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Self-deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914–18

The formidable robustness demonstrated by armies in twentieth-century warfare has aroused much academic interest. Most research follows Morris Janowitz and Edward Shils's pioneering work on 'primary groups' in understanding resilience as a product of military institutions. Martin van Creveld argues in his book *Fighting Power* that armies' organizational ability to satisfy and manipulate soldiers' sociological and psychological needs determines durability and compliance. Christopher Browning's study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 similarly analyses how the unit's organization and disciplinary structure encouraged its members to commit mass murder.¹ Other historians have followed the sociologist Stephen Wesbrook in focusing on societal explanations of combat motivation: Omer Bartov, for example, contends that Nazi Germany's success in inculcating its soldiers with an extreme, racist ideology provided the mainstay of their resilience on the second world war's Eastern Front.² Curiously absent, however, are psychological explanations of combat endurance. In particular, soldiers' mental coping strategies, their innate ability to overcome extreme stress and the effect of this hardiness on military robustness remain poorly understood.

The purpose of this article is to correct this omission by studying the mental coping strategies used by British and German soldiers on the Western Front during the first world war. This conflict provides a good illustration of the importance of innate human resilience in military robustness, not least because of the unique level of stress it engendered. Its characteristic trench fighting was prolonged, indecisive and dangerous. Overall, 11.8 per cent of Britons and 15.4 per cent of Germans mobilized were killed and, including wounded, missing and captured, 45 and 51 per cent respectively became battle casualties.³ Unsurprisingly, losses were concentrated in frontline units, which could be almost annihilated during major offensives.⁴ Above all, static warfare was

1 M. Janowitz and E.A. Shils, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II' in M. Janowitz (ed.), *Military Conflict. Essays in the Institutional Analysis of War and Peace* (Los Angeles, CA 1975), 177–220; M. van Creveld, *Fighting Power. German and US Army Performance, 1939–45* (London and Melbourne 1983) and R. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York 1992), particularly 185–6.

2 S.D. Wesbrook, 'The Potential for Military Disintegration' in S.C. Sarkesian (ed.), *Combat Effectiveness. Cohesion, Stress and the Volunteer Military* (Beverly Hills, CA and London 1980), 244–78 and O. Bartov, *Hitler's Army. Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford 1992).

3 N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London 1998), 295, 299.

4 Thus, 12/Manchesters lost 616 of its 862 officers and men at the Somme on 7 July 1916. In

intensely disempowering. This caused extreme strain, for, as modern psychologists assert, 'people have a need to predict the future and control events'.⁵ Claustrophobic trenches and heavy artillery fire, which, according to contemporary German research, caused 76 per cent of all wounds by 1917, engendered severe feelings of helplessness, as soldiers were unable either to flee or actively defend themselves.⁶

Historians have generally argued that these conditions left combatants cognitively overwhelmed and vulnerable. Peter Knoch suggests that men typically experienced 'paralysis before the all-powerfulness of war'. Eric Leed portrays soldiers as incapable of processing the monstrous machine warfare raging about them and Modris Eksteins asserts that 'men stopped asking questions, deliberately. They ceased to interpret.'⁷ Yet statistics for nervous disorders contradict these statements: in the German army, 613,047 men, 4.57 per cent of those mobilized, were treated for such diseases. The British recruited more than five million soldiers, yet paid only 120,000 pensions for psychiatric ailments after the war. Even allowing for diagnostic inaccuracies and contemporary ignorance of mental disease, most men clearly overcame battle stress extremely successfully.⁸

How did men cope? This article will argue that at the root of soldiers' resilience lay a number of perceptual filters and psychological strategies which presented them with a distorted, overly-optimistic but beneficial view of their surroundings and personal chances of survival. The first section will investigate how men adapted to harsh frontline conditions. It will examine their changing attitudes towards risk assessment and explain the psychological strategies enabling them to face their awful reality without being overwhelmed

III/Füsilier Regiment 86, more than 1000 of its 1200 soldiers became casualties when defending against a French attack in June 1915. See the diary of Captain O.P. Eckhard, quoted in M. Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Somme* (London and Basingstoke 1996), 123 and Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg [hereafter BA-MA Freiburg], M5g 1/690: *Feldzahlmeister Öhlmann*, letter to Frau von Meding, 9 June 1915. Due to German privacy laws all the surnames of German soldiers quoted in this article are pseudonyms.

5 S. Joseph, 'Attributional Processes, Coping and Post-traumatic Stress Disorders' in W. Yule (ed.), *Post-traumatic Stress Disorders. Concepts and Therapy* (Chichester 1999, 2000), 51–70.

6 *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918 (Deutscher Kriegssanitätsbericht 1914/18). Die Krankenbewegung bei dem deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918*, ed. Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichskriegsministeriums (3 vols, Berlin 1934) iii [hereafter *Sanitätsbericht III*], 71.

7 P. Knoch, 'Erleben und Nacherleben. Das Kriegererlebnis im Augenzeugenbericht und im Geschichtsunterricht', in G. Hirschfeld, G. Krumeich and I. Renz (eds), *Keiner fühlt sich hier mehr als Mensch . . . Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen 1993), 211–12; E.J. Leed, *No Man's Land. Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge 1979, 1981), 130–3 and M. Eksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London, New York, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland 1989), 174.

8 *Sanitätsbericht III*, 145 and B. Shephard, *A War of Nerves. Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914–1994* (London 2000, 2002), 328. For the problems of interpreting first world war psychiatric casualty statistics, see E. Jones and S. Wessely, 'Psychiatric Battle Casualties. An Intra- and Interwar Comparison', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 178 (2001), 242–3.

by fear or despair. Not only did men develop strategies allowing them to function at the front, but also, as the second section demonstrates, they displayed an amazing and, indeed, unrealistic level of optimism about their chances of survival. The section explains this optimism by studying how soldiers used religion and superstition to impose an imagined structure of security, sense and control on their chaotic environment. In the final section, however, it will be suggested that men's optimism was not exclusively imaginary but was also founded on highly positive perceptions of reality. By concentrating on short-term risk and overestimating personal control, soldiers were able to convince themselves that they would survive.

It was an impressive fact in the great war to note the extent to which the ordinary man was capable of adapting himself to active war conditions.⁹

The outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 wrenched men away from their peacetime lives and forced them to confront the novel horrors of industrial warfare. As many recent historiographical works attest, they were by no means fully unprepared for the ordeal. Most went willingly, convinced of the necessity of fighting. Peacetime societal influences may, as J.G. Fuller and John Bourne have argued, also have helped to ready them for the trenches.¹⁰ Nonetheless, front conditions remained both unfamiliar and demanding. Men's only hope of survival lay in quickly adapting, a process which at its heart consisted of learning to recognize danger and assess risk.

Unsurprisingly, troops new to the front were especially inclined to assess risk inappropriately. On both sides, wartime training of recruits was short and often of poor quality.¹¹ Many men consequently arrived in the line astoundingly ignorant of modern weaponry's power. One British soldier, for example, described shells as being initially 'quite a novelty' and said that he did not feel frightened because 'I didn't know anything about them'.¹² Such naivety could lead to inappropriate or dangerous behaviour: another man recorded that on first facing shellfire, he and his company 'didn't realise at first the danger we

⁹ F. Dillon, 'Neuroses among Combatant Troops in the Great War', *The British Medical Journal*, 8 July 1939, 66.

¹⁰ See J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–1918* (Oxford 1990) and J. Bourne, 'The British Working Man in Arms' in H. Cecil and P.H. Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced* (London 1996), 336–52. For soldiers' willingness to fight, see P. Liddle, 'British Loyalties. The Evidence of an Archive' in the same volume, 524–5 and A. Lipp, *Meinungslenkung im Krieg. Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914–1918* (Göttingen 2003), 11.

¹¹ P. Simkins, *Kitchener's Army. The Raising of the New Armies, 1914–16* (Manchester and New York 1988), 313 and BA-MA Freiburg, W-10/50900: Ueberblick über Organisation und Regelung des Mannschafersatzes für das deutsche Heer während der Weltkrieges. I. Von der Mobilmachung bis zum Herbst 1916, 21.

¹² Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, London [hereafter IWM], Misc. 99 Item 1515: Diary of unknown soldier, 21 November 1915.

were in, and stood up and laughed at the thing'. Only when one shell burst over another company, killing two soldiers, did the event become 'a very pannicky [sic] experience'.¹³ Insufficient preparation was only one cause of recruits' complacency. Fear of appearing afraid and having their manhood questioned could prompt men to take unnecessary risks, often with fatal consequences. Officers were particularly prone to such behaviour: one of Lieutenant Edward Chapman's colleagues, for example, was a 'quite fearless' subaltern, who 'would not take any notice of flares or snipers, and was shot dead, the bullet going from ear to ear'.¹⁴

Other untried soldiers displayed intense fear. A study of British troops fighting in Salonika found that signs of nervousness, including 'palpitation, nightmare and broken sleep' were common even before the baptism of fire.¹⁵ New men walked stooped in quiet sectors, ducked constantly and suffered great anxiety. Ernst Huthmacher described his first five days at the front as 'horrendous' and told his wife, 'I know now what mortal fear means'.¹⁶ If the baptism occurred in heavy action, such feelings were still more extreme. Private D.L. Rowlands, who had the misfortune to experience shellfire first during the Third Battle of Ypres, admitted to being 'absolutely frightened to death!' during the ordeal.¹⁷ After such a scare, initial nervousness often receded slowly: the psychologist Charles Bird observed that 'for weeks the men suffer from intense fright as comrades are killed or horribly mutilated'.¹⁸ Chapman admitted that this initial period 'nearly broke me'.¹⁹ Some soldiers did indeed collapse. Robert Gaupp, a psychiatrist attached to the German XIII Corps, observed that for some individuals 'a single experience of horror . . . cleared the way for psychotraumatic symptoms'.²⁰ Research undertaken on Bavarian psychiatric casualties found that most hysterical disorders had manifested themselves during patients' first experience of war.²¹

13 IWM, 84/22/1: B.O. Dewes, diary, 27 November 1914.

14 IWM, 92/3/1: E.F. Chapman, letter to mother, 27 August 1916. Cf. Sir John Goodwin in *Report of the War Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock'*, ed. War Office (London 1922) [hereafter RWOCIS], 13 and L. Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front. Hinterlassene Aufzeichnungen des im Kriege gefallenen Nervenarztes* (Tübingen 1920), 128.

15 See RWOCIS, 202.

16 Deutsches Tagebucharchiv, Emmendingen [hereafter DTA], 930: E. Huthmacher, letter to wife, 12 March 1915. Cf. W. Ludwig, 'Beiträge zur Psychologie der Furcht im Kriege' in W. Stern and O. Lipmann (eds), *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie. 21. Beiträge zur Psychologie des Krieges* (Leipzig 1920), 137 and Chapman, letter to mother, 20 August 1916.

17 IWM, 93/20/1: D.L. Rowlands, letter to girlfriend, 5 February 1918.

18 C. Bird, 'From Home to the Charge. A Psychological Study of the Soldier', *The American Journal of Psychology*, 28, 3 (July 1917), 333.

19 Chapman, letter to mother, 14 February 1917.

20 R. Gaupp, 'Schreckneurosen und Neurasthenie' in K. Bonhoeffer (ed.), *Geistes- und Nervenkrankheiten. Erster Teil* (Leipzig 1922), 72.

21 K. Weiler, *Arbeit und Gesundheit. Sozialmedizinische Schriftenreihe aus dem Gebiete des Reichsministeriums. Heft 22. Nervöse und seelische Störungen bei Teilnehmern am Weltkrieg, ihre ärztliche und rechtliche Beurteilung. Erster Teil. Nervöse und seelische Störungen psychogener und funktioneller Art* (Leipzig 1933), 190.

In order to survive the front both mentally and physically, soldiers thus had to learn to judge risk without being overwhelmed by it. Contemporaries reported that newly drafted troops often exhibited curiosity, indicative of an attempt to gather information about their environment and respond to it.²² Gradually, they habituated to the frightening sights and sounds of the front and developed what Franz Schauwecker, an ex-front officer turned amateur psychologist, termed *Dickfälligkeit* ('thick-skinnedness').²³ Survival skills were also acquired. Another ex-officer and psychologist Paul Plaut observed that after one or two months soldiers could judge shells' size and direction from their noise.²⁴ They also learnt to employ the landscape to their advantage: 'Every depression or elevation is immediately considered from a utilitarian standpoint and afterwards used', he wrote.²⁵ Such skill not only provided soldiers with the knowledge necessary to counter imminent mortal threat but also increased their ability to operate effectively on the battlefield by raising their self-confidence. It was calmness and self-control in peril which, according to Plaut, distinguished the well-adjusted veteran from the naïve recruit: 'Even in the moment of direct, imminent danger', he wrote, 'an almost unexplainable cold-bloodedness and emotional intransigence makes itself noticeable.' Soldiers' testimonies concur. In an emergency, as Private William Tait observed, 'only the old hands really kept their heads'. While other troops 'got the wind up a good bit', experienced soldiers would be 'watching each shell, predicting where it would fall & then scuttling'.²⁶

As soldiers developed greater awareness of danger, they became more fatalistic about the possible consequences of their risk-taking. In a survey of German combatants' coping strategies undertaken by the psychologist Walter Ludwig, 44 of the 200 men questioned reported that they or their comrades adopted this mindset at the front.²⁷ Letters and diaries also testify to the widespread adoption of fatalism, particularly in extreme adversity. 'One becomes a fatalist. If it comes, it comes', wrote Leutnant Wilhelm Lühje during the German army's final traumatic retreat.²⁸ 'I think we are all Fatalists here believing in the preordained order of things', observed Private Arthur Wrench

22 See Scholz, op. cit., 128 and Ludwig, op. cit., 155. Cf. IWM, 69/25/1: G. Donaldson, letter to mother, 31 May 1916; IWM, 96/29/1: S.A. Knight, letter to girlfriend, 27 February 1915 and IWM, P 239: W.B. St Leger, diary, 27 September 1916.

23 F. Schauwecker, *Im Todesrachen. Die deutsche Seele im Weltkrieg* (Halle 1921), 12.

24 P. Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers' in W. Stern and O. Lipmann (eds), *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie. 21. Beiträge zur Psychologie des Krieges* (Leipzig 1920), 31.

25 P. Plaut, 'Prinzipien und Methoden der Kriegpsychologie' in E. Abderhalden (ed.), *Handbuch der biologischen Arbeitsmethoden. Abt. VI: Methoden der experimentellen Psychologie. Teil C/I* (Berlin and Vienna 1928), 650.

26 Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers', op. cit., 24–5 and IWM, PP/MCR/161: W.H. Tait, diary, 2 November 1914. Second world war studies also support these observations. Cf. S.A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier. Combat and its Aftermath* (2 vols, New York 1949, 1965) ii, 283–4.

27 Ludwig, op. cit., 168–9, 172.

28 BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 1/ 2797: W. Lühje, diary, 3 October 1918.

on the other side one year earlier.²⁹ As Leutnant Hans Muhsal discovered, two roads led to this attitude: 'Either one is completely dulled or makes oneself accept that the trouble has to come again.'³⁰ Men noted that 'one seems to lose all depth of feeling and take things just as they come out here', yet they also attempted to cultivate fatalism by repressing disturbing thoughts or memories.³¹ On both sides, soldiers agreed that 'if you did ruminate much on the real meaning of the things you do and the things that are done to you, your nerves would crack in no time' and correspondingly became 'determined to forget'.³² They avoided 'telling the worst part of this war' and instead, particularly on the British side of the lines, used euphemisms such as 'knocked out' or a 'trying time' to avoid acknowledging traumatic or painful facts.³³

Often, fatalism was skewed. Plaut referred to the 'elation of being able to die in the middle of wanting to live' and Captain H.W. Yoxall similarly found that in the trenches 'while life becomes more desirable death seems less terrible'.³⁴ Under such circumstances, a certain amount of indifference to death could be a blessing, negating some fear which would otherwise have caused great mental strain. The middle way between excessive anxiety and total indifference was, however, difficult to maintain. As Ludwig observed, 'the impression [of fatalism] is often so strong or of such long influence that the will to live is crushed and makes way for a mindless apathy and resignation'.³⁵ Men could enter a state similar to that described by modern psychologists as 'learned helplessness'.³⁶ Soldiers worn down by mental or physical exhaustion became passive, indifferent and so 'callous' that they 'took very little trouble to protect [themselves]'.³⁷ Such a condition was extremely dangerous: as Scholz remarked, 'he who does not fear death won't yearn long for it'.³⁸

29 IWM, 85/51/1: A.E. Wrench, diary, 25 October 1917.

30 BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 1/ 3109: H. Muhsal, diary, 5 February 1917.

31 IWM, P 317 Con Shelf: H.W. Yoxall, letter to parents, 25 December 1916. Cf. IWM, 87/56/1: O.H. Best, letter/diary, 2 October 1914.

32 Respectively, Yoxall, letter to family, 1 June 1916 and IWM, 82/26/1: A.R. Williams, letter to Dolly Gray, 31 December 1915. Cf. IWM, 83/6/1: V.S. Braund, letter to brother, 2 July 1915 and BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 2/ 2735: H. Genscher, letter to friend, 9 March 1916.

33 IWM, 97/37/1: A. Cornfoot, letter to 'Winnie', 3 September 1915. For euphemisms see IWM Con Shelf: R.P. Harker, letter to Ethel, 16 December 1914; Yoxall, letter to mother, 18 June 1916; Wrench, diary, 14 November 1916 and 9 April 1917; Chapman, letter to mother, undated but written between 28 and 30 April 1917. Also, P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London 1975), 174–87.

34 Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers', op. cit., 66 and Yoxall, letter to mother, 30 January 1917.

35 Ludwig, op. cit., 168.

36 A state of 'learned helplessness' is described as a situation in which there is non-contingency between the person's actions and outcomes, an expectation that future outcomes will not be contingent and passive behaviour. Individuals in this state suffer from 'low self-esteem, sadness, loss of aggression, immune changes and physical illness'. See C. Peterson, S.F. Maier and M.E.P. Seligman, *Learned Helplessness. A Theory for the Age of Personal Control* (New York and Oxford 1993), 8–9.

37 J.F.C. Fuller in RWOCIS, 29. Cf. Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (London 1945, 1966), 71 and Scholz, op. cit., 128.

38 Ibid., 159.

Alternatively, contemporaries observed that veterans sometimes returned to a state of intense fear: 'Some soldiers, and particularly officers, . . . disappear . . . as quickly as possible behind cover, if the enemy occasionally sends over a few shots.'³⁹ Franz Brussig was surprised that in a bombardment, 'the men with most experience of shelling have the most funk', while Yoxall similarly remarked that 'the people who have been out the longest like [shelling] least'.⁴⁰ Repression, although a useful immediate solution, was not an effective long-term coping strategy. Once out of danger, traumatic episodes could return to haunt soldiers as memories or nightmares; despite a determination to avoid thinking of painful events, men admitted to 'doing it very often'.⁴¹ According to the psychiatrist John MacCurdy the failure of 'war sublimation' resulted in the soldier '[dwelling] obsessively on the difficulties which surround him . . . and being unable to keep his mind away from the possibility of injury'.⁴² Correspondingly, veterans 'sometimes became obsessed with fear'.⁴³ Loss of the ability to predict the fall of shells could follow and soldiers might become ultra-cautious, suffer breakdown or alternatively, seeking escape from their misery, might actually wish for death, act recklessly and be killed.⁴⁴

As the psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers found when treating men incapacitated by recurring painful memories or emotions, it was often better to reinterpret unpleasant experiences positively rather than attempt to repress them.⁴⁵ There is abundant evidence that soldiers also recognized this, albeit subconsciously. Humour was widely used to reinterpret the environment positively, making it less threatening and thus less frightening. Mockery played a key role: while it was easy to be frightened of a machine gun or shellfire, weapons thought of as 'chattering Charlies' or 'die blauen Gurken' ('the blue cucumbers') appeared less terrifying.⁴⁶ Brushes with death were similarly ridiculed. Sapper J.P. Fowler, recounting the discovery of a 'wee burned' hole in his tunic, jokingly observed: 'Never mind that as lang as they dinna nock any buttons off I will no say anything to them.'⁴⁷ Such levity not only made danger appear less

39 Ibid., 129. Cf. Fuller in *RWOCIS*, 29.

40 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriftabteilung [hereafter Staatsbib. Berlin], Ms. Boruss. fol. 1084: F. Brussig, diary, 12 January 1916 and Yoxall, letter to mother, 1 June 1916.

41 IWM, 82/3/1: J.P. Fowler, letter to niece and nephew, 2 May 1915. For nightmares behind the lines, see E.P. Frost, 'Dreams', *Psychological Bulletin*, XIII, 1 (15 January 1916), 13; [Editorial], 'Soldiers' Dreams', *The Lancet* (23 January 1915), 210 and Scholz, op. cit., 225.

42 J.T. MacCurdy, *War Neuroses* (Cambridge 1918), 22.

43 Fuller in *RWOCIS*, 29.

44 MacCurdy, op. cit., 23 and Scholz, op. cit., 129.

45 W.H.R. Rivers, 'An Address on the Repression of War Experience', *The Lancet* (2 February 1918), 173–7.

46 Donaldson, letters, 31 May 1916 and 6 July 1916 and BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 2/ 3788: G. Klein, letter to parents (from Eastern Front), 2 November 1914. Cf. also M.R. Habeck, 'Technology in the First World War. The View from Below' in J. Winter, G. Parker and M.R. Habeck (eds), *The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT and London 2000), 112–16. Habeck argues that men anthropomorphized weaponry to make it appear less threatening.

47 J.P. Fowler, letter to niece and nephew, 2 May 1915.

threatening but, according to Ludwig, also sponsored 'a kind of climbing of the ego' which encouraged soldiers to believe in their own ability to overcome peril. The fact that German soldiers said 'jetzt bist du groß' ('now you are big') to comrades who joked in danger surely supports this interpretation.⁴⁸ Finally, humour enabled men to cope with wishes as well as fears. In the British army, songs such as 'I Don't Want To Be a Soldier' or 'Far Far from Ypres I Want to Be' usefully, according to John Brophy and Eric Partridge, 'poked fun at the soldier's own desire for peace and rest, and so prevented it from overwhelming his will to go on doing his duty'.⁴⁹

The historian J.G. Fuller has suggested that ridicule and irony were peculiarly British traits deriving from peacetime Edwardian culture. Noting their efficacy in averting strain, he argues that British humour was thus 'to many the war-winning quality', different from and more effective than that of continental armies.⁵⁰ An examination of letters and diaries, however, reveals not only that Germans also valued humour as a coping strategy but that the genres they best appreciated were similar to those which Fuller sees as quintessentially British.⁵¹ By April 1916, the German army's once patriotic songs were giving way to satirical parodies mocking the war and the hardships of army life.⁵² Like the British, who referred to 'tin hats' and 'tooth-picks' instead of 'steel helmets' and 'bayonets', the Germans undermined military pomp, downgrading their *Minenwerfer* (mortars) to *Marmaladeneimer* (jam buckets) and elevating the humble field kitchen to the status of *Gulaschkanone* (goulash gun).⁵³ Black humour was also not solely an English preserve. Even in the grim months of the 1918 Spring Offensive, German soldiers still joked in a macabre way and, according to one contemporary, their 'pure gallows humour' became like that 'displayed by a sarcastic criminal who directly before his death can still laugh at the gathered public'.⁵⁴ Men learned not only to treat the possibility of their own death with derision but also developed an increasingly dark sense of humour towards general misfortune. 'Something from the men in the 186th [Regiment] pleased me', wrote Muhsal; 'namely, that they are still so war enthused that they even went so far as to take one of their own, who sat at

48 Ludwig, op. cit., 161.

49 J. Brophy and E. Partridge, *The Long Trail. Soldiers' Songs and Slang 1914-18*, revised edn (London 1965, 1969), 17. Psychologists also emphasize the use of humour as a 'buffer' against stress. See S.M. Labott and R.B. Martin, 'The Stress-moderating Effects of Weeping and Humour', *Journal of Human Stress*, 13, 4 (Winter 1987), 163 and R. Williams, 'Personality and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder' in Yule (ed.), op. cit., 105.

50 Fuller, op. cit., 143-53.

51 See K.E. Neumann, 'Psychologische Beobachtungen im Felde', *Neurologisches Centralblatt*, 33, 23 (1 December 1914), 1244 and Ludwig, op. cit., 160-1. Humour received 30 mentions in Ludwig's study, coming seventh on his list of coping strategies.

52 W. Schuhmacher, *Leben und Seele unseres Soldatenlieds im Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main 1928), 167-83.

53 Fuller, op. cit., 145, Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers', op. cit., 99 and BA-MA Freiburg, PH 3/ 93: Documents of Dr Bode. Letter to 'Chef IIIb', 16 April 1916.

54 BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 1/3183: E. Vogt, diary/memoir, 5 April 1918. Cf. Ludwig, op. cit., 160.

night on the lavatory, for a Frenchman and stabbed him with a bayonet.⁵⁵ Even hostile exchanges between opposing troops could take a black, almost sarcastic form, as Yoxall recounted:

The Hun, too, is not without his sense of humour — grim enough, it is true, but everything out here is like that. We have a very clever machine gunner who can play tunes on his gun. the [sic] other night he fired a burst of fire with the ‘Pom-tiddly-om-pom’ cadence and Fritz replied with ‘Pom-pom’ and hit two men of ours who were on a working party. And so the game goes on.⁵⁶

Rather than being culturally specific, such humour may represent a human response to the situation confronting both sets of belligerents. Modern psychological research has found that people demonstrate an increased liking for ‘hostile’ humour following uncontrollable experiences. Given the inability of the individual soldier on the Western Front to determine his own fate, it is unsurprising that trench wit was similar on both sides and typified by ironic, black and gallows humour.⁵⁷

Reinterpreting the front by considering it through the prism of the blackly absurd, ironic and ridiculous did not raise the objective chances of survival, nor did it make soldiers’ comparative powerlessness to influence their fate any less real. Rather, by humanizing the horror of their situation, humour made it appear more manageable and thus protected men from becoming obsessed with fear or descending into an ultimately self-defeating, apathetic fatalism. It made the reality of death, mutilation and powerlessness at the front easier not only to accept but also to address and thus enabled men to maintain an optimal approach to risk, recognizing but not becoming overwhelmed by it. So armed, they could endure the horror of the trenches.

A thousand may fall dead beside you,
Ten thousand all round you,
But you will not be harmed.⁵⁸

Although humour helped men to confront the possibility of death and pursue a middle course between the dangerous extremes of apathetic fatalism and overwhelming fear, there are nonetheless indications that most soldiers lacked a realistic grasp of the risks they faced. Both modern historians and contemporary psychologists studying first world war soldiers have observed a widespread and in hindsight largely unjustified optimism with regard to personal chances of survival. Of the 200 men in Ludwig’s study, 30 recorded that they found *allgemeine Hoffnung* (‘general hope’) to be a useful coping strategy

55 Muhsal, diary, 9 September 1915.

56 Yoxall, letter to family, 10 June 1916.

57 A.D. Trice, ‘Ratings of Humor Following Experience with Unsolvable Tasks’, *Psychological Reports*, 51, 2 (December 1982), 1148.

58 Psalms, xci, 7.

in action. Still more surprising in warfare characterized as chaotic, unpredictable and intensely disempowering, 36 soldiers found that *Erwägungen über dem Grad des möglichen Übels* ('consideration of the degree of possible unpleasantness') provided reassurance under fire. Perhaps most astounding, given the danger at the front, no fewer than 17 expressed a firm belief in their own invincibility.⁵⁹ That these men were unexceptional is confirmed by the historian Benjamin Ziemann, who has found that German soldiers' letters and diaries betray a 'widespread illusion . . . that one personally could not be killed or wounded'.⁶⁰ British soldiers appear to have been no less unrealistically optimistic. Bird observed that most possessed an 'inner conviction that they themselves will not be killed' and the psychiatrist C. Stanford Read posited that 'each [soldier] mostly thinks that there is a good chance that he himself will be spared'.⁶¹ Many a British soldier believed, like Lieutenant Chapman, that 'I'm a lucky sort of chap, I am'.⁶²

Historians have explained away this unrealistic optimism as stemming from a human inability to imagine one's own demise. Ziemann suggests that men automatically repressed any notion that they might be killed, while Niall Ferguson quotes Freud's assertion that 'no instinct we possess is ready for a belief in [our own] death' to explain the phenomenon.⁶³ Psychologists who (unlike Freud) had served in the front line acknowledged that soldiers did have difficulty invoking concrete images of themselves no longer existing. However, they also observed that, in contrast, thoughts of dying were often extremely vivid:

One can certainly think of death but not feel it. Death is quiet. In contrast, we suffer with the wounded man: we see his need and hear his complaints. And thus it is less the picture of death, which makes even the brave tremble, than that of dying; dying in pain.⁶⁴

Repression or an inability to recognize the consequences of being hit are thus unlikely to have been at the root of men's confidence in their own survival. The results of Ludwig's study, however, hint at another explanation: among the coping strategies mentioned by his subjects, *religiöse Regungen* ('religious feelings') was by some degree the most commonly named.⁶⁵ Could it be that in the absence of security, certainty or control in the natural world, men turned to the supernatural for reassurance?

Particularly in the first world war German army, many men drew great

59 Ludwig, op. cit., 172.

60 B. Ziemann, *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrung im südlichen Bayern 1914–1923* (Essen 1997), 174.

61 Bird, op. cit., 336 and C. Stanford Read, *Military Psychiatry in Peace and War* (London 1920), 10.

62 Chapman, letter to mother, 20 August 1916.

63 Ziemann, op. cit., 174; Ferguson, op. cit., 365.

64 Scholz, op. cit., 153. Cf. Ludwig, op. cit., 145–6.

65 Ludwig, op. cit., 169–72. Religious feelings were reported by 90 of the 200 men. *Erinnerungen an die Heimat* ('memories of home') came second with 65 mentions.

strength from religion. Despite the fact that Ludwig Scholz reported that he was unable to find a single officer or man in his battalion who possessed a New Testament and although there was only one believer in Pastor Paul Göhre's Saxon *Landsturm* platoon, to most German soldiers religious convictions seem to have been important.⁶⁶ Göhre, despite his own unit's secularism, thought that approximately 50 per cent of troops harboured some sort of belief and the volunteer Friedrich Nawrath also observed that faith provided strength to many soldiers, although he emphasized that their creed was not that of the official army chaplains but rather an inner spiritualism.⁶⁷ Ludwig saw embrasures on which men had scratched saints' names and holy verses, while Georg Pfeilschifter, an academic who undertook an examination of Catholic belief at the front, actually found cases of troops building altars and chapels in their reserve positions.⁶⁸ The fact that 'Wir treten zum Beten' ('We go to pray') was often sung by small groups of soldiers directly before combat and that among survivors, even those with minimal religious convictions, 'Nun danket alle Gott' ('Now thank we all our God') was the preferred anthem, shows how important religious faith was to the German army's ability to endure.⁶⁹

Religion supported soldiers in various ways. For the pious but egotistical, it guaranteed survival: as Knoch has observed, 'a form of privatisation of divine help' took place in the trenches, with many interpreting their survival as evidence of godly favour.⁷⁰ Georg Kirchner, for example, having fought through the first two bloody months of hostilities and outlived most of his comrades, simply commented, 'I can only thank God that until now he has spared me.'⁷¹ *Gefreiter* Kurt Reiter interpreted a near miss by a shell as a sign that 'the dear God mercifully protected me' and *Grenadier* Franz Meier similarly attributed his survival through 'some difficult hours' to the fact that 'God's protection and help was with me and my comrades'.⁷² For other, perhaps less naïve, souls, faith gave sense to an otherwise frightening and chaotic world. Gotthard Gruber, for example, noted in his diary that 'the thought which always put me personally back on my feet was that a *God of Love* stands behind every-

66 Scholz, op. cit., 172 and P. Göhre, *Tat-Flugschriften 22. Front und Heimat. Religiöses, Politisches, Sexuelles aus dem Schützengraben* (Jena 1917), 3–5. Both men served on the Eastern Front.

67 Göhre, op. cit., 9–11 and BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 1/ 1383: F.O. Nawrath, letter to parents, 8 March 1915.

68 Ludwig, op. cit., 169–70; G. Pfeilschifter, 'Seelsorge und religiöses Leben im deutschen Heere' in G. Pfeilschifter (ed.), *Kultur Katholizismus und Weltkrieg. Eine Abwehr des Buches La Guerre Allemande et la Catholicisme* (Freiburg im Breisgau 1916), 248.

69 Schuhmacher, op. cit., 152–5.

70 Knoch, op. cit., 209. Cf. A. Reimann, *Der große Krieg der Sprachen. Untersuchungen zur historischen Semantik in Deutschland und England zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen 2000), 97. One-third of the interviewees in Ludwig's study who mentioned religion testified that they or their comrades had some hope of divine assistance. See Ludwig, op. cit., 170.

71 DTA, 9/II: G. Kirchner, letter to sister, 2 October 1914.

72 BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 1/161: K. Reiter, diary, 22 June 1916 and BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 2/ 5800: F. Meier, letter to friend, 19 March 1917.

thing'.⁷³ Such a belief facilitated the acceptance of one's fate, regardless of its eventual form, and consequently many religious soldiers embraced it. Heini Weber, fighting in the Argonne, thought that in questions of mortality, 'one must just trust in God'. Arthur Meier, considering a possible transfer to the Somme battlefield in 1916, similarly fatalistically concluded: 'Even in this case, I trust in our omnipotent and all-loving God, who guides everything for the best.'⁷⁴

Religious faith was also important for many British troops, both as a reassurance of continued life and a comfort in death. The Medical Officer of 1/Irish Guards Hugh Shields was heartened in September 1914 by the thought that despite the danger of his duties, 'somehow I don't feel that God means me to get killed yet'.⁷⁵ Lieutenant St Leger found solace in the idea that when a man achieved his earthly mission 'he is taken away by God to enjoy his rest', adding fatalistically, 'I wonder when I shall have fulfilled my parts'.⁷⁶ Britons were told to 'put their lives into God's keeping' so that they could 'shelve all responsibility and go forward with a quiet mind in the knowledge that God is at the helm and that nothing can happen without his sanction'.⁷⁷ In British trenches and dugouts, as in German, men were sometimes seen 'reading scripture under the ugliest conditions of peril'.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, references to God are rarer in British correspondence than in German missives and a small survey undertaken by the Third Army's censor estimated that only 25 per cent of letters contained some reference to religion.⁷⁹ This probably reflects the fact that British society was simply less pious than that of the *Kaiserreich*. Although three-quarters of English children had attended Sunday school in 1888, wartime investigations into British soldiers' religious belief uncovered a remarkable ignorance of Christianity. The Divisional Chaplain Philip Crick found that 'the [Anglican] Church has not succeeded in impressing upon the majority of them a sense of allegiance to her teaching and practices', while a study undertaken by the Bishop of Kensington estimated that 80 per cent of men from the Midlands had never heard of the sacraments.⁸⁰ Private Rowlands

73 DTA, 138a: G. Gruber, diary, 27 February 1916. Emphasis in the original.

74 DTA, 865: H. Weber, letter to friends, 7 January 1915 and BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 2/5799: A. Meier, letter to friend, 6 September 1916. Cf. Ludwig, op. cit., 169.

75 Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, London, RAMC 383 Box 41: H.J.S. Shields, letter, 25 September 1914.

76 St Leger, diary, 10 October 1917.

77 Reverend M.S. Evers, letter to sister, no date, reproduced in P. Liddle, *Testimony of War 1914–1918* (Salisbury 1979), 61.

78 Williams, letter, 26 September 1916. Cf. (for Germans) Ludwig, op. cit., 170–1.

79 IWM, 84/46/1: M. Hardie, Report on Complaints, Moral, etc., 23 November 1916, 10. The random sample contained 50 letters.

80 P.C.T. Crick, 'The Soldier's Religion' in F.B. MacNutt (ed.), *The Church in the Furnace. Essays by Seventeen Temporary Church of England Chaplains on Active Service in France and Flanders* (London 1917), 370 and D.S. Cairns (ed.), *The Army and Religion. An Enquiry and its Bearing upon the Religious Life of the Nation* (London 1919), 448. See also R. Holmes, *Tommy. The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914–1918* (London 2004), 504.

was doubtless exaggerating when he asserted that religion ‘hasn’t a place in one out of a million of the thoughts that hourly occupy men’s minds’ but in the light of this evidence it seems reasonable to conclude that a ‘stubborn, strictly agnostic spirit . . . ruled in the dangerous places of 1914–18’ on the British side of the lines.⁸¹

British soldiers’ relative irreligiousness made little difference, however, to their perceptions of the front. As Pfeilschifter observed:

Even indifferent and in ordinary life so-called unbelievers are shaken up by the constant danger, renunciation of worldly things and suffering of the trench war and turn to the Almighty, as they feel and experience dozens of times that here blind chance does not prevail but that a friendly guide holds human fate in his hands.⁸²

Faithless British soldiers, like their German counterparts, did grope for meaning and security in the chaos of the trenches. As the British Third Army’s chief censor observed, ‘The Army is essentially religious — not necessarily in outward expression, but in the widest sense of an inward faith and trust in Divine guidance.’⁸³ The supernatural protector to whom such men turned, however, was not usually a Christian God. For many, ‘luck’ became a form of ersatz personal deity controlling events. Both the religious and non-believers referred to it and it is not uncommon to find men hedging their bets when giving thanks for deliverance. Arthur Wrench, for example, attributed his ‘repeated miraculous escapes’ variously to ‘luck’, ‘God’ and ‘fate’ at different points in his military career.⁸⁴

Faith in an abstract omnipotent being was often supported by reliance on physical objects believed to possess supernatural powers. Often these were amulets of a religious nature, such as crucifixes, scapulars, Agnus Dei and consecrated coins.⁸⁵ Wrench recorded that many men carried a New Testament in their breast pocket in the hope that it might stop a bullet from entering their hearts. That metal objects might have stood more chance of doing this was irrelevant; Wrench was emphatic that ‘it has to be a bible [sic] even if its only other use is for a convenient piece of paper to light a cigarette’.⁸⁶ So-called *Schutzbriefe*, letters with religious or magical formulae designed to protect

81 Rowlands, letter to girlfriend, 5 February 1918 and Brophy and Partridge, op. cit., 17. Cf. Fuller, op. cit., 156–7.

82 Pfeilschifter, op. cit., 249.

83 Hardie, Report on Complaints, Moral, etc., 23 November 1916, 10.

84 See Wrench, diary, 22 April 1917, 9 September 1917, 28 February 1918, 26 March 1918 and 19 April 1918. Cf. Yoxall, letter to family, 29 May 1916, IWM, 76/121/1 & Con Shelf: C.S. Rawlins, letter, 12 October 1915; Muhsal, diary, 6 May 1917 and 31 May 1918.

85 Plaut, ‘Psychographie des Kriegers’, op. cit., 78 and IWM, 96/29/1: J. McIlwain, memoir based on contemporary diary, 33.

86 Wrench, diary, 21 July 1917. Such beliefs may have been encouraged by wartime propaganda: see ‘Some Mascots and Trifles that have Saved Lives’, *The War Illustrated. A Picture-Record of Events by Land, Sea and Air*, 2, 28 (February 1915), 47 and Schmah, ‘Die Gewehre der europäischen Mächte’, *Illustrierte Geschichte des Weltkrieges 1914/15. Allgemeine Kriegszeitung*, 30 (n.d.), 100.

their owner, were also widely carried. Some contained simple prayers or Bible quotations such as the comforting Psalm 91 but others were more spiritualist in nature, naming protective ghosts or devils.⁸⁷ Lucky leaves of clover, coins and carp scales were all believed by German soldiers to avert danger, and Scottish soldiers of the 51st (Highland) Division wore as talismans 'little woolly golly-wogs' beneath their cap badges.⁸⁸ Objects of personal significance, such as letters and photographs, which linked men to their families and reminded them why they were fighting, also often became charms. Such was men's need for security that, as Wrench observed: 'Any little keepsake [the soldier] cherishes becomes a fetish and some will almost stake their lives on it'.⁸⁹

Rituals also gave abstract religious beliefs and superstitions a more concrete, tangible and comforting character and, like amulets, took multifarious forms at the front. Scholz saw men uttering words and performing actions designed to deflect projectiles and Plaut recorded the case of a serving student who, realizing that the day was the thirteenth of the month, suddenly decided that he would be killed unless he could appease the gods by offering a blood sacrifice of 13 flies.⁹⁰ Another soldier, shocked by the bearded face of a fallen comrade, decided that salvation lay in shaving and obsessively removed his stubble twice daily.⁹¹ Often rites took a Christian form: the quickly intoned 'Our Father' in danger was probably the single most common protective ritual performed on the Western Front.⁹²

The attraction of rituals and amulets lay not only in the apparent protection they offered or in the fact that they provided something more tangible than abstract faith in an invisible God. Rather, their popularity stemmed primarily from their perceived ability to provide a clear set of unwritten instructions for survival in an unpredictable and frightening world. Woe betide the man who contravened these rules by forgetting his protective talisman, failing to pass on a *Kettenbrief* (chain letter) or who carried an 'unlucky' object, such as a pack of cards or wedding ring, into danger.⁹³ In contrast, the British despatch rider who obeyed the self-imposed rules and turned back when he found he had forgotten his lucky rosary was rewarded by being spared a bombardment further along the road on which he had been travelling.⁹⁴ Moreover, not only did these rules provide security but they also returned responsibility for per-

87 H. Bächtold, *Deutscher Soldatenbrauch und Soldatenglaube* (Strassburg 1917), 17, 19. For Psalm 91, see note 58.

88 Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers', op. cit., 78 and Wrench, diary, 21 July 1917.

89 Ibid. Cf. Scholz, op. cit., 179–80.

90 Ibid., 180 and Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers', op. cit., 79.

91 E. Wittermann, 'Kriegspsychiatrische Erfahrungen aus der Front', *Münchener Medizinische Wochenschrift*, 62, 34. *Feldärztliche Beilage*, 34 (August 1915), 1165–6.

92 For the forms of prayer used at the front, see Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers', op. cit., 74 and Ludwig, op. cit., 170–1.

93 Bächtold, op. cit., 22 and B. Ulrich, *Die Augenzeugen. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914–1933* (Essen 1997), 45–6.

94 Wrench, diary, 21 July 1917.

sonal fate to the individual, negating the damaging feelings of disempowerment arising from the front's objective uncontrollability. It is significant, for example, that a British tank crewman, captured by the Germans in August 1917, attributed his deliverance from danger not directly to God but to the fact that he had prayed incessantly throughout combat.⁹⁵ Similarly, the German soldier who, wounded and captured by the French, blamed his fate not on the objective ineffectiveness of his *Schutzbrief* but on his own foolishness in losing faith in the letter for 15 minutes and thus negating its protective powers, at least felt in control of his own fate.⁹⁶

By looking beyond their own disempowering and dangerous world to the supernatural, soldiers were able to impose structure and certainty on the surrounding chaos. Belief that God, Providence or luck would shield them from death provided security and reassurance. Even faith that a loving deity was behind the bloodshed and destruction imposed some sense on an otherwise unpredictable and frightening world. Amulets and rituals, both Christian and pagan, became popular because they went further still in helping to satisfy the human need 'to predict the future and control events'. Protected by a loving God, supplied with a set of rules which appeared to guarantee survival and imbued with a sense of power over their fate and their surroundings, it is perhaps unsurprising that many soldiers were able to remain highly optimistic about their ability to cheat death.

You won't be hit by any bullet, you're immune.⁹⁷

Turning to the supernatural was, however, not the only means by which soldiers reassured themselves about the future. In attempting to understand men's experience on the Western Front, historians suffer from their own professional ethos, which encourages them to view the horrors there as objectively as possible. Soldiers, whose occupational demands were quite different, were far less keen to perceive their surroundings objectively. There is, in fact, considerable evidence in letters and diaries to suggest that the widespread belief in personal survival was not entirely based on fantasy but was rather grounded in a highly positively biased interpretation of the trench environment.

As Peter Bernstein has observed, 'the nature of risk is shaped by the time horizon'.⁹⁸ Early in the conflict, men found it 'extraordinary how all the Tommies seem to have a fixed idea in their heads that they will be home before

95 BA-MA Freiburg, PH 3/ 585: Intelligence Officer, A.O.K. 4: *Vernehmung* [of one officer and seven men of 12th Comp. D. Batl., Tank Corps and one officer and three men of 18th Comp., F Batl., Tank Corps]. 26 August 1917, 5. Cf. Ludwig, op. cit., 170.

96 Bächtold, op. cit., 19.

97 Combatant quoted in Ludwig, op. cit., 165.

98 P.L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods. The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York and Chichester 1996), 197.

Xmas'.⁹⁹ Once trench warfare became fully established, such concrete predictions became rarer and increasing numbers of soldiers declared despairingly that 'we no longer believe that [the war] will ever come to an end, it appears that we are all condemned for life'.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, monotony and routine probably helped to dull soldiers' consciousness of time, hindering consideration of the war's duration.¹⁰¹ Moreover, hopes of an imminent end to the conflict never fully receded but were simply expressed in a different form, as peace rumours. In September 1916, Lieutenant O.P. Taylor heard gossip circulating in the British trenches stating that 'the Kaiser wrote a private letter to King George asking him for an armistice to allow him to withdraw beyond the Rhine, which was refused'.¹⁰² Eleven months later, Arthur Wrench wrote excitedly of 'a great rumour that Austria has given Germany 24 hours to consider peace'.¹⁰³ Such hopes, although normally dashed, were probably important in reminding soldiers that the war was finite and that there was a chance of returning home alive. Certainly, Plaut noted that soldiers continued to treat the conflict as a temporary interlude and argued that this attitude was important in their willingness to continue fighting.¹⁰⁴

Hopes of temporary relief also eased the strain of active service. Leave was joyfully anticipated both as a respite from danger and as an opportunity to see the loved ones for whom a man was fighting. As the British Third Army's postal censor observed:

Nothing so cheers and heartens men as the prospect of leave It is the constant 'lookforwardness' to eight or ten days of Blighty that, more than anything else, keeps them going. . . . The immediate prospect of leave, as something visible and tangible, seems to count for more to men's minds than the ultimate, visionary hope of Peace.¹⁰⁵

Leave had two disadvantages, however. Firstly, it was seldom granted. At best, British soldiers received ten days or, after November 1917, two weeks at home every fifteen months, while Germans were released once a year.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, the hope and emotions invested in leave meant that when it was finally granted, soldiers abandoned fatalism and became terrified of being killed before their departure. Wrench recorded 'a rotten nervous feeling' on being told in December 1916 that he was to take leave three days hence. 'I am almost afraid I will never survive till then', he wrote. 'I am full of doubts and now that

99 Dewes, diary, 29 November 1914. Cf. IWM, 78/4/1: T.H. Cubbon, diary, 29 September 1914.

100 BA-MA Freiburg, MSg 2/ 5458: J. Kohler, 2 March 1916.

101 Harker, 28 December 1914 and Nawrath, letter to parents, 24 January 1915.

102 IWM, 92/3/1: O.P. Taylor, diary, 10 September 1916.

103 Wrench, diary, 30 August 1917.

104 Plaut, 'Psychographie des Kriegers', op. cit., 64. Cf. Fussell, op. cit., 131–5, in which he explains how superstition and peace rumours came together in the mythology surrounding the leaning Golden Virgin at Albert.

105 Hardie, Report on Moral, etc., III Army, 1 January 1917.

106 Ziemann, op. cit., 84–5 and Fuller, op. cit., 72.

it seems years and years since I came out to France, at the moment it is only like yesterday while Sunday seems too far away to be real.¹⁰⁷ More common and less likely to affect fatalistic attitudes adversely was the practice of unit rotation. In normal trench warfare, British battalions usually spent only ten days per month in the line.¹⁰⁸ The recognition that combat, however awful, was only a temporary state greatly helped soldiers through the more stressful periods of action. The rumour of relief after almost a month at Verdun in 1916, for example, strengthened Kurt Reiter's resolve to endure: 'Hurrah!', he wrote at the end of June, 'it is said, that we will definitely be relieved on the 7 July. We are all looking forward to it! If only it were true. One must simply not lose hope.'¹⁰⁹

Belief in an imminent end to hostilities, or at least the immediacy of rest, was helpful in maintaining both men's mental stability and army discipline because it encouraged soldiers to focus on short-term rather than cumulative risk. If such a perspective were adopted, then hopes for survival were by no means unjustified, for deaths on the Western Front usually came in a slow trickle rather than a flood. Analysis of casualties suffered by the 1/5 Durham Light Infantry, a not untypical Territorial battalion with an initial strength of 1031 men, shows that outside 'battle' periods (as defined by the official history) a man was killed in action on average only once every six days. The risk of death rose dramatically during battles when, on average, six men per day were killed. However, such intense action was extremely rare: of the approximately 1300 days in which the battalion was in France, only 63 were spent in a major battle.¹¹⁰ Providing that a man ignored cumulative risk and concentrated on the short term, it was thus perfectly reasonable to believe that survival was highly likely. The benefits of this perspective were elucidated by Lieutenant-Colonel McTaggart in a postwar military journal article. Noting the signs of mental strain increasingly exhibited by men employed on nightly carrying duties who feared that their luck was running out, he suggested that they should be educated to think only of short-term risk. Estimating the chance of being hit on such a carrying party at 3000 to one, he suggested that 'if . . . men were taught to think of the chances in their favour each time they went up it would considerably lessen their apprehension'.¹¹¹

Most commonly encountered in letters and diaries, however, are not estimates of men's own short-term chances of survival but rather of whether the next shell or bullet would hit; the extreme inefficiency of first world war

107 Wrench, diary, 7 December 1916. Cf. IWM, 96/29/1: S.H. Steven, letter to family, 10 August 1915 and Chapman, letter to mother, 18 November 1916.

108 G. Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock. Britain and the First World War* (London 2003), 89–91. For German patterns of rotation, see Ziemann, op. cit., 77.

109 K. Reiter, diary, 29 June 1916.

110 Calculated from casualty lists in A.L. Raimes, *The Fifth Battalion. The Durham Light Infantry 1914–1918* (No Place 1931), 204–12. For the battalion's initial strength, see 222.

111 M.F. McTaggart, 'Danger Values', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 66, 462 (May 1921), 290.

weaponry in killing, although lost on most historians, was eagerly acknowledged by combatants.¹¹² Captain Geoffrey Donaldson marvelled at the 'little damage' the enemy did 'with his infernal instruments', while his opponents found consolation in the belief that 'Tommy appears to have a squint' and from the calculation 'that out of one hundred shells comes only one direct hit'. Private Jack Ashley thought it 'astonishing how harmless a really heavy coal-box can be' and H.W. Yoxall remarked in somewhat blasé fashion to his mother: 'It's wonderful how many shells it takes to kill a man. The expenditure of ammy. gives quite an exaggerated idea of the monetary value of human life.'¹¹³ Bullets were similarly recognized as comparatively ineffective. Hugh Shields, for example, remarked on 'the minute number of casualties to bullets fired', and 'not every bullet hits' became a catchphrase among German troops.¹¹⁴ Viewed in this way, and providing that the almost inexhaustible supply of enemy munitions was ignored, the chances of survival appeared reasonably good.

Even if contemporary weaponry did actually find a victim, permanent incapacitation was not certain. Sixty-four per cent of British and sixty-nine per cent of German wounded were healed and returned to the front during the war.¹¹⁵ Realizing this, many soldiers, particularly those fighting in active sectors where the quantity of ammunition being fired made the probability of unscathed survival seem slim, placed their redemptive hopes on comparatively minor injuries which would provide an exit from the trenches and preferably some time hospitalized at home. Thus, for example, Sergeant T.H. Cubbon, lying exposed to rain and artillery fire after the heavy fighting of early September 1914, recorded in his diary: 'Men wishing they were wounded to get taken away from here.'¹¹⁶ One of Ludwig's soldiers similarly stated: 'I would be grateful to the Frenchman, if he would make me g.v.h. (fit for garrison service at home) for a few months.'¹¹⁷ The failure to receive such a 'Blighty wound', *Tango-* or *Heimatschuß* could cause much disappointment. One German soldier, for example, writing in 1916 from the Somme battlefield,

112 According to a contemporary calculation, it took 329 shells to hit one German soldier. Joanna Bourke suggests that it took approximately four times that number to kill him. See *Sanitätsbericht III*, 71 and J. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing. Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London 1999), 6.

113 Respectively, Donaldson, letter to mother, 5 June 1916; The National Archives, London [hereafter TNA], WO 157/23: Summary of Information, 24 August 1917; 4, combatant quoted in Ludwig, op. cit., 165; R.S. Ashley, *War-Diary of Private R.S. (Jack) Ashley 2472 7th London Regiment 1914-1918* (London 1982), 9 and Yoxall, letter to mother, 13 July 1916.

114 Shields, diary, 23 October 1914 and Genscher, letter to father, 24 October 1914. Cf. Scholz, op. cit., 131 and Ludwig, op. cit., 165.

115 T.J. Mitchell and G.M. Smith (eds), *History of the Great War based on Official Documents. Medical Services. Casualties and Medical Statistics of the Great War* (London 1931, 1997), 20. German figures calculated from *Sanitätsbericht III*, 64, *Übersicht 57*.

116 Cubbon, diary, 17 September 1914.

117 Ludwig, op. cit., 166-7. Cf. Stanford Read, op. cit., 9. Five soldiers in Ludwig's sample expressed the wish for a *Heimatschuß*.

regretted that 'I unfortunately could not get the much desired wound to send me home'.¹¹⁸ For soldiers who did 'succeed' in acquiring such an injury, relief was often overwhelming. 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow! — I'm wounded', wrote Arthur Wrench when a shrapnel splinter gave him a legitimate exit from the hell of the 1918 *Kaiserschlacht*.¹¹⁹

Less statistical but no less reasoned calculations also prompted soldiers to overestimate their chances of survival. Combatants sometimes adopted what modern psychologists might term 'a worse-off social comparison target' in order to feel better about their own plight. Thus, for example, after receiving news of his brother's death, Wrench consoled himself by comparing his situation to the experience of another man whose sibling had fallen dead into his arms while they served together at the front.¹²⁰ Hans Muhsal, serving on the comparatively calm but uncomfortable Vosges Front in November 1916, reassured himself with the thought that whatever the hardships, his lot was better than that of his countrymen fighting on the Somme.¹²¹ Similarly, it was not only to gain kudos that veterans told less experienced comrades that 'this here is alright. But once before Verdun, once at the Somme — that was something, there one could go mad'; such statements also reassured the speaker of the likelihood of his own future survival by placing the current danger in the context of much greater perils already overcome.¹²² An analysis of contemporary letters and diaries suggests that this strategy had only limited application, most commonly being used in sectors with little or moderate violence rather than in areas where the full-scale *Materialschlacht* was raging; perhaps men embroiled in the *Kaiserschlacht* or at the Somme were simply unable to imagine anything worse.¹²³

When indeed the situation was truly hopeless, coping strategies did change. Objectively, when under very heavy bombardment, there was nothing a man could do except 'sit tight against the parapet, smoke cigarettes furiously, and trust in whatever gods there be'.¹²⁴ In such circumstances, rather than try to judge or rationalize the danger, soldiers simply ignored it by using avoidance and distraction strategies. As one of Ludwig's subjects observed: 'The soldier gets into the habit of using certain reflections in order to counter the thought of death in the moment of danger.'¹²⁵ Still more effective in averting fear and stress was the pursuit of some diversionary activity. Card playing was ubiquitous in shellfire and folk singing similarly provided a welcome distraction for

118 TNA, WO 157/ 13: Summary of Information, 7 September 1916.

119 Wrench, diary, 24 March 1918.

120 Ibid., 14 December 1917.

121 Muhsal, diary, 16 and 24 November 1916.

122 Schauwecker, op. cit., 49. Cf. Scholz, op. cit., 131 and Ludwig, op. cit., 165.

123 Modern research has found that similar techniques are used by terminally ill cancer patients. See D.A. Armor and S.E. Taylor, 'When Predictions Fail. The Dilemma of Unrealistic Optimism' in T. Gilovich, D. Griffin and D. Kahneman (eds), *Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid and Cape Town 2002), 344.

124 Yoxall, letter to mother, 21 December 1916.

125 Combatant quoted in Ludwig, op. cit., 162.

some men.¹²⁶ Others preferred something more orchestral: when a bombardment opened on enemy lines close to Franz Brussig's dugout, 'all at the same time Hoffmann began to play his concertina, Tuhnert & Decker gave a concert on the mandolin as well as they could and Hüb[ner] along with several other comrades let themselves be heard on harmonicas. Thus there was a concert until the bombardment came to an end.'¹²⁷

In normal trench life, however, soldiers did possess a modicum of influence over their own fates. Mortar bombs could be dodged, enfiladed sections of trench could be identified and avoided and, as previously noted, men learnt to distinguish the direction and type of shells by sound. Interestingly, combatants tended to overestimate the control which these skills gave them, not just initially but even after they had become grizzled veterans. Thus, already after his first experience of trench warfare, Yoxall observed that 'barring the shells it's purely a contest of wits'. Seven months later, he had also learnt that artillery fire could be countered, commenting that it was 'extraordinary' how men gained a 'sense of shelling — the knowledge where to go and where not to go, when to lie down and when to run, & c.'¹²⁸ Other soldiers also emphasized that they were relatively safe from artillery fire providing that they could take adequate cover quickly. Ernst Berner, for example, derived comfort from the fact that although it was impossible to predict exactly where shells were going to land, 'mostly one has a trench or a hole into which one can throw himself'.¹²⁹ Donaldson actually took pride in his prowess in taking cover: 'I was well satisfied with the rapidity with which I got into that infernally muddy ditch when I heard the beggar coming', he wrote of a shell that had just missed him.¹³⁰ Even actions objectively less likely to ensure survival could be interpreted by soldiers as part of their repertoire for cheating death. It is difficult, for example, to see how white-hot shrapnel falling from the sky could be dodged, yet on finding himself in this situation, Wrench recorded '[making] sure my tin hat was square on my head and my legs in good running order'.¹³¹

In the light of this evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that soldiers' unrealistic optimism about their personal chances of survival in the unpredictable, dangerous and disempowering world of the trenches did not stem solely from faith in an imagined supernatural order or confidence in a divine protector. Rather, men simply refused or were unable to recognize the high level of unresponsiveness and danger of their surroundings. Instead, the environment which they perceived, although not pleasant, offered a far greater likelihood of survival than the reality. Shells and bullets rarely found their targets and, when they did, wounded instead of killed, thus providing a

126 *Ibid.*, 160.

127 Brussig, diary, 21 February 1916.

128 Yoxall, letters to family, 1 June 1916 and to mother, 10 January 1917 (mistakenly dated '1916').

129 BA-MA Freiburg, MSh 1/1941: E. Berner, letter to mother, 3 April 1918.

130 Donaldson, letter to mother, 1 June 1916.

131 Wrench, diary, 28 February 1918.

welcome rest from action. Compared to previous experience or others' ordeals, sectors were usually 'cushy' with minimal risk. Moreover, a soldier's safety was assured by his own skill in avoiding danger and dodging death. Providing that the war ended soon, as it surely would, why should he doubt his ability to survive the conflagration?

As was shown in the first section of this article, the means by which a man assessed risk were crucial to both his mental and physical survival. Soldiers ignorant of immediate threat underestimated risk, exposed themselves needlessly and were consequently often killed. Poorly-trained recruits were particularly prone to such mistakes. On the other hand, veterans with enough experience of active service to realize their own impotence were also inclined to endanger themselves unnecessarily, becoming either apathetic and careless or obsessed with fear, vastly overestimating risk and suffering mental collapse. In order to maintain both physical and psychological health, it was thus necessary for men to develop strategies enabling them to cope with the horrendous sights, sounds and emotional stimuli of life at the front. Their solutions were not dependent on national culture, race or religion, although sometimes coloured by these factors; rather, they were basic, universal human responses to a situation of intense danger and uncontrollability. In both the British and German armies, men reinterpreted and confronted their fears through black humour, irony and sarcasm. By such means, they steered a middle way in their assessment of risk, recognizing danger without becoming overwhelmed by it.

There is, however, a potential paradox here, for as the second and third sections demonstrate, the risk assessment which this 'middle way' entailed was by no means realistic. Even experienced combatants were normally convinced that they would survive the horror of the trenches unscathed. Two phenomena appear to account for this largely unjustified belief. Firstly, soldiers used religion and superstition to impose sense and structure on their environment. Many believed that they were protected by a loving God. For others, the thought of such a figure behind the chaos gave some order and sense to the bloodshed, making it less threatening. The widespread adoption of amulets and rituals added further structure to the environment, as they placed in soldiers' hands the apparent means to determine their own fate. Secondly, the feelings of security these beliefs encouraged were furthered by men's own view of the front, which incorporated a strong optimistic bias. They eagerly identified the positive aspects of their situation, insisted that the war was coming to an end and believed that their own martial skill would ensure their survival in the interim. So equipped, they looked forward confidently to peace.

Was this unrealistic optimism useful or damaging for combatants? Certainly, the example of new recruits, whose overconfidence often led to unnecessary fatalities, implies that it was a highly dangerous mindset. However, other, more compelling, factors militate against this opinion. Firstly, the fact that soldiers themselves believed that optimism was crucial in the trenches does

suggest that it was beneficial: contemporaries remarked on how the closer men were to the line, the more cheerful they became.¹³² Moreover, the findings of this study echo those of modern psychological research carried out by Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown, who have found that individuals ‘possess unrealistically positive views of themselves, an exaggerated belief in their ability to control their environment, and a view of the future that maintains that their future will be far better than the average person’s’. Significantly, they argue that these ‘positive illusions . . . may be especially apparent and adaptive under circumstances of adversity, that is, circumstances that might be expected to produce depression or lack of motivation’.¹³³ A close examination of first world war soldiers’ optimistic attitudes suggests that they were, indeed, highly adaptive. Firstly, by imposing an imagined order on the frightening and unpredictable environment in which they operated, soldiers made it seem less chaotic and threatening and provided themselves with a sense of security and empowerment crucial for mental health. Concentration on short-term risk not only gave a more positive prognosis for survival than cumulative risk calculations but, by encouraging soldiers to focus on immediate threat, probably also raised the likelihood of their leaving the trenches alive. Overestimation of personal control was similarly beneficial as it discouraged soldiers from sinking into a state of dangerous apathy by motivating them instead to interact with their environment and thus protect themselves. By lacking a truly objective sense of risk and of their surroundings, and instead embracing positive illusions, soldiers certainly protected themselves from mental strain, probably prolonged their life expectancy and remained willing to risk their lives despite danger and disempowerment. Human faith, hope and optimism, no less than cultural traits, discipline, primary groups and patriotism, explain why and how men were willing and able to fight in the horrendous conditions of the Western Front for four long and bloody years.

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132 BA-MA Freiburg, W-10/50794: Postüberwachung bei der A.O.K. 6. insonderheit 5. Armeekorps. Erfassungen der letzten Kriegsjahre, 12 July 1917, 13; IWM, 83/12/1: J.D. Wyatt, diary, 19 December 1914 and Yoxall, letter to mother, 23 July 1916.

133 S.E. Taylor and J.D. Brown, ‘Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health’, *Psychological Bulletin*, 103, 2 (1988), 196 and 201.