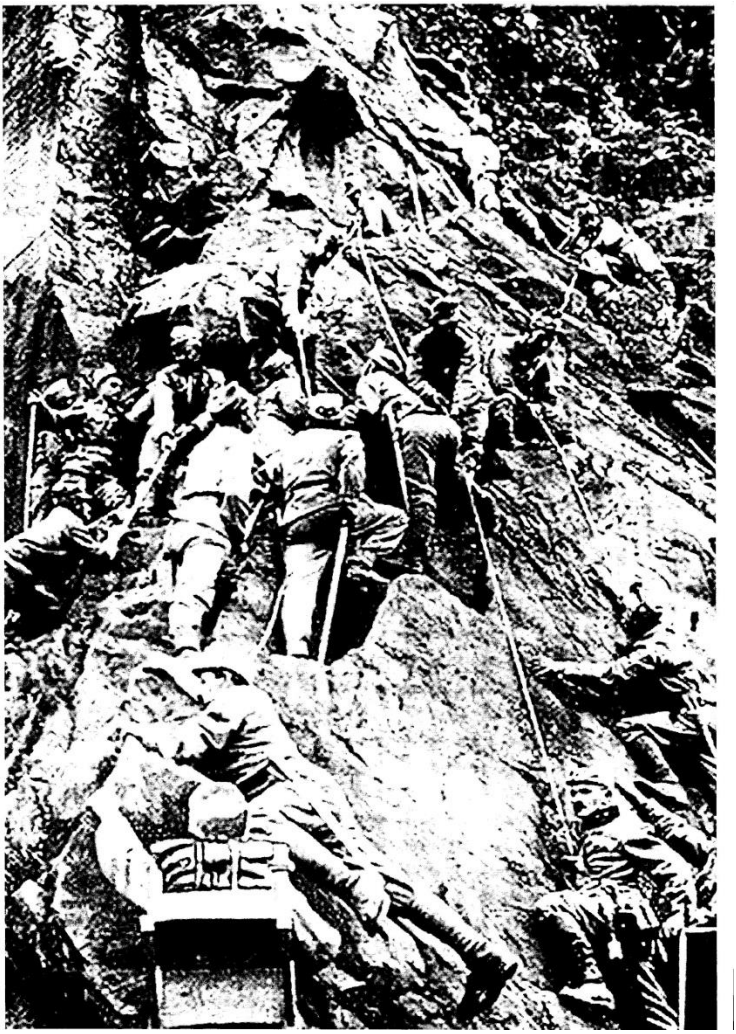

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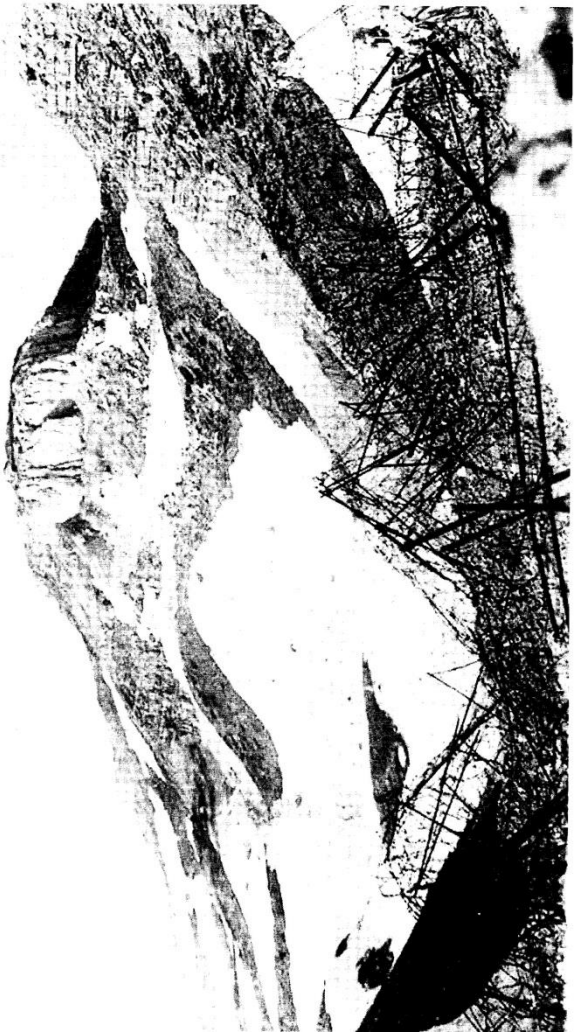

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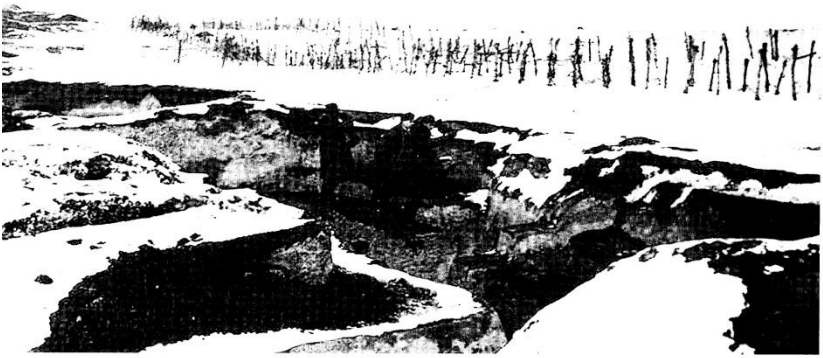

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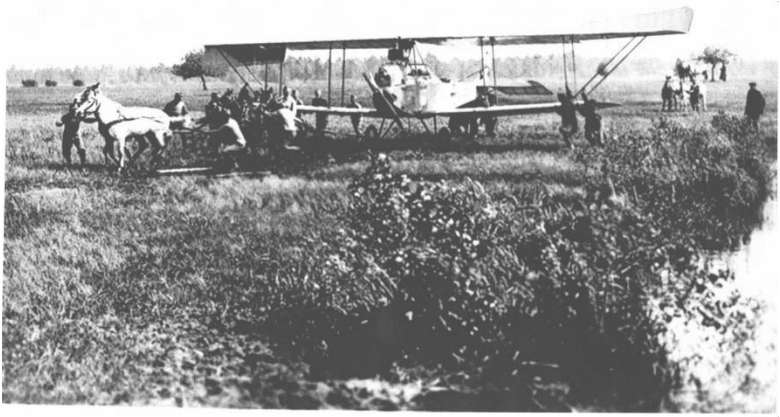

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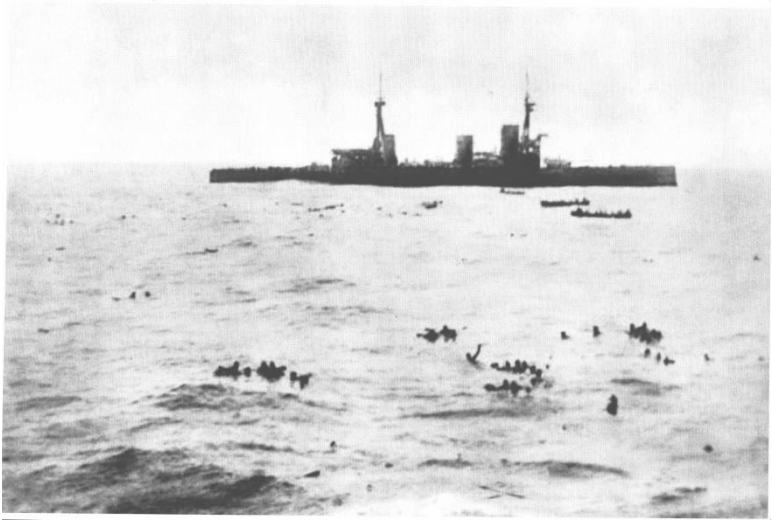

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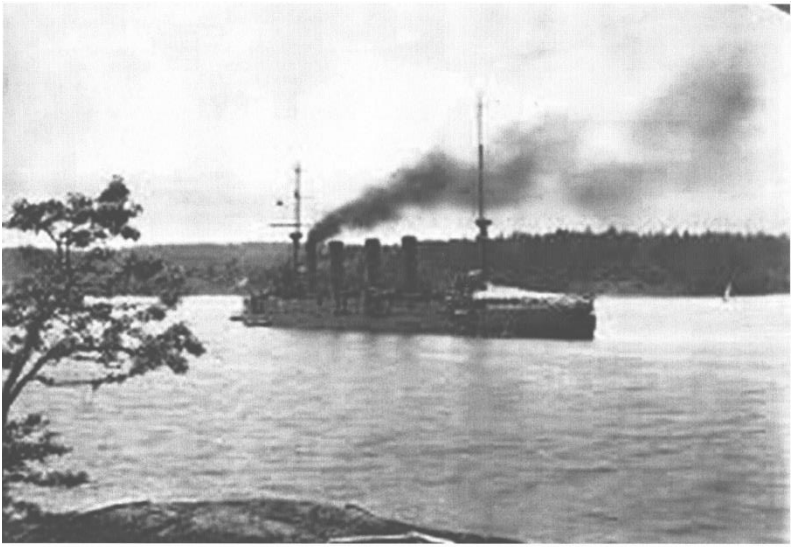

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