

Rudolf Eucken – *The Moral Forces of War*¹

The damaging effects of war have long raised vocal objections. These objections have implicated foremost the loss of *blood and possessions*² as well as the devastation and destruction that are necessarily the consequences of war. More profound intellects have recognized as even more alarming the damaging consequences on morality: the collapse of the rule of law, the release of wild passions, and the inner fissure of mankind. There is no doubt that such dangers are ever present, which would make war appear to be straightforwardly negative, if, however, war were not revealed in a different light. The feasibility of the latter depends on the character of war: if war is waged from hatred and envy, for the thirst of glory or lust of conquest, it is evil. If war, however, is waged by a whole nation for the purpose of self-preservation, the maintenance of its sacred goods, and a defense against violent attacks, it will strengthen solidarity among the people, unveil hitherto dormant powers, and increase the standard of life. This is luckily the case with Germany at the moment. That our war does not stem from impure incentives but fights instead the good fight is to be recognised not only in terms of the war's emergence but equally through its effect on our soul, its purification and ennoblement. A just war of this kind, I am inclined to say, a sacred war, springs from pure intentions: it makes clear and certain that strong and ethical forces can stem from a genuine war.

Such a war gives life a certain degree of seriousness that leads to the effacement of all those frivolous and fleetings characteristics of everyday life. The tension produced by the struggle for self-preservation necessitates that everything is examined in terms of its meaning and that nothing is tolerated that would make this test too easy. When everything is at risk, the incidental will cease, only the cardinal will persist. Only that which proves to be useful to us in war will also hold to be valuable in life.

A true war not only demands severity, but equally pointed attention. The sciences, art, and technology are essential elements of the richness of our culture but should not arrest our attention, for now there is something greater at stake that concerns mankind as such. A task directed at his ultimate aspiration and true spirit of mankind's thinking, hence a task that is through and through ethical. Each and everyone is called upon to determine the fate of all as his own fate and to therein summon all his courage, and define his spirit,

¹ *Die sittlichen Kräfte des Krieges*, 1914

² Archaic expression, *Blut und Gut* („one's own life and property“).

his existence, regardless of his own personal destiny. We shall not need to ask him to follow us today, but he does so willingly and thankfully. Members of all social classes, touched by the spirit of the movement, are eager to participate; what was formerly unviable now seems self-evident; where heroic deeds were few, they now are many. One can see that the prevalent concern of true German patriots, material affluence, might have caused general limpness and slackness of moral judgment, but this turned out to be unfounded. The imminence of the battle proves the exact opposite; the core of our people has never been in better shape.

The nature of war though, shows to have a special impact on the refinement of morals; it requires order and structure, everyone has to obey and is given a certain position and task to fulfil and has to always be at hand if the enhancement of the *whole* really is what he desires. Thus in the context of war the concept of moral duty takes on its most definite and forceful form. It bears nothing indifferent, nothing small; even the utmost insignificant things are being done with full conscientiousness. It is not a coincidence that the notion of moral duty took its origin from philosophical reasoning that understood life in terms of the confrontation with the Other; the Other was yet the *self* and hence confrontation with the Other aimed for independence of one's soul and the overcoming of one's own destiny. The Stoics, the early Christians, as well as the ethics of Kant and Fichte adhered to such ideas that penetrated into the very depths of the soul of our liberation fighters. For if guided by the gaze of the spirit of moral duty, whereby the individual includes the end of the whole into his own willing, strict obedience does not paralyse but encourage man to act benevolently, and serving does not amount to a humiliating task, but to the very spring of a blooming character.

The just war not only imposes rule and order upon the people but also strengthens solidarity among them. Each and everyone is aware of the fact that he cannot achieve anything without the help of the other and equally, that his own destiny depends on the welfare of the whole. In times of peace one easily forgets about that and is inclined to think of himself as being independent. As war has taught us by experience a thousand times, one's joy and sorrow entirely depend on the *whole*. This is also the best way of putting egotism to an end. If Dangers, distresses, successes are shared experiences, if everyone *feels* in the presence of the other, suffers in the immediate presence of the other, empathy will overcome arrogance and isolation. That very spirit is now present in our nation. All differences in classes and between the parties vanish amidst the common grounds we share as compatriots. How heartening, how promising, we cannot expect anything more as a justification of the war we are now about to encounter. Disunity, the great evil of the

Germans impeded us from achieving anything noteworthy; something we have always been capable of. It indeed occurred throughout our entire history. Today however, we are - supposedly for the first time - able to say: this is how it used to be and since today everything is different, disunity and disagreement among our people have fully disappeared. That states all the more, that in our present time vast differences still have been of great concern; the Liberals and the Conservatives still could not come to agreement on political nor on ideological matters, Catholicism and Protestantism have ever since been hostile to each other, but especially the social problems³ divided our nation; as if it were impossible to unite the working class with the bourgeoisie. But now all of a sudden we seem to have overcome all differences, for now we do not see the other as a member of this or that party, what we see is nothing but the German, the comrade with whom we fight together side by side for the very same purpose.

This represents an enormous transformation of which we can confidently expect to have long term effects. Because after having fully grasped and realised how united we appear, that we are able to rely on each other, and how all of us is deeply inspired by our mother country, we shall equally well handle upcoming battles together and remain united despite conflicting views that might one day emerge. That people share similar lives and destinies constitutes the fundament of a whole nation; They induce a national consciousness that will be carried on through many generations. Such a common ground is exactly what we have always missed and what brought us so much distress. The old story of our kaiser, which we still share, receded in the distance, the dead of the tribes and nation-states that followed have not yet had a great share in what our nation is today, even the wars of liberation still saw a scattered Germany. Only the French war of 1870/71 can be called a mutual project. The present war adds another core to our nationhood, and by doing so makes it even stronger.

From this we can see that those shared experiences united us also in a spiritual way. But they do much more: They unite us with higher forces and uplift our lives by means of their mere presence. Since it does not come natural to us to refrain from our personal needs and ends in order to blithely act according to a higher ideal, we are in need of supernatural assistance that diagnoses our actions. Because without contemplating and having much to worry about we will be directed to higher ends, able to acquire new practical and intellectual skills and will think of ourselves as members of an invisible

³ *Soziale Frage*: The problematisation of negative impacts on the population caused by the Industrial Revolution (18th Century). Here a problem of classes.

network that provides us with stability and that leads us to a noble path. The subjective belief in a higher force allows us to be certain that our deeds are not in vain, because they are done for the sake of that very force. It assures us furthermore that our just war will endure the threat of the enemy.

Thus the German nation currently undergoes a vast religious transition that reaches far beyond individual dogmas and the differences of certain confessions. It internalises the uniting forces that the current course of events has awakened, makes us reverent for the divine; the divine which seems infinitely enigmatic but is yet so close. Furthermore it makes us stronger so that we can more easily endure the casualties which have brought about the heroic uplift of the German nation. Many sacrifices are being imposed on us. The lives of many, of heads and essential members of families, of young and talented people will be extinguished. But with death there is also life. As religion adds to suffering hope and consecration so too does death strengthen the solidarity among people. The loss of one is a loss for everyone; we all immerse in mourning, but we equally are full of pride. As the religions praise their martyrs, so do we want to esteem the martyrs of our fatherland and their legacy in order for them to serve as an incitement for high aspirations and as an eternal spring of inner elevation. So too the spiritual aspect of war will show great effect also on the German nation, for nothing is more effective in forging a bond between people than the mutual experience of pain and distress.

From that we can see that the uniting effect of war, of *our* war is a manifold; he awakens dormant souls and hitherto disguised forces, puts life into great flux; he reinterprets terror and the tragedy of casualties as great and divine. That spirit of war however is not merely obtained by the dead, but is accessible to all who are willing to elevate their deeds into full heights and want to become that what the present demands of all to become.

translated by Anton Leodolter