

IN THE TRENCHES: MARC BLOCH, ROBERT GRAVES, AND THE INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE OF FRENCH AND BRITISH SOLDIERS DURING WWI

World War I took over most of the nineteen-teens and littered Europe with violence and damage. To provide a very general background of the war, it was fought between the French, allied with Russia and the United Kingdom and later the United States, and Germany, allied with the Astro-Hungarian Empire, also known as the Hapsburg Empire. Much of the fighting was located on the French and Belgium borders with Germany, which was known as the Western Front. This is where the memoirs I will talk about later originate from. There was another front, though: the Eastern Front on the border between Germany and Russia. The causes of the war are so many that I won't take up all my time to talk about them. Instead, I would like to tell a story about three soldiers: two French and one British.

Imagine: you are a twenty-year-old young man ripped away from your family to partake in a war you know nothing about. One minute you are eating dinner with your parent, the next you are sitting in a muddy trench and it is raining. Your clothes are soaked through, and you don't have extra. The seasoned officers tell you not to stand up too straight so the Germans sniper can't see you. The next day, one of the other soldiers who hadn't listened stood up and briefly raised his head out of the trench, only slightly. The next thing you know, he's lying on the ground of the trench with a bullet wound through his forehead.

During the war, senior officials ordered offensives or attacks that they knew would cost the soldiers at the front their lives in a way that was monstrous. These officials, on many occasions, had never seen trench warfare because they put their time in at the front in a different century, before trench warfare was even considered. Many senior officers and generals during 19th century went to war without the fear of the machine gun or tank being used; the technology was not developed yet. There was such a denial of the new military technology that one senior

officer behind the lines ordered the men to advance to the German trench, which is not so out of the ordinary during a trench war. But, he ordered them to *walk* over no man's land, which made it much easier for the machine gunners to kill most of them before they even cleared their overbarbed wire fortifications.

Marc Bloch, a historian I will talk about in depth later, uses psychological studies to argue that accounts of war, or other aspects of history, are not always accurate, which questions the accuracy of the eyewitness account. Bloch argues that the war writings are influenced by countless factors, which have different effects on each individual. He says that, "collective psychosis was everywhere the same; the incidents which in each particular case were the occasion of the false narrative, different in their details, are likely to be similar in their essential features: it was the sight of unaccustomed uniforms, it was an unknown language spoken by foreign soldiers". In this case, the language barrier between the different armies allied together is a challenge that everyone will deal with in a different way. For example, a French soldier who does not speak English may describe the British soldiers as cold, distant, unfriendly, when in reality the French soldier has subconsciously cut himself off from the British soldiers because of his inability to communicate with them. However, if we do away with and ignore personal accounts of events, such as the war, a historian is only left with newspapers and other official accounts, but it can even be argued that those are in the same category as personal accounts. Because of this, we must be wary of personal accounts and the ways in which they can be unreliable. According to Bloch, the reason for the false narratives is very clear and apparent: "they are born only where men from different groups can meet".

The individual experience was different for every soldier during the first world war. No two soldiers experienced the same things because of their environment before the war. In that, a

wealthy elite would not have the same experience as a soldier from an impoverished family. The two would not even be in the same class of the military; one would be an officer with a fancy uniform and elaborate quarters, the other would be an enlisted soldier whose boots had holes through the bottom.

This disparity is shown in the movie *Paths of Glory*, directed by Stanley Kubrick. The movie uses the French mutinies of 1917 to talk about class consciousness during the war. The soldiers in the trenches face many dangers and unsanitary quarters, while the general is several miles behind the lines in an extremely elegant, lavish home, that is more like an estate or castle, giving orders about the fate and the lives of the soldiers. At the beginning of the movie, the general's superior comes to talk about taking the 'anthill', which is a point of the front the Germans have taken possession of. At first, the general declines and states that his men cannot achieve such a feat. However, his superior dangles a promotion in front of him, and the general decides that his men's lives are worth the promotion even though it was estimated that 55% of the men involved would not survive the attack.

The typical soldier felt that the war did not align with his own beliefs, whether those beliefs included pro-war ideas or not. After the war began, the soldiers began to feel like they were fighting someone else's war, so to speak, especially if they happened to be an enlisted soldier rather than an officer. For many, the war shifted the relationship between social classes.

As mentioned before, *Paths of Glory* also talks about this. After the failed attack on the 'anthill', the general orders the colonel to choose one man from each section of his unit to undergo a court martial on bogus accusations of cowardice. The three men are chosen at random by their superiors. During the court martial, all three men are sentenced to death by firing squad. The general is so angered that he did not receive the additional star on his shoulder, he was

willing to sacrifice his men *off* the battlefield by implying that his stars are more important than their lives. During the attack, the general ordered an artillery bombardment of his own trenches because the soldiers were pinned down and could not advance out of the trench. Though, to him, it was viewed as the soldiers showing their true cowardice.

Similar themes are found in Stanley Weintraub's *Silent Night*. The Christmas of 1914 was supposed to be brutal and bloody, but it turned out to be peaceful when a Christmas truce took over the trenches on the front lines. Soldiers on both sides of the war put their differences aside and met in the middle at No Man's Land to celebrate the holiday. They sang, ate, and played soccer together like old friends. For that night, the violence stopped, and the warring parties joined together in celebration of the Christmas holiday. According to Weintraub, "the truce seemed to end as it had begun-from the bottom up, with random acts of violence-the High Commands on both sides were also demanding renewed war, and by orders and threats they made it happen". And, the peace was ended as simply as it had started.

The High Commands were not at all happy about the fraternizing with the enemy because it made them human. The intermingling on Christmas, 1914 put names and faces on the enemy. The Germans now had stories, likes, dislikes, and humanity, and the British and French saw it. The same was true for the German side; they saw the human aspects of their enemy. Now, everytime they fired into the enemy trench, they would wonder if they had just killed so-and-so, who was their newfound friend. This made it harder for the soldiers in the trenches on the front to fight the war.

Joyeux Noel, directed by Christian Carion, portrays the 1914 Christmas truce in this way. On Christmas, the two sides overcome their differences and meet in no-man's-land. The next day, they return to their trenches. However, when the German High Command orders an artillery

bombardment of the French and Scottish trenches, the German commander in charge warns them and invites them to seek shelter in the German trench. Later in the movie, the French commander does the same, and the Germans shelter themselves in the French and Scottish trenches. Because of this friendship that develops between the two sides at this section of trench, the High Commands of all three sides punish those involved: the German soldiers are sent to the eastern front to face the Russian army, the Scottish division is disbanded, and the French were moved to Verdun.

Although the movie is a fictional account of the Christmas truce, I think the reactions by the High Commands are probably accurate. The soldiers were punished because the enemy was humanized, which makes it more difficult to kill them. When the enemy does not have a name or a face, it takes the humanity out of killing; you are not killing another person, you are killing an *other*. By removing the *other* status of the Germans, it made them human, and murder is a mortal sin. This humanization also dismantled the idea that the war was a crusade against German aggression to take over the British and French ways of life. The war was still a war of the upper class, wealthy elites.

During the war, Marc Bloch experienced many difficulties, ranging from the loss of friends to near-death experiences. Fortunately, he survived the war and the many wounds and diseases that ravaged the trenches. For this reason, his writings during the war and his memoirs serve as reliable sources for the individual experience of trench warfare and one of the deadliest wars in history. Bloch had a unique experience in the trenches. While in the trenches at the front, He was shot in the head, but, remembering that head injuries were either very serious and lethal, or insignificant, he didn't panic. Instead, he thought, "If I'm not dead in two minutes, everything's fine."

In 1915, Bloch returned to the front after nearly dying of typhoid fever. In June of the same year, he received his first decoration for his "challenge of danger" during a French counterattack against the Germans, following a gas attack. In April of the following year, he received a second decoration. During the mission for which he was decorated, he, along with others, distracted the Germans from the main French attack on their trenches. His third decoration of the war took place in November 1917, when he occupied his position in the trench, which was subjected to powerful enemy bombardments. His objective in the attack was to obtain information for his command post, which he did. He was decorated a fourth time in July 1918 for his reconnaissance missions providing crucial information. He was demobilized in the early months of 1919.

Bloch talks of what he saw in France and the effects of the war on "peasants of France". He described a sight from August 1914: "on the road, we see people leaving their village in a hurry. Men, women, children, furniture, bundles of linen piled up on cars. These peasants of France, fleeing before an enemy whose protection we could not protect, composed a cruel picture, the most frightful perhaps of all those whom the war offered us". Once they reached the new trenches, they stayed in the town at night, but occupied the trenches during the day. However, they did not stay there too long and were soon moving on with their march.

During the same march, Bloch learned of an order he had not previously known about. He said, "we were not told at larzicourt the order or General Joffre ordered 'to be killed on the spot rather than to retreat". Understandably, Bloch was not very happy with this new order, which made their entire existence a suicide mission, especially if they patrolled no man's land at night or if the Germans ordered an advancement on the French trenches. This is an example of the disparity within the French army. The high officials made decisions about the lives of the men in

the trenches. The high officials had never had to endure the horrors that Bloch and others went through in the trenches during the war.

Robert Graves was a native British and professional poet. As a child, he spent a lot of time in Germany with his German family. At school, he was persecuted for his German name: Robert von Ranke Graves. Before the war, he was supposed to go to Oxford, but he was "scandalized to read the cynical violation by the Germans of Belgian neutrality". He had expected the war to be short, like most others. At first, he was only keeping prisoners, which seemed to him an unimportant job as thousands of people were dying on the other side of the Channel. Instead, he wanted to be in the trenches, fighting.

Graves provides a detailed account of the trenches. He talks of walking through a trench at night with the aid of a flashlight. Using the light, he saw field mice and frogs in the bottom of the trench. He ended up turning the light off because he "could not help treading on them". According to Graves, shell-fire was more preferred than rifle-fire; one could usually hear a shell approaching, but a rifle bullet did not have a warning. During one bombardment, a thunderstorm interrupted, but the soldiers in the trenches could not tell when the shelling stopped, and the thunder began.

Graves also talks a lot about the disparity between officers and soldiers, and even between high ranking officers and low-ranking officers. He recalls being assigned to a new regiment. When he and another officer reported to their new Adjutant, he did not shake either one of their hands. Graves then asked a second-lieutenant from the East Surrey Regiment (who he refers to as "the Surrey-man") about the encounter, who said " 'the peacetime custom of taking no notice of newly-joined officers is still more or less kept...It's bad enough for the Sandhurst chaps; but worse for special reservists, like you...; and it's worse still for outsiders

like me". While attached to this regiment, Graves faced a lot of strain from his superior officers. Graves began going on night patrols, which took him into no man's land and almost to the German trenches. During one of these patrols, the moon was unusually bright, which made it even more dangerous to go on a patrol into no man's land. Graves and his partner made it within 30 yards of the German trench and saw a party of German soldiers also in no man's land. On their way back to their own trench, a German machine gun opened fire, and the two men hurried back to their trench. The next day, a man called "Buzz Off", the second in command, muttered that Graves had gotten "cold feet" because he and his partner had not shot the German soldiers. Another example of this disparity occurred when they were marching to a new destination. Graves provided an inventory of all the equipment each soldier was carrying and any extras they might have. He does this to explain how difficult it was to march along a cobbled road, let alone to do it properly and in formation. He said, "marching on cobbled roads is difficult, so when a staff-officer came by in a Rolls-Royce and cursed us for bad march-discipline, I felt like throwing something at him".

Henri Desagneaux kept a journal throughout the war. He wrote very little in 1914 and 1915, but the accounts he left from 1916-1919 are filled with contempt for officers not in the trenches. In June 1916, he said, "But what are our leaders doing? Ah, we don't see them here. We are left to ourselves, they won't come and bother us". It seems as though the senior officers have a kind of disrespect for the soldiers in the trenches. They order ridiculous training and orders to attack that are prone to failure. For example, in January and February 1917, the senior officials in the rear order those at the front to engage in hand to hand combat with German soldiers. The purpose of this was to capture German prisoners. Desagneaux disliked the order,

and said “the whole plan is elaborated, of course, kilometers in the rear on a map. Is it possible? - they don't think about that. They need prisoners”.

On June 16, 1916, he said that he and his men had not eaten in 24 hours, and it was unknown if any supplies were going to arrive in time for them to eat. Throughout the journals, he speaks a lot about the lack of food and other supplies in the trenches. On July 10, 1917, he described soldiers who are dirty and have not changed clothes in weeks because of “some supply officer who doesn't know what the front is like or to some commander lacking foresight. Oh, how they ought to make all those in the rear come and see what it's like in the trenches”.

The memoirs, both British and French, feature similar opinions on senior officers not at the front. Many of the soldiers did not appreciate the fact that their orders were coming from those who were not experiencing the violence. In the Russian army, many soldiers deserted their posts in the trenches and simply went home. In the French army, there was a string of munitions that left large portions of the front unattended in 1917. Henri Desagneaux shows a lot of contempt for senior officials in the French army. Throughout his diary, he makes comments about the fact that those issuing the orders are not at the front and have no idea if their orders will work or simply cost more human life. Because of the blatant disregard for enlisted soldiers during the war, the senior officers could issue orders leading them to death.

There is a parallel here with the way the high commands reacted to the Christmas Truce of 1914. For the remaining years during the war, bombardments were ordered on Christmas to discourage fraternization with the enemy. This was done to make them less than human. As I mentioned before, humanizing the enemy makes them harder to kill, and the Christmas Truce humanized the enemy for both sides. This is also apparent for the high command and soldiers in the trenches. Generals and others issuing the orders stayed in the rear, away from the front lines.

If they had gone to the front, they would have humanized the men they were sending to their deaths. By not putting names and faces to them, it made it easier for the high commands to send the soldiers to walk over no man's land or engage in hand to hand combat with the enemy. If generals had been on the front lines, the soldiers would be more than just names or numbers listed on a sheet of paper after their deaths: they would have been humanized.

Because generals and senior officials were not in the trenches with the other soldiers, they did not truly understand the horrors these men went through as a result of their orders. British generals ignored the new technology and looked back to the cavalry charge, because it had been successful in 19th century wars.

If senior officers and generals had cared about the soldiers in the trenches, fewer lives would have been lost. The deliberate issuing of insane orders is the reason for the high death toll during the war. The loss of life could have been minimized greatly if the generals understood what trench warfare was like, but they did not. The generals often remain miles behind the lines in fancy houses requisitioned from the French or Belgian families that fled the area. This disparity is shown in the Bloch, Graves, and Desagneaux memoirs, as well as the movies I mentioned. To be truly effective and minimize the loss of life, the orders should have been issued from the trenches on the front lines, rather than from the rear.