



Contemporary Reflections on War and Death

by Sigmund Freud

Translated by FT

Contemporary Reflections on War and Death

by Sigmund Freud

Translated by FT

May–July 2017

all proceeds from sales of this translation go to

Make The Road New York

& the Sylvia Rivera Law Project

I. The Disappointment of War

Caught in the maelstrom of this time of war, with information coming from one side only, lacking distance from the great changes that have already taken place or are now beginning to unfold, and without a hint of the future that is taking shape, we are at a loss as to the meaning of the impressions that assault us and value of the judgments which we form. We want to tell ourselves that no previous event ever destroyed so much of humanity's common good, led astray so many of the sharpest intellects, or so thoroughly degraded what was highly valued. Even knowledge itself has shed its dispassionate neutrality; its deeply embittered servants seek to craft weapons from it, that they may contribute to the enemy's destruction. The anthropologist must declare the opponent inferior and degenerate; the psychiatrist must announce the diagnosis of a cognitive or psychic disturbance. But it's likely that we experience the evils of our own time with disproportionate intensity, and lack justification in comparing them to the evils of another time, which we have not experienced.

3

The individual who has not become a combatant, and thus a cog in the gargantuan machinery of war, feels themselves disoriented, and feels their capacity for action constrained. I think that individual would welcome any insight which made it easier for them to find their way, at least internally. In this text, I want to emphasize and discuss two among the factors to which we can attribute the mental anguish of those who have stayed behind at home, the overcoming of which presents such an arduous task. These two are the disappointment conjured up by this war, and the altered attitude towards death that this war, like every war, demands of us.

When I speak of disappointment, everyone knows immediately what I mean. There's no need to be sentimental about it: you can grasp the biological and psychological necessity of suffering in the economy of human life and still denounce war in its means and aims, and long for an end to all wars. It's true, you did tell yourself that as long as groups of people live under such different existential

needs, as long as the values of individuals diverge so greatly, and as long as the petty hatreds that divide them express such powerful psychic forces, there could never be an end to war. And you were therefore resolved to the fact that for some time to come humanity's attention would be occupied by war between primitive and civilized peoples, between the races of humanity who are divided by the color of their skin, even war with and among the less-developed or regressed nationalities of Europe. But there was another hope you dared cling to. From the great, world-dominating nations of the white race, whose lot is the leadership of the human species, whom you believed to be preoccupied with world-spanning affairs, whose innovations include technical progress in the mastery of nature as well as aesthetic and epistemological cultural ideals; from these nations you expected enough insight to resolve disagreements and conflicts of interest in some other way. In each of these nations, rigorous moral norms had been established according to which the individual was to organize his mode of living if he wanted to take part in the cultural community. These proscriptions were often too strong, and demanding of him a thorough self-restraint, an extensive renunciation from satisfying his drives. Above all he was prohibited from utilizing the enormous advantages of lies and treachery in the competition with his fellow humans. The cultured state considered these moral standards the basis of its existence; it firmly intervened if anyone dared violate them and quite often declared it a bad idea even to subject them to the examination of our critical faculties. You might assume, then, that the state itself would respect those standards and not think of doing anything that would undermine them, thus contradicting in turn the very justification for its existence. True, when all was said and done you could see for yourself that within these cultured nations were mingled remnants of populations that were widely disliked and for this reason were only reluctantly and partially permitted to take part in the collective cultural labor, at which they had proved themselves barely competent. But the great peoples themselves, one might say, had acquired such great understanding of their commonalities and so great a tolerance of each other's differences that "foreigner" and "enemy" were no longer fused together in a single concept, as had been the case in antiquity.

Kulturgemeinschaft

Kulturstaat

Kulturnationen

Kulturarbeit

Trusting in this union of cultured peoples, countless individuals have replaced a home town in their native country for a residence abroad, and tied up their existence in the relations of exchange between allied nations. Anyone not rooted in place by the contingencies of life could reassemble the varied advantages and attractions of the various cultured nations into a new homeland, where he could live unrestricted and without suspicion. Thus he enjoyed both the blue and the grey seas, the beauty of the snowy mountains and the splendor of southern vegetation, the spirit of the landscapes on which rest great historical memories, and the silence of untouched nature. This new fatherland also served him as a museum, full of the treasures which artists of cultured humanity had for centuries been creating and leaving behind. As he wandered between the galleries of this museum he could recognize with impartial appreciation just how many varieties of perfection the Mother Earth had wrought in the fellow citizens of this extended nation with a combination of mixed blood, historical development, and local idiosyncrasies. Here a cool, unbending energy had been most highly developed; there the gracious art of beautifying life; elsewhere a sense for law and order or some other quality which had made humans the masters of the Earth.

Kulturvölker

Kulturvölker

Kulturmenscheit

Let's also not forget that every citizen of this cultural world created for himself his own "Parnassus" and his own "School of Athens."¹ From among the great thinkers, poets, and artists of all nations he had selected those to whom he owes all that has been made available to him of life's pleasures and of its insights, arranging the immortal ancients in the pantheon of his admiration right alongside the trusted masters of his own tongue. None of these great figures seemed more alien to him just because they spoke another language, not the peerless explorers of human passion, not the intoxicated worshippers of beauty, not the forceful and menacing prophet, nor the refined satirist, and never while contemplating them did he reproach himself for being disloyal to his own nation or to his beloved mother tongue.

Kulturweltbürger

1. Two frescoes by Raphael (1483-1520), the legendary Renaissance painter. The "Parnassus" (~1511) depicts the different areas of human knowledge, while "The School of the Athens" (1509-1511) depicts all the great thinkers of the classical era standing together. Both frescoes are in the Vatican.

The pleasures of this cultural community were interrupted from time

Kulturgemeinschaft

to time by voices warning that due to longstanding differences, even members of the community would unavoidably find themselves at war. You didn't want to believe them, because what would such a war look like, if it could even be imagined? It would be an opportunity to demonstrate the progress that has been made in the sphere of human empathy since those days when the Greek Amphictyonic Leagues prohibited destroying any member city, cutting down its olive trees, or cutting off its water supply. It would be a chivalrous trial of arms, confining itself to determining one side's superiority while avoiding as far as possibly any serious suffering, which would contribute nothing to this determination; and protecting fully both the wounded who must retreat from battle and the doctors and caretakers devoted to their well-being. And naturally it would preserve careful awareness of the non-combatant population, for the women who remain far from the handiwork of war, and for the children who when they grow up could hope to find friends and help on both sides of the divide. And it would preserve all the international businesses and the multinational institutions in and through which the cultural community was incorporated in times of peace.

Kulturgemeinschaft

A war like would still have offered much that was horrific and difficult to bear, but it would not have ruptured the ethical relations between the various entities of humankind, its people and its nations.

Then the war we didn't think was possible broke out, and it brought with it... disillusionment. Not only is it bloodier and more damaging than any war ever before, thanks to the powerfully advanced weapons of attack and defense, it's also equal in horror, bitterness, and mercilessness to any war that came before. It exceeds every limit to which we might have committed ourselves in times of peace, what we call "international law": it doesn't recognize the rights of the wounded or of their physicians, the distinction between combatant and civilians populations, or the constraints of private property. It tears down anything that stands in its way with blind rage, as though to ensure that there will be no future and no peace among nations in its wake. It rips apart any bond of community among the