

***The Recollections of Rifleman Harris* in light of Gabriel
Marcel's 'spirit of abstraction'**

Nick Germanacos

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Chapter One: Rifleman Harris and Context	5
Chapter Two: The Spirit of Abstraction	9
Chapter Three: Application of the Spirit of Abstraction to Rifleman Harris.....	15
Chapter Four: The Military Revolution and an Officer’s Diary.....	20
Chapter Five: Reflection and Concluding Remarks.....	25
Conclusion	27

INTRODUCTION

One's psychology and humanity can come under unimaginable strain as a result of war experiences. Perception, morals and attitude among other things, are all brought to the test on a scale unlike any other experience. War is perhaps the greatest calamity of man and the highest pillar of ignorance, and so has an astounding 'unnatural' effect on the nature of the individual and inflicts unspeakable atrocities on one's conscience and constitution. Among such unnatural effects is a perception which pre-assigns attributes to things and objects without understanding their 'true' nature. An example of this in the case of a soldier could be the loss of the knowledge that an enemy soldier is a living being, sensitive and precious, and the replacement of this knowledge with the idea that this person is an insensitive automaton, rampant with rage that must be destroyed or defeated. There may be some extent of acknowledgement by the soldier that the enemy soldier is a living being but this is more in a psychological sense than any other. Furthermore, although there may be acceptance that this soldier may have their own personal life it is liable to be pre-supposed that this soldier's life was full of violence and negativity rather than anything beautiful. The list of pre-assigned attributes soldiers give their enemies goes on, be it slaves of a despotic tyrant or witless imbeciles, full of malice, all of which are abstractions created to justify killing. The French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, developed an approach, which is capable of outlining the effect that is referred to above. This approach addressed a 'spirit of abstraction' rampant in modern culture and mind set. His approach can be seen throughout history and observed more particularly in warfare. In the Napoleonic Wars, soldiers began to write about their experiences on an unprecedented scale¹ and this has given us an insight to the experiences and emotions of soldiers of that war but perhaps also of wars in general. If war, and more specifically killing humans is taken to be unnatural and if wars in general involve killing humans, then we can assume that a spirit of abstraction can be applied to wars in general.

The Napoleonic period was a particularly notable one in which extraordinary circumstances took place, the political and ideological era of this particular epoch also contribute greatly towards its significance in human history. Furthermore, it was the beginning of an era of mass mobilisation, in which conscription was used far more than in the past and the size of armies drastically increased. It entailed a form of warfare that wrenched young men from their family homes, swallowed their old lives and regurgitated

¹ Dwyer, Philip. *War Stories: French Veteran Narratives and the 'Experience of War' in the Nineteenth Century European History Quarterly* (2008), p.563

them out as soldiers into a furnace in which human dignity itself was put to the sword. Those who could not afford to pay, went to war. This meant war was more the experience of the common man than ever, the common man being one of non-noble or highly privileged birth. Soldiers throughout time have been, of course, mostly “common men” but for several hundred years before, armies that saw combat were composed often of a professional body of men. These men were brutally drilled and indoctrinated, with no room to express independent thought. This war was therefore very significant as although drills, punishment and orders remained a typical trait of the European army, restraints were greatly relaxed. This change allows for an attempt to reveal a human identity to the soldiers so that a greater understanding of them can be acquired. This is not to say that past soldiers were not human, but more often than not, previous soldiers had had their personalities and emotions pushed into a corner by their drillmasters due to the prevailing dogma rife among European militaries at the time. The mentality was that only drill and fear of punishment could force men to obey orders and even then they were a danger and capable of desertion. There was no room for personal initiative or emotion among the common soldier. This all changed in the late 18th century when military ideology radically changed and the effectivity of light companies was recognised: bodies of men whose officers relied on initiative and reason and did not fight in formation as regular soldiers. This brought about a military revolution which eventually gave more personal initiative to soldiers and, although drill was still important, it was not something in itself and more a part of training rather than a tool to control the actions and initiatives of the men, although for some it likely remained so². This is especially significant because it provides an explanation as to what made this war different from previous European wars.

This question will be approached by explaining the relevance of the Napoleonic period, particularly in relation to the revolution within the military and the end of the traditional military ideals of the early 18th century. Rifleman Harris will be examined in depth and instances of Marcel’s theory identified and explained where and if applicable. The diary will be examined from the beginning to the end in order to outline the drastic psychological change experienced by Rifleman Harris, the man whose experiences the diary accounts. Chapter 4 will look at the case of an officer’s diary. This is because the mentality of officers was often radically different from that of soldiers due to their background. However, they are related in that the human experience applies to both of them. This thesis therefore examines whether

² Harari, YN. *“The Ultimate Experience Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000”* (Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 165-192

Marcel's notion of a 'spirit of abstraction' can shed light upon why killing becomes possible from a human perspective.

CHAPTER ONE

RIFLEMAN HARRIS AND CONTEXT

It is important to draw notice upon the importance of the Napoleonic era, in terms of politics and ideology and more specifically propaganda, but also its contribution towards the "common soldiers" ability to write. This chapter will therefore begin to investigate the importance of the diary in relation to understanding the period and also commence upon examining Harris's diary from the beginning, in order to introduce the reader to Harris's character, which is crucial in order to display the change occurring later on.

There exist a myriad of war diaries written during the Napoleonic wars, many, if not all equally fascinating, each writer capable of providing a unique perspective and a different set of experiences. Due to the huge range of background and experiences, whether it be rank, country, education or other, war diaries tend to differ remarkably not only in what is accounted but how they are accounted. The *Recollections of Rifleman Harris* was first published in 1848 and then again in 1970 after being edited by Christopher Hibbert. Harris's accounts can tell us a great deal about the experience of war but also about the period as well as bringing forth an idea of the reflective abilities of soldiers at the time. Harris is described by the modern editor, Christopher Hibbert, as a remarkable story teller. Despite this, he did not write the works himself but told them to an officer, one Henry Curling, who put them down on paper, the diary is written in the first person. Hibbert states that Curling allowed the "disjointed narrative to ramble along inconsequentially;" meaning that Harris and Harris alone told the story as it came to his mind, Curling simply put it to paper. Furthermore, no attempt at correcting mistakes or lapses of memory was made nor were corrections to instances where Harris repeated himself. This, therefore, makes for an accurate and realistic impression of what fighting in the Napoleonic Wars was like. This diary is perhaps one of the most well-known diaries as stated in the introduction of the book and appears to be used frequently by scholars or writers researching the period³. Naturally, the diary, albeit renowned, offers only one insight to the war and war as a phenomenon, as that is all it can offer. However, it is a

³ (Hibbert, C. *The Recollections of Rifleman Harris* (Leo Cooper Ltd, 1970), Introduction p. 5

perspective that would appear to resonate through many war diaries of the time and, indeed, speak, at least to an extent, for many a soldier who could not write. Had they had the ability, they would certainly have put their experience to paper⁴. Indeed, soldiers are known to account things differently than they were and twist or exaggerate events or even account something entirely untrue⁵. Harris brings up a great deal of anecdotes in his book and indeed only specific experiences or memories are accounted for, likely the ones most imprinted on his memory; be it an officer he greatly admired or a time of turmoil or celebration. Rifleman Harris paints a reliable account which fits in with historical events and characters which seem very difficult for him to otherwise have known about. The memoirs are written in profound detail which makes his tale all the more immersing. Although reliability holds great importance it is also the perspective of Harris that holds great importance and the manner in which he accounts his experiences.

Introduction to *The Recollections of Rifleman Harris*

Harris's simple and direct way of speaking resonates from the very first sentence of his account: "my father was a shepherd, and I was a sheep-boy from my earliest youth". Little more than a page is devoted to introducing Harris's past [at the start of the account] and nothing is said of his personality, although that is left to the reader to deduce. Harris was drafted in to service in the 66th Regiment of Foot as a result of the 1802 Militia Act. He expresses little feeling about his drafting or reflection about the effect it would have on his life, as the reader is soon to see. He does express the desperate attempts by his father to convince the recruiting sergeant otherwise and suggest that he might have wanted to help his father who was growing old. The simplicity and manner in which men were forced into service is mentioned by Harris: "off he went, carrying me (amongst a batch of recruits he had collected) away with him", despite claims by his father that Harris's broken forefinger made him of little use as a soldier.

This apparent simplicity of view and acceptance is striking; this may be typical of the time as many were drawn up to fight by ballot. It may well have been accepted as Britain was at war and there may have been a sense of duty in Harris. More likely, though, this was not the case; Harris expresses no feelings of determination or patriotism but rather seems to accept his fate passively almost as an inevitability. Among the European proletariat there was a general antipathy towards soldiering, this was also true in

⁴ Dwyer, Philip. (2008) p.563

⁵ Dwyer, Philip. (2008) p.562

Britain. Cookson gives a good description of how soldiers were perceived at the time: “the popular image of the soldier was one who existed in a kind of exile from the ordinary world, bereft of the ties of social existence and deprived of the felicities and securities that these conferred; if the soldier did return, he returned as if from the dead, too often without the means of earning a livelihood”⁶. This may not have been true of Harris’s household but what is almost certain is that they had no great sympathy for Britain’s war and had no active interest in being a part of it. In essence, Harris was suddenly, unexpectedly and without any notice, shipped off to a war and thrown into an entirely different lifestyle, aspects of which he eventually came to relish.

Harris must have had an extremely difficult time the first few months after he enlisted and there is evidence that he witnessed an execution early on.

“The sight was very imposing, and appeared to make a deep impression on all there. As for myself, I felt that I would have given a good round sum (had I possessed it) to have been in any situation rather than the one in which I now found myself; and when I looked into the faces of my companions I saw, by the pallor and anxiety depicted in each countenance, the reflection of my own feelings.”

He may not express it, but this would have undoubtedly had a severe effect on him and likely began to change his perception and mentality as well as give him a better idea of what army life was like, particularly when at war. Not only did Harris witness this, he also took part in it and was ordered onto the firing squad. As he mentions, many of the men shared in his shock and horror at this unnatural atrocity. It goes without saying that an execution by firing squad, the intentional and public killing of a man was not something a “sheep-boy” could expect to witness in 19th century rural Dorset, let alone participate in. This is the first account of death that Harris recounts in his diary and after making clear his feelings on the matter, describes the event quite pointedly and proceeds on to another matter. This is a very important event in Harris’s recollections and is the start of a long sequence of events which change Harris’s life drastically.

Harris’s words very clearly depict the direction of this chapter: “Everything was new to me, I remember, and I was filled with astonishment at the bustling contrast I was so suddenly called into from the tranquil and quiet of my former life”. Harris went from the blissful breezes of the English countryside to the crackle of the musket and tremor of the cannon in a matter of months and this is not something to be

⁶ (Cookson, J.E Door, “The British Armed Nation 1793-1815” 1997, p. 111)

overlooked.

Harris's account of his military life sometimes goes at a fast pace, dismissing a period of nine weeks with a brief phrase, and at times it is difficult to grasp precisely when something occurred especially when no date is provided. It can be assumed that several months passed from when he moved to Ireland and was put into the light company, an apparent privilege, when he went to Dublin where he discovered the 95th rifles. He described his fascination with them and indeed they were a regiment of great repute, to the extent that a film series was recently based on them.

It would appear that Harris is a down to earth character, who observes things very much as they are or appear to be. He is a fascinating gateway on understanding and accessing the mentality of the European rural masses at the time. It would also seem that Harris appears not to have been inclined towards glorification of war that was, and to an extent still is, natural among the youth at the time. This tendency, however, does develop further on in the book. He expresses no concern prior to the first combat experience that he mentions, the siege of Copenhagen, but rather "I felt so much exhilarated that I could hardly keep back" and refers to a wavering man, ready to turn back that "in the excitement of the moment I swore that if he did not keep his ground, I would shoot him dead on the spot;". Harris also mentions that while others around him experienced exhilaration, this man experienced the reverse. This man, quite naturally scared for his life, attempted to turn back whereas reckless bravery and eagerness for combat takes hold of young Harris and we see perhaps a different, less passive side to him. If Harris was excited to be fighting, it may be that he was operating under an illusion but there is evidence to suggest the contrary as throughout the book he refers to exhilarating moments in combat and this is something not unknown in tales of war or war diaries. Soldiers do experience an excitement and a feeling of aggression that can be described as a bloodlust or lust for action. It can be also be explained by the heat of the moment; many of these young men had never before had to face so much unknown yet fast paced action. This would only naturally have such an effect on men thirsty for adventure, yet this is where the illusion suddenly and quite unexpectedly, reveals itself.

It can be said that Harris in his right mind back home in Dorset would never have caused harm to a man who had not caused him any personal grievance or trouble, let alone kill him. In the heat of battle, this is not so for Harris's perception changes abruptly and he becomes victim of a terrible illusion, one that broadly excuses killing. In threatening the man in front of him to keep his ground, he is portraying a different side of himself, perhaps one that he was not aware of. After the battle this attitude lapses and Harris once again recalls his manners, which all the more exposes the illusion, which takes hold in battle.

CHAPTER 2

THE SPIRIT OF ABSTRACTION

Many are baffled as to why such an atrocity as war can occur in human society, how men can almost ceaselessly kill each other and cause destruction, how such acts are possible on such a wide scale and why society itself is, in certain regards, so defective and rife with problems. In the previous chapter, an eye was cast over the war diary of Rifleman Harris and has created a context. With this context now in mind, this chapter will proceed directly to a particular concept in *Les hommes contre l'humain* by Gabriel Marcel⁷, the notion of a "spirit of abstraction". Marcel states that "as soon as we accord to any category, isolated from all other categories, an arbitrary primacy, we are victims of the spirit of abstraction"⁸. This notion could be one (and such is my hypothesis) that sheds a particular light on the experiences that were described in the previous chapter. It has the potential to explain many of the problems of society and more specifically and more importantly to this thesis, a very common occurrence in human mentality. This can therefore be applied to war and is capable of exposing many of the human actions in war which result from a mentality which many fail to comprehend. This is to say that by defining set attributes upon an object, for example, one fails to realise the real traits of this object. This assigning of attributes, therefore, affects every subsequent decision one makes upon it unless one's perception is changed as it is imposed on one's mind like a parasite. Marcel finds that resentment in human nature is linked to a general tendency to conceptual dissociation and as such causes abstractions to be made. As soon as an external source, be it state or political party or other, lays claim on an individual to undertake a warlike action, it is absolutely necessary to the external source that the individual loses all awareness of the reality of their victim. Therefore, to the external source, the victim must be converted to an abstraction, be it Communist, rebel, Fascist, Republican and so forth, in order for the warlike action to be carried out and by creating this abstraction they are inciting resentment.

The Necessity of Abstraction

One may conclude, reading thus far, that Marcel supposes abstraction as an evil that must be avoided and is therefore opposed to all forms of it, rather the contrary: he states it is necessary if we are to

⁸Marcel. Gabriel. *Man Against Mass Society* (Gateway Editions Ltd. 2008), 155-156.

achieve any determined purpose. It is the danger of yielding to this abstraction taking over the perception of reality which presents the problem in question. Abstraction is nothing more than a tool, a method. However, it is when one loses awareness of this fact and allows oneself to be convinced that abstraction is reality, as a result of passion or well Marcel describes as “a sort of fascination” that the danger occurs⁹. This is the focal point of the topic of abstraction in this thesis rather than abstraction in a broader sense.

Propaganda

To Marcel, lies and war are inextricably linked as the basis of wars can be found in lies. This can be applied to propaganda in which what Marcel describes as “an operation of pure and simple banditry” is camouflaged as a punitive expedition. It is easy to base propaganda on a lie which can make a people fight out of an obligation originating from a sort of pseudo religion, something that is seen as an obligation but is in fact, not. Psychology puts light upon the internal link between abstraction and action, a spirit of abstraction protects a specific conscious, the specific omissions of reality which are required to obtain a result, the action. Marcel goes as far as suggesting that the spirit of abstraction may be a transposition of imperialism to the mental plane¹⁰. It could well be seen as such, after all one does not think in one’s correct conscience when under this effect and is therefore subject to a sort of imperialism. He describes the spirit of abstraction as one of the most formidable contributors to war and responsible for some of the worst atrocities¹¹.

Therefore, Marcel’s spirit of abstraction wishes to stress upon the defectiveness of modern, western society particularly in relation to humanity and the military, it aims to highlight a crucial issue which is capable of explaining this defectiveness and war. Very often when the state releases a lie to its society, large amounts of people collectively take it in, believe it and incorporate it into their mentality thus creating an abstraction. The case of war is used because it is the single most physically damaging result of the spirit of abstraction, this much can be concluded without direct reference to Marcel. The abhorrent nature of war becomes particularly noticeable when it is experienced the first time; it is at this point that the self and its grasp on reality come into conflict with abstraction. However, in many cases, abstraction

⁹ Marcel, 155

¹⁰ Marcel, 155

¹¹ Marcel, 157.

prevails and the systematic atrocities constantly witnessed become an accepted normality, something that the self has immense difficulty recovering from.

It is only through this or another form of organised lying, that war can become acceptable to those that participate in it, whether passively or actively. Thus, propaganda or the spread of ideology is a crucial tool in the implementation of this notion, particularly in relation to war. Propaganda of various kinds has been one of the greatest stimulators of the spirit of abstraction because it creates illusions and abstractions in the minds of those affected. It is a tool of the government and serves to promote an ideology. This illusion is therefore aggressively forced upon its people, particularly in a mental sense and perhaps subsequently on other peoples. An example of this could be the French ideals during the French Revolution where the victims, the people of the countries attacked, were in some ways forced to commit their lives to combatting the illusion that the French state circulated throughout France. This concept is not limited to the “aggressor” state; even Great Britain which strove to put an end to the ideals of the French Revolution had an extensive propaganda program which stimulated the spirit of abstraction throughout its army as will be seen later on in this thesis.

Mass Media

This in turn relates to the popular press, which by its nature has a bias that opposes reflection of any sort. To Marcel, mass media would act as though any reflection must be exercised on behalf of the concrete and not in response to an inner need. Indeed, the press attempts to construct an image of the world as if it something we can touch and is fully concrete, almost making it seem like a much smaller place and causes individuals to lose their appreciation for the vastness of the world. Marcel even gives the example of the bareness of contemporary architecture and how this is tied with the general state of affairs at the time of his writing in the 1950s. Marcel states that this is an example of abstraction materialising without actually becoming real; the abstraction is expressed and thus materialises as something but cannot be real.

Marcel clearly marks out that there is an ever diminishing distinction between waging and suffering war, between being active or passive during a war. In terms of psychology, abstraction is a “preliminary clearing of the ground” or “en somme proceder a un deblayage prealable”¹²; in some cases this is not an unreasonable thing to do. In order to achieve a purpose, the mind must make various “methodological

¹² Marcel, Gabriel. *Les Hommes Contre L’humain* (La Colombe, 1951), 115.

omissions". It is crucial, however, that the mind is aware of these omissions which must be undertaken to achieve a final result. As a result of passion, the mind loses awareness of these conditions which give justification to abstraction and deceives itself about the nature of what is simply a means to an end. Crucially, therefore, the spirit of abstraction is aroused primarily by passion, which forges abstraction¹³. Human dignity thereby suffers immensely as a consequence of being categorised as it loses its meaning in the minds of those afflicted by abstraction Marcel states that from a young age he found it impossible for true peace to be built on abstractions, this therefore goes to say that although abstraction is certainly a necessary process, one which humankind may not be able to do without, it is a hindrance to true peace.

Peace within oneself

Peace within ourselves can be assumed to be a terminus, the most difficult state of mind to attain and most certainly not a preliminary state; to presume it so would be one of the worst if not the worst illusion possible. Marcel states that some suppose the contrary: that one cannot be at peace with oneself without being at peace with one's brothers. This notion is flawed to its core: one can only be at peace with others if they are at peace with themselves. This change begins within oneself and can then be applied outwards. If this is not the case, it can only be described as a "false peace", a peace constructed to satisfy surrounding social conditions as a direct result of one's surroundings or brothers. Marcel outlines the fact that it is not men themselves that are equal, rather rights which should be universally recognised. He states that if this recognition is lacking, there exists chaos and tyranny and consequently, the primacy of the vilest people over the noblest. This is what equality has to do with the abstract; the error occurs when one claims that what has to do with rights can be applied to men themselves. This comes about precisely because equality, being of the abstract, is transferred to the realm of beings and only emerges as a lie; one cannot bring an abstraction into reality without it losing its qualities and thereby becoming a lie. Marcel states that his hostility towards the spirit of abstraction is very likely a result of an ideology which claims to justify democracy on grounds of philosophy. Marcel draws upon the fact that the French Revolution never inspired admiration or attachment in him, partly because when he was young the damages of "egalitarian bigotry" upon French social life were evident to him and he developed an innate horror of violence, cruelty and disorder¹⁴. The French Revolution itself is a perfect example of the spirit of abstraction and Marcel recognised this all too clearly. To Marcel, the followers of the French Revolution

¹³ Marcel. Gabriel. *Man Against Mass Society* (2008) ,

¹⁴ Marcel, 2

believed simple-mindedly that liberty, equality and fraternity could be placed on the same level and this allowed them to be satisfied by its rudimentary ideals¹⁵. As noble as they may have appeared to some, the principles of the French Revolution were a direct contributor to the horrors of war and turmoil that resulted because people fell victim to the spirit of abstraction. This tragic fact can only be too clear in this case and is absolutely not something limited to the French Revolution. This clearly indicates the atrocious and unspeakable damage that can be caused by abstracting from reality.

Explanation of War

A concrete example of this notion's application to war could be that of a military leader giving orders to his soldiers to go into battle. When a general or other high ranking officer sends in soldiers to war, particularly in Napoleonic times but also today, he sends them as numbers on paper, as a means to an end, as a resource. This, of course, varies in extent; some commanders, particularly those that form personal relationships with those under their command, may express utter regret and reluctance at this act. Furthermore, it would not be accurate to say that commanders lose all their humanity in this act and do not feel any regret at their order but the fact that the order is given indicates a lapse in humanity on its own and thus makes the application of this notion fully sufficient in this case. This is because, and this is the underlying point here, the very notion of commanding a person to die is slavery in itself. One may argue that in signing up to the army, one has already committed one's life and that officers are merely doing their work in operating as a leader. However, this example only serves to reinforce the prevalence of our topic at hand as the spirit of abstraction is in operation here. If a commander believes his soldiers to be expendable resources or, even if not, that he can command their lives, he is a victim of the spirit of abstraction. Such is the mentality of the spirit of abstraction, the commander does not consider that he is ending lives, not at least with the natural and emotional considerations innate to humankind. This commander does not reflect upon the fact that these soldiers may not want to fight, nor that he will be causing terrible pain to families in the process, he has arbitrarily and unconsciously assigned the category of "resource" to a soldier.

Marcel's notion can be used to explain the enormous numbers of people sent into battle in the Napoleonic Wars as well as subsequent wars. Mass mobilisation only increased the scale of war: the generals had far more soldiers to send to fight and so far more died. In the case where a commander

¹⁵ Marcel, 161

refuses to command his men on the basis that he believes it is not his place to command their lives, he is not a victim of the spirit of abstraction. Note must also be taken in the case where the soldiers trust the commander with their lives and therefore trust his judgement and experience better than their own. This is radically different to sending soldiers to shoot and be shot at by the line, let alone charge a flurry of bullets and artillery as no man would voluntarily commit such an action in his right mind, save under the grasp of an abstraction or other mental illness. However, it is the self and the self alone who should be able to make judgement on matters concerning the self. It is important to be careful here not to impute vanity to the efforts of soldiers to protect their countries or noble principles, when the reality is quite the opposite. Given the circumstances, many had very little choice in the matter – or at least were under the illusion that they had no choice, which is just as bad- and in some twisted way they contributed to the progress of the disastrous and unspeakably wasteful atrocity called war.

The spirit of abstraction can only be described as an affliction, an infection of the mind and of intelligence which results from passion. The single most effective way of preventing war is a universal abstention of war arising from an acknowledgement of its deceptive illusions, although it is almost certain that for this to occur, peace in oneself is also a universal prerequisite.

CHAPTER THREE

APPLICATION OF THE SPIRIT OF ABSTRACTION TO RIFLEMAN HARRIS

As Marcel's theory can be applied to war and its experience it would be expected that it can be applied to *The Recollections of Rifleman Harris*. There are many instances when such an illusion becomes abundantly clear.

A first account to be given is earlier on in the diary and describes a scene where Harris having shot a French soldier, proceeded to loot him whereupon he was accosted by an officer.

"What! Looking for money my lad.' said he, 'eh?'

'I am sir.' I answered; 'but I cannot discover where this fellow has hid his hoard.'

'You knocked him over, my man,' he said, 'in good style, and deserve something for the shot. Here,' he continued, stooping down and feeling in the lining of the Frenchman's coat, 'this is the place where these rascals generally carry their coin. Rip up the lining of his coat, and then search in his stock. I know them better than you seem to do.'

Thanking the officer for his courtesy, I proceeded to cut open the lining of his jacket..."¹⁶

The focus here is not on the fact that Harris plundered an individual, this being extremely common practice in war, but on the apparent attitude of Harris and the officer. Here, in front of them is a fallen man and the officer, in typically British gross understatement states that 'You knocked him over' and therefore Harris 'deserves' a reward for his apparently good deed. It is not enough in this case that he has killed a man, but it appears he should be rewarded for it. The officer then proceeds to tear open the fallen man's coat and states that 'this is the place where the rascals generally carry their coin...I know them better than you seem to do'. It is almost as if the Frenchman is a creature, a monstrosity which

¹⁶ Hibbert, 39

carries only negative traits and even holds predictable tendencies, almost as if he were an abstraction. By referring to the soldier and treating him as such, the man clearly possesses a view abstracted from reality. It is difficult to imagine today that it would be commonplace for an Englishman to venture into Spain and coming across a Frenchman on a quiet stroll, shoot him as if he were a creature and proceed to unburden him of his possessions. If this is true, then the only remaining explanation is a different mental context; by seeing the Frenchman as an almost senseless creature that desires to kill and loot, the mind justifies itself in killing it, putting the person at ease in doing so. Eventually, the person becomes so much at ease that war and killing becomes almost a game and even fun, as the enemy is almost seen as a mere target. Of course, this has absolutely drastic effects on the conscience of those affected, despite being under an illusion. This is because those effected edge further and further away from reality and in doing so further and further away from themselves towards what can be said to be the polar opposite of being at peace with oneself, essentially, being at war with oneself. This thesis is not directed at exploring those effects in depth and this topic therefore goes beyond the general scope of the inquiry, however a comparison will be made as to the changes in Harris's disposition later in this thesis.

What can be seen here is the crass perception of "the French" that Harris has appeared to have accumulated. By "the French" one can assume the French people in general, or at the very least its soldiers. Harris accompanies two officers into Lisbon town, apparently under French occupation at the time. The officers find a hotel, enter and proceed upstairs and Harris remains downstairs in what he describes as a "sort of taproom". There he finds himself amongst a large group of French soldiers, who, despite bearing many scars of what Harris assumed to be "tokens of our bullets of a few days before", cordially invite themselves to drink with Harris. Here Harris accounts "I was young then, and full of the natural animosity against the enemy so prevalent with John Bull. I hated the French with a deadly hatred, and refused to drink with them, showing by my discourteous manner the feelings I entertained;"¹⁷In this case, despite the offer of the Frenchmen to drink, Harris refuses on the basis of their being French, not because they were the enemy. One can observe very clearly that Harris has an illusion and prejudice towards the French, and evidently this is stimulated by propaganda.

¹⁷ Hibbert, 45.

His reference to John Bull, being the national personification of Great Britain, the British equivalent of Uncle Sam, brings to mind an age of patriotic pomp and jingoistic fervour, an age of ardent nationalism. This is clear evidence of Harris being affected by the nationalism circulating in British society at the time and caused him to acquire an innate dislike of the French without, we can assume, having ever known anyone from France personally. Indeed, it is also quite likely that having been shot at and having seen his friends slaughtered at the hands of Frenchmen that Harris would acquire an intense hatred of the French and therefore this reason is the inciter of this hatred. However, Harris's exposure to nationalism would certainly have been able to set the foundations for this prejudice which would inevitably build over time as positive encounters with Frenchmen were likely to be sparse if they ever occurred and therefore Harris's experience with Frenchmen was primarily limited to fighting them. Such a feeling of intense animosity is sadly perfectly understandable, given the unimaginable turmoil that Harris suffered at the hands of French soldiers, but his image remains an abstraction caused by resentment. Harris does not consider that, much like himself the French soldiers were only undertaking what they had signed up, or been conscripted and therefore forced to do and that he is likely to have caused them as much harm as they caused him. Therefore, although Marcel aimed the theory particularly towards the role of the state and mass media creating abstractions, as they clearly seem to have done here, Harris's own experiences are crucial. However it cannot be stressed enough that the abstractions, or propaganda and rhetoric that were used by the British state and circulated by word of mouth and other means were a crucial framework for this abstraction to become possible. The illusions they created in Harris's mind were the basis for his ever increasing animosity towards them.

Critique

One might indeed say that is almost a kind of prejudice that causes warlike acts to be possible rather than a philosophical theory. However, this does not account for the fact that the human mind is excusing itself for killing another individual: this is the underlying fact. Furthermore, prejudice itself is an abstraction, it is categorizing something without looking at its real attributes. Therefore such an argument cannot be used. Furthermore, one might go on to suggest that it could be a lesser respect for life that might have been existent in many societies of that age and a reduced ethical disposition on the part of individuals and Harris in particular that would explain his actions. One may be inclined to argue that Harris's view of life was quite different to those in the West today, and that Harris's inability to reflect caused him to see life in purely concrete terms. By doing so, he would only see that the war was a great adventure with some horrible and perhaps unexplainable events, which he would edge out of his mind and that his life in rural

Dorset was simply his upbringing, something he never wished to return to. Such an argument would be flawed, Harris has a strong notion of ethics and this can be seen throughout his diary. When stationed in Denmark and spending time in a Danish household- he was likely billeted there but it is unclear- Harris prevented his fellow men from harassing the two young daughters of the house-owners and kept guard over the family for the time they remained¹⁸. On another occasion he gave water from his flask to a dying Frenchman. This much should be evident and fully expected, that as a result of human nature, Harris, a reasonable being, had an innate compulsion to help the dying Frenchman. Further, as described in the first chapter, Harris was horrified at the execution which he had to partake in. This is the first time Harris mentions death and it can be assumed the first time he killed another individual or perhaps even witnessed such an event. Throughout his diary there are plenty of instances where Harris gives indication of his good and ethical character. However, other events do not fit appear to fit in with this impression, Harris recalls the time when the body of Frenchman, charred by a nearby fire became a “subject of mirth” to Harris and his comrades and “called forth from us very little sympathy”. Such a depressing and most disturbing action calls forth suggestions of an illness or damage of character or indeed of the mind, something very much noted in war. At the time however, war was glorified far more than today and therefore such events might have been to some extent inexplicable to Harris as they did not add up with the illusion that had been created in his mind. Yet Harris is capable of reflecting to some extent, indeed, great evidence of the change in his character can be seen here when he remarks that:

*“War is a sad blunter of the feelings I have often thought since those days. The contemplation of three ghastly bodies in this lonely spot failed then in making the slightest impression upon me. The sight had become, even in the short time I had been engaged in the trade, but too familiar. The biscuits, however, which lay in my path, I thought a blessed windfall, and, stopping, I gathered them up, scraped off the blood with which they were sprinkled with my bayonet, and ate them ravenously.”*¹⁹

The extent of the harm that was mentally inflicted upon Harris is not expressed in the diary but one can remark upon it surely enough. The fact that the sight of fallen soldiers made little impression upon him is in drastic contrast to the effect Harris experienced when he took part in an execution in the beginning of

¹⁸ Hibbert, 11.

¹⁹ Hibbert, 41

the diary. Indeed, as he expresses, war is a sad blunter of the feelings. Harris often expresses regret and sadness at losing comrades or witnessing appalling events but he does not reflect upon them in a manner that truly contemplates metaphysical or abstract reasoning. In the same way, one might even say that racism is an effect of the spirit of abstraction, indeed, racism is rooted in resentment and would as such give some explanation to the inhumane racist acts throughout history. Racism like nationalism, is essentially a form of prejudice and as prejudice creates an illusion of reality from resentment, and abstraction and illusion are the same, racism and indeed all other forms of prejudice are a result of abstraction. One might use the illusion of war as a partial explanation as to why war is fought but in fact abstraction and an illusion are one and the same. Therefore the youthful mentality that imagines war as a glorious adventure is utterly an abstraction.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MILITARY REVOLUTION

This Chapter aims to examine the reason for the rise in the amount of soldiers recalling their experiences in the Napoleonic Wars and gives some explanation to the mentality of the soldier and indeed of society at the time. Having examined Rifleman Harris's diary in light of the spirit of abstraction, it would be prudent to examine the writings of an officer of the same period due to make note upon the manner in which experiences are accounted and the differing backgrounds between officers and "common soldiers". The chapter discusses the change in revolutionary ideology which gives the reasoning behind the increase in reflective thinking in the Napoleonic age among all members of the military. Although common soldiers did not often entertain a reflective capacity comparable to modern philosophers due to their lower educational background, there was a drastic change in their incentives to operate and think independently from those incentives one hundred years earlier. This chapter therefore enables the reader to comprehend the fact that soldiers lacked reflective ability due to the mentality drilled into them.

Military Revolution

A revolution in the European militaries in the late 18th and early 19th centuries brought about a radical change in the thinking of the common soldier. Prior to this it was assumed that the intelligence, resourcefulness and cunning of soldier was something dangerous and had to be kept in check. Therefore, great lengths were gone to in order to assure that soldiers were heavily supervised. Napoleon's armies utilised these individual energies to their benefit.²⁰

The Israeli historian, Yuval Harari, described this revolutionary change in the military in his book *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*. Harari's book looks at this from a more positive aspect as it compares the change to an extreme, where soldiers were treated almost as "automatons". Presented in such a light the change appears positive and as great progress. However, despite this change, one looks back today to see that reflection by the common

²⁰ Harari, 165

soldier was still very much suppressed as a result of the circumstances. Retrospectively, it is relatively easy to say that Harris's reflective capacity was small but it should be understood that the increased acceptance freedom of thought in the military was a very slow paced process that took place over hundreds of years.

Part of this revolution came about from education and originated from what is described as "culture of sensibility" which emphasised that all knowledge came from sensory experiences²¹. As this ideology came about, the size of armies increased because soldiers no longer required extensive training in order to be forcibly disciplined. Furthermore, armies of huge sizes could not be raised because of the issue that presented to the chain of command. The ideals of the Cartesian military, that which preceded the revolutionary ideology, envisioned one single leader that gave all commands to the armies and the army duly obeyed. This was not possible with armies that numbered in the hundreds of thousands as effective individual responsibility had to be handed down. The responsibility caused soldiers to understand the logic behind their actions rather than coerce them with beating. La Mettrie, an 18th century radically materialist thinker, stated that the human body is incredibly complicated, and that it can only function when decisions are authorized by themselves. For example, the demands of the liver dictate the action of the mind. Applied to armies, it allowed for far more leverage among the rest of the army which drastically improved its effectiveness²². Along with this, the perception of soldiers throughout society, particularly in Europe, changed²³. Soldiers became celebrated, and more blame was placed upon officers for the mistakes of the army. This caused a boost in confidence which ultimately led to the soldiers being more confident about accounting their experiences. Western culture began to listen to the voices of common soldiers and as a result soldiers gained more confidence to talk about their experiences whereas before they even apologized for writing anything at all. The accounts of soldiers were listened to with awe, whereas those of peasants, slaves and prostitutes, with sympathy. Generals and officers who had previously taken much nigh all credit for previous military successes, faced criticism and were viewed in a more negative light. Furthermore, as a result of changes in the education system, soldiers were far more literate than soldiers before the late 18th century²⁴. All of this contributed to a type of soldier who was far

²¹ Harari, 166

²² Harari, 181

²³ Harari, 184-186

²⁴ Harari, 190-192

more capable of accounting his experiences, which led to a great acceleration in the number of war diaries.

The 'spirit of abstraction' in Britain

According to Charles Oman, in his book *Wellington's Army 1809-1814*, perhaps one of the most extensive books on that topic, the "...extraordinary outburst of interesting military literature with which the nineteenth century begins could be explained by:

"...the fact that the generation which grew up under the stress of the long Revolutionary War with France was far more serious and intelligent than that which saw it begin, and realized the supreme importance of the ends for which Great Britain was contending, and the dangers that threatened her national existence"

Oman elaborates upon this fact stating that although the British Empire had been in danger before, "...the enemy had never been so terrifying and abhorrent as the Jacobins of the Red Republic". He goes on to state that "To the greater part of the British nation the war against the Revolution soon became a kind of Crusade against the "triple-headed monster of Republicanism, Atheism and Sedition". The feeling that Great Britain had to fight not so much for empire as for national existence, and for all that made life worth having- religion, morality, constitution, laws, liberty- made men desperately keen for the fight, as their ancestors had never been"²⁵. The fact that the British went out to combat Republicanism, Atheism and Sedition gives strong evidence as to why the spirit of abstraction can be applied to this war and Harris's experiences. These three words are essentially the "cause" of the British, at least to the common soldier, they are Britain's justification for war. With this taken into account, it can then be understood where abstraction has its place, particularly in Harris's diary. Much as the French wanted to bring liberty to the areas of France so is the case that Britain wished to combat Frances ideals which is viewed as a threat to their beliefs. With these abstract concepts that each nation aims to fight against in mind they could be transmuted into applying to all the opponents as a whole and then justify, to each individual soldier, their warlike actions.

An Officer's Diary

²⁵ Oman, Charles, *Wellington's Army 1809-1814* (Greenhill Books, 1913) 4-5

The diary examined in this case will be that of a German officer- a name is not given-serving the British army in the Kings German legion. He provides a vivid and very descriptive account of his circumstances and his diary is beautifully written overall. It is clear that the officer is of a significantly different background than Harris by observing his literary technique and it is clear that he is well educated. It is important to note that this officer was attached to the medical staff of the regiment which enabled him to acquire a more comprehensive view of the battlefield. The officer accounts the Battle of Talavera, a battle that took place in the Peninsular War and he states things very much from an objective perspective, simply accounting the events with little to no reflection or emotive remark:

*“In this several movements and contests both sides suffered greatly, the more so as nothing could exceed the ardour of the soldiers. They performed, indeed, prodigies of valour; and in the last assault it was evident that the entire French army had combined”*²⁶

*“The field of battle presented a spectacle truly dreadful! A space extending several leagues was almost literally covered with the slain! On the fatal height which had been so gallantly disputed, our courageous fellows lay as if they had been entire battalions taking their natural rest-painfully conspicuous from the red uniform”*²⁷

The manner in which the officer accounts the experience and his attention to valour shows that he does not necessarily have a particularly pacifistic attitude towards war. The innate, natural human side to him becomes clear, but it is almost as if the officer is glorifying wars, indeed he is glorifying the acts of his comrades in order to bring them to mention but whether he truly believes in this is unclear. Although the officer gives hints of empathy, the recollection above turns more into a poetic ballad, glorifying the fallen rather than being an attack upon war and its nature.

*“The loss of the allies during these three days (namely the 26th, 27th and 28th) amounted to 10,000 men in killed, wounded and prisoners; of which number about 5000 English and 3000 Spanish fell on the latter, or great day of the battle. The French loss amounted to about 12,000 men, twenty cannon and numerous ammunition-waggons”*²⁸

²⁶ King’s German Legion, *“Journal of an Officer in the King’s German Legion”*. (Henry Colburn 1827) 155.

²⁷ King’s German Legion, 157

²⁸ King’s German Legion, 160

This statement makes clear the descriptive nature of the officers' diary, with no empathetic comment or response. From this one may observe that war has had its toll on this officer as well. As a medical officer, this man did not witness front line combat on a frequent basis but throughout his diary has borne witness to the destruction of war. Therefore, like Harris, it is likely that he became more accustomed to the awful experiences he witnessed over time. Although, throughout the diary, he commonly expresses distress, as seen before, calling the scene "dreadful!" this, as with Harris must have affected him from a mental perspective.

It is difficult to draw definite conclusions about what diarists actually thought, particularly war diarists in the Napoleonic Period. However, as this officer is writing to his family back in his native Germany, many if not all of his writings are probably earnest and heartfelt. In the case of Harris, it appeared to be for his own personal reference more than anything and such facts give weight to the reliability of the diaries.

This therefore gives rise to the point that, despite an education and a very different background from Harris, it is still very possible for an officer to have fallen victim to abstraction. Indeed, it may be to a lesser extent as he makes no implicit justification for his actions as Harris does, but he certainly does not criticise them. As may be seen with the diary of the officer, education and a different upbringing may have an important role in encouraging reflective thought, yet the officer still fell victim to abstraction.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Upon understanding what has been stated thus far, some comments are in order for purposes of clarification.

Note should be made upon a sort of “defensive thinking”, a justification of killing or causing harm through defence. That is to say, if a farmers’ country was invaded by a foreign enemy, then he would see it as his duty to protect his country, rather than risk having his livelihood destroyed with no means of defending it. Yet, as justified as it may appear, abstractions are still very much necessary for such an action to happen. It is quite likely that one of those soldiers that would destroy his livelihood would himself be a farmer from another country. The destruction of what this farmer sees as a threat to his nations’ ideals justifies his actions in his mind. In order for the defender to feel justified in shooting the invader, he too must categorise his target and forge abstractions upon his nature.

Furthermore, this thesis does not attempt to assess facts from a historical perspective, the question is not who is the aggressor and who is the defender but more, how has abstraction allowed warlike actions to be permitted. Therefore, the argument will not be made that the British were justified in their warlike actions because they were under direct threat from the French Empire, nor that the French were justified

as this is not the focus of this thesis. In essence, war is not justified and can never be justified, it occurs primarily out of ignorance and a mistake of the mind. Regardless of each nation's position in the Napoleonic Wars, the people that fought, fought under the effect of abstraction, which permitted mass killing to occur.

Marcel notes that the setbacks in our time, then the 1950s are linked with an increase in the development of the spirit of abstraction and far more alarmingly, an intensification of a warlike spirit in the world²⁹. He states the issue of contemplation and the issue in peace and essentially one and the same. Therefore reflection and contemplation is necessary for an everlasting peace to occur. One cannot build true peace on abstractions. One can see this too clearly from the "notional disassociations" or abstractions which are responsible for atrocities and destruction. Marcel uses the example of the failure of the League of Nations to emphasise this point, calling it a "pretentious organisation" ³⁰. In this sense, an abstraction and idealistic structure could not possibly build true peace.

²⁹ Marcel, 158

³⁰ Marcel, 3-4

CONCLUSION

War is a wicked practice and serves to sicken the mind in ways difficult to fathom. The case of Rifleman Harris presents the effects of abstraction upon the mind. Abstraction justifies the mind of performing a warlike action upon another by creating abstractions about the victim in question. In the case of Rifleman Harris, the Frenchman is seen as a living opposition to British ideals, a being that must be killed else it consume Europe and bring to it a state of destruction. It is probable that throughout his life, killing has been almost glorified and accepted in his society, and that the ethical discrepancy between the illusion and reality only becomes apparent when Harris witnesses it for the first time. This can be seen very surely in the fact that before going to battle, Harris expresses no fear of killing and no worry about ending lives, he is merely undertaking an adventure. Despite a completely human feeling of disgust, Harris continues to kill as he operates under an abstraction that his killing is justified. This is indication of the corruption war has upon the human mind.

As a result of a military revolution, diaries were kept on a greater scale like never before and the ability of soldiers to reflect became greater. The appalling effect that the war had on Harris is evident having looked at the beginning and end of the diary. The fact that Gabriel Marcel states that abstraction is rooted in our affective nature and in many cases is also rooted in resentment ca explains Harris's hatred

toward the French. Harris's lack of positive encounter with the French only inflamed his dislike towards them.

As such, Gabriel Marcel's notion can be applied to Rifleman Harris and is seen throughout the diary, his notion therefore is capable of explaining why war is possible from a human perspective. However, this thesis has attempted to expand on his notion and to bring to light some issues that remained unmentioned. In the case of Rifleman Harris, individuals in the early 19th Century perhaps felt less in control of their fate than those in Western Europe today. As a result of this it would suggest that Harris would therefore see his joining the army as something expected, an almost inevitable fact that he would not try to resist. Therefore, resigned to what he saw as, in some ways, his fate, Harris did not resist. He did not fathom the effect that war would have on him, and in some ways it can be seen he went about it quite innocently. As stated by Charles Oman, Britain went out to fight the republican, seditionist and atheist regime of France. With the mind they were putting an end to the rule of a despotic tyrant, almost anything was justifiable. The twisted effects of killing and bearing witness to all sorts of horror had its toll on Rifleman Harris, the young shepherd's son that set off from rural Dorset, and it this has made it abundantly clear what the effects of war and on an individual are. Killing was only made possible by the abstractions which justified the action. Were it possible among the common soldiers of the time to resist their passions, as abstraction is rooted in passion, and see past this abstraction, the war may never have been possible. This may appear very idealistic thing, but it holds that if the soldiers of the Napoleonic Wars could comprehend fully the actions they undertook and their consequences, and were able to overlook the "ideals" and "principles" of their respective nations, then the war would have been impossible.

It is therefore clear that, although abstraction is a necessary part of the human experience it has its basis in some of the worst atrocities and cruellest human actions wherever they may occur. Reflection is an essential part of overcoming this and is an integral part of being at peace with oneself. Therefore, in order to create a universal peace, a state where war is overcome, it would be required that there would be a universal peace of mind. Although in this modern world and its circumstances such an occurrence may seem just as possible a barnyard animal setting off on a journey into the sky, it is not among the most impossible of impossibilities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cookson, J.E. Door, *"The British Armed Nation 1793-1815"*. Clarendon Press 1997.

Dwyer, Philip. *War Stories: French Veteran Narratives and the 'Experience of War' in the Nineteenth Century European History Quarterly* (2008).

Harari, Yuval Noah. *The Ultimate Experience Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Harris, Benjamin, Hibbert, Christopher, ed. *The Recollections of Rifleman Harris*. The Windrush Press 1970.

King's German Legion, *"Journal of an Officer in the King's German Legion"*. Henry Colburn 1827

Marcel, Gabriel. *Les Hommes Contre L'humain*. La Colombe 1951.

Marcel, Gabriel, G.S Fraser, trans. Donald Mackinnon, ed. *Man Against Mass Society*. Gateway Editions 2008

Oman, Charles. *Wellington's Army 1809-1814*. Greenhill Books, 1913.