

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
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PhD THESIS

***PEOPLE AND DEATH DURING THE GREAT WAR.
FEELINGS, ATTITUDES AND MANIFESTATIONS
TOWARDS THE WAR***

ABSTRACT

**COORDINATOR
Univ. Prof. PhD. Toader NICOARĂ**

**PhD CANDIDATE
Gheorghe NEGUSTOR**

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At almost a century away from its beginning, the experience and repercussions of the *Great War* are still objects of special fascination. Large scale event of the XXth century, World War I left behind a world deeply stricken by the impact and dimension of such a conflagration. Generations of historians, scholars, psychologists, artists, sociologists, men of theology, philosophers, anthropologists, jurists, etc, consequently strove to offer different hypotheses to the image of war and find explanations to the large array of phenomena and manifestations which have never been known before, or at least not at such a level. In a period in which nationalism and nationalist movements were at the climax of existence, when people were exaggeratedly attached to such an ideology, when the passion of romanticism still was being felt, the impact of war created an obvious rupture between the world before the war and that after it.

We are on the grounds of what we call today the cultural history of the Great War. If the anthropology of war was not at its heights in the last decades of the last century, its younger kin, cultural history, is in its full maturity years in the Western society, penetrating, in the last years, in Romanian historiography as well. This „long lasting fascination”, words by which Jay Winter used to describe the interest raised by the history of the first world conflagration¹, finds at least two different explanations: on the one hand, the extraordinary dimension of war, with all its facets, and on the other hand, the metamorphoses from generation to generation of the different perspectives of the approaches its history used to have. This was due to the interest the historians manifested for the feelings and sensitivities born during the conflicts, which were transmitted to the post-war generations.

What was *The Great War*, actually? Was it a time in which the *Raiders of the Apocalypse* met and decided to ceaselessly haunt about the world, especially Europe. The hope invested in modernity and industrialization was soon to be transformed in a complete faith in science and progress. People used to live much differently from what we can now imagine. They did not know the graceless effects technological progress was about to generate. The great blow was about to be revealed when the war started and *Modernity* had just opened “Pandora’s box”. Enthusiasm of the beginning and of the end: this was the image of joy during the more than four years of conflict. The intensity of the enthusiasm characterizing the beginning of war can be felt again at the arrival of the long waited “big news”, the signing of the armistice. The terrible years of war left people with the hope that the massacre was about to end.

¹ Jay Winter, *Entre deuil et mémoire. La Grande Guerre dans l'histoire culturelle de l'Europe*, Armand Colin Publishing House, Paris, 2008, p. 11.

For a long time the fighters of the Great War were being seen by the historians only from the perspective of heroism, of the perfect way of defending their nation. In the first decades after the end of the first world conflagration, the events, the well-known characters, especially the political and military ones, but also the, memoires, were the main attraction for the historian. Debates regarding the guilty of war are common. Historians were the fiercest partisans of accusation or justification. Researchers focusing their analysis on such subject were privileged by the post-war political regimes of the nations involved in war. Gradually, the attention of Western historiography was caught by other perspectives and possibilities of reconstructing the. Great specialists of Anglo-Saxon and French historiography propose a new grill of lecturing war sources. The themes that the new cultural history brought forth have raised a special interest in the Western cultural environment, and historiography began to analyze and investigate the different perspectives related to the mutations this great event caused. Having its roots in the social history of the '60s², cultural history, by its pioneers representatives of the American and Western-European historiography, implemented new approaches, enhancing the comprehensive horizon of World War I in its complexity. If up until now in central spot focusing the attention of the historians, was occupied by the “great actors of war”, meaning generals, statesmen, diplomats, from now on, the focal point shifts toward the largest categories of individuals forming the society of the age: children, widows, women, the elders, the poor and the rich; all of them are involved in a way or another in the development of the event. Priests bring their spiritual and moral contribution as well, without neglecting tough all other aspects. Doctors contribute with their skill and all the knowledge accumulated in the long years of study and experience. Sociologists analyze situations and never cease with counting the number of casualties. Witches engage all mechanisms and occult forces in order to grant protection and bring forth the final victory. Painters, sculptors, writers, poets, they all draw and depict war to eternity, in its various facets and hypostases. For one of the greatest specialists of war, Jean-Jacques Becker, the common element to all these categories is the fact that all these people were suddenly involved in a war of unknown dimensions, and their culture, the culture of each and every nation, became the main focus point of this new direction in historiography, which shall be simply named: *war culture*.³

² Toader Nicoară, „Istoriografia *Marelui Război*: de la istoria politico-diplomatică la noua istorie culturală”, in *Războiul și societatea în secolul XX/Guerra e società nel XX secolo*, Accent Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, p. 42.

³ Jean-Jacques Becker, *Quinze ans d'histoire culturelle de la Grande Guerre*, în *Histoire culturelle de la Grande Guerre*, sous la direction de Jean-Jacques Becker et du Centre de Recherche de l'histoire de la Grande Guerre (Péronne-Somme), Armand Colin Publishing House, Paris, 2005, p. 7.

A history of war is always, implicitly, a history of death. It is a history of violence and destruction. The relationship between people and death is closer than ever. In the present research, *Death* and the *Individual* go separately up until the moment they come across one another, thing which cannot be avoided in war time. If during other historical periods death experienced individually is considered to be a priority, the Great War offers us the image of collective death. By its dimension and huge involvements, this conflict is differs from the previous wars, from many points of view. The almost 10 million deceased stand testimony of an unprecedented carnage which was hardly expected in 1914. The context and situations were so complex and complicated that, almost a century away from its end, historians, statisticians and other researchers or employees from different institutions still count the dead. It is more likely that we shall never be able to know the exact number of the deceased, either on the battlefield or by disease, or in captivity. Therefore, collective death represents a constant element characteristic to World War I, and kept all through the post-war years. Although historians concluded that each war casualty had its own way of dying⁴, without having any intention of contradicting such conclusion, our research has reconsidered the phenomenon of dying during the Great War, separating it in four large and generous categories: death on the battlefield, death by execution, death by disease and/or epidemics and death by accident, obviously at a much smaller scale. Based on these four general frames of death, we shall try to see the reaction of the soldiers in front of the imminent peril of death. Fear towards this phenomenon and the unknown following it is a constant in the evolution of human society. The feeling of fear in front of death could not be missing from the period taken under observation. Could it be that human feelings and attitudes are always in accordance with the legislation and military rules and regulation? Can a human being completely adapt to the requirements of military discipline in the context of a over stressful war? What are the reasons that caused the appearance of phenomena that have never been experienced before, or at least not at such a large scale? These are only few of the aspects that we have tried to tackle in the course of our analysis, by taking into consideration the complex variety of sources that can be found in Romanian institutions. The motivations of going to the battlefield, the motivation for killing, with or without resentment, are perspectives that focus on two types of education existing in the period preceding the war: national and military pedagogy. We strongly believe that by taking this road in our analysis, we could reach, after a difficult path of research, a few pertinent conclusions, regarding two key elements in the

⁴ Thierry Hardier, Jean-François Jagielski, *Combattre et mourir pendant la Grande Guerre (1914-1925)*, Imago Publishing House, Paris, 2001.

economy of the cultural history of the Great War: people and death during war. Firstly, what is the factor that determined, in the first years of World War I such a great display of forces; why do so many people choose to go on the battlefield risking their life? Secondly, which is the context that allowed the metamorphoses of innocent people in killing machines? We believe that killing is the main trait of the First World Conflagration. And the fact that it happened at such a great scale, represents more than enough reason for us to choose an extensive debate on the subject.

In which the pallet of sources is concerned, war *legislation, regulations and decrees* can be analyzed together with all the other sources, in order to be able to draw an objective and as close to reality as possible image of the issues of the age: what has been done – according to confessions and sources – and what was to be done, according to legislation and different regulatory documentation. Besides these sources, we have a great number of *journals* and *memoires* of war, which, although considered to be subjective sources, are extremely valuable for the history of the attitudes and individual and collective sensitivity.

There again we have a complete set of sources, which are particularly significant and valuable, which capture the feelings and sensitivities of the protagonists of the cultural history of the Great War: the soldiers as well as the civilians, found in different hypostases of manifestation. They are the *personal objects* of the deceased; they are the *graves* and the *epitaphs*; and the war literature: *novels, poetry, army songs, art and architecture, photography, documentary, movies* etc. Analyzed one by one, or considered as a whole, all those sources have something more to say, in order to complete the image desired by the historian, being all able to answer fractions of its questions. The writing of the war represents a consistent genre reuniting poetry and songs, short stories, real or imaginary stories, letters and post cards and probably the most important literary manifestation: the novel. Many of these sources are written directly by the soldiers, for example *Fire* written by Henri Barbusse. In 1927, T. E. Lawrence publishes his personal experience in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Year 1929 is the most spectacular one from this point of view: Robert Graves publishes *Good-bye to All That*, Erich M. Remarque publishes *All Quiet on the Western Front*, meanwhile Ernest Hemingway published *A Farewell to Arms*.⁵ All these transmit the experience of war, lived or told. This literature, along with the impressions of artists and other categories of intellectuals, has deeply marked the vision upon the war. War is seen through the curtain of a sensitivity afflicted by the horrors from the battlefield. In the Romanian

⁵ Astorri Antonella, Patrizia Salvadori, *Istoria ilustrată a primului război mondial*, Enciclopedia RAO Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, p. 151.

literature we have some novels of reference, and not only in which war literature is regarded, although they seem to be a real success of this type of literature. Liviu Rebreanu's novel, *Pădurea spânzuraților* (*Forest of the Hanged*), was largely used in the pages of the research.⁶ This book was brilliantly turned into a movie by the director Liviu Ciulei in 1965. In *Strada Lăpușneanu*⁷ (*Lăpușneanu Street*) or *Cronică din 1917* (*The Chronicle of 1917*), Mihail Sadoveanu depicts the Romanian society of the city of Iași during World War I, when the city became the capital of "refuge". Sadoveanu's work presents the life from Iași by analysing the manifestations of three categories of individuals: the peasants, "passive in their souls towards the war", the intellectuals "broken by the slough and misery of life on the front and behind it" and "the world of the ones who enjoyed war and had gained from it".⁸ Ion Minulescu's volume, a poet with symbolist traits, represents a parody of the politicians, "the generation which made war came to being"⁹. It is somehow, a much reduced version of Jaroslav Hašek's novel, *Peripețiile bravului soldat Švejk în Războiul Mondial* (*The Good Soldier Švejk and other strange stories*).¹⁰ Other novels worthy to be mentioned due to their depth in describing experience and individual trauma on the battlefield are: Cezar Petrescu's *Intunecare*¹¹ (*Darkening*) and *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război*¹² (*The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War*), written by Camil Petrescu, who fought, was wounded and taken prisoner by the Bulgarians.¹³

Last but not least, the *will* embodies one of the main sources of such research. Not yet taken into consideration by the Romanian historiography of World War I, so much appreciated by consecrated historians such as Philippe Ariès or Michel Vovelle, the will offers extremely interesting information regarding the perceptions of the man going to war, but also the way he imagines his death or his return home. The details of such wills are clearly stated, and, just like any document signed on the front, it is elaborated in special conditions, with testimonies.

⁶ Version used: Liviu Rebreanu, *Pădurea spânzuraților*, Gramar Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007.

⁷ Mihail Sadoveanu, *Strada Lăpușneanu*, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1970.

⁸ Constantin Kirițescu, *Literatura împotriva educației? Generația războiului de întregire și scriitorii noștri*, „Cartea Românească” Publishing House, Bucharest, 1929.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 20-24.

¹⁰ Jaroslav Hašek, *Peripețiile bravului soldat Švejk în Războiul Mondial*, Adevărul Holding Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010.

¹¹ Cezar Petrescu, *Întunecare*, 100+1 Gramar Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995.

¹² Camil Petrescu, *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război*, Curtea Veche Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009.

¹³ An interesting collection of debates on the literature of World War I in: Silvia Burdea, *Romanul primului război mondial*, Didactică și Pedagogică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1977.

War and Death are two phenomena that we encounter everywhere all along the history of the human existence. War, forever present in inter-human relationships, has always been and continues to be the brutal way to solve the problems arising among two or more communities. When the diplomatic ways failed, people accepted, without a blink, the solution offered by war. On the other hand, death, which is the main character of our research, is considered nowadays to be the only certitude of man and mankind. It does not matter whether we are on the battlefield, or in the quietest place on earth, death is omnipresent asking mercilessly the human life tribute: nothing puzzling about its presence in a conflict of the dimensions taken by a war such as World War I. The four years of conflict signified the climax of death. Death gained different hypostases, being always surrounded by the terrifying army of the *Raiders of the Apocalypse*. We perceive the face of violent death, characteristic to wars, revolutions, riots, conflicts generally speaking. This violent death, as we know well, metamorphosed into heroism, especially at the level of the political speech. Famine, diseases and epidemics, them too are the carriers of the implacable and merciless bacilli of death. Generated by the unfavourable conditions of war, these maladies competed with war itself in matters of the huge number of casualties. The harshness of military discipline, pushed to extreme measures during the Great War, imposed another facet of death, one which nobody desired, but which represented a necessity of the age: the cruel merciful image of death on the faces of the death convicted. Be them reconstructions based on testimonies or, much more realistic, photos remaining from war, containing the images of the ones executed during war, the image of death captures a wave of sensitivity which was unthinkable during those times. Death by accident is omnipresent in the landscape of dying during the war. Chaos from the unexpectedly long battlefield, disorganized retreat to Muntenia and then to Moldavia, created, unavoidably the perfect ground for an undesirable number of accidents. These are phenomena which determined us to separate the image of death all along the war, into four different categories. Ours is of course a subjective categorization, but such general framing allows us to imagine the real destructive impact of World War I. At the same time, a complex image of the ideological and legislative barriers which separated the “honourable death”, which was considered to be a good death, and the “dishonourable death” is possible only by a complete analysis of the entire set of sources, the subjective ones proving to be of real help in the understanding of that *terminus* point, characteristic to any human being.

What we have said before has the purpose to depict the itinerary of national conscience in the Romanian society up to the Great War. The socio-political changes as well as the international context, favourable in some moments, strengthen and backed this

conscience and created the proper. Feeling protected as sons of the nation, they apprehended, by political education, the duty towards the nation in case of danger. The idealism specific to the XIXth century and to the first half of the XXth century, sustained by a masterful propaganda, implemented amongst the individuals the supreme importance of the nation. Thus, anyone who attempted to its safety was directly striking into each and every individual forming it. Gradually, such context lead to hostilities, sometimes manifested in extreme forms, towards foreigners, even when they were citizens of the same nation. The literature of the age, be it represented by poetry, novels, articles in the press of the time, or even by personal letters, capture the pathos nourishing such hatred. Any unaccomplishment was attributed to those enemies who sustained the imaginary of the age. The political class was part taking in this situation, using it to the fullest. The socio-political failures were subtly blamed, by a partial mass media, on these unwanted foreigners. This was the surprising context of the contrast between a Europe devastated by the harsh war and the Romanian nation, celebrating its participation to the same war.

Such a long war, which suddenly broke the enthusiasm and idealism of soldiers, left deep marked on the sensitivity of the age. The physical and psychical trauma of individuals, the mental carving of the societies profoundly affected by the horrors of war, begin to gradually turn into a *grave depression* or, better said, a big disillusion for all war meant. The devastating impact of war, its magnitude, caused trauma within the families who remained at home: children of different age live for four years with the pain and hope in their father's return from the battlefield. Some writers from Transylvania, capture in their short stories the sadness characteristic to the bleak world of the Transylvanian village during world war I.¹⁴ The three authors, Al. Ciura, A. Melin and Toma Cocişiu, restore the social fresco of the Transylvanian village, stressing on the drama of the children left without the support of the one who was practically the provider of the family. A. Melin, in a brilliant short story entitled *Moş Crăciun* (Santa Clause), imagines a dialogue between Saint Peter and Santa Clause, in which the latter refuses to descend on earth to bring gifts to children. The reason is one related to the drama of the age - war. He does not recognise himself anymore in a world crimsoned by the blood shed during two long years of battles, considering that he is no longer able to bring happiness to the children who, before, were waiting for him in the great enthusiasm of the holidays. This is a denial symbolizing the fact that no one can replace or make up for the pain caused by the long absence of the father, not even Santa Clause.

¹⁴ Al. Ciura, A. Melin, Toma Cocişiu, *Copiii în războiu. Schițe din zilele de acum*, Tipografia Seminarului Teologic Gr.-Cat., Blaj, 1918.

With war, we are in front of a macabre picture, an image of the carnage which marked generations of people all around the globe. No matter how much we tried to look at it from a different angle, we cannot deny the reality of the endless rows of deceased, in hospitals and railway stations too small for the injured who kept coming and coming, of the emptied bombed and plagued villages, nor of the smirk of death, grinning victoriously from everywhere. This was a traumatized world, exhausted by the war which seemed never to end. We also perceive a wave of hatred, more frightening and thick than ever before. Politicians were ready to any compromise in order to annihilate the enemy. The military strategists claimed the shooting of our own soldiers in case of failure. Meanwhile, men and women, in armoury and labs, were creating the most poisonous and harmful weapons meant for human destruction. One thing is clear, the impact of the Great War is very hard to equal, even if we were to look in the complexity of human history. Susan Sontag brilliantly captured it, by means of photography:

*To shudder at Goltzius's rendering, in his etching *The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus* (1588), of a man's face being chewed off his head is very different from shuddering at a photograph of a First World War veteran whose face has been shot away.¹⁵*

Structure of the thesis: In which regards the way in which we conceived our research, we opted for a structure which can be considered innovative for the Romanian historiography of the Great War. In the rather consistent *Introduction* we described the main trends of Western historiography, focusing our interest more on the methodology used by the greatest French, Anglo-Saxon, Italian and German specialists. In order to have a complex image of war, which is what cultural history wishes to restore, we opted for a complete reading of all sources, themes and methodological approaches which, all together, represent the key to this type of research. At the same time, and since such bibliography represents a real challenge due to the huge amount of it, a critical approach and reading helped us make the necessary selection to the bibliography dedicated to World War I we actually used.

In chapter I, entitled *To Die for the Nation. Education and Idealism*, we actually tried to recreate a *fresco* of national education, specific to all the nations in the decades preceding the Great War. In the context of idealism, which is the main trait characterising national idealism in this period, the modern state became consolidated by a strong patriotic education, which focused mainly on the citizens rights and safety. In return, the citizens were supposed to become available unconditionally to

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, *Privind la suferința celuilalt*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest 2011, pp. 44-45; English version in PDF format *The pain of others*, Picador Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 2003, p. 33 [<http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/michalak/html/CD8320/Sontag,%20Susan%20%282003%29%20Regarding%20the%20Pain%20of%20Others.pdf>]

serve the national ideal. They were supposed to be ready to make the supreme sacrifice “on the motherland’s altar”. The Romanian state, fond in full process of consolidation and modernisation, invested massively, as influenced by the French and German schools, into the military education of its young generation. The young intellectual elite, coming from all domains of knowledge, was the main channel by which the ideology of the supreme sacrifice for the nation was actually conveyed and spread. Such was the national context of the Romanian state at the moment of its entering the war.

In chapter II, *To Die on the Battlefield. Heroic Death?*, we tried to bring novelty into the Romanian historiography ways of analysing the Great War, by speaking about the way death was experienced on the battlefield. At first there was the exacerbated enthusiasm of entering the war, the illusion of a short term conflict, aspects that the official propaganda never ceased to proclaim. But then, after only a few months, there came the cruel reality of the disaster of proportions experienced on the battlefield, with the huge amount of casualties, proving war to be a real carnage, which caused a real shock on all the fighters. A general disillusion hung over all armies. Heroism was being reconsidered, even denied. The image of heroes corresponded to the image of the torn bodies, scattered all over the battlefield. Death during war becomes a horrible death, which involves a set of problems which the state found difficult to handle.

In chapters III, entitled *Insanity and Military Discipline during the Great War*, and IV, entitled *Another Kind of War, another Way to Die*, we took a deep incursion into the darkness of death during war. Leaving behind the terrors of the battlefield, death was still omnipresent. Death really showed the world the *true face of war*. The ultimate war, consequence of industrialization, was to become the specific trait of the modern world. It imposed an exceptional military discipline, capable to maintain order, which was really driven to the extreme dew to the horrors of war. The sophisticated armament and the different way to fight the war caused the most extensive and unexpected disease, which was to become a characteristic trait for the XXth century wars: *shell-shock* or better said the war neurosis. Soldiers proved their limits in front of the power of industrialized war. In this context, fear on the battlefield becomes a common phenomenon, leaving the Martial Courts to establish the limit between heroism and cowardice. There were quite a few cases of convictions for cowardice and deflection, and it caused another phenomenon, hardly known before: sending convicts to the front line, with the promise of rehabilitation. Besides executions, diseases and epidemics, all kinds of shortage and accidents caused overwhelming rate of mortality, not only among soldiers but also among the civilians.

In the last chapter, *Attitudes and Manifestations towards Death*, we debated the main problems the modern war raised: the great number of casualties and the difficulties the state had to face in order to correctly manage the problem of the corpses, the way in which the fighters reacted to

the carnage from the battlefield, the level of violence imposed by the modern war, but also the pompous cult of mourning dedicated to the memory and commemoration of the deceased in the name of the motherland. The huge sacrifice needed a re-evaluation of the way to commemorate war. Thus, the memory of the dead becomes a common memory by the cult of the Unknown Hero, portraying in one the many faces of the sacrifice made by tens of thousands of unidentified corpses, which, due to the harsh conditions and violence of war have never been completely recovered, and which could never have been otherwise properly cared for and commemorated by the dear ones.

Since in the *Introduction* we have started by a series of interrogations, we are compelled to enouncing some final considerations. First of all, we can enumerate a few arguments that turn the First World Conflagration into the *Great War* of humanity.

1. War coevals were conscious that they were assisting to an event without comparison. Intellectuals and military men alike realized that the world was experiencing the greatest man made catastrophes. The passion and enthusiasm of a world living modernity trenched into the passions of life and the mirage of progress darkened even the most enlighten minds. But when they came to realize that, it was all too late.

2. Historians were and they continue to be fascinated by this subject. By discovering new methods of analysis, by using different sources and historiography trends, World War I historiography production fascinates by the complexity of research, it tending towards recreating a complete history of war. Practically each aspect and phenomenon is put to value and evidenced in the most eloquent scientific manifestation.

3. The today generations, especially from France and the Commonwealth, „recall” war by manifestations of mourning, piety, commemoration of the deceased during war. Such ritualized gestures and annual commemorations, such as *Remembrance Day*, or *Poppy Day*, or *Armistice Day*, represent the longest tradition of collective manifestations dedicated to such a great scale event. The foreign officials who come to Romania usually have in their agenda visits to the monuments dedicated to the deceased soldiers, as well as attending commemorative services in their honour.

4. As most of the historians concur, the disastrous consequences of the XXth century find origin in the tragic event happening in between 1914-1918.

5. Being a direct consequence of modernization and mass industrialization, war offered the most macabre display of destruction. The shock was so great that the most common and spread among the soldiers psychological malady was shell-shock. War came with all types of destructions: diseases and epidemics, which ended hundreds of thousands of lives, over 9 million casualties, geography of war never seen before, a war going on at the

same time on water, in the air and on the ground, even a submarine war, in its incipient form. There was no family who did not have at least close relative or friend dead during the war.

6. For the first time, Romania reunited inside its borders the majority of Romanians. The national ideal was finally accomplished by huge sacrifice. Despite the fact that the mistakes of the Romanian rulers were quite evident, the final result and the international context allowed the instauration of a relative calm and prosperity period. Although Romania lost gradually a big hunk of its territory, the final victory of the Allies allowed it to enjoy an unexpected result.

Another aspect that we consider important to mention in our conclusions is represented by the impact war had on the Romanian society. Romania had all the time to prepare the war during the two years, troubled by the contradiction between the sustainers of the *Antente* and the ones of *Germany*. From 1914 and up to 1916 the preparations had been made extremely slowly. Be it for fear of not raising the suspicion of one party or another, or be it because of the opposition and espionage, which was the thing working better than anything else in the country, the Romanians have missed from the beginning the occasion of modernising the army and insuring a decent security of the territory. National pedagogy represents the most powerful element of propaganda. The national spirit, sustained by the intellectual elite with influence in society, represented the motivation to fight. Expectations being big, enthusiasm raised at the level of expectations as well, especially in the midst of the old generation of politicians: Nicolae Filipescu, Take Ionescu etc.; realizing they were testimonies of an epochal event. The militarism of Romanian society, the militarism that can be seen in all Europe and spreading even in the USA and Japan, is another trait of the society before the war. Military schools were increasing in number and by importing some Western models of military training, tactics considerably improved. Nevertheless deadlines were here and things were hardly moving fast enough in comparison with the military training offered by states such as France or Germany. Even if things were going on relatively well, for example the medical preparations, the disasters of the first months upset the entire mechanism of a society under siege. In this context death caused havoc: hundreds of thousands of casualties among the soldiers and almost the same number of civilians; a huge number in comparison with the population of the country. A huge mortuary opened its doors all around the country: death unforgiving anyone. Who was able to escape death on the battlefield had good chances to catch a deadly disease.

Thus, at the beginning of war, we confront a young society, in the middle of a development and modernization process, enjoying the mirage of city life; yet the greatest part

of this society is represented by a rural world, highly contrasting with the rest of the society. a conservative world was it, on the verge of breaking equilibrium. For most of the people forming it life takes suddenly a different turn. Adolescents forcibly separated from their families, taken away from the comfort of their community, have to kill and do things that they could not even imagine before. Suddenly life asks them to become dehumanized: violence becomes the main instinct. Despite it all, the carnage to which they assist, the long separation from their families, the wife, the kids, push soldiers to gestures which are judged to be dishonourable. An iron discipline hardly succeeded in keeping recruits in row. Defections, fleeing from the battlefield and vagrancy are just normal phenomena caused by unbearable conditions. Individuals develop a different kind of sensitivity. Becoming accustomed with violence was a sure way to behaviour mutation and change in soldiers. There were acts of treason, damnatory deeds and sharp accusations such as those denounced by the likes of Averescu, Culcer, Crăiniceanu or Pârvan.

At the same time, war gave space to the creation of a fascinating literature or the Great War. Letters and postcards are testimonies of war experienced first hand. After a harsh retrench, few letters were able to bring us through time the feelings and attitudes of soldiers towards the times they were living. In this type of writing we were able to trace similitude with the reactions of characters from well-known novels. The death convict, the obsession of Dostoevsky's characters, manifests similarly with the soldiers executed on the Romanian battlefield. The role of the Martial Courts was as efficient as possible, even if sometimes they were at fault. The fact that there happen to be people who were unjustly condemned and killed cannot be compared with the dimension of the carnage from the battlefield or the massacre caused by the epidemics. A sensitivity specific to our time criticises, by the voices of historians, some manifestations and decisions taken by the politicians and the military decision making factors of the age. This manifests especially in the French and Italian historiography. The military historians answer to such accuses, by saying that without discipline and extreme measures war cannot be and nation cannot be created.

We cannot go forward in this debate without clarifying a quite troubling question: How did the Romanian soldier fight? Was he valiant, a true hero, or was he a coward, fleeing to the "Moldavia of the refugees"? Leaving aside the official history, the herofying history which is specific to the Romanian discourse, testimonies prove the bravery of the Romanian soldiers. Be them seen either as fearless peasants, adapting quickly to any circumstance, or badly equipped and badly instructed troupes, they had to face the merciless death. Such testimonies come not only from the Romanian officers and generals, but they are the general

image the foreign officers on the enemy line depict and praise the bravery of the Romanian soldier. Target of criticism remain the superior officers, the bad organisation of the army and the faulty tactics adopted. Falkenhayn, the German general ceaselessly notes the errors in the communications sent from the General Military Office or Central Marshall Staff Such errors allowed the enemy to surprise the Romanian troupes and carnage was inevitable.

The history of mourning and of commemoration is a constant manifestation in the Romanian society of the inter-war years. Mourning is an inheritance of war with roots deeply spread in the Christian tradition. The novelty brought by war in this respect was collective mourning, translated in a recollection and commemoration at the level of society itself, which was well deserved by the war casualties. Conflict still in course, the authorities considered and decided the building of military burial grounds and small monuments in the memory of the dead. Death for the motherland was supposed to be heroic and so it became. A masterful propaganda was at work in this scope. The final victory was to be celebrated with spectacular pomp. Hundreds of public events and local manifestations were happening, under the patronage of dedicated organizations, associations, the Church and, last but not least, under the patronage of Queen Mary herself. Thus she became the mother of all war wounded and, after the war ended, she was associated with the image of comfort brought by the alleviation of pain for the loss of the dear ones, a palliating mother for the entire post-war society. Her image, even in the absence of her physical presence, alleviates the mourning souls of war survivors. The state actively acts in building triptychs, monuments and mausoleums. A strong civic conscience is generated by the cult of mourning. War gave birth to an exceptional and profound civic spirit. Unfortunately this will end in many divergences and deviances. But the Romanian society gained collective value. Pressured by the constant lobby of the veterans and different associations, the state is compelled to take some necessary measures. The individual tends to be placed higher on the scale of value in a society destroyed by war. The cult of the dead soldier, transformed in Romania in the *cult of heroes*, has gradually become a cult of memory and recollection. Excessively politicised during the communist regime, it lost its initial symbolism in the past few decades. Mourning and homage brought to the memory of the dead soldiers became reason for communist party show-display, meanwhile the monuments built in sacrifice in the inter-war period were abandoned and disintegrate today under the passive eyes of an indifferent society. Much more, the monuments built out of heavy material are alienated, demolished and used as scrap iron. Nowadays there is an almost complete lack of civic feeling and spirit in respect of the memory of the great sacrifice suffered during the Great War. Now as we rapidly approach commemorative years of war,

there is an almost complete lack of public debates or actions. Could it just be a memory back stroke?

To conclude, I think that we can clearly state that behind all national achievements, World War I was an event which deeply marked the Romanian society. The experience of war meant a dimension of war never once experienced before, as well as a degree of violence which can hardly be depicted with accuracy. It ended Romania's *la belle époque*, giving birth to a troubled period, full of more or less pleasant experiences. The key of reading the sources of death stands in the experiences of the people living those troubled times. The reports and testimonies we inherited prove the sudden terror striking just like lightening, each individual of the age. Then the consternation of the pain felt for casualties. Then the strenuous waiting for years in turn, hoping in the miraculous return of the departed ones. Despite the collective loss and mourning, the experience of war is lived individually, but it is also quantified at the level of society itself, revealing the true "face of death" which is the face of war itself... or vice versa.

Key words: The Great War, cultural history, nation, death, heroism, violence, mourning, memory, commemoration, the convicted, vindication, honour, sacrifice, official propaganda, military priests, epidemics, religious belief, modernization

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