

## World War One: The Great War

### Introduction

- an entry in the *Larousse Dictionary* (1875)

Humanity is perfectible and it moves incessantly from the less good to the better, from ignorance to science, from barbarism to civilization.... The idea that humanity becomes day by day better and happier is particularly dear to our own century. Faith in the law of progress is the true faith of our century.

- from Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* (1888)

Disintegration characterizes this time, and thus uncertainty: nothing stands firmly on its feet or on a hard faith in itself; one lives for tomorrow as the day after tomorrow is dubious. Everything on our way is slippery and dangerous, and the ice that supports us has become thin: all of us feel the warm uncanny breath of the thawing wind; where we will walk, soon no one will be able to walk.

The zeitgeist of the Western World shifted perceptibly during the period from the late nineteenth century to the 1930's. Throughout the second semester we have been studying literature that questions the liberal ideals we inherited from the Enlightenment which had become accepted throughout Europe after the French Revolution: reason, democracy, capitalism, progress and the centrality of the individual to society. The short stories we studied by Poe and Gogol raised questions about whether freedom indeed was the best course for all societies. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we watched in horror as liberal ideals were perverted by colonialism and racism into justifications for exploitation and mass murder.

World War One was a watershed event in European history. It inaugurated over three decades of armed struggle which wiped out a generation of young men, killed millions of civilian non-combatants, re-arranged the map of the world, opened challenges to liberal government from both the political left and right, and permanently altered our understanding of human nature. Conrad's perception that savagery lurks beneath the thin veneer of civilization was fulfilled in the horror of total war.

Centuries before, the scientific revolution had given birth to a dream of social harmony. Instead, that dream of order brought civilization to the brink of self-destruction. Advanced technology created the great capitalist powers that emerged from the industrial revolution. Patriotic nationalist movements inspired these powers to carry contests for markets to every corner of the developing world. In Europe the industrialists began an arms race that needed only a spark to erupt into open conflict. The weapons they invented were utterly new to warfare: the machine gun, barbed wire, poison gas, the submarine, the airplane. Instead of offering opportunities for a young Achilles to find honor in battle, the new technology led to the butchery of millions.

World War I began the great test of liberalism, and upon its survival hinged the fate of Western civilization. We nearly entered a new age of barbarism. And since the bleak years of total war, modern liberal society has struggled to learn from its mistakes and so safeguard its citizens from ever again having to undergo such a catastrophe.

### The Grand Illusion

In this unit we will examine how this shift in the zeitgeist of Western Civilization is reflected in the poetry of war. We will read the poems of writers who actually fought and died in the Great War. At first, these writers extolled the patriotic mission and urged young men to join up for the great adventure. They sold the idea of war to the young men as a glorious measure of character, a test of courage, duty, honor, and loyalty associated with country and class. Fighting for country and if necessary sacrificing one's life was the ultimate act of patriotic self-assertion, of manhood. War forges heroism in the crucible of action. That was the sale's pitch, and millions of young men bought it.

### **The Reality of Total War**

The War forced us to question not only these notions of heroism but also our own understanding of the nature of character itself. To crack under pressure in combat was cowardly. To retreat was the ultimate cowardice. A young man proved his good character by maintaining jaunty good humor, polite manners, and team spirit even while facing the terrible realities of a new form of warfare: the tense stalemate of trench warfare with its sleepless nights, bad food, vermin and mud, its smell of open latrines and rotting flesh. Eventually, in this new type of war, you slowly came to the realization that your own death was inevitable no matter how heroic your character. The landscape of the front line was truly surreal: weird sounds and intolerable boredom were suddenly shattered by screaming shells. It is not surprising that people went mad.

The poems we will read trace the transformation of the soldiers' attitudes about war. In so doing we will watch these brave, doomed men grope for a new vision of human nature. The heroic individualism of the Romantic age and the comforting stability of the Enlightenment's faith in reason will be shattered. In its place the writers will subject all the time honored notions of beauty that we inherited from Greece and the Renaissance to rigorous skepticism. Balance, the composition of parts to whole, idealized physical forms, universal moral truth, the beauty of language, these ideals no longer conformed to the truth. The soldier had to discover new principles that would give his sacrifice meaning and new language in which to express them. The soldiers found such meaning in each other, in personal loyalty to their fellow soldier and in a tough, unflinching vision of the truth about war.

### **The Oubreak and Progress of the War**

From [http:// www.pbs.org/greatwar/](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/)

Slide #1 German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's adage was always to be in a majority of three in any dispute among the five great European powers. His aim was to preserve Germany's peaceful ties with Russia.

Slide #2 Kaiser Wilhelm II quickly upset Bismarck's delicate balance of power. Germany, by refusing to renew its friendship with Russia, soon found itself in a minority of two. Its only European ally, was the weakest of the European powers, Austria-Hungary.

Slide #3 The tripwire that set off the century's first global conflict was Austria's declaration of war against Serbia on July 28, 1914. A war between Austria and Serbia meant a war between Austria and Russia, Serbia's traditional ally. That meant war between Russia and Germany. And that meant war between Germany and France. And that meant war between Germany and Great Britain. In a flash, the whole continent was at war.

Slide #4 The Schlieffen Plan required precision timing. In the east, the Russian army was to be held at bay. In the west, the German army would avoid France's line fortifications by sweeping west

through neutral Belgium and then turning in a huge arc south into France. The French army would be destroyed defending Paris.

Slide #5 Believing that Germany's advance into Belgium was a diversion, most of the French army moved northeast to attack Germany through the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. The first major battle on the Eastern front occurred when German forces surrounded and destroyed Alexander Samsonov's Russian army at the Battle of Tannenberg. This August 1914 engagement proved to be Germany's greatest victory of the war.

Slide #6 German plans for the Western Front soon began unraveling. As the German right flank drove deeper, it separated from the rest of the invading force. Recognizing their vulnerability, the Germans pulled up twenty-five miles short of Paris. Now, it was France's chance to attack. What followed was the Battle of the Marne where the German advance was stopped.

Slide #7 On April 24th, 1915, an amphibious force of British, French, Australian, and New Zealand troops began landing on the Turkish peninsula of Gallipoli. Their aim, to knock Germany's ally, Turkey, out of the war. Only a small Turkish force awaited them on the cliffs overlooking the shore.

Slide #8 After two years of war, the battle lines of the Western front (noted in yellow) had barely changed from the first days of stalemate. This was modern warfare. The Eastern front was a different story, where battles more resembled fluid engagements of the 19th century

Slide #9 German General Erich von Falkenhayn developed a battle plan for attacking Verdun, France, a city protected by a ring of underground forts.

Slide #10 One hundred and twenty-five miles northwest of Verdun, the British and French armies joined at the Somme river. A Franco-British offensive was planned here for 1916 to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun.

Slide #11 British General Douglas Haig often believed his army was on the verge of a breakthrough. His optimism resulted in a plan in 1917 to attack the German lines just outside of Ypres, Belgium. Breaking through, his army would sweep across the low plains and swing north to the sea. The attack was mired by mud and rain. The ambitious plan yet another failure.

Slide #12 Over four months in 1918 the German army launched five major assaults at different parts of the allied line. Initially the plan worked. The British Fifth Army collapsed. The allies gave ground. But for every allied trench captured, there was always another for the Germans to take. Soon the elite German storm troopers were a spent force. In desperation Ludendorff resorted to the old and murderous tactic of mass assault.