Presentation

Erich Auerbach and War Literature

Apresentação

Erich Auerbach e a Literatura de guerra

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Abstract The text is an introduction to the conference "*Poesie et guerre*" ("Poetry and War"), by Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), likely delivered in 1941 in Turkey. It highlights and seeks to demonstrate the sensitivity with wich Auerbach's critical reflection was attuned to the transformations of the world around him. With the conciseness typical of this kind of text, the historical relationships between poetry and war are brought to light, emphasizing the uniqueness of contemporary war literature and its inscription into Auerbach's philological project. The reader will find a transcription of the conference in its original language, French, along with a Portuguese translation of the document in this same volume of the jornal *Varia História*.
Keywords poetry, war, conference

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Resumo O texto é uma apresentação à conferência "*Poesie et guerre*" ("Poesia e Guerra"), de Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), proferida provavelmente em 1941, na Turquia, e preza por demonstrar a sensibilidade da reflexão crítica do autor às transformações do mundo à sua volta. Com a concisão própria de um texto dessa natureza, as históricas relações entre poesia e guerra são trazidas à luz, de modo a salientar a peculiaridade da literatura de guerra contemporânea e sua inscrição no projeto filológico auerbachiano. O leitor encontrará a transcrição da conferência em seu idioma original, o francês, bem como a tradução do documento para o português neste mesmo volume da revista *Varia História*.
Palavras-chave poesia, guerra, conferência

Perhaps what is most haunting about a war situation is the strange feeling of an unprecedented time that, although new, prevents a free and somewhat innocent relationship that a society usually establishes with its future. War undermines an entire set of expectations that once seemed like unwavering goals but now waver in the face of the unfolding of great political events worldwide. It disrupts the seemingly stable dimensions of time, throwing a sharp spear into the past, piercing it as if demanding an account to be settled. Yet, the present of war is too fragile, so uncertain that it offers no evidence that the spear will hit its intended target. The time of war is the time of uncertainty.

Today, two wars dominate the pages of newspapers and the screens of televisions, computers, and smartphones: Russia and Ukraine on one side, Israel in Gaza on the other. Beyond these conflicts, many others ignored by the media and international organizations cast the same uncertainty over the daily lives of those directly involved, as well as an immeasurable discomfort on all of us who watch helplessly. In this bleak scenario, can poetry, or literature in general, offer, if not clarity, at least a probable interpretation of its time capable of providing some parameters, some measure of understanding? How can contemporary creative writing shed light on a time marked by events that seem

unprecedented – though it is always possible to find precedents somewhere – due to extreme destruction and dehumanization?

It is certain that, since ancient times, the theme of war has been an important part of the poetic tradition, so this union of opposites does not surprise the attentive reader. However, despite tracing the origin of this relationship to ancient epic poetry, drawing from biblical and Greek traditions, the theme of Erich Auerbach's (1892-1957) conference – about which we will speak below – addresses a specifically contemporary literature and war, right in the heat of its unfolding. Delivered in Turkey, likely in 1941, "Poetry and War" was part of a series of lectures included in Auerbach's contract at the University of Istanbul. Originally written in French, his working language at the time, the text addresses pressing issues of Turkish and European society of his era and their implications for contemporary literature – thus preserving remarkable relevance.

In 1935, Auerbach was forced into exile after the promulgation of the Nuremberg Race Laws, which, among other restrictions, removed individuals of Jewish blood from the German civil service. His dismissal from the University of Marburg coincided with the transfer of Leo Spitzer (1887-1960) from the University of Istanbul[1] – where he had been a professor of Latin Languages and Literatures and director of the School of Foreign Languages since 1933 – to a position in the Romance Philology Department at Johns Hopkins University in the United States. As expected, Spitzer's vacancy was coveted by high-level philologists in Germany, including Auerbach, Hans Rheinfelder (1898-1971), Victor Klemperer (1881-1960), and possibly Robert Ernst Curtius (1886-1956). At first, Klemperer believed that his background as a former combatant

1 Spitzer arrived in Istanbul through the efforts of the Swiss educator Albert Malche (1876-1956), who was hired by the government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (president from 1923 to 1938) to carry out a university reform aimed at overcoming the imperial past and establishing the institution as "cosmopolitan" (i.e., Westernized). Mass dismissals took place to allow professors, primarily from Germany but also from other European nations, to take up academic positions. Spitzer was one of the émigrés recruited by Malche in collaboration with the *Notgemeinschaft deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland* (Emergency Association of German Scholars Abroad), and his task was to establish a department of philological studies, teaching in various European languages. (Ver: Green, 1983, p. 105).

would compensate for his Jewish ancestry, allowing him to remain in Dresden. He quickly realized his mistake and began actively seeking other job opportunities around the world: in addition to Turkey, his primary destination, Palestine and South America were also on his radar.

According to the diaries he kept during the years of National Socialism, Klemperer did not take Curtius's candidacy very seriously, as the Alsatian philologist was not a target of Nazi persecution and held a fairly secure position at the University of Bonn (Klemperer, 1999, p. 31). His intuition proved correct, and Curtius did not pursue his supposed interest in emigrating (given his controversial personality, such interest may never have been genuine). His greatest rival was, in fact, Auerbach, with whom he maintained an ambiguous attitude over the years, shifting between resentment and intellectual admiration. The reason for this initial resentment may have stemmed from Auerbach's selection for the position in Istanbul, particularly due to the explicit support he received from Spitzer and the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952):

> He [Auerbach] had already been in Florence for a year, and Croce gave an opinion on him. (And I protested to Vossler! Supidone io!) Now Auerbach is improving his French in Geneva. And Spitzer acted in Italy, saying that the position had to go to someone who really knew French! If I settle in Geneva for a few months, I, too, can once again really know French.[2] (Klemperer, 1999, p. 116).

Evidently, this should be seen as more than mere resentment; rather, it reflects how war and life under the Nazi regime amplified fears and distorted perceptions in an uncertain present. Klemperer was never able to leave Dresden and, as a means of surviving the terror and

2 Author's free translation: "Er [Auerbach] saß schon ein Jahr in Florenz, und Croce gab ein Gutachten über ihn ab. (Und ich habe mich protestierend an Vossler gewandt! Supidone io!) Jetzt frischt Auerbach sein Französisch in Genf auf. Und Spitzer hat in Italien operiert, der Posten müsse an einen Mann, der wirklich Französisch könne! Wenn ich mich für ein paar Monate nach Genf setze, kann ich auch wieder "wirklich Französisch"."

political persecution, wrote the aforementioned diary, titled *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten*. After overcoming his initial dissatisfaction with Auerbach's appointment in Istanbul, Klemperer eventually acknowledged the quality of his work, especially after the publication of *Mimesis*[3].

Upon arriving in Istanbul, Auerbach found a city experiencing a cultural boom: intellectuals, primarily from England, France, and Germany, found at the University of Istanbul a welcoming environment for thought, in the wake of the Westernization process promoted by then-President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1953). According to Kader Konuk in *East West Mimesis* (2010), the hiring of European émigrés at major Turkish universities aligned with the broader argument of modernization and progress, fostering a stimulating exchange of ideas between European and Turkish philologists. Spitzer himself often organized gatherings at his apartment to discuss topics related to linguistics and Romance literature with students, assistant professors, and émigré intellectuals, such as Traugott Fuchs, Eva Buck, and Robert Anhegger (Apter, 2003, p. 266-267). This scenario seems to contradict Auerbach's words in the final pages of *Mimesis*: "[...]Moreover, the research was written during the war in Istanbul. There is no library here well-equipped for European studies." "[4] (Auerbach, 1994 [1946], p. 518).

Although Konuk questioned Auerbach's argument regarding the lack of well-equipped libraries in Istanbul, the fact remains that the philologist felt isolated and without the necessary resources to carry out his intellectual project in exile. In addition to the widely known remarks in the final pages of *Mimesis* and in *Epilegomena*, he reiterated this opinion in a letter to Oskar Seidlin (1911-1984), in which he justified his desire to leave Turkey: "[...] for Istanbul, despite many advantages, is a

3 To mention just one compelling example, Klemperer wrote a highly favorable review of the book. See: Klemperer (1948, p. 863–868).

4 Author's free translation: "[...] Dazu kommt noch, dass die Untersuchung während des Krieges in Istanbul geschrieben wurde. Hier gibt es keine für europäische Studien gut ausgestattete Bibliothek […];"

temporary solution for a Romance philologist."[5] (Auerbach an Seidlin, 19. Januar, 1946) What was the reason for such a profound sense of displacement? While scholars such as Fuchs and even Spitzer integrated themselves into the new culture, learning the language and taking on the task of building bridges between the West and Turkey, Auerbach remained a foreigner. He never learned Turkish and, despite holding important positions, including that of department director, he felt isolated and increasingly eager to leave.

Perhaps the answer lies in the theoretical project that guided his humanist philology, the *Neuphilologie*. Practiced by both Spitzer and Curtius in distinct yet converging ways, it opposed the nationalist philology of the Weimar Republic and Nazi literary science not through a renewal in the style of avant-garde artistic movements that dominated the period, but through the idea of restoring *Bildung*, in an attempt to reconstruct, on renewed foundations, a notion of Europe as a cultural unity. This project was only fully developed in the final years of his career when, in the article "Philology of World Literature", he refined and incorporated into his critical repertoire Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*.

Auerbach's concept of world literature took an entirely different approach from nationalist perspectives. While traditional philology sought to demonstrate the superiority of the German spirit over others – especially the *esprit français* – through essentialist definitions and the identification of stages in Europe's spiritual development, Auerbach's *Weltliteratur* viewed national literatures not as competitors but as engaged in a process of "reciprocal fermentation." Its goal was to create a kind of mosaic in which each piece simultaneously maintained its individual color and shape while fulfilling a specific role in composing the whole.

Such a perspective, in advocating for a common literature that did not equate to crude massification, was interpreted by authors such as Edward Said[6] as a humanist stance. However, and this must be made

5 Author's free translation: "[...] denn Istanbul, trotz vieler Vorzüge, ist für einen Romanisten ein Provisorium."

6 See Said's Introduction to Mimesis, in the 2003 American anniversary edition.

clear, Auerbach did not intend to dismantle the central reference point to which local literatures should relate, but merely to reprogram its axis: from a specific nation to the unitary concept of Europe. His vision of world literature, while preserving the European continent as the collective singular from which aesthetic references and the sense of historical becoming originated, relegated certain parts of the globe – such as Turkey – to a marginal position (although he was quite impressed by a Russian author, Tolstoy, whose work he enthusiastically recommended in the lecture that follows).

Despite this, the 1940s in Istanbul can be considered the most productive period of Auerbach's career, during which he composed two of his most brilliant works, which continue to spark stimulating debates to this day: *Mimesis* (1946) and *Figura* (1938). In addition to these and other well-known texts, such as those compiled in *Neue Dantestudien* (1941), there is a series of lectures delivered between 1940 and 1941 that remain largely unknown to the non-specialized Western public. This highly productive phase of Auerbach's life, which, according to his son Clemens, was marked by deep depression due to the course of the war[7], led him to reflect on two fundamental concepts for his generation. In this brief text, originally a lecture, Auerbach spoke about *Poetry and War.*

The topic is not incidental. Between 1913 and 1945, the Ottoman Empire – and later, the Republic of Turkey – faced a series of large-scale armed conflicts, including the Balkan Wars, World War I, the Armenian Genocide, the War of Independence, and World War II. For this reason, war was a deeply ingrained experience in both the memory and daily life of multiple generations of the population, and Auerbach's audience had a clear understanding of the subject. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that some writers of the period began publishing journalistic articles on the theme of war, offering society a critical and aesthetic perspective on a particularly turbulent present.

7 See (A. Jørgensen, 1996) and the article by Leopoldo Waizbort (2025) published in this dossier by *Varia Historia*.

High-circulation magazines such as *Yeni Mecmua* and *Harp*, for example, published notes, sometimes anonymously, reporting on the disadvantages faced by Turkish armies, which, unlike their foreign counterparts, did not benefit from the moral reinforcement provided by poets, composers, and painters, especially during the Balkan campaign and World War I. However, a shift can be observed starting from the Turkish War of Independence in 1922. The psychological consequences of World War I were still deeply felt across various levels of society, bringing to the forefront a reflection on its effects. In this context, the propagandistic function of literature began to be questioned. What started to emerge from then on – gaining even more strength during World War II – was a literature of non-war, with a strong emphasis on the suffering and destruction it caused.

In his lecture, Auerbach analyzed two types of war poetry. The first, belonging to the lyric genre, referred to a "current war," aiming to boost soldiers' morale, insult the enemy, celebrate victory, or plead with the gods for a successful campaign. Some of the earliest examples of this type of poetry include the Old Testament, with the triumphal song of the priestess Deborah, and the war songs of Tyrtaeus, which encouraged Spartan soldiers in their campaign in the Peloponnesus. The second type of war poetry, according to Auerbach, consisted of epic narratives recounting "a war from the past," tracing back to *The Iliad* by Homer and *The Aeneid* by Virgil. The purpose of these epics was to shape and strengthen national sentiment in "critical moments" of a people's history. Even though this second genre did not deal with a contemporary event, its relevance to the present was even more decisive, as the philologist states: "It is especially during critical moments in a people's history that works of this second group, whose subject is historical rather than contemporary, attain a great current importance."

In his lecture, Auerbach traced the history of war poetry throughout Western literature in a way quite similar to the approach he developed in *Mimesis*. He highlighted its Judeo-Christian roots, beginning in Antiquity – where we should recall his discussion of the separation of styles as an important model in the composition of literary works – up

to his own contemporary period. In modern realism, even the lowest-ranking figure, the "unknown soldier" in the trenches, was portrayed with seriousness and tragic depth. The events of World War II and the literature that emerged from it no longer glorified the "beautiful death" as the fate of the fearless hero, whose bravery challenged even the gods. Instead, they focused on the anonymous young soldier who left behind his life and hopes on some distant battlefield.

> The cult of individual heroes, whether generals, aviators or submarine commanders, which certainly provided the subject for many books, had very little success, while the best-written, most widespread books speak directly about the people: about an ordinary infantryman in the trenches. You can see its symbol in the monuments erected everywhere to the "unknown soldier". (Auerbach, 1941).

The modest actions of everyday life[8] in an unrelenting trench and what happened to the common soldier returning from battle became the favored themes of post-1945 war literature, and the way Auerbach identified this transformation in the heat of the events is truly remarkable. The lecture that follows was conceived during this debate. At that time, the author was living with his family in Bebek, a residential area far from the center and the Istanbul University. Reflecting on literature and war was a pressing issue, and despite all the isolation the philologist claimed to experience, it is certain that such concerns of Turkish society engaged him, whether through his students and colleagues at the university or simply by walking between cafés with a newspaper in hand on the banks of the Bosphorus. But certainly, his interest was distinct from that proclaimed by the press. He did not find it necessary to define whether or not there was a war literature in Turkey or if the country had a warrior vocation despite the disdain of the intellectual

8 On the discussion of everyday life in Auerbach, see: Gumbrecht (2002, p. 152-174); see: Reis (2023, p. 487-504).

elites. His concern was, as demonstrated through the themes and authors he engaged with over time, notably historical.

Perhaps this is a possible answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this introductory text: can literature offer an appropriate horizon of understanding in a time as uncertain as that of war? What Auerbach seems to signal in this lecture and throughout his work, armed with the philological scholarship inherited from Romanticism and Idealism, is a frequent and unwavering belief in the transformative power of historical forces and in literary language as a particular mode of intervention in the world. When diplomatic meetings become a mere protocol, and, at a more terrifying degree, when the sense of *Humanität* dissipates, Auerbach's lecture reminds its readers, both from 1941 and today, who share the present of various "current wars", of the roots of Western literary culture, far removed from the purity desired by extremist ideologies. It is a wager on the historical potential of poetry to interpret the "critical moments of history."

* * *

Poetry and War[9]

Erich Auerbach

It seems to me that there are two types of war poetry. One which is caused by an actual war. These are, in general, short pieces of the lyric genre: prayers asking the gods for victory, songs encouraging soldiers, satirical poems denigrating and insulting the enemy, hymns celebrating the victory won and thanking celestial powers. There are many examples of all this.

The oldest piece in the Judeo-Christian Bible is probably the triumphal song of the priestess Deborah for a victory won by the people of Israel over the Canaanites, the ancient inhabitants of Palestine. Among the oldest surviving monuments of Greek poetry are the elegies of Tyrtaeus (Tyrtaios), in which he encourages the Spartans in their war against the Messenians, their neighbors in the Peloponnese. He was the first, as far as we know, to express a thought that has been frequently repeated since: Beautiful is the death of a brave man falling in the front ranks, having fought for his homeland.

We also find this kind of poetry among all the peoples in modern Europe, as soon as a war becomes the concern of the entire people waging it. Many things have changed since the crusade songs of the twelfth century or the hymns that were both religious and warlike during the Reformation of the sixteenth. The objective of these fights has become of no interest to us, but when reading them, we still feel the breath of enthusiasm that inspired them. And, for more modern times, I only need

9 Typewritten conference in French, without a title or date, housed in Erich Auerbach's collection at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. It was originally delivered to the students of the French literature chair at the University of Istanbul between the years 1940 and 1941. The present translation was made directly from the original. The original typewritten text was consulted at different times by Leopoldo Waizbort and Patrícia Reis. The final version of this transcription was prepared by Leopoldo Waizbort, who was also responsible for minor spelling and typing corrections. [Note from the dossier editors]
Translated by Cecilia Sá Cavalcante Schuback. (Doctoral student in Aesthetics Research at Södertörn University)
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to remind you of the French *La Marseillaise*, a song of war and freedom, or the Germans' songs in their war of liberation against Napoleon I.

La Marseillaise is particularly interesting for the purpose I have set for this lecture. For it is, as I just mentioned, both a song of war and of freedom, a song of the entire nation, armed against their oppressors both internally and externally; and we can clearly see that in France, as well as elsewhere in Europe, nationalism has popular roots and is intimately connected to the aspirations of the people for individual freedom, whether it be freedom of consciousness or economic freedom.

Let us now move on to the second type of war poetry, which may be even more important from an artistic perspective, as it has produced far more masterpieces – works that, almost everywhere, constitute the very foundation of national literature. These works are for the most part long, not lyrical, but epic, and they do not speak of a war contemporary to the poet's life; rather, they sing of past wars and celebrate the heroic deeds of ancestors.

First, there are the great national epics such as *The Iliad* by Homer, *The Aeneid* by Virgil, the German *Nibelungen*, the French *Song of Roland*, and many others. In more modern times, there are also historical tragedies such as some plays by Goethe and Schiller, and even novels. Among novels of this kind, I will mention the great work by the Russian Tolstoy, titled *War and Peace*; its subject is Napoleon's campaign against Russia in 1812. In my opinion, this is one of the finest books of the nineteenth century, and I recommend that you read it if you have not yet done so. There is even a Turkish translation available.

All the works of this second type are historical, as I have said; they are not about current events. However, they have all contributed (especially the ancient epics) to shaping and strengthening the national feeling. Homer's *Iliad* played a great role in sustaining the Greeks' sense of unity during critical moments in their ancient history, and the importance of *Roland* for the French, or *El Cid* for the Spaniards, has not been lesser.

It is especially during critical moments in a people's history that works of this second group, whose subject is historical rather than contemporary, can attain a great current importance. On several occasions

we have seen among different peoples, Greek, French and German, that verses by an old poet, recited onstage, have struck a deep chord with spectators who discovered in them an allusion to the present situation […]. In 1871, during the siege of Paris, a lecture by Professor Gaston Paris on *The Song of Roland* and French nationalism contributed much to revive the spirit of heroic resistance. We can thus say that even the political importance of this second group of works, whose subjects are historical, is not inferior to that of the first.

Now, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that is during the time of European absolutism, there was neither national and popular war poetry, nor works of the first group, that is, epic and historical ones – despite the fact that there were many wars during this period.

There is indeed *La Henriade* by Voltaire, an epic poem on the wars of King Henry IV of France, but this is a cold work and not at all popular. More importantly, there are a few very popular military songs and marches from the eighteenth century, songs attaching themselves to the names of a few famous generals of the time such as Eugene of Savoy and Marlborough. I suppose many of you are familiar with "*Marlborough s'en va-t-en guerre*," composed to celebrate the general Duke of Marlborough, an ancestor of Prime Minister Churchill. Well, these songs and marches do not have the gravity and fervor that characterize war poetry from other times. They sound more like dance music, and their lyrics refer not to the great political ideas of the time nor to the tragic and heroic task of national defense. Instead, their content is rather cheerful, at times a little melancholic, at times frivolous; this is not the poetry of a people fighting for its existence and freedom.

What is the reason for the strange fact that two centuries filled with wars were so fruitless in this type of poetry? It is not a general poetic sterility, because in all European countries, above all in France, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were times of literary blossoming. This was the time of masterpieces of French classicism, the era of Racine, Molière, Boileau, La Fontaine, and their imitators in France as well as in neighboring countries.

But this classical poetry was not popular poetry; it was poetry intended for certain groups of society, a poetry of extreme refinement both in content and form, inaccessible to the masses of the population at the time. And this observation shows us the path to follow in order to find the solution to the problem that interest us now: during the two centuries of absolutism in Europe, the people were, so to speak, mute; they did not take part in public life, they were only an inert mass in the hands of governments.

In the Middle Ages, and again during the Renaissance of the sixteenth century, the people played an active and important role in history. Through its various organizations by estates and trades, such as the bourgeois in cities and the peasants in the countryside, it represented an integral and powerful part of public life. These were not organizations with an individual basis like in modern democracies, but at base corporative and hierarchical. Nevertheless, they were strongly active and aware of their power, all the more so as the people in many countries were the natural allies of the central power, namely of the king, in his struggle against the centrifugal forces, composed primarily of the feudal nobility.

These were primarily the foundations of national unity and sentiment in France: the king and the people, allies against the feudal and particularist nobility. In these periods, it was not easy to wage a great war without arousing the interest of the people and without gaining their sympathy for the cause one wanted to defend; often, the people of the cities and the countryside took up arms themselves. But after the end of the religious wars, when absolutism had definitively attained victory, when the feudal nobility had been subdued, the king's power became such that he no longer needed the people. The absolutist state governed through its officials, without the competition of corporations and representations of the people; wars were wars of princes, prepared, declared and led in the cabinets, and the people had no part in them except to pay the costs.

The technical development of the art of warfare also contributed to eliminate the military activity of the people. Firearms, especially

artillery, required professional training, which at that time could not yet be given to the entire people. Keep in mind that, even in Europe, there was neither military service nor compulsory education, and the vast majority of Europeans were illiterate. Therefore, the armies consisted of professional soldiers, mercenaries who were often not even from the country in which they served; they were people who sold their blood.

Even within the officer corps, there were many people of a type which was called "soldier of fortune"; adventurers, often younger sons from noble families, without inheritance or career in their own countries, who traveled the world selling their services to belligerent princes. We find this type in a celebrated comedy of the eighteenth century, *Minna von Barnhelm*, by the German poet Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: it is the lieutenant Riccaut de la Marlinière, the youngest son of a French noble family, who, after having served successively in the armies of the Netherlands, the Pope, and King Frederick the Great of Prussia, now finds himself reduced to making a living through gambling.

If such were the officers, then you can very well imagine what the soldiers were like. Recruiters travelled through various countries of Europe in search of young men capable of entering the service of the prince, their master. They enlisted the malcontents, the estranged from their families, the failures, the poor, the desperate, often criminals; they would sometimes win over an unfortunate young man without experience, who they got drunk before having him sign a contract that bound him for 10, 12 or even twenty years. Even minor princes, their financial resources exhausted, would sell a few thousand of their young subjects to another rich and powerful prince who needed them for his wars.

You can see that wars fought with armies formed in this way could not have been popular wars, and that they were solely matters of cabinets and dynasty. In the most important and longest of these wars, the issue was deciding whether the German House of Habsburg or the French House of Bourbon would succeed to the throne of Spain, which had become vacant with the death of the deceased king without a direct heir, and whose family had family ties to both the Habsburgs and Bourbons. It was purely an issue of royal dynasties, in which neither

the German nor the French people were directly interested. As for the Spanish people, their opinion was hardly asked.

It might be unfair to say that the kings who waged similar wars did not think at all about their people; certainly, they believed that by increasing their power, they could gain significant political and economic advantages that would increase the wealth and well-being of their subjects. However, they had lost the habit of consulting them, they did no longer feel the need to do so, and they often misjudged their people's ability to bear the costs and burdens of a long war. The famous example of Louis XIV shows that even a king who was intelligent, conscientious, and almost always victorious, but wanted to decide everything on his own, with no other counsel than that of ministers and officials appointed by himself, undermined the economy and political structure of his country.

As for the people, it seems that, at first, they were fairly content with the state of things. The consolidation of central power, that is, the king's power, had granted them many benefits: they felt freed from their former oppressors, the feudal barons; the organization of administration in the hands of the monarch and his bureaucracy guaranteed them internal peace and the security of their work. Exhausted from the religious conflicts, weary of the upheavals that had lasted for centuries, they relinquished their rights, renounced the ancient privileges of their corporations, and allowed themselves to be peacefully governed by their princes.

It was only little by little that they began to regret this abdication of rights and to revolt against absolutism. Completely removed from any collaboration in government, suffocated by taxes, exasperated by the injustice and corruption of the bureaucracy, their peaceful submission gradually gave way to a spirit of revolt. When, in the eighteenth century, new ideas on national freedom and individual freedom were spreading, they found a profound resonance first among the French people and later among other European peoples.

The French revolution of 1789 was the signal and the first phase of this change, and by overthrowing absolutism, establishing the national sovereignty of the people, and giving the same people full political

responsibility, it also overturned the old constitution of the armies, changed ideas about war, and created the concept of national defense by the people. It was from this moment that the institution of compulsory service was born, closely linked to the establishment of compulsory education for all children under the care of the government.

There is a people in Europe whose political development outpaced that of others by a century, or even several centuries. They are the English. For them, democracy did not begin at the end of the eighteenth century but in the seventeenth, and it was the end of an evolution that began much earlier. Almost all the institutions of modern democracy were first established in England; however, the military organization is an exception, simply because the of national defense was posed quite differently for them, thanks to their country's geographical situation. They were able to conduct all their wars up until 1914 through their navy and volunteers, who were often colonials. Even now, they view compulsory service as an exceptional measure, necessary only in times of national danger. That is why the organization of the nation as an army may be the only major democratic institution that is not of English origin, but French.

The French ideas, which soon became the world's ideas on national defense by the entire people, originate from – if we go back to the source – the political system of a man who was perhaps the least bellicose, the most idyllic among political writers: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He almost never speaks of war in his writings, and military glory is probably something quite distant from the ordinary framework of his ideas. Nevertheless, his conception of all men's natural liberty, a supreme good that, as such, must be defended by all means, and which leads him to his famous theory on the nation's sovereignty and solidarity, has as a necessary and inevitable consequence that every citizen capable of bearing arms has the duty to defend the common liberty of all members of the nation whenever that liberty is threatened.

The events of the revolution, occurring ten years after Rousseau's death, brought this hidden germ of his political system to light. When the people revolting believed itself – rightly or wrongly – to be

threatened by the king's mercenary troops when, later, neighboring kings and princes sent their armies composed of professional soldiers against France to save the king, to restore absolutism, and to destroy liberty – both national and individual – that had been expected to be forever secured, the solution which was necessarily and immediately imposed in such a dangerous situation was to arm the entire nation for its defense. And thus, the French army of 1792, this hastily formed, poorly equipped army that performed so many miracles in defense of the country and from which the Napoleonic army developed, was the first army of the organized people.

This is a development of the utmost importance for the history of mankind, one whose importance surpasses the military perspective: a people, having become aware of itself, understanding the necessity of national defense by all, must also adapt to the intellectual demands that such a task requires in modern times; in order to defend itself, it must educate itself. Military service and compulsory education are intimately connected and mutually complement each other; school is the preparation for the barracks, and the barracks, in many cases, complete the intellectual education of the people, not only for military instruction but also for general education and professional preparation.

Now, the French people did everything necessary to get the other peoples of continental Europe to adopt the measures of national defense that had worked so well for them. For the strength that had served them to defend themselves during the revolution, they later used, under Napoleon, to subjugate almost all of continental Europe; in doing so, they awakened the national feeling of others and obliged them to defend themselves by means of the same weapons that had defeated them. The war from 1813 to 1815, which freed Europe from Napoleonic domination, was a war of peoples, of nations in arms.

When King Frederick William III of Prussia declared war on Napoleon in 1813, he simultaneously issued a proclamation "To my people." This title, which now seems so natural for such a situation, was at the time something new and unheard of; it clearly shows the profound change that had occurred since the period of cabinet wars, in which the

people played no active part, and which kings waged without asking the consent of their subjects.

Since the time of the French revolution and Napoleon I, the idea of national defense and compulsory service has firmly rooted itself within all European peoples and many others. This did not happen without struggles. Different political parties seized on the issue, sometimes wanting to abolish the institution of compulsory service or use it for goals far removed from its democratic and popular origin. It is not our task to recount the history of these political struggles, which could not halt its development: the idea of the armed nation remained, to this day, the foundation of modern warfare.

It goes without saying that such a change has had a profound impact on literature. Nineteenth-century war literature is the literature of the people in combat. It is true that it did not become this way overnight. Many poets hesitated in the face of the horrors of the French revolution, and upon witnessing such an uprising by the entire mass of the people, they felt a certain antipathy; they feared the destruction of all civilization, of all moral and aesthetic values, by the tyranny of unchained masses.

Goethe, who in his early youth, in writing his tragedy *Goetz von Berlichingen*, had strongly supported the cause of liberty and of the people, contemplated with a painful astonishment, even with disgust, the spectacle unfolding in France after 1789. He took part in the war that the German princes began in 1792 against revolutionary France, and his report on this campaign, while very realistic and far removed from any fanatism, shows no sympathy for the revolutionary movement.

However, when on the evening of the cannonade at Valmy, on account of which the troops of the German princes were forced to retreat before the French revolutionary army, his concerned friends asked for his opinion, he replied: today a new era of history begins, and you can say that you have attended its birth. This sentence shows his perspicacity; he did not share the hope of most of his comrades in arms that the movement of the people could be stopped. However, he did not have much sympathy for this movement, whose victory he foresaw, and even in his

later years – he lived until 1832 – he maintained a very reserved attitude toward anything that resembled popular movements.

The other great classical poet of the Germans, Schiller, ten years younger than Goethe, and his close friend, never completely abandoned the revolutionary idealism that inspired the tragedies from his youth. One of his last tragedies, and perhaps his most popular one, is "Wilhelm Tell" whose subject is the conspiracy of Swiss cantons against the foreign domination of the Habsburgs at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Schiller was inspired to it by a popular legend which had transformed into a spontaneous movement, into a dramatic uprising of the all the people what had been a slow evolution in historical reality. And the ideas of liberty expressed by the characters in his tragedy are rather those of his time than those of the fourteenth century. The success of his play was all the more resounding, and although Schiller was not Swiss by birth and had never even seen Switzerland, his tragedy became the national poem of the Helvetic Confederation.

In France, war literature in the first half of the nineteenth century is connected above all to the person and legend of Napoleon I. Napoleon, after his fall and death, gradually became a popular myth and a symbol of the people's nationalism; this development can be traced through some authors such as Paul-Louis Courier and Stendhal, both of whom had served in the emperor's armies, and whose literary careers only began after his fall.

During his reign, neither Courier nor Stendhal had much sympathy for the emperor and, like many of their contemporaries, they saw Napoleon as more of a destroyer than a continuer of the Revolution. But after his fall, when the reactionary and a somewhat petty Bourbon government had fallen from the people's favor, the memory of the grandeur of his ideas and the glory he had brought to France erased the memory of the suffering endured under him; he was no longer the tyrant, but became the national hero who had led the people in arms, victory after victory, in the war against the reactionary spirit of foreign princes and emigrated aristocrats.

It is above all among the young of that generation who had courage and imagination that the memory of the emperor exerted an extraordinary fascination. It is by following this current, more or less consciously, that Courier and Stendhal wrote almost enthusiastic pages about him – pages they almost certainly would not have conceived while he was reigning. Others, who did not share their personal memories, surpassed them greatly in their admiration for Napoleon; the most well-known among them was Béranger, an ultraliberal popular poet devoted to the memory of the emperor—essentially quite mediocre, he had an enormous influence on his contemporaries because he had the talent of expressing the general feeling with easy and striking rhythms.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the popular and democratic nationalism, which involves the idea of the nation in arms, made great progress throughout Europe. In France, Victory Hugo, leader of the Romantic movement who had initially been conservative in politics, increasingly turned toward an enthusiastic and almost mystical democracy. In *Les Châtiments*, *La Légende des siècles*, and later in *L'Année terrible*, he celebrated the heroism of the peoples fighting for their freedom with all the ardor of his genius. The historians of the Romantic generation, such as Michelet, adopted the same attitude.

In Germany, the democratic group called the "Young Germany," which played a crucial role in the revolution of 1848 and who greatly contributed to preparing for the German unification achieved in 1871, lauded both democracy and patriotism in equal measure. In Italy, the movement for the unification of the country was born from revolutionary ideas and had a profound influence on literature. Even in Switzerland, the idea of the armed nation was inseparable from democratic ideas; those who have read the works of Gottfried Keller, especially *The Flag of the Seven Upright* (Das Fähnlein der sieben Aufrechten), can appreciate this mindset.

There are only two European countries that stand out as exceptions, where the atmosphere of militant democratic patriotism of the nineteenth century is hardly known: one of them is England, the most democratic; the other, Russia, at that time the most despotic among

European nations. England, where democracy was firmly established and had put on a traditionalist character, and whose geographical position provided a safeguard against invasion, almost never exalted military patriotism. The cult of bravery in war played only a secondary role in the literature of the nineteenth century.

Thackeray's celebrated novel *Vanity Fair*, which relates to historical events surrounding the Battle of Waterloo, offers a strongly significant example of this. The major historical events are merely a framework through which individual moral dilemmas and sociological critiques are explored. There are only a few rare allusions to the heroism exhibited by the English during the Napoleonic Wars, and within one of his main characters, Thackeray resolutely shows how a man with brilliant bravery can simultaneously possess a vain and weak character.

When it came to Russia, the case was quite the opposite. During the nineteenth century, its people were largely untouched by democratic ideas, and their nationalism was based more on an immediate and instinctive feeling, on their love of the native soil. In Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*, which I have cited in the beginning of my lecture, and which exactly like *Vanity Fair* depicts the final phase of the Napoleonic era (we cannot even imagine greater contrasts), it is the soil itself of Holy Russia which seems to rise up against the invader, the men seem to only act under its impulsion, and their leader, General Kutuzov, a simple, calm, and patient yet tenacious old man, appears as a symbol of the genius of his land and race.

During the long period of peace that lasted from 1871 to 1914, it seemed that war literature lost all its importance. What largely dominated was an extremely refined lyricism on the one hand and, on the other, the problems of psychology and sociology dominating everywhere. I spent my youth during the last years of this period, and I believe I can assure that, despite the diplomatic complications, despite many discussions on an eventual war, not many people believed practically and seriously in the possibility of a European war.

With its outburst in 1914, we were taken off guard. The literature only followed slowly. Except for some pieces written by order or inspired

by passing passions, almost all of them mediocre, the literature of the war from 1914 to 1918 was a literature written after the war, a post-war literature. It is vast, this literature; I only know some specimens of it, and it must also be added that we can judge it very differently, according to the perspective of the one who judges. I only can give you my impressions.

What dominates in these war books is always the people in arms; it dominates more than ever. The cult of individual heroes, whether generals, aviators or submarine commanders, which certainly provided the subject for many books, had very little success, while the best-written, most widespread books speak directly about the people: about an ordinary infantryman in the trenches. You can see its symbol in the monuments erected everywhere to the "unknown soldier". Thus, it is always the people in arms who dominates, as in the nineteenth century.

But the overall emphasis or tone has changed. There is much more talk about the suffering of war than of acts of heroism, and of the grand goals being pursued. There is talk of the misery, the mud in the trenches, the hunger endured. And why all this? We wish to live and work in freedom, raise our children, and give them a future that our civilization would allow if everyone were reasonable. And the man in the opposing trench, adjusting his machine gun to kill me, does he not have the same ideas as I? Must we kill each other for that? That's it; this seems to me to be the general sentiment in post-war Europe; there is the spirit of most of the books that speak of the Great War.

And it is easy to understand that all the peoples were horrified of a new war, that many governments hesitated for a long time to consider such a possibility and even prepare for it vigorously. But despite this state of mind, the new war broke out, it is still spreading, and it is possible that it will surpass the first, not only in its extent but also by the significance of the changes that will occur in the lives of people on Earth as a result. It is premature to speak of the literature of this war; but we can already make some observations on the role of the people, and it is with these observations that I want to conclude my lecture.

War has become more than ever the concern of the entire people. In order to conduct and prepare for it, the entire population must be

organized; in industry, agriculture, air defense measures, transportation – every inhabitant, even women and children, is forced to adapt both actively and passively to conditions very different from everyday life, imposed by war. Although the number of combatants in the strict sense is relatively small in the current phase, no one in the belligerent countries can live as they had the habitude of doing.

It follows that success depends on the ability of the rulers to organize on the one hand and, on the other hand, to a very large extent, on the spirit, on the morale of the people. I would even say that the first factor, organization, largely depends on the second, the morale of the people. We have seen that a people determined to defend itself at all costs is not easily defeated, even if it is outnumbered and in a very difficult situation. One cannot wage war without the support of the entire people, and it is hard to lose it as long as the people maintain their courage and composure.

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