

Why War? Teachings of the Lost Generation

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Generation after generation, history repeats itself. One hundred years after World War I, “the war to end all wars,” the US military has a presence in countless countries around the world. The US has created technology that has advanced weapons to lengths unimagined by the people who experienced our first world war. Now, one hundred years later, there is a real possibility of US military involvement in Ukraine, only days after the conflict began. More alarming than the covert operations, the advances in drone warfare, and the haste to join the war in Ukraine, is the fundamental idea that after a hundred years of scientists, philosophers, intellectuals, politicians, writers, artists, and general citizens questioning and protesting war, we still find ourselves entangled in a vicious cycle of armed conflict appearing to have no end.

A 2011 survey by CNN observes the “disconnect between civilian and military worlds” (Basu) with 84% of veterans and 71% of the public agreeing that “most Americans do not understand the myriad problems they [veterans] and their families have had to face” (Basu). What causes the separation? In the age of the iPhone, Twitter, and Facebook, there is no shortage of information being fed to us in the 21st century. However, the kind of information being spread could account for the public disconnect from the realities of war. Many of the stories seen on the news and read in articles are inherently disconnected, stating facts and statistics that quantify the number of lives lost and dollars spent. Death becomes an abstraction. Howard Zinn, in his article “A Just Cause ≠ A Just War,” states, “When you think about the human cost, generally it’s an abstraction.” He urges readers to look beyond the statistics, beyond the abstractions, and see it as “every human being who died, every human being who lost a limb, every human being who came out blind, and every human being who came out mentally damaged” (Zinn). This is where our news often fails. To bridge the gap of disconnect, it is imperative that the public hears the truth about the front: not in numbers, but personal experience, human emotion, and brutal reality.

As war experiences are universally both emotional and brutal, retelling a story from the front proves difficult for many veterans, and though often effective, is among the most difficult ways of facing and overcoming the trauma of war. Therefore, true accounts of wartime experience are

seldom told and more seldom shared with the public. For understanding the function of wartime literature in creating connectedness and comprehension of war-reality, looking back to the lost generation of World War I provides remarkable insight. The lost generation refers to the thousands of young people who lost their youth and innocence in the instability and horrors of the First World War. In the century anniversary of World War I, we can look back at the rich literature left by these people who were shocked out of their peacetime world and disillusioned by the terrible acts of modern warfare. By studying their history, we can analyze and discuss controversial issues without the risk of offending veterans and their families. If we were to analyze the war in Afghanistan, criticizing the war could be insensitive to those currently risking their lives or those who have recently lost friends or family in service. Additionally, patterns show that war stories often don't emerge until significant time has passed following the experiences, allowing a period of convalescence and settling after the trauma. Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is a first-person, fictionalized account of his experience on the Italian front, published ten years after the end of the war. Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* is a first-person, non-fiction autobiographical portrait of her war-tainted youth, published fourteen years after the end of the war. Patterns show that, through the years, nations have had similar reasons for going to war like national security, alliances, resource allocation, and power. If we look back in history and study patterns, a new perspective can be gained on current world affairs from past yet similar events, providing a safe emotional distance from present conflict. By looking at *A Farewell to Arms* and *Testament of Youth* and taking into account the first-person perspective, we receive the closest version of the "real" story, unaffected by the media or politics, and unfiltered by a secondary source.

For what reason would the media filter the "real" stories of war? Established early in *A Farewell to Arms* is the distinction between the expectations and realities of war. While Frederic Henry, the protagonist of the story, sits with Catherine Barkley, a nurse and his love interest throughout the novel, she tells him of her past lover, who died on the front. She remembers hoping that he would come to her hospital with "a sabre cut" or "bandage around the head," "something picturesque" (Hemingway 20). Frederic agrees "this is the picturesque front" and Catherine replies "Yes. People can't realize what France is like. If they did, it couldn't all go on" (Hemingway 20). If people realized the ugliness and brutality of war, far fewer would be likely to enlist. To hide the ugliness is a contrasting image: valor, glory, and bravery, all proven to be incredible incentives for joining the military. Unlike in WWI times, the present-day US military does not have a draft. As long as you are a US citizen or resident alien, have a high school diploma, and are at least 17 years of age (with parental consent), you are able to join the

military. With the US military being 100% volunteer, what drives 2,266,883 troops (“By the Numbers”) to risk their lives, knowing the reality of their decision? Or more importantly, how many of these young people are aware of the reality?

Though reasons for enlistment vary, many enlist based on the myth of honor and glory portrayed from the front. In Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, Vera’s lover, Roland, enlists in the war. A scholar at the top of his class, his abilities seem far beyond the demands of the trenches. Brittain struggled with the lack of logical reasoning in his enlistment, being only “heroism in the abstract” (Brittain 129). Although the desire to serve one’s country is noble in itself, Brittain struggles with another disconnect. When pondering Roland’s enlistment, she says “he neither hated the Germans nor loved the Belgians” (Brittain 129). This furthers Brittain’s anguish, as she sees no reason for him to risk his own life while taking lives from men with whom he has no connection or conflict, all over the death of an Archduke that concerns him not at all. She herself felt disconnect. “To me and my contemporaries, with our cheerful confidence in the benignity of fate, War was something remote, unimaginable” she reflects, something that is to be “followed in the newspapers” but “never, conceivably, have to be lived” (Brittain 98). Before her lover and her brother enlist, she confesses, “We all know so little of the meaning of war that we are all so indifferent” (Brittain 95). However, by the time the war starts, “public events and private lives had become inseparable” (Brittain 95).

In both *Testament of Youth* and *A Farewell to Arms*, the impositions of war have profound effects on some of the most prominent aspects of life: love and religion. In the beginning of Brittain’s story, she is an “unquestioning if not indifferent church-goer” (Brittain 41) and later “too much of an agnostic” to convert to Catholicism, “even in tribute to his [Roland’s] memory” (Brittain 248) after the war begins. The repetition of her agnostic beliefs makes clear that her previous ties to religion have been severed. In *A Farewell to Arms*, the animosity toward religion is repeatedly displayed. “All thinking men are atheists” (Hemingway 8), the major claims as the men from Frederic’s troop drink and converse late at night, routinely making fun of the priest. One night, when Frederic is talking with the priest, the priest asks Frederic if he loves God. Frederic says no, but adds, “I am afraid of him in the night sometimes” (Hemingway 72). He goes on to say, “I don’t love much,” to which the priest replies, “Yes. You do...when you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve” (Hemingway 72). Although he doesn’t wish to serve or sacrifice to God, throughout the novel he finds religion in love, as does Vera Brittain. In the “religious ecstasy of young love sharpened by the war to a poignancy beyond expression,” Brittain writes, “O Roland! I wonder if I shall have found you only

to lose you again” (Brittain 114). Her love drives her to become a nurse in the war efforts, to serve and sacrifice, keeping her busy and engaged in a practice that brings her closer to the war, and more importantly, Roland. “I never minded the aches and pains,” she says, adding that they “appeared to me solely as satisfactory tributes to my love for Roland” (Brittain 164). Throughout the war in *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic and Catherine find every possible moment to be together. When they first part, Catherine tells Frederic, “You’re my religion. You’re all I’ve got” (Hemingway 116). Near the end of the book, Frederic is playing billiards with Count Greffi, a former diplomat from Austria. “Perhaps I have outlived my religious feeling”, Greffi says, to which Frederic gives the same reply as he previously gave the priest: “my own comes only at night”. To that, Greffi says, “then you too are in love. Do not forget this is a religious feeling” (Hemingway 263). Though the war severed faith in religion and love of God, those feelings were replaced with the more tangible, more intimate love for one another: war brothers, friends, family, and lovers. These intense feelings of love universalize the emotion felt by the writers, putting into perspective the wagers at stake when their loved ones leave for the front.

When audiences read the story of Roland or the story of Catherine, life in World War I becomes more real, more personal than just numbers. When they die, death is no longer an abstraction, but the loss of a real person, a future husband or wife, father or mother, friend and companion. In each book, the writer displays immense anxiety about death, ending in a cynical acceptance that death is inevitable. In *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain finds herself in shambles in the weeks following Roland’s death. When walking along the sidewalk, she sees a red earthworm, and runs away in horror. “I remember that, after our death, worms destroy this body” (Brittain 240), she says, displaying anxiety, yet recognizing that death is inevitable and that every person inevitably returns to the earth, the body turning back into soil. Trying to justify Roland’s death, she wonders how he died. Looking for a noble reason, a heroic way to die as he had hoped for upon entering the war, she found details “so painful, so unnecessary, so grimly devoid of that heroic limelight which Roland had always regarded as ample compensation for those who were slain” (Brittain 241). This furthered her torment, throwing her deeper into depression. After enduring gloomy months, she ultimately concludes that “one can never rise to the heights until one has gone right down into the depths” (Brittain 265). She says that if she is to ever rise, to ever be worthy of him in peace, war, and death, it will be because she learned through him that “love is supreme, that love is stronger than death and the fear of death” (Brittain 265). When she lost everything, she had nothing left to fear. She goes as far as to say, “I came to life again after Roland’s death” (Brittain 290). With this new life came a new fire, a thick and pervading hatred for the war and all it cost her: “The war was a tragedy and a vast stupidity, a waste of youth and

of time, it betrayed my faith, mocked my love, and irremediably spoilt my career” (Brittain 290). It was then that Brittain began calling the war what it was, a vast injustice, horror, and waste.

Frederic Henry goes through a near-death experience that leaves him with the same antipathy to the war. While traveling through dangerous territory, Frederic is held up by a group of soldiers interrogating officers for “treachery” that led to an Italian defeat. “The questioners had all the efficiency, coldness, and command of themselves of Italians who are firing and not being fired on” (Hemingway 223), a “beautiful detachment and devotion to stern justice of men dealing in death without being in any danger of it” (Hemingway 225). To avoid being shot, he jumps into the river and floats downstream until he is no longer in range. It is then that Frederic Henry is through with the war. “Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation” (Hemingway 232), establishing his personal “Farewell to Arms.”

Once all is lost, the absurdity of war is made apparent. Reasons for going to war, for dying in the war, are seen for what they really are. “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain . . . abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of the villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers....” (Hemingway 185), Frederic thinks. When he is blown up on the front, he is told that he is to be decorated with bronze for being gravely wounded, but if he can think of some heroic act either before or after, he can get the silver. When they prompt him, trying to extract any remotely heroic-sounding story, he just puts it plainly: “I was blown up while we were eating cheese” (Hemingway 63). It’s humorous and absurd that one would be decorated for being blown up while performing an act as heroic as eating cheese. The honor of being wounded in combat holds such high regard, but in contrast to Frederic’s mundane reality, it appears far less honorable, much like Roland’s death. Before Roland died, he expressed in letters to Vera the shift in his view of the war as his ideas of glory and sacrifice faded: “I used to talk of the Beauty of War; but it is only War in the abstract that is beautiful. Modern warfare is merely a trade” he says, later adding that “the glamour fades, and that behind that glamour grim realities lie” (Brittain 172). If one were to ask Vera Brittain why people enlist, she would reply “the causes of war are always falsely represented; its honor is dishonest and its glory meretricious, but the challenge to spiritual endurance, the intense sharpening of all the senses, the vitalizing consciousness of common peril for a common end, remain allure to those boys and girls who have just reached the age when love and friendship and adventure call more persistently than at any later time” (Brittain 292). This best encapsulates the “national

exploitation of youth by its elders” (Brittain 99) Brittain states. The young are sold on obscure and abstract concepts of glory and honor, at the cost of life.

With awareness of this exploitation and having personally experienced war, characters from both works begin questioning the basis of the war and the authority perpetrating it. According to Passini, one of the drivers Henry commands on the front, “everybody hates this war” (Hemingway 51). The way Brittain sees it, “the world was mad and we were all victims...these shattered, dying boys and I were paying alike for a situation that none of us had desired or done anything to bring about” (Brittain 377). She voices her frustration for those who remain in support of the war, saying this:

I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy War, and the orators who talk so much about going on no matter how long the War lasts and what it may mean, could see a case--to say nothing of 10 cases--of mustard gas in its early stages--could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard-coloured suppurating blisters, with blind eyes--sometimes temporally, sometimes permanently--all sticky and stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke. (Brittain 395)

This graphic detail creates a deeply disturbing, uncomfortable image, allowing readers to experience the terrible things that happen to people in war, bridging yet another disconnect that occurs between the people who drive the war, who sit in positions of authority, and those who see the true costs of their decisions. It is imperative that everyone, especially people in positions of power, see the true costs of the war and that when the harsh realities of war are spoken of, the voices be heard. One night, when Frederic is talking to the priest, the priest says, “you cannot believe how it has been. Except that you have been there and you know how it can be. Many people have realized the war this summer.” When Frederic asks what will happen, the priest says, “they will stop fighting” (Hemingway 178). When both sides recognize there is nothing personal against the other side, and no personal gain from the war but all personal cost, there leaves little justification for continuing on.

Although they lost so much, it is important to take note of how Brittain and Hemingway changed and what they gained from enduring war. Before the war, Vera Brittain lived in “effulgent prosperity” (Brittain 22), an “unparalleled age of rich materialism and tranquil comfort” (Brittain 50). She criticizes the “social snobbery” and “unreal values” (Brittain 55) of her time, and the people she grew up around. Unlike her contemporaries who, like her, attend private schools for girls and aspire for little else than acquiring husbands, she has noble and ambitious goals. In

1913, a year before the war, she writes a list of her aspirations, the first being “to extend love, to promote thought, to lighten suffering, to combat indifference, to inspire activity” (Brittain 43). Although she explains the reason for referring back to her diary as “to give some idea of the effect of the War, with its stark disillusionments, its miseries unmitigated by polite disguise” (Brittain 45), it seems as though the war helped fulfill several aspects of her initial checklist. The war was extremely effective in shocking people, especially women, out of inactivity. According to the Department of Labor, “Prior to World War I, of all women employed in the manufacturing industries, three-fourths were making wearing apparel or its materials, food, or tobacco products. During the war, the number of women in industry increased greatly and the range of occupations open to them was extended” (“Our History”). Although Vera Brittain saw the war’s effect on the women’s cause as “quite dismaying,” women getting “all the dreariness of war and none of its exhilaration,” she recognizes her thoughts as evidence of an “inferiority complex” (Brittain 104). Earlier in the book, she uses the same term, “inferiority complex,” when describing her contemporaries who were being tested on their “marriageable qualities” on the “basis of their popularity as dancing partners” (Brittain 51). Although the post-war inferiority complex is the same in words, it undergoes a shift in nature that indicates a strengthening of women through the war. Rather than being insecure about who they will dance with or who they will marry, they think about how they can be more involved in helping with the war, and although the work is hard and tedious, it breaks the cycle of superficiality that controlled the futures of young women prior to 1914.

Along with the ability to work came other freedoms, like freedom of mobility for women who would have required escort prior to the war, and an increasing strength of mind. Roland undergoes the same strengthening of mind as a “newly baptized young soldier,” “so soon to be hardened by the protective iron or remorseless indifference to horror and pain” (Brittain 137). Vera shows her own evolving indifference through her medical work as she begins to see death as a “matter of course” when before the war she says, “the idea of death made me shudder and filled me with horror and fear” (Brittain 176). It allowed her to live and think in the moment, a “mental quiescence” which she says in a letter to Roland “was more than worth the fatigue involved” (Brittain 173). In many ways, the war provided invaluable experience in maturing a generation that had become too comfortable in blissful superficiality, shocking people out of isolation and indifference, bringing unity to a nation, and outlining the true importance of life when life itself is at stake.

Even though the war provided these experiences and subsequent advancements in the collective strength of the war generation, the advances were overridden by the effects of the war. With the war, freedom was succeeded by oppression, strength of mind became pessimism, and the unity between war brothers, friends, and lovers built by the war was inevitably destroyed by bullets and landmines. In the end, neither Vera Brittain nor Ernest Hemingway believed the means justified the ends in war. "It is impossible," Vera Brittain concludes, "to find any satisfaction in the thought of 25,000 slaughtered Germans, left to mutilation and decay; the destruction of men as though beasts, whether they be English, French, German, or anything else, seems a crime to the whole march of civilization" (Brittain 97). After all was lost and the dust had settled, she made it her mission to understand how the war had happened, how she and her contemporaries were "used, hypnotized and slaughtered" through their "own ignorance and others' ingenuity" (Brittain 471). By writing *Testament of Youth*, she made it her job to share the truth, in hopes that her generation's suffering could prevent it from happening to generations to come. Writers like Vera Brittain solved the disconnect. By reading works like *Testament of Youth* or *A Farewell to Arms*, readers who have never experienced war are forced out of peaceful isolation from their world, detachment from history, and blissful ignorance. With the ability to feel war in true form, unmasked of illusions of beauty and glory, one can begin to weigh the outcome with the cost: human life. To those who live in disconnect from war, these stories destroy the abstraction of death, decreasing the apathy felt by those who are unaffected by war, not having seen the horrors or felt the repercussions. Even as the writing of these stories served as a personal overcoming of the war, a final cleansing from a trauma long suppressed by resignation, denial, and alcohol, they were also written as personal testament to the belief that future generations can take and learn from the past, when "humanity failed and civilization went wrong" (Brittain 472).

Although it is a widely held belief that World War I was a "failure of humanity" as Vera Brittain claims, some people see some beneficial developments in the minds of the people. According to the BBC radio series "The Great War of Words," WWI was an example of mobilization from below, not exploitation by the government and authorities from above. They say that most propaganda was actually made by the public, and the public supported the war because they truly believed in it, not because they were told to do so. This negates Brittain's idea that the public was merely exploited through their own ignorance. When discussing the "rape of Belgium," which "caused international outrage and created a long propaganda war for the hearts and minds of millions overseas" (Portillo), Hew Strachan, professor of history at Oxford University, says, "great speech becomes the root of international law, moral obligations, the

rights of nations, a speech that goes to the heart of Britain's strategic interests as well as the list of moral and legal interests," going on to discuss Britain's post-war political neutrality. Britain's position as a global power depends on the rights of neutrals and small states, being neutral itself, and has benefited from being a neutral, Strachan says. Out of conflict came new rights and alliances with small states, as well as an increase in neutrality, all steps towards the recognition of the interconnectedness and dependency between nations, steps toward peace. In America, the war had great economic and social benefits. Hugh Rockoff, Professor of Economics at Rutgers University in New Jersey, looks at the political effects of World War I and how it positively impacted policymaking. The war "increased the confidence on the left that central planning was the best way to meet a national crisis, certainly in wartime, and possibly in peacetime as well...almost every government program undertaken in the 1930s reflected a World War I precedent," explains Rockoff, adding that, "Many of the people brought in to manage New Deal agencies had learned their craft in World War I." The author concludes that the scope and speed of government expansion in the 1930s were likely greater because of the impact of the war on the worldview of new economic and political leaders, who in turn inspired future generations of reformers. "For America, to sum up," writes Rockoff, "the most important long-run impact of the war may have been in the realm of ideas" (Rockoff).

Whether one views the war as success or failure, the goal is to look forward, shaping the future based on informed opinions of the past. Although hardened by her experience, Brittain shares her realizations after a life of learning, analyzing, and experiencing the "failures of humanity", showing promise for the years to come:

I discovered that human nature does change, does learn to hate oppression, to depreciate the spirit of revenge, to be revolted by acts of cruelty, and at last to embody these changes of heart and mind in treaties--those chronological records of a game of skill played by accomplished technicians who can hardly, in any time or place, be described as leading the van of progressive opinion. (Brittain 473)

With this emphasis on personal responsibility, Vera Brittain leaves it in the hands of the reader to be revolted by the cruelty she lived and describes, to resist ignorant resignation to injustice, to realize that we are not at the mercy of "accomplished technicians," whether parliament, congress, the media, or the idea of inevitable war. By reading the true accounts of war, we take, at no expense except our ignorance, a dive to the depths of dysfunction, suffering, and hardship, and by doing so, find new conviction in the heights of noble prospects for the future of humanity.

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