NO MAN'S LAND

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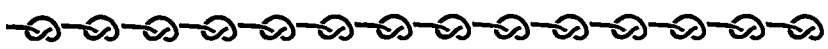
Combat & Identity in World War I



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In memory of my mother, ALICE A. LEED 1908–1972

Contents

Preface

There is much that this book is not and cannot claim to be. It is not a military history, although I have found military histories essential for assembling in my own mind the skeleton of events of World War I. Neither is it an analysis of the literature of war. Although I have used this literature extensively, I have done so to gain a purchase on experiences that lie outside the boundaries of text and narrative. And, finally, this book is not a psychohistory of the First World War. Its subject – the transformation of personality in war – would seem to fall within the concerns and competencies of psychohistory, but, as I have tried to show in the first chapter, transformations of character that appear highly subjective are often drawn from age-old conventions and traditional symbols. Thus my concern in this book is not with psychohistory per se but with the cultural repertoires of meaning drawn upon by participants to define felt alterations in themselves. The "self" appears in this investigation not as the ultimate goal of analysis but as one of those supremely important fictions used by participants to define the nature of their experience.

I have written this book as an analysis of a coherent, unified, historical experience, the aim being to isolate and define the way in which an historical event of the first magnitude contributed to the character and definition of modernity. The war contributed

to the character of the age by altering the status, expectations, and character of participants. I must admit that even now – after a great deal of time spent in reading about the war, thinking about it, and occasionally dreaming about it – I still believe that the war cannot hold one's interest for very long unless one is an aficionado of military things or a member of the war generation. As a purely military event the war is of strictly limited interest. But it gains an overwhelming fascination when one looks at it in order to see how it mobilized, articulated, and modified the resources of signification available to the individuals who entered its bewildering and terrifying reality. The war experience is an ultimate confirmation of the power of men to ascribe meaning and pattern to a world, even when that world seemed to resist all patterning. The war mobilized all the cultural resources of meaning available to Europeans in the first decades of the twentieth century. It allows us to see what those resources were, not as an abstract system of thought but as something which rendered experience coherent and meaningful.

The narrowest subject of this book is the way the war changed the men who participated in it. This focus has led me to lean most heavily on the most self-conscious and introspective testimony and to prefer an intensive treatment of a few combatants to a broader analysis of the war literature. I cannot, thus, claim extensive coverage of the literature of the war. Most of my examples are drawn from German materials, although I have used British, American, and French works – as well as materials drawn from other wars – as a source of counterpoint and comparison. Because, in the last analysis, it is difficult for any history of the war to "prove" that the events of battle changed the character of participants, I have attempted to surround the transformations of war with models and insights drawn from a wide variety of fields other than history, particularly social anthropology, sociology, and psychology. At times I have preferred the strategy of "boxing in" the phenomenon of the transformation of character by events, rather than attacking this phenomenon directly. It is this strategy of circumvention which, more than anything else, has evolved into the structure and purpose of this study: to provide a cultural history of the First World War *through* men who participated in it, by retracing their dis-

coveries and reversals that – in the more distant past – would be the subject of tragic drama rather than historical analysis.

The discussion follows the very simple but well-tested form of beginning, middle, and end. In my analysis of the beginning of the war, I have been primarily concerned with defining the ways in which the war was envisioned as a solution to basic cultural contradictions. In examining the middle, the war experience itself, I have been particularly attentive to the forms in which these contradictions reappeared in altered guise, through unexpected realities, and to the fantasies, myths, and psychological pathologies necessitated by the realities of war. But with the ending of the war the pattern of discussion breaks down, for the cessation of hostilities did not mean the end of the war experience but rather the beginning of a process in which that experience was framed, institutionalized, given ideological content, and relived in political action as well as fiction. The final chapter cannot be a conclusion. It is rather an attempt to explain why the war experience was something which could *not* be resolved, reintegrated, and covered over with the exigencies of civilian existence.

This study began some time ago in a somewhat inchoate desire to anchor the stuff of intellectual history in the ineluctable reality of historical events. I am grateful to the many people who furthered the process of coming to earth, people who taught me the difference between writing history and studying it, between the sayable and the thinkable. First and above all I am thankful to Lavina Leed who has edited, criticized, and struggled with this manuscript, often at the expense of her own work. The manuscript has gained life and clarity where it was most needed from her critical intelligence and powers of organization. Sidney Monas, of the University of Texas, from the very beginning has contributed enormously of his time, his sensitivity, and his eye for the complexity of human motives. I am also relieved to finally have the chance to thank Hayden White, of Wesleyan University, for his support and intellectual generosity. My colleagues in the History Department at Florida International University have been unfailingly supportive of this project. I have benefitted greatly from Brian Peterson's extensive knowledge of German history and from Howard Kaminsky's criticism

of this book when it was in a critical phase. Much of what is most valuable in this book emerged originally from conversations with Roger Abrahams, of the University of Texas, and with Phin Capron, who have both acquainted me with a world of material I did not know existed. I am very grateful to them.

E. J. L.