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1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War. Introduction

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1. A Global War

The general public's understanding of the First World War continues to be shaped by the [Western Front](#), images of endless trenches, positional warfare, and the industrial battles of attrition at [Somme](#) and [Verdun](#). In academic history, too, the predominant perspective on the war is still that of Central and Western Europe. The war chiefly appears as a kind of European civil war between [Germany](#),

France, and Great Britain. It has largely been forgotten, at least among the wider public, that Eastern and Southern Europe were more profoundly affected by the war than Central and Western Europe. While many countries in the West, like Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, were able to maintain their neutrality, all of Eastern and Southern Europe was caught up in the hostilities. It is even less commonly known that the losses on the eastern and southern fronts and in the Middle East were higher than in the West, where there was brutal attrition warfare. Accordingly, approximately one-third of the Serbian and Romanian soldiers in the war lost their lives, which was more than twice as many as in the German or in the French armies. The contrast is even clearer when the civilian casualties in Eastern Europe and Asia Minor are taken into account. The Middle East alone bore one-third of the civilian losses in the First World War.

The fact that the East European and Middle Eastern dimension of the world war has hardly registered in the collective consciousness and, at least until recently, even in the research, may be ascribed not least to the Soviet Union's fixation on the founding myth of the Russian Revolution. This effectively obscured the memory of the Great War, even though the Soviet Union actually emerged out of the conflict. In countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia, citizens recalled the nation-state formation that occurred at the conclusion of the war and the conflicts that followed, rather than the war itself. Turkey was no exception in this regard. Here, the First World War did not become the central point of reference in the collective memory, but rather the resultant war of independence that was primarily waged against Greece and culminated in the founding of the republic.

The First World War, however, not only affected all of Europe, but was also a global conflict. The term "world war" was already occasionally in use before 1914, though it specifically connoted a war between the major European powers. The First World War was soon designated a "world war" in this Eurocentric sense shortly after it began. This did not refer first and foremost to a "global war," but rather to a "war of world-historical significance." One therefore frequently simply spoke of the "Great War," a designation that persists to this day in many countries. Historians adopted the term "First World War" from contemporaries in its thoroughly ambiguous and Eurocentric meaning. At the same time, aside from the United States' entry into the conflict, its global dimension was largely ignored. Only in recent years has historical research turned to the worldwide aspects of the war.

In an age marked by the experience of increasingly rapid globalization, the global character of the First World War deserves special attention. The war was not only a profound turning point for Europe, but also for many countries outside the continent. The war suddenly brought them into contact with the globalized world, and the blessings and curses of modernity. It transformed their self-awareness and their relationship to the empires, while providing them with critical momentum towards decolonization that remained effective long after 1918. No event in previous world history had changed the lives of so many people on every continent. The war was not only conducted between the European powers outside Europe, such as in Africa or on the world's oceans, like many conflicts before it. The fighting now also directly involved sovereign non-European states on a large scale, above all Japan, the Ottoman Empire and the United States, and numerous other nations.

The intense efforts of both sides to recruit allies contributed to the spread of the war. In order to motivate other nations to enter the war it was necessary to make concessions with regard to their territorial interests. As a result, more and more regional conflicts that had little to do with the central event added fuel to the fire. This dynamic can be observed in the cases of [Romania](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Italy](#), [Portugal](#), as well as Japan, the Ottoman Empire and [China](#). They all attempted to exploit the primary European conflict in order to protect themselves against neighbors they perceived as superior and to reclaim lost sovereignty, as with the Ottoman Empire and China, or to claim additional territory, as with Japan, which became the dominant power in the East Asia during the First World War. [Australia](#) and [South Africa](#) also tried to utilize the war for their own purposes and inflamed the hostilities through their sub-imperialism. When the US finally entered the war, hardly any state could afford to remain on the sidelines, especially as it was certain that the map of the world would be redrawn at the victors' conference table. This dynamic is demonstrated, for instance, by [Latin American](#) and other states that now followed the example of the United States in entering the war.

The war also became a global conflict due to the fact that France and Great Britain [mobilized the resources of their colonial empires](#), not only economically, but also militarily. The British Empire alone comprised one-fourth of the world population. France recruited 550,000 men from its colonies, 440,000 of whom were deployed in Europe. The territories of the British Empire provided a total of 1.2 million soldiers, with 900,000 of these serving in Europe. Beyond this, the British and the French also made massive use of laborers from their colonies and [China](#) in Europe.

The First World War was also a global economic war. The Central Powers were largely cut off from world markets by the Allied [naval blockade](#). As a result, they had to readjust their economies in an especially radical manner. The [U-boat war](#) also forced the Entente powers to concentrate their domestic resources in critical sectors and to regulate imports. The key to their success, however, did not lie in their increased rationing of limited natural resources, but in their massive intervention in international markets under state leadership and purchase of [raw materials](#), provisions, and goods of every kind on an immense scale. As a consequence, the British Ministry of Munitions developed into the world's largest trading concern. The Allies' control of global markets was then strengthened by the United States' entry into the war. Its effectiveness was assured because there were hardly any other markets outside of the Entente where producers of raw materials could sell their goods.

For this reason alone, the First World War also had a profound impact on neutral countries and regions of the world like East Asia and Latin America where there was little or no fighting. The war, moreover, was a global media event that was also closely observed and followed outside Europe, as recent studies on Japan and Latin America demonstrate. Both sides also engaged in a global [propaganda](#) battle, as they tried to influence and sway the sympathies of the world public. Here, too, the Entente powers enjoyed greater success for a variety of reasons.

2. A Total War?

Borders were also blurred in the First World War because civilians were victimized to an extent that

was previously unimaginable. Both the Allies' sea blockade and the German U-boat war aimed to place a stranglehold on the enemy's entire economy, armaments production, and food supply. It is therefore possible to speak of a trend towards "total war." Indeed, in the First World War, civilians were made the direct target of violence from the beginning, as for example during the German invasion in Belgium and France in the summer of 1914, when 6,500 people were put to death, or in the first aerial bombing raids. Throughout the [occupied territories](#) and in [Russia](#), civilians and [prisoners of war](#) were subjected to [forced labor](#). The regime of the Young Turks used the war as an opportunity to commit an unprecedented [genocide against the Christian Armenian population](#).

The war was a constant learning process for everyone involved. It represented a new kind of mass industrial war in which the old axioms were no longer valid. The war could no longer be steered by the individual actors, for it essentially took on a dynamic whose momentum and protean transformations defied comprehension. By the same token, it is not possible to speak of a natural process, for the decisions were made, after all, by human beings. Ultimately, the Allied high command, and Marshall [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) in particular, succeeded in conducting coalition warfare, integrating all aspects of military operations and logistics. It is further possible to speak of "totalization" because the conflict touched upon more or less every area of existence. By the end of the war, nothing was as it had been before. The victorious nations in Europe emerged weakened from the conflict; Europe had lost its dominant position in the world, while the United States and Japan were the war's great beneficiaries in economic terms and in their geo-strategic position. Although from a historical perspective starving populations are usually not in a position to bring about a [revolution](#), the failure of the authoritarian regimes to ensure the rational distribution of supplies was largely responsible for the old order's loss of legitimacy by the end of the war and the revolutions that developed in [Russia](#), [Germany](#), and [Austria-Hungary](#). Of course, Britain and France were able to expand their empires after the war through the partitioning of the German colonies and the Ottoman Empire, but the idea of a people's right to self-determination was now in the air. Liberation movements stirred in the colonies, from [Egypt](#) to [India](#), and numerous states were formed as a direct result of the world war. In 1922, most of [Ireland](#) gained independence. The white settler colonies of the British Empire demanded complete autonomy and ultimately received it. Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians recognized themselves for the first time in the world war as nations. To this day, Australians and New Zealanders celebrate Anzac day on 25 April in order to commemorate the fallen at [Gallipoli](#). Poland, Czechoslovakia, [Finland](#), [Estonia](#), [Latvia](#) and [Lithuania](#) obtained their independence, and a Serb-dominated state that soon became known as [Yugoslavia](#) emerged.

The world war not only accelerated the process of nation-building, but also encouraged the radicalization of ideologies. The fall of the tsarist regime in Russia and the assumption of power by the most radical opponents of the war, the Bolsheviks, are therefore hardly imaginable without the war. The Bolsheviks became the model for the communist movements that soon sprouted up everywhere. Extreme [nationalism](#), however, also spread and became more radicalized in many countries due to the war. The champions of [fascism](#), for instance, soon took power after the war in

Italy. While these trends certainly existed before the war, the conflict nonetheless accelerated and consolidated these processes decisively.

One of the effects of the war was the [devastation of entire landscapes](#). Though Germany suffered very little in this regard, throughout western and eastern Europe millions of homes, businesses, [churches](#) and works of art were destroyed. Vast agricultural areas were contaminated or too dangerous to use for decades. Starvation continued to be an issue even years after the war, especially in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East. [East Africa](#) had been so devastated by the war that a famine led to the death of 1 million people. The destruction that was wrought by the war, however, was not only of a physical or material nature. In 1915, [Sigmund Freud \(1856-1939\)](#) had already observed that the war had "destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences."^[1] Indeed, the war had also resulted in the mobilization of intellectuals on both sides. At the end of the culture war, there were not only incinerated libraries, but also a lasting irreconcilability between the enemy nations.

3. The Long War

Extending the point of view beyond Central and Western Europe puts the war's conventional periodization into perspective. The First World War was not only a global war, but also an especially long one. In many respects, the war already began before 1914, primarily in the [Balkans](#) and in peripheral colonies like Libya. It also lasted much longer than until 1918, though not only for the familiar reason that the Treaty of Versailles essentially created the conditions for the Second World War because of its failure to create a stable international order and was partially responsible for the rise of fascism and National Socialism. Even without a more expansive definition, the year 1918 did not signify the end of hostilities, for numerous additional wars and armed conflicts followed that were directly related to the war and which to some extent continued through the early 1920s. The list of these violent conflicts is long. It extends from the [Russian Civil War](#), which cost more lives in the region than the First World War, to the many conflicts after 1918 in East-Central Europe and to the Greco-Turkish War, which did not come to an end until the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

The commemoration of the war was also often fiercely debated. For instance, the history of the Weimar Republic was marked by acrimonious controversies about how to remember the world war. Even though the overwhelming majority of the population and the veterans of the war were against the idea of ever going to war again, there was clear disagreement about the war's memorialization. There was no national collective memory, only a struggle over interpretational sovereignty. The military and the foreign office were especially adept at masking defeats and highlighting victories. The well-financed campaign of the foreign office and numerous scholars against the so-called war-guilt clause and reparations exemplified the refusal of large portions of German society to acknowledge defeat. The election of the war's victorious commander in the East, [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#), as *Reich* president in 1925 signaled an important turning point in this respect.

As the basic structure of the German army was still intact, it was able freely to disseminate dangerous historical myths and engage in the psychological preparation of a new war. The experience of the world war, as well as the brutal violence conducted against internal enemies by the *Freikorps* and army units in the Weimar Republic, facilitated the manifestation of several elements of future Nazi warfare: mass killings and the elimination of the enemy and his culture; ruthless exploitation of the human and natural resources of occupied lands without moral or humanitarian constraints; and the absolute supremacy of the military over all civilian authorities. In other words, it laid the groundwork for the expectation and the demand for a future "total war."

This is not to make a general argument in favor of the well-known brutalization thesis of [George Mosse \(1918-1999\)](#), however. To be sure, without the war, [Benito Mussolini \(1883-1945\)](#) and his German admirer would never have come to power. The conflict made it possible for both Mussolini and [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) to reinvent themselves as frontline soldiers and charismatic leaders who introduced the values of war to society and the political culture. Nonetheless, even in 1939, most Italians and Germans were still against the idea of a new war and, as the security service of the SS complained, wanted to maintain the peace.

With National Socialism's rise to power, the orientation toward a "total state" in Italy, and the radicalization of [Joseph Stalin's \(1878-1953\)](#) rule, three "mobilizing dictatorships" emerged from the world war. From that point forward, they engaged in permanent rearmament and viewed war as a means of consolidating power. The contrast could hardly have been greater to the democracies that were based on social consensus at home and which endeavored – with the exception of the colonial sphere – to resolve conflicts as peacefully as possible.

4. The Encyclopedia: Multiple Perspectives

These are just a few of the central [historiographical](#) perspectives that inform the encyclopedia's orientation. The encyclopedia aims to portray the First World War in its entire spectrum from a transnational point of view as a pan-European and global conflict that extended beyond the year 1918. This transnational approach includes making a comparison between the participating nations and regions, as well as considering their diverse entanglements and interdependencies. From a global perspective that is not limited to the military events, there is hardly such a thing as actual neutrality, just various types of participation in the war. The encyclopedia thus also deliberately includes the neutral countries and regions that were greatly affected by the war – whether in terms of their political or economic development, the media, or mentalities.

While these perspectives are not new to scholars, they have not yet become part of the wider public's common knowledge. The encyclopedia intends to summarize the latest knowledge of international experts and make it accessible to a general audience to a degree that is more comprehensive than has been the case so far. In this way, it aims to make a contribution to a post-national and global understanding of the First World War that includes the culture of remembrance. Through its comparative global design, the encyclopedia will also strive to identify knowledge gaps

and to thereby stimulate further research.

These perspectives and objectives are reflected in the encyclopedia's article structure in various ways.

The encyclopedia not only presents the current state of research, but also solicits and publishes new research findings. The site's users are able to find state-of-the-art information on the central themes and the most important developments both during and after the First World War. In addition, they are also able to discover entirely new research in the encyclopedia, particularly as 1914-1918-online also takes account of recent lines of research, like the history of emotions, and contains articles on topics like ["subjectivity"](#) and ["emotions in war"](#).

The encyclopedia therefore offers global, transnational, comparative, but also national and – above all on the level of encyclopedic entries – local and individual perspectives. It depicts a multilayered history of the First World War which has brought individual, local, regional, national and transnational histories together in an unprecedented way. Users are able to choose among depictions of various depth and different complexity and levels of abstraction – from transnational summary articles to encyclopedic entries.

The encyclopedia does not conclude with the year 1918. It does justice to the previously mentioned extended periodization and methodically examines the conflicts that followed immediately from the war, but also its other consequences and commemoration. There are, accordingly, articles on the [Russian Civil War](#), the [Independence Wars in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia](#), as well as the [Polish-Soviet War 1920-1921](#), along with a comprehensive thematic survey article on the subject of ["Postwar Welfare Policies,"](#) which examines from a comparative perspective the significance of the war for the development of the welfare state. Moreover, the encyclopedia features contributions on topics as diverse as [Colonial Empires after the War/Decolonization](#), [The Spanish Flu](#), [Veterans' Associations](#), [The Paris Peace Conference and its Consequences](#), [Historiography 1918-today](#) and, last but not least, [Centenary 1914-2014](#).

5. Structure of Content

The encyclopedia provides four different article types:

1. *Survey Articles (Regional)* offer an overview of the region or country
2. *Survey Articles (Thematic)* offer a transnational and comparative overview of a topic
3. *Regional Thematic Articles* treat a specific subject for a region or a country
4. *Encyclopedic Entries* provide concise encyclopedic entries, e.g. on events, people, and organizations

1914-1918-online is therefore not only an encyclopedia in the narrow sense, but also a comprehensive guide.

5.1. Survey Articles (Regional)

The encyclopedia is divided up into the following eleven world regions: *Africa, Australasia, Central Europe, East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, North America, Middle East, South and South-East Asia, South-East Europe* and *Western Europe*. This division clearly indicates the project's global character or parameters and shows that the regions that have so far been underrepresented in the research have equal standing.

These regions are, in turn, subdivided into individual nations, each of which has its own Regional Survey Article, or respectively its own Encyclopedic Entry. These articles provide an overview of the development of individual countries during the time of the First World War, whereby the prehistory and the consequences of the conflict are also thoroughly examined. Not only are political and military developments treated here, but so are social, economic and cultural trends. Consideration is also given to neutral countries like Sweden or Spain, and states that were first established during or after the First World War, like Poland or Czechoslovakia.

5.2. Survey Articles (Thematic)

In addition, the encyclopedia is divided into six thematic sections: *Pre-war, Power, Violence, Media, Home Front, and Post-war*. This division is oriented in terms of the main focal points of the research on the First World War. In these sections, there are Thematic Survey Articles such as [Schools and Universities](#) in the section *Home Front*, or [Russian Civil War](#) in the section *Post-war*. Further examples of these transnational and comparative Thematic Survey Articles include [Prisoners of War, Revolutions, Labor, Transportation and Logistics](#) or [Colonial Empires after the War/Decolonization](#). Along with comparative, transnational survey articles, many of these themes also include regional articles that are directly linked to the survey articles, for instance to [Labor](#) during the war in [Germany](#), [France](#), [Russia](#), [India](#), or [China](#). Readers of the encyclopedia are thus able to directly click from developments in labor policy in Germany to those in France, or to consult the summary article that is based on the regional articles and discusses the developments in labor policy during the First World War from a comparative perspective.

5.3. Regional Thematic Articles

The *Regional Thematic Articles*, however, not only include comparative articles like the ones mentioned above, but also articles on subjects that are specific to certain countries and regions. For example, in the section *Great Britain and Ireland* there is an article on the [Easter Rising](#) which deals with the 1916 Irish rebellion against Great Britain in pursuit of independence. Similarly, the *Indochina* section includes an article on Religious Missionaries and the Colonial State 1914-1918. In the section *Africa*, an article on [Post-war Colonial Administration](#) treats changes in the colonial administration of territories that "switched owners" as a result of the war.

5.4. Encyclopedic Entries

The longer articles are supplemented by the *Encyclopedic Entries*, the actual encyclopedic articles. They are divided into six categories: Persons; Organizations; Events; Objects; Spaces; Concepts, Practices and Policies. Examples of these entries include: [U.S. race riots](#), [Battle of Kostiuchnowka](#), [Russian-Japanese War](#), [March First Movement \(Korea\)](#), [Sič riflemen](#), [Commission for Relief in Belgium](#), [Hindustan](#) and [Edith Cavell](#). The latter is an entry in the category *Person*. Here, the regional thematic article [Literature \(France\)](#) is linked to the encyclopedic entry [Henri Barbusse](#), which deals with the French writer who wrote the famous anti-war novel [Le Feu](#). As a result of the taxonomy that links the encyclopedia's content, writers from other countries are linked with the lemma "Henri Barbusse", e.g. [Robert Musil](#) or [Erich Maria Remarque](#).

6. A Global Project

The encyclopedia is supervised by a project team in Berlin. The content of the project is coordinated at the Institute of History at the Freie Universität Berlin. The technical side of the project is overseen by the Center for Digital Systems at the Freie Universität Berlin. Additional support is also provided by the Bavarian State Library in Munich. The library is responsible for permanent archiving and also catalogs the encyclopedia's individual articles, which can be located and searched in the worldwide library network catalog.

An editorial board is responsible for the encyclopedia's content. The board consists of a thirteen-member Editorial Advisory Board, which supports the editors in an advisory capacity, seven General Editors and seventy Section Editors. The seven General Editors, who are located in Europe, the United States, and South Africa, are the encyclopedia's primary editors. They established the encyclopedia's guidelines and take all strategic decisions. They also act as referees in a two-stage review process which every article of the encyclopedia must go through.

The Section Editors, all of whom are well-known and highly qualified experts, maintain the regional and thematic sections of the encyclopedia. They devise concepts for the articles of their section and recommend authors. Moreover, the Section Editors are responsible for conducting the first peer reviews of the articles of their section.

In total, the Editorial Board consists of ninety experts, who come from twenty different countries. While the USA (17), Germany (15) and Great Britain (13) predominate, experts are also strongly represented from Russia (6), France (5), Ireland (5), Austria (5), and Italy (4). The remaining editors come from Australia (1), China (1), Japan (2), Canada (2), Lebanon (1), Luxembourg (1), the Netherlands (1), Poland (2), Portugal (2), Switzerland (2), Serbia (1), South Africa (1), Belgium (1), Lebanon (1) and Turkey (1).

In addition, the review process is supported by over seventy external referees. In a second assessment stage, they evaluate the articles jointly with the General Editors within the framework of an anonymous peer review. This two-stage evaluation process, which is required for all contributions to the encyclopedia, ensures the high academic quality of the site's content.

There are over 900 authors from around the world who write for the encyclopedia. Authors from Trinidad and Tobago, Indonesia and Nigeria contribute to the encyclopedia as well as authors from Germany, Great Britain, and France. Occasionally, articles are also written by author collectives from different countries. One article on the subject of [Commemoration and the Cult of the Fallen](#), for example, provides a comparative analysis of Poland, the Baltic States and Finland. The article was jointly written by a German, a Polish, and a Finnish author.

Furthermore, the project is supported by over twenty partner organizations from ten countries. These include institutions like the [Imperial War Museum](#) in London, the [Koloniales Bildarchiv](#) in Frankfurt am Main and the [Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte](#) in Stuttgart. They provide documentary material, mainly image sources, for the encyclopedia from their own collections. Among these partners is also the project [European Film Gateway 1914](#), financed by the European Union. It digitizes material on the First World War, which are directly linked to the encyclopedia's content.

The *German Historical Institutes* in [Moscow](#), [Warsaw](#), [London](#), [Paris](#) and [Rome](#) assist the encyclopedia's editors and finance translations into English. Moreover, several of these institutes organize conferences for the regional sections. The sections East Central Europe and Russian Empire are supervised at the *German Historical Institutes* in Warsaw and Moscow. Here, the directors of the institutes function as Section Editors. These institutes also provide grants for authors. They have, further, assigned their own employees with the task of writing contributions for the encyclopedia or to oversee the sections as reviewers. New research exclusive to the encyclopedia is expected above all from Poland, where the research on the First World War lagged behind for many years.

1914-1918-online has also been approached about a number of ongoing research projects on the First World War that have offered to supervise sections of the encyclopedia, including several that were originally not involved in the project. One example is the project [Die Schweiz im Ersten Weltkrieg](#) carried out at the universities in Zurich, Geneva, Berne and Lucerne, which will develop the section *Switzerland*. Further examples include the historians at Lisbon University, who supervise the section *Portugal*, or the colleagues at the University of Kyoto, who oversee the section *Japan*. These collaborations make the encyclopedia especially innovative because they put a spotlight on countries that have so far been neglected in First World War Studies.

Another project partner is [CENDARI](#) (Collaborative European Digital Archive Infrastructure), a project sponsored by the European Union. It brings together the archive on the First World War and its electronic resources across national borders and, in this way, is constructing a digital research infrastructure on the First World War. The articles in 1914-1918-online are connected to this infrastructure, allowing for archival material on relevant topics to be linked to in a targeted manner.

1914-1918-online is, accordingly, the largest and most global project and network in the field of First World War Studies. It now comprises over 1,000 experts from around the world who are affiliated with the project as editors, authors, reviewers, and institutional partners.

7. A Global Publication

To conclude, a few words are called for about the advantages of publishing such an encyclopedia on the Internet. First and foremost, it is worth mentioning that 1914-1918-online will be accessible to all users free of charge. Furthermore, all content is published in the English language. This will allow the encyclopedia to maximize the level of awareness and its impact beyond the circle of experts and to be accessible to students, instructors, and an interested public all over the world.

An additional advantage to digital publication is that the articles may be published as they become available and updated at any time. The various versions of an article can also always be accessed. What is more, the online publication allows for the medial enrichment of the individual articles with image, audio, and video material and other digitized sources, as well as links to library catalogs and external web content. In this way, they are integrated into the “knowledge space” of the Internet.

Beyond this, online publication permits an innovative way of navigating through voluminous collections of texts. The articles are searchable and linked together in a variety of ways. As a result, users are able both to browse the extensive text collection associatively and specifically to access desired information. They can also compile a sample of articles related to a specific interest, for instance according to subject, keywords, countries or regions. This makes it considerably easier for users to recognize interconnections and relationships, but also to draw comparisons. The encyclopedia’s transnational and global focus is therefore also fundamentally supported and validated by its technical structure and the form and medium of its publication.

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Notes

1. ↑ Freud, Sigmund: Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915), in Mitscherlich, Alexander/Richards, Angela/Strachey, James: Sigmund Freud, Studienausgabe, Frankfurt 1969-1975, volume 14, pp. 275-300.

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