

Modern War and Aesthetic Mobilisation: Looking at Europe in 1914

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ABSTRACT

*This article considers how mobilisation inflected European aesthetic contexts in the opening months of the First World War. It traces how, in 1914, urban and rural landscapes altered to accommodate mass armies, and how the visual experience of the war helped to develop broader cultural and political narratives about the need for collective resolve and total commitment to national and Allied efforts. Drawing on literary and epistolary sources, as well as photographs that captured the theatrical and the mundane realities of European cities, frontiers and hinterlands, the article examines how public and private tensions implicit in a war that was both fantastical and deeply problematic for many participants and observers played out when the war was in its infancy. In so doing it also locates the opening months of the war in broader discussions about the appetite for escalating violence: what Susan Sontag describes in *Regarding the Pain of Others* as making the 'spectacular not spectacular' through depictions of twentieth-century war.¹*

Introduction

In 1914 the European concept of mobilisation outside of the conventional movement of armies and navies was not fixed, and lacked a definite plan of action, timetable or theoretical context. The notion of the 'home front' was a nebulous one, although after the war it provided a convenient mechanism for creating hierarchies of experience. Governments increasingly understood that mobilisation depended first and foremost on people, people who required different narratives explaining their particular relationship to the war if it were to be waged successfully. Simultaneously the citizens on whom the collective war effort depended generated their own particular narrative tropes – written and visual – reflecting and reaffirming their

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (London; Penguin, 2003), p. 71.

existing relationship to the pre-war conceptions of the military,² communal infrastructures, political orientations,³ aesthetic preferences and direct class and cultural experiences.

This was particularly the case in 1914 when the war was not yet omnipresent and fully established as a day-to-day strand of national life, or as a source of continuous anxiety to those responsible for its pursuit, for the men and women who fought, and for their families. Away from the fighting, aesthetic interventions – from paintings to pageants to decorated storefronts to everyday tokens of battle – helped to make the war both real and comprehensible (See **Image 1** below). More than this, they offered visual expressions of the moral and cultural frameworks that allowed individuals to feel that their place in society at war was defined and secure, part of a larger narrative of collective advancement and effort. Drawing on a variety of visual, epistolary and literary sources, this article considers a broad view of the ways in which political, social, cultural and art historians have advanced arguments about the aesthetic context which evolved and informed personal experiences of the First World War, and which continues to influence our understanding of the conflict and, to an extent, modern war in Europe to this day.

² See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Raymond Poincaré (1860-1934), président de la République française, passant les troupes en revue, Saint-Pétersbourg (Russie), 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/1OsQj3O> (accessed 13 June 2015). This is one of numerous examples of martial spectacles – designed to impress fellow citizens, allies and enemies alike – existing from the period immediately anticipating the outbreak of the First World War.

³ See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Manifestation austro-hongroise. Berlin (Allemagne), July 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/119HdAx> (accessed 13 June 2015). This photograph, also by Branger, shows a demonstration of Austro-Hungarians in Berlin in July 1914.

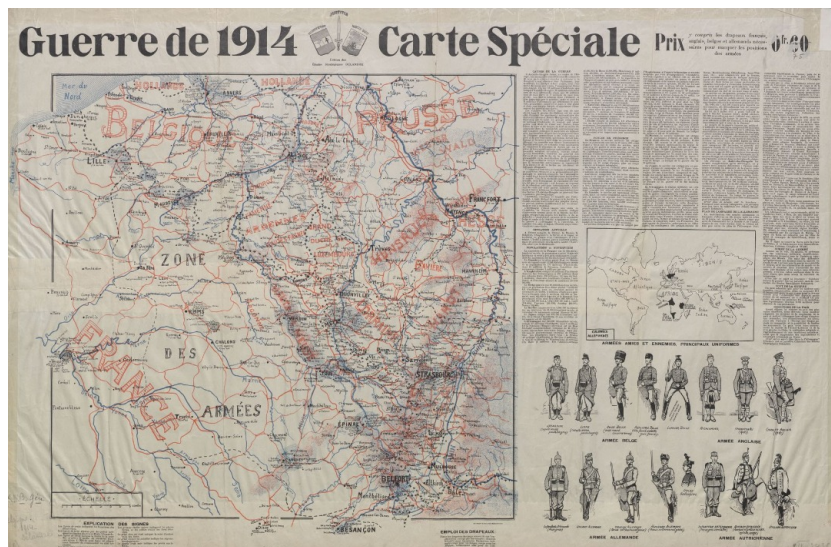


Image 1: A literal example of attempts to narrate and hence make the war more comprehensible to participants and observers alike can be found in this illustrative map – one of many – produced in the opening stages of the war. ‘Guerre de 1914 carte spéciale’, Edition des études stratégiques Delandre; Imp. Bouchy & Cie, Royal Library of Belgium: <http://uurl.kbr.be/1009510> (accessed 16 June 2015).

Participants and Observers

Even for the most directly implicated citizens across the mobilisation spectrum – that is, front line military personnel – contemplation of the war within the emerging national narratives helped to make it attractive and endurable. Excepting moments when these men found themselves in the midst of active and, in the case of the opening months, intensely mobile battles, there were always moments and even sustained periods where the balance between active and passive engagement with the conflict shifted (see **Image 2** below). It was in these moments that contemplation of the aesthetic systems sustaining the war might begin for soldiers who became their most privileged observers, contributors and consumers.



Image 2: Note the relative informality, the sense of slight unease and/or anticipation, and the mix of uniforms found in this image of soldiers in a small town gathering together. 'Ukraines Hetman, General Skoropadski, forklarar det ukrainske Infanteris Udrustning for Generaloberst Grev Kirchbach, Ukraine', 4868: 1914-1918. National Library of Denmark: <http://bit.ly/1URAojp> (accessed 12 June 2015).

At the edges of the battle zones, in the moments and spaces between the war's early and incredibly bloody confrontations, men still slipped into civilian identities and looked to make sense of the war in civilian contexts. They wrote and read letters, newspapers, magazines and books, they went to music halls and to the theatre, they perused advertisements aimed at men in uniform and their families, and they traded in the war's material accessories and paraphernalia. They laughed at jokes about the war, sang popular songs, played sport and games, explored the places and peoples wherever they were based or were on leave. Their identity within the war might be fixed, but their experience of it could be extremely fluid.

This was also the case for the men, women and children who stayed at home in the cities and towns, villages and hamlets across Europe. The richness and variety of visual reminders of the war available on mobilised home fronts must have been striking; mobilised society could be spectacular to behold, and there existed so many ways of engaging with it. Yet some of these men, women and children were not safe

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in mobilised cities. They encountered uniformed men intoxicated by their first exposures to violence and became refugees. These citizens shifted roles in the emerging collective narrative and in turn related it back – directly or through intermediate media – to their civilian counterparts at safe distance. As much as the men visually transformed by uniforms and their unique and privileged experiential solidarity, these refugees became aesthetic icons of the early war, replete with all of the moral outrage of civilised society.

As populations and communities came under direct attack, and others worried that they were next, the role of the viewer or observer, both at home and at the front, was elevated. Men, women and children became witnesses, each accumulating and curating their particular store of objects, images and experiences. Just as *The Times* articulated its chronicle ‘History of the War’ almost from the opening shots, no one seemed in any doubt that something had shifted, and that they were witnessing and indeed contributing to history, even if in 1914 the full nature of the anticipated epic – modern and brutal as it became – was not yet realised.

Particular and Universal Aesthetics

The aesthetic lexicons of mechanised violence, weariness, horror and despair that developed and were refined as the war dragged on and then petered out in to the turbulence and violence of the interwar years would not have resonated in 1914. The language of mobilisation and its reinforcing imagery did not revel in force but in the beauty of mobilised collective will manifest in the altered visual landscape. Romance persisted: Richard Wagner’s direct influence on, in particular but not limited to, the German interpretation of how art, history and contemporary life interact to elevate the ‘essence of existence’ has often been noted: the competition between *Kultur* and civilization that emerged in 1914 and continued throughout the war raised the stakes of how the combatant populations understood their role in the drama.⁴ The glory was not in technology and death, as the Futurists would later have it, but in the everyday, reinforcing spectacle of what did, on its surface at least, in every mobilizing nation come to feel like a common and inclusive cause. The art and literature that emerged and became popular in the opening months of the war succeeded because it was an abstraction, or as Samuel Hynes puts it, provided ‘an allegory about *ideas* of war’.⁵

This suited the nature of exchange between the fronts and home fronts in 1914. Although the might of modern European media, much more developed and prepared

⁴ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London: Black Swan, 1990), p. 118.

⁵ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War in English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 42.

to capture the war for posterity than at any time in the past, was poised and ready to convey to rapt publics the war's truths and meanings, very little specific information emerged from official channels to fill out the details of the conflict. Hence individual experience and impression took precedence, even if this was then reinterpreted and categorised to meet cultural expectations about the nature of war.

The allegorical approach to conveying a conflict that must have felt foggy, confused and horribly chaotic to direct participants and spectators alike appealed to many for a number of reasons. As historians have argued, popular enthusiasm did not drive governments towards their declarations of war. Support for the conflict coalesced in August 1914, and continued to build even as the extremely high costs of the opening months came to be understood.⁶ Popular acceptance and ultimate endorsement balanced emotions of sorrow and anger. The rapidity of the shift from ambivalence to outright hatred of the enemy exhibited by many should not be underestimated in assessing the war's early aesthetic context because of the widely accepted notion – in all combatant nations – that the war had been forced upon them.⁷

Art and literature associated with mobilisation in 1914 stressed continuities and presented parables of personal and collective cultural morality. Its heroes could be enraged, righteous, ardent, plucky or sanguine, depending on the demands of a given audience. Certain common tropes prevailed. While the internationally recognised ideal of the Roman and Greek hero in the opening months may be more accurately described as appealing to a particular class of European society, the aesthetic was part of the common culture, made accessible through public sculpture and the casts that filled the vitrines and galleries of museums as well as through the poems celebrating war as the ultimate fulfilment of the citizen ideal.⁸ The medieval aesthetic register, with its chivalric knights, appeared in numerous popular and highbrow guises, provided an appealingly adolescent device to explain what was a very confused and changeable military situation. Picking up on the medieval strain, Herbert Asquith's

⁶ James J Sheehan, *Where Have all the Soldiers Gone?* (New York: Mariner, 2008), p. 59.

⁷ Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 38.

⁸ From the late 17th century casts and copies were regularly displayed in, for example, the French Academy in Rome, the gardens of Versailles, the Hague Academy as well as academies in Germany, Sweden and Poland. England engaged in the trade slightly later than its Continental counterparts (the Royal Academy was founded by George III in 1768): 'The most interesting developments in early eighteenth-century England were due more to private enterprise than to public patronage.' Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1700* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 79.

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'The Volunteer' provides a critique of the dreary modern urban existence with its 'clerk who half his life had spent / Toiling at ledgers in a city grey.' Now this man in the crowd has the opportunity to fulfil a boyhood fantasy of heroic achievement and contribute a new chapter to national mythology:

And now those waiting dreams are satisfied;
From twilight to the halls of dawn he went;
His lance is broken; but he lies content
With that high hour, in which he lived and died.
And falling thus he wants no recompense,
Who found his battle in the last resort;
Nor need he any hearse to bear him hence,
Who goes to join the men of Agincourt.⁹

Even in an extraordinarily volatile Ireland, inclusivity – and a targeting of any and all possible proponents of mobilisation – helped to distract many and redirect efforts away from more difficult questions about the relationship between Ireland and the Empire. Centres of education played a particularly important role in this context, and a specific literature was quickly produced to help to convince the youngest members of society of their important role in mobilisation. One of the earliest was Elizabeth O'Neill's *The War, 1914: A History and an Explanation for Boys and Girls*.¹⁰ Published in the autumn of 1914, it presented the conflict as a 'chivalric struggle against the forces of evil'; similar leaflets were also produced on behalf of organisations like the Victoria League, and children were encouraged to take these home to read to their parents.¹¹ In such a way even the youngest Europeans contributed to the process of aesthetic mobilisation.

In all nations there was pressure for visual manifestations and representations – visceral as well as fixed in collected media – to be both 'of the moment' and 'timeless', reflecting the strength of the nation or empire as well as long-embraced notions of solidity, wealth and continuity. Writing about the journalistic and artistic visions of the European soldier that built up around the Battles of Magenta and Solferino, which offered an extraordinarily violent yet appealingly brief precedent for more hopeful witnesses to European mobilisation and the initial battles of the Great

⁹ Herbert Asquith, 'The Volunteers', in Jon Stallworthy (ed), *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 163.

¹⁰ Elizabeth O'Neill, *The War, 1914: A History and an Explanation for Boys and Girls* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1914).

¹¹ Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 63-4.

War, Jonathan Marwill observes that cultural assumptions underpinning visual expectations about war were distinctly celebratory:

In an era when many people could remember Napoleon I, soldiers dressed up in expensive finery to go out and kill each other, and a journalist could write that nothing made a man seem more like a general than an empty sleeve, war had acquired a distinctly theatrical quality.¹²

It also relied on a tacit relationship between the dramatizer (journalist, artists) and the consumer: both accepted a level of imaginative license if the aesthetic trope affirmed expectations about the value of sacrifice for the national community.¹³



Image 3: 'L'entrée des Allemands à Paris, Septembre 1914', Vve Hayard L. NIM23828: Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg: <http://bit.ly/1PvFZYI> (accessed 10 July 2015)

Yet universally recognised idealisations of the heroic implying collective endorsement or a universalised sentiment was itself a tenuous abstraction. Of course, just because people choose to join a crowd, or sing a song – and are captured doing so in a

¹² Jonathan Marwill, *Visiting Modern War in Risorgimento Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 99.

¹³ See Herman-Paul, 'Le départ pour le Front jeune femme fleurissant le fusil d'un soldat partant pour le Front durant la guerre 1914-1918'. 1914-15. Royal Library of Belgium: <http://uurl.kbr.be/1015309> (accessed 16 June 2015) and **Image 3** above. Note both the modern aesthetics and the historical continuities, illustrating the cult of the *poilu* and the dream of the Revolutionary spirit reborn in 1914, captured in these two images of French soldiers and civilians.

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photograph – does not mean that they endorsed a traditional understanding of the soldier as the manifestation of collective values focused on property, wealth and glory. There were significant gradations across the spectrum of those who endorsed the aesthetics of mobilisation and patriotism in 1914. European Labour activists who might have shunned elite symbols of military valour volunteered in 1914 as the working classes responded – sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes out of a sense of duty, solidarity and camaraderie – and their enlistments were approvingly recorded in local and national union publications. Solidarity as much as patriotism came to be viewed as the clarion virtue, and those who avoided enlisting or took unofficial industrial action came to be viewed as ‘shirkers or slackers, failing to pull their weight in their nation’s hour of need’.¹⁴ Across Europe the image of the common soldier as father, lover and consumer (of drink and cigarettes in particular) multiplied.¹⁵ So the rag-tag *poilu* – who eventually became a cult figure in mobilised France, owing in no small part to the impressive performance of the reserves as well as the new recruits exemplifying the nation in arms at the Battle of the Marne¹⁶ – and drab Tommy assumed their places in the aesthetic register of mobilised citizenry alongside ascetic Grecian and Roman heroes, shining knights revelling in medieval glory, and fantastically clad Imperial soldiers of the Romantic period.

The Spectacular City

The closing pages of Joseph Roth’s *The Radetzky March*, a historical novel of fathers and sons whose decline parallels that of the Austro-Hungarian empire contains an evocative description of the opening moments of the First World War in a small town near what is now Ukraine.

Suddenly all of the bells in town began to toll. The wayfarers paused for a moment, listened, and then strode on. Trotta stopped one of the last to ask why the bells were tolling.

“It’s because of the war,” the man replied without looking up...

¹⁴ David Swift, ‘Labour Patriotism in Lancashire and London, 1914-1918’, in Nick Mansfield and Craig Horner (eds), *The Great War: Localities and Regional Identities*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), pp. 137-52, p. 142.

¹⁵ James Aulich, ‘Graphic Arts and Advertising as War Propaganda’ in Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer and Bill Nasson (eds.), ‘1914-1918-Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War’ (Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08), DOI: <http://bit.ly/1OsUTz5> (accessed 20 June 2015).

¹⁶ John Horne, ‘Myth or Model? The French Revolution in the Great War’, Lecture, Institute Francais, London, 14 January 2015.

The bells tolled endlessly. Now the customs barriers came. The sentry with the wooden leg stood outside his booth, surrounded by people: a radiant black-and-yellow poster hung on the door. The first few words, black on yellow, could be read even from far away. Like heavy beams they loomed over the heads of the assembled onlookers: TO MY PEOPLES!

Roth goes on to describe the diversity of the Kaiser's 'PEOPLES' as they, momentarily at least, come together to contemplate their collective and individual futures under the canopy of mobilisation:

Peasants in short odorous sheepskins, Jews in fluttering black-and-green gabardines, Swabian farmers from the German colonies wearing green loden coats, Polish burghers, merchants, craftsman, and government officials surrounded the customs officer's booth.

The communication of the explicate message has been considered and, despite the plurality of languages (and the fact that some of the would-be conscripts cannot read) everything, from the bold colours of the letters and the reinforcing sounds generated by the crowds and public buildings affirms the historical importance of the moment:

On each of the four bare walls a huge poster was pasted, each in a different tongue and starting with the Kaiser's salutation: TO MY PEOPLES! Those who were literate read the text aloud. Their voices mingled with the booming chant of the bells. Some onlookers went from wall to wall, reading the texts in each language. Whenever one bell died out, another instantly started booming. Throngs poured from the little town, surging into the broad street that led to the railroad station. Trotta walked toward them in town.¹⁷

The city, town or village – and as Jean Louis Robert and Jay Winter have shown, in its most realised iteration the European capital¹⁸ – at war resonated on a practical and a theoretical level as nations began to draw in and take stock of their accumulated resources. The sense to which the mobilisation process lifted people out of the struggles of remote everyday existence was felt and to an extent enjoyed across Europe. Although conceptualised and explained through a variety of aesthetic metaphors, all combatant nations relied on the articulation of a common cultural inheritance to make sense of a confusing political moment. Hence the emphasis on

¹⁷ Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 313-4.

¹⁸ See in particular Volumes I and II, Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 & 2012).

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physical spaces providing natural meeting points, as much as the metaphysical communion of patriotic soldiers and civilians.



Image 4: 'Deutsche Flieger und deutsche Bomben über Paris, 30. August 1914'. 14.4 Bildpostkarten: Universität Osnabrück: <http://bit.ly/1OsT5WG> (accessed 15 July 2015).

Cities, with their rail stations and common thoroughfares, were traditional points of collection. The spectacle of crowds expressing approval as opposed to hostility for the state garnered cross-party and class appeal and should not be underestimated both in the relief and the encouragement it offered to those deciding how to engage with the war. Many of the images of regional celebrations that have survived from the opening months of the war are reminiscent of town or village fetes and the celebrations accompanying a saint's day, but in this instance writ large and imbued with the fate of nations and of peoples striving together in a collective progress. The capital cities, where the public spaces and institutions naturally lent themselves to this form of celebration, put on the most imposing performances but these were certainly not limited to London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Brussels, Belgrade and St. Petersburg.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Défense de Paris. Entrainement des Territoriaux sur l'esplanade des Invalides. Paris, 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/1Q02Yhl> (accessed 13 June 2015); 'Travaux de défense du camp retranché de Paris. Porte Maillot, 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/1OsSd4m> (accessed 14 June 2015); and **Image 4** above. These photographs and illustrations depict the ways in which the war imposed itself on quotidian urban landscapes (in this instance Paris) but also how the imagined www.bjmh.org.uk

Urbanisation in the 19th century meant that the 'traditional dispersion of the imagery was thus countered by the new principle of the concentration of the audience' in theatres, music halls, schools, around newspapers, radios and then cinemas.²⁰ In the larger cities, modern department stores 'traded in spectacle' that was replicated in storefronts in towns and villages, offering 'a certain theatricality through their visuality'.²¹ The democratisation of civic life in Europe, although hardly perfected, aided mobilisation, allowing for permutations of public display. Storefronts were crowded with patriotic colours and goods, churches were covered in flowers, flags fluttered from public halls and along common thoroughfares.²² As Adrian Gregory has observed, rail stations in Europe in particular had become 'works of art, the cathedrals of the nineteenth century' even as they extended the 'control of the capitals over the provinces' by regulating time, and serving as 'places of transition, arrival, and departure, for shedding social roles and adopting new ones'.²³

Railway stations provided a space that condensed both the spectacular and the human experience of mobilisation:

Here was the interface with the war itself: mobilisation and demobilisation, the arrival and departure of refugees, soldiers on leave and the wounded and also the more subtle questions of re-definitions of boundaries, artistic and political, which centred on the stations.²⁴

destruction of the iconic capital landscape served as an illustrative – and presumably a motivational tool – for the enemy (in this instance, Germany).

²⁰ Ulrich Keller, *The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 58.

²¹ Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 21.

²² See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Le café allemand Salamander saccagé par la foule, Paris, Août 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/1Q7UW7X> (accessed 13 June 2015). The spectacle of the street extended the war beyond the frontlines. This photograph reveals how anger against the perceived enemy could manifest itself at home as well as on the battlefield.

²³ See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Permissionnaires rejoignant leur garnison. Paris, juillet 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/2024pRc> (accessed 14 June 2015); 'Gruppenbildnis leitender Damen der Wiener Gesellschaft auf dem Nordbahnhof, Vienna, 1914. Bildarchiv Austria: <http://bit.ly/1RPk9E7> (accessed 17 June 2015); and **Image 5** below. This series of images shows the rail stations as points of collection and natural places for people to pause and mark the moment of transition from war to peace for men and women, as well as areas of often chaotic and poignant farewells.

²⁴ Adrian Gregory, 'Railway Stations: Gateways and Termini', in Winter and Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War Volume 1*, pp. 23-56, p 24.

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Image 5: 'Partenza di truppe per la Guerra, Vienna'. Stabilimento tipo-litografico: 1915-21. Biblioteca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea: <http://bit.ly/1OR44gd> (accessed 17 June 2015).

Grand or homely, on the streets and around such points of trade and transition, the aesthetics of war played out on a grand and appealing scale.

Capitals and urban centres across Europe might share some common characteristics, but they did not have a ubiquitous meaning in comparative national contexts. That is, the Imperial capital of Vienna represented something different to subjects in Roth's far-flung Eastern outpost than Berlin did to a Bavarian farmer. The level of connection depended on the political relationship, not to mention levels of education and ethnic diversity. Jon Lawrence has argued that, although Berlin 'could never stand unproblematically for a nation that was still predominantly rural, the patriotic urban crowd did acquire a new centrality to the iconography of the nation'. Yet the image of the crowd remained weighted with political expectations in 1914, positive and negative depending on where one sat on the political spectrum. As a result, a German version of the *union sacrée* was not expounded by the Social Democratic press – who preferred 'an older, more limited concept: that of the *Burgfrieden* – a medieval concept denoting a temporary truce between warring factions in a city under siege.'²⁵ In different ways a similar version of this truce between fractious communities and classes at least appeared momentarily achievable in 1914 as the drawing of enemy lines simplified the European picture: whichever side you were on, now it was 'us' versus 'them' and, in many manifestations, right versus wrong.

²⁵ Jon Lawrence, 'Public Space, Political Space', in Winter and Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War Volume II*, pp., 280-312, p. 284.

The 'party truce' in Britain initially appeared to be more tenuous or, at least, less glamorous.²⁶ The unification principle could hardly have achieved the dynamism or drama in the quiet village shires or indeed in London that it reached for a soldier or civilian in a Paris with the might of the German Army bearing down and refugees daily pouring in with tales of violation and material destruction. Given that the initial impetus for British engagement was interventionist as opposed to immediately defensive, the emphasis on creating a common context and aesthetic system was potentially more pressing. In the opening months of the war invasion was at least considered plausible by many, and hence the language of island sanctity made an appearance. However, as events played out, the swift appeal of the political and cultural truce, engendered by the 'defence of Belgium' and ultimately the declaration of war and mobilisation, meant that the objecting peace movement was taken by surprise and 'never succeeded in getting its message across'.²⁷ The lure of the truce and the sentimental appeal of the nation, city, town or village unified in a common cause prevailed.

Vera Brittain, a young middle class woman from a small English town excited by the prospect of war, recorded her reaction following a visit to the capital in September 1914:

London, though it seems empty & not very busy, was a most inspiring sight with all its flags – British, French, Belgian, Russian, & Japanese...the sight of all the flags waving together on the same flag post makes me occasionally feel cold with excitement.²⁸

For Brittain, who was training to become a nurse while chronicling family quarrels about whether or not her brother would enlist (he wanted to, but their father was fully against it),²⁹ London affirmed that the Entente represented a community of right-thinking nations united. Her moral and aesthetic context for mobilisation was fully positive:

To be afflicted & to endure, & to help others to courage by one's endurance, is a far greater destiny than to enjoy never-ending satisfaction or complacent

²⁶ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, p. 75.

²⁷ Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?*, p. 63.

²⁸ Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth: Great War Diaries 1913-1917*, Alan Bishop, (ed.) (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 16 September 1914, p. 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 September 1914, p. 94.

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supremacy, rousing others to irritation & envy, but never inspiring nobility or moving the better instincts of human nature.³⁰

With Britain as with others, it was a feature of 1914 to anticipate suffering but to elevate endurance in the name of 'nobility'. From reading letters and diaries from the war's early stages, one gets the sense that even those who expressed ambivalence about the conflict and the diffuse aesthetic effort deployed as part of a campaign to ensure individual mobilisation understood the appeal of values publically rehearsed: the visual symbols and public spaces that drew a path in the ground and directed people to where they needed to go. In this way aesthetic mobilisation reinforced the demands of wartime logistics.

Scale was an important factor informing the aesthetics of mobilisation, as was variety. The sheer numbers of people on the street impressed, as did the site of so many uniforms. Catriona Pennell has charted the speed of the expansion of the army and navy which contributed to the thrill of mobilisation as well as to the sense of an Empire united. By mid-August the streets of Dublin were 'swarming with soldiers...The populations of small towns and villages, unaccustomed to large numbers of people, mushroomed as men were put up across the United Kingdom.' Tring, a small market town in Hertfordshire found itself accommodating 1,600 men, with another thousand or so in nearby villages, while the population of Stock in Essex increased from 1,000 to 2,000 when the 7th Battalion Warwickshire Regiment arrived at the end of August.³¹ These men moved about, animating their uniforms: they made noise, possessed different accents, and were accompanied by jaunty military bands playing wartime songs, and trailed children mimicking the marching steps of the soldiers to the beat of military bands. They might also be about to be killed or horribly maimed; they were simultaneously poignant and enlivening figures wherever they were observed.³²

Stephan Zweig, who was in Le Coq near Ostend³³ when war was declared, recalled the incongruity of mobilisation in a holiday town:

³⁰ Ibid., 5 September 1914, pp. 97-8.

³¹ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, pp. 207-8.

³² See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Soldats écossais à Paris, 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/119ODUu> (accessed 13 June 2015). This photograph captures informal exchanges between Scottish soldiers and Parisian civilians.

³³ See 'Une vue du bord de la mer à Ostend', Agence Rol, 28 August 1914. Bibliothèque Nationale de France: <http://bit.ly/1SKc9wj> (accessed 14 June 2015); **Image 6**, below; and 'Et saakaldt "Granat-Krater" foran Porten til Kathedralen i Ostende', 777/250: 1914-1918. National Library of Denmark: <http://bit.ly/1RPu5O4> (accessed 12 June 2015). This series of images shows the evolution of Ostend from a

The seaside visitors were still bathing, the hotels were still full, there was still a crowd of smiling, talking summer visitors on the promenade. But for the first time a new note had been struck. Suddenly there were Belgian soldiers in uniform around the place, a sight never usually seen on the beach. By a strange caprice of the Belgian army, its machine guns were transported on little carts with dogs harnessed to them.³⁴



Image 6: 'Tyske Soldater efter Badning ved Ostendes bekendte Strand', 4895: 1914-1918. National Library of Denmark:
<http://bit.ly/1ORaNXM>
(accessed 12 June 2015)

Rupert Brooke described the various aesthetic registers available to the war's urban audience in London at a particular moment as the nature of the war shifted:

I've just been to a music-hall. I feed with Eddie every night from 9 to 10. Then he goes back to the Admiralty. Tonight I turned into the Coliseum. It was pretty full. Miss Cecilia Loftus was imitating somebody I saw infinite years ago – Elsie Janis – in her imitation of a prehistoric figure called Frank Tinney. God! How far away it all seemed. Then Alfred Lester. Then a dreadful cinematography reproduction of hand-drawing patriotic things – Harry Furniss it was – funny pictures of a soldier and a sailor (at the time, I suppose, dying in Belgium); a caricature of the Kaiser, greeted with a few perfunctory faint hisses. Nearly everyone sat silent. Then a scribbled message was shown; 'War declared with Austria. 11.9.' There was a volley of quick low handclapping –

European holiday destination to a city poised on the brink of battle to, finally, the effects of that battle on the town.

³⁴ Stephan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Pushkin Press, 2009), pp. 242-3.

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more a signal of recognition than anything else. Then we dispersed into Trafalgar Square, and bought midnight war editions, special.

Despite the jumbled experience, Brooke was touched by the communal nature of what he experienced as the crowd exited together into the new reality: 'All these days I have not been so near tears. There was such tragedy, and such dignity, in the people.'³⁵

Cities supported amused, quotidian, visceral *and* contemplative responses to the war.³⁶ Interpreters and amplifiers of the conflict, from newspapers to posters, required everything from glancing to intense, directed reading for their meaning to become clear. Some ambiguities heightened the sense of both implied and explicit violence, in particular representations of 'German atrocities' in Belgium and Northern France where the 'vocabulary and imagery...available to make sense of it was by definition unmatched to the task'.³⁷ For all the resonance of the war image – perhaps the most famous being Alfred Leete's 'Britons (Lord Kitchener) Wants You', created in 1914 and adapted many times, most successfully by James Montgomery Flagg for the US Army in 1917 – in 1914, words and more specifically descriptive narratives and appeals still compelled. Local recruiting posters relied on coercive language, with particular words and phrases reinforced by scaled typefaces. A recruiting poster for the 7th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, created in August 1914 asked, in bold: 'Will you Come Forward?' and, in smallest type, wondered '...Or must Recruits be obtained outside the County?' Happily, the poster concluded in larger, reassuring lettering: 'We are confident you will help to uphold the honour of the County of Sussex.'³⁸ This poster reflected, linguistically and in terms of typographic design, the methods of the local recruiting meetings with their dramatic questions-and-answer appeals and the pressure on men to attest, and their reliance on community pressure.³⁹ In 1914, each of these examples formed pieces of an aesthetic system feeding in to collective and individual mobilisations across Europe

³⁵ Rupert Brooke to Catherine Nesbitt, 12 August 1914, Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 607.

³⁶ See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Entrée de métro gardée par un fusilier marin, Paris, Août 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/202eEor> (accessed 13 June 2015). A photograph of an entrance to the metro, another logistical focal point for a mobilised Paris, captures how the war revealed itself in the everyday.

³⁷ John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 224.

³⁸ West Sussex Record Office. RSR MS 7/5, Recruitment Poster for the 7th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, August 1914.

³⁹ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, p. 75. See also Coulson Kernahan, *Experiences of a Recruiting Officer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915).

and imperial networks.

The recounted glamour and drama of the embattled community expressed through the spectacle of the city from which the national effort radiated, and around which clustered its myriad resources, was a particular feature of aesthetic mobilisation in 1914. Across the Atlantic in neutral New York City, the press depended on the imaginative capacity of its readership to relate to the unfolding spectacle and to the transformation of the city into the centre of war production and collective investment into the war effort on a variety of levels. Indeed the escalation of the political crisis from ultimatums and secret talks into military and cultural mobilisation were presented as ‘an exotic adventure to intrigue’ to fellow urban readers during the summer months, even as the human costs were presented as ‘an unfolding tragedy.’⁴⁰

The Hinterlands

Individuals always had options, depending on the moment, when it came to engaging with different iterations of aesthetic mobilisation. In his chapter examining the pastoral strain common to many poems written by soldiers, Keith Grieves argues that nationally orientated narratives in official publications published after the Great War ‘vanquished nuanced attitudes and overlapping dispositions in debates on patriotism, especially when originating in less abstracted sensory perceptions of place’.⁴¹ This was the case during the war as well, as from its very beginning the various estates – and in particular the press and government – began to construct these ‘national narratives’, even as men and women made sense of the historic situation from their particular perspectives and experiences. Even those individuals who made the ultimate commitment and enlisted to fight still had available to them a ‘civilianised’ vision of their military identity because they believed themselves to be only ‘temporary soldiers’ (see **Image 7** below).⁴²

Mobilisation was a graded and subtle process, nowhere more so than in regions and countries where the political commitment to war took longer to resolve itself. In the Netherlands, Conny Kristel argues that the calm ‘Dutch self-image’, along with the ‘mental preparation’ required in a country where the war was only deemed justifiable

⁴⁰ Ross J. Wilson, *New York and the First World War: Shaping an American City* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 45.

⁴¹ Keith Grieves, ‘The Propinquity of Place: Home, Landscape and Soldier Poets of the First World War’ in Jessica Meyer (ed.), *British Popular Culture in the First World War* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 21-46, p. 30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

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if its own national boundaries were breached, led to a period of 'tense waiting' that could not resolve itself in an 'excess of exuberance'.⁴³



Image 7: This photograph illustrates the sense of fluid martial and civilian identities. 'Forsøgshave for Ungdommen, anlagt med Understøttelse af Byen Berlin', 4463: 1914-1918. National Library of Denmark: <http://bit.ly/1J54Q97> (accessed 12 June 2015)

The process of mobilisation of a would-be ally, poised on the edge of engagement, was equally complex. The Italian experience was made even more compelling given the dispersed and intensely local nature of Italian society and culture. In his study of the Sicilian province of Catania, Sean Brady observes that the economic crises that emerged in the region in the opening months of the war produced political and culture tensions that helped to make the case for engagement. In making the argument, newspapers and political leaders 'self-consciously referred back to events taking place in other countries when contemplating their own situation'. Hence the stirring depictions of the French *union sacrée* offered an attractive outlet for the regional crisis and a model of national unity even as the 'economic crisis and reports of atrocities' became linked to 'the dual effects of Teutonic feudalism and militarism'.⁴⁴ The appeal of the emerging aesthetic systems – the head-on collision of 'civilisation' vs. 'Kultur' – of the requisite combatants actively competed for supporters in these hinterlands.

⁴³ Conny Kristel, "'A Wonderful Something': The Netherlands and the War in 1914" in James Kitchen, Alisa Miller and Laura Rowe (eds.), *Other Combatants, Other Fronts: Competing Histories of the First World War* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), pp. 79-98, p. 83.

⁴⁴ Sean Brady, 'From Peacetime to Wartime: The Sicilian province of Catania and Italian Intervention in the Great War, June 1914-September 1915', in Kitchen, et al, *Other Combatants, Other Fronts*, pp. 3-28, p. 12.

Mobilisation was also a state of mind. Even in countries where the call to arms was, by necessity, immediate, those whose relation to the war had not yet been defined for them experienced a sense of anxious displacement. Men and women lucky enough to be given a choice about their futures experienced a sense of suspension in late 1914 as they contemplated their options. Wilfred Owen was in the old spa town Bagnères-de-Bigorre when news of the outbreak of war reached him (he would remain there until the autumn of 1915). He described the reactions of the inhabitants of this still relatively remote commune in the foothills of the Hautes-Pyrénées:

Women were weeping all about; work was suspended. Nearly all the men have already departed. Our household, is one in a thousand. Mr Léger, who doesn't look his age, and I, who look French, are objects of mark at present.

His very presence had, very quickly, shifted from benign foreigner to an 'object' of disapproval and suspicion. The practicalities of life had to be considered:

Our food is already much dearer, and we are all getting ready to live on bread and maize-soup. If need be, Monsieur and I will undertake the harvest between us.

Owen concluded by noting that, after the flurry of the send-off, the predominant feeling was of being left behind: 'Nobody is very gay.'⁴⁵

Another eventual poet-soldier and artist, Isaac Rosenberg, son of Jews who fled the pogroms of Russia to settle in the East End of London, found himself far from the centre of British mobilisation in 1914, in one of the more contentious and unruly Imperial outposts: South Africa. In a letter from Cape Town where he had moved in order to attempt to improve his health, he wrote of his perception of what the war meant to Edward Marsh, Winston Churchill's Private Secretary and a patron of Rosenberg's (note the use of martial language to conjure up an image of the over-worked civil servant):

⁴⁵ Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 1 August 1914, Harold Owen and John Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 272. Note that although the letter is dated 1 August, Owen's biographer Jon Stallworthy believes it to have been finished at least a few days later, allowing time for the news of the war to reach the town and for Owen to have gathered the material informing his description. See Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 102.

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By the time it reaches you I expect the world will be in convulsions and you'll be in the thick of it. I know my poor innocent essay stands no chance by the side of the bristling legions of warscented [sic] documents on your desk.⁴⁶

Despite the gently teasing tone of the letter, Rosenberg understood the seriousness of the hour – as well as Marsh's personal concern for friends as the allegorical idea of war was made real on bloody European battlefields.

Like Owen, Rosenberg was grappling with his place in relation to the war, and despite his parents' objection to his enlistment (linked to their experience of Russian conscription) he acknowledged its pull: 'I think the safest place is at the front – we'll starve or die of suspense, anywhere else.'⁴⁷ Rosenberg, who considered himself entirely immune to the spectacle of patriotism sensed an aesthetic shift; he too would, by choice, eventually find himself on the Western Front. Attempting to capture the strange atmosphere in Cape Town he wrote in 'On Receiving News of the War' in 1914:

Snow is a strange white word;
No ice or frost
Have asked of bud or bird
For Winter's cost.

Yet ice and frost and snow
From earth to sky
This Summer land doth know.
No man knows why.

These stanzas are evidence of Rosenberg's painterly poetic skills as he conveys the elemental chill as the war and its associated hatreds spread to 'This Summer land'.⁴⁸

Yet Rosenberg's lexicon of images and metaphors reflects not an isolated reaction but a strain of poetry that emerged in 1914. Edward Thomas, Robert Frost, Emile Verhaeren, Charles Peguy and Ernst Stadler, to name a few, all foregrounded nature in their attempts to convey the fundamental essence of mobilisation in 1914: Stadler's 'The Roses in the Garden' with its roses that suddenly 'leap more lustily, as if pouring from lacerated veins.../ Their wild Blossoming is like the gasp of death / that the

⁴⁶ Isaac Rosenberg to Edward Marsh, 8 August 1914, Jean Liddiard (ed.), *Isaac Rosenberg: Selected Poems and Letters* (London: Enitharmon, 2010), p. 134.

⁴⁷ Rosenberg to Marsh, October-November 1914, Cape Town, *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁸ Isaac Rosenberg, 'On Receiving News of the War', August 1914, *Ibid.*, p. 61.

passing summer carries on into the uncertain light of the fall⁴⁹ provides a vivid example. Many people from all walks of life reacted to the war by putting pen to paper, regardless of whether or not they expected their contributions to aesthetic mobilisation to become public. Usually their outpourings were kept private or, in some cases, they made their way into local or, even more occasionally, national newspapers. Rosenberg's 'On Receiving News of the War', like Rupert Brooke's famous 'War Sonnets' – composed in the autumn and first published in the small literary journal *New Numbers* in December 1914 (they would not attract a significant popular readership until the spring of 1915) – were not isolated creations, but reflect a loose aesthetic consensus about how to convey the sentiments associated with war and European mobilisation. A draft of Owen's poem '1914', composed in south western France and dating from the same year relies on similar imagery:

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.
The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

Jon Stallworthy observes that it is 'hard to imagine how this could come from the same hand' who would go on to write 'Dulce et Decorum Est' and 'The Ballad of Purchase-Money'.⁵⁰ Owen's 'Winter of the world' is not so metaphorically different from Rosenberg's 'ice and frost and snow', and the former's 'Love's wine's thin' echoes Brooke's 'red / Sweet wine of youth' from 'The Dead'. The war and the stirring of peoples is elemental, like the weather or nature, and the poets recognise, feed upon and helped to build up the aesthetic case testifying to its terrible grandeur.

In *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*, Siegfried Sassoon articulated the experience of someone whose passions were directly mobilised (and hence accounted for) within the broader narrative of mobilisation and its effect on how they viewed and hence made sense of the world: 'there was something almost idyllic about those early weeks of the War...It seemed almost as if I had been waiting for this to happen,

⁴⁹ Ernst Stadler, 'The Roses in the Garden', transl. Jeremy Adler, in Tim Cross (ed.), *The Lost Voices of World War I* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 107.

⁵⁰ Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, p. 105. 'The Ballad of Purchase Money' was also written in 1914.

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although my own part in it was so obscure and submissive.⁵¹ The war had the effect of sharpening his senses, particularly when contrasted with the anxious mood of the older generations. Sassoon's reflection on the weeks leading up to, as well as his departure for France presents a clear transgression of special as well as existential boundaries:

Dick and I were on our way to the First Battalion. The real War, that big bullying bogey, had stood up and beckoned us at last; and now the Base Camp was behind us with its overcrowded discomforts that were unmitigated by *esprit de corps*. Still more remote, the sudden shock of being uprooted from the Camp at Clitherland, and the strained twenty-four hours in London before departure. For the first time in our lives we had crossed the Channel.⁵²

He, like many men and women in 1914, found himself leaving the security of home for the first time. Despite mundane and tedious experiences, as he floats between the allied front and the English home front, he reflects on how the combined powers of nature and the new 'degree of intensity' that he feels towards his life work to paint a beautiful picture: 'We had crossed it in bright moonlight...'⁵³

Human Landscapes

The Radetzky March contains a description of the spectacle of soldiers moving through the landscape in early August 1914.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 245.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 245, 271.

⁵⁴ See 'Føreren af en tysk Arméafdeling passerer en nyanlagt Bro over Dnjester under Fremrykningen mod Cernowitz, Ukraine', 460/1383: 1914-1918. National Library of Denmark: <http://bit.ly/1RSLQvW>. (accessed 12 June 2015) and **Image 8** below. These photographs show soldiers on the move, contending with the modern and ancient logistical challenges that inform military narratives of the First World War.



Image 8: *Fra Wolhynien, 'En fastkørt Automobil trækkes i Gang igen, Ukraine', 225: 1914-1918. National Library of Denmark : <http://bit.ly/1n249Up> (accessed 12 June 2015)*

That same night the rifle battalion headed northeast toward the border area of Woloczyska. It began drizzling gently, then raining harder and harder, and the white dust on the road turned into silvery-gray slime. The mire slapped against the boots of the soldiers and splattered the impeccable uniforms of the officers, who were marching to their death in regulation regalia. The long sabers got in their way, and the splendid long fringed tassels of their black-and-gold sashes dropped on their hips, soaked, snarled, and spotted with a thousand tiny clots of mud. By dawn, the battalion reached its destination, joining with two other infantry regiments and forming skirmish lines.⁵⁵

It is a telling image of the old idealisation of military glory petering out in anti-climax: the military finery 'soaked, snarled and spotted with a thousand tiny clots of mud'. The depleting march led to no culmination or affirmation; instead they 'waited there for two days, with no sign of the war.'⁵⁶

The novel was published in 1932, when Roth had had time to consider the full legacy of the war and shift in the military aesthetics. Violet Asquith, one of a relatively small number of women who actually went out on an 'expedition' to view the armies on the Western Front in the opening months of the war, wrote back to her father the Prime Minister from Amiens in October of 1914 with no such reserve:

Everything that has ever or can ever happen to me pales & shrivels before the thrilling interest of this expedition... We passed miles of our transport

⁵⁵ Roth, *The Radetzky March*, p. 316.

⁵⁶ Roth, *The Radetzky March*, p. 316.

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waggon going on towards the front – huge motor lorries with City of Westminster stamped on them covered with the most splendid men who all waved their hands & shouted with joy when they saw us – know we were English – I have never felt more moved. At one point I stopped the car and offered them cigarettes. You should have seen them.⁵⁷

She went on to describe the comparative national qualities of the armies, observed from a car flashing through the mobilised landscape:

One town – Marville – we passed through was full of Turcos. I've never seen such low savage faces. They are extraordinarily Oriental & all have Arab horses. We saw many dead horses & trees blasted by shells by the wayside – & in one field – delicious sight – a lot of our men intently – concentratedly [sic] – wildly – playing football! Gradually as we got south our soldiers ceased & the French ones began – just like pictures of the Napoleonic wars – they look rather sad & tired & their horses in poor condition. Not at all gay or Latin or demonstrative.⁵⁸

The horrors of war were clearly visible, but as a witness Asquith responded to – and recorded for posterity – the thrill and glamour of war observed from a relatively – but not completely – secure vantage point.

The diaries and letters available to modern European historians (with more appearing every day, thanks to efforts to expand digital collections) are full of reactions to the opening months of the war in 1914. Soldiers already in units, understandably, often focus on logistics; reserves called up do as well, but linger longer on the shift from civilian to military or, at least, mobilised identities and the practicalities of preparing for war. For an English aristocrat like Julian Grenfell, the shift was entirely natural and, to an extent, welcome. His entire family fell neatly into natural roles to form a perfect picture of an industrious, publicly-orientated family offering an example of civic responsibility and patriotism.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Violet Asquith to H. H. Asquith, Monday 19 October 1914, Mark Pottle (ed.), *Champion Redoubtable: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1914-1945*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998), pp. 11-12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ 'In England [Grenfell's brother] Billy was training with the Rifle Brigade, Ivo was with the Eton Volunteers, Monica was nursing at the London Hospital, [mother] Ettie was organising work parties for the Maidenhead Red Cross, and [father] Willy had started the Taplow Defence Force and was later to become President of the Volunteer Defence Force for the whole country.' Nicholas Mosley, *Julian Grenfell* (London: Persephone, 1999), p. 365.

The psychology of the break with a fully civilian past is the grand theme for men and women accustomed to writing about themselves and their particular states of mind. The path to personal mobilisation seems to have depended very much on whether or not the particular individual thought of his or herself as a public entity. That is, someone with a natural role to play – however small and inconsequential – in the national drama. Young men like Rupert Brooke with connections to people at the heart of the national power base became almost frantic with the anxious waiting that the opening months of the war involved, and spent the weeks after war was declared searching for outlets and complaining to one another about the infuriating bureaucracies of enlistment.

This would not have been the case, of course, for everyone. The sense of a historic moment established itself, relatively quickly, in Europeans whatever their class, but the implications of mobilisation were not collectively felt and understood: they moved in stops and starts, practically and emotionally. Brooke's much quoted and culturally resonant (at least from April 1915) visual metaphor of 'swimmers into cleanness leaping' from the sonnet 'Peace' is an example of the ideal overwriting the reality: the grinding, piecemeal experience of being just one person in a disparate and rapidly expanding military system.⁶⁰

His poetry would eventually establish itself in the aesthetic mainstream. Other media had an effect, but their effects were more diffused. Paintings had a limited audience, and although illustrations and to an extent photographs did increasingly alter the public's sense of its visual literacy and understanding of the battlefield, it is impossible to point to one or even a few exemplars. Poetry and prose still appealed in the sense that they filled in the human reaction to war, however the nineteenth century's love of paintings – for example, Jean-Charles Langlois's extremely popular (and often reproduced) panorama of Solferino charting the sweep and deadly glamour of battle – persisted.⁶¹ Such examples of martial art remained influential in dictating style and content for artists and writers attempting to convey the essence of war in 1914.

The opening months of the war did not abandon antecedents, but there was a subtle shift towards emphasising individual experiences within a landscape, as opposed to allowing the grand battle to stand in for that landscape. Alan Seeger, writing from Toulouse as an American enlistee in the *2me Régiment Etranger* in October 1914, described the spectacle of mobilisation from the point of view of a foreigner in France. Extracts of his diaries and letters as well as direct accounts of his experiences

⁶⁰ Rupert Brooke, 'I. Peace', *1914 and Other Poems* (London: Siegfried and Jackson, 1915), p. 11.

⁶¹ Marwill, *Visiting Modern War*, p. 188.

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were published in American newspapers, consumed and commented on by a readership fascinated by the distant war. These extracts are far away from the visual flamboyance and concentrated patriotic endeavour of the metropole⁶² (although Seeger had been in both Paris and London to experience this in late August, and it certainly influenced his decision to don a uniform):

Fifth Sunday since enlistment. The arbor of a little inn on the highroad running east from Toulouse. Beautiful sunny afternoon. Peace. The stir of the leaves; noise of the poultry in the yards near by; distant church bells, warm southern sunlight flooding the wide corn-fields and vineyards.⁶³

Seeger's sense-filled account testifies to the diversity of experience of mobilisation from place to place and country to country. Although Toulouse was an increasingly industrial city in 1914 and home to migrant workers from Northern France, Italy and Spain, Seeger and his regiment were novel impositions in both the city and the surrounding rural landscapes as they prepared to move up to the concentrated Western battle zones ('Some say Antwerp, some say Châlons'⁶⁴) where a much more radical vision of war was unfolding. However, much of embattled France, and much of Europe, remained bucolic and rural, bathed in summer light, even as the presence of soldier figures moving through, or encamped in, agricultural landscapes illustrated the shift from peace to war for people on the home front. As a visitor to the landscape, Seeger simply passed through it. For many, contemplation of the rural in relation to mobilisation raised other more practical questions: who would stack the hay, pick the fruit, milk the cows, plough the fields and feed the livestock?

Nature provided a grand and terrible backdrop to the unfolding human drama, which could be scaled up or down based on the needs of audiences. Already in 1914 much of the art and literature created in response to the war utilised a prevailing emotion: nostalgia. Nostalgia appealed because it helped 'to illuminate the pre-war structures of feeling through which army recruits – the majority of them amateurs – responded to military institutions and their experiences of warfare'.⁶⁵ Staged images of (usually) mothers and sometimes wives pining for the serving man were also prevalent as

⁶² See Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Volontaires américains à Paris, août 1914'. *Europeana*: <http://bit.ly/1mYhwUS> (accessed 13 June 2015). This photograph shows Alan Seeger's fellow countryman displaying local enthusiasm for the international conflict.

⁶³ Diary entry, 27 September 1914, Amanda Harlech (ed.), *Letters and Diary of Alan Seeger* (Paris: Steidl Edition Paris, 2001), p. 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Michael Roper, 'Nostalgia as an Emotional Experience in the Great War', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2011), pp. 421-51, pp. 424-5.

personal tokens, testifying to the need for the war's aesthetics to express and elevate the domestic as well as the grand landscape and the military figure as hero.

As designed objects many of the postcards and illustrations produced in 1914 and beyond are doubly interesting in that are photographs of photographs; they show subjects looking at or being looked at by photographs of the one who is longed for. This added a layer of theatrical poignancy, and to an extent heightened the superstitions attached to such objects as they came to stand in for human beings, serving almost as talismans for anxious families. In England the Royal Academy's autumn show featured bucolic landscapes, some containing small figures identified as nuclear families; these were read as allegories to peace that could act as a comfort in times of war. The corollary to these landscapes were the generalised 'portraits' of soldiers depicting a kind of everyman that proved most popular in the opening months of the war, particularly when presented in a religious context, as with James Clark's enormously popular *The Great Sacrifice*, which was reproduced in multiple formats in 1914.⁶⁶

If the soldier was the masculine embodiment of mobilisation in 1914, intent on defence as he moved through foreign landscapes, the other resonant emotional human figure was the refugee. John Horne and Alan Kramer have traced how the press amplified atrocities by connecting oral history to narrative and, finally, to image. Newspapers reporting German atrocities against civilians in France and Belgium did so by 'uncritically' deriving set pieces from refugees and soldiers, as was the case with the story of a little boy in the village of Magny who had aimed his wooden rifle at a German soldier and subsequently been executed. The story appeared first in an official communiqué produced on the 18 August, and on 20 August it appeared as a cartoon on the front page of *La Guerre sociale*, and then was reproduced on postcards and in numerous illustrated journals.⁶⁷ The image was particularly sentimental; the curly-haired child innocently eats his *tartine* as a tall, strong German soldier takes aim with his rifle. The drama – and the impending atrocity – are palpable.

In terms of developing a common lexicon of horrific, galvanizing images, few approaches seem to have been more effective – apart from when things appeared to go too far, and test the bounds of credulity – than to present victims of German atrocities. In the United States the sentimental appeal of the French or Belgian refugee was strong, but condemnation in the early stages of the war was even-handed: reports of Russian war crimes against non-combatants and the targeting of

⁶⁶ See James Fox, 'British Art and the First World War, 1914-1919', *Art History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (September 2013), pp. 810-833.

⁶⁷ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, p. 207.

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Jewish communities by advancing Tsarist forces also attracted press coverage, emphasising the stark brutality of the conflict in Europe.⁶⁸ Readers joined the chorus of moral witnesses, despite their distance from the conflict.

The refugee was as resonant a figure (and perhaps even more so) for men in uniform, perhaps because they represented a kind of failure on the soldier's part as understood in 1914.⁶⁹



Image 9: 'Après la bataille de l'Ostende, une foule de réfugiés'. Agence Rol, 1914. Bibliothèque Nationale de France: <http://bit.ly/1JMCq3l> (accessed 14 June 2015).

The chivalric ideal that they must defend the civilian – and in particular women, children and the elderly – above all else prevailed. Many soldiers wrote about their shock when encountering refugees. Even if they could not communicate directly with them due to difference in language and culture, they experienced an overriding sense of empathy for them. For many men, however tragic, soldier victims made sense in the war. The brutality of war, the transgressing of civilian and military boundaries, and the complete and total loss of a fixed and secure place in the world conveyed by the figure of the refugee undermined the very foundations of civilisation, personally and internationally. In terms of heightening the stakes for aesthetic mobilisation, the civilian victim proved extremely effective.

⁶⁸ Wilson, *New York*, p. 48.

⁶⁹ See **Image 9** above, and Maurice-Louis Branger, 'Arrivée des réfugiés belges à Paris, 1914'. Europeana: <http://bit.ly/1ZxCbAL> (accessed 13 June 2015). These two images of refugees, the former showing men, women and children from the holiday town of Ostend that Stefan Zweig described so vividly, capture the absolute dislocation that the war brought to many lives, and illustrate why the figure of the refugee – and particularly child refugees – had such an aesthetic impact on participants and observers of the war.

Conclusion

Aesthetic mobilisation echoed and elevated human exchanges; it reinforced local human ties as the bedrock of a society worth defending, but it scaled everything up, heightening every sensation and encounter. Even as these public spaces left lasting impressions and induced wonder on the part of observers, the relationship between individual and national became more confused when people passed across thresholds and moved away from homes and cities to European battlefield. When they returned to private contemplation of the emptiness that was also the direct result of mobilisation in 1914, celebration was replaced with anxiety. James Sheehan reminds contemporaries that, in practice, for the vast majority of people directly implicated in or observing the mobilisation spectacle:

the bonds of the private, familial world were not so easily severed...Parents and lovers knew that some of their hurried farewells would be forever. And in millions of simple homes, families worried about how they would get by without the breadwinner's wages.⁷⁰

Caroline Brothers, writing about war photography as a cultural phenomenon, notes that while photographs 'freeze time and seem to give the past a tangible form, they can never be more than a *point de départ* for a wealth of experience they may indicate but cannot contain.'⁷¹ Every photograph of a crowd gathering in an urban space in August 1914 giving every appearance of expressing a unified resolve contains thousands of individual experiences, inflected by personal circumstances.

Susan Sontag has observed the self-conscious twenty-first-century tendency to make the 'spectacular not spectacular' in war photography, despite the long Western tradition duly embedded in Christian iconography to use the spectacular to understand and explain human suffering.⁷² In 1914 the spectacular aesthetic, coupled with an intense focus on the human figure, was very much in the ascendancy. The opening months of the war present a series of lurid, sentimental, fervent and flamboyant images that speak to the rich and troubling history of mobilisation in modern Europe in the twentieth century. There was never one single register available to those who experienced the war on its peripheries, or for those who found themselves in the midst of it. They encountered a raft of visual tokens of the conflict, and from these constructed their particular relationship to an embattled international tragedy.

⁷⁰ Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?*, p. 65.

⁷¹ Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A Cultural History* (London; Routledge, 1997), p. 14.

⁷² Sontag, *Pain of Others*, p. 71.