

Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War

By [André Loez](#)

Summary

Soldiers' attitudes towards the Great War are a controversial issue, as they prove difficult to assess and raise complex methodological questions. They evolved during the course of the conflict, from a broad acceptance of a defensive war in the summer of 1914, to war-weariness as early as winter 1914, to various and sometimes spectacular forms of refusal from 1917 onwards, although obedience and compliance remained the norm. Acceptance, endurance and refusal can further be explained by taking into account variables such as military context, individual combatants' political ideas, their social backgrounds and their national loyalties and affiliations.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine and understand the complexity of soldiers' attitudes towards the war, and their evolution from apparent acceptance to tenacious endurance and, in some cases, to open refusal. This topic has sparked many interrogations, and a degree of controversy, as the respective roles of patriotism and coercion in soldiers' obedience are debated by researchers. In the words of a prominent historian, in 1914-1918, "why was it not a natural reaction to the terror of battle for a man to drop his gun and turn around and go home? [...] And is it the case that they consented to carnage?"¹

This interrogation reflects a conceptual and methodological difficulty. "Acceptance" and "refusal" of the war are not easily characterized, and even less easily retrieved or reconstructed from source materials. It could be argued that the scholarly debate on soldiers' attitudes towards war is, to some extent, a disagreement over definitions: should "acceptance" be construed as meaning adhesion or "consent"? Does the term point to a favorable view of the war, to a conscious recognition of its legitimacy, to a plain admittance of its inevitability, or to the mere compliance to military duty? As for "refusal," should it imply a condemnation of war in general, a politically grounded criticism of the current conflict, a tendency to minimize one's exposure to its violence, or a deliberate effort to seek its end via protest or collective action?

Furthermore, methodological difficulties in interpreting primary sources (some [letters](#) or diaries will show evidence of acceptance of the war yet their author may well desert, conversely, some soldiers who write of their refusal or disapproval of the conflict can nonetheless show great resolve and a willingness to fight) indicate that the question of soldiers' attitudes towards war needs to be framed carefully, to be put in context, always taking into account the variety of military situations and of belligerent nations.

Within all armies and societies in 1914-1918, acceptance was expected and celebrated, whereas refusal was punished. This is not only true in military terms, as the insistence on "duty," on "holding on" ("*tenir*," "*durchhalten*") was grounded in a much wider social framework, that of modern states with (for most of them) compulsory schooling and military service, where an insistence on patriotism or dynastic loyalty was instilled by state institutions as well as ever-growing and powerful media. These states governed hierarchical societies in which obedience, deference and compliance were widely upheld social norms even before the war.

It is thus possible to inquire soldiers' "acceptance" and "refusal," bearing in mind the ubiquity of the former and the difficulty of the latter, and the complex ways in which personal

attitudes of combatants were shaped by individual and group identities, social pressures (within the army, from the rear) and interactions (with their peers, superiors, families and enemies) in a changing context.

In order to do so, I will first try to sketch the rough evolution of these attitudes from 1914 to 1918, from the initial favorable response to the war to the growing discontent culminating in mutiny and revolution. Throughout this period, we will try to understand why compliance and tenacity were the most common attitudes for soldiers during the war, with instances of overt refusal, that, although scarce, could have dire consequences.

I will then examine four specific factors which proved decisive in explaining soldiers' acceptance or refusal of the war: military configuration, political or ideological affiliation, rank and class, and national integration.

Accepting the war, 1914

Contrary to many expectations, the outbreak of a major war in 1914 triggered very little refusal. The apparent consent to the war on its inception must be explained as it provides the background for an understanding of the later dynamics of acceptance, endurance and refusal.

Summer 1914: The Outbreak of war

In all belligerent states, mobilization was highly successful,² combining extremely low desertion or draft-dodging rates and high levels of volunteering. In [France](#), only 1.22 percent of men did not show up for mobilization.³ This number, already much lower than pre-war estimates, must be further deflated: in fact, most of the men classified as "deserters" in 1914 were actually living abroad and could not therefore be incorporated in good time.⁴ On the other hand, where compulsory conscription left out high percentages of the male population (as in [Germany](#)) or was altogether absent (as in [Britain](#) and its Dominions), vast numbers of men volunteered for active service.⁵ This was echoed by equally strong enlistments in Britain's remote Dominions.⁶

Furthermore, contrary to many pre-war fears, industrial workers did not sabotage the war effort, nor did nationalist militants in [Ireland](#), Bohemia or [Poland](#). Trains ran smoothly according to established timetables, carrying millions of uniformed men to the borders. What anti-war rallies could be held did not disrupt mobilization in any serious way. With the exception of severe riots in [Russia](#),⁷ pre-war fears proved completely unfounded.

But this consensus must not be confused with a general “war-enthusiasm,” an idea that Europeans marched gallantly and joyfully into the conflict has been decisively dispelled by several thorough studies of public opinion.⁸ Indeed, there were passionate and positive responses to the war, especially among professional soldiers, artists and intellectuals; in the public space this translated in the patriotic crowds in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg or Budapest, seemingly welcoming the outbreak of war. Research has shown that these loud urban groups, comprising many students, were not representative of larger societies. Yet their role must not be underestimated: what enthusiasm there was in 1914 was highly visible and valorized, and contributed to the more general attitude of wary resignation and compliance, ensuring, furthermore, that refusal could not be expressed. With the entry into war, opposition to the conflict ceased to be a legitimate political opinion, and became a treasonous stance that could not be publicly held, as arrests or physical harm could ensue.⁹

On an individual level, on the continent, men were ordered to join their units leaving them without a choice to “refuse” or “accept” the war: “As the law orders, one must obey” wrote a young French conscript of his mobilization.¹⁰ Even the great influx of volunteers in Britain and the dominions cannot be entirely separated from economic and social pressures: it corresponded to a steep rise in unemployment especially in the building sector, and to a collective insistence on joining the ranks, expressed by peers, by hierarchical superiors (headmasters, company directors) as well as by the numerous women who started handing out white feathers to men perceived to be unwilling to volunteer, in a general “assault on inappropriately passive behavior.”¹¹

Hence, a sober assessment of attitudes at the outbreak of war – technically, before most men were turned into soldiers – shows that the conflict was greeted with surprise and sadness, especially in [rural communities](#) where the gathering of the harvest was threatened by the sudden departure of men as well as the requisition of horses.¹² For the great majority of men, the war was equated with separation from their kin, economic uncertainty for themselves and their families in their absence, and with the perspective of hardship and death. These feelings were often mitigated, however, by the short-war illusion, for some by excitement due to the prospect of new horizons and risky endeavors, and, for all, by a sense of inevitability reinforced by defensive patriotism.

This constitutes a key component of the initial response to the war, as political leaders and [newspapers](#) were careful to frame their state’s actions in the diplomatic crisis as defensive, and the measures taken (mobilization, declarations of war) as necessary. This resulted in a shared belief, within belligerent societies, that the war was fought for defensive reasons, and

was the basis of widespread political truces ([Union sacrée](#), [Burgfrieden](#)) and displays of national unity and unanimity, while the Socialist International proved divided and powerless. Finally, at first, a defensive war's legitimacy could not be openly challenged, resulting in a quasi-absence of public debate on [war aims](#) and war prosecution. In the following weeks, this idea was reinforced in the Entente by [atrocities](#) stories regarding the conduct of German troops in [Belgium](#) and in France, and in the Central Powers by the targeting of civilians resulting from the [naval blockade](#).¹³

These perceptions and representations did not exist in the abstract, but were mediated, in a very direct manner, by the social interactions of summer 1914, when men met in public places and village squares often under the supervision of state authorities (mayors, policemen, army officers and recruiters) and community leaders (priests, parsons, elders, school teachers). They had to show courage and resolve in front of an expectant and anguished civilian population, thereby embodying expected gendered roles.¹⁴ They were regrouped in barracks or train stations¹⁵ where their departure to the front was often ritualized through patriotic songs and proclamations – thus contributing to the enduring image of naïve war-enthusiasm.

The reactions towards the war in the summer of 1914 reveal the efficiency of peacetime socialization (through compulsory schooling and military service on the continent), and the strength of the national or dynastic loyalties that had been constructed in the previous decades. Even if the conflict as such was not necessarily “accepted” the fact that states or sovereigns could call to arms millions of men in a defensive war was everywhere seen as a distressing but normal situation.

Enduring the war, 1914-1916

If the legitimacy of the war was not directly challenged by the vast majority of frontline soldiers until 1917, from late 1914 onwards their will to fight started to erode, and they developed “coping” and “exit” strategies. Various forms of refusal emerged in the context of what was becoming a war of attrition. However, all armies ensured that compliance remained the norm, in part through disciplinary measures.

From late 1914 onwards: A growing War-Weariness

One must first take into account, after the first few weeks of fighting and the enormous [casualties](#) they entailed, the lack of ideological commitment for most frontline soldiers, many of whom, without ceasing to wish for their nation or state's victory, expressed a longing for home and for an “end” to the conflict.

There are several converging indicators of this prevalent war-weariness, which started to grow during the winter of 1914-1915. In the Austro-Hungarian army, commanders blamed military setbacks on their troops' lack of fighting spirit, and postal [censorship](#) offices had to be set up because of the despondent tone of soldiers' correspondence,¹⁶ also visible in the German army.¹⁷ As early as 2 January 1915, a sergeant in the 240th French [Infantry](#) regiment wrote of the "egoism" of soldiers under his orders, who longed for an end to the war.¹⁸ Such remarks by officers and authority figures abound in all armies once the war settled in a pattern of attrition, as the men in their troops realized that the ordeal of war was to be much costlier and longer than anyone had expected.

The general trend of a "long-term, inexorable decline in soldiers' willingness to go on with the war"¹⁹ was frequently mitigated by short-term hopes for a successful offensive, as in the French army before the September 1915 attack.²⁰ But many indicators show growing difficulties in military recruitment after the success of mobilization in 1914. British volunteering slowed and then stalled after 1914, the steep drop in enlistments by mid-1915 opening a political debate that would result in the progressive introduction of conscription starting in January 1916.²¹ In [Austria-Hungary](#), the draft of spring 1915 provoked "murmurings of discontent" and localized protest.²² These were more widespread in Russia in the fall of 1915, as new levies of men caused difficulties and riots, sometimes leading to political demonstrations.²³ In France as well as Germany, from late 1915 onwards, soldiers urged their relatives to refuse subscriptions to war loans in order for the conflict to end sooner.²⁴ For the main part, however, the prevalent war-weariness of 1914-1916 did not lead to open protest, refusal or revolt. In all belligerent countries, the great majority of soldiers longed for the end yet hoped for victory and admitted the defensive nature of the war.

Obedience, Compliance and Discipline in a War of Attrition

Many factors enabled these soldiers to "hold on" in the dire conditions of industrialized [warfare](#), as evidenced by a large and growing body of historical research. This plurality of factors must be stressed, as the [historiographical debates](#) on soldiers' attitudes towards the war are often narrowly expressed as a binary interpretive choice, that of "coercion" versus "consent."²⁵ In reality, while both of these notions can have some validity, they need to be supplemented with a series of other social factors in order to illuminate obedience, compliance and tenacity.

It should first be noted that once men became soldiers, whatever their initial thoughts or

beliefs may have been, "obedience ceased largely to be a conscious choice and instead became a default option."²⁶ Turned from civilians into combatants, their initial assent to the war became irrelevant as they were placed in the framework of armies insistent on rules and discipline, an insistence embodied by hierarchical superiors whose presence was a decisive factor for military cohesion. Many scholars have pointed to officer-men relations as a key component of soldiers' endurance, through paternalistic forms of authority.²⁷ Of special importance were the officers in close contact with soldiers, junior and non-commissioned officers, who could exert their authority in multifold manner: by setting examples of courage and tenacity in combat (occasionally through stern displays of firmness including, in rare cases, summary executions)²⁸, by proving attentive to soldiers' material conditions (food, comfort, drink, rest), by delivering inspiring, understanding or frightening speeches according to the military context, and by being receptive to "a degree of consultation and bargaining"²⁹ and the airing of grievances often expressed through "grousing."³⁰

This illustrates a more general pattern that enabled combatants to endure the war: they tried to maintain peacetime habits and values so as to maintain or re-create a measure of normalcy. On the [western front](#), [trench art](#) and [newspapers](#), football matches and [theatrical shows](#), drawing and writing were fundamental elements that enabled soldiers to sustain to some extent their pre-war identities.³¹ Letter-writing, in particular, had a huge importance, as it ensured the persistence of social bonds of kinship and friendship.³²

These bonds were also developed in the context of military units: on a large scale through "*esprit de corps*" and regimental traditions, often grounded in local, communal or professional identities (so-called "[pals' battalions](#)" in Britain);³³ on a smaller scale in the "primary groups" of a dozen or so combatants, small groups of men sharing dangers, hardships, but also food, drink and sleep, creating for each soldier a strong sense of duty for one's comrades and the necessity of resolve and [masculine](#) courage.³⁴ Again, this showed the transfer, in the front lines, of previous civilian values of stoicism and compliance through hard work, as many soldiers developed, rather than an overt and abstract patriotic or dynastic commitment, a kind of tangible "professional consciousness" towards their war duty.³⁵

On an individual level, soldiers developed many psychological "coping strategies," among which forced gaiety and derision, fatalism, "self-deception" and [religious or superstitious practices](#) were especially important.³⁶ These collective and individual efforts in order to adapt

and endure the war were overseen by the military. Armies, as institutions, showed great concern for men's willingness to fight, and tried to manage it in two complementary manners. There were "positive incentives," as armies learned to control time and space in order to avoid keeping troops in the front lines for too long, grudgingly granting leave and rest policies after the first year of war, giving soldiers a "manageable horizon of expectations."³⁷ Courage, patriotism, and willingness to fight were also positively sanctioned through medals, decorations and distinctions of great symbolic importance.³⁸

But there was also a negative, coercive aspect to the upholding of cohesion and obedience. If coercion never was the sole factor of soldiers' endurance, it nonetheless existed in conspicuous forms, as "all armies retained the capacity to inflict brutal, degrading, and often highly visible punishments upon enlisted personnel."³⁹ These have generated a huge amount of scholarship, focusing especially on the death penalty and military executions. All states had [military tribunals](#) and court-martials, and all armies (except for [Australia](#)) executed soldiers found guilty (among other offences) of disobedience or cowardice (with many judicial nuances according to the different legal systems): between 1914 and 1918, eighteen soldiers were shot in the Belgian army, thirty-five in the [American Expeditionary corps](#), at least forty-eight in the German army, 346 for Britain and its Dominions, around 670 for France, at least 750 for [Italy](#), to which one must add dozens of executions on the spot by officers, without trial (at least 300 for [Italy](#)).⁴⁰ One of the functions of these executions was generally to "make an example," and they were thus highly ritualized and publicized, with troops having to stand to attention during executions for instance.

But the death penalty was one extreme of a judicial and disciplinary continuum intended to maintain obedience and cohesion. Detention, alcohol and tobacco severances, bodily punishment (the infamous "Field Punishment n°1" in the British armies, consisting of tying men to a wheel or post for a few hours), confinement to barracks, extra work or drill, extended front-line duty, were some of the instruments of military discipline.⁴¹

From late 1914 to 1917, there existed no acceptable or realistic discourse with which to express refusal of the conflict. The war's legitimacy could not be challenged, even less so as the gigantic losses of the first months and years definitively validated complete victory as a undisputable war aim for all warring states. Furthermore, the valorization of combatants and the despise for "shirkers" was so strong in all countries that attitudes of refusal, doubt or avoidance of the war effort, especially among military-age men, were socially disqualified.⁴² Within this framework, all the preceding factors help one understand how, even if the war was not "accepted," it could be endured. These symbolic and material limits also explain why

instances of “refusal” in the first years of the war were generally individual, covert and apolitical.

Covert forms of refusal: Legal and Illegal Exit Strategies

In 1915 and 1916, for those soldiers who either opposed the war or sought to escape its violence, refusal was not translated into protest or political discourse but rather in limited exit strategies. Once believed to have been isolated phenomena, limited to the [peculiar atmosphere of Christmas 1914](#), truces between front-line soldiers are now known to have been ubiquitous, throughout the war, despite commanding officers' efforts to suppress them.⁴³ Even though any attempt at quantification must fail, sufficient evidence from soldiers' letters and from official reports shows that, as early as October 1914, a “live and let live system” (Tony Ashworth) could be set up, through discussions, ritualized aggression and even encounters in [no man's land](#).⁴⁴ It does not ensue that soldiers participating in those truces “refused” the war in a deep, ideological sense: rather that, when presented with an opportunity to reduce its violence and minimize their own exposure, they were willing to temporarily withdraw from fighting when not in the midst of major military operations.⁴⁵

Even if officers could in some cases “close their eyes,” fraternizations remained illegal and all armies made efforts to suppress them. Other exit strategies could be found within the limits of military discipline. Armies themselves provided some opportunities for soldiers seeking to avoid combat or minimize their exposure to life and death in the front lines: as the war went on, new fronts were opened and the technical and logistical components of the military grew. This enabled many men to request a change of military affectation, or to volunteer for specific units in a hope to avoid the high casualty rates of infantry combat. In France, younger recruits voluntarily enlisted in order to steer clear from the trenches: in 1918, only 4 percent of the men enlisted for infantry units, against 48 for the Navy and 32 percent for the [artillery](#).⁴⁶ Other temporary exits could present themselves in the form of learning periods, exceptional leave or transfers in the factories for some soldiers whose pre-war professions could lead them to temporary or permanent posts as, for instance, telephone operators, translators, or cartographers.⁴⁷

Sick or hospital leave could also be seen as in a positive manner, all the more so as a relatively light wound (short of maiming and disfigurement) was both a visible proof of courage and a sure way out of the front lines. This led some soldiers to try various degrees of simulation, from “malingering” and attempting to convince doctors one was ill, to seeking [venereal disease](#) and to actual self-inflicted wounds, “an individual form of revolt, minimal

and apolitical.”⁴⁸ This could take many forms, from using infected bandages to shooting oneself in the hand or foot.⁴⁹

Suspicious wounds would draw the attention of doctors and officers liable to prosecute (sometimes wrongly) combatants.⁵⁰ This forms the basis for admittedly imperfect attempts at quantification. Prosecution statistics indicate that self-mutilation was never widespread without being negligible: 3,478 British soldiers were tried before October 1918 for self-inflicted wounds, and 10,035 were found guilty in Italy.⁵¹ Even in these relatively limited numbers this practice shows the astonishing amount of pain some soldiers were ready to inflict on themselves in order to refuse the war.

Finally, among exit strategies, desertion played an important role. Soldiers' refusal of the war could result in the minimal and uncomplicated acts of leaving the front, or not returning to their units after a period of leave. However, some crucial distinctions must be made in order to make sense of this phenomenon. In reality, “desertion” could encompass five very different kinds of actions, highly unequal in their ease and significance. The most common type consisted of soldiers reporting to their units with a significant delay. In this sense, the majority of deserters never intended to escape the war altogether, but merely tried to defer their return. According to [Leonard Smith](#), this was partly due to the “disciplinary dilemma” of military justices that could not imprison and even less sentence to death large numbers of combatants for what came to be seen as minor offences, away from the front, in the context of a widening dearth of men.⁵²

A second, less common attitude, was that of deserters whose defection was intended as permanent, and sought to hide in the rear, among relatives (when fighting took place in their own country, as was the case for Frenchmen, Italians, and for some Russians or Poles), trying to avoid police and *gendarmarie* or *carabinieri* forces on the lookout for men of military age.⁵³ This practice was much more difficult as it flew in the face of accepted social norms and gendered roles, and such deserters were far less numerous. A third kind of desertion, marking a steeper form of refusal of the war, consisted of flight towards [neutral](#) countries (Germans towards [Denmark](#) or [The Netherlands](#), Frenchmen towards [Spain](#), [Switzerland](#) being a central destination).⁵⁴ It was an extreme and rare undertaking, as it meant almost certain judicial sentencing (*in absentia*) and renouncing to one's entire social ties and past. Finally, the most severely condemned and rarest sort of desertions involved the “definitive choice”⁵⁵ of defecting to the enemy, in two different ways: as a deliberate, planned, attempt to cross the lines, generally at night or during a patrol, or in the midst of combat, in the form

of a hasty surrender, sometimes visible in large offensives. In this fashion, one can interpret the huge number of captives resulting from certain operations as partial signs of growing reluctance to fight: 1 million Russian soldiers were taken [prisoner](#) during the 1915 retreat, and 380,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers were taken captive after the Russian “Brusilov” offensive of June 1916.⁵⁶ The meaning of such acts will be further studied below in relation to certain national minorities.

At this stage, two elements can be pointed out. Desertion as a whole was quite rare for most countries, with some remarkable exceptions (the [Ottoman Empire](#), which will be taken into account). For Britain, Germany and France, deserters – with all the caveats linked to judicial statistics that are difficult to interpret – appear never to have numbered more than 0.5 percent of men in uniform before 1918.⁵⁷ This, however, does not take into account the immeasurable phenomenon of voluntary surrender, which seems to have been more frequent on the [eastern front](#). But in all armies, there was an unmistakable upward trend between 1914 and 1917, evidenced by existing statistics at divisional, regional or national levels:

	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
French 3 rd Infantry division (prosecutions, total)	5	16	172	224	161
Bavarian army (prosecutions, total)	418	1,993	2,493	4,196	3,591
British expeditionary force (prosecutions, total)	627	3,357	5,621	6,055	8,578
Belgian army (missing soldiers, monthly average)	NC	NC	100	467	556
Italian army (sentences, total)	NC	10,272 (June 1915-May 1916)	27,821 (June 1916-May 1917)	55,034 (June 1917-May 1918)	8,622 (June 1918-Oct. 1918)

Table 1: Desertion totals and desertion rates in select units and armies⁵⁸

The general rise in desertions from 1914 to 1917 indicates a shift in the attitudes towards

war that must be studied and explained.

Refusal, Revolution, Remobilization? 1917-1918

Military disintegration and unwillingness to fight, mixed, in the later stages of the war, with growing vocal, ideological and politicized opposition to the very nature and existence of the conflict.

From Consensus to Discontent: A changed Context

The year 1916 can be considered as a turning point regarding soldiers' attitudes towards the war, with what one scholar has called a "massive worsening of the mood,"⁵⁹ especially after the huge battles fought at [Verdun](#) and on the [Somme](#) on the western front, and the costly Brusilov offensive on the eastern front. At the end of 1916, military failures, social unrest and political turmoil would combine to create a new background in which soldiers' endurance and compliance became more uncertain.

The first element behind this shift is the lengthening of the war. Even if many soldiers still longed for a rapid end to the conflict, by early 1916 the short-war illusion had been proven wrong, and by the end of 1916, after gigantic battles that, despite appalling casualties, failed to even minimally alter the military stalemate on the western, eastern and Italian fronts, a new level of war-weariness was reached in all belligerent armies. More importantly perhaps, these military disappointments led to a hitherto unseen questioning of the war: in each country, and on an international scale, war aims and peace perspectives came to be discussed on unprecedented levels, starting with the German peace proposals of December 1916 followed by Wilson's diplomatic efforts. Internal politics became more uncertain as well: in Austria-Hungary, the death of [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) weakened the already strained national fabric (November 1916); the Austrian *Reichsrat* and Russian [Duma](#) convened, for the first time, in late 1916, becoming a platform for voicing criticism. In Britain, a political crisis led to the fall of [Herbert Henry Asquith's \(1852-1928\)](#) government, as one of his ministers, [Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, Marquess of Lansdowne \(1845-1927\)](#), openly questioned the war in his Memorandum written on 13 November 1916.

These events, still uncertain and scattered, started to question the – until then – unassailable fact of the war's continuation until a victorious ending. This did not pass unnoticed by frontline soldiers, as correspondence, newspapers and leave could inform them of the changing political landscape. [Pacifism](#) – in its widest possible sense – therefore ceased to be entirely confined to the remote world of isolated urban working-class militants. Soldiers' desire for an end to the war and political discourse bent on hastening it, slowly started to converge. In France, the pacifist deputy [Pierre Brizon \(1878-1923\)](#) received over 150 letters

from the front, applauding him in his refusal of the war.⁶⁰ In Russia, the chief of the Petrograd postal censorship commission wrote, in November 1916:

It is impossible not to notice in the letters both to and from the army the increasingly sharp manifestations of dissatisfaction with the internal political situation in connection with the general disorganization of the home front and the ever increasing prices of objects of prime necessity.⁶¹

At the end of 1916, two powerful trends intersected, both linked to the lengthening of the war: the cumulative strain that wore down men and units, their willingness to go on and their military cohesion on the one hand; the rise of dissent and socio-political strife that would provide the framework and vocabulary hitherto lacking in order to refuse the war, on the other.

Between Mutiny and Revolution in 1917

In 1917 initial acceptance and tenacious compliance gave way, in almost all armies, to instances of collective protest, in the wake of the [February revolution in Russia](#). These protests and mutinies were dissimilar in shape, extent and consequences.

Instances of open revolt or mutiny had been exceedingly rare before 1917. Some battalions had refused to leave the trenches for attacks, in 1915 and 1916, at Verdun for example, yet without voicing protests, political or pacifist demands.⁶² These occurrences of refusal to fight – without refusing the war – grew more frequent in the Russian army during the fall and winter of 1916, as it experienced a “rash of mutinies,” like that of the 20th Siberian Rifle Division in Latvia on 23 December 1916.⁶³ The Russian army’s war-weariness coalesced with civilian demands for bread and peace during the demonstrations of February 1917 (March, in the western Gregorian calendar used here), leading to the first Russian revolution.⁶⁴ This event was to have massive consequences for the Russian army and for all belligerents.

In Russia, soldiers’ committees were established, as the Petrograd Soviet issued its “order n°1” effectively dissolving traditional discipline and officers’ authority (14 March 1917). While the [Provisional Government](#) intended to continue the war, this position was partially challenged by the Soviet’s “appeal to the people of the world” for a peace “without annexations or indemnities” (27 March 1917), still justifying a defensive war in order to protect the revolution. This translated in soldiers’ attitudes toward the war: while desertions remained limited, there was a massive spread of fraternization, and a renewed hope for an end to the conflict, evidenced in the twenty instances of mutiny between March and May

1917.

The overthrow of discipline and yearning for peace in the Russian army provided the background for unrest and protest among other armies in the spring and summer of 1917, while new waves of strikes affected France, Britain, Germany and Italy, and with the perspective of a third socialist pacifist conference (after [Zimmerwald](#) in 1915 and Kienthal in 1916) to be held in June 1917 in [Stockholm](#).⁶⁵

In Italy, some units went into open refusal of combat: on 21 March 1917, near Gorizia, the 38th regiment of the "Ravenna" brigade was ordered back to the trenches despite dreadful losses and insufficient leave in the previous months: soldiers erupted into violent protest, refusing to advance and discharging their weapons in the air. Similar incidents occurred in May 1917, with the most serious instance of refusal in the Italian army taking place on the night of 15-16 July 1917, when the "Catanzaro" brigade went into armed revolt in Friuli leaving between twelve and thirty dead. Some soldiers shouted pacifist slogans ("Long live anarchy, we want peace, long live Russia, down with the war"), prompting the authorities to fear a non-existent "socialist conspiracy," and to a harsh repression.⁶⁶

In May to June 1917, the French army was confronted with a wave of mutinies in more than 110 units, comprising two-thirds of infantry divisions. Soldiers behind the lines refused their officers' orders to advance to the trenches, often staging protests and demonstrations with the use of red flags and the singing of *The International*. This wave of protest spread in the wake of the failed Chemin des Dames offensive (16 April 1917) and peaked in the early days of June 1917. Soldiers' refusal of the war during the mutinies has led to much discussion, as early studies sought to minimize it in order to praise the role of [Philippe Pétain \(1856-1951\)](#), or the patriotic and republican commitment of French citizen soldiers.⁶⁷ But there was a subversive, pacifist and political aspect to the mutinies as well, visible in the dozen attempts of mutineers to board trains for Paris in order to demand peace from deputies, in the unequivocal slogan "down with the war," in the sometimes overtly militant tone of chants and demands ("long live the revolution," "we want immediate peace").⁶⁸ The mutinies were suppressed by a mixture of firm repression (around thirty soldiers were shot, several hundred deported in colonial penitentiaries, many more were jailed) and concessions (a better leave policy), while further offensives had to be hastily abandoned.⁶⁹

These events, that German commanders failed to exploit,⁷⁰ had a small counterpart in the German navy with the "politicization of naval unrest"⁷¹ leading to mutiny in the summer of

1917 in Wilhelmshaven, for which two sailors were shot.⁷² There were no such instances of pacifist protests among British troops, where the strains of the war nonetheless produced limited disciplinary breakdowns. In June 1917, combatants stationed in Kent formed a "Soldiers and Workers council,"⁷³ and on 9-12 September 1917, the military camp at Etaples, where discipline was resented, erupted into revolt, in what amounted more to a riot, with shades of "collective bargaining in khaki," than a mutiny.⁷⁴ Similar events affected colonial (Egyptian and Chinese) workers behind the British front.⁷⁵

The pattern of violent disorder within armies in 1917 was finally illustrated by the Russian expeditionary corps' mutiny in the center of France. Russian troops in France, numbering 16,000 men, had been heavily influenced by the Revolution and were therefore isolated in late June 1917 in the military camp of [La Courtine](#), hundreds of kilometers from the front. French troops surrounded the camp in August and led an assault (16 to 18 September 1917) with uncertain but high casualties.⁷⁶

All these instances of violent refusal had commonalities and differences. They took place in a volatile context where soldiers grasped at rumors and news that seemed to indicate the possibility of an end to the war, justifying efforts and attempts at collective action. They were almost never led or organized by political movements, yet could be influenced by pacifist demands as they provided a ready vocabulary for soldiers' longing for peace. But they were also constrained by a disciplinarian apparatus that remained efficient, and most of all by a military setting that prevented prolonged protest, as units were scattered, and could not abandon their positions without risk to themselves and their comrades. This explains why most cases of protest took place among troops ordered back to the lines rather than among those in actual combat situation, where, apart from truces, disobedience was simply not an option.

Finally, the year 1917 showed a continued rise in desertion, which can be seen through two major cases. In the Italian army, the massive number of men taken prisoner (300,000) by the Austro-Germans after their [offensive on Caporetto](#) (October 1917) was judged, at the time, as evidence of the soldiers' unwillingness to fight. This has been disproved by modern scholars⁷⁷ but nonetheless illustrates the extent to which Italian authorities were scared of complete military collapse due to soldiers' refusal of the war, a fear that the Bolshevik revolution (at the exact same time) would only strengthen. This military collapse was the fate of the Ottoman army. By December 1917, over 300,000 of its men – around one in eight – had deserted, because of military exhaustion, lack of pay, nourishment and clothing.⁷⁸ It was the first case of military disintegration as a result of individual soldiers' refusal to go on fighting,

that would be further evidenced in the final year of the war.

Between Disintegration and Remobilization in 1918

The year 1918 saw intensified fighting, as a renewed war of movement ultimately led to the military collapse of Austria-Hungary and Germany. Soldiers' attitudes were affected by the short-term changes in the military situation, ensuring their renewed willingness to fight in what seemed to be, at last, decisive battles, yet they continued to be influenced by the longer trends previously evidenced of war-weariness and political protest against the war, explaining their participation in the revolutionary events at the end of the year in the defeated countries.

Faced in 1917 with military protest and revolutionary risk, many political leaders pursued peace initiatives, internal (the "Peace resolution" of the *Reichstag* in July 1917) and external ("peace feelers" and covert negotiations.)⁷⁹ But at the end of 1917, these diplomatic overtures had proved futile while the revolutionary danger seemed yet stronger in the shape of the Bolshevik revolution. In a further political shift, shattering the political truces of 1914, new governments were formed – by [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) in France, [Georg von Hertling \(1843-1919\)](#) in Germany, and [Vittorio Orlando \(1860-1952\)](#) in Italy, for instance, all taking charge in October or November 1917 – with a renewed commitment to war until victory, leading to the repression of dissent and pacifism. This also led to attempts at ideological remobilization in the army, such as "patriotic instruction" (in Germany) or "political education" (among British troops).⁸⁰

But the prospect of peace was redefined in the "[Fourteen points](#)" speech of American President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) on 8 January 1918, drawing considerable attention as it provided a new vocabulary with which to oppose the war, on liberal and national grounds. Most importantly, peace had actually been attained on the eastern front, with the [Brest-Litovsk armistice \(15 December 1917\) and peace \(3 March 1918\)](#). This had a major, if paradoxical, impact on the Central powers.

Indeed, Germany and Austria-Hungary, despite dire social and economic conditions, and growing anti-war movements, began the year with strong positions on the western front, huge territorial gains on the [Italian front](#) following Caporetto, and complete victory over Russia in the east. This, however, was a partial cause for further refusal of the war. On the Austro-Hungarian naval base of Kotor / Cattaro (Montenegro), the sailors' "overwhelming desire for peace" sparked a violent [mutiny](#) in early February 1918. Mutineers hoisted red flags and placed political demands for democratization, national emancipation and peace on the basis of the "Fourteen points."⁸¹ This isolated protest failed but it illustrated a more

general unwillingness to go on with the war. In the Austro-Hungarian army, many men expected to be released from service in the spring of 1918 due to the victories in the east. When ordered back to the front, they undertook open revolts, leading to drastic increases in desertion (230,000 deserters in the summer of 1918).⁸²

The final German offensives, starting on 21 March 1918, initiated the last stage of the war, seven months of mobile warfare that made open revolt or fraternization implausible, and that eventually led to the military disintegration of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies. The behavior of soldiers during these spring attacks is not easy to interpret, as there are sure signs of remobilization, combatants on each side being conscious that victory and defeat were directly at stake. In Germany, initial optimism was generally high,⁸³ even if some soldiers proved reluctant to be transferred towards the western front.⁸⁴ In France, munitions workers stopped their strikes when it appeared that they might cause defeat; and the renewed invasion of French territory, especially after the German breakthrough of 27 May 1918, could be an incentive to continue fighting. Similarly, British troops, once recovered from the initial shock, also proved resilient.

But these attacks took their toll on already exhausted troops. They also led to panics or massive surrenders among the defenders (21,000 for the British on 21 March 1918, a hitherto unseen figure)⁸⁵ and to discouragement and disillusion among the attackers. The summer of 1918, with the successful allied counteroffensives (beginning on 18 July 1918) marked a final turning point. There were instances of refusal on the allied side, with Australian troops of the 59th battalion and then 1st battalion refusing to advance because they were not “getting a fair deal” on 5 and 21 September 1918.⁸⁶ But for German soldiers, who had expected their attacks to be decisive, there was no longer any foreseeable path to victory. At this stage, in a context of severe lack of supplies and material hardship, “the central powers’ armies crumbled into mass desertion and surrender.”⁸⁷ Evidence of this mass desertion has recently been discussed, as Wilhelm Deist’s notion that the German soldiers conducted a “covert military strike” with as much as 1 million deserters in late 1918 has been challenged by [Christoph Jahr](#) and [Alexander Watson](#), the latter insisting that the German army dissolved through “ordered surrenders” by officers rather than through a disappearance of discipline.⁸⁸ There is little doubt, however, of the rise in individual refusals, as deserters fled by the thousand to neutral countries, roamed the capital, looted train stations and ceased to obey orders⁸⁹ – a situation much similar to that of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman armies.

The last stages of refusal were at once political and military: in Austria-Hungary, [Charles I.](#)

[Emperor of Austria's \(1887-1922\)](#) "October manifesto" alluding to the autonomy of the state's national components led to a final disintegration of the army along national lines. In Germany, it was in the highly politicized community of working-class sailors, that refusal to obey orders for a last, and doomed, naval battle, led to the late October / early November 1918 mutinies in Wilhelmshaven and [Kiel](#) that ignited the [German Revolution](#).⁹⁰ As in Russia, a year earlier, soldiers' unwillingness to go on with a hopeless conflict had precipitated the downfall of a political regime which had staked its survival on a victorious war.

Interpreting and explaining acceptance and refusal

A chronological overview cannot fully explain the subtle variations of obedience and disobedience, of acceptance and refusal in the different armies. These were also influenced by specific factors that relate to combatants' prior social, national and ideological identities, and to their specific war experiences.

Military Configuration and Unit Solidarity

Soldiers' attitudes toward the war must never be considered in the abstract, as if they were entirely autonomous individuals, free to debate and "accept" or "refuse" war as an external entity. Once they became soldiers, choices were limited by the very context of war, and especially by the proximity of fire and danger.

In the front lines, war is a physical reality that can hardly be escaped. As seen before, truces and fraternizations could only exist when permitted by the lack of major operations, and in many cases officers made sure, via raids or artillery bombardments, that the front remained "active."⁹¹ The possibility of voluntary surrender, alluded to above, was always risky as in the midst of combat, intentions and actions could be misinterpreted, while occurrences of prisoners simply being executed, while not general, were frequent enough to make one think twice.⁹² And abandoning one's post or refusing to attack could have dire disciplinary or judicial consequences. In short, in the front lines, obedience and combativeness were the most obvious and generally the only realistic options, independently of soldiers' opinions on the war and its continuation.⁹³ Even hard bouts of combat did not automatically result in war-weariness or disillusion: soldiers could also experience a desire for retaliation.⁹⁴

Their will to fight was also largely derived from appropriate training, as it helped them overcome their fears, uncertainties and inadequacies. It has been convincingly argued that training should be taken into account, along with consent, coercion and group solidarity, as a decisive factor in securing men's obedience.⁹⁵

A third military factor that influenced acceptance and refusal was the management of manpower, and of rest. When [periods of leave](#) could not be implemented, major problems could arise: one of the general factors that led to the May / June 1917 mutinies in France was a drastic restriction of leave policy.⁹⁶ And manpower shortages in the final stages of the war played a considerable part in the central powers' military collapse, as they were unable to relieve fighting units and to allocate rest or leave periods, thus accelerating their demise.⁹⁷ This revealed the inherent paradox in the "small-group argument" for military cohesion, as these groups are inevitably worn down by the very attritional warfare they help endure.⁹⁸

A key element in attempts to maintain high cohesion among fighting troops was the presence of experienced and trusted officers. As seen before, officer-men relations go a long way in determining attitudes towards the war, as even skeptic or indifferent soldiers could be swayed by charismatic and efficacious officers. In a letter to his parents on 20 August 1914, an otherwise wary French recruit wrote of his captain: "I would get myself killed for such a man."⁹⁹ But major offensives disorganized unit hierarchies, and some armies suffered severe shortages of competent officers: Austria-Hungary and Russia as early as 1915, Italy in 1916.¹⁰⁰ In France, the arrival of new, inexperienced officers among disgruntled troops who therefore had little trust in them was also a factor in the 1917 mutinies.¹⁰¹ The same can be said for the Austrian and German naval mutinies of 1918, where sailors' refusal was made easier by their estrangement from their officers.¹⁰² In the Russian army, distrust for officers, especially those thought to be of German descent, was also widespread before the 1917 revolutions.¹⁰³

Another military factor of acceptance and refusal was armies' capacity to feed, clothe and equip soldiers appropriately. Motivation for offensives was more easily obtained when combatants felt that appropriate material preparations were made, with regard to artillery guns, or new [weapons](#) such as [tanks](#). These played a part in the cautious optimism of many French soldiers before the spring 1917 offensive, as did the special training received by some German troops before the final 1918 offensives.¹⁰⁴ Conversely, the lack of supplies and even of basic clothing strongly contributed to the alarming desertion rates in the Central powers and their allies (the Ottoman Empire) in 1918.¹⁰⁵

Political and Ideological Beliefs

The men who entered the war in 1914 had very different sets of beliefs and ideals. For some, war found a natural place in a [nationalist](#) or patriotic world view; for others, it was difficult to

renounce pacifist ideals, whether derived from religious or political (liberal, socialist) ideals. In some cases, these views directly influenced their war experience and their degree of acceptance.

One must first take into account the numerous cases of men whose volunteering corresponded to political ideals. In 1914, around 15,000 foreigners living in France or abroad volunteered in the French army, in some cases in order to become French citizens, but sometimes for relatively abstract political ideals, like the “defense of the Enlightenment and the Rights of man” which prompted some Peruvian, Chilean or Brazilian enlistments or the formation of a “Garibaldian” corps from (then) neutral Italy.¹⁰⁶

Things were more difficult for pacifists at the outbreak of war, especially where [conscientious objection](#) was not recognized. In France, relatively few working-class socialists were present in the trenches, being more useful in armament and munitions factories; but what records remain of socialist and pacifist trajectories in the front lines show men willing to fight yet still acting as “bootleggers of socialist culture” reading pamphlets out loud or writing to their deputies.¹⁰⁷ In Germany, Bavarian union members with pacifist leanings were nonetheless strongly opposed to autocratic Russia, and in the initial stages of the war, their sense of union discipline tended to reinforce their military commitment.¹⁰⁸ More research would be necessary in order to draw more general conclusions, but it appears that ideological commitment to peace could be reconciled with a minimal participation in the war.

Even where conscientious objection was recognized (Germany and Russia in 1914, Britain from 1916, the [USA](#) from 1917), opposition on political and ideological grounds proved extremely difficult. Many religious exemptions were given, for instance to Quakers, but tribunals often judged applicants with harshness. In Britain, there were approximately 16,000 objectors, of whom 10,000 accepted to serve in non-combatant duties. Many others were sentenced to prison, with severe consequences: ten men died in jail, and an additional fifty-nine from the conditions of their detention.¹⁰⁹

Yet it could be supposed that in the British and American cases, these legal exits from the war for those who ideologically refused it, however limited and difficult, played a part in preserving their armies from cases of open refusal. If one wonders why the French army massively mutinied in 1917 and the British army remained relatively calm, this might constitute a partial explanation, as politicized soldiers did play a role in instances of collective disobedience. It was not, however, the organizing role generally suspected by officers keen on seeking “ring-leaders” and wary of “conspiracies.” Mutineers were never the emissaries of pacifist movements. But when protest broke out, soldiers who had been militant and were

politicized could coordinate action and become spokesmen.¹¹⁰ Those combatants with prior experience of collective action, strikes or protest helped shape the movement, as did the militant sailors of working-class backgrounds on mutinous German ships in 1917 and 1918. And of course politicized soldiers and officers had a prominent role in soldiers' councils during the 1917 revolutions in Russia.¹¹¹

This explains why political consciousness became an issue for military staffs by 1917, as they set up patriotic or political talks, leaflets to be distributed among the troops, [propaganda](#) efforts with clearly thought-out talking points.¹¹² In 1917-1918, it was the war itself that had taken new political meanings.

Rank and Class: The Social Differentiations behind Obedience and Consent

To what degree were national loyalties a motivation for soldiers? Or, to be more precise, for which soldiers did this component of the war prove effective? While this is still the object of some contention, several studies have shown that "patriotism" was not homogenously shared within warring nations, but was first and foremost felt by social elites and middle-class urban dwellers, whereas "national sentiment" was more remote for rural and working-class soldiers.

In a path-breaking study of bourgeois intellectuals' war experiences among other ranks in the French army, Nicolas Mariot has shown the huge divide between representations of the war at one end of the social spectrum (among literate, wealthy intellectuals, many of whom were or became officers, and whose patriotism was a strong, vibrant, frequently expressed and clearly outlined motivation), and the more ordinary compliance of peasants, manual workers, servants and shopkeepers who made up the bulk of the French infantry.¹¹³ In their case, "national sentiment" was not necessarily lacking: simply put, it generally was not in play during the war, as they proved indifferent to patriotic proclamations and discourses, sought exit strategies and hoped for an end to the war, while their endurance was primarily due to a sense of duty, courage, and [comradeship](#) far remote from the abstract patriotism found among the elites. This finding is confirmed by many studies regarding French soldiers: whereas trench journals, overwhelmingly written by officers and middle-class combatants, reflect patriotic values,¹¹⁴ empirical research on rural soldiers has shown them to be massively indifferent to the war's patriotic justification, if not to its outcome.¹¹⁵

This sharp social divide in the attitudes toward the war, between acceptance on the part of the higher and middle classes, and indifference or sullen endurance among peasants and manual workers, is visible in most countries. The clearest cases are the Russian and Italian

armies, where the nation's very construction was still thought of as incomplete before the war, due to the weakness of state administration and schooling, incapable of ascribing modern national identities and values among peasant communities. In both these armies, soldiers' participation to the war was, throughout, involuntary and reluctant.¹¹⁶ But this does not mean that, deprived of a "national" goal or stake these peasant-soldiers were more necessarily prone to refusal or disobedience, even if the events of 1917 showed these two armies to be fragile. In its way, in Italy, "the peasant-catholic society was an extraordinary school of obedience and acceptance of one's fate."¹¹⁷

In Germany, too the contrasts are visible between urban or middle-class soldiers and poorer, rural recruits. Students of bourgeois background are over-represented among the 1914 volunteers,¹¹⁸ and in his case study of Bavarian combatants, Benjamin Ziemann made a forceful case for the passivity and indifference of peasant soldiers, exemplified by the higher rates of self-inflicted wounds. The social divide between these men and their socially superior officers would be widened, in the later stages of the war, by differences in pay and rations that would fuel "officer-hate" with shades of class resentment.¹¹⁹

Finally, British volunteering statistics allow one to draw much the same conclusions, showing the "reluctance of rural men to come forward"¹²⁰ whereas, enlistment rates proved higher for educated and middle-class professions. 40 percent of the professional and commercial classes enlisted, against 27 percent in industry and 22 percent in agriculture. The exposure of the urban middle classes "to the influences of the press, to the appeal to escape the office routine of bourgeois life, was not without its effect."¹²¹

While additional data would certainly be welcome, this comparative overview clearly indicates that acceptance and refusal of the war were socially differentiated. Social elites, whether by schooling (Public-school students and graduates in Britain; *Normaliens* in France)¹²² or economic status, were generally willing participants of the war because they were able to envision it in national terms, thinking of their duty and their responsibility with a patriotic vocabulary. It should be noted that these visions had a lasting effect on the way historians reconstructed attitudes toward the war, as these social elites left large quantities of easily accessible and well-written documents (letters, memoirs, novels), leading many researchers to believe that their stated patriotic beliefs were in fact shared by all soldiers.¹²³

But, on the contrary, these representations distinguished them from more ordinary soldiers – the petty employees, peasants, manual workers, servants who made up the vast majority of their countries' infantries, and for whom national loyalties were almost never altogether

absent but generally not a motivational factor during the ordeal of 1914-1918.

Minorities, National Integration and the Attitudes towards war

National and dynastic allegiances were crucial to the war effort, but often proved ambiguous. For some (French or German Jews for instance), the war could be seen as a means of national integration; for others, on the contrary, the war could be seen as an obstacle to national hopes or aspirations: [Czechs and Slovaks](#) within the Habsburg Empire, for example, could show reluctance towards a war that led them to fight other Slavs in Russian uniforms. Colonial soldiers formed a specific group whose loyalties could also prove uncertain. Armies and political leaders were acutely conscious of these ambiguities, and often [suspected national minorities and specific ethnic groups of being unreliable or disloyal](#). The degree of national integration of groups and individuals was therefore a key variable in determining not only acceptance and refusal towards the war, but also the way these attitudes were perceived and in some cases punished.

At the outbreak of war, contrary to many beliefs, minority groups did not resist in the conflict in a significant way. The sole serious instance of refusal took place in the British Dominion of [South Africa](#), where, as a legacy of the Boer wars, some 12,000 Afrikaners rose up in rebellion in the autumn of 1914.¹²⁴ In Ireland, where the [Home Rule](#) issue had been the source of unrest and political uncertainty up until the summer of 1914, both unionist and nationalists initially supported the war, and around 200,000 Irishmen volunteered, with rates close to those of rural England.¹²⁵ In an even more striking display of national loyalty by often marginalized minorities, French and German Jews clearly supported the war, in the belief that their dutiful and willing involvement in the conflict would “eliminate the remaining barriers and [stereotypes](#).”¹²⁶ And in the USA in 1917, with a large part of the population born overseas, immigrants volunteered for the war in accordance with their national aspirations: 40 percent of the first 100,000 applicants for the draft were Polish, hoping to participate in their nation’s liberation.¹²⁷

But some cases proved more ambiguous. [French Canadians](#) were far less eager to volunteer than English-speakers, of whom many were immigrants born in Britain, willing to cross the ocean for the defense of the former country, whereas France and its anticlerical policy held less appeal for strongly catholic Quebec. French Canadians thus represented 35 percent of the population, but only 5 percent of volunteers.¹²⁸ In Russia, Finns were not conscripted, and other national groups were dispersed within units.¹²⁹ In Austria-Hungary, where the issue of [minorities’](#) loyalty was simply vital to the survival of the state, the statistical success of

mobilization did not dispel worries and uncertainties. A degree of Czech reluctance was visible at the beginning of the war: in Prague on 22 September 1914, two battalions left for the front under a Czech flag, displaying “we are marching against the Russians and we do not know why.”¹³⁰

This sustained the preexisting fears of disobedience along national lines, that received apparent confirmation in the spring of 1915, when the collapse of the 28th and 36th (Czech) infantry regiments against Russian troops were deemed suspicious by the Austro-Hungarian high command.¹³¹ Authorities were therefore encouraged in their increasingly strict policies of surveillance and geographical distribution: they qualified some ethno-linguistic groups, including the Italians, as “politically unreliable,” and tried to avoid placing Slavic troops against Russian armies. Conversely, they had more success when they placed Croat (who were generally thought of as reliable) and Slovene soldiers on the Italian front after Italy’s entry into the war in May 1915, partly because these men realized what they had to lose in case of an Italian victory and annexation of Adriatic territories.¹³²

Nevertheless, the national question proved harrowing throughout the war for Austria-Hungary, as there were clear instances of refusal on national basis. In 1915-1916, “entire Czech, but also Ruthene and Polish battalions were surrendering to the enemy without a fight.”¹³³ In the Navy, minority affiliations played little part in the Cattaro revolt of 1918, but led to smaller incidents such as the mutiny on a torpedo boat led by two sailors of Slovene and Czech origin on 5 October 1917.¹³⁴ In the wake of the October 1918 defeat at [Vittorio Veneto](#), minorities, subject to powerful propaganda efforts by the allies, ultimately refused to go on fighting for a dynasty that had lost its last unifying figure two years earlier with the death of Emperor Francis Joseph.¹³⁵

The strained loyalties of minority groups, as the war went on, are further exemplified in the case of the Alsatians-Lorrainers in the German army and the Flemish in the Belgian army. Some 380,000 men from [Alsace](#) and the part of Lorraine annexed by Germany in 1871 fought in the war, but with noticeably small enthusiasm: there were few volunteers in 1914 (around 8,000), whereas 17,250 men managed to enlist across the border, in the French army. In order to prevent desertions towards France (precise rates are uncertain), they were mostly assigned to the eastern front. When repatriated, some mutinied on March and May 1918, in one instance with the singing of the *Marseillaise*, and on the other with plans to desert.¹³⁶

The Belgian case shows how refusal can be linked to resentment within a complex nation-state: Flemish-speaking soldiers represented around 60 percent of combatants, whereas the

hierarchy was overwhelmingly francophone. This led to political action among Flemish catholic elites, in the form of the “frontist movement” (*Frontbeweging*),¹³⁷ and explains the steep difference of origin among deserters: 93 percent of the 141 Belgian soldiers who defected to the enemy were Flemish.¹³⁸

Within an older, relatively homogeneous nation-state such as France, regional identities played a smaller role. What data exists shows that deaths in combat as well as desertions were quite evenly distributed geographically, even if border counties tend to have slightly higher desertion rates (4.25 percent of conscripts for Pyrénées-Orientales, against a national average of 2.25 percent).¹³⁹

But France, like Britain, was an imperial power and enlisted [colonial soldiers](#). These men’s attitudes towards the war have not been sufficiently studied, due in part to a lack of first-person written sources, but nonetheless show that instances of refusal, while not necessarily more prevalent, were punished more harshly. The mutiny of 5th (Native) Light Infantry in the Indian army in Singapore, on February 1915, led to thirty-seven executions. It appears to have been linked more to leadership issues and insufficient rations than to a protest against the war or the colonial order.¹⁴⁰ A similarly harsh treatment was handed to Tunisian soldiers, whose refusal to fight near Ypres in December 1914 led to summary shootings, ten men being picked randomly for execution.¹⁴¹ Refusal along ideological lines could be present, in some cases: in the French army, a Lieutenant from Algeria, Rabah Boukabouya, deserted to the German lines on 15 April 1915, and became a spokesman for a revolt of Muslim soldiers in the French and British armies, with little success.¹⁴² But for the majority of colonial soldiers, compliance, and not refusal, remained the norm, as some even hoped that loyal service in the army could ameliorate their economic status or even lend support to their political agenda, after the war.¹⁴³

Conclusion

A measure of humility is necessary in concluding on this topic. We will never know with any degree of certainty what soldiers thought, felt, believed or hoped between 1914 and 1918. Most of them left no record of their attitudes toward the war, and many others left ambiguous or contradictory traces of their perceptions.

Yet this does not mean in any way that their tenacity remains a mystery. The questions ceaselessly asked by historians, “How did they hold?,” “Why did they fight?,” are, to some extent, disingenuous. They fought because it was normal, as soldiers in a war, to do so, and

most of them found ways to cope with the strains of combat. In 1914-1918, as in all other conflicts, military obedience was the norm, mutiny and refusal were the exception. Unlike in 1914, there were no joyous celebrations of the war in London, Paris or Berlin in September 1939. But soldiers fought all the same. And when French reserve soldiers were called up for service in Algeria, in 1955-1956, in a deeply unpopular war that was vocally opposed by some parties and unions, they complied.¹⁴⁴

The compulsion to fight was even stronger during the Great War, because to refuse, in the initial stages of the war, would have meant defying or tearing oneself from the entire social fabric, military and domestic, bent on adhering to and participating in the conflict. The response to the outbreak of the war must be seen as proof of the extraordinary success in the century-long process of constructing modern states and, within them, national or dynastic identities and loyalties, that left little choice to individuals in the summer of 1914.

This became even more obvious after the first few weeks of fighting as casualties mounted in a horrifying way and would only appear redeemed by complete victory, rendering unimaginable the prospects of peace, negotiation, compromise or refusal. It does not ensue that soldiers, as individuals, "accepted" the war as the war simply was there, whether soldiers accepted it or not. At best, they could find ways to endure the war, seeking solace in wartime bonds with the rear, their chiefs and their comrades, adapting to difficult conditions while bending to strict discipline.

Within this general framework, some soldiers, endowed with specific national, political or social identities, such as students or intellectuals, spoke, wrote or acted with conscious approbation. Similarly, the specific dispositions of minority national groups or of socialist militants could have the reverse effect, leading to increased or hastened refusal. But both these attitudes remained marginal as the majority of soldiers, from working-class or rural backgrounds, simply complied and endured, hoping for a favorable end to the conflict.

In later stages of the conflict, especially after 1916, new discourses and practices of opposition became available as the war's continuation was contested from inside as well as outside the military. Peace became thinkable, and various forms of protest emerged. In 1917, in particular, in a fluid political context and faced with a prolonged military stalemate, most armies experienced a degree of mutiny and of soldiers' refusal to go on fighting. But it was only where the attitudes of the soldiers combined and converged with that of significant social and political movements in the rear that refusal of the war could, as in Russia and Germany, effectively be carried out.

After the war, acceptance and refusal of the war remained important topics for discussion

and remembrance, in many forms: veterans' associations sought the rehabilitation of executed soldiers, some disillusioned writers voiced their (belated) abhorrence of the war, statues and memorials paid tribute to combatants' commitment and courage, and, on different sides of the political divide, mutineers or volunteers were glorified, as pacifists and nationalists fought to define the meaning of the war.

But in the end, for historians, the debate on soldiers' "consent" to the war is neither moral, nor political. It is rather a debate on their degree of agency during the conflict. This article has argued that in the context of the First World War, it is unrealistic to view soldiers as free agents, at leisure to decide whether to participate in the conflict, and whose conscious acceptance of the war prolonged its violence.¹⁴⁵ It points to the strength of states and military institutions, of social norms and interactions in shaping obedience and preventing refusal. Most of all, it stresses the inertia of the war, an event beyond soldiers' reach, overwhelming and persistent, that had to be faced and experienced, collectively, whether one "accepted" or "refused" it as an individual.

André Loez, Sciences Po Paris

Notes

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Citation

André Loez: Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10461](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10461)

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Author Keywords

Consent; Coercion; Obedience; Mutiny; Discipline

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