Blood and Ink

A New Interpretation of German and British First World War Poetry

Master Thesis History

Leiden University 2017

Jesse Pauw

S1173553

CONTENTS[1]

[1] Cover image retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I [17/6/2017].

Introduction

When the war that would become known as the First World War broke out in August 1914, many people in the belligerent nations of Europe rejoiced at the prospect of a 'frischer und fröhlicher Krieg'. With both nationalism and international animosity running high in the years preceding the war, people expected it to be a short 'happy' war in the traditional sense. It turned out to be an altogether different experience, that would leave the whole of Europe profoundly changed. The German armies, advancing through Belgium and Northern France in the summer heat, were halted just before Paris by the French and British. After intense fighting the British Expeditionary Force managed to stop the German advance in Flanders. With the coming of winter, the war grew into a stalemate. Little did the soldiers on both sides know then that the trenches they constructed, stretching from the Belgian Channel coast to the Swiss border, would be their home for almost four years. In the words of the famous historian Eric Hobsbawm: 'this was the "Western Front", which became a machine for massacre such as had probably never been seen before in the history of warfare. Millions of men faced each other across the sandbagged parapets of the trenches under which they lived like, and with, rats and lice.'[2]

The young men in the trenches encountered a world of destruction that left them feeling disillusioned and disconnected from every belief they had been brought up with. The experiences of war, amplified by the scale of the slaughter and the introduction of deadly weapons such as machine guns and poison gas, traumatised an entire generation of young men. The soldiers had different ways of coping with their feelings of fear, anger and disillusionment. One of the most direct ways to express themselves was through the written word. Among the men who were drafted or volunteered to fight were many well-educated youths with a talent for describing the world around them. Their experience in the war inspired them to produce some of the best war poems ever written.

In Great Britain, with its extensive yearly celebration of Armistice Day on November 11, the memory of the Great War is still alive in the public mind. The British war poets are an important aspect of this culture of remembrance. Their works are part of the public discourse and a continuing source of national pride. They are taught at schools and read at public ceremonies. The strong anti-war tone that is found in much of the war poets' work is no impediment for the British people in remembering them as national heroes.

[2] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, 1914-1991* (London 1994) 25.

In Germany however, the memory of the First World War has become overshadowed by the horrors of the Second World War. For the greater part of the twentieth century, the era of Wilhelmine Germany (1890-1918) evoked a feeling of unease at the perceived aggressiveness and militarism of the country. Although this view has recently been revised by historians such as Christopher Clark, this has not yet had the result that the experiences of common German soldiers in the First World War became part of the public discourse of remembrance. German First World War poets are not (yet?) the national treasures to Germany that Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon are to Britain.

This emphasis on British war poetry is the main characteristic of the historiographical debate about First World War poetry. British poets generally tend to be over-represented in online archives and their works are often the only available ones. For example, Oxford University's First World War Poetry Digital Archive contains only source material from poets born in the British Isles. Most regular publications also focus exclusively on British poets, despite their titles claiming coverage of all 'Poetry from the First World War'. This historiographical one-sidedness has gone so far that should you ask a layman about war poetry from the First World War, they can most likely reproduce some well-known verses of Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen, but have no idea that soldiers from other countries even produced poetry during that era. Not only does the current historiography leave out the many Commonwealth war poets, it also pays scant attention to the multitude of French, Italian, Russian and German war poetry.

The purpose of this research is to fill some of that historiographical gap by delving into the German war poets, and comparing their works with that of their English contemporaries. The main focus of this research is on the similarities and differences between these German war poets and their British counterparts, the subjects they raised and the criticisms they offered. It has not the intent of being a comparison in a literary-analytical sense, but in a historical sense: what subjects did they raise? Did they support their countries' war effort or were they critical? And if they were critical, were they criticising commanding officers, the war in general, or the conduct of the war? This research focuses on gaining more understanding of the German war experience by comparing its rendition in poetry with themes already well-known from British war poetry.

Approaching the First World War poetry from a thematic angle makes for a new interpretation of this poetry, which is visible in the approach taken here. Divided in two main parts, the starting point of this research is the work of the British war poets, chosen because of their predominance in the traditional historiography. The second part takes a close look at

German First World War poetry. Instead of a literary analysis, the method employed in this research is an ordering of the poetry according to themes that are representative for World War I history. In this way, a connection is possible between the historical content of the poems and what is known about the Western Front of the First World War. Out of a large number of war poems from the Western Front, a selection will be made that fits each theme accordingly, for which the main criterion for a theme to be considered representative is that it has to be addressed by at least two different war poets in their work. How the themes and poems are selected will be explained in the chapter 'The Soldier's Experience Captured in Poetry: A Thematic Approach'.

The proposed method of this research raises an important question: how reliable are these war poems as historical sources? To answer this question, it is necessary to keep in mind that researching first-hand experiences of the battlefield is always a complicated matter due to the trauma experienced by the participants. Photography and cinematography are established ways to document the experiences of the battlefield, but they capture only the outside, not what happens in the mind of a soldier. Poetry on the other hand, can be a very personal reflection of what happens inside a soldier's head and can therefore be a good way to study the individual's experience of war. And contrary to diaries, poems were often published during or shortly after the war, making the experiences and opinions of common soldiers known to the wider public. But what is in this specific case the main argument for the usability of war poems as a historical source, is Elizabeth Marshland's findings in her book *The Nation's Cause: French, English and German Poetry of the First World War.* She states that for many British and German soldier-poets, poems were not only a representation of their personal war experiences, but also a way of passing a message back home. Poems that depicted the war realistically were a deliberate message of these men, with which they tried to shock the public back home and provide an alternative to the war propaganda.[3]

[3] Elizabeth A. Marshland, *The Nation's Cause: French, English and German Poetry of the First World War* (London 1991) 6, 167-169.

The British Great War experience expressed in poetry

If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England – Rupert Brooke, 1914

Great Britain and the Coming of the Great War

The British population had not been directly confronted with a large-scale war for a long time. Even the last great war, waged a hundred years earlier against Napoleon's armies, had been fought by a relatively small professional British army. The only conflict Britain had been in during the nineteenth century was colonial conflict against underdeveloped adversaries, which was also fought by professional soldiers. While other European powers had introduced conscription during the nineteenth century, Britain had always relied on volunteers for its armed forces.[4]

The possibility for a new European war had been lurking in the background ever since the defeat of France at the hands of Prussia in 1870. This possibility was not only considered by governments and military staffs throughout Europe, but also by the wider public. Fiction writers in Britain and France wrote wildly unrealistic accounts of a future war. Only a Jewish financer from St. Petersburg, Ivan Bloch, published a six-volume book in which he wrote almost prophetically about a future war in which a stalemate would lead to a prolonged conflict, with an economic and human price that would eventually be so high as to lead to social upheaval and even revolution.[5]

And yet, war was not really expected by governments and the public. Up until 1912, Britain and Germany were still trying to come to an understanding about the balance of power in Europe. This failed when the Germans, in return for keeping their navy second in size to the British, demanded a guarantee that Britain would not intervene on the side of France in the case of a new German-French war.[6] Nevertheless, as Hobsbawm put it: 'peace was the normal and expected framework of European lives.'[7] He argued that while the European powers were certainly not very pacifist, none of them actually had a desire for war. The complexity of the eventual outbreak of the First World War lies in the great amount of actions and reactions that can be said to have contributed to the outbreak of a European-scale war. Hobsbawm argued

[4] Max Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew* (London 2014) 4.
[5] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London 1987) 303-307.
[6] Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (London 1962) 59.
[7] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire,* 303.

that there is not one aggressor, like Adolf Hitler in the 1930's, but that 'at a certain point in the slow slide towards the abyss, war seemed henceforth so inevitable that some governments decided that it might be best to choose the most favorable, or least unpropitious, moment for launching hostilities.'[8]

The impact of the First World War on British society in general, and specifically on the young men fighting in it, was enormous. Almost every family in the country was afflicted in one way or the other. The war had such a profound influence on the public that 'the break with an earlier peace became a powerful myth, of shattered calm or beauty, of broken illusion.'[9] It is this sense of disillusion that is so characteristic for the young men fighting the war in the trenches. It is perfectly captured by the writer D.H. Lawrence, in his 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover:* 'all the great words […] were cancelled, for her generation: love, joy, happiness, home, […] all these great, dynamic words were half dead now and dying from day to day.'[10]

[8] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire,* 311.
[9] Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory,* 4.
[10] D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Florence 1928).

The Phenomenon of War Poetry

The pre-war European society was one in which the writing of poetry was an often-practised pastime for young, well-educated people. For most young Brits, it was a secretive pastime. Charles Sorley, who went on to become one of the most famous war poets, phrased this reserve well when he compared it to the poetic gusto of his fellow German students: 'they all write poetry, and recite it with gusto to any three hours' old acquaintance. We all write poetry too, in England, but we write it on the bathroom washstand and lock the bedroom door and disclaim it vehemently in public'.[11] This poetic reserve changed dramatically when Great Britain declared war on Imperial Germany on August 4, 1914, as the first war poem was printed in *The Times* just a single day later. 'The Vigil' by Henry Newbolt had originally been written for the Boer War sixteen years prior, but it fitted the rising patriotic mood: 'Rise to conquer or to fall / Joyful hear the rolling drums / Joyful hear the trumpets call / Then let Memory tell thy heart: / "England! What thou wert, thou art / Gird thee with thine ancient might / Forth! And God defend the Right!'[12] The surge in patriotism led to a flood of poems: *The Times* received over a hundred a day during August. The writing of patriotic war poetry was stimulated by the newly created War Propaganda Bureau under the leadership of Liberal politician Charles Masterman. Masterman encouraged the writing of poetry that idealised chivalry, courage, personal sacrifice and the nation fighting for justice.[13] In this frenzy of nationalist war poetry, only John Masefield described a realistic vision of the horrors to come in his poem 'August 1914', in which his soldier is 'not a swimmer into cleanness leaping', 'But knew the misery of the soaking trench / The freezing in the rigging, the despair / In the revolting second of the wrench / When blind soul is flung upon the air'.[14]

The nationalistic poetry that poured into *The Times'* offices stood in a broader tradition of patriotic poetry, a tradition that saw its high point in the couple of months following the outbreak of the war. Elizabeth Marshland, argues in *The Nation's Cause* that the tradition of patriotic war poetry as a general trend was still quite new in 1914. She places this tradition in the late nineteenth century rise of nationalism. This expanding national consciousness, paired with a growing audience and the means to reach them, made the amount of patriotic poetry grow significantly, especially in wartime.[15] Henry Newbolt's *The Vigil* is an excellent example

[11] Charles Sorley, quoted in: Marshland, *The Nation's Cause,* 1.
[12] Henry Newbolt, 'The Vigil' (1897), retrieved from https://greatwar.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/poetry/clarke/clarke019/ [15/6/2017].
[13] Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 40-41.
[14] John Masefield, 'August 1914' (published in 1914), retrieved from http://www.warpoets.org/poets/john-masefield-1878-1967/ [retrieved on 23/3/2017].
[15] Marshland, *The Nation's Cause,* 70-71.

of this blend of poetry, warfare and nineteenth century-nationalism. Marshland expresses the view that in this blend, nationalism is the new factor. She states that warfare and poetry have been linked in literature for ages, but the new development in the patriotic First World War poetry is the fact that the loyalty, that is pledged by the writers, is addressed to their home country, rather than to a specific leader or group.[16]

This surge in patriotic war poetry did not last when the war settled down into the stalemate of the trenches. What is also interesting, is that the traditional historiography of British war poetry does not feature any poets who served in the original British Expeditionary Force that tried to stop the German advance in Northern France and Flanders in the first months of the war.[17] All well-known poetry from these first months was either written by young men who were yet to join the war, such as Rupert Brooke, or by older, established poets like Thomas Hardy. When the war settled down into a stalemate of trench warfare, new sounds began to emerge. Young men had been fighting in the trenches long enough to witness a new type of war, which became evident in the poetry they produced. One of these new trends came from men with frontline experience, who had witnessed and participated in the horrors of modern trench warfare. Their works painted an entirely different picture than the poetic visions of glory did earlier. The horrors of trench warfare, so unimaginable to those who did not experience them, are what they wanted to convey in their stark, factually-written poems.[18] A great example of this frontline experience was given by Siegfried Sassoon in the first stanza of his poem 'The Redeemer':

> Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;
> It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,
> When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;
> There, with much work to do before the light,
> We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might
> Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,
> And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;
> We were soaked, chilled and wretched every one;
> Darkness; the distant wink of a huge gun.[19]

[16] Ibidem, 70.
[17] Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 43.
[18] I.M. Parsons ed., *Men Who March Away. Poems of the First World War* (London 1965) 18.
[19] Siegfried Sassoon, *The Redeemer* (1915), quoted in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away,* 54.

This trend of factual description slowly gave way to one of bitterness and horror as the war progressed and the scale of battles and numbers of casualties became ever larger. Battles such as Verdun or the Somme in 1916, and Passchendaele in 1917, caused a number of casualties on both sides that had never before been seen in warfare. The war poems of this period, most of which were written by men who were at or near the frontline, were no longer works that reported on a new kind of warfare. Instead, they explicitly expressed horror, disillusion and disgust. Their vindication was aimed at a multitude of targets: incompetent leadership, the unknowing public at home, and against war itself.[20] Again, it was Siegfried Sassoon who gave a prime example of the growing bitterness at the war:

> You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
> Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
> Sneak home and pray you'll never know
> The hell where youth and laughter go.[21]

The phenomena of 'war poetry' and 'soldier-poets' have always been intimately connected with the First World War. As Robert Graves, an acclaimed war poet himself, observed years after the war: '"war poetry" and "war poet" were terms first used in World War I and perhaps peculiar to it'. There are earlier examples in English literature of poetry about war, of which Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (1854) or Rudyard Kipling's 'Barrack-Room Ballads' (1892) are arguably the most famous examples. Nevertheless, almost all poetry about war written before 1914 was produced by civilians, and without a clearly definable identity. War poetry as a true British genre, produced by soldier-poets, was forged in the trenches of Northern France and Flanders between 1914 and 1918.[22]

In any analysis of British war poetry and its historiography it is important to remember the relatively very small number of war poets compared to the total number of British soldiers at the Western Front. Of the more than five million British soldiers who fought at the Western Front, less than four hundred are generally recognised as war poets. Despite their relatively small number, these war poets left a profound impression on both their contemporaries and on

[20] Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, 20.
[21] Siegfried Sassoon, 'Suicide in the Trenches' (1917), quoted in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away,* 86.
[22] Santanu Das, 'Reframing First World War Poetry: An Introduction', in: Santanu Das ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* (London 2013) 5.

readers in later years.[23] This impression lead to a continuing interest from historians and the public, and has seen to the rise of an extensive historiography concerning the subject. As noted in the introduction, this historiography has both its uses and its limits. The uses are beyond doubt: to preserve an ongoing interest in this specific field of research that can tell us so much about the experience of the First World War.

The limits of the current historiography however, become also clear with a quick scan of the existing research. Most books mainly focus on the writers of the war poems, their personal backgrounds and life stories, and fail to connect these poems to their specific historical context. This approach is of course not wrong, but it limits the understanding that can still be gained from studying the content of the poems, and connecting that to what is known about the daily life of the soldiers in the trenches. Another shortcoming is the lack of attention paid by historians to war poets of other nationalities than English, Welsh or Scottish. Although some historians, like Elizabeth Marshland in *The Nation's Cause*, pay attention to soldiers from other nationalities writing poetry, they often stick with a more literary-analytical approach. In doing so, they again fail to connect their research into the poems to the soldier's daily life. Other trends that are characteristic for the historiography of First World War poetry are ordering the poems by poet and/or by year and providing some historical background (Max Egremont in *Some Desperate Glory*); or delving into a specific literary aspect of the war poems (Susanne Puissant in *Irony and the Poetry of the First World War*).

This research has the aim of addressing two different aspects that are often neglected in the historiography: the focus on war poets from another nation, and organising and interpreting war poems in a thematic manner, so as to connect them with themes often found in the study of soldiers' experiences on the frontlines. Due to the volume and detail of English war poetry found in the historiography, it is the obvious starting point for this research.

[23] Marshland, *The Nation's Cause*, 191.

The Soldier's Experience Captured in Poetry: A Thematic Approach

The First World War caused a huge increase in poetic output from British soldiers fighting on the Western Front. According to Santanu Das in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* this was due to a conjunction of particular historical factors: 'a late Victorian culture of heroism and patriotism, a dominant public school ethos among the officers as well as a generally higher level education. Above all, the processes of recruitment – first voluntary and then the Conscription Act of 1916 – meant that the British army had an enormous number of highly educated young men.'[24]

Paul Fussell in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory* adds some explanative observations about the intimate connection between poetry and the First World War. He describes the pre-war societies of Europe as exceptionally literary: 'in 1914 there was virtually no cinema; there was no radio at all; and there was certainly no television. Except for sex and drinking [and sports], amusement was largely found in language formally arranged, either in books and periodicals or at the theatre and music-hall, or in one's own or one's friends' anecdotes, rumours, or clever structuring of words.'[25] This increasing literacy of society meant that in times of war, armies became also increasingly literary. According to Fussell, the American Civil War was the first war in which large numbers of literate men fought as common soldiers, but 'by 1914, it was possible for soldiers to be not merely literate, but vigorously literary'.[26]

Due to the traditional historiographical focus on the individual behind the poems, certain poets have become associated with a certain style or theme. Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were seen as the masters of satire and sarcasm, Robert Graves used irony and deliberate understatement to tell of his experiences, and Ivor Gurney described the frontline-world around him with a cool, colloquial language.[27] What the historians researching these poets largely neglected, is to study what they actually wrote, and determine if the contents of the poems correspond with the current knowledge of the life in the trenches. The goal of this chapter is to study this often neglected part of the history of the war poets, look at them as ordinary soldiers writing down their experiences in Flanders or Northern France. The method this research uses in the study of these experiences is a thematic grouping of the war poetry.

[24] Das, 'Reframing First World War Poetry', 5-6.
[25] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford 1975) 170-171.
[26] Ibidem, 170.
[27] Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, 19.

This thematic grouping is based both on the reading of a large volume of British war poetry and on themes commonly found in the historiography of World War I.

In specifying the themes for this research, Ian Parsons's *Men Who March Away* forms the departure point. This is one of the few studies that organises English war poems thematically. Parsons' criteria for arranging the poems thematically are more historical than most other anthologies, but his selection criteria are explained only briefly, and do not connect the poems to the historical reality of the Western Front. The first and foremost theme used in this research is the nationalism and patriotism which played such an important role in the outbreak of the war. Especially the early period of the war was drenched in this feeling of patriotic euphoria, of bombastic, nineteenth-century heroism and self-sacrifice for one's country. The second theme used in this research is the absolute horror that followed this period of nationalistic optimism; the horror that was unleashed with modern trench warfare, which was beyond what ordinary soldiers knew and expected. As the war drags on and puts an increasing strain on the soldiers, other themes emerge: bitterness and disillusion at the futility of the war, the grave fear of death and injury, sarcasm due to having to follow incompetent officers.

Poetry is a very personal way of writing down and processing individual experiences. This is probably why in the traditional historiography the focus is put on the individual behind the poems. The intention behind this research is to change the way we look at the war poets: how do they and their works fit in what we know about life in the trenches?

Britannia Forever: Glorifying (the) War

The patriotic British war poetry of the first months of the war has the curious characteristic that it was written exclusively by men who were not (yet) participating in the war. This makes the subject matter of the poems from this period quite one-dimensional in that it is patriotic, chauvinistic and melodramatically heroic. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that this nationalistic glorification of war was a new trend. Elizabeth Marshland in *The Nation's Cause* argues that while it would be obvious to see the nationalist poetry of the first months of the war as exemplary for 'traditional' poetry, this is not the case when investigated deeper. Although 1914-1915 marked an end of this style of writing poetry and the later war poetry is generally regarded as 'modern' poetry, the patriotic war poetry of the early months of the war can be seen as a new, if short-lived, development within traditional poetry writing.[28]

[28] Marshland, *The Nation's Cause*, 70.

What made this brand of poetry unique in regards to its predecessors and successors, is the blend of poetry and warfare with nineteenth-century nationalism. 'This was the period of euphoria, when it was still possible to believe that war was a tolerably chivalrous affair, offering welcome opportunities for heroism and self-sacrifice.'[29] One of the most well-known war poets from this period is Rupert Brooke, who 'seemed to be speaking for his generation: innumerable young men responded to the war with feelings that were a compound of traditional patriotism and boredom with the world they had grown up in'.[30] Brooke wrote five war sonnets that became the benchmarks for war poetry of the early months of the war. The dissatisfaction of the young men with the world they had grown up in was addressed by Brooke in his first sonnet, 'I: Peace':

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.[31]

Perhaps the most famous works of Brooke are 'The Dead' and 'The Soldier', the third and fifth sonnet of the five. In these, the sentiments of self-sacrifice and selfless heroism were very much propagated. They were not a first-hand account of the war, since Brooke died from an infection in the Mediterranean in early 1915, and probably because of this, differed sharply in tone from

[29] Parsons, *Men Who March Away,* 16.
[30] Ibidem*,* 16-17.
[31] Rupert Brooke, 'Peace' (1914), quoted in: Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 57.

the later British war poetry. Brooke in these sonnets idolised the dead who gave their all for the glory of England:

‘III: The Dead’

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!

There’s none of these so lonely and poor of old,

But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.

These laid the world away, poured out the red

Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be

Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,

That men call age; and those who would have been,

Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,

Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.

Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,

And paid his subjects with a royal wage;

And Nobleness walks in our ways again;

And we have come into our heritage.[32]

‘V: The Soldier’

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,

A body of England’s, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.[33]

[32] Rupert Brooke, ‘III: The Dead’ (1914), quoted in: Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 58.
[33] Rupert Brooke, ‘V: The Soldier’ (1914), quoted in: Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 60.

Although Brooke was, and still is, the most well-known writer of this particular brand of war poetry, this almost melodramatic affection for either the soldiers who left for the frontline or the ones who gave their lives is characteristic for the early British war poetry. The tendency to use grandiloquent language to describe the soldiers leaving to defend their homeland was widespread. Early war poets took on a tone that was almost one of reverence, making heroes out of the common soldiers who were killed in the first months of the war. Many of the poets were already too old to enlist themselves, but they regarded it as their patriotic duty to promote the heroic ethic that permeated the land at the outbreak of the war and made men volunteer in large numbers.[34] One fine example of this kind of poetry is 'For the Fallen' by Laurence Binyon, published in *The Times* on August 21st, 1914. It mournfully described the dead, yet stressed the importance of their sacrifice:

> With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
> England mourns for her dead across the sea.
> Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
> Fallen in the cause of the free.
>
> Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal
> Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres.
> There is music in the midst of desolation
> And a glory that shines upon our tears.
>
> They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
> Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
> They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
> They fell with their faces to the foe.
>
> They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
> Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

[34] Marshland, *The Nation's Cause*, 74-75.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain.[35]

Most of the war poets that are still remembered today only joined the army somewhere in the first half of 1915, exhorted by the patriotic poetry that was being widely publicised in England. They would be responsible for the second phase of war poetry that is discerned by Stuart Sillars in *Fields of Agony: British Poetry from the First World War*. Like Elizabeth Marshland, he observes the patriotic poetry of the first months of the war as a separate phase within the phenomenon of war poetry, a phase that is characterised by the use of large, abstract wording and a strong emphasis on manhood, sacrifice and purpose. The second phase 'consists of poems presenting narratives of individual episodes of suffering, often involving bitter anger or confusion at the scale of loss'.[36]

[35] Laurence Binyon, 'For the Fallen' (September 1914), retrieved from: http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/laurence-binyon-for-the-fallen.htm [29/5/2017].
[36] Stuart Sillars, *Fields of Agony: British Poetry from the First World War* (Penrith 2007) 82.

A New Kind of War

'There had been no *world*[37] wars at all. […] Between 1815 and 1914 no major power fought another outside its immediate region, although aggressive expeditions of imperial or would-be imperial powers against weaker overseas enemies were, of course, common. […] Such exotic conflicts were the stuff of adventure literature or the reports of that mid-nineteenth-century innovation the war correspondent, rather than matters of direct relevance to most inhabitants of the states which waged and won them.'[38]

One probable reason why war was perceived as something heroic in Great Britain, France and Germany around the time of the outbreak of the First World War was that these countries' societies had not been directly confronted with a large-scale war in over a century. Smaller-scale wars such as the Crimean War or the Franco-Prussian war had arguably a considerably impact on society, but did not affect it as fundamentally as the First World War would. It is no wonder Thomas Hardy wrote in September 1914 that 'Victory crowns the just / and that braggarts must / surely bite the dust', since nineteenth-century nationalism saw every conflict in the light of a country's righteous struggle to exist.[39]

The realistic vision of what war does to men came with the experiences of the war poets in the trenches. Although the sonnets of Brooke were an inspiration to start writing poetry about their experiences, poets like Isaac Rosenberg and Charles Sorley, already serving on the Western Front, disliked the exultant language and sentimentalism.[40] Instead, Rosenberg wrote 'Marching – As Seen from the Left File' in 1915, a cool and almost detached vision of modern warfare, 'a vision of machine-inflicted carnage'. It was totally different from the war poetry in the style of Brooke that the British public was used to at the time:[41]

> My eyes catch ruddy necks
> Sturdily pressed back, -
> All a red brick moving glint.
> Like flaming pendulums, hands
> Swing across the khaki –
> Mustard-coloured khaki –
> To the automatic feet.

[37] Original italics.
[38] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 23.
[39] Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, 32.
[40] Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 69.
[41] Ibidem, 80-81.

We husband the ancient glory
In these bared necks and hands.
Not broke is the forge of Mars;
But a subtler brain beats iron
To shoe the hoofs of death,
(Who paws dynamic air now).
Blind fingers loose an iron cloud
To rain immortal darkness
On strong eyes.[42]

The vision Rosenberg conjured in his poem is one of chaos, and is quite modernist in both subject matter and linguistic aspect. Another interpretation of the experiencing of this new kind of war was written down by Ivor Gurney in 'The Silent One', which is less detached than Rosenberg's rendering of the frontline experience but instead has a peculiar British touch:

Who died on the wires, and hung there, one of two –
Who for his hours of life had chattered through
Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:
Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went
A noble fool, faithful to his stripes – and ended.
But I weak, hungry, and willing only for the chance
Of line – to fight in the line, lay down under unbroken
Wires, and saw the flashes and kept unshaken,
Till the politest voice – a finicking accent, said:
'Do you think you might crawl through, there: there's a hole'
Darkness, shot at: I smiled, as politely replied –
'I'm afraid not, Sir.' There was no hole, no way to be seen,
Nothing but chance of death, after tearing of clothes
Kept flat, and watched the darkness, hearing bullets whizzing –
And thought of music – and swore deep heart's deep oaths

[42] Isaac Rosenberg, 'Marching – As Seen from the Left File' (1915), quoted in: Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory,* 101.

(Polite to God) and retreated and came on again,
Again retreated – and a second time faced the screen.[43]

Gas Warfare

Both sides tried to break the deadlock on the Western Front by bringing new technologies onto the battlefield. Perhaps the most feared new weapon was poison gas. Using chemicals or toxicants as weapons was not a new invention, but the scale and technological skill with which it was used was definitely a product of the modern era. Chemical warfare in the First World War started amateurish, but the combatants quickly became adept at producing and using chemical weaponry. Tear gas was already used in 1914, but proved ineffective and was replaced by chlorine gas, which is lethal in high concentrations. Chlorine gas was used in the most dramatic (and arguably the most successful) gas attack of the entire war. On April 22, 1915, in the late afternoon, the Germans near Ypres launched 150 tons of chlorine gas over a front of seven kilometres. A light north-easterly breeze steadily blew the gas over the slightly uneven terrain towards the allied trenches. The gas had formed into a towering, greenish cloud that had a devastating impact on the French colonial troops opposing the Germans. Those who did not suffocate from spasms broke ranks and fled. The Germans however only managed to exploit the attack partially, since they were hampered by patches of gas that remained in the uneven terrain.[44]

Gas proved a fickle and often ineffective weapon, since its use was dependent on local meteorological conditions. For this reason, gas was from 1916 on increasingly fired in artillery shells instead of released from large containers. 'Light' gases such as chlorine, phosgene or tear gas were increasingly replaced by mustard gas, which became responsible for eighty percent of World War I gas casualties. This blister gas was heavier than air, and after delivery settled on the ground and remained active for a long period. It did not necessarily kill, but caused horrific chemical burns, internal bleeding and damage to the eyes and respiratory system.[45]

Although both sides managed to develop mostly effective countermeasures against gas attacks, ranging from gasmasks to cotton mouth wads drenched in neutralising chemicals, the psychological effect of gas warfare for soldiers in the trenches was devastating. Arguably the

[43] Ivor Gurney, 'The Silent One', in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, 60.
[44] Ludwig Fritz Haber, *The Poisonous Cloud: Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Oxford 1986) 33.
[45] F.R. Sidell a.o., 'Chapter 7: Vesicants', in: F.R. Sidell, E.T. Takafuji and D. R. Franz, *Medical Aspects of Chemical and Biological Warfare* (Washington DC 2004) 200-204.

most famous poem to emerge from the war described a gas attack and its effect. In ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, Wilfred Owen gave the reader some insight in the impact such an attack has on the soldiers:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori.

Evident is the sudden fear gripping the men when the warning is heard. All the fatigue with which the soldiers stumbled towards their rest position was suddenly replaced by the rush of adrenaline that was triggered by the fear of gas. They fumbled to fit the gas masks, which was easy for trained men but often was a difficult and slow task for less experienced soldiers, who were easily panicked by the gas. A lot of soldiers were either too late with fitting the mask, like Owen describes, or tore it off in a panic-induced fit.[46] This exposed them to the gas, with horrible consequences. Poison gas did not kill immediately, but instead caused horrible injuries. Gassed soldiers had to remain in the hospital for weeks, with 'vile, incurable sores' in their airways, their lungs filled with pus and their eyes damaged. Some recovered, but others died slow, agonising deaths in the hospitals. The impact poison gas had on soldiers from both sides was horrendous, which was exactly why Wilfred Owen chose this gruesome type of warfare to attack overzealous people advocating the ultimate glorious sacrifice for the fatherland.

[46] Haber, *The Poisonous Cloud*, 99.

The Soldier's Fate: Life and Death

Wounded, Crippled, Dead

In his book *Enduring the Great War*, Alexander Watson gives his view on how soldiers on both sides were able to endure the hell of the Western Front: 'human resilience lay at the heart of the robustness displayed by the German and British armies […] without individuals' innate ability to cope psychologically with the discomfort, danger and, above all, disempowerment of combat, armies would soon have become ineffective organisations full of mentally broken men.'[47] Fighting in the trenches extorted a great mental toll on the men. And while there were many instances in which shell-shock or other combat-induced psychological trauma rendered soldiers unable to continue fighting, most men found a way to cope with the horrors they witnessed. New recruits arriving at the frontline took a heavy toll due to inexperience and often inadequate training. As they developed greater awareness of danger, saw men around them being killed and wounded, they became increasingly fatalistic.

Trench warfare for the regular soldier meant a lot of waiting doing regular tasks. This gave soldiers time to think about home, their fallen brothers, and their own fate. With death so omnipresent, fatalism was the natural train of thought for soldiers. They started wondering if they would ever get home again, and if so, in one piece or not. In his stylistically very simple 'Ballad of the Three Spectres', Ivor Gurney gave us a look into the calculating mind of the common soldier:

> As I went up by Ovillers
> In mud and water cold to the knee,
> There went three jeering, fleering spectres,
> That walked abreast and talked of me.
>
> The first said, 'Here's a right brave soldier
> That walks the dark unfearingly;
> Soon he'll come back on a fine stretcher,
> And laughing for a nice Blighty.'
>
> The second, 'Read his face, old comrade,
> No kind of lucky chance I see;

[47] Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War. Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge 2008) 85.

One day he'll freeze in mud to the marrow,
Then look his last on Picardie.'

Though bitter the word of these first twain
Curses the third spat venomously;
'He'll stay untouched till the war's last dawning
Then live one hour of agony.'

Liars the first two were. Behold me
At sloping arms by one – two – three;
Waiting the time I shall discover
Whether the third spake verity.

With this poem Gurney enabled the reader to imagine the common soldier, on patrol, up to his knees in the freezing mud, contemplating his fate. Of course he was fearful of getting wounded, but knew that it was a very realistic part of trench life. He hoped however, that if he was wounded, it would be a nice 'Blighty-wound': a wound that was not life-threatening, but severe enough to get him evacuated back to Britain. The other options the future held for him are grimmer. He would either die of hypothermia or worse still, live out most of the war only to be killed in the dying moments of the conflict.

Beautiful as the poem is, and fitting though it may be in regards to the uncertainty of life in the trenches for the common soldiers, it seems to be written from a certain distance from the frontline. Alexander Watson in his book introduces one Captain H.W. Yoxall, who in a letter to his mother summed up the view most soldiers seem to have had in the trenches: 'if you did ruminate much on the real meaning of things you do and the things that are done to you, your nerves would crack in no time'.[48] Soldiers started to look differently at life and death. The same Captain Yoxall described how, while life became more and more desirable, death seemed to lose some of its terror. This growing indifference to death proved dangerous however, especially in regards to the effectiveness of the troops. Both anxiety and indifference could render troops ineffective at combat.[49]

As was to be expected, soldiers often cracked under the horrific circumstances. However, their psychological distress was not always recognised by the military. Due to the limited knowledge of psychological disorders, many military and medical officers regarded

[48] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 88.
[49] Ibidem.

this as a disciplinary, rather than a medical, issue. Based on available records, almost 350.000 British soldiers were treated for psychological issues during the war, almost six percent of the total number of British men mobilised. The British Army was slow to recognise and accept psychological breakdowns: as late as 1916, men who had suffered a breakdown were still executed by firing squads as cowards or deserters.[50] Wilfred Owen graphically described the havoc war could wreak on the human mind in 'Mental Cases':

> Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
> Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
> Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
> Baring teeth that leer like skull's teeth wicked?
> Stroke on stroke of pain, - but what slow panic,
> Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
> Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms
> Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
> Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?
>
> These are the men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
> Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
> Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
> Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
> Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
> Always they must see these things and hear them,
> Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
> Carnage incomparable, and human squander
> Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.
>
> Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
> Back into their brains, because on their sense
> Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
> Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.
> Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,

[50] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 238-240.

Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.[51]

The mental casualties were only a small part of the total casualties suffered by the British army during the war. Out of the more than five million men who served in the wartime army, 723.000 were killed, and double that number wounded.[52]. At the Battle of the Somme in the summer of 1916, one out of every two British soldiers deployed was either killed or seriously wounded. It was not uncommon for divisions to lose seventy or eighty percent of their men in a great offensive.[53] The fatalism that originated in the close proximity of death inspired in many soldiers a sense of melancholy at the futility and waste of life. The most famous example in war poetry of this melancholy, in which the dead played a prominent role is 'In Flanders Fields' by Canadian Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae. Written early in 1915, it still has some of the romanticism of the early war poetry. Later English war poets dealt with Death and the Dead with more melancholy and less romanticism:

[51] Wilfred Owen, 'Mental Cases', quoted in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, 140.
[52] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 11.
[53] Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven 2005) 301.

‘The Last Post’, by Robert Graves

The bugler sent a call of high romance –
‘Lights out! Lights out!’ to the deserted square:
On the thin brazen notes he threw a prayer,

‘God, if it’s *this* for me next time in France…
O spare the phantom bugle as I lie
Dead in the gas and smoke and roar of guns,
Dead in a row with the other broken ones,
Lying so stiff and still under the sky,
Jolly young Fusiliers, too good to die.’

The music ceased, and the red sunset flare
Was blood about his head as he stood there.[54]

‘Soliloquy 2’, by Richard Aldington

I was wrong, quite wrong;
The dead men are not always carrion
After the advance,
As we went through the shattered trenches
Which the enemy had left,
We found, lying upon the fire-step,
A dead English soldier,
His head bloodily bandaged
And his closed left hand touching the earth,

More beautiful than one can tell,
More subtly coloured than a perfect Goya,
And more austere and lovely in repose
Than Angelo’s hand could ever carve in stone.[55]

Spatial Awareness: The No-Man’s Land and the Enemy

One of the most striking characteristics of trench warfare in the First World War was the proximity of the two opposing sides. Often the trenches were dug within hearing distance from each other, with the No-Man’s Land in some places only twenty-five meters’ wide.[56] This No-Man’s Land, ‘a chaos of waterlogged shell-craters, ruined tree-stumps, mud and abandoned corpses’[57], became one of the defining features of the Great War. At one-time battlefield, graveyard and epitaph of destroyed civilian life, it stood symbol for the destruction wrought by this industrialised war. No war poet described the horror and chaos of the No-Man’s Land better than Arthur Graeme West in his 1916 poem ‘Night Patrol’:

[54] Robert Graves, ‘The Last Post’ (June 1916), quoted in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away,* 147.
[55] Richard Aldington, ‘Soliloquy 2’, quoted in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, 158.
[56] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 14-15.
[57] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 25.

Over the top! The wire's thin here, unbarbed
Plain rusty coils, not staked, and low enough:
Full of old tins, though — "When you're through, all three,
Aim quarter left for fifty yards or so,
Then straight for that new piece of German wire;
See if it's thick, and listen for a while
For sounds of working; don't run any risks;
About an hour; now, over!"
And we placed
Our hands on the topmost sand-bags, leapt, and stood
A second with curved backs, then crept to the wire,
Wormed ourselves tinkling through, glanced back, and dropped.
The sodden ground was splashed with shallow pools,
And tufts of crackling cornstalks, two years old,
No man had reaped, and patches of spring grass.
Half-seen, as rose and sank the flares, were strewn
The wrecks of our attack: the bandoliers,
Packs, rifles, bayonets, belts, and haversacks,
Shell fragments, and the huge whole forms of shells
Shot fruitlessly — and everywhere the dead.
Only the dead were always present — present
As a vile sickly smell of rottenness;
The rustling stubble and the early grass,
The slimy pools — the dead men stank through all,
Pungent and sharp; as bodies loomed before,
And as we passed, they stank: then dulled away
To that vague fetor, all encompassing,
Infecting earth and air. They lay, all clothed,
Each in some new and piteous attitude
That we well marked to guide us back: as he,
Outside our wire, that lay on his back and crossed
His legs Crusader-wise: I smiled at that,
And thought on Elia and his Temple Church.
From him, at quarter left, lay a small corpse,

Down in a hollow, huddled as in a bed,
That one of us put his hand on unawares.
Next was a bunch of half a dozen men
All blown to bits, an archipelago
Of corrupt fragments, vexing to us three,
Who had no light to see by, save the flares.
On such a trail, so light, for ninety yards
We crawled on belly and elbows, till we saw,
Instead of lumpish dead before our eyes,
The stakes and crosslines of the German wire.
We lay in shelter of the last dead man,
Ourselves as dead, and heard their shovels ring
Turning the earth, then talk and cough at times.
A sentry fired and a machine-gun spat;
They shot a glare above us, when it fell
And spluttered out in the pools of No Man's Land,
We turned and crawled past the remembered dead:
Past him and him, and them and him, until,
For he lay some way apart, we caught the scent
Of the Crusader and slide past his legs,
And through the wire and home, and got our rum.[58]

Killed by a sniper in 1917, Arthur Graeme West described the debris that littered the No-Man's Land even more graphically. The strip of land that separated the opposing trenches was often completely churned up by the artillery bombardments that preceded any infantry attack. Once this preparatory bombardment was over, the infantry battalions went 'over the top' and had to negotiate the uneven terrain, barbed wire, fetid pools of stagnant water mixed with chemicals and human remains, all under a hail of enemy artillery and small-arms fire. Attacking soldiers often carried up to forty kilos of extra arms and ammunition required to hold a captured enemy position. This meant that they could only move at a walk, or at most a slow jog, making them ideal targets.[59] Once the attack was over, the No-Man's Land was littered with dead and

[58] Arthur Graeme West, 'Night Patrol' (March 1916), in: Arthur Graeme West, *The Diary of a Dead Officer, Being the Posthumous Papers of Arthur Graeme West* (London 1918) 81-83.
[59] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 15.

wounded soldiers. And because it was highly dangerous to get out of the safety of the trench, the bodies of the fallen remained were they were, providing grim company to the soldiers who were waiting for the next attack:

> Sparse mists of moonlight hurt our eyes
> With gouged and scourged uncertainties
> Of soul and soil in agonies.
>
> One derelict grim skeleton
> That drench and dry had battened on
> Still seemed to wish us malison;
>
> Still zipped across the gouts of lead
> Or cracked like whipcracks overhead;
> The gray rags fluttered on the dead.[60]

Trench warfare was a particular stressful form of combat, due to the constant exposure to artillery fire, bad hygiene and endless waiting. However, not everywhere was equally bad. Some sectors were feared by the soldiers because of the intensity of the fighting there, such as Ypres and the Somme, while others were feared because the waterlogged ground made for wet, unhygienic conditions in the trenches. But in quiet sectors were the ground was either chalky or rocky, soldiers on both sides managed to create shelters in the trenches that were quite comfortable. They adorned their shelters with what furniture they could find in the deserted villages near the frontline, and found some peace in gardening.[61] The trenches became a home away from home for soldiers, who adjusted as best as they could. Nevertheless, no single comfort could erase the stress and bitterness a lot of soldiers felt:

> The darkness crumbles away –
> It is the same old druid Time as ever.
> Only a live thing leaps my hand –
> A queer sardonic rat –

[60] Edmund Blunden, 'Festubert: The Old German Line' (May 1916), quoted in Parsons: *Men Who March Away* 71.
[61] Watson, *Enduring the Great War,* 23-24.

As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German –
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes
Less chanced than you in life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver – what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe,
Just a little white with the dust.[62]

[62] Isaac Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches' (1916), quoted in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, 111.

The Pity of War

Starting from late 1915, a significant shift in the content and style of British war poetry took place. The war had dragged on for almost two years with no end in sight. Conscription was introduced in Britain early in 1916 to battle the shortage of manpower. The patriotist optimism of poets such as Rupert Brooke slowly gave way to more cynical and sarcastic voices that were inspired by the unending stalemate that kept demanding British lives. But the event that definitively shifted British war poetry away from its patriotic roots was the Battle of the Somme that started in July 1916 and lasted for five months. Designed as the war-winning offensive by the British, it still stands as one of the bloodiest battles in the history of warfare. Between July and November, the British suffered 432.000 casualties, of which 150.000 were killed and 100.000 unable to fight again. The Germans suffered 230.000 casualties in the same period.[63] This disparity in casualties was caused by the fact that the British had to attack the well-entrenched Germans across the open No-Mans' Land, exposed to enemy machine-gun and artillery fire. This image of industrialised war is described by John Buchan, in his 1917 account of the Battle of the Somme: 'The British moved forward in line after line, dressed as if on parade; not a man wavered or broke rank; but minute by minute the ordered lines melted away under the deluge of high-explosive, shrapnel, rifle, and machine-gun fire'.[64]

The scale of the Battle of the Somme was new even to this war, but the practice of marching wilfully into a storm of enemy fire was not. After the Battle of Loos in December 1915 a poem was recovered from the fallen body of a young soldier, Charles Sorley, that became a symbol for the grimness and senseless waste of industrialised mass battles:

> When you see millions of the mouthless dead
> Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
> Say not soft things as other men have said,
> That you'll remember. For you need not so.
> Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
> It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
> Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.

[63] Prior and Wilson, *The Somme*, 300-301.
[64] John Buchan, *The Battle of the Somme* (New York 1917), 42 [accessed digitally on https://archive.org/details/battleofsomme00buch, 24/5/2017].

Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, “They are dead.” Then add thereto,
“Yet many a better one has died before.”
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.

Although written before the Battle of the Somme took place, the poem still stands as an accusation of war and its glorification. Another poet who is well-known for his strong anti-war stance is Wilfred Owen. Killed on November 4, 1918, one week before the end of the war, he is generally regarded as one of the best British war poets. His poem ‘Exposure’ gave an insight into what it meant for soldiers to endure the brutality and boredom of the war:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive [sic] us…
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent…
Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient…
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow…
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,
But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
    But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
    —Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,—
    We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
    For love of God seems dying.

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shriveling many hands, and puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
    But nothing happens.[65]

[65] Wilfred Owen, 'Exposure' (1918), quoted in: Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 51-52.

Critique on the Glorification of the War

The relative isolation of the trenches, combined with the proximity to the enemy, made soldiers feel disconnected from the sentiments that emanated from Britain. British wartime propaganda depicted the Germans as bloodthirsty barbarians bent on the destruction of civilised lands. Patriotic writers and poets in England raged against these Germans and called upon the soldiers in the trenches to stop the menace of the 'Hun', as the Germans were called. At the front however, many soldiers held different views. The closeness of the enemy's trenches, as opposed to the great distance to both home and the generals who directed the war from far behind the frontline, created both a curious brotherhood with the enemy and a bitterness at the agitation from the home front.[66] Both this brotherhood and bitterness were expressed by Siegfried Sassoon in 'Glory of Women', which stands in sharp contrast with the bombastic war poetry written by, for example, Rupert Brooke.

> You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
> Or wounded in a mentionable place.
> You worship decorations; you believe
> That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
> You make us shells. You listen with delight,
> By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
> You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
> And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.
> You can't believe that British troops "retire"
> When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
> Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.
>
> O German mother dreaming by the fire,
> While you are knitting socks to send your son
> His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

Eric Hobsbawm states in his book *The Age of Extremes* that one of the great questions surrounding the First World War is how it could have lasted this long, especially since it was

[66] Sir Maurice Bowra, *Poetry and the First World War: The Taylorian Lecture* (Oxford 1961) 22-23.

not driven by ideology or ideological hatred such as was the case with the Second World War.[67] Answering this question is beyond the scope of this research, but the poem by Sassoon nicely illustrates the absence of hatred of the enemy. The last three lines of the poem convey a certain sense of compassion for the enemy soldier and his grieving mother, directly opposing Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The Beginnings', in which Kipling wrote: 'It was not part of their blood, / it came to them very late / with long arrears to make good / when the English began to hate'[68]. Another poem that went directly against the sentiments of hatred for the Germans that came from civilian life in Britain was 'Battlefield' by Richard Aldington:

The wind is piercing chill
And blows fine grains of snow
Over this shell-rent ground;
Every house in sight
Is smashed and desolate.

But in this fruitless land,
Thorny with wire
And foul with rotting clothes and sacks,
The crosses flourish –
Ci-gît, ci-gît, ci-gît …
'Ci-gît I soldat Allemand,
Priez pour lui.'[69]

[Here lies:, here lies:, here lies:…
Here lies this German soldier,
Pray for him]

[67] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes,* 29.
[68] Rudyard Kipling, 'The Beginnings', in: Rudyard Kipling, *A Diversity of Creatures* (1917) (republished by the University of Adelaide Library, https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kipling/rudyard/diversity/index.html [29/5/2017].
[69] Original italics. Richard Aldington, 'Battlefield', quoted in: Parsons, *Men Who March Away,* 88.

Incompetent Officers

Less-than-competent generalship is generally viewed as one of the main causes of the hundreds of thousands of British and Commonwealth soldiers losing their lives in the great battles at Loos, Ypres, the Somme, Passchendaele, and numerous other places. There is an intense historiographical debate surrounding the British military conduct of the war, with many lesser debates about the conduct of lower-ranked officers. The main debate however has always been about the personification of British generalship in the Great War: Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force from December 1915 until the end of the war.

The debate surrounding Haig is intricately connected to the new way the First World War was fought. Traditional historians, critical of him and of the British military conduct of the war in general, have depicted him as a conservative general who believed in the decisive power of the cavalry, and who was responsible for the death of a British generation by his offensives on the Somme and at Passchendaele. Prior and Wilson in *The Somme* share their opinion on Haig's conduct of that battle, and they offer severe criticism of his abilities as a battlefield commander. The greatest criticism they have on him is his belief in the concept of a 'decisive battle', which made him send wave after wave of men against well-defended German positions. In their opinion he failed to learn the most important lesson from the 1915 battles: that attacking well-defended trenches costs a lot of casualties, and the only way to wear the enemy out in the long term is by making sure that they suffer more casualties on defence than the British do on offense.[70] His eagerness for the 'decisive battle' however, has provided ammunition for critics who argued he senselessly wasted a whole British generation. Siegfried Sassoon in 1917 wrote a satirical poem that was meant for his own battalion commander, but that also perfectly fitted this historiographical trend regarding Haig's conduct of the war:

> 'Good morning; good morning!' the General said
> When we met him last week on our way to the line.
> Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
> And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
> 'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack
> As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
> But he did for them both by his plan of attack.[71]

[70] Prior and Wilson, *The Somme,* 307.
[71] Siegfried Sassoon, 'The General' (1917), quoted in: Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory*, 184.

No matter how just the satire and bitterness must have felt for Sassoon when writing the poem, many revisionist historians nowadays disagree with the view that Haig was an incompetent general. Revisionist historians seem to have come full circle to the point of Haig's death in 1928, when he was a well-known public figure, loved by the public and veterans alike. The casualties of the Somme and Passchendaele were not attributed to Haig as fruitless disasters, but rather as victories that came at a price. Andrew Wiest in *Haig: The Evolution of a Commander* concludes that although Haig made his mistakes, he learnt quickly and was largely responsible for transforming the British Expeditionary Force into a modern army that proved more than capable of defeating the vaunted German army. Wiest discredits the views of traditionalist historians about the general by saying that 'Haig was indeed a product of his time, an Edwardian gentleman officer confronted by the horrors of the first truly modern war.'[72]

[72] Andrew A. Wiest, *Haig: The Evolution of a Commander* (Washington 2005) 117.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the historiography of British war poetry has always focused itself on the personae of the soldier-poets, and on the literary aspects of the poems they wrote. Many anthologies that cover 'British poetry from World War I' do no more than just that. They usually offer an introduction on the lives of the war poets whose poems will be listed in the book, and some background information on the war. There are also some examples of books that take it a step further. Ian Parsons in *Men Who March Away* categorises his poems in four different categories according to British sentiment towards the war. Elizabeth Marshland in *The Nation's Cause* compares British, German and French war poetry from a literary-poetic viewpoint. Marshland comparing poetry from different nationalities is an exception on the standard anthology that only features war poets from the British Isles.

This past chapter is a new way of studying and appreciating war poetry from a historical viewpoint instead of only from a literary-poetic viewpoint. The main division used in this research is the one mentioned by Stuart Sillars, who describes war poetry as a movement from a first phase of patriotic purpose to a second phase of individual narratives of experience and suffering. This research has built on this division by taking the poems that are individual narratives of experience and looking at what kind of war experiences are described in these poems. The conclusion is that the historic content of the poems paints a vivid picture of the personal experiences of soldiers serving in the British army on the Western Front. The next question is of course if the German soldiers opposing the British (or French, for that matter) wrote about similar subjects as their British counterparts.

The German Great War experience expressed in poetry

Truppen marschieren bei Nacht. / Alle Gesichter sind gleich: / Fleckig und bleich, / Helmüberdacht. – Carl Zuckmayer

Imperial Germany and the Coming of the Great War

The first fourteen years of the twentieth century had been years of political turmoil and civilian progress. The political turmoil that sparked in different places in Europe had in some cases led to conflicts between smaller nations, while in other cases political crises between the Great Powers of Europe had put relations on the edge. Large-scale war however, had been avoided. The Russian Tsar was still in power after the failed revolution of 1905, although his international prestige had diminished with his country's ignominious defeat at the hands of the Japanese in the war of 1904-1905. On the Balkans, unrest was brewing as several countries violently declared their independence from the decaying Ottoman Empire, leading to two short Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913.

Much of the political turmoil within Europe in this first decade of the century had something to do with the emergence of a relatively new Great Power: Imperial Germany. Unified in the aftermath of its victory over France in 1870, the German states proved to be a quickly growing, industrious rival to the existing Great Powers. The volatile emperor Wilhelm II, who came to power in 1888, sought to expand and confirm Germany's Great Power status by enlarging the German battle fleet and acquiring colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Both courses led to tension with France and especially Great Britain, who relied on her naval superiority to keep her gigantic Empire intact. In answer to the perceived expansionism of Wilhelm II, France, Great Britain and Russia 'encircled' Germany with their Entente Cordiale.[73]

There was, and still is, an intense historiographical debate about who is to blame for starting the war that became the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles (1919), drawn up by the winners, forced the Germans to accept the blame for starting the war. Historians, of who Fritz Fischer is the most well-known, built upon this view and declared Germany guilty of choosing war; or even worse: of planning a large-scale war in order to break out of the

[73] Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London 1997) 18-19.

encirclement and become the dominant world power.[74] This view has been revised however. Holger Herwig in his history of Germany and Austria-Hungary in the First World War refutes the claims of the so-called Fischerthesis: Germany did not go to war to become a world power, but rather to secure and perhaps expand its borders. On top of that, the decision to go to war was made in July 1914 according to Herwig, and not planned beforehand like proponents of the Fischerthesis claim.[75] Both Christopher Clark in *Sleepwalkers*, and Hobsbawm before him in *The Age of Empire*, offer a more nuanced view of the war guilt question. Clark argues that the outbreak of the war should be seen as a tragedy, not a crime, although he also states that the imperialism and aggressive paranoia of Germany should not be downplayed. His note in the debate is that other countries suffered from the same imperialism and paranoia.[76] Hobsbawm brings his view along the same lines: the machinations of alliances following the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia meant the balance was tilting against Germany and Austria-Hungary. 'Was it not best to fight before it tilted further?'[77]

The German War Poets

Charles Sorley's observation of the poetic gusto of his fellow German students[78] was spot on. Germany in the pre-war years had a lively poetic and literary tradition. When compared with the English literary tradition from the pre-war years, some striking differences become visible. British poets and writers had not yet ventured in any modernist or experimental literary direction. They continued in the traditional Georgian style of poetry, reaffirming Great-Britain's status as the world's 'major conservative power'. In Germany however, especially in the years between 1910 and 1914, there was a blossoming of Expressionist poetry amongst other avant-garde literary developments. Most poets within the German Expressionist poetic movement were grouped around the periodicals *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*. The poets around *Der Sturm*, of who August Stramm would become the most famous of the German war poets, were more radically aesthetic in their approach. They were driven by a desire for aesthetic innovation that was born out of fascination with modern technologies: a fascination that would show itself in their poetic approach to the experience of war. The poets around *Die Aktion* were more politically orientated. *Die Aktion* gave a platform to poets with internationalist and

[74] Christopher Clark, *Slaapwandelaars: Hoe Europa in 1914 ten oorlog trok* (Dutch Edition: Antwerp 2013) 644-645.
[75] Herwig, *The First World War*, 19.
[76] Clark, *Slaapwandelaars*, 646.
[77] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire,* 311.
[78] See page 8.

pacifist tendencies, and during the war, had a section for 'Verse vom Schlacht-Feld' that featured graphically realistic war poems.[79]

When the war broke out in August 1914, Germany also saw a significant increase in the number of poems published. Julius Bab, a German editor who from the beginning of the war started collecting the best German war poems, estimated that over one and half million poems were written in this first month by soldiers and civilians. Although he was probably exaggerating, his estimation was based on the fact that he himself, as a modest editor, was already receiving forty poems a day in August 1914. Whatever the real numbers, it is clear that the outbreak of the war inspired many German soldiers and civilians to write poems about the conflict. And Britain and Germany were not the only countries that saw poetic output flare up with the outbreak of war: almost all countries involved in the First World War have their own history of war poetry.[80]

A notable difference with the English poetic tradition is that the German poets in the years before the war already experimented with war as a poetic subject. The British poets stuck mostly to describing rural England and the natural world around them, while the German poets used war as a metaphorical image for renewal and modernism. They wrote from a desire to revitalise society and culture, in which war stood for the radical break from traditionalism that was necessary to achieve this renewal.[81] A great example of this activist avant-garde stance was written by Ernst Wilhelm Lotz, a poet whose work appeared regularly in *Der Sturm*. In 1913 he wrote 'Aufbruch der Jugend', in which he used a militaristic theme to illustrate his desire for a youthful cultural revolution:

> Also zu neuen Tag erstarkt, wir spannen die Arme,
> Unbegreiflichen Lachens erschüttert, wie Kraft, die sich staut,
> Wie Truppenkolonnen, unruhig nach Ruf der Alarme,
> Wenn hoch und erwartet der Tag überm Osten blaut.
>
> [...]
>
> Vielleicht würder uns am Abend Siegesmärsche umstreichen,
> Vielleicht lägen wir irgendwo ausgestreckt unter Leichen.
> Aber vor dem Erraffen und vor dem Versinken

[79] Martin Löschnigg, '"Expressionist-Artillerist": "Poet" and "Soldier" as Conflicting Role Models in German Avant-Garde Poetry from the First World War', in: Tiffany Johnstone, Patrick Imbert and Sherrill Grace ed., *Perspectives on War and Peace from the Arts and Humanities* (Montreal 2012) 79-80.
[80] Marshland, *The Nation's Cause*, 2.
[81] Löschnigg, '"Expressionist-Artillerist"', 80-81.

Würden unsere Augen sich an Welt und Sonne satt und glühend trinken.[82]

In the Expressionist poems that toyed with war as a literary subject there were almost no political or chauvinistic overtones to be found. There was not even a concrete longing for war, but rather a general longing for change that came from a boredom with the world in which the writer grew up. This is a theme that was not unique for Germany, but was characteristic for many European young men in the years preceding the war. In England, the best expression of this boredom was found in Brooke's 'Peace': 'To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping / Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary'. In Germany, the young Expressionist poet Georg Heym wrote in his diary in 1910 that 'sei es auch nur, dass man einen Krieg begänne, er kann ungerecht sein. Dieser Frieden ist so faul ölig und schmierig wie Leimpolitur auf alten Möbeln'.[83] And although he died before the war broke out, his 1911 poem 'Der Krieg' painted a harrowing picture of the destruction and death that an industrialised war would cause; a picture that was in a way comparable to John Masefield's poem 'August 1914'[84]:

Einem Turm gleich tritt er auf die letzte Glut,
Wo der Tag flieht, sind die Ströme schon voll Blut.
Zahllos sind die Leichen schon im Schilf gestreckt,
Von des Todes starken Vögeln weiß bedeck.
[…]
Und mit tausend hohen Zipfelmützen weit
Sind die finstren Ebnen flackernd überstreut,
Und was unten auf den Straßen wimmelnd flieht,
Stößt er in die Feuerwälder, wo die Flamme brausend zieht.[85]

The German Soldier's Experience Captured in Poetry: A Thematic Approach

The historiographical neglect of war poetry from other nations than Great Britain has not limited itself to historians or literary critics. In France for example, the French war poetry is barely known to both critics and public. When it is known at all, it is generally because the

[82] Ernst Wilhelm Lotz, 'Aufbruch der Jugend' (1913), retrieved from: http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/-9061/7 [5/6/2017].
[83] Georg Heym, quoted in: Löschnigg, '"Expressionist-Artillerist"', 81.
[84] See page 9.
[85] Georg Heym, 'Der Krieg' (1911), retrieved from: http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/gedichte-2980/24 [5/6/17].

writer is famous in the first place for his pre- or post-war literary work. Germany is the exception on this rule, because already during the war there existed a lively interest in the poetry that was produced by the soldiers. The earlier mentioned Julius Bab compiled a series of anthologies between 1914 and 1919, while Franz Pfemfert, editor of *Die Aktion*, was eager to publish poems from the battlefield. Interest in Germany for the war poetry continued well into the 1930s, partly inspired by National-Socialism and partly inspired by a continued interest in the Great War that also embodied itself in novels such as Erich Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues*.[86]

After the Second World War historiographic interest in German First World War poetry focused itself both on the war poetry and the war motif as used by the German Expressionists in and before the war, or on individuals whose reputation was made by their war poetry. Probably the only study on German war poetry that is comparable to the many 'English' anthologies is *The German Poets of the First World War* by Patrick Bridgwater, published in 1985, that offers prose translations, biographical information and textual analysis. Placing German war poetry in an international perspective (or studying war poetry as an international phenomenon) has only been done by a handful of studies, of which Elizabeth Marshland's *The Nation's Cause* (1991) and Sir Maurice Bowra's *Poetry and the First World War* (1961) are the best examples.

Connecting the content of First World War German poems from the frontlines to what is known about the war is a new approach to this subject. As is the case for the British, it can add to our knowledge about the individual German soldier's experience in the Great War. Since there is no preceding research available upon which could be built, the themes found in the British war poetry from the previous chapter are used as a blueprint for the German poetry. The goal of this chapter is to discover whether the German war poets addressed similar themes when describing their frontline experiences in poetry and see if, and how, they differ from their British counterparts.

[86] Marshland, *The Nation's Cause*, 11-12.

Glorifying (the) War

Germany Surrounded

The plan for the expected war against France that the German General Staff in the person of General von Schlieffen had worked out, by necessity included the violation of the Belgian and Luxembourgian national borders by German troops. The bulk of the German army would perform a gigantic encircling operation through Belgium and Luxembourg, in order to move around the French defensive lines and take Paris, all within forty days from the start of mobilisation. The plan thought out by Von Schlieffen worked with a strict time-schedule, all because the German army had another task after the defeat of the French: move to the east and stop the expected advance of the enormous Russian army. The only way the General Staff thought Germany could win the next European war was if it succeeded in defeating France before Russia could completely mobilise its huge armies.[87] For this reason, many ordinary Germans saw an attack against neutral Belgium and Luxembourg as an act of self-defense, not as a move of aggression. When the war broke out and there was international outrage over the violation of Belgian neutrality, many German writers felt the need to defend the actions of their *Vaterland:*

> Immer schon haben wir eine Liebe zu dir gekannt,
> bloß wir haben sie nie mit einem Namen genannt.
> Als man uns rief, da zogen wir schweigend fort,
> auf den Lippen nicht, aber im Herzen das Wort
> Deutschland.
>
> Unsre Liebe war schweigsam; sie brütete tiefversteckt.
> Nun ihre Zeit gekommen, hat Sie sich hochgereckt.
> Schon seit Monden schirmt sie in Ost und West dein Haus,
> und sie schreitet gelassen durch Sturm und Wettergraus.
> Deutschland.
>
> Daß kein fremder Fuß betrete den heimischen Grund,
> stirbt ein Bruder in Polen, liegt einer in Flandern wund.

[87] Herwig, *The First World War*, 46-48.

Alle hüten wir deiner Grenze heiligen Saum.
Unser blühendstes Leben für deinen dürrsten Baum,
Deutschland.

Immer schon haben wir eine Liebe zu dir gekannt,
bloß wir haben sie nie bei ihrem Namen genannt.
Herrlich zeigte es aber deine größte Gefahr,
daß dein ärmster Sohn auch dein getreuester war.
Denk es, o Deutschland.[88]

The feeling of being surrounded, of having to defend Germany from enemies attacking from all sides, is a recurring theme in the early German war poetry. Karl Bröger described here how one 'brother' died in Poland, while another is wounded in Flanders; all in order to make sure no foreign enemies could harm Germany. Another outspoken example of this feeling of being surrounded by enemies came from Cäsar Flaischlen, in his poem 'Deutscher Weltkrieg':

Sie haben seit Jahren uns umstellt
An alle Ecken und Kanten,
Verträge und Klauseln ausgeheckt
Und einander Schmiere gestanden.
[…]
Nun geht ein Kesseltreiben los
Rundum, uns fest zu zäunen,
Hie Russ', hie Brite, hie Franzos'…
Und alles gegen einen![89]

A recurring theme in the poetic work from this period was the necessity of the war for the survival of Germany on the political world stage. While this may seem to historians to be a justification for a crime that had already been committed, its recurrence in poetry suggests that it was a legitimate concern for many Germans. In one of the most popular German poems of

[88] Karl Bröger, 'Bekenntnis' (first published 1917), retrieved from: http://gedichte.xbib.de/Br%F6ger,+Karl_gedicht_006.+BEKENNTNIS.htm [7/6/2017].
[89] Cäsar Flaischlen, 'Deutscher Weltkrieg', quoted in: Marshland, *The Nation's Cause,* 49.

the war, Heinrich Lersch took the view of the simple soldier who went to war with but one goal: to defend Germany and die for her, if need be:

[…]
Nun lebt wohl, Menschen, lebet wohl!
Und wenn wir für euch und unsere Zukunft fallen,
Soll als letzter Gruß zu euch hinüberhallen:
Nun lebt wohl, ihre Menschen, lebet wohl!
Ein freier Deutscher kennt kein kaltes Müssen:
Deutschland muss leben, und wenn wir sterben müssen![90]

One difference between the early British and German war poetry is that the German poets often mentioned the enemy against which their country fought. In the British war poetry studied in this research, the focus was put on heroism, self-sacrifice and patriotic duty, while German poets not only stressed the (in their eyes) righteous battle against encirclement but also tried to instigate hatred against the enemy. The most famous poem of this kind in the war was Ernst Lissauer's 'Hassgesang gegen England':

Was schiert uns Russe und Franzos
Schuss wider Schuss und Stoß um Stoß
wir lieben sie nicht
Wir hassen sie nicht
Wir schützen Weichsel und Wasgaupaß
Wir haben nur einen einzigen Hass
Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint
Wir haben nur einen einzigen Feind

Den ihr alle wisst, den ihr alle wisst
Er sitzt geduckt hinter der grauen Flut
voll Neid, voll Mut, voll Schläue, voll List
durch Wasser getrennt, die sind dicker als Blut
Wir wollen treten in ein Gericht

[90] Heinrich Lersch, 'Soldatenabschied', in: Heinrich Lersch, *Herz! Aufglühe dein Blut: Gedichte im Kriege* (1916) 14-15. Digitally republished, retrieved from: https://archive.org/details/herzaufglhedei00lers [7/6/2017].

einen Schwur zu schwören, Gesicht in Gesicht
einen Schwur von Erz, den verbläst kein Wind,
einen Schwur für Kind und für Kindeskind.
Vernehmt das Wort, sagt nach das Wort
es wälze sich durch ganz Deutschland fort:
Wir wollen nicht lassen von unserm Hass
Wir haben alle nur einen Hass
Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint
Wir haben alle nur einen Feind:
England![91]

The German feeling of insecurity at being a relative newcomer on the international stage, and the hunger for recognition as a Great Power, directed itself mostly at Great Britain. As Lissauer's poem showed, France and Russia were considered a threat, but a threat that was manageable for Germany. 'Russia stands for reaction, […] France for decadence', one German journalist remarked. '[But] we Germans are the most industrious, the most earnest, the best educated race in Europe.'[92] Both Emperor Wilhelm II and his people envied the existing Great Powers, of which Great Britain was the greatest, and demanded their respect and recognition. This explains the fact that when the war broke out, hatred directed itself against Britain, who denied Germany her 'place in the sun'.[93]

A New Kind of War

An important difference between English and German war poetry is the moment when it developed itself into a literary force in its own right. In England, most of the war poets who were part of the 'realistic phase' of English war poetry did not arrive at the frontlines until late 1915 or 1916, after the war had been going on for almost two years. In Germany, many young men who had been active poets in peacetime were mobilised in the summer of 1914 and took part in the war right from the start. This striking difference, which is clearly visible in the themes that are addressed by the German poets from almost the first day of the war, can be explained by the pre-war recurrence of war as a theme in the German literary tradition. This

[91] Ernst Lissauer, 'Hassgesang gegen England' (1914), retrieved from: https://www.volksliederarchiv.de/hassgesang-england/ [29/5/2017].
[92] Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 342.
[93] Ibidem, 9.

means that German war poetry did not follow a succession of themes such as is visible in English war poetry. There was no 'dawning of realism' after an initial phase of patriotism and idealisation of self-sacrifice. For German war poetry, there was no 'turn to bitterness and irony' when the soldiers at the frontline became disillusioned with the war. Rather, all these themes were present from the first day of the war.

In 1916 Franz Pfemfert, one of the editors of *Die Aktion*, published an anthology of Expressionist war poems that he had received from soldiers on the frontline. This anthology makes for intriguing source material, since the poems that are printed cover many different subjects and themes. What makes it truly interesting however, is the fact that all poems deal with the phenomenon of modern, industrialised war in which soldiers had become anonymous pawns. Patriotic poems that tell of heroic sacrifice, characteristic for the British war poetry of the first years of the war, were mainly absent in the works of the German war poets. Rather, the Expressionist viewpoint of these soldier-poets gave them the ability to describe the destruction wrought around them with an almost absurd detachedness:

> Langsam beginnen die Steine sich zu bewegen und zu reden.
> Die Gräser erstarren zu grünem Metall. Die Wälder,
> Niedrige, dichte Verstecke, fressen ferne Kolonnen.
> Der Himmel, das kalkweiße Geheimnis, droht zu bersten.
> Zwei kolossale Stunden rollen sich auf zu Minuten.
> Der leere Horizont bläht sich empor,
> Mein Herz ist so groß wie Deutschland und Frankreich zusammen,
> Durchbohrt von alle Geschossen der Welt.
> Die Batterie erhebt ihre Löwenstimme sechsmal hinaus in das Land.
> Die Granaten heulen.
> Stille.
> In der Ferne brodelt das Feuer der Infanterie.
> Tagelang, wochenlang.[94]

Wilhelm Klemm, a military doctor at the Western Front, wrote this poem while taking part in the Battle of the Marne in September 1914. When reading it, the enormity of the war in which

[94] Wilhelm Klemm, 'Schlacht an der Marne' (published October 1914), quoted in: Franz Pfemfert ed., *Die Aktions-Lyrik. 1914-1916: Eine Anthologie* (Berlin 1916) 65.

the writer found himself becomes immediately clear. By September, one month after the war had started, more than one-and-a-half million German soldiers had penetrated deep into Belgium and Northern France, pushing the French and British armies back towards Paris. Never before in the history of warfare had so many men engaged each other on the battlefield. In the previous wars the Germans fought, against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870, they had mobilised only around 300.000 men.[95] Now seven German armies, more than one-and-a-half million men strong, were engaged against an equally large French army.[96] The sheer scale of the war was a disorientating experience for the men involved. The German soldier-poet who was arguably the best at depicting the mind-numbing chaos of modern warfare was August Stramm, company commander at the Western Front until early 1915 and eventually killed at the Eastern Front in September 1915. He found a way of almost visually depicting the chaos of modern war through his experimental use of language:

> Aus allen Winkeln gellen Fürchte Wollen
> Kreisch
> Peitscht
> Das Leben
> Vor
> Sich
> Her
> Den keuchen Tod
> Die Himmel fetzen.
> Blinde schlächtert wildum das Entsetzen.[97]

Stramm deliberately used linguistic tricks such as compression, the fracturing of syntax, portmanteau words ('wildum') and the grammatical re-functioning of words (the verb 'fürchten' is made into a noun). Stramm's poetry was a unique case in which the experimental use of language conveyed a message in itself. It represented the chaos, the destruction of the known world and the disconnection experienced by soldiers in a modern war.

[95] Herwig, *The First World War*, 48.
[96] Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 178.
[97] Löschnigg, '"Expressionist-Artillerist"', 85.

Destruction and Disconnection

The destruction and disconnection that August Stramm depicted through his experimental use of language, seem upon closer scrutiny a theme in itself in German war poetry. This probably originated within the Expressionist poetic trend. Expressionist poets used poetry as a means to articulate their concern with the individual's vulnerability and the fragmentation of the individual in new, extreme circumstances.[98] Whereas the British war poets seemed very much personally involved in their lyrical output, the German poets who described the brutality of modern war write as if they are coolly detached from it. This does not mean that they were trivialising the war. Rather, the a-personal approach strengthened the feeling that this was a new kind of war, in which there was no place for the vulnerable individual:

Es reißt mich in Nacht.
Aus ihrem Schacht
In den Viehwagen winkt
Der Mond leichenfarb.
Leuchtest mir zum frühen Tod.
Kameraden betäuben sich.
Lieder sind lauter als Schmerz.
Ein paar sind schon Tiere.
Aus Augen und Maul
Speien sie Rauflust.
Mancher sitzt stumm
Und bedenkt noch;
Oder gräbt sich
Sinnlos ins Dunkel.
Wir fliegen über helle Bahnsteige
Wo Landsturm Spionen lauert.
Über Flüsse und Städte.
Immer tiefer in Nacht.
Ich hab [sic] keine Mutter mehr.
Von meinen Brüdern weiß ich nichts.

[98] Chris Waller, 'Anton Schnack (1892-1973): The First World War and the Fate of the Self', in: *Oxford German Studies* 42.1 (2013) 57-75, there 59.

Ich bin Soldat
Und werde auch Mörder sein.
Blut durchsickert mein Herz.
Blut und blut,
bis es stickt.[99]

Oskar Kanehl, whose poems had a distinct anti-war tone and who would become a communist after the war, was certainly not the only one in observing the destruction the war wrought on the soldiers and their surroundings. Anton Schnack, who fought on the Western Front for a few months in 1915 and 1916 before he became an invalid in an accidental explosion[100], offered another view on the impersonal and at the same time heart-wrenching destruction that the war caused to the once beautiful French countryside:

Es war der Süßigkeiten voll:
Hollunder wuchs...ein altes Lilienwappen,
Moosüberzogen, trug das Tor und eine Bäu'rin ging in Schlappen,
Sonnschützend sich, zum Stall, wo eine Pfeife scholl...
Verwunschen lag im Park, silbernumspielt von alten Wasserspeiern,
Das Grafenschloss mit dunkelblauen Fenstern und rostgoldnen Schildern,
Umgürtet hoch von Taxushecken, keck unterbrochen
    durch die Schar von nackten Frauenbildern...
Dorfjugend schrie und fischte in der grünen tang-vermoorten Weihern...
Am Baum die Grotte, wo Maria stand in Blumen und in weissen Himmelssternen
Und wo die Jungfrau'n kniten mit buntfarb'gem Schal
Des Abends, wenn die Sonne rot am Fluss hinuntersank...
    Trümmer ist alles...Dumpf und fortwährend rollt aus alle Fernen
    Die Front der Schlacht in Gassen voll Verwüstung, Traurigkeit und Qual,
    Voll Schutt und Asche, Schmutz und Brandgestank...[101]

The rapid advance of the German armies through the Belgian and French countryside, and the subsequent stagnation of the war in trenches that covered large tracts of countryside, extorted

[99] Oskar Kanehl, 'Unterwegs', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 44.
[100] Waller, 'Anton Schnack', 57.
[101] Anton Schnack, 'Französisches Dorf', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 102.

a heavy toll on the civilian population. More than one-and-a-half million Belgian civilians fled the German advance, and an equally large number of French civilians fled south, clogging the roads and hindering the French army's capability to manoeuvre. Most refugees fled either to neutral nations such as the Netherlands, or in the direction of large towns hoping for shelter and food. In the countryside, the frontline passed by the homes of many civilians, destroying their villages and forcing them to seek refuge elsewhere.[102] Wilhelm Klemm described the wreckage of one such abandoned, destroyed and overgrown village:

> Die Häuser sind wie aus Pfefferkuchen
> Und halb abgegessen. Der blaue Himmel hat soviel Platz drin,
> Lächelt durch so viele runde Löcher in Trümmerhaufen
> Und leere Granaten. Alles, aber auch alles ist zerstört.
> […]
> Die Kirche ist hohl. Und der Turm, du lieber Gott,
> Hat nur noch eine Seite. Darum liegt ein Friedhof
> Lauter Soldatengräber. Die weißen Kreuze
> Stehen so sauber, als exerzierten sie noch.
>
> Disteln duften süß aus ihren meilenweiten Feldern.
> Die Wege sind verwachsen. Mohn blüht wunderbar groß
> Berauschendes Rot mit einem Hang ins Purpurne.
> Kamillen nicken in riesigen Büscheln.[103]

Because of the nature of warfare in the First World War, with a limited war of movement at the beginning and ending of an almost four-year long phase of static warfare, it left specific parts of Northern France and Belgium completely devastated. This destruction, caused for a large part by incessant artillery bombardments, was already noted by soldiers such as Klemm. Within the historiography of the First World War however, this field has received little attention. Most research into the post-war years focused itself on national and international developments such as the Versailles Treaty or the revolution in Germany. The British historian Hugh Clout is one of the few who has done extensive research into the post-war rebuilding of the destroyed countryside. In a study on the reconstruction of the French Département du Nord,

[102] Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*, *1914-1918* (New York 2010) 114-118.
[103] Wilhelm Klemm, 'Dörfer', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 60.

he describes the sheer volume of the destruction, but also stresses its localised nature. Because of the war, the department had lost forty percent of its original population. Around the place where the frontline had cut through the department, 72.000 hectares of ground had to be cleared of unexploded ordnance, more than nine million square meters of barbed wire had to be cleared as well as almost twenty million cubic metres of trench. Over a hundred and fifty communes suffered between ninety and fifty percent of their buildings utterly destroyed.[104] With a quick glance on Clout's work it is clear that the French and Belgian governments faced a daunting task in restoring the countryside to its pre-war state. What also becomes clear is that this is a very under-researched field which could provide more insight in the civilian experience of war.

Gas Warfare

The German army experienced many difficulties with developing working chemical weapons. Like the French, they believed that it could be the weapon they needed to drive the enemy from his fortified positions. In October 1914, Chief of the General Staff General Falkenhayn invited several eminent physicists and chemists to Cologne to discuss the development of irritating substances as a weapon. The first chemical artillery shells were developed soon after and used in the attack on Neuve Chapelle in France on October 27, but they were so ineffective that the French did not even notice there was a chemical weapon being employed against them. Subsequent experiments with tear gas were more successful, and tear gas shells were first used against the Russian army on January 31st, 1915. As the outside temperature was far below zero, the liquid tear gas in the artillery shells failed to vaporise upon impact, leaving the Russian soldiers unaware of its use. This piecemeal approach is characteristic for the first stage of chemical weapons in the Great War.[105] However, the development of toxic gases took huge leaps during the war. By 1918 Germany, France and Britain together had produced more than 125.000 tons of chemical weapons, and its use in the war had caused more than a million casualties, of which roughly 90.000 had been fatal.[106]

The impact a gas attack had on soldiers receiving one was magnificently depicted by Wilfred Owen in his poem 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. Nevertheless, German soldiers also experienced the deadly effects a gas attack had on its recipients and their natural surroundings.

---

[104] Hugh Clout, 'Devastation and Reconstruction in the Countryside of Nord Department, 1914-1930', in: *Bulletin de la Société Géographique de Liege* (January 2015) 35-43, there 35-36.
[105] Haber, *The Poisonous Cloud*, 24-26.
[106] Aswin Mangerich, and Charlotte Esser, 'Chemical Warfare in the First World War: Reflections 100 Years Later', in: *Archives of Toxicology* 88.11 (2014) 1909-1911, there 1909.

In ‘Gasangriff’, published in 1916, Arnold Ulitz described the devastation of a German gas attack on the Russians:

> Wir trafen einen Wind, der sich unserm Zorne verschwor,
> Da entriegelten wir dem [sic] Gase das stählerne Tor.
> Bleichsüchtig grün, tierhaft, vampirhaft, mit Schneckenbauch
> Ausgehungert von finsterer Kerkerhaft,
> Verdorrt und durstig nach lebendigem Saft,
> Kriecht er hervor, molluskischer Leib aus Rauch.
> Wind spornt die Bestie. Sie stinkt nach Chlor.
>
> Das Gasraubtier kriecht
> Feuchtfingrig tastend auf weichen leisen Pfoten.
> Blatt und Blume siecht.
> Sterben muss der Falter, der an toten
> Blumenlippen riecht.
>
> Die Gongs im russischen Wald läuten Alarm,
> Leichen mit aufgepflanzten Bajonetten warten
> Auf die stillen Sieger regungslos.
> Hinter den Froschaugen der Masken stehen die erstarrten
> Menschenaugen betend, tot und groß.
>
> Vor den toten Menschen sind wir nicht erschrocken,
> Toten Menschen sahn [sic] wir zu oft ins Gesicht.
> Aber siehe, siehe! Allerorten
> Fallen tote Vögel von dem Bäumen, die verdorrten,
> Fallen fruchtschwer ins ergraute Moos.
> Und wir horchen, wie sie fallen, und wir reden nicht.
>
> Und wir hören auch die toten Blätter fallen,
> Knisternd, wie verbrannt, auf kleine Nachtigallen.
>
> Vor den toten Menschen sind wir nicht erschrocken.

Vor den toten Vögeln wissen wir mit einem Male:
Wo wir gehen, da ist bald Herbst geworden,
Gottes Zeitenfolge müssen wir ermorden.
Seht, das Raubtier weidet schon im Tale.

Wird noch einmal Frühling werden, Brüder,
Glaubt ihr noch?[107]

The Soldier's Fate: Life and Death

Fear of Being Wounded, Crippled, Killed

Every soldier who wished to survive at the frontline both physically and mentally, had to develop his risk assessment. Unexperienced troops who arrived on the frontline often displayed a deadly combination of curiosity and a carelessness that came from inexperience. Over time, they got used to the noise, chaos and stench and developed skills that were necessary for survival. It was essential for frontline soldiers to be able to use even the slightest elevations and depressions in the terrain for cover, and to be able to predict the fall of enemy shells by their sound. Skills such as these made soldiers able to function in a combat situation by raising their self-confidence and thus minimising fear. Soldiers' testimonies reaffirmed this image: calmness and self-control in battle distinguished the veteran from the recruit.[108]

Becoming aware of the dangers also meant becoming aware of the likeliness of death or injury. For dealing with the intense stress and fatalism that the fear of death or injury brought, religion proved to be an important source of strength for the German soldiers in particular. Alexander Watson in *Enduring the Great War* attributes this to the fact that 'faith gave sense to an otherwise frightening and chaotic world'. Many fatalistic soldiers put their trust in God, like Heini Weber, who fought in the Argonne: 'in questions of mortality, one must just trust in God'.[109] Alfred Lichtenstein in his 'Gebet vor der Schlacht', instead pleaded with God to spare him because he had so many nice things still left to do in life:

[107] Arnold Ulitz, 'Gasangriff', in: *Simplicissimus* 21.32 (7 November 1916) 393-408, there 394.
[108] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 87.
[109] Ibidem, 93-95.

Inbrünstig singt die Mannschaft, jeder für sich:
Gott, behüte mich vor Unglück,
Vater, Sohn und Heiliger Geist,
Dass mich nicht Granaten treffen,
Dass die Luder, unsre Feinde,
Mich nicht fangen, nicht erschießen,
Dass ich nicht wie'n Hund verrecke
Für das teure Vaterland.

Sieh, ich möchte gern noch leben,
Kühe melken, Mädchen stopfen
Und den Schuft, den Sepp, verprügeln,
Mich noch manches Mal besaufen
Bis zu meinem selgen Ende.
Sieh, ich bete gut und gerne
Täglich sieben Rosenkränze,
Wenn du, Gott, in deiner Gnade
Meinen Freund, den Huber oder
Meier, tötest, mich verschonst.

Aber muss ich doch dran glauben,
Lass mich nicht zu schwer verwunden.
Schick mir einen leichten Beinschuß,
Eine kleine Armverletzung,
Dass ich als ein Held zurückkehr,
Der etwas erzählen kann.[110]

Lichtenstein's pleading with God to give him the German equivalent of a 'Blighty' wound, is reminiscent of Ivor Gurney asking the same in his poem 'Ballad of the Three Spectres'. The fatalism displayed by these poems is a characteristic emotion of the static warfare of the Western Front. One seemingly contradictory fact about trench warfare is one that goes against all popular perceptions of the Great War: trench warfare did not

[110] Alfred Lichtenstein, 'Gebet vor der Schlacht', retrieved from: http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/alfred-lichtenstein-gedichte-5161/35 [9/6/2017].

increase casualties, but instead caused fewer casualties when compared to open warfare. The German army on the Western Front suffered most in the three months of mobile war in 1914, and again in the mobile fighting in 1918. In the war of movement in East Prussia against the Russians in 1914-1915, the German army suffered an average casualty rate of 476 wounded per 1000 men. In the static war of the Western Front during 1916-1917, the casualty rate was a considerably lower 182 per 1000 men.[111] Nevertheless, soldiers hated trench warfare. What made it especially hard to endure was the continued exposure to deadly risk, combined with a lack of perceivable progress. One (British) commander concluded after the war that psychological trauma such as shellshock was less the result of sudden trauma than the 'prolonged danger in a static position, where the man cannot get away from it'.[112] The exposure to intense danger and death could lead to a certain acceptance of death that severely limited a soldier's effectiveness:

Grabenrand durchs ganze Land
Alle Sinne angespannt,
Kauern wir am Grabenrand,
Lauern wir: ob Tod uns wird,
Wenn die wilde Kugel schwirrt,
Grabenrand, Grabesrand,
Ihr seid nah, so nah verwandt…
Grabenrand durchs ganze Land…[113]

The Enemy

Because of the closeness of the enemy's trenches and the static nature of the war, the Western Front of the First World War was quite unique in the fact that the opposing armies had a relative large amount of informal contact. The most famous example of this informal contact was the 'Christmas Truce' of December 1914. All along the Western Front, German, British and French soldiers on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day impromptu mingled in the No-Man's Land to exchange pleasantries and small gifts, despite this being forbidden by the officers. Cases such as this one were rare of course, but local ceasefires or mutual understandings that allowed both

[111] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 24-25.
[112] J.F.C. Fuller, quoted in: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 21.
[113] Georg Davidsohn, 'Am Rand', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 28.

sides to recover the dead and wounded were common. Wilhlem Klemm described his view on the daily rhythm of the frontline in 'Feuerüberfall':

> In den stillen Graben hängen die Sterne herein,
> Näher und größer als sonst. Man geht in die Schulterwehren,
> An schweigenden Posten vorbei.
> Eine Kriegsnacht ist wieder halb vorüber.
>
> Plötzlich wie ein Signa, fällt der erste Kanonenschuss.
> Krachen und Pfeifen in hoher Luft. Blitzen und Erderbeben.
> Sämtliche Maschinengewehre rasen los.
> Nun aber schnell in die Löcher zurück!
>
> Feuersturm und echteste wilde Jagd!
> Man versteht sein Wort nicht mehr. Getöse,
> Explosionen. Jetzt schießt unsere Artillerie.
> Wie Orgelton brummen die großen Minensplitter.
>
> Es gröhlt, quiekt, rasselt und pfeift, dröhnt wie Bergsturz,
> Es regnet Erde. Der Luftdruck presst einem den Magen.
> Abwarten. Es muss doch auch einmal aufhören.
> Und wirklich, nach einer halben Stunde wird's ruhig.
>
> Die Maschinengewehre plappern noch eine Weile,
> Steppen sich die langen Stunden hindurch.
> Aber früh um sechs herum trinkt der Engländer Kaffee,
> Dann können wir unsere Toten bergen.[114]

This poem shows that for Klemm, war consisted of a certain rhythm and mutual understanding between the warring sides: an attack took place with an intense exchange of machine-gun and artillery fire, that was at the same time adrenaline-pumping and strangely normal for the experienced soldier. When the attack died down, the English would drink their morning coffee,

[114] Wilhelm Klemm, 'Feuerüberfall', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 66.

during which the Germans had some time to recover their dead. After this, the waiting for the next attack began again. Besides the incidental friendly exchanges and short ceasefires to recover the dead, soldiers did develop a strange connection with the enemy that was characterised by a combination of compassion and black humour. Watson in *Enduring the Great War* describes how humour, and especially dark humour, was a powerful coping mechanism for the soldiers. This sentiment is often seen as quintessentially British, but new insights such as Watson's show that the Germans equally valued humour as a coping mechanism. A British officer described a short confrontation between a British and a German machine-gunner who both displayed a macabre sense of humour:

'The Hun, too, is not without his sense of humour – grim enough, it is true, but everything out here is like that. We have a very clever machine gunner who can play tunes on his gun. the [sic] other night he fired a burst of fire with the "Pom-tiddly-om-pom" cadence and Fritz [the German gunner] replied with "Pom-pom" and hit two men of ours who were on a working party. And so the game goes on.'[115]

The game did go on indeed. According to Watson, psychological study has shown that 'humans demonstrate an increased liking for "hostile" humour following incontrollable experiences'. Humour helped the soldiers to keep their fear in check and manage the horrors they saw around them. It also kept them from sliding too deep into fatalism.[116]

When studying the German war poets' view of the enemy, it is immediately clear that there is no hatred in their words. The main emotions found in the poems concerning the enemy are compassion and a sense of sharing the same fate. This feeling was put into words by Heinrich Lersch in 'Im Schützengraben':

> Ich lieg an dem Gewehr zum Anschlag an.
> Ein Käppi hebt sich überm Grabenrand,
> und eine Hand
> wirft eine Schaufel Erde hoch hinan ...
>
> Mein Kamerad Franzos, dich traf ich gut!
> Du musst nicht böse sein, dass ich dich schoss:

[115] Captain H.W. Yoxall, quoted in: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 91.
[116] Watson, *Enduring the Great War,* 91-92.

Ich bin dein Bruder ja, bin dein Genoss;
wir sind erlöst durch eines Gottes Blut.

Was ist es denn, was uns zu töten heißt?
Du mich – ich dich, dass wir so vogelfrei?
Nur treffen, töten, wen ist einerlei,
wem du dich nur von einem Feind befreist.

Wir denken nicht. Wir tun nur Schuss auf Schuss!
Fällt jemand neben uns – dann wächst die Wut,
und wie die Erde trinkt das frische Blut,
so wächst der Rache grauser Hochgenuss.

Denn Blut will Blut. In Strömen fließt es hin.
Tot liegt nun der, des Herz so warm doch schlug,
der Nacht um Nacht das schwere Heimweh trug,
das wachsend schwoll seit Krieges Anbeginn.

Wozu das all, mein Kamerad Franzos?
Du stirbst für deines Reiches Herrlichkeit,
ich steh für unseres Tuns Gerechtigkeit,
und gleicher Tod ist unser beider Los.

[...]

Mein Kamerad Franzos, nun ruhst auch du
in Heimaterde aus von Kampf und Schlacht,
auch ich hab sie zur Heimat mir gemacht, –
wir harren wohl der Auferstehung zu.

Und unterdessen wird ein Sonnentag
mit ungeheurem Jubel um die Erde gehn,
und Blumen fliegen, Banner, Fahnen wehn,
und jeder jubelt, wie er kann und mag.

Wir hörens nicht. Wir liegen kalt und tot.
Uns weckt kein Singen, keines Friedens Gruß,

auf unsern Leibern steht der Menschheit Fuß:
Sie schaut hinein ins neue Morgenrot.[117]

[117] Heinrich Lersch, 'Im Schützengraben', in: Lersch, *Herz! Aufglühe dein Blut*, 43-44.

Critique (on War, Leadership, the Home-front)

Enduring the War: Poems of Protest

Instead of the 'frischer und fröhliger Krieg', a hopeful sentiment that is still (incorrectly) seen as defining the mood of the summer of 1914, Europe got a protracted conflict that killed an entire generation of young men and required the combatant countries to commit all available resources to maintain their war effort. The hope for a short war, inspired by nationalist feelings and propaganda, was not shared by the higher political and military circles. The Prussian War Office in 1911 foresaw a war of at least nine months long, and the pre-war Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke feared that the war would be 'a protracted struggle on two fronts'.[118] However, neither side had expected a prolonged war of attrition such as the one that eventually developed when the initial phase of mobile war came to a halt at the end of 1914. In the absence of viable strategies to break the deadlock, it fell to the soldiers to endure the uncertain conditions at the frontlines:

> Nun dauert der Krieg das dritte Jahr,
> Wir sind ihn gewohnt geworden. Vertraut mit Siechtum
> Und vor allem dem Sterben. Dies ist zwar nie erwünscht,
> Aber am schlimmsten soll es in der Einsamkeit sein.
>
> Es fallen täglich viele viele tausend Soldaten.
> Immer wieder liegt der Tote hingestreckt
> Und wenn der zufällig deinen Namen trägt –
> Was ist da wunderbares dabei?
>
> Gewöhnung ist alles. Nicht schlafen und schlecht zu essen,
> Mit blutenden Füssen zu laufen, niederzukauern.
> In Höhlen und Mauerresten voll Schmutz und Ungeziefer,
> Wo die Luft nach altem Brand schmeckt und die Ratten quieken.
>
> Das sind die Zeitläufte, gegen die es kein Wehren gibt.
> Alles wird gleichgültig, auch was die Zukunft bringt.

[118] Herwig, *The First World War*, 49-50.

Der Krieg mag noch zehn Jahre dauern,
Der Soldat wird immer wieder da sein.[119]

Though not openly accusing in tone, this poem can certainly be seen as anti-war. The tone in which it is written, is characteristic for German war poetry. Whereas British poets like Sassoon and Owen used a biting irony and sarcasm to express their disgust with the war, the German poets used a brutally realistic tone of detached resignation at the horrors they endured:

Schwefelig mit roten Blutspritzern
Schwindet die Sonne.
Nur dann und wann
Bummst irgendwo ein Mörserschuss.
Lichtläufer suchen am Himmel
Feindliches Flugzeug.
Dunkle Meldereiter galoppieren
Mit neuen Mordbefehlen.
Manchmal grinst in der Ferne
Ein Feuerschein.
Die Schlacht ist müde.
Samariterhunde
Wie menschenfreundliche Hyänen
Traben über den Plan.
Rotekreuzwagen. Ärzte.
Träger und Trägerinnen.
Verwundete vergessen ihren Völkerhass,
und Leichen lagern brüderlich.
Schmerzschreie schwer Getroffener.
Röchelnde Rufe Sterbender.
Pferdekadaver. Weggeworfenes
Und zerschossenes Krieggerät.
Modergestank.
Letzte Zeilen kritzelt ein Griffel.

[119] Wilhelm Klemm, 'Betrachtung', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 69.

Am Freundesherzen horcht ein Kamerad.
Ein Atem stockt. –
Tränen und Siegjubel.
Beten und Fluchen.
Und alles schluckt
Die grosse Nacht.
Ein weisser Totenschädel
Scheint der Mond.
In Menschenaugen hacken Krähenschnäbel.[120]

Surprising enough, censorship did not seem to have restrained soldiers much in publishing their poems, however protesting they were. Poems such as the ones shown above are not only a poet's representation of his personal war experience The poets also actively tried to pass a message with their poetry. The major part of the poetry written on the frontlines was already published during the war, sometimes even to great critical acclaim. War poetry was not written for the large public however, with the exception of the patriotic war poetry of the early period. Prominent newspapers such as *The Times* or the *Frankfurter Zeitung* printed many patriotic war poems, but not poems that voiced protest. These were printed on a much smaller scale in periodicals or (soldier's) magazines.[121]

Most poets recognised that their protesting voice would have the largest effect within a relatively small circle. They knew that their failure to reach a large audience would prove no handicap to the impact their poetry would have. Both the poetic form and the content was designed to appeal to a small, literary invested and interested group of readers. This group would spread the realistic picture of war that was conveyed by the poetry. The Expressionist poets who went to war and sent back for publication many great poems with a realistic depiction of the war to *Die Aktion*-editor Franz Pfemfert, had from their literary background already enough experience in writing anti-establishment poetry. One of their goals was to shock by telling the truth, by means of the poetic form they chose.[122] A great example of a poem that offered implicit criticism of war is 'Betrachten' by Kurd Adler. In it, he painted an entirely different picture of the German soldier than Heinrich Lersch did in his 'Soldatenabschied'.

[120] Oskar Kanehl, 'Schlachtfeld', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 46.
[121] Marshland, *The Nation's Cause*, 6.
[122] Ibidem*, 167-169.*

Adler's soldier was one that was horrified by the destruction of war, and who melancholically thought of peaceful Sunday mornings at home:

> Ganz lauernd stehen wir auf hohem Berg
> Und sehen Deutschland links und Frankreich rechts;
> Und überall ist großes stilles Land
> Mit weichen Wäldern und verblinkten Dörfern.
> Tief eingegraben sind wir wie die Tiere,
> Die Beute Bergen. Der Geschütze
> Blauschwarze Mäuler glotzen stumpf und stier.
> So ahnungslos ist aller Dinge Schein,
> Dass erst der runde, dumpfe Schall von drüben
> Uns bitter denken lässt, dass wir Zerstörer sind.
> Hoch hebt sich ein Gefühl
> Von jener Liebe zu dem stillen Lied,
> Dem Sonntagmorgen und Sebastian Bach.
> Ein Augenblick! Und schon ist alles grau.
> Fünf Männer rennen wild um ein Geschütz,
> Ich denke lächelnd der Begeisterung
> Der Morgenblätter, die wir nicht mehr lesen.[123]

Even more than their British contemporaries, the German poets were on a quest to bring the war home as realistically as possible. The vehicle they chose for this was not necessarily satire or biting irony, such as the British poets did, but rather a factual realism. This is visible in Pfemfert's *Die Aktions-Lyrik,* which features almost only poems in this category. Although these poems are not labelled as deliberate poems of protest, Pfemfert in his (very brief) afterword states that 'dieses Buch, Asyl einer heute obdachlosen Idee, stelle ich wider diese Zeit'.[124] This accusing realism is ever so evident in Klemm's poem 'Lazarett', which meticulously used medical terminology to increase the feeling of horror at the carnage:

> Jeder Morgen ist wieder Krieg.

[123] Kurd Adler, 'Betrachten', quoted in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 10.
[124] Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik,* 118.

Nackte Verwundete, wie auf alten Gemälden.
Durcheiterte Verbände hängen wie Guirlanden von den Schultern.
Die merkwürdig dunklen, geheimnisvollen Kopfschüsse.
Die zitternden Nasenflügel der Brustschüsse.
Die Blässe der Eiternden.

Dass Weiße in den vierteloffnen Augen der nahe dem Tode.
Das rhythmische Stöhnen von Bauchgetroffenen.
Der erschrockene Ausdruck in toten Gesichten.

Die Bauchrednerstimme der Tetanuskranken.
Ihr starres, qualvolles Grinsen, ihr hölzernes Genick.
Die Fetzen geronnen Blutes, auf denen man ausgleitet.

Die Skala der Gerüche:
Die großen Eimer voll Eiter, Watte, Blut, amputierten Gliedern,
Die Verbände voll Maden. Die Wunden voll Knochen und Stroh.

Einer hockt auf dem stinkenden Lager
Ein großer, kranker, nackter Vogel. Ein andrer
Weint wie ein Kind: Kamerad hilf mir doch!

Der schonende Gang der Arm- und Schulterbrüche.
Das Hupfen der Fuß- und Wadenschüsse, das steife Stelzen
Der ins Gesäß geschossenen. Das Kriechen auf alle Vieren.

Ein Darm hängt heraus. Aus einem zerrissenen Rücken
Quoll die Milz und der Magen. Ein Kreuzbein klafft um ein Astloch.
Am Amputationsstumpf brandet das Fleisch in die Höhe.

Pilzartig wuchernd Ströme von hellgrünem Eiter
Fließen: über das Fleisch hinausragend
Pulsiert der unterbundene Arterienstamm.
Das fürchterliche, klonische Wackeln des ganzen Stumpfes,

und das Geheul, das Wimmern und Schreien, das Jammern und Flehen,
Das schweigende Heldentum und rührende: ‚fürs Vaterland'.

Bis das Schnappen nach Luft kommt, - und der perlende Schweiß,
Und auf graue Gesichter die Nacht sich senkt –
Soldatengrab – zwei Latten über Kreuz gebunden.[125]

Critique on Officers

Poetic critique on the ability of officers to lead men in battle was rare in German war poetry. This is probably due to the fact that the German army had well-trained officers. Much has been written in historiography about the German officer corps, and one thing is clear: they were professional leaders, whether they were generals or mere lieutenants. Traditionally, the one characteristic to which the success of the German officer corps was generally attributed, was the *Auftragstaktik* that was instituted after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Whereas officers of other nations liked to keep a strict control on the execution of the orders they gave, German officers issued the general outlines of the objective that was to be attained, and left the execution of the orders to the initiative of their subordinate officers. The directives that German officers received were therefore usually much less detailed than the ones officers in other armies received. Officers were both required and expected to display initiative. They were constantly reminded that doing nothing was worse than making the wrong decisions. In this way, the *Auftragstaktik* encouraged officers to think for themselves.[126] Because the functioning of German officers generally caused no incentive for extensive criticism such as Douglas Haig's conduct of the Battle of the Somme did, this theme is largely absent from German war poetry. The only critique concerning the functioning of officers that arose dealt with their hunger for war. It mocked their professionalism by scoffing at their absence of common humanity:

Ich bin der Herr Divisionskommandeur,
Seine Exzellenz.
Ich habe erreicht, was menschenmöglich ist.

[125] Wilhelm Klemm, 'Lazarett', in: Pfemfert, *Die Aktions-Lyrik*, 71-72.
[126] Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (New York 2005) 116-117.

Ein schönes Bewusstsein.
Vor mir beugen das Knie
Hauptleute und Regimentschefs,
Und meine Herren Generäle
Horchen auf meinen Befehl.
Wenn Gott will, beherrsche ich nächstens
Ein ganzes Armeekorps.
Frauen, Theater, Musik
Interessieren mich wenig.
Was ist das alles gegen
Parademärsche, Gefechte.
Wäre doch endlich ein Krieg
Mit blutigen, brüllenden Winden.
Das gewöhnliche Leben
Hat für mich keine Reize.[127]

[127] Alfred Lichtenstein, 'Ein Generalleutnant Singt', retrieved from: http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/alfred-lichtenstein-gedichte-5161/36 [10/6/2017].

What subjects do they raise? German and British war poets compared

In this research the historical content of the British and German war poetry was examined, and this content was placed within its historical context. This method of using (war) poetry as a historical source for the interpretation of individual soldier's experiences at the frontline, is arguably an innovative approach, as most other similar studies do not look beyond the lives of the poets or the literary merits of their works. Because this is a new approach to both the history of warfare and the history of First World War poetry, it is important to offer a reflection on the possible usefulness of war poetry as a historical source. As mentioned before, poetry has its uses and its disadvantages. It is very much an expression of an individual, and is therefore unsuitable to provide a general overview of the soldier's experience on the Western Front. When researched in larger quantities however, the usefulness increases. The grouping in themes, with multiple writers represented in each theme to guarantee representativeness, lends credibility to the war poetry as a historical source.

To state what has already become clear: there is not that much difference between the themes that are addressed in German and British war poetry. The most intriguing difference has to do with the chronology of the themes: for the British war poetry, this research has confirmed the traditional historiographical view that there is a certain development in the themes of British war poetry. Inspired by traditional Georgian poetry and the illustrative British poetic tradition, war poetry in Britain got off to a very patriotic start. Both amateur and established poets produced poetry glorifying the noble endeavour Britain had committed itself to, stressing the importance of heroic values such as self-sacrifice and dedication to one's homeland. Compared with the development of German war poetry, it took a while for the British to catch up with the realities of trench warfare. Once the young British soldier-poets on the frontlines started to describe the naked reality of what they saw happening however, British war poetry took a sharp turn. After the eyes of the poets had been opened for what this specific war dealt to a generation of young men, they started to voice their protest. Shortly after the phase of protest, when the war drew to an end and the scale of the destruction wrought on the nations at war became clear, there appeared poems that lamented the pity of war.

While there is clear succession of themes in British war poetry, the German war poetry did not experience this succession. The experience of the Expressionist poets in using war as a literary subject, combined with the fact that due to German conscription most young poets entered the war in a very early stage, caused realistic war poems to appear in the first months

of the war in Germany. At the same time, there was also a trend of patriotic poetry similar to that in Britain. The notable difference here is that the German patriotic poetry mostly dealt with the contemporary view of a surrounded Germany, who defended herself against hostile encirclement. Theme-wise, the German poetry did not differ much from the English poetry. Only the tone used was more realistic, almost factual in its accusations against the horrors of war. The most notable difference in themes was the absence in German war poetry of any critique on the bellicosity of the home-front and on the leadership capabilities of their officers. A possible explanation for this is that the German war poets had another mission with their work: not to accuse the people at home, but to go against the official war propaganda and offer them a vision of the horrors of the war in all its naked reality.

These are the themes that are more or less discerned in the historiography. This research has tried to build on these themes and expand them in order to use the poetry as a rendition of life at the Western Front. By looking closely at what events, feelings, personae, landscapes and emotions the poets described, it is definitely possible to visualise trench life. This becomes especially clear when reading the poems concerning death or injury. The whole psychological experience of the soldier, which has been given much attention in the historiography of the First World War, is made extremely personal and imaginable by reading through the poetry available on the subject. The same is true for the spatial awareness of the soldiers, their relationship with their immediate surroundings and the surprisingly complicated relationship with the enemy. And besides the enemy, they also had to deal with the bellicosity of the people at home. Because of the inherently complex nature of these relationships, a personal viewpoint such as the war poetry offers is valuable in establishing knowledge about the experience of war.

An important conclusion of this research is the confirmation of the historiographical overrepresentation of British war poetry. The causes of this are not entirely clear, but it surely has something to do with the wartime popularity of the war poets in England and with their legacy as national symbols for the Great War. What is interesting in a country that still clings proudly to its Commonwealth is the absence of any war poetry from the many Commonwealth soldiers fighting in Europe in the Great War. The extensive celebratory culture in Britain surrounding Armistice Day probably also adds to the continued popularity of the English war poets and therefore guarantees a continued scholarly interest. For Germany, much work can still be done to expand what historiography there is for German war poetry. The active Expressionist literary community before, during and after the war is a rich source of poetry, but it is also a slightly one-sided source. Besides the Expressionist sources, there are only a

few dated anthologies, and no recent anthologies in the 'English style'; who, despite their historiographical shortcomings, provide a great oversight of poems and poets.

Studying the historiography of the subject leads to the foremost conclusion of this research: there is much room for further research. This research has touched only lightly upon many aspects of the Great War: mainly on British and German war poetry, but also on many historical aspects of the First World War that have received a varying degree of historiographical attention. Already, the literary output concerning the First World War is the largest volume on any one historical subject. Evident from both this enormous historiography and all the poems cited in this research is that war is a thoroughly dehumanising affair, but paradoxically a distinctively human affair none the less. The possible pitfall the historiography of war has is that it becomes disconnected from the reality that people who participated in the war experienced. No human experience brings up so many different emotions as warfare does; no human experience provokes such a combination of beautiful poetry and horrific experiences that the poetry describes. Because of this, it is crucial for historians to keep researching this human aspect of war, for example through poetry, so that we can contribute to a better understanding of war as a human phenomenon.

Sources

Bowra, Sir Maurice, *Poetry and the First World War* (Oxford 1961).

Buchan, John, *The Battle of the Somme* (New York 1917).

Clark, Christopher, *Slaapwandelaars: Hoe Europa in 1914 ten oorlog trok* (Dutch Edition, Antwerp 2013).

Clout, Hugh, 'Devastation and Reconstruction in the Countryside of Nord Department, 1914-1930', in: *Bulletin de la Société Géographique de Liege* (January 2015) 35-43.

Das, Santanu ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* (London 2013).

Egremont, Max, *Some Desperate Glory. The First World War the Poets Knew* (London 2014).

Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford 1975).

Graeme West, Arthur, *The Diary of a Dead Officer, Being the Posthumous Papers of Arthur Graeme West* (London 1918).

Haber, Ludwig Fritz, *The Poisonous Cloud: Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Oxford 1986).

Herwig, Holger H., *The First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London 1997).

Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (London 1987).

Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Extremes 1914-1991* (London 1994).

Hull, Isabel V., *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (New York 2005).

Lersch, Heinrich, *Herz! Aufglühe dein Blut: Gedichte im Kriege* (1916).

Löschnigg, Martin, '"Expressionist-Artillerist": "Poet" and "Soldier" as Conflicting Role Models in German Avant-Garde Poetry from the First World War', in: Tiffany Johnstone, Patrick Imbert and Sherrill Grace ed., *Perspectives on War and Peace from the Arts and Humanities* (Montreal 2012).

Mangerich, Aswin, and Charlotte Esser, 'Chemical Warfare in the First World War: Reflections 100 Years Later', in: *Archives of Toxicology* 88.11 (2014) 1909-1911.

Marsland, Elizabeth, *The Nation's Cause: French, English and German Poetry of the First World War* (London 1991).

Parsons, I.M., ed., *Men Who March Away. Poems of the First World War* (London 1965).

Pfemfert, Franz, ed., *Die Aktions-Lyrik. 1914-1916: Eine Anthologie* (Berlin 1916).

Puissant, Susanne Christine, *Irony and the Poetry of the First World War* (New York 2009).

Prior, Robin, and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven 2005).

Proctor, Tammy M., *Civilians in a World at War*, 1914-1918 (New York 2010).

Sidell, F.R., a.o., 'Chapter 7: Vesicants', in: Sidell F.R., E.T. Takafuji and D. R. Franz, *Medical Aspects of Chemical and Biological Warfare* (Washington DC 2007).

Sillars, Stuart, *Fields of Agony: British Poetry from the First World War* (Penrith 2007).

Tuchman, Barbara, *The Guns of August* (London 1962).

Unknown author, *Simplicissimus* 21.32 (München, 7 November 1916) 393-408.

Waller, Chris, ‘Anton Schnack (1892-1973): The First World War and the Fate of the Self’, in: *Oxford German Studies* 42.1 (2013) 57-75.

Watson, Alexander, *Enduring the Great War. Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge 2008).

Wiest, Andrew A., *Haig: The Evolution of a Commander* (Washington 2005).