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Making Sense of the War (France)

By Juliette Courmont

To support the war, people needed to be able to make sense of it, and the French successfully achieved this. To do so, the elite and actors “from below” worked together to concoct a complex rhetoric against the Germans and to confound *Kultur* with barbarism. This article will examine the mechanisms employed and point up their main features by analysing the “culture of war” – understood here as the set of representations and practices created by the warring parties to support the war and give it meaning –, and its unique, particularly violent attributes in France.

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Introduction

On 1 August 1914, the order to mobilize ushered [France](#) into the war. Everyone initially assumed that the conflict would be brief and the population broadly supported the war. Indeed, following the German invasion of [Belgium](#) and [Luxembourg](#), the French faced a very real threat of direct aggression. And yet with the German offensive in the autumn of 1914 and the gradual entrenching of armies at the front, the face of the war began to change. The war became more difficult and much longer than the French had initially imagined, but they nonetheless maintained their support over the next four years, although there were at times moments of doubt and the scope of support varied somewhat by social group.

Supporting the war over such a long course required great effort from the nations involved; the ability of the parties at war to exert such effort was so influential on the outcome that [Germany](#) was defeated. Under the circumstances, the funding, supply of arms and massive mobilization of men could not have been fathomed without total and complete support from the population. This meant collective, civil support, driven by national sentiment which nonetheless needed to be flexible in order to adapt to the array of individual positions. While the great momentum of the war's onset was enough to drive its support in the first days, the same was not true in the months and years to follow. Then, the meaning given to the conflict was necessary to provide the fuel to carry on. Here, we will examine how the French were able to support the war over the long term.

We will begin by showing how, from the outset, very broad-scale mobilization legitimized the war in the eyes of the entire population. Then we will examine how war experiences aligned with the representations that were created, and how such representations in turn worked to shape the war experience. Finally, we will seek to understand why French [war culture](#)^[1] was so violent and at times even surpassed the violence in other allied and enemy countries.

Historiographical background

Interest in the meaning given to the war is rooted, as we shall see below, in the cultural history of the war which has become an important influence in the [historiography](#) of the First World War since the early 1990s – and in [France](#) more particularly following the publication of the seminal article by [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) (1990) and the book he co-wrote with [Annette Becker](#) (2000). The field opened by this research is extremely vast, both in terms of the new perspectives offered and the ongoing debate that it has continuously fuelled. Here, we will limit ourselves to briefly pointing up its main parameters in order to understand the issues at play.

The notion of “brutalization” defined by historian [George Mosse \(1918-1999\)](#) in reference to [Italy](#) and Germany is the first point of discord. Refuted by some, like [Antoine Prost](#), it is seen as a blanket concept for all of the countries at war by Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau.

The second rift is based on an (often imagined) divide between the cultural and social history of the war. For historians connected to the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* (the Museum of the Great War, in Péronne, Somme department, France), war culture at times transcends the social divide; for their critics, notably Frédéric Rousseau and [Rémy Cazals](#), it is almost always necessary to take a social history approach to understand the representations at work at the time. The choice of primary source accounts studied by the different schools of thought – the sources upon which their differing views of the history of the First World War are based – has led to debate over the representativeness of the different accounts used.

A final point involves the motivation of soldiers and the answer to the infamous question “why did they continue to fight?” first studied from the angle of consent by [Jean-Jacques Becker](#) and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau in the early 1990s when they examined discourse and mentalities to understand their anthropological rooting. For others, notably Frédéric Rousseau and Rémy Cazals, men held out simply because they had no other choice. That is why the CRID 14-18 (International collective for research and debate on the First World War), a group of historians that offer a counter-perspective to the researchers associated with the *Historial* in Péronne, prefer to focus on concrete circumstances to explain the soldiers’ “tenacity”.

Unanimous mobilization to justify the war to the population

How public authorities justified involvement in the war

In the summer of 1914, the question of what meaning to give to the war was initially part of a top-down process to justify to the population the mobilization decided by public authorities. The French were by no means prepared for the war, as newspapers from the period clearly underscore: the situation in the Balkans was not at all front page news until the very end of July. Moreover, [pacifism](#) was predominant and the initial reactions to the war’s imminence came via demonstrations against the war organized by socialists and unionists, like the one in Paris on 27 July. The mobilization of 1 August as such came as a surprise to most of the French population – a surprise and an about-face since the protest and pacifism almost immediately gave way to resolve and the “[Union Sacrée](#)”.

This concept was outlined quickly, on 4 August, in a message from the President of the Republic [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) to parliamentarians^[2] in which he made several references to national reconciliation. The nation was described as a family and the call to patriotism was largely justified by the flouting of the law so dear to France. Among other things, the country’s history required it to be a model of civilization and to defend “liberty, justice and reason”. As such, the community of French people, their history and their soil were assimilated to conjure the Nation State just as it had been constructed in the 19th century. This process occurred in other countries too and,

according to historian Jean-Jacques Becker, made it possible to understand the war "for the first time and in some respects for the last time", as a "war of peoples."^[3]

While arguments about the country's national defence made sense and the majority of the population supported the war – even among the working class, whose ideological stance differed quite radically on the topic –, the meaning of the "*Union Sacrée*" was not self-evident since it was not an ideology but rather a practice that did nothing to obscure ideological differences and interpretations of the war. Indeed, temporarily putting aside their points of discord did not mean giving them up, particularly since everyone was convinced that the war would be brief. And so despite being a model, the French *Union Sacrée* was still very much a façade. Nationalists, socialists and Catholics all had very different expectations for the war and the *Union Sacrée* government, formed in late August, clearly reflected this, with the inclusion of centre-left nationalist representatives and, for the first time, socialists, but no one from the Catholic right wing – there were limits to any compromise.

The broad acceptance of the war facilitated the orchestration of information to rally public opinion. Although no official system was really operational before December 1914 and the French press bureau under Ministry of War control, there was a spontaneous rallying of the national media who accepted [censorship](#) and disseminated anything that might further convince the population that France was acting with good reason. The media's zeal occasionally exceeded even the wildest expectations of the state [propaganda](#) machine, thus quickly earning the national press a reputation for "brainwashing": rumours about the inefficiency of German [weapons](#), accounts of German [atrocities](#) just as they invaded, almost anything could get published in the name of victory.

The self-mobilization of intellectuals

On top of the official justification for the war provided by public authorities and the press, intellectuals partook in patriotic mobilization that took various forms to legitimize the conflict. Here, too, the price paid often involved sudden ideological wavering or even outright about-facing. Indeed, the war led to a reversal of roles and the scientific community, whose work up to that point had been quite international, began to see an insurmountable otherness in all things foreign.

Under the pretext of their responsibility to the war, intellectuals essentially traded in their freedom of thought for discourse that was hostile towards the enemy. Like the youth mobilized on the battlefield, older intellectuals self-mobilized into a war of words, despite the fact that nothing seemingly required them to do so.

This commitment was first expressed collectively through texts such as the "Manifesto by French Universities to the Universities of neutral countries. A reply to the protest by German Universities" published on 3 November 1914. As its title implies, the text was not the first of its kind; it was a response to the "Protest to the civilized world" signed by ninety-three German intellectuals on 4 October 1914, and it was part of an obscure array of declarations by different European intellectual communities. The arguments advanced were all similar and based on the idea that German

intellectuals were traitors in order to dispel any doubt about Germany's cultural contributions to European civilization.

Intellectuals also mobilized on an individual level, however, like philosopher [Henri Bergson \(1859-1941\)](#) who gave clear meaning to the war on 8 August 1914 when he spoke at the tribune of the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* (Academy of moral and political science): “the struggle underway against Germany is that of civilization versus Barbarism”. This was a Manichean interpretation that he constantly defended, as did other well-known French scientific figures including sociologist [Emile Durkheim \(1858-1917\)](#). The latter got involved with the *Comité d'études et de documentation sur la guerre* which was created on his initiative with historian [Ernest Lavisse \(1842-1922\)](#) and redirected his research to reflect this focus, for example with the 1915 publication of *Germany above all: German mentality and war*. Many intellectuals followed suit. Doctor [Edgar Bérillon \(1859-1948\)](#), who in the pre-war years had studied the psychology of olfactory perception, even proved in early 1915 that the Germans suffered from “fetid bromidrosis”, an alleged disorder to which they were racially prone and that physically distanced them from other peoples.^[4] This written commitment by intellectuals – which occurred alongside the military engagement of those who were able to enlist – as such worked to create war front [literature](#).

Above all, the self-mobilization of intellectuals provided well formulated, ideological interpretations of the conflict which underscored the issues at play.

Enlisting children to support the war

As a [total war](#), the Great War pushed back the limits that had been commonly accepted in previous conflicts; this notably involved addressing the youngest generations, considered to be actors on the home front. Historian [Manon Pignot](#) has shown how France stood out in this respect by targeting [children](#) with discourse that was more violent than the other warring parties, and by targeting them at an earlier age.

Mobilizing [children](#) was similar to rallying adults. It involved justifying the war and fostering patriotism, since children belonged to the nation and therefore needed to partake in its defence. It also involved repeatedly claiming France's right and the enemy's barbarism. This involved teaching children to hate the enemy – the “*Boches*” – and emphasizing the Germans' moral and racial inferiority. Lastly, it involved cultivating a degree of guilt since it was for their future that the country was at war and, as such, they held a special place in the war that meant they were fully involved.

Upon ministerial request, French schools had to adapt and the war was on the curriculum starting in 1914. Schools even became an intermediary with the front via the collection of donations for the war effort and the writing of letters to soldiers. In addition to [school](#), children were also confronted with other discourse in their daily lives. For example, in their leisure activities, since games and books were refocused through the lens of the war and became powerful vectors for childhood mobilization; but also through religion, which encouraged children to pray for the saviour of the country and its

soldiers; and in their families, where they were enjoined to adopt an appropriate attitude given the circumstances.

While all of these messages were directed at children, there was no way of knowing exactly how they would interpret or internalize them. For children like adults, therefore, the question was how to make sense of the war?

War experiences and representations

Understanding the war based on experience

Since the interpretations of the war promoted by the public and moral authorities were focused on the collective nature of the war, they do not necessarily represent the diversity of lived experiences. To examine these, we need to take a closer look at the accounts of French people and observe how they connected elite discourse to their own experience.

Many sources indeed reflect the common representations of the time. This is the case, for example, in the journal of a twelve year old girl from Picardie whose home was occupied.^[5] Her text employs all of the *topoi* of German barbarism: filth, gluttony, drunkenness, animal nature, vileness, theft and vice. It reveals the obvious contagion of the mainstream racist and patriotic discourse, as does this account by another occupied woman in Guise, in the Aisne department, according to whom: "homes get dirty, a thick layer of dust gets all over your belongings, everywhere there is the filthy stench of sweat and tobacco, an overpowering *Boche smell* that won't go away."^[6] This account also refers to the filth of the *occupier* and mentions the thick dust and lingering odour to reinforce its claim; the "Boche smell", however, actually recalls a pre-existing state, since it already has a name. This is not particularly surprising when we know that the woman was a teacher and the role that schools played in spreading such representations. Similarly, a resident of occupied Lille wrote in her journal on 28 March 1915: "There was an unpleasant smell wafting through the air. Such is the case wherever there are Germans *I think*."^[7]

In these examples, people's experience appears to confirm the ubiquitous discourse and reflect how it was interiorized; other sources, however, show that some representations were forged more spontaneously. Far from the official propaganda, they shed very different light on the mechanisms at work in the process of demonizing the enemy.

Direct confrontation and the construction of a hostile enemy figure

While the war context obviously created a biased lens through which to view the events, this was not sufficient to explain the existence of another type of source: spontaneous and virulent accounts that attributed to the enemy the most hostile traits without any trace of a normative basis. It is as such that a French artilleryman wrote on 9 November 1918: "We can get rid of the flies, but we cannot eliminate a faint but very distinct odour: the Boche smell. It was easy for me to recognize as I had

smelled it before in 1917 when I was sleeping on the Côte de Talou in a sap we took from the Germans.” The description indeed refers to something that is known, at least amongst a group of soldiers, and perhaps more broadly within the French army, but the perception and discomfort experienced are nonetheless very real. Whereas some authors associated an alleged smell with the animal-like nature of the enemy, therefore making an interpretive leap, this man simply expressed his discomfort.

The repulsion experienced was far from neutral, however, since smell is a convincing tool for distancing the Other. It instantly erects an anthropological barrier that is far more effective than much of the discourse condemning the barbarism of the enemy. And yet, if there was indeed a smell, it was a reflection of the context itself much more than of [the Other](#). More than a “*Boche* smell”, it was actually more about the smell of aggression – an aggression that fuelled and, in turn, legitimized discourse that essentialized the enemy. It is this type of example that brings us closest to the representations forged by the war’s actors themselves and the violence from below.

The war experience: a matrix of representations

While the elite produced a specific war discourse, its matrix was above all the war itself. It was primarily a source of inspiration to confirm the theories advanced. It is as such that, right from the autumn of 1914, arguments about the enemy’s barbarity were broadly reinforced in the different accounts of German atrocities that ran widely in the [French media](#).

The war also inflicted violence that demanded a reply, not so much for revenge as to allow people to simply carry on and make sense of the events that were occurring. The sources that make olfactory accusations are telling in this respect: distancing the enemy is both a way to protect oneself and make possible his killing. It is as such particularly interesting that, throughout the war, representations of the enemy focused on the German figure alone, as though the French had no other enemies in 1914-1918. The French fought on other fronts, but the [Western front](#) was the one where the most men were mobilized, it was the closest to home and therefore the most dangerous both militarily and ideologically. Being so close to home (both figuratively and metaphorically) made it necessary to demonize.

Moreover, the war literally and sustainably transformed men via the repetition and trivialization of the violence they experienced. According to historian George Mosse, this phenomenon notably resulted in a trivialization (in part derealized) of the war experience that is detectable in representations from throughout the war.^[8]

Finally, the ideological rearming of the population was dictated by the war as it played out. After the crux of hostilities in the summer of 1914, there was a new crest in criticism of the enemy Other in 1915, notably in April following the first deadly attack with asphyxiating [gases](#). Indeed, innovative means were immediately used to fuel people’s representations, as seen for example on the cover of the 29 May 1915 issue of *Rire Rouge* which portrayed a “stinky beast” with monstrous traits.

Throughout the war, the particularly violent offensives constantly rekindled the hostile sentiment in those at war. In contrast, in 1916, there was a shift in discourse and, while the accusations remained virulent, their frequency diminished. A certain degree of lassitude set in and German savageness was less virulently attacked.

French war culture was particularly violent

Converging representations

To begin, French war culture was violent because it was widely shared. The power of the representations that spread through society can be explained by the synthesis that occurred between the *topoi* advanced by the elite and those brandished by actors from below, whether they were the result of observation, direct experience with the “Other” or rumours. The French as such collectively elaborated a veritable war culture whose characters were part of a system.

Doctor Edgar Bérillon based his thesis on *bromidrosis* – the disease behind the nauseating smells that allegedly emanated from Germans – not on clinical research but rather on accounts he collected from occupied citizens or soldiers who had spent time near German [prisoners](#) for example. He was not the only one to advance such theories, even before his “research” was published or disseminated. It is obvious that the broad dissemination of such findings, including in publications aimed at the military, encouraged other accounts and most likely influenced them. A multifaceted circulation of elements indeed helped make sense of the war: from bottom to top and vice versa, from one group of actors to another. This constant cross-over provides insight into how it was possible for different elements of society to embrace the different facets of the demonizing process.

What remains, however, is the “who” question that is impossible to really answer. The sources indicate that there were no generational gaps: pre-school children, their parents and grandparents all vehicled the war culture, as letters from the period illustrate. Similarly, there does not appear to have been a social divide: similar accounts can be found in very distinct social spheres. There is more debate over the different positions held about the war. There is evidence to suggest that fraternizing at the front sometimes actually reduced the distance created by rhetoric; but there are also examples from the front that essentialize the enemy, just the same as behind the lines and in occupied regions. This is likely a paradox that reflects the diversity of involvement in the war, particularly given that such involvement could fluctuate for a single person over the course of the war.

Indeed, the fact that the war culture was massively embraced by the population does not mean that it was uniform or that all French citizens approved of it fully; some people came to accept it gradually. The existence of resistance to the war, which took both individual and collective forms, is proof of more or less strong and more or less sustainable dissent towards the conflict. For some, like the shell shocked, such resistance was due to an impossibility to fight and, therefore, their involvement in an imposed war. Some military defeats had a similar effect: a large number of prisoners, the loss

of a large amount of material, broad-scale and rapid withdrawal from a territory that brought the troops closer to surrender – this was the case for example within the French army along the border in August 1914. But the most obvious cases were those which rejected the war altogether: individual refusal for some of the 600 French soldiers executed for having resisted; or collective refusal during mutinies, as was the case in 1917 during the unsuccessful Chemin des Dames offensive. Although interpretations differ on this topic, the opportunity for troops that had refused to take up position on the front lines to keep fighting elsewhere in the war is a telling example of how complex people's feelings were about the war. Constraint alone is not enough to explain such turnarounds. There is a complexity in the scale of consent to the war that exists both in terms how people refused the war (although they were a minority) and how they supported it.

The Germans, animals to hunt down

The violence of French war culture was also expressed in what it said about the Other. The Germans were first described using animal traits, particularly those related to pigs. This image focused on the enemy's primary attributes, which is not without ambivalence since pigs are biologically close to humans. The pig figure was as such particularly suitable for an enemy whose strangeness was not remarkably obvious. Criticism of the German diet – they were called deli meat eaters and gluttons – went well with the bovine image. The argument went that because the enemy does not eat like us – an entirely debatable claim no less – he is different; and from being a pork eater he was turned into a pig.

While this image was effective and extremely widespread during the Great War, it was not the only thing used to construct the enemy figure. An element of disgust was also included that was based on Germans' resemblance to excrement. This symbolic resemblance derived from the bread eaten by the German army, KK bread – whose acronym means excrement in French – and was connected to the ruining of homes during the invasion. Accounts of German atrocities provided proof of this and many sources further relayed it. They called the enemy coprophagous, assimilated *kultur* with “shit” and some even reduced the enemy to this category.

And yet the final touch was still lacking: the enemy was a repugnant *and* wild animal. By making him stink, the enemy was placed at the far end of the animal savagery spectrum. His smell was not due to poor hygiene; it was intrinsic and the result of a combination of factors including the excessive consumption of meat. This was a transformation of the enemy's body that definitively excluded him from humanity and could explain his bestiality. It was a process that allowed connections to be made between representations of the enemy and the overall meaning given to the war through the accusations of Germany's barbarism made by France and its allies.

Legacies

Finally, what is striking about French war culture is the speed with which it spread and the early availability of most of its components. This suddenness was of course a reaction to necessity, but it

was also rooted in a revival that was provoked by the war.

Firstly, a revival of the antagonism of the war of 1870-1871. Part of French society in 1914 had lived through the previous war and, for the rest, the memory had been perpetuated by their families and schooling. Some had already been in direct contact with German soldiers and the accusations directed at the enemy were as such in part a memory-based reflex. Indeed, many were identical: e.g., the filth, animal-like nature, excremental soiling of homes, as well as the smell.

It was also the revival of a strong ideological adversity: that connected to disputes surrounding the Dreyfus affair (1859-1935), with which there were similarities in 1914 that went beyond the involvement of intellectuals. The figure of the pig, excrement, the smell – all of these accusations had already been projected on the captain.^[9]

Right from the war's outset, the demonization of the Germans built on these two sources. They were immediately transposable and could be understood by all. Nevertheless, the scope of the war and the repetition of some experiences gave them new meaning. These accusations have now been theorized from an anthropological perspective. German historian Michael Jeismann has as such noted that a threshold was crossed with the First World War and a shift occurred from barbarian to *Nicht-Mensch*.

Conclusion

In France, behind the lines and at least in part on the front lines, the State and civilian actors worked to define a war culture that both gave meaning to their involvement and also worked to enable it, although, conversely, there were some who were simply subjected to it or, even more rarely, refused it altogether. This scenario existed in most of the countries at war, since the war required a reversal of norms that had to be legitimated at all cost. The severing of ties between French and German intellectuals is an obvious example of this.

And yet, upon close examination, French war culture nonetheless stands out from its European counterparts for its more extreme violence. This violence was rooted in both the reality of the war and previous legacies. It beckons us to see the war not as an exception but rather as an indicator of the trends underpinning society.

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Notes

1. ↑ On the notion of “war culture” see the seminal article by Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane and Becker, Annette: “Violence et consentement: culture de guerre du premier conflit mondial”, in Rioux, Jean-Pierre and Sirinelle, Jean François (eds.): *Pour une histoire culturelle*, Paris 1997, pp. 251-271. This concept was initially contested by part of the historical community on the basis that the authors placed too much importance on people’s consent to the war and did not focus enough on the role played by constraint and social difference. All historians now agree, however, on the importance of cultural history when studying the First World War.
2. ↑ Poincaré, Raymond: *Communication à la chambre des députés, séance du 4 août 1914*. Issued by Assemblée nationale, online: http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/guerre_14-18/seance_4aout1914.asp (retrieved: 4 February 2013).
3. ↑ Translation (JS). Becker, Jean-Jacques: *Unions sacrées et sentiment des responsabilités*, in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau/Jean-Jacques Becker (eds.): *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre 1914-1918*, Paris 2004, pp. 205-217.
4. ↑ Bérillon, Edgar: *La bromidrose fétide de la race allemande*, Paris 1915; Bérillon, Edgar: *La polychésie de la race allemande*, Paris 1915.
5. ↑ Account by Ms. Prudhommeaux quoted in Nivet, Philippe: *Vivre avec l’ennemi. Les relations entre occupants et occupés en Picardie (1914-1918)* in Carpi, Olivia/Nivet, Philippe (eds.): *La Picardie occupée: du Moyen-âge au XXe siècle. Actes du colloques d’Amiens du 13 juin 2003*, Amiens 2005, pp. 81-136.
6. ↑ Journal. Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, côte F delta (en triangle) 1126/ 7C 695, quoted in Pignot, Manon: *Avoir 12 ans dans Ham occupé. Le journal de guerre d’une jeune picarde, Henriette Thiesset (1914-1919)* in Carpi/Nivet (eds.), *La Picardie occupée 2005*, pp. 137-146, translated here (JS).
7. ↑ The unpublished journal of Marie Masquelier, a woman from Lille under the occupation, found by David Bellamy, 1 January 1915, translated here (JS).
8. ↑ Mosse, George L.: *Fallen soldiers. Reshaping the memory of the world wars*, Oxford 1990.
9. ↑ De Perthuis, Bruno: “L’imagerie de la réaction antidreyfusarde transférée à la Grande Guerre ” in *Cahiers d’Histoire* 75 (1999), pp. 85-91.

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