

Making Sense of the War (Norway)

By [Eirik Brazier](#)

Summary

This article explores how Norwegian intellectuals and cultural elites interpreted the impact of the First World War on the world in general, Norwegian society, and their own lives. Despite Norway's declaration of neutrality in 1914 and governmental attempts at suppressing conspicuous support for any of the belligerent nations, many citizens were sympathetic to and supportive of one or another state involved in the war. Most of the population were economically and culturally close to Britain or France, while a smaller number of Norwegians were eager to defend Germany. Foreign intelligence services, especially the German one, attempted to influence Norwegian's perceptions of the war, but with uncertain results.

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Introduction

This article explores how the First World War influenced Norwegian society and how the country's intellectuals attempted to make sense of the war, both in a short- and long-term perspective. However, it is important to underline that there are several gaps in the existing historiography. Hence, this account can only provide a partial and disjointed introduction to how Norwegians made sense of the First World War.

Members of Norway's intellectual and cultural elite had, for more than a century, looked to [Germany](#) for cultural inspiration and the ideas of [Johann Gottfried Herder \(1744-1803\)](#) romantic [nationalism](#) had deep roots in the shaping of Norwegian national identity during the 19th century. At the same time, the First World War also revealed a widespread sympathy towards both [France](#) and [Britain](#) among Norwegians due to both longstanding cultural

exchanges and close economic ties, especially with Britain. Hence, many Norwegian artists and intellectuals were torn about whom to support when the war broke out in 1914. Furthermore, any overt support or distain for the different warring states would have to be limited, as the Norwegian government was eager to defend its [neutrality](#).

As a [neutral](#) state, Norwegian authorities walked a tightrope with regards to being seen to favour one or the other side of the conflict, be it financially or in other ways. Hence, the government attempted to limit the most ardent supporters of either side of the conflict from expressing their support in public by placing discrete pressure on newspapers and editors.¹ In addition, the editors and publishers themselves practised a high degree of self-censorship which limited opportunities for anyone to publish texts that might provoke one of the belligerent states. This approach became more difficult as the war progressed and became largely ineffectual after Germany's declaration of unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) in 1917, which resulted in a sharp rise in loss of life for the Norwegian merchant fleet. The government also had to contend with British and German officials, like Sir [Mansfeldt Findlay \(1861-1932\)](#), [Paul von Hintze \(1864-1941\)](#), and [Gustav Michahelles \(1855-1932\)](#), who repeatedly criticized officials for the lack of sanctions and [censorship](#) of individuals and newspapers that they deemed to be spreading [propaganda](#) and wrongful depictions of their respective countries.

Norway as a Battlefield in a Propaganda War?

Most of [Norway's](#) newspaper editors were sympathetic towards the Allies from the start of the war but both self-censorship and pressure from the authorities encouraged them to keep a relatively neutral editorial line. They often interpreted the war as a clash between superpowers who had little or no interest in the havoc they caused for smaller nations like Norway. In *Morgenbladet* for example, editor [Carl Joachim Hambro \(1869-1938\)](#) denounced the power politics of both Britain and Germany in his editorials, which instilled him with a lifelong opposition to the interference of world powers in international affairs. Individual journalists, on the other hand, were a different matter and some of them were profoundly open about their support for either the Allies or the Central Powers. Two notable examples were *Aftenposten's* foreign correspondents, [Frøis Frøisland \(1883-1930\)](#) in Paris and [Ella Anker \(1870-1958\)](#) in London, who covered the war for several newspapers, including the national publications *Dagbladet* and *VG*. Frøisland wrote extensively on the war and its impact on France and French society, visiting different parts of the front, interviewing soldiers, and reporting from field dressing stations.² While attempting to deliver balanced accounts, his sympathies for France's war efforts were evident. During one visit to Norway, he embarked on a successful lecture tour about France and the war. After the [United States](#)

entered the war in 1917, he sought out Norwegian-Americans who served in the [American Expeditionary Forces](#) to interview them and bring their stories to a Norwegian readership, mixing his strong affinity for France with a touch of Norwegian patriotism. As foreign correspondent for one of the country's main national newspapers, Frøisland certainly had a large audience and his views would influence both contemporary and long-term impressions of the war. Allied allegiance was also easily identifiable in the reporting of Ella Anker, who worked diligently to strengthen the relationship between Britain and Norway during her time abroad and was, among other things, a founding member of the Anglo Norse Society in 1918. Anker was rewarded for her efforts by being made a member of the Order of the British Empire in 1919 along with other Norwegian citizens who had rendered valuable assistance to Britain during the war.³

While Frøisland and Anker's pro-Allied views represented those of many Norwegian journalists, there were also those who publicly defended and agitated for the Central Powers. The most notable example was a pro-German circle of journalists and artists centred around the colourful and flamboyant editor [Victor Mogens \(1886-1964\)](#) and his magazine *Ukens Revy*. It was founded in 1914 and became a lone pro-German voice among Norwegian publications. Other high-profile journalists, authors, and artists who contributed to the magazine were [Sven Elvestad \(1884-1934\)](#), [Nils Kjær \(1870-1924\)](#), [Ronald Fangen \(1889-1977\)](#), [Hjalmar Christensen \(1869-1925\)](#), and [Olaf Wilhelm Erichsen \(1870-1946\)](#). Mogen's circle of friends also included the sons of two of Norway's most influential writers of the late 19th century: [Bjørn Bjørnson \(1859-1942\)](#), the son of [Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson \(1832-1910\)](#), and [Erik Lie \(1868-1943\)](#), the youngest son of [Jonas Lie \(1833-1908\)](#).⁴ Both Bjørn Bjørnson and Erik Lie were passionate defenders of imperial Germany throughout the conflict. Lie travelled extensively through Germany and German-occupied areas in Eastern Europe and on his return to Norway launched a lecture tour on the war, financed by *Ukens Revy*. A study by the Norwegian historian Espen Nævestad later revealed that Erik Lie had been secretly recruited by the German [intelligence](#) service and his lecture tour was less about neutral depictions of Germany than propaganda.⁵ In 1918, Lie followed up on his lectures and published *Indenfor fæstningens mure, skildringer fra det beleirede Tyskland* (Inside the Walls of the Fortress, Stories from Besieged Germany), an account of his travels in Germany during the war. Nævestad has also found evidence that the magazine *Ukens Revy* was itself a product of the German intelligence services, and that they played a decisive role in financing the magazine during the war. Indeed, Germany's intelligence services made a concerted effort to influence Norwegian public opinion, especially in early years of the war, through both *Ukens Revy* and the work of Pastor [Hermann Günther \(1879-1965\)](#), head of the German Evangelical Church in Kristiania.⁶ It is difficult to determine to what extent these

efforts influenced Norwegian opinions on the war in general or Germany in particular.

Unlike Germany, there is little evidence that Britain devoted large amounts of resources to influence Norwegian public opinion during the war. However, Britain was in a more advantageous position, as many Norwegians were either supportive or neutral towards the Allies. However, this situation did not stop British representatives like Findlay from attempting to influence Norwegian authorities and demanding stricter censorship of what was perceived as German propaganda.

Painting the War

[Per Krohg \(1889-1965\)](#) and [Henrik Sørensen \(1882-1962\)](#) were two Norwegian painters who had a longstanding and close relationship to France and French culture. They were students of [Henri Matisse \(1869-1954\)](#) in the years prior to 1914 and both the war and their ties to France left a deep impression on their post-war work. Krohg was the only one of them to witness the war in person, as he volunteered to serve with a Norwegian [Red Cross](#) ski-ambulance in late 1916. The unit served on the [Western Front](#), near Vosges. As a combat medic, he helped to transport wounded French soldiers from the frontline to field dressing stations during a period of three months. When asked about his wartime experiences he described them as “magnificent and awful”.⁷ He produced several drawings and paintings which depicted his impressions of the war and life on the frontline.⁸ These have been described as a mixture of excitement, tragedy, and humour. The British art historian Richard Cork has classified Krohg as cubo-futurist.⁹ In 1933, Krohg and another Matisse student, [Axel Revold \(1887-1962\)](#), known as “the fresco-brothers”, were tasked with painting a large mural in three parts at the university library of Oslo. The overarching topic was to be *Völuspá*. In the part called *Ragnarok*, Krohg returned to the topic of his experiences of the First World War. Here Krohg depicted lines of machine men or centaurs that are half man and half armoured [tank](#) in addition to [aircraft](#), submarines, and divers who are also half machine and half man. In a contemporary newspaper interview, Krohg admitted that his inspiration for *Ragnarok* came from a parade of allied soldiers that he witnessed in Paris shortly after the war.¹⁰

Unlike Krohg, Henrik Sørensen was not an eyewitness to the war, but still he interpreted the conflict through his paintings. He viewed it as an apocalyptic event and produced two paintings during the war years, *Menneskefuglene* (The Human Birds) in 1917 and *Redd* (Frightened) in 1919. Sørensen returned to the First World War as a topic in the interwar years, for example in a series of paintings that also had a religious motif: *Gethsemane*, *Golgotha*, and *Pietà* (1921-1925), in addition to *Inferno* (1924-1925). All these works were in some way influenced by his return to Paris in 1919 and his observation of the effects of the

First World War on French society. He travelled extensively across France and visited the battlefield at Verdun, which left a lasting impression. The publication of [Erich Maria Remarque \(1898-1970\) *Im Westen nichts Neues*](#) was another source of inspiration. His painting *Ærens mark* (The Field of the Honoured) from 1931 depicted a British-style tank on the verge of crushing a soldier to death while another soldier is about to pierce someone with a bayonet.¹¹ The painting received much praise at its premier and has been complemented for its evocation of war and [revolution](#).

Making Sense of the War in Literature

In 1925, the author [Nils Collett Vogt \(1864-1937\)](#) argued that the First World War had created new perspectives on life and [society](#) among Norwegian artists, surpassing Norwegian independence in 1905 as a prime source of creativity.¹² Despite Vogt's assertion, there is little evidence that the war had a substantial impact on Norwegian literary culture in the post-war era. Indeed, many prominent Norwegian authors, such as the soon-to-be Nobel laureate [Knut Hamsun \(1859-1952\)](#), drew on the pre-war years for their inspiration.¹³ The historiography is incomplete, but the impression is that the war and its impact on society did not figure largely in the works of Norwegian authors.¹⁴ There are, however, a few notable exceptions to this general assumption.

One of the earliest artists to reflect on the consequences of the war was the writer and poet [Arnulf Øverland \(1889-1968\)](#), who, in March 1918, published two [war poems](#) titled *Le Morthomme - La fille morte* and *Fra feltlasarettet* (From the Field Dressing Station). Inspired by the renewed fighting on the Western Front in the spring and summer of 1918, Øverland's poems contemplated the seemingly senseless human cost of frontline fighting. The two poems were later included in a collection titled *Brød og Vin* (Bread and Wine), published in 1919. It includes several other poems inspired by the war under a section titled *Blodvidner* (Blood Witnesses). Another poem in this collection is called *Det tusenårige riket* (The Thousand-year Reich) and presents a criticism of the [Versailles peace treaty](#) and an ironic view of the Allies' ambitions to create world peace after the war.¹⁵ Øverland had been outspokenly pro-German during the conflict, but his political views shifted to the left and communism in the interwar period. This move was in some part due to his close association with the communist party and the organization *Mot Dag* (Towards Day). By the 1930s he had become an ardent anti-fascist and his poem *Du må ikke sove* (Dare Not to Sleep), published in 1936, was a warning against the onward march of Nazism and [fascism](#) in Europe.

Perhaps the most commercially successful novel to analyse the impact of the war on

Norwegian society was [Johan Falkberget \(1879-1967\)](#) *Bør Børson jr.*¹⁶ First published in 1920, the novel gives a satirical portrayal of businesspeople who made and lost vast amounts of money during the wartime boom-and-bust [economy](#). The story revolves around Bør Børson Olderstad, a farmer's son from the fictional valley of Olderdalen, and his dreams of becoming a wealthy [financial speculator](#). The name Børson is a paraphrase of the Norwegian word *børs*, from the French *bourse*, or stock market, and is undoubtedly Falkberget's critique of those who became rich on financial speculation during the war. The story of Bør Børson Jr. enjoyed extended popularity in Norway and the novel was adapted for both a [movie](#) and a musical in the 1970s.

[Nordahl Grieg \(1902-1943\)](#) play *Vår ære og vår makt* (Our Honour and Power) from 1935 deals with similar themes as those portrayed in *Bør Børson jr.* The play depicts life among the sailors and shipowners in the port city of Bergen during the First World War. Grieg contrasts the life of the two groups by showing the dangerous life of the sailors, who must cross the seas and face Germany's U-boats, with the luxuries and safe life of shipowners back home in Norway. The play received almost unanimous praise by critics, but there were also voices who argued that Grieg was more of an agitator than an artist.¹⁷ This latter criticism was influenced by Grieg's growing admiration for communism and the Soviet Union.

Finally, four Norwegian authors who had personally witnessed the war also wrote about their experiences. [Ingeborg Steen-Hansen \(1885-1964\)](#) published *Fra tre fronter. Med Røde Kors paa slagmarkerne i Belgien, Frankrig og Serbien* (From Three Fronts. With the Red Cross in Belgium, France, and Serbia) in 1916.¹⁸ The book was also published in English, co-authored with St. Claire Livingstone, and detailed Steen-Hansen and Livingstone's service as Red Cross [nurses](#), first on the Western Front in 1914 and later in [Serbia](#). The last part of the book concerned the fall of Serbia and their escape during the great retreat in the autumn of 1915. In addition to Steen-Hansen's memoirs, three post-war autobiographies were published by soldiers who had served during the war. [Tryggve Gran \(1889-1980\)](#) *Under britisk flag. Krigen 1914-1918* (*Under the British Flag. The War 1914-1918*) was published in 1919 and deals with Gran's attachment to the Royal Air Force during the war. [Lyder Ramstad \(1885-1952\)](#), who had served with the German forces on the Western Front, published *Med tyskerne på vestfronten* (With the Germans on the Western Front) in 1930. The book is a mixture of boy's adventure and ideological justification for his military service with Germany. [Knut Werswick \(1894-1974\)](#) *Fra borger til soldat* (From Citizen to Soldier) is a more personal story that deals with the horrors of war and is, to a large extent, built on the author's own experience as a Canadian soldier during the war. Werswick emigrated to [Canada](#) before the war and was drafted into the Canadian Expeditionary Force before being sent back to Europe. The story was published in 1929 and is similar in tone to Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*.

Werswick offers the reader realistic descriptions of trench warfare: “read and be sick” as one reviewer noted.¹⁹ The book is clearly anti-war and foreshadows Werswick’s emerging [pacifism](#), which would only grow during the 1930s.

Radicalization

In September 1921, the radical magazine *Mot Dag* published its first issue, which included a manifesto by the editorial staff who stated that their political views had been “moulded by the impressions of a world war”.²⁰ The manifesto went on to state that they had watched with horror as “the youth of Europe had been mowed down, and generations of culture had been shot to pieces”. It accused both the scientists and cultural elites of Europe of having exacerbated the conflict and willingly joined in the service of killing.²¹ For the subsequent decade and a half, the political group of intellectuals and laborers associated with the magazine would shape the politics of the [labour movement](#), and indeed its influence would extend after its dissolution in 1936. Under the leadership of its founder [Erling Falk \(1887-1940\)](#), the group became an important supporter of the radical leader of the Norwegian Labour Party, [Martin Tranmæl \(1879-1967\)](#).

Many of the magazine’s editorial staff and contributors were recruited from the Norwegian Student’s Society in Christiania (Oslo) and had come of age during the war. The society had itself become an important arena for debate during the First World War. Prominent speakers that were invited included notable dignitaries such as the country’s Prime Minister [Gunnar Knudsen \(1848-1928\)](#) and foreign visitors like [Friedrich Naumann \(1860-1919\)](#), member of the German *Reichstag*, who spoke on “*Deutschlands Sache*”.²² Other speakers who also sparked fierce discussion included the journalist [Jakob Friis \(1883-1956\)](#), who gave a speech entitled *Tysk demokrati - engelsk imperialism* (German Democracy - English Imperialism).²³ Disagreements were often continued in the student publication *Minerva*, edited from 1916 by [Sigurd Hoel \(1890-1960\)](#), later a founding member of *Mot Dag*, and Erling Winsnes (1893-1935). Both Hoel and Winsnes became radical socialists during the war years, but while Hoel remained loyal to the labour movement and an important chronicler of an emerging modern society, Winsnes became increasingly fascinated by reactionary ideas and ideologies. In the 1925, he became the editor of *Norges Fremtid* (Norway’s Future), a magazine published by the newly founded *Fedrelandslaget* (Fatherland League), a right-wing, anti-communist political organisation. Consequently, the First World War and the [Russian revolution](#) impacted heavily on both Winsnes and Hoel. These events shaped their future and the choices they made in the interwar years, resulting in two very different and diverging paths.

Conclusion

While neutrality kept the Norwegian state safe from the direct consequences of modern [warfare](#), Norwegians grappled with coming to terms with the war and its impact on society. Public support for one or the other side of the war was to a large extent muted, in part due to broad support for the government's [policy](#) of neutrality, but also to pressure to censor the public debate from authorities who feared it could jeopardise said neutrality. The war was portrayed as a European tragedy that Norway and other Scandinavian countries had been lucky to escape. Furthermore, many Norwegian intellectuals were confronted by their own divided loyalties during the war. While both Britain and France were viewed favourably by many Norwegians, especially among both the intellectual and political elites, at the outbreak of war, they also retained strong ties to Germany and German culture. This tension might also explain why there were only a few outspoken supporters of either side during the war.

In the interwar years, several young Norwegian intellectuals and artists became more outspoken about the conflict and the impact that the war had on both European and Norwegian society. As in other parts of Europe, these ideas were also coloured by the Bolshevik revolution and its radicalizing effect. While the war continued to be understood as a European tragedy, a deep divide emerged among intellectuals in Norway on how to respond to the fallout of war. For some artists, the answer was provided by totalitarian voices on the political right or left, while others chose the peace movement and international collaboration.

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- [Dagbladet, Norwegian Newspaper \(Nasjonalbiblioteket\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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- [Morgenbladet, Norwegian Newspaper \(Nasjonalbiblioteket\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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- [Sørensen, Henrik: Gethsemane, painting, 1925 \(Nasjonalmuseet\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Sørensen, Henrik: Golgatha, painting, 1925 \(Nasjonalmuseet\) \(Image\)](#)

- [Sørensen, Henrik: Pietà, painting, 1923 \(Nasjonalmuseet\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Sørensen, Henrik: Ærens mark, sketch, 1931 \(Nasjonalmuseet\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Ukens Revy, Norwegian Newspaper \(Nasjonalbiblioteket\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Verdens Gang, Norwegian Newspaper \(Nasjonalbiblioteket\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Norvège](#)

Key Person(s)

[Hintze, Paul von](#); [Lange, Christian Lous](#); [Matisse, Henri](#); [Knudsen, Gunnar](#); [Tranmæl, Martin](#); [Findlay, Mansfeldt](#); [Hamsun, Knut](#); [Herder, Johann Gottfried](#); [Michahelles, Gustav](#); [Frøisland, Frøis](#); [Anker, Ella](#); [Mogens, Victor](#); [Elvestad, Sven](#); [Kjær, Nils](#); [Fangen, Ronald](#); [Christensen, Hjalmar](#); [Erichsen, Olaf Wilhelm](#); [Bjørnson, Bjørn](#); [Bjørnson, Bjørnstjerne](#); [Lie, Erik](#); [Lie, Jonas](#); [Günther, Hermann](#); [Krohg, Per](#); [Sørensen, Henrik](#); [Revolv, Axel](#); [Vogt, Nils Collett](#); [Øverland, Arnulf](#); [Falkberget, Johan](#); [Grieg, Nordahl](#); [Steen-Hansen, Ingeborg](#); [Gran, Tryggve](#); [Ramstad, Lyder](#); [Werswick, Knut](#); [Falk, Erling](#); [Friis, Jakob](#); [Hoel, Sigurd](#); [Winsnes, Erling](#); [Naumann, Friedrich](#); [Remarque, Erich Maria](#); [Nurses](#)

Key Location(s)

[Bergen](#); [Kristiania \(Oslo\)](#); [Paris](#); [Verdun](#)

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