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**The Rules and Morals of War in Ernst Jünger’s
*Storm of Steel (In Stahlgewittern)***

And

***The Fight as Inner Experience
(Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis)***

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Among the three prominent “thinkers of war” between the two World Wars, namely, Carl Schmitt, Erich Ludendorff, and Ernst Jünger, who talk about total war, Jünger’s concept of total war seems to be the hardest to grasp. “Total war” is a new term which emerged during and after WWI in which not only one part of the population, i.e. the army, was engaged in the struggle, but rather the entire population was involved in it. WWI gave birth to a new concept of war. As Ernst Jünger puts it in the first section of *Total Mobilization (Die totale Mobilmachung)*:

We will attempt . . . to collect some data that distinguish the last war, our war, the greatest and most influential event of this time, from other wars whose history has been handed down to us’.¹

This state of affairs makes it harder to define the concept of war by using the common terms such as just and unjust measures, means and end, achievements, victory and loss. Furthermore, it makes it harder to reconstruct the perspective of the writer on the war.

In talking about total war, Erich Ludendorff attacks Clausewitz who conceives of war and military measures as a means to achieve political goals (Ludendorff 1935: 7). War, according to Ludendorff, is a total one, and thus politics cannot be seen as higher in the hierarchy of the state under which the armed forces are subsumed. Thus, Ludendorff writes: “The armed forces and the people are one and the same” (ibid: 5) He states further that “the times of the cabinet wars and of wars with limited political goals are over” (Ibid: 6).

¹ Cited in Schäfer (2007), p. 114.

The new war, according to Ludendorff, does not acknowledge politics as the highest instance. The war is rather total. And yet, hierarchy is implied by any understanding. In place of politics as the highest instance, Ludendorff posits the *people* (*Volk*). In the new era, war should be waged by the entire people for the sake of the people and its preservation. Ludendorff writes: “War and politics serve to preserve the life of the people (*Volk*), war is however the highest expression of the people’s will to live. Thus, politics has to serve the warfare” (Ibid: 10).

In Carl Schmitt, politics exists due to the free act of the sovereign who decides about friend and enemy. The word “*de-caedere*” in Latin means to cut off; the German verb “*Entscheiden*” renders this Latin meaning. By means of his free decision, the sovereign draws a clear line between friend and enemy. An example is the action that Hitler carried out in the *Night of the Long Knives* in which he executed Röhm and his close supporters. Schmitt writes:

The Führer protects justice against the worst misuse, insofar as he, in a moment of danger, instantly creates justice by virtue of his Führership [*Führertum*] as the court’s highest judge: “In this hour I was responsible for the destiny of the German nation and hence the court’s highest judge of the German people.” The true Führer is always also a judge. His judgeship [*Richtertum*] emanates from his Führership (Schmitt 1934: 946–947).

On the contrary, in Jünger we find neither the people nor the free act of the sovereign Führer at the pyramid peak. We do not know who is the enemy and who is the friend; we do not know who started the war. Jünger never talks about just or unjust war. He is never concerned with questions of justification and morality. It seems that even victory is secondary for him. The failure to identify these components means that Jünger’s work may turn out to be incomprehensible. My purpose in what follows is to suggest a framework in which Jünger’s perspective on war can be understood.

1. The War – *Storm of Steel*

Total war, according to Jünger, means to engage and recruit all the population in the dynamics of war. Thus Jünger writes in *Total Mobilization* (*Die totale Mobilmachung*):

In order to develop energies of this extent, it no longer suffices to arm the sword-arm – it is armament up into the innermost marrow, to the finest life-nerve. To realize this is the task of the total mobilization, an act through which the power-supply system of modern life, one that is extensively branched and many-times veined, is delivered by a single grasp to the switchboard to the great stream of warring energy.²

In *The Worker* (*Der Arbeiter*) and *Total Mobilization*, the two postwar works in which Jünger unfolds the idea of total war, the reader is exposed to the dynamics of total war with no hierarchies and definite goals which could help him to find his way in this dynamics. Thus, Walter Benjamin remarks on the volume *War and Warrior* (*Krieg und Krieger*), in which *Total Mobilization* appeared:

These trail blazers of the Wehrmacht could almost give one the impression that the uniform represents their highest end, most desired by all their heartstrings, and that

² Cited in Schäfer (2007), p. 115.

the circumstances under which one dons the uniform are of little importance by comparison.³

Storm of Steel (1920) and *The Fight as Inner Experience* (1922) preceded *The Worker* (1932) and *Total Mobilization* (1930) and do not explicitly refer to the idea of total war as do Jünger's later works. Total war however is the central idea also in these two earlier works, and the reader is required to find rules and meaning in the dynamics of an all-encompassing struggle, the depiction of which contains no mention of goals, achievements, reasons, as well as no explicit reference to justice. We read only about the enthusiasm of the people to fight and kill as well as about atrocities.⁴

Only on page 177 of the German edition of *Storm of Steel* does Jünger ask for the first time about the meaning of war, but never addresses this question and never repeats it.

And in the evenings we often sat up over a cup of tea, played cards and chatted. The perennial question came up a lot, of course: Why does mankind have wars? (Ibid: 326).

Storm and Steel opens up shortly before the war starts, with no references to the reason and goals of it. Jünger writes:

We had come from lecture halls, school desks and factory workbenches, and over the brief weeks of training, we had bonded together into one large and enthusiastic group. Grown up in an age of security, we shared a yearning for danger, for the experience of the extraordinary. We were enraptured by war. We had set out in a rain of flowers, in a drunken atmosphere of blood and roses. Surely the war had to supply us with what we wanted; the great, the overwhelming, the hallowed experience. We thought of it as manly, as action, a merry dueling party on flowered, blood-bedewed meadows. 'No finer death in all the world than ...' Anything to participate, not to have to stay at home! (Ibid: 45-46).

These are very general descriptions of the adventurous character, no particulars, no discussions of the inner life of the characters. We know that they are adventurous, but nothing else is said about the personality. But the war is also anonymous:

What was that about? War had shown its claws, and stripped off its mask of coziness. It was all so strange, so impersonal. We had barely begun to think about the enemy, that mysterious, treacherous being somewhere. This event, so far beyond anything we had experienced, made such a powerful impression on us that it was difficult to understand what had happened. It was like a ghostly manifestation in broad daylight (Ibid: 48-49).

Anonymous is the war, and anonymous are the living soldiers and the corpses. Thus Jünger depicts his encounter with dead corpses:

3 Cited in Segev (2013), p. 39.

4 "The overwhelming desire to kill lent wings to my stride. Rage squeezed bitter tears from my eyes. The immense desire to destroy that overhung the battlefield precipitated a red mist in our brains. We called out sobbing and stammering fragments of sentences to one another, and an impartial observer might have concluded that we were all ecstatically happy" (Jünger 2004: 464).

A sweetish smell and a bundle hanging in the wire caught my attention. In the rising mist, I leaped out of the trench and found a shrunken French corpse. Flesh like moldering fish gleamed greenishly through splits in the shredded uniform. Turning round, I took a step back in horror: next to me a figure was crouched against a tree. It still had gleaming French leather harness, and on its back was a fully packed haversack, topped by a round mess-tin. Empty eye-sockets and a few strands of hair on the bluish-black skull indicated that the man was not among the living (Ibid: 82).

Now, this anonymity is not only a literary product of Jünger. It is also the type of the war waged and the advanced technology used in the battle: fighting without seeing whom one is fighting against. As Jünger says:

The battle at Les Eparges was my first. It was quite unlike what I had expected. I had taken part in a major engagement, without having clapped eyes on a single live opponent (Ibid: 97).

Jünger never seriously addresses moral questions such as those concerning just and unjust killing. He conceives war as a game and it should be a fair play. He however never raises the question as to what it means for this play to be fair. Thus he writes regarding the enemy:

Throughout the war, it was always my endeavor to view my opponent without animus, and to form an opinion of him as a man on the basis of the courage he showed. I would always try and seek him out in combat and kill him, and I expected nothing else from him. But never did I entertain mean thoughts of him. When prisoners fell into my hands, later on, I felt responsible for their safety, and would always do everything in my power for them (Ibid: 142).

And this game is compared by Jünger at some point with hunting. Jünger writes:

The encounter will be short and murderous. You tremble with two contradictory impulses: the heightened awareness of the huntsman, and the terror of the quarry [*“Wild”* in the original which means “game” (Jünger 2013: 80)]. You are a world to yourself, saturated with the appalling aura of the savage landscape (Jünger 2004: 166-167).

Descriptions of war adventures, atrocities and horrors without questioning the goals and achievement of the war, without talking about justice, loss and victory, leave us perplexed. The anonymity of the war and the warrior leaves us, the readers, dissatisfied. In what follows I will try to use the keywords that Jünger uses in order to refer to war and thus to draw an outline in which the description of war can acquire meaning.

2. Phenomenology of War – The Fight as Inner Experience

I will now turn to Jünger's work dated 1922, *The Fight as Inner Experience* (*Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*), in which he provides us with clues to decipher his portrayal of war as unfolded in *Storm of Steel*. In Jünger's depiction of war in *Storm of Steel*, his detestation of the secure and comfortable bourgeois lifestyle stands out. Jünger suggests adopting the martial lifestyle as an alternative to the bourgeois lifestyle. In the pacific bourgeois lifestyle, everything is meant to serve the individual, his security and comfort. By contrast, in the martial lifestyle, everything is directed toward the total, towards the elemental and basic principles of existence. Thus, metaphysically viewed, war has prevalence over peace. As Max Scheler remarks in *War as Experience of the*

Whole (Der Krieg als Gesamterlebnis), peace is the principle of the past deed that became a *fact (festgewordene Tat)* (Scheler 1916: 7), whereas war is the principle of becoming, of creation. “The viewpoint of peace is microscopic, whereas the viewpoint of war is macroscopic” (Ibid: 5). The viewpoint of peace, Scheler claims, is bound to individual corporeality and comfort, whereas in the viewpoint of war the body loses its meaning and this viewpoint is thus spiritual (Ibid: 6). War, as also Jünger claims, is the real reflection of the human soul (Jünger 1928: 39).

The martial perspective and lifestyle consist, first of all, of *manhood* and *camaraderie*, or in one word *Männerbund*. As George Mosse claims, they are both a product of WWI but also the legacy of the German *Youth Movement*.⁵ Manhood implies a maturing process in which the warrior becomes tough and cruel in waging war.

In *The Fight as Inner Experience* Jünger provides us with 13 headings to help us to organize this experience of war.⁶ The first heading is “blood” (*Blut*) which stands for the human most basic instinct to fight, to kill, to destroy, in order to build anew.

War, the father of all things, is also our father; it has pounded and chiseled and tempered us to what we are. ... It has trained us to fight, and we will remain fighters as long as we live (Jünger 1928: 3-4).

War did not create our martial character. This is our true nature, our blood, which lies hidden under a net of sublimations and masks enforced upon us by culture and civilization. The war rather tears these veils away from us and reveals our wild unrefined barbaric nature which is our true self.

Under the always shining and polished appearance, under all garments with which we decorated ourselves as magicians, we remained naked and rough as the human of the forest and the steppe (Ibid: 4-5).

The war tears away the mask of civilization and culture and the true self bursts out and takes revenge for being repressed by civilization:

Here the true man compensated himself with ecstatic orgy for everything that has been neglected; here his drives, which had been dammed by society and its rule, have become again the absolute and the holy and the ultimate reason (Ibid: 5).

The bestiality of man lies dormant, but in war it bursts forth (Ibid: 7). This is not an incident but rather a necessary event: the human ought to destroy in order to build anew. Jünger assumes that war and the true bestial nature of man are interrelated but he never seriously addresses the question concerning the type of this interrelation or whether war and the true nature of man are one and the same. If they are different, the question is why does Jünger give war precedence and claim that it reveals the true nature of man, for he could likewise claim that the true nature of man creates war and thus reveals itself. Thus, war would not be the first principle of existence, as Jünger claims, but rather dependent on the true nature of man. On the other hand, if war and the true nature of man are one and the same, the question should rather be about the interrelations between war as the true nature of man or its realization and its sublimation, as Freud and Nietzsche have posited.

⁵ Mosse (1996), 155. “The First World War tied nationalism and masculinity together more closely than ever before and, as it did so, brought to a climax all those facets of masculinity that had merely been latent and that now got their due” (Ibid: 110).

⁶ Blut, Grauen, Der Graben, Eros, Pazifismus, Mut, Landsknechte, Kontrast, Feuer, Untereinander, Angst, Vom Feinde, Vorm Kampf

Jünger, as I said, does not talk explicitly about sublimation, although it is tacitly implied. War destroys and creates a new reality on the ruins of the destroyed:

As the man builds himself up on the animal and its conditions, in the same manner he has his roots in everything which his fathers created in the course of the time by means of thought and force (Ibid: 6).

Now, our drive to fight is not only instinctive and unreflective, Jünger claims. It is accompanied by horror (*Grauen*) which is the first occurrence of reason within man (Ibid: 11). "Horror" is the second heading which Jünger introduces in order to render the experience of war meaningful. Horror is the feeling that grips upon us in face of death and decay (Ibid: 14). Horror reflects the point in which life and death touch one another (Ibid: 15). It is thus bound up with the unknown (Ibid: 17). We can therefore understand why Jünger claims that horror is the first or most basic occurrence of reason within man: with the unknown the human transcends the fright which fills up his momentary present, something which is common to man and animal, and grasp the possibility of future death, of disaster that may afflict him in the future.

The third heading which Jünger introduces is the "trench" (*Der Graben*). The trench contains within itself blood, calm and manly strength (Ibid: 22). The trench gives war its form, as a human handicraft, and it turns the warrior into a day laborer (Ibid: 24). The scope of this heading is limited, since trench relates above all to the experience of WWI which was a trench war. Thus, this heading is related to a very specific experience of war.

The return to the primal and bestial instincts and the enthusiastic will to fight and kill are the expression of Eros, the fourth heading that Jünger introduces. It is not clear to what extent Eros and blood intersect and overlap.

Is it not that the crossing points of the modern military roads glow night after night as a sign of Eros, of the unbridled? (Ibid: 33).

These are the times of the uncovering, of unleashing in which we live, being averse to any fine, delicate and lyrical feeling. ... It is not time to read Werther with sobbing eyes (Ibid: 34).

War is not a human institution, nor is the sexual urge. They are rather laws of nature, as Jünger claims. Thus, we could never escape their grip. We ought not to deny war; if we do, it will consume us (Ibid: 36). Thus, the question arises as to how we should understand pacifism, namely, the unwillingness to fight. "Pacifism" is the fifth heading that Jünger introduces. Jünger distinguishes between two types of pacifists. The first, the authentic pacifist, prefers humankind over the nation. He is an idealist. He is ready to die for the sake of humankind, but not for the sake of the nation. The second, the inauthentic pacifist, opposes war because he is afraid for himself and shuns death and pain. Pacifism is only his false excuse (Ibid: 36). In this reluctance to fight Jünger identifies the demise of culture.

A culture may be eminent – if its manly nerve gets lost, it is like a shaky colossus. The more powerful is its edifice, the scarier is its collapse (Ibid: 37).

The will to fight is the magnetic force that provides individuals with cultural unity (Ibid: 37). The sixth heading that Jünger introduces is "courage." Courage is the drive that urges the human forward and it is thus the force that creates culture. Courage is the drive to heroism which no one wished to avoid (Ibid: 45). It seems that courage makes little sense without restraint as its

counterbalance. Jünger never goes into a meticulous definition of the relationship between courage and restraint.

“Landsknecht” is the seventh heading that Jünger introduces in order to talk about the true soldier. The Landsknecht stands for a different type of soldier, different from the bourgeois who goes to the army and is concerned about his life and culture and not about the war.

The Completeness. This is the crucial point. Sharp penetration up to the limits of the ability, shaping the given with one own form. Complete in this sense – from the viewpoint of the front – there appears only one, the Landsknecht.

Distinctively, as of different race, he [the Landsknecht] rises above the bourgeois who are stuck to the weapons, above the predominant type of the army militia, the military expression of democracy (Ibid: 51).

“Contrast”, the eighth heading that Jünger introduces, refers to the state of conflict that keeps life fresh. Under the ninth heading, “fire”, Jünger describes the new soldier as a new race of warrior in a new age of wars (Ibid: 70-71). Concerning the new war and the new race of warrior, Jünger says:

Indeed, it may be pity about ourselves. Perhaps we sacrifice ourselves for something insignificant. But nobody can take our value from us. It is not important why we are fighting, but rather in what manner we are fighting (Ibid: 71).

The fighting, the commitment of the person, and be it for the tiniest idea, overweighs any brooding about good and evil (Ibid: 72).

“Togetherness” (*Untereinander*) is the tenth heading which Jünger introduces in order to distinguish the military camaraderie from the bourgeois mass which is characterized by the press, fun, and small-talk (Ibid: 80-81).

“Angst” is the eleventh heading which Jünger introduces, and it enables him to distinguish between the general idea and the individual. The individual is afflicted by angst, but the general idea, the general will, which is active in him, overcomes this angst.

We feel angst because we are ephemeral creatures, but when the eternal overcomes our angst, we can be proud about that. It shows that we are actually bound with life and not only with [our ephemeral] Dasein (Ibid: 90).

“Enemy” is the twelfth heading which Jünger introduces. We do not always see our enemy. We are both the realization of the same principle of struggle. Jünger writes:

Whenever we clash in cloud of fire and smoke, we become one, we are two parts of one force, merged to one body.

One Body – it is a parable of special kind. He who understands it, approves himself and the enemy, and he lives at once in the whole and in the parts (Ibid: 98).

“Before the war” (*Vorm Kampf*) is the last heading which Jünger introduces. It stands for the *Spring Offensive* dated March 21 1918. And yet, Jünger is not concerned with the German attacks on the Allies and its consequences, but rather with the general experience before that series of

confrontations. All personal concerns became unimportant and only the will to die for the land and its greatness remained (Ibid: 100), Jünger claims.

The headings which Jünger provided may assist in classifying his war experiences as he depicts them in *Storm of Steel*. However, the one principle that ought to combine all these experiences is still missing. At the end of *The Fight as Inner Experience* Jünger seems to concede that such a principle does not exist at all. He writes:

All the goals are ephemeral, only the movement is eternal, and it constantly brings forward marvelous and merciless scenes. To be able to immerse one's self in its exalted futility as in the work of art or the starry sky, only a few can do this. But he who can feel in this war only the negation, only one's suffering and not the confirmation, not the higher movement, experiences it as a slave. He has had no internal but only external experience (Ibid: 105).

This is obviously nihilism in the sense of Nietzsche, as Heidegger remarks. And although nihilism means the lack of an end, we should ask what is the purpose of this nihilism? Heidegger replies:

It is the simple approving (*das einfache "Ja" sagen*) of what exists as of what is known as existent – approving the will to power as the basic character of reality (Heidegger 2004: 240).

It is not a *passive nihilism* which sinks into resignation, Heidegger says, but rather *active nihilism* which Jünger calls a heroic stance toward reality or heroic realism which means approving reality as it is without concern about one's self (Ibid: 240).

The decision to go to war then is based on nothing, derived from nothing, from no political and economic considerations, and it is for the sake of nothing. Likewise, it is not made for the sake of any such goals. Otherwise, Jünger's critique of the bourgeoisie would lack meaning. It is an unfounded decision, stemming from nothing, to approve what exists. However, the motivation to go to war, to destroy and get destroyed, cannot be reduced to nothing. It is rather about everything – about the freedom of the individual. This freedom is his release from the realities with which he is surrounded, to which he is bound, and about which he cares. In their destruction, he becomes free.

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