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Walter Benjamin

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Theories of German Fascism

On the Collection of Essays *War and Warriors*,
edited by Ernst Jünger

Léon Daudet, the son of Alphonse Daudet and himself an important writer, as well as a leader of France's Royalist party, once gave a report in his *Action Française* on the Salon de l'Automobile—a report that concluded, in perhaps somewhat different words, with the equation: "L'automobile, c'est la guerre."¹ This surprising association of ideas was based on Daudet's perception that there had been an increase in technological artifacts, in power sources, in tempo, and so on that private lives could neither absorb completely nor utilize adequately but that nonetheless demanded justification. They justified themselves in that they abstained from any harmonious interplay in war, whose destructive power provided clear evidence that social reality was not ready to make technology its own organ, and that technology was not strong enough to master the elemental forces of society. Without going too deeply into the significance of the economic causes of war, one might say that the harshest, most disastrous aspects of imperialist war are in part the result of the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic means of technology and the minuscule moral illumination it affords. Indeed, according to its economic nature, bourgeois society cannot help insulating everything technological as much as possible from the so-called spiritual [*Geistigen*], and it cannot help resolutely excluding technology's right of determination in the social order. Any future war will also be a slave revolt on the part of technology. Today factors such as these determine all questions of war, and one would hardly expect to have to remind the authors of the present volume of this, nor to remind them that these are questions of imperialist war. After all, they were themselves soldiers in the World War and, dispute what one may, they indisputably proceed from the experience

of this war. It is therefore quite astonishing to find, and on the first page at that, the statement: "It is of secondary importance in which century, for which ideas, and with which weapons the fighting is done." What is most astonishing about this statement is that its author, Ernst Jünger,² thus adopts one of the principles of pacifism—indeed, the most questionable and most abstract of all its principles. Though for him and his friends this is based not so much on some doctrinaire schema as on a deep-rooted and—by all standards of male thought—really rather impious mysticism. But Jünger's mysticism of war and pacifism's clichéd ideal of peace have little to accuse each other of. Even the most consumptive pacifism has, for the moment, one thing over its epileptically frothing brother—namely, a certain contact with reality, and not least some conception of the next war.

The authors like to speak—emphatically—of the "First World War." Yet how little their experience has come to grips with that war's realities (which they refer to with alienated exaggeration as the "worldly-real") is shown by the utterly thoughtless obtuseness with which they view the idea of future wars without any conception of them. These trailblazers of the *Wehrmacht* could almost give one the impression that the military uniform represents their highest end, their heart's desire, and that the circumstances under which the uniform later attains its validity are of little importance by comparison. This attitude becomes more comprehensible when one realizes, in terms of the current level of European armaments, how anachronistic their espoused ideology of war is. These authors nowhere observe that the new warfare of technology and matériel [*Materialschlacht*], which appears to some of them as the highest revelation of existence, dispenses with all the wretched emblems of heroism that here and there have survived the World War. Gas warfare, in which the contributors to this book show conspicuously little interest, promises to give the war of the future a face which will permanently replace soldierly qualities by those of sports; all action will lose its military character, and war will assume the countenance of record-setting. For the most prominent strategic characteristic of such warfare consists in its being waged exclusively and most effectively as an offensive war. And we know that there is no adequate defense against it, except from the air. Even individual protective devices against mustard gas and Levisit. Now and then, however, there is a "reassuring," such as the invention of a sensitive device which registers the whirl of propellers at great distances, or the soundless airplane is invented. Gas warfare will be recorded in the records, and will involve an absurd degree of risk, but it will occur within the bounds of international law. The end of the war—war—is debatable, but its end will no longer be limited by limitations. Since gas warfare obviously eliminates the distinction between civilian and military personnel, the most important

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The authors like to speak—emphatically—of the "First World War." Yet how little their experience has come to grips with that war's realities (which they refer to with alienated exaggeration as the "worldly-real") is shown by the utterly thoughtless obtuseness with which they view the idea of future wars without any conception of them. These trailblazers of the *Wehrmacht* could almost give one the impression that the military uniform represents their highest end, their heart's desire, and that the circumstances under which the uniform later attains its validity are of little importance by comparison. This attitude becomes more comprehensible when one realizes, in terms of the current level of European armaments, how anachronistic their espoused ideology of war is. These authors nowhere observe that the new warfare of technology and matériel [*Materialschlacht*], which appears to some of them as the highest revelation of existence, dispenses with all the wretched emblems of heroism that here and there have survived the World War. Gas warfare, in which the contributors to this book show conspicuously little interest, promises to give the war of the future a face which will permanently replace soldierly qualities by those of sports; all action will lose its military character, and war will assume the countenance of record-setting. For the most prominent strategic characteristic of such warfare consists in its being waged exclusively and most radically as an offensive war. And we know that there is no adequate defense against gas attacks from the air. Even individual protective devices, gas masks, are of no use against mustard gas and Levisit. Now and then one hears of something "reassuring," such as the invention of a sensitive listening device that registers the whir of propellers at great distances. And a few months later a soundless airplane is invented. Gas warfare will be based on annihilation records, and will involve an absurd degree of risk. Whether its outbreak will occur within the bounds of international law—after prior declarations of war—is debatable, but its end will no longer be concerned with such limitations. Since gas warfare obviously eliminates the distinction between civilian and military personnel, the most important principle of international

law is abolished. The most recent war has already shown that the total disorganization imperialist war entails, and the manner in which it is waged, threaten to make it an endless war.

More than a curiosity, it is symptomatic that something written in 1930 about "war and warriors" overlooks all this. It is symptomatic that the same boyish rapture that leads to a cult of war, an apotheosis of war, is here heralded particularly by von Schramm and Günther. The most rabidly decadent origins of this new theory of war are emblazoned on their foreheads: it is nothing other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war itself. But if, even on its home ground, this theory tends to become a mockery in the mouths of mediocre adepts, its outlook in this new phase is disgraceful. Who could imagine a veteran of the Marne or of Verdun reading statements such as these: "We conducted the war on very impure principles . . . Real fighting from man to man, from company to company, became rarer and rarer . . . Certainly the front-line officers often conducted war without style . . . For through the inclusion of the masses, the lesser blood, the practical bourgeois mentality—in short, the common man—especially in the officers' and noncommissioned officers' corps, the eternally aristocratic elements of the soldier's trade were increasingly destroyed." Falser notes could hardly be sounded; more inept thoughts could not be written; more tactless words could not be uttered. The authors' absolute failure precisely here is the result—despite all the talk about "the eternal" and "the primeval"—of their unrefined, thoroughly journalistic haste to seize control of the actual present without having grasped the past. Yes, there have been cultic elements in war. They were known in theocratically constituted communities. As harebrained as it would be to want to return these submerged elements to the zenith of war, it would be equally embarrassing for these warriors on their flight from ideas to learn how far a Jewish philosopher, Erich Unger,³ has gone in the direction they missed. And it would be embarrassing for them to see to what extent his observations—made, if in part with questionable justice, on the basis of concrete data from Jewish history—would cause the bloody schemes conjured up here to evaporate into nothingness. But these authors are incapable of making anything clear, of calling things by their names. War "eludes any economy exercised by the understanding; there is something inhuman, boundless, gigantic in its Reason, something reminiscent of a volcanic process, an elemental eruption, . . . a colossal wave of life directed by a painfully deep, cogently unified force, led to battlefields already mythic today, used up for tasks far exceeding the range of the currently conceivable." Only a suitor who embraces his beloved awkwardly is so loquacious. And indeed these authors are awkward in their embrace of thought. One has to bring them back to it repeatedly, and that is what we will do here.

And the point is this: War—the "eternal" war that they talk about so

much here, as well as the most recent one—is said to be the highest manifestation of the German nation. It should be clear that behind their “eternal” war is concealed the idea of cultic war, just as behind the most recent war hides the idea of technological war; and it should also be clear that these authors have had little success in perceiving these relationships. But there is something rather special about this last war: it was not only one of matériel but also one that was lost. And thus, admittedly, it was the German war in a special sense. To have waged war out of their innermost existence is something that other peoples could claim to have done. But to have lost a war out of their innermost existence—this they cannot claim. What is special about the present and latest stage in the controversy over the war, which has convulsed Germany since 1919, is the novel assertion that it is precisely this loss of the war that is tied to Germanness. One can call this the latest stage because these attempts to come to terms with the loss of the war show a clear pattern. These attempts began with an effort to pervert the German defeat into an inner victory by means of confessions of guilt, which were hysterically elevated to the universally human. This political position, which supplied the manifestos for the course of the decline of the West, was the faithful reflection of the German “revolution” by the Expressionist avant-garde. Then came the attempt to forget the lost war. The bourgeoisie turned over, to snore on its other side—and what pillow could have been softer than the novel? The terrors endured in those years became the down filling in which every sleepyhead could easily leave his imprint. What finally distinguishes this latest effort from earlier ones in the process involved here is the tendency to take the loss of the war more seriously than the war itself.—What does it mean to “win” or “lose” a war? How striking the double meaning is in both words! The first, manifest meaning certainly refers to the outcome of the war, but the second meaning—which creates that peculiar hollow space, the sounding board, in these words—refers to the totality of the war and suggests how the war’s outcome also alters the enduring significance it holds for us. This meaning says, so to speak, the victor retains the war; the vanquished misplaces it. It says, the victor annexes the war for himself, makes it his own property; the vanquished no longer possesses it and must live without it. And he must live not only without the war per se but without every one of its slightest ups and downs, every subtlest one of its chess moves, every one of its remotest actions. To win or lose a war reaches so deeply (if we follow language) into the fabric of our existence, that our whole lives become that much richer or poorer in symbols, images, and sources. And since we have lost one of the greatest wars in world history, one which involved the whole material and spiritual substance of a people, one can assess the significance of this loss.

Certainly one cannot accuse those around Jünger of not having taken this into account. But how did they approach it, monstrous as it was? They have

not yet stopped fighting. They continued to celebrate the cult of war when there was no longer any real enemy. They complied with the desires of the bourgeoisie, which longed for the decline of the West, the way a schoolboy longs for an inkblot in place of his wrong answer. They spread decline, preached decline, wherever they went. Not even for a moment were they capable of holding up to view—instead of doggedly holding onto—what had been lost. They were always the first and the bitterest to oppose coming to one's senses. They ignored the great opportunity of the loser—which the Russians had taken advantage of—to shift the fight to another sphere until the moment had passed and the nations of Europe had sunk to being partners in trade agreements again. "The war is being *administered*, not *led* anymore," one of the authors complains. This was to be corrected by the German "postwar war" [*Nachkrieg*]. This *Nachkrieg* was as much a protest against the war that had preceded it, as it was a protest against the civilian character they had discerned in it. Above all, that despised rational element was to be eliminated from war. And, to be sure, this team bathed in the vapors rising from the jowls of the Fenriswolf. But these vapors were no match for the mustard gases of the yellow-cross grenades. This arch-Germanic magical fate acquired a moldy luster when set against the stark background of military service in army barracks and impoverished families in civilian barracks. And without subjecting that false luster to materialist analysis, it was possible even then for a free, knowing, and truly dialectical spirit such as Florens Christian Rang⁴—whose biography exemplifies the German better than whole hordes of these desperate characters—to counter their sort with enduring statements:

The demonic belief in fate, the belief that human virtue is in vain; the dark night of defiance which burns up the victory of the forces of light in the universal conflagration of the gods; . . . this apparent glorying of the will in this belief in death in battle, without regard for life, flinging it down for an idea; this cloud-impregnated night that has hovered over us for millennia and which, instead of stars, gives us only stupefying and confusing thunderbolts to guide the way, after which the night only envelops us all the more in darkness; this horrible world view of world-death instead of world-life, whose horror is made lighter in the philosophy of German idealism by the notion that behind the clouds there is after all a starry sky: this fundamental German spiritual tendency in its depth lacks will, does not mean what it says, is a crawling, cowardly know-nothingness, a desire not to live but also a desire not to die either . . . For this is the German half-attitude toward life; indeed, to be able to throw it away when it doesn't cost anything, in a moment of intoxication [*Rausch*], with those left behind cared for, and with this short-lived sacrifice surrounded by an eternal halo.

But in another statement in the same context, Rang's language may sound familiar to those around Jünger: "Two hundred officers, prepared to die,

would have succeeded to suppress the revolution in these places; but not one was to be found. No doubt many of them would actually have liked to come to the rescue, but in reality—not actuality—nobody quite wanted to begin, to put himself forward as the leader, or to proceed individually. They preferred to have their epaulets ripped off in the streets." Obviously the man who wrote this knows from his very own experience the attitude and tradition of those who have come together here. And perhaps he continued to share their enmity to materialism until the moment they created the language of material warfare.

If at the beginning of the war supplies of idealism were provided by order of the state, the longer the war lasted the more the troops had to depend on requisitions. Their heroism turned more and more gloomy, deadly, and steel-gray; glory and ideals beckoned from ever more remote and nebulous spheres; and those who saw themselves less as the troops of the World War than as the executors of the *Nachkrieg* increasingly adopted a stance of obstinate rigor. Every third word in their speeches is "stance." Who would deny that the soldier maintains a stance? But language is the touchstone for each and every position taken, and not just, as is so often assumed, for that of the writer. Yet those who have conspired here do not pass the test. Jünger may echo the noble dilettantes of the seventeenth century in saying that the German language is an originary language, but he betrays what he means when he adds that, as such, it inspires an insurmountable distrust in civilization and in the cultivated world. Yet this linguistic distrust cannot equal that of his own countrymen when the war is presented to them as a "mighty reviser" that "feels the pulse" of the times, that forbids them "to do away with" "a tried and proven conclusion," and that calls on them to intensify their search for "ruins" "behind gleaming varnish." Far more shameful than these offenses, however, is the smooth style of these purportedly rough-hewn thoughts which could grace any newspaper editorial; and more distressing yet than the smooth style is the mediocre substance. "The dead," we are told, "went, in death, from an imperfect reality to a perfect reality, from Germany in its temporal manifestation to the eternal Germany." This Germany "in its temporal manifestation" is of course notorious, but the eternal Germany would really be in a bad way if we had to depend on the testimony of those who so glibly invoke it. How cheaply they purchased their "solid feeling of immortality," their certainty that "the terrors of the last war have been frightfully exaggerated," and their symbolism of "blood boiling inwardly"! At best, they have defeated the war that they are celebrating here. However, we will not tolerate anyone who speaks of war, yet knows nothing but war. Radical in our own way, we will ask: Where do you come from? And what do you know of peace? Did you ever encounter peace in a child, a tree, an animal, the way you encountered a sentry in the field? And without waiting for you to answer, we can say No! It is not that you would then

not be able to celebrate war more passionately than now; but to celebrate it *the way* you do would be impossible. How would Fortinbras have borne witness to war? One can deduce how he would have done it from Shakespeare's technique. Just as he reveals Romeo's love for Juliet in the fiery glow of its passion by presenting Romeo in love from the outset, in love with Rosalinde, he would have had Fortinbras begin with a passionate eulogy of peace so enchanting and mellifluously sweet, that when at the end he raises his voice all the more passionately in favor of war, everyone would have wondered with a shudder: What are these powerful, nameless forces that compel this man, wholly filled with the bliss of peace, to commit himself body and soul to war?—But there is nothing of that here. These are professional freebooters speaking. Their horizon is fiery but very narrow.

What do they see in their flames? They see—here we can entrust ourselves to F. G. Jünger⁵—a transformation:

Lines of psychic decision cut across the war; transformations undergone by the war are paralleled by transformations undergone by those fighting it. These transformations become visible when one compares the vibrant, buoyant, enthusiastic faces of the soldiers of August 1914 with the fatally exhausted, haggard, implacably tensed faces of the 1918 veterans of machine warfare. Looming behind the all too sharply arched curve of this fight, their image appears, molded and moved by a forceful spiritual convulsion, by station after station along a path of suffering, battle after battle, each the hieroglyphic sign of a strenuously advancing work of destruction. Here we have the type of soldier schooled in those hard, sober, bloody, and incessant campaigns of attrition. This is a soldier characterized by the tenacious hardness of the born fighter, by a manifest sense of solitary responsibility, of psychic abandonment. In this struggle, which proceeded on increasingly deeper levels, he proved his own mettle. The path he pursued was narrow and dangerous, but it was a path leading into the future.

Wherever precise formulations, genuine accents, or solid reasoning are encountered in these pages, the reality portrayed is that of Ernst Jünger's "total mobilization" or Ernst von Salomon's "landscape of the front." A liberal journalist who recently tried to get at this new nationalism under the heading "Heroism out of Boredom" fell, as one can see here, a bit short of the mark. This soldier type is a reality, a surviving witness to the World War, and it was actually this "landscape of the front," his true home, that was being defended in the *Nachkrieg*. This landscape demands that we linger.

It should be said as bitterly as possible: in the face of this "landscape of total mobilization," the German feeling for nature has had an undreamed-of upsurge. The pioneers of peace, who settle nature in so sensuous a manner, were evacuated from these landscapes, and as far as anyone could see over the edge of the trench, the surroundings had become the terrain of German

Idealism; every slain crater had become a problem, an antinomy, every barb a definition, every explosion a thesis; by day the sky was the cosmic interior of the steel helmet, and at night the moral law above. Etching the landscape with flaming banners and trenches, technology wanted to recreate the heroic features of German Idealism. It went astray. What it considered heroic were the features of Hippocrates, the features of death. Deeply imbued with its own depravity, technology gave shape to the apocalyptic face of nature and reduced nature to silence—even though this technology had the power to give nature its voice. War, in the metaphysical abstraction in which the new nationalism believes, is nothing other than the attempt to redeem, mystically and without mediation, the secret of nature, understood idealistically, through technology. This secret, however, can also be used and illuminated via a technology mediated by the human scheme of things. "Fate" and "hero" occupy these authors' minds like Gog and Magog, yet they devour not only human children but new ideas as well. Everything sober, unblemished, and naive that has been considered regarding the improvement of human society ends up between the worn teeth of these Molochs, who react with the belches of 42-cm. mortars. Linking heroism with machine warfare is sometimes a bit hard on the authors. But this is by no means true for all of them, and there is nothing more revealing than the whining digressions exposing their disappointment in the "form of the war" and in the "senselessly mechanical machine war" of which these noble fellows "had evidently grown bored." Yet when one or another of them attempts to look things squarely in the eye, it becomes obvious how very much their concept of the heroic has surreptitiously changed; we can see how much the virtues of hardness, reserve, and implacability they celebrate are in fact less those of the soldier than those of the proven activist in the class struggle. What developed here, first in the guise of the World War volunteer and then in the mercenary of the *Nachkrieg*, is in fact the dependable fascist class warrior. And what these authors mean by "nation" is a ruling class supported by this caste, a ruling class—accountable to no one, and least of all to itself, enthroned on high—which bears the sphinx-like countenance of the producer who very soon promises to be the sole consumer of his commodities. Sphinx-like in appearance, the fascists' nation thus takes its place as a new economic mystery of nature alongside the old. But this old mystery of nature, far from revealing itself to their technology, is exposing its most threatening feature. In the parallelogram of forces formed by these two—nature and nation—war is the diagonal.

It is no surprise that the question of "governmental checks on war" arises in the best, most well-reasoned essay in this volume. For in this mystical theory of war, the state naturally plays no role at all. These checks should not for a moment be understood in a pacifist sense. Rather, what is demanded of the state is that its structure and its disposition adapt themselves

to, and appear worthy of, the magical forces that the state itself must mobilize in the event of war. Otherwise it will not succeed in bending war to its purpose. It was this failure of the powers of state in the face of war that instigated the first independent thinking of the authors gathered here. Those military formations ambivalently hovering between comradely brotherhoods and regular government troops at the end of the war very soon solidified into independent, stateless mercenary hordes. And the captains of finance, the masters of the inflation to whom the state was beginning to seem a dubious guarantor of their property, knew the value of such hordes.⁶ They were available for hire at any time, like rice or turnips, by arrangement through private agencies or the *Reichswehr*. Indeed, the present volume retains a resemblance to a slogan-filled recruiting brochure for a new type of mercenary, or rather *condottiere*. One of its authors candidly declares: "The courageous soldier of the Thirty Years' War sold himself life and limb, and that is still nobler than simply selling one's politics or one's talents." Of course, when he adds that the mercenary of Germany's *Nachkrieg* did not sell himself but gave himself away, this is of a piece with the same author's comment on the comparatively high pay of these troops. This was pay which shaped the leadership of these warriors just as clearly as the technical necessities of their trade: as war engineers of the ruling class, they were the perfect complement to the managerial functionaries in their cutaways. God knows their designs on leadership should be taken seriously; their threat is not ludicrous. In the person of the pilot of a single airplane full of gas bombs, such leadership embodies all the absolute power which, in peacetime, is distributed among thousands of office managers—power to cut off a citizen's light, air, and life. This simple bomber-pilot in his lofty solitude, alone with himself and his God, has power-of-attorney for his seriously stricken superior, the state; and wherever he puts his signature, the grass will cease to grow—and this is the "imperial" leader the authors have in mind.

Until Germany has exploded the entanglement of such Medusa-like beliefs that confront it in these essays, it cannot hope for a future. Perhaps the word "loosened" would be better than "exploded," but this is not to say it should be done with kindly encouragement or with love, both of which are out of place here; nor should the way be smoothed for argumentation, for that wantonly persuasive rhetoric of debate. Instead, all the light that language and reason still afford should be focused upon that "primal experience" from whose barren gloom this mysticism of the death of the world crawls forth on its thousand unsightly conceptual feet. The war that this light exposes is as little the "eternal" one which these new Germans now worship as it is the "final" war that the pacifists carry on about. In reality, that war is only this: the one, fearful, last chance to correct the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology. If this corrective effort fails, millions of human bodies will indeed inevitably be chopped

to pieces and chewed up by men and gods alike. The chthonic forces of terror, who carry their volumes of Klages in their packs, will not learn one-tenth of what nature promises its less idly curious but more sober children, who possess in technology not a fetish of doom but a key to happiness.⁷ They will demonstrate this sobriety the moment they refuse to acknowledge the next war as an incisive magical turning point, and instead discover in it the image of everyday actuality. And they will demonstrate it when they use their discovery to transform this war into civil war, and thereby perform that Marxist trick which alone is a match for this sinister runic nonsense.

Published in *Die Gesellschaft*, 1930. *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 238–250. Translated by Jerolf Wikoff.

Notes

1. Alphonse Daudet (1840–1897), French author, was known for his gentle portrayals of life in the French countryside. His son, Léon Daudet (1867–1942), edited the right-wing Catholic journal *L'Action Française*, organ of the eponymous nationalist political movement that he founded with Charles Maurras in 1898. The journal was noted for its antidemocratic and anti-Semitic views.
2. Ernst Jünger (1895–1998), German novelist and essayist, was perhaps the leading voice of the intellectual radical Right in the Weimar Republic. His ideas and writing took a dramatic turn after World War II, when he began to espouse peace and European union.
3. Erich Unger (1887–1952), German-Jewish author, was a member of the circle around the esoteric thinker Oskar Goldberg. He was a student of the Kaballah, and criticized empiricism from a magical and mystical viewpoint.
4. Florens Christian Rang (1864–1924), conservative German intellectual and author, was perhaps Benjamin's most important partner in intellectual exchange in the mid-1920s.
5. Friedrich Georg Jünger (1898–1977), German writer and Ernst Jünger's brother, published poems, novels, and stories. He is best-known for his memoirs and his essays on political, cultural, philosophical, and literary topics.
6. The German inflation began as early as 1914, when the imperial government began financing its war effort with a series of fiscally disastrous measures. The economic situation deteriorated rapidly in the years following the end of World War I, as an already crippled economy was further burdened by war reparations. The inflation reached its critical phase—that of hyperinflation—in late 1922 and 1923. If we compare late 1913 (the last year before the war) with late 1923 using the wholesale price index as the basis for the comparison, we find that one German mark in 1913 equaled 1.26 trillion marks by December 1923.
7. Ludwig Klages (1872–1956), German philosopher and psychologist, attempted to found a “metaphysical psychology” which would study human beings in their relationship to reality—a reality which he saw as composed of archetypal images. Klages became the darling of the radical Right in the course of the 1920s.