ALIENATION OF SOLDIERS

Did soldiers who had fought at the front feel permanently alienated from civilian culture?

Viewpoint: Yes. The conditions of the fighting and the remoteness of many theaters combined to establish a barrier of understanding between those who fought and those who did not.

Viewpoint: No. The myth that front-line soldiers were alienated from home-front society is based on the experience of a small, vocal group.

Among the persistent images of the Great War is that of an unbridgeable gulf between the home front and the fighting fronts. Accordingly, shock at the comprehensive alienness of the front-line experience combined with the nurturing comradeship of the trenches to create a state of being impossible to describe to civilians blinded by traditional myths of glory and heroism. As the war progressed, the armies became substitute societies, providing nurture, entertainment, family surrogates—even to a degree sexual substitutes, as evidenced by the “transgressive” female impersonators that were such a frequent and popular feature of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF)’s concert parties.

Letters home only deepened the gulf, as men sought both to reassure those left behind and to conceal from themselves the true nature of their own circumstances. Memoirs and fiction alike are replete with narratives of soldiers on leave who felt comprehensively alienated from even their families and returned to their front-line “homes” with something approximating relief.

To a degree, the concept of alienation between home front and fighting front served as a shorthand mythic explanation for the impact of the war on societies that never expected anything like the events of 1914–1918. It served as well to explain the revolutionary phenomena, and the social changes, that shook Europe to its foundations during the 1920s and 1930s. It served, finally, as a trope of identification for a “war generation” that considered itself a product of the trenches, no matter what had been the specific experience of particular individuals.

Recent research, applying the methods of the “new social history,” has significantly modified the traditional construction. At the most basic level the Great War featured extensive physical movement between front and home. Men mobilized in the first rush of 1914 were subsequently demobilized or furloughed to work in the factories and on the farms whose products were vital for the war effort. Many of these men were in turn “combed out”: returned to the war when the demands of the trenches escalated. Near-universal literacy meant that civilians were kept closely and consistently informed of conditions in the field, and systematic evaluation of the preserved correspondence shows high levels of frankness on both sides. The men at the front were kept well informed by their families of shortages and hardships; the soldiers pulled few punches in describing their experiences.

Another major link between the worlds were the wounded. To keep the forward facilities free for later arrivals, casualties were sent home in unprecedented numbers. Medicine and surgery, moreover, had progressed to points...
where large numbers of men who would have died of trauma or infection survived—some faceless, others limbless, all reminders that mocked propaganda.

Their counterpoints were the teenage boys, for whom the war was waiting after school, and for whom the summons came earlier and earlier as armies anticipated conscription call-ups to keep their ranks filled. Their common reaction was a desire to experience life before they had to risk it. For the working classes, "deviant behavior" usually amounted to spending their earnings on liquor, cigarettes, and movies instead of bringing their pay home. For the sons of the bourgeoisie, rebellion meant indulging in such things openly instead of clandestinely. Both the challenge to traditional patriarchal/authoritarian order and its roots in the war were, however, clearly understood by all parties involved.

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It goes without saying that World War I was in every way a new kind of conflict. One of the striking new phenomena that emerged from the battlefield was the intense sense of alienation from civilian life felt by a generation of traumatized combat soldiers. Famously expressed in the timeless works of such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque, Ernst Junger, Siegfried Sassoon, John McCrae, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves—all World War I soldiers—the persistence of a "front mentality" became a serious challenge to the stability of European societies.

At the most basic level, the unprecedented magnitude of the destructive power of the war left a serious psychological impact on combatants. Unlike the relatively short and "easy" wars that had characterized European military history in the century before 1914, World War I came to involve tens of millions of men in uniform, millions of casualties, and a long and apparently interminable duration. On the Western Front, the bloodiest and most heavily contended theater of the conflict, combat degenerated into a senseless series of frontal assaults and counterassaults on enemy trenches, machine-gun posts, and artillery batteries. The static nature of battles and campaigns abandoned the idealized European tradition of swift and glorious campaigns for ignominious death in a mess of barbed wire and mud.

That several years of exposure to this unimaginable horror would have an impact on the psyches and mentalities of surviving soldiers should be self-evident. Yet, medical science, especially the emerging field of psychology, developed an array of diagnoses relating to the damaged mental condition of soldiers. Although they were certainly not new to the human condition, shell shock, survivor guilt, combat fatigue, and a general desensitization to violence became mass phenomena for a huge segment of the adult male population of Europe. The enormous human scale of the war created such large numbers of psychologically afflicted men that their alienation could neither be marginalized nor avoided by civilian society.

In a war with wholly unprecedented casualty rates, the very nature of European military organization worked to destroy the fabric that bound soldiers to the home front. For logistical expediency, the recruitment and formation of military units in most countries was defined by localities or regions. "Home regiments," often named for a city, region, province, or even profession, had traditionally been a source of local pride, military prestige, and civilian morale. When more men had to be recruited to replace immense battlefield losses, many governments maintained and emphasized this continuity in peacetime social relationships because they believed it would lead to better morale at the front. The creation of so-called "chums" and "pals" battalions by Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener, the British Minister of War, explicitly promised the preservation of civilian communities in the ranks of the army as an inducement for young men to enlist. A large number of soldiers of many nationalities, therefore, went off to the destructive war alongside friends, neighbors, classmates, colleagues, and others known to them personally. In a war where units were regularly—and often repeatedly—decimated, however, the traditional policy of unit formation merely forced soldiers to endure battlefield catastrophes compounded by the loss of their former-civilian fellows. The protagonist of Remarque’s semi-autobiographical novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) witnessed the deaths of most of his high school graduating class before he, too, was killed.

The main source of social friction that resulted from the new facts of war was that nothing in the civilian experience could possibly relate to it. Earlier conflicts, or at least those in living memory, had been small
enough not to involve millions of troops and short enough to bring them home after relatively brief campaigns. Soldiers had certainly suffered, but their numbers had always been too small to create a measurable impact on broader civilian societies.

Previous European conflicts, moreover, had involved relatively mobile campaigns that often brought armies into direct contact with civilian populations. The stagnation of West European battlefronts early in the struggle created a paradox in which the human scale of the war was infinitely larger than it ever had been before; yet, the direct involvement of civilians was chiefly limited to frontier zones. Surely the Germans occupied Belgium and Poland, but there was no repeat of the bloody Prussian siege of Paris (1870–1871) or of the occupation of that city by the armies of a European coalition after 1815. Napoleon Bonaparte’s deep penetration into the Russian heartland of 1812 had no World War I equivalent, despite the impressive success of the German army on the Eastern Front. Russian and French troops never got to Berlin, as they had in 1760 and 1806, respectively, nor did French troops ever reach Vienna, as they had in 1809. As a result, the civilian populations of the major combatant powers remained quite unaffected by the violence of World War I. Material shortages were suffered and small frontier nations such as Belgium and Serbia were subject to cruel occupations, but life for the average British, French, or German civilian rarely intersected with the living hell of the front. It therefore became extremely difficult for civilians to understand or even imagine what conditions were like there. Since the war resulted in a long-term clash between fixed defensive positions, moreover, soldiers of all armies were able to return to their homes and the relative normalcy of civilian life on furloughs. The technological innovation of railroads made this movement easier, even if it had also ironically facilitated the mass concentration of troops. As Remarque’s striking description depicts, the transition from trench to hometown and back again was surreal. Ordinary soldiers were able to see their families and neighbors, yet were incapable of sharing with them the details of army life and the daily struggle between life and death. The frustration that Remarque’s protagonist felt when the older men of his hometown engaged him in patronizing armchair strategy stands as a seminal example of the disconnect between the pain of those who could not relay and the awkwardness of those who could not relate.

Another important measure of the alienation of World War I combat soldiers is their collective activity after the war. As European nations tried to reintegrate demobilized troops into civilian life, former soldiers often became an important force in social and political destabilization. Throughout Europe the return of men from the front meant high unemployment, long-term financial burdens from caring for wounded and disabled veterans, and the social question of having to deal with a generation of psychologically traumatized young men.

Not all nations dealt with these problems effectively. Britain, it is true, established a comprehensive system of social support for its combat veterans and war-wounded in the 1920s and also benefited from its long-standing traditions of political stability. The continent was not so blessed, however. In France, war veterans took up leading roles in social and political movements that presented philosophical challenges to the Republic and its security. A large number of veterans from across the political spectrum were active in the pacifist movement. Their wartime experiences, which included both traumatic combat and a widespread mutiny in 1917–1918, had been horrible enough to motivate them to work to keep France out of war for all time. The popular novels of combat-veteran writers such as Henry de Montherlant and Louis-Ferdinand Céline were paean to pacifism. Almost every French analysis of the domestic determinants of foreign policy in the interwar period takes its popular pacifist movement into account when analyzing the reluctance to confront Germany over peace-treaty violations and aggressive behavior in the 1930s. The pacifism of war veterans was by no means the only factor in the decision of the French government to pursue the appeasement of Nazi Germany, but it was a factor nevertheless.

Equally important was the decision of many veterans to support extreme right-wing groups that were inimical to the survival of the French Republic. Although some have argued that these groups were fascist in nature, the label generally does not seem apt. Nevertheless, it was clear that they opposed democracy and the republican status quo. Colonel François de la Rocque’s Croix de feu (Cross of Fire), a veteran’s organization that had several hundred thousand members by the mid 1930s, advocated the installation of an authoritarian regime. Another group, Action française (French Action), which advocated the restoration of a reactionary monarchy, also included many veterans, particularly aristocratic officers and devout Catholics. In addition to those formations, there were several
British infantry officer Siegfried Sassoon writes of a convalescence at home:

I couldn't be free from the War; even this hospital ward was full of it, and every
day the oppression increased. Outwardly it was a pleasant place to be lazy in.
Morning sunshine slanted through the tall windows, brightening the grey-green
walls and the forty beds. Daffodils and tulips made spots of color under three
red-draped lamps which hung from the ceiling. Some officers lay humped in bed,
smoking and reading newspapers; others loafed about in dressing-gowns, going to
and from the washing room where they scraped the bristles from their contented
faces. A raucous gramophone ground out popular tunes. . . . Before midday no one
had enough energy to begin talking war shop, but after that I could always hear
scraps of conversation from around the two fireplaces. My eyes were reading one
of Lamb's Essays, but my mind was continually distracted by such phrases as
"Barrage lifted at the first objective," "shelled us with heavy stuff," "couldn't
raise enough decent N.C.O.'s," "first wave got held up by machine-guns," and
"bombed them out of a sap."

There were no serious cases in the ward, only flesh wounds and sick. These
were the lucky ones, already washed clean of squalor and misery and strain.
They were lifting their faces to the sunlight, warming their legs by the fire; but
there wasn't much to talk about except the War.

In the evening they played cards at a table opposite my bed; the blinds were
drawn, the electric light was on, and a huge fire glowed on walls and ceiling.
Glancing irritably up from my book I criticized the faces of the card-players and
those who stood watching the game. There was a lean airman in a gray
dressing-gown, his narrow whimsical face puffing a cigarette below a turban-
like bandage; he'd been brought down by the Germans behind Arras and had spent
three days in a bombarded dug-out with Prussians, until our men drove them back
and rescued him. The Prussians hadn't treated him badly, he said. . . . Along the
ward they were still talking about "counter-attacked from the redoubt," "permanent
rank of captain," "never drew any allowances for six weeks," "failed to
get through their wire" . . . I was beginning to feel the need for escape from
such reminders. My brain was screwed up tight, and when people came to see
me I answered their questions excitedly and said things I hadn't intended to say.

From the munition factory across the road, machinery throbbed and droned
and crashed like the treading of giants; the noise got on my nerves. I was being
worried by bad dreams. More than once I wasn't sure whether I was awake or
asleep; the ward was half shadow and half sinking firelight, and the beds were
quiet with huddled sleepers. Shapes of mutilated soldiers came crawling across
the floor; the floor seemed to be littered with fragments of mangled flesh. Faces
glared upward; hands clutched at neck or belly; a livid grinning face with bristly
mustache peered at me above the edge of my bed; his hands clawed at the
sheets. Some were like the dummy figures used to deceive snipers; others
were alive and looked at me reproachfully, as though envying me the warm
safety of life which they'd longed for when they shivered in the gloomy dawn,
waiting for the whistles to blow and the bombardment to lift . . . A young English
private in battle equipment pulled himself painfully toward me and fumbled in his
tunic for a letter; as he reached forward to give it to me his head lolled sideways
and he collapsed; there was a hole in his jaw and the blood spread across his white
face like ink spilt on blotting paper. . . .

Violently awake, I saw the ward without its phantoms. The sleepers were
snoring and a nurse in gray and scarlet
was coming silently along to make up the
fire.

Source: Siegfried Sassoon, Memories of an
Infantry Officer (New York: Coward-McCann,
1930), pp. 238-240.
other prominent “leagues” and groupings that
were structured along military lines—often involving uniforms, marches, and training—and included many veterans. In the turbulence of interwar French politics these mass organizations were not to be taken lightly. A violent right-wing demonstration in Paris in February 1934 caused the collapse of a democratically elected ministerial government. Two years later a gang of youths connected with the fighting arm of Action française nearly murdered the leader of the French Socialist Party and the future Prime Minister, Léon Blum. Several leading right-wing figures supported by this constituency of radical veterans’ organizations backed and even accepted positions (albeit usually marginal) in the Vichy regime that governed France after the defeat of 1940.

Nowhere was veteran unrest more prominent than in Germany, however. It did not help that many German soldiers had served in armies that were either victorious (in the East) or still standing deep in enemy territory (in the West) when an armistice that many regarded as a betrayal had brought them home. In the immediate postwar period, many demobilized German soldiers (including Corporal Adolf Hitler) were employed in the so-called Freikorps (Free Corps), a paramilitary militia used by the Weimar government to control left-wing civic unrest. After Hitler became leader of the National Socialist German Workers’ (Nazi) Party, he organized it along military lines, according to a Führerprinzip (leadership principle) that gave him complete control of a hierarchical party structure. Many prominent Nazis, including Hitler, Rudolf Hess, Ernst Röhm, and Hermann Göring, were veterans of World War I but so too were many of their rank-and-file followers, especially early on. The fighting arm of the Nazis, the Sturmabteilung (SA, or stormtroopers), became a paramilitary force that paraded around in brown shirts and caps and engaged in street brawls with opponents. It grew to be so threatening that even after the Nazis came to power, Hitler himself decided in 1934 to demilitarize it and execute its leaders. In the 1920s many other German combat veterans joined the Stahlhelm (steel helmet), a conservative veterans’ organization linked to a right-wing political party. Although they remained distinct from the Nazis, in 1933 the party they supported helped Hitler become chancellor by agreeing to govern in coalition with him.

Veterans played an important role in other countries as well. Like its northern neighbor, the new Austrian republic was also destabilized by veterans who could not be integrated into the mainstream political life of the country—a problem enhanced by the defeat and dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the territorial truncation of the Austrian republic. Many Austrian veterans joined Prince Stahremberg’s Heimwehr (Home Guard), a paramilitary veterans group similar to the German Freikorps, while others joined the indigenous Austrian Nazi movement. Interwar Austrian politics was bedeviled by coup plots, political assassinations, street violence, and finally the coerced union of the country with Nazi Germany in March 1938.

Although Italy had turned up on the winning side of the conflict, it was not satisfied by the peace. Much Italian-populated territory that had been promised to Rome by the Allies as an enticement to enter the war in 1915 was ultimately not turned over. Italy had also suffered serious military defeats, heavy casualties, and economic dislocation as a result of the conflict. Many Italian veterans, frustrated with the peace and traumatized by the fighting, joined the militant Black Shirts, a paramilitary group organized by the fascist leader Benito Mussolini. His seizure of power in October 1922 resulted directly from a threatened “March on Rome” by fifty thousand armed Black Shirts. Without even having to show his strength, Mussolini won appointment as Prime Minister and, eventually, license to establish a dictatorship in Italy.

The tremendous divide between soldier and civilian is no modernist myth. Soldiers felt a widespread alienation from civilian society after prolonged involvement in a war that had been bloodier and more violent than ever before. The gap of understanding between soldier and civilian is well attested in the memoirs, novels, poetry, and other media of the war years and interwar period. Bearing unexpressible grief, feeling deep guilt, having grown accustomed to violence, and facing economic and political disappointment at home, many soldiers became involved in destructive political movements that promised military order and the violent achievement of extreme goals. The destabilization of political life in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and several smaller countries besides, at least partly inhered in their inability to reintegrate psychologically tortured communities of veterans into civilian life. The failure of the governments of those countries to deal adequately with the needs and sentiments of those soldiers contributed to their eventual undoing.

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The myth that front-line soldiers were alienated from homefront society is based on the experience of a small, vocal group.

The traditional view, advocated by many historians, maintains that a gulf of misunderstanding separated the fighting front and the home front during the Great War. It was an idea first popularized by many war novelists and poets in the late 1920s and 1930s. Through their writing, authors, including Siegfried Sassoon, Henri Barbusse, and Erich Maria Remarque, suggested that civilian ignorance of conditions at the front had embezzled the ordinary soldier and led to the perpetuation of the war for four long years. These powerful sentiments have contributed to the myth that characterizes the World War I soldier as a disillusioned figure, who, angered by censorship and propaganda at home and unable to find the means to convey the horrors of the trenches to his friends and family, became alienated from civilian society and retreated into his own trench culture to survive the war experience. Elements of this myth remain influential today, surfacing in the work of historians who see World War I as a watershed in the development of modernist cultural trends and providing the framework for the majority of discussions examining propaganda and censorship during the war.

As compelling and familiar as this interpretation may sound, the idea that the front line had an alienating effect on the majority of soldiers is fundamentally flawed. The problem is that the thesis is based on evidence produced by a small group of self-selecting, privileged veterans. Moreover, the negative attitudes displayed toward the home front by this group have been taken at face value, when, in fact, their writing has more significance when viewed as a disillusioned search for the meaning of the war in the disappointing aftermath of peace. In other words, their testimony was more a reaction to the inadequacies of the peace than a true reflection of war experience. While it would, of course, be wrong to discount the testimonies of these privileged few, in using these sources almost exclusively, historians have endowed them with a wider applicability than they deserve.

When a broader range of sources incorporating those derived from the rank and file is viewed, a different picture emerges. Family and friends, in addition to social, religious, and workplace affiliations, continued to play a vital role in the lives of the soldiers of the Great War. Communication between front and home front occurred through a variety of mediums. Letters, war literature, newspaper and film reports, and face-to-face conversations between civilians and soldiers wounded or on leave transmitted information and ideas to and from the trenches, traversing easily the line between front and home front. This communication became the mainstay of many soldiers, helping to keep them engaged with family and community and providing them with material support and emotional solace through the long years of war.

The letter remained the most popular method of maintaining contact with home, and indeed, it was continually noted by military authorities that delays in delivering mail and depriving soldiers of news of home—and the attendant food and clothing parcels—had a dangerously depressive effect on the men. The utility of the letter in transmitting the reality of the trenches to those at home is hotly disputed because of the issue of censorship. The existence of a censorship regime has long been used by historians to support the idea that soldiers were prevented from disclosing their true feelings through fear of punishment or through the black lines of the censor's pencil. The reality appears rather more complex when the dual role of the military censor is examined.

For the British and French authorities it was initially deemed important to keep the troops from communicating information that could be of use to the enemy, but as the war progressed, the censorship system became a valuable tool in monitoring army morale. Army intelligence services were able to scrutinize a proportion of letters that passed through the postal system each day to deduce the thoughts and attitudes of the troops. Military authorities were thus faced with something of a conundrum. On the one hand, they advocated tight control of information leaving the front line, and on the other they required the troops to express themselves freely in order to ascertain the state of their morale. The result was a compromise. While specific information, such as troop movements and casualty figures, was routinely censored, and censorship became more severe leading up to an attack, in many cases the soldiers had ample opportunity to express themselves freely in a letter. Of all the protagonists, the German soldier had been given the most leeway during the early years of the war, as field post was not censored until 1917; while the British authorities helped to facilitate freedom of expression by instituting a system of green envelopes that guaranteed that a soldier's letter would not be censored by his own officer, in line with general practice at the time, but by an unknown official in England.
Alongside the official military censorship, a form of self-censorship also operated amongst soldiers. Some combatants wanted to protect loved ones from the horrors they were suffering, while others did not possess the inclination, or the necessary literary skills, to express themselves adequately. To assume, however, in the manner of historian Paul Fussell, that the experience of the war was indescribable and that soldiers retreated behind formulaic and meaningless expression in their letters is to deny the diversity and vitality of the many thousands of letters that now lie in European archives.

To be sure, each letter would have been crafted for its target audience. Thus, letters to families and friends, particularly those addressed to male civilians, were often the most revealing, describing conditions at the front and the nature and circumstances of the deaths of friends. Expressions of boredom with trench warfare, of the strain of living under constant shelling, and of course, the pain of privations were all to be found in letters to families.

The soldiers were not totally obsessed by their own lives in the trenches. For them, the real and meaningful life was that which they had left behind on enlistment, and so it was not surprising that the soldiers inquired about the progress of events at home. For the French peasantry, this interest often involved giving advice on the conduct of the harvest or the rearing of livestock. For the urban recruits who populated the British army, letters often centered on the mechanics of an abandoned business or the vagaries of the sometimes unreliable allowances system.

Letters were not restricted to family and friends. Soldiers of the Great War left a network of community and business contacts behind with whom they were anxious to keep in touch. A typical British soldier may have been in contact with his home church, sports team, and former workplace, and many of these institutions produced their own journals, in which letters from the front played a prominent role. As one might expect, these letters were of a less intimate nature than those sent to individuals, but the conditions of the front line were constantly described, if only to prompt the dispatch of a parcel. In contributing to these journals and newsletters, the soldiers helped to determine their content and hence the messages they wished to be transmitted about their experience of the war. In some small way, soldiers were able to remain part of the community they had left behind.

Trench journals, the humorous and often cynical newspapers produced by the soldiers themselves, also helped to propagate messages from the front. Although primarily designed for internal consumption, many were destined for a civilian audience, winging their way to families and workplaces across Europe. In these publications the soldiers retained editorial control and thus the freedom to express their grievances. French and British trench journals were able to rail against authority, both civilian and military, as well as criticize certain sections of the population ranging from war profiteers to journalists and their newspapers.

Criticism directed at newspapers was a consequence of censorship and propaganda.
The German authorities enforced tight management of the news, even dictating the form and tone to be employed, while the British government relied on self-censoring principles of the newspaper magnates. Censorship was a feature of life in all belligerent states, whether authoritarian or liberal democracies, and their journalists were not averse to pedaling a propagandist line. The French had a word for the contents of their newspapers, which translates simply as “eyewash.”

Many of the newspapers, the nationals in particular, were guilty as charged, but the extent to which all information from the front was suppressed or misrepresented is exaggerated. Studies of German, French, and British newspapers have revealed that the degree of censorship exercised varied throughout the war. In Germany the censorship regime depended upon the deputy commanding generals in charge of the twenty-four army-corps districts, while a cursory glance at the British provincial press, with its long casualty lists, letters from the front, and graphic reports of fighting, suggests that the informal agreements between press and government had not been as binding as some historians have claimed.

Civilian populations during the Great War, moreover, were not the unthinking, gullible masses that have been previously portrayed. With letters streaming from the front, they had alternative sources of information against which to test the veracity of what they read. Most people, civilians and soldiers alike, were aware of the extent of the censorship and propaganda permeating their press but were also aware of its necessity in wartime. Despite soldierly skepticism of the content of their newspapers, there was, nevertheless, a constant demand for deliveries to the front. Newspapers provided an escape from reality, and for this reason alone, both soldiers and civilians did not want to consume a diet of unrelied horror. Some soldiers valued the blatant falsehoods about the success of their side, because it renewed their hope and faith in the ending of the war, and eagerly devoured the domestic news pages as a means of keeping in touch with events at home. Soldiers and civilians may have been reading partial truths about the war, but they were the same partial truths and helped to maintain a shared perspective on the conflict.

Soldiers and civilians not only shared the same newspapers, but also the same forms of popular entertainment. The soldier visited civilian music halls while on leave, and the music, films, art, and literature released on the home front were also accessible at the fighting front. For the Allies, many of these entertainments had some type of patriotic, propagandist message at their core, but far from alienating the troops, these messages served to remind them of home and their motivation for fighting. The Allies were more effective in boosting commitment to the war through these media because they were willing to allow a modicum of the anguish and destruction of war to be featured. German and Austrian entertainment, on the other hand, took a different path, concentrating on escapist themes. Nevertheless, all these cultural activities had one thing in common: they ensured that the home and fighting fronts experienced the same entertainment, which helped in the retention of common cultural and social values throughout the war and guarded against the emergence of a specific trench culture far removed from the civilian sphere.

The real test of a soldier’s connection with the civilian world was his ability to reintegrate into civilian society. Throughout the war a steady stream of soldiers returned home briefly on leave, and others reappeared permanently wounded or were recalled for essential war work in heavy industry or mining. Thus, there was no shortage of men who had experienced war to mingle with civilians on the home front.

There is ample evidence to suggest that, far from being alienated from civilian culture, soldiers who returned to civilian life, if only for a few days, and with the absence of censorship, communicated the reality of the trenches freely to those at home. Of course, there were veterans who chose not to discuss their experiences, and many were horrified at the power and greed of the war profiteers, the newspaper magnates, and the politicians, but overall this anger did not stop the men from communicating with the civilians they had known prewar. Indeed, by 1917 soldiers and veterans were seen as the most significant group molding public opinion. The authorities became concerned at the effect that tales of the trenches might have on civilians, as well as the potentially depressive effect on the army of tales of hardship on the home front, which were communicated by soldiers returning from leave. The situation became particularly acute for German authorities after June 1918, when conditions on the home front deteriorated still further and the hope of military success receded. Ultimately, the German home front and its army collapsed at the same time because soldiers and civilians held common views on the conflict and each was essential in supporting the other.

In the aftermath of the Great War it was inevitable that a proportion of soldiers failed to reintegrate into society and felt alienated and betrayed by those for whom they had fought.
Yet, the literary offerings of this minority group of veterans do not provide sufficient evidence to support the notion of a rift between home front and fighting front during the Great War. For the majority of soldiers there was an understandable desire to pick up their lives where they had left off and re-immerses themselves in the everyday activities of those homes and communities they had fought to preserve. That they were able to do so with relative ease suggests that they had maintained their links with home and had remained an integral part of the life of their communities throughout the long years of conflict.

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