

## FROM A KNIGHT TO A MASS WORKER: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ERNST JÜNGER'S VIEW OF THE FIGHTING INDIVIDUAL

PETER ŠAJDA\*

**ABSTRACT.** In the article I first examine Ernst Jünger's thematically structured memoir *The Fight as Inner Experience* in which he depicts the individual soldier as a committed knightly fighter who is willing to sacrifice his life for an idea. Subsequently I analyze Jünger's treatise *Total Mobilization* in which a largely different picture of the fighting individual emerges: a conformist member of the working mass who performs unquestioningly tasks assigned to him by the collective. I explain the reasons for "the victory" of *the worker* over *the knight* and highlight important shifts in Jünger's thinking as well as its ambiguities.

**Keywords:** *conflict, enemy, metaphysical community, knight, worker*

Ernst Jünger is well-known for his naturalistic descriptions of the events on the fronts of World War I which he witnessed first-hand as a German soldier. His autobiographical novel *Storm of Steel* (1920)<sup>1</sup> represents alongside Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) the most prominent German literary testimony to the tragic world conflict. Jünger, who was wounded multiple times and received for his bravery the rare decoration *Pour le Mérite*, discussed his turbulent participation in the German war effort in several publications in the first half of the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> In the present article I examine first the thematically structured memoir

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\* Institute of Philosophy of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia. Email: saj dus@yahoo.com

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Helmuth Kiesel. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2013 (English translation: *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofmann, New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Die Konservative Revolution. Fünf biographische Skizzen*, Berlin: Landtverlag, 2019, p. 203. In this article I am building on the ideas I presented in my book *Existencia medzi konfliktom a ľudskosťou. Filozofia existencie a konzervatívna revolúcia [Existence between Conflict and Humanity: Philosophy of Existence and the Conservative Revolution]*, Bratislava: Post Scriptum, 2021.



*The Fight as Inner Experience* (1922)<sup>3</sup> in which Jünger focuses on the individual soldier whom he depicts as a committed knightly fighter who is willing to sacrifice his life for an idea. Subsequently I analyze Jünger's treatise *Total Mobilization* (1930)<sup>4</sup> in which a largely different picture of the fighting individual emerges: a conformist member of the working mass who performs unquestioningly tasks assigned by the collective. I explain the reasons for "the victory" of *the worker* over *the knight* and highlight important shifts in Jünger's thinking as well as its ambiguities. In this examination crucial aspects of Jünger's philosophy of conflict come to light.

### I. The Fight as a Natural Given

In *The Fight as Inner Experience* Jünger reflects on his experiences from the fronts of World War I and analyzes the phenomena of fighting, war and the enemy. Although his reflections are based on concrete events and experiences, ultimately they lead to general conclusions.<sup>5</sup> Issues pertaining to human nature, self-defense, self-sacrifice and community formation are discussed at length. Jünger resists the temptation of interpreting the war in a one-sided way and grasps this complex and tragic phenomenon in its deep contradictoriness. On the one hand he describes courage and heroism, on the other hand the devaluation of man in technological

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<sup>3</sup> Ernst Jünger, „Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,“ in *Betrachtungen zur Zeit (Sämtliche Werke, vol. 9, Essays I)*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2015, pp. 11-103.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ in *Betrachtungen zur Zeit (Sämtliche Werke, vol. 9, Essays I)*, pp. 119-142 (English translation: "Total Mobilization," trans. Joel Golb and Richard Wolin, in Richard Wolin (ed.): *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998, pp. 119-139). In the article I refer to the German original. Direct quotations are taken from the English translation.

<sup>5</sup> In *Storm of Steel* Jünger follows a chronological line and in *The Fight as Inner Experience* a thematic one. In the latter work he presents short chapters focusing on different aspects of the war experience. For more detail on the structure and content of the work see Thomas Weitin, „Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis (1922),“ in Matthias Schöning (ed.): *Ernst Jünger Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014, pp. 59-63. Inspirational interpretations of the work and its context can be found in Milan Horňáček, „Der Sprachbegriff der konservativen Revolution im Frühwerk Ernst Jüngers (1920 – 1934),“ in Natalia Žarska, Gerald Diesener and Wojciech Kunicki (eds.), *Ernst Jünger – eine Bilanz*, Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2010, pp. 112-129; Thomas Pekar, „Vom nationalen zum planetarischen Denken. Brüche, Wandlungen und Kontinuitäten bei Ernst Jünger,“ in Matthias Schöning and Ingo Stöckmann (eds.), *Ernst Jünger und die Bundesrepublik: Ästhetik – Politik – Zeitgeschichte*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 185-204; Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Der konservative Anarchist. Politik und Zeitkritik Ernst Jüngers*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach Verlag, 1962; Thomas Weitin, *Notwendige Gewalt. Die Moderne Ernst Jüngers und Heiner Müllers*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach Verlag, 2003.

warfare and the destruction of human life. Jünger develops his line of thought both at the level of individuality and collectivity, but it is the former that is at the center of his scrutiny. The leitmotif of his explorations is the ambiguous inner experience of the fighting individual: "The individual, who sensed in this war only negation and his own suffering, but not affirmation and a higher movement, lived through it as a slave. He had no inner experience, only an outer one."<sup>6</sup> While examining the individual's experience of war both as negation and affirmation, suffering and higher movement, Jünger chooses to emphasize the positive moments which were largely suppressed by anonymous technological warfare and postwar mass mentality. On the basis of these moments he develops the concept of knightliness and the notion of a metaphysical community of knightly fighters.

Jünger describes the fight both as a natural given and a higher movement of the idea. From the first perspective, the fight is a necessary component of both the animal kingdom and human society. The fighting instinct is proper to man and while we are able to regulate it, we are unable to rid ourselves of it completely: "The true source of war lies deep in our chest and all the horror that from time to time fills the world, is merely a mirror image of the human soul."<sup>7</sup> Despite moral and cultural formation man is still characterized by pugnaciousness that can be seen in an overt form in the animal kingdom. The fighting instinct is a natural disposition aimed at one's own survival. Its dysfunction can result in self-destruction, as evidenced by the extinction of animal species that developed for too long without natural foes. Jünger provides the example of the dodo which did not prove itself in the fight for survival after new animal species had arrived on the island of Mauritius, since it had not developed defensive strategies.<sup>8</sup> Under normal circumstances, human society limits the fighting instinct through conventions and norms, but it becomes prominent in situations when the power of shared values decreases. In such situations the animality, which is latently present in man, erupts and becomes evident: "In the fight...an animal rises from the bottom of the soul like a mysterious monster."<sup>9</sup> Jünger's references to animality, boiling blood and the activation of basic instincts highlight man's irrational stirrings, which are expansive and without rational guidance result in primitive thirst for blood and the desire to destroy. These are expressions of the will to kill.<sup>10</sup> Jünger maintains that the initial waves of the war swept away subtle rational distinctions and created a space for "the rebirth of barbarism,"

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<sup>6</sup> Jünger, „Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,“ p. 103 [*translations are my own unless otherwise noted*].

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

“intense outbursts of sensuality,” and “the rediscovery of violence.”<sup>11</sup> The war brought to the forefront elements of human nature that seemed marginal in peace times, especially its death drive.

The situation in which fighting unfolds requires the maximalization of one’s strength and uncovers such levels of personality that are hidden under normal circumstances. One needs to invest his whole person in the situation, as the fight prompts him to reach the utmost limits of his capacities. The appropriation of the *will to fight* is a fundamental prerequisite for being not merely a passive participant in the events but rather their active shaper. This will is not just a precondition for the individual’s self-defense and self-formation, but also constitutes the “center” of the nation which assumes responsibility for its own existence in a situation of conflict.<sup>12</sup> Jünger claims that the war unleashed a large amount of accumulated energy and at the time of its eruption overshadowed even the most noble values.<sup>13</sup>

When describing the irrational dimension of fighting Jünger pays close attention to the encounter with the enemy in which intense emotions are released. During the preparation for this encounter the fighter experiences a broad spectrum of positive and negative impulses, ranging from belonging and camaraderie to anguish and horror. The explosive mixture of emotions is aggravated by the long tense stay in the trenches. Even though the encounter with the enemy is primarily marked by the fear of death, it also includes a liberating moment: “The view of the enemy brings alongside great horror also liberation from heavy unbearable pressure.”<sup>14</sup>

During the encounter *a primal relation* is constituted,<sup>15</sup> which emerges from the depth of two fighting individuals, of whom only one can prevail. This relation is characterized by dynamics that slip into oblivion in peaceful times, as they appear unnecessary. In the confrontation with the enemy deep animal layers of human personality come to the fore. The individual discovers “a terrible dream that animality dreams in him” and that connects him with prehistoric times when hordes of primitive humans fought for survival on vast steppes.<sup>16</sup> The blood and the animal instinct prompt the individual to cast himself upon his enemy and defeat him in a merciless struggle. A glimpse of the enemy’s face mobilizes unsuspected destructive potential. Jünger speaks of the reign of “other gods,”<sup>17</sup> when primitive power and the desire for destruction replace the usual rules of human coexistence.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

The proximity of the enemy and the permanent awareness of the possibility of a fight narrows one's life perspective. The individual, who previously performed a broad variety of actions, is focused on a limited number of steps that ensure the continuity of the military operation. One's inner experience is also substantially narrowed, as it reflects the one-dimensional focus of the war. The enemy represents the central moment of this experience, despite the fact that immediate contact with him as a human being is relatively rare.<sup>18</sup> He permeates one's conscious and subconscious processes and paralyzes mental and emotional actions: "In a context when thinking and action are reduced to a single pattern, also emotions coalesce and adapt to the dreadful simplicity of the goal, which is the destruction of the adversary."<sup>19</sup> The enemy becomes the target of a chaotic mixture of emotions and thoughts which are directed against him without regard for his personal uniqueness.

## II. The Fight as Service to an Idea in a Metaphysical Community of Knights

The fight is not merely an outburst of basic instincts and waves of irrational stirrings, but it is also a clash of opposing ideas. Jünger interprets the conflict of rational designs as a higher movement. He points in this direction already when discussing the fight as a natural given, as he speaks of *the deep reason of blood*.<sup>20</sup> Although he does not elaborate on this concept, it clearly expresses the connection between the rational and the irrational dimension of the fight. Jünger describes the fight as "God's judgement over two ideas"<sup>21</sup> and the last rational instance for the resolution of a dispute that cannot be resolved by peaceful means.

A certain tension emerges in Jünger's descriptions of *the idea*. On the one hand, he places it at the metaphysical level and attributes to it an independent dynamic, on the other hand, he presents it as a conviction of the fighting individual. Jünger explores the abstract metaphysical form of the idea when analyzing the will that drives the fighting individual in moments of intense anguish. The paralyzed individual is able to act only because "a higher will supports him."<sup>22</sup> Although his own will revolts against the higher will, the latter is more powerful. Jünger explains similarly the way in which the idea permeates individual soldiers. He has little illusion about the soldiers' motivations and claims that they are mostly concerned

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 89. For more detail on Jünger's interpretation of the connection between the idea and the fight see Michael Großheim, "Kampf/Krieg," in Matthias Schöning (ed.), *Ernst Jünger Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014, p. 332.

with their own needs and do not understand the essence of war. They consider war an external process, succumb to the manipulation by the mass media and interpret the course of war in a fragmentary way. Nevertheless, even the existence of such soldiers is permeated by the idea which uses them as “material for its own purposes, without them even knowing.”<sup>23</sup> We encounter here the concept of unconscious service to the idea which operates in soldiers despite their neither understanding nor accepting it.

Jünger is, however, mostly interested in conscious service to the idea by those who understand it and have adopted the fight as an inner experience. They are willing to “sacrifice their personality for the idea”<sup>24</sup> and subordinate the individual good to the collective good, which is represented by the idea. Importantly, Jünger does not attribute to the idea any concrete content emphasizing solely the act of the individual’s submission. He focuses on *the form*, not *the content*: “to die for one’s conviction is the highest thing”<sup>25</sup> regardless of the conviction’s content. The radicality of this view is most clearly manifested in the claim that even death for an erroneous conviction is great heroism.<sup>26</sup> The decisive factor is the individual’s commitment to the idea and his readiness to give his utmost.

Jünger describes conscious service to the idea as *knightliness*. The soldier, who is devoted to the idea he is fighting for, uncovers gradually the essence of the fighting spirit.<sup>27</sup> In this process he sees ever more clearly that the fight is not merely an instinctive matter but can be “ennobled by knightliness.”<sup>28</sup> This means consciously serving the idea and recognizing its presence in every fighting individual who is radically committed to it. This has far-reaching consequences, as the individual knight does not stand alone, rather a transfrontal metaphysical community of knights is formed. This community relativizes the external frontlines between the different fighting parties.

As we have already pointed out, the proximity of the enemy provokes a number of irrational reactions in the fighting individual. A dynamic emerges, however, that is contrary to the irrational desire to destroy the enemy. Jünger highlights the fact that while influential noncombatants – statesmen, intellectuals and journalists – spread hate against the enemy, this negative attitude is not common among soldiers.<sup>29</sup> The proximity of the enemy leads to a paradoxical

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<sup>23</sup> Jünger, „Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,“ p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

solidarity between the fighting parties. Although in direct combat they seek to defeat each other, they refuse to *degrade* each other.<sup>30</sup> Especially during ceasefire, respect for the enemy is shown in various ways.<sup>31</sup> The shared life on the frontline and acts of courage connect the enemies while distancing them from their compatriots in the rear: "How much the man on the frontline despised the whole supply machinery in the rear. He felt closer to the fighting adversary...Every hate cry is suspicious, it is weakness. Only courage recognizes courage!"<sup>32</sup>

Jünger interprets the solidarity with the enemy as an expression of knightliness and a higher movement of the idea. The soldier, who fights passionately for his cause, considers the idea more important than himself.<sup>33</sup> His commitment is radical, and he encounters the same radicality in the enemy, with whom he thus gains common ground.<sup>34</sup> Even though their goals are contrary and resolute fighting is aimed at vanquishing the other, the idea unites them in a metaphysical community of knights. They respect the fighting spirit manifested in all committed individuals, including the enemy. Through the community of knightly fighters the constructive dimension of the fight is manifested. The contrariness of their purposes does not prevent them from jointly forming the course of history: "The fight is not merely destruction, it is also a male form of procreation; thus, even the one who fought for errors did not fight in vain. Today's and tomorrow's enemies are united in manifestations of the future that they create together."<sup>35</sup> Individuals, who perceive the fight as inner experience, collaborate on forming the future despite the fact that externally only that which divides them is apparent.

Availing ourselves of the reflections developed above we can claim that *the form* unites the enemies while *the content* divides them. They are united by courage and dedication, as well as by faith in something that transcends them. Although they fight against the content of the other party's faith, they respect the faith itself.<sup>36</sup> The unambiguous disposition of dedication and faith brings the knightly fighter closer to the enemy—who thinks and feels similarly—while distancing him from soldiers and civilians on his own side who do not share this disposition. The pithiest expression of Jünger's *formalism* is the slogan "It is not essential *for what* we fight, but *how* we fight."<sup>37</sup> This slogan reflects the dedicated individuals'

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

intensive service to the idea and points to their metaphysical community which transcends the division into friends and enemies. This community may be manifested in a physical way—through helping the prisoners of war or paying the last respects to the fallen enemies<sup>38</sup>—but it persists even in moments when there is no opportunity for such manifestations. In this context Jünger highlights an important distinction between a political enemy and a private adversary: one fights against the former out of principle, not for personal reasons.<sup>39</sup> The metaphysical community with the enemy is thus not hampered by personal antagonism.

The most compelling images of the metaphysical connection between the knightly fighters are found in Jünger's descriptions of the soldiers' physical clash during an attack. Alongside naturalistic descriptions of the destruction of human life Jünger describes also the fighters' positive bond which does not cease to exist even in merciless life and death combat: "[W]hen we clash in a cloud of fire and smoke, we are united, we are two parts of a single force...The one who understands this, affirms both himself and the enemy and lives simultaneously in the whole and in its parts."<sup>40</sup> The image of enemies as two parts—or two poles—of a single force corresponds to the dynamic of content and form in Jünger's reflections. From the point of view of content, the enemies are antipoles that negate each other. From the formal point of view, they are parts of the same force, since they both consciously serve the idea and respect its presence in all knightly fighters. In the former sense they are hopelessly divided, in the latter sense they are fatefully united.

Jünger's poetics of the metaphysical bond of knightly fighters is disrupted by a fact whose significance steadily increases. Despite emphasizing the role of the individual in modern warfare Jünger admits that the unprecedented rise of military technology changes the character of the fight in a decisive way.<sup>41</sup> Soldiers imagined the fight and the enemy differently: instead of a direct confrontation with other human beings they were flooded with waves of deadly steel and gas. Rolf Peter Sieferle points out that in the initial phases of World War I an outdated image of war was common: "a heroic, fast and colorful campaign, similar to the Napoleonic Wars or the Franco-Prussian War, with short fierce clashes, with movement and

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47, p. 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87. See also Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 28-29. Schmitt makes a similar distinction but it is of a later date. Jünger and Schmitt knew each other's works and corresponded for over a half century.

<sup>40</sup> Jünger, „Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,“ p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> For more detail on Jünger's view of technology see Olaf Schröter, „*Es ist am Technischen viel Illusion*“. *Die Technik im Werk Ernst Jüngers*, Berlin: Köster, 1993; Helmuth Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger. Die Biographie*, Munich: Pantheon Verlag, 2009; Thomas Rohkrämer, *Eine andere Moderne? Zivilisationskritik, Natur und Technik in Deutschland 1880 – 1933*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999, pp. 301-338.



courageous attacks.”<sup>42</sup> Jünger describes the transformation of the image of the enemy caused by extensive use of military technology: “Sometimes we forget that we fight against people. The enemy appears as an enormous impersonal force.”<sup>43</sup> In another passage he even claims that “the fight of the machines is so tremendous that man almost completely disappears in it.”<sup>44</sup> The efficiency of machines facilitates an unprecedented scope of destruction.

Jünger’s descriptions of the enormous extent of annihilation of human life overshadow his compelling descriptions of the knightly fighters’ respect for each other. The use of machines may still be determined by humans, but technological warfare changes man himself. Jünger maintains that the individual is *the vanquished* of his age.<sup>45</sup> The mass, which originated in the milieu of industrial operation of military technology, has been placed on the pedestal. Knightly virtues have been replaced by the mediocrity of the mass of workers to whom the production and operation of impersonal destructive machinery was entrusted. In *The Fight as Inner Experience* Jünger still views this development as negative but in the works from the 1930s he takes a much more ambiguous stance.<sup>46</sup>

### III. Total Mobilization: The Rise of the Working Mass

Jünger continues his reflections on the nature of the fight in *Total mobilization*<sup>47</sup> in which he presents new perspectives. The virtuous knightly individual is relegated to the background and the uniform collective of the working mass becomes the main protagonist. Jünger interprets World War I as a decisive historical event in which “the emergence of the great masses” became evident and it led to “the great surging forth of the masses.”<sup>48</sup> This trend did not abate when the war came to an end, on the contrary, it was strengthened and the 1930s were marked by movements

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<sup>42</sup> Sieferle, *Die Konservative Revolution. Fünf biographische Skizzen*, p. 190.

<sup>43</sup> Jünger, „Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,“ p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>46</sup> See especially the works *Total Mobilization* and *The Worker*.

<sup>47</sup> For the different editions of *Total Mobilization* see Ulrich Bröckling, “Die totale Mobilmachung (1930),” in Matthias Schöning (ed.), *Ernst Jünger Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014, p. 100. For the polemics that the work provoked see Uwe-K. Ketelsen, „Nun werden nicht nur die historischen Strukturen gesprengt, sondern auch deren mythische und kultische Voraussetzungen.“ Zu Ernst Jüngers *Die totale Mobilmachung* (1930) und *Der Arbeiter* (1932),“ in Hans-Harald Müller and Harro Segeberg (eds.), *Ernst Jünger im 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1995, pp. 77-95.

<sup>48</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 128 („Total Mobilization,“ p. 128).

of “the uniformly molded masses.”<sup>49</sup> Wolfgang Kaempfer points out that “[in] *Total Mobilization* objective trends of the epoch, which prompt society to constantly prepare for war, overshadow subjective radicality and aggression.”<sup>50</sup> Jünger’s view of the dominance of the working mass is ambiguous: on the one hand, he considers it a dangerous manifestation of unfreedom and conformism, on the other hand, he does not see any alternative and thus accepts it as a given.

A key concept in Jünger’s treatise is *total mobilization*, with the help of which he explains both the uniqueness of World War I, the weakening of the individual and the strengthening of the mass. This concept relates to the unprecedented mobilization of human and material resources that ultimately led to the elimination of traditional distinctions between war and peace, combatants and noncombatants. No fighting party was ready for this challenge, but those who mastered it, won the war. Even they, however, did not succeed in gaining full control over total mobilization: partly they control it, partly they are “thrown” into it.

When describing total mobilization Jünger highlights the differences between World War I and earlier conflicts. He describes the wars of the nineteenth century as limited conflicts which normally took place under the leadership of monarchs. A certain financial sum was set aside in the form of “a fixed war budget” which limited the extent of military operations.<sup>51</sup> Armed confrontations of regular armies on battlefields constituted the core of the war and in the end determined its outcome. General conscription implemented in Germany represented only “a *partial* measure,”<sup>52</sup> since it applied to a part of male population. Although armies grew in size and the emphasis was shifted from professional soldiers to conscripts, the fundamental framework of war was not altered.<sup>53</sup> A decisive change took place in World War I which due to technological and social progress became a world revolution.<sup>54</sup> Jünger views the progress as ambivalent but considers its lack the decisive cause for Germany’s defeat. Uncritical belief in progress<sup>55</sup> became a fundamental mobilizing

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<sup>49</sup> Jünger, “Die Totale Mobilmachung,” p. 141 (“Total Mobilization,” p. 138). In the late 1920s a series of crucial works were published that examined the situation of the contemporary man from a philosophical-anthropological perspective. Cf. Jaroslava Vydrová, “The Intertwining of Phenomenology and Philosophical Anthropology. From Husserl to Plessner,” in Peter Šajda (ed.), *Modern and Postmodern Crises of Symbolic Structures. Essays in Philosophical Anthropology*, Leiden: Brill, 2021, pp. 41-62.

<sup>50</sup> Wolfgang Kaempfer, *Ernst Jünger*, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1981, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,” pp. 124-125 („Total Mobilization,” p. 126).

<sup>52</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,” p. 124 („Total Mobilization,” p. 125).

<sup>53</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,” p. 125.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>55</sup> Jünger claims that “progress is the nineteenth century’s great popular church—the only one enjoying real authority and uncritical faith.” Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,” p. 123 („Total Mobilization,” p. 124).

impulse of the forces that formed the victorious masses of the world conflict. At the same time, the dark side of the progress became evident with its lack of rationality and humanity.<sup>56</sup>

In World War I new forces took part in the fighting process and conditions for total mobilization were created. The *war of knights* was replaced by the *war of workers* and the *army on the battlefield* was overshadowed by the *army of work*.<sup>57</sup> War became a vast work operation, in which new ways of armament, supply and transportation were implemented due to technological achievements. From the financial point of view, the conflict expanded significantly due to the accessibility of war credits. The fighting nations were transformed into enormous factories that continuously produced war material. Mass work processes were designed to achieve an advantage over the enemy in the production of key goods. Compared to the limited mobilization of military forces in Bismarck's Germany World War I brought about the mobilization of broad social strata which participated in different ways in the saturation of the needs of technological warfare. Although the fighting parties were not ready for such a colossal mobilization of working masses, the outcome of their technological-economic competition became a key factor of the final victory.

The worker-oriented character of technological war transforms the individual into a standardized participant of mass processes. Civilians safeguard supply operations and the organization of the rear area, soldiers manage the lethal machinery in the theater of war. The increasing power and range of technologies eliminates the traditional division into combatants and noncombatants, since powerful artillery, air and navy attacks strike also unarmed individuals and civilian targets.<sup>58</sup> The fact that the threat to human life is not limited to the fighting zone but concerns in an increasing measure the rear area prompts the fighting parties to intensify the mobilization of working masses. Partial mobilization turns into total mobilization which is to a large extent an anonymous process that is out of human control: "Total mobilization is far less consummated than it consummates itself...it expresses the secret and inexorable claim to which our life in the age of masses and machines subjects us."<sup>59</sup>

Jünger reiterates the fact that extreme mobilization of human and material resources for the sake of war did not end with the capitulation of the Central Powers. The total character of the mobilization of working masses is manifested precisely in

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<sup>56</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ pp. 122 and 140.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 126 and 128. In earlier works Jünger expressed regret at the fact that modern technology eliminated romantic features of heroic combat. Cf. Sieferle, *Die Konservative Revolution. Fünf biographische Skizzen*, p. 196.

<sup>58</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 128.

<sup>59</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 128 („Total Mobilization,“ p. 128).

the fact that it is not bound to a concrete military conflict. It takes place also in the postwar period and substantially determines “the state of peace.” Armament continues and the collaboration of military and industrial structures deepens. Society adapts to permanent work processes that prepare it for war, which strengthens the mass and weakens the individual. World War I did not exhaust all the possibilities of mobilization, and therefore it is still underway despite peace declarations.<sup>60</sup>

A key claim in Jünger’s deliberations is that the ability of mobilization turned out to be an even more decisive factor of victory than the development and production of technology. This ability was most clearly manifested in “progressive” countries that managed to efficiently appeal to masses and turn them into working collectives on the basis of a widespread belief in progress.<sup>61</sup> The combination of the watchwords of progress and human rights created a persuasive rhetorical basis which due to its universality prevailed over particular watchwords of the enemy. The incorporation of the themes of humanity and peace into war propaganda proved to be an efficient instrument in spreading progressive ideas.<sup>62</sup> Seen from a structural point of view, states based on egalitarian principles carried out a faster mobilization of working masses than monarchies with complicated structures. In the conflict between the Western *civilization* and the German *culture* the former prevailed, since it corresponded better to the demands of mobilization.<sup>63</sup>

Jünger identifies several interconnected factors that contributed to Germany’s defeat in World War I. Above all, Germany implemented only a partial mobilization, as its elites insufficiently grasped the zeitgeist and did not manage to persistently motivate the masses of potential workers. A considerable part of German human resources focused on activities that did not contribute to the implementation of total mobilization. National elites relied on the power of *old* symbols which were modernized with *foreign* elements.<sup>64</sup> Slogans, such as “for Germany” were popularized but were emptied out when their interpretation was not persuasively anchored and directed.<sup>65</sup> References to tradition appeared untrustworthy, since the elites did not identify with them wholeheartedly. Official ideology was “simultaneously timely and untimely, resulting in nothing but a mixture of false romanticism and inadequate liberalism.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 127. Ulrich Bröckling points out that in *Total Mobilization* Jünger succeeded in connecting various motifs of his political thought and integrating them in a powerful image of “war as a normal state of society.” Cf. Bröckling, „Die totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ pp. 129 and 130.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 131, 134, 136.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132, 135.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>66</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 133 („Total Mobilization,“ p. 132).

In Germany a consensus on total mobilization—which would enable military, political and cultural elites to use mass working processes for the sake of victory—was not reached.

His diagnosis of the causes of military defeat leads Jünger to the conclusion that Germany does not have at its disposal an alternative to the ideology of progress and the civilization of working masses. The ideological mixture which German elites offered to the fighting individuals and collectives proved to be inconsistent and inefficient. The disintegration of “non-civilizational” structures during and after the war signals the power of modern working masses that possess a developed technological foundation.<sup>67</sup>

Unprecedented successes of progressive movements suggest that in the given historical moment there is no other way of appropriating the zeitgeist. Jünger lists among progressive movements such different paradigms as Americanism, Bolshevism, Fascism, Zionism, and national liberation movements of Africa and Asia. He recommends that Germany join “progressivist optimism” with a clear awareness that the mask of humanity conceals an absolutist face.<sup>68</sup> The fact that the interwar period brought about a tremendous rise of working masses is indubitable, therefore it is to be accepted as the point of departure. At the same time, it is necessary to uncover the reality that hides behind the recruitment slogans about progress and humanity. Jünger maintains that the rise of working masses necessarily includes a systematic suppression of the individual: “forms of compulsion stronger than torture are at work here; they are so strong, that human beings welcome them joyfully. Behind every exit, marked with the symbols of happiness, lurk pain and death.”<sup>69</sup> Jünger’s apocalyptic vision does not contain normative reflections on how to tackle the negative effects of massification. Except for the fatalist acceptance of the zeitgeist he only calls on the individual to “[step] armed into these spaces.”<sup>70</sup>

#### IV. The Weakened Individual *vis-à-vis* the Deceptions of the Mass

When comparing the works *The Fight as Inner Experience* and *Total Mobilization* we see the shift of Jünger’s focus from the knightly individual to the working mass and the deepening of his resignation.

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<sup>67</sup> Jünger, „Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 140.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139 and 140.

<sup>69</sup> Jünger, “Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 141 (“Total Mobilization,“ p. 138).

<sup>70</sup> Jünger, “Die Totale Mobilmachung,“ p. 141 (“Total Mobilization,“ p. 138). Jünger will develop his apocalyptic vision of the mass society of workers in *The Worker*. Cf. Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt*, Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932.

In the first work, the key protagonist is the knightly fighter, whose personal disposition represents a decisive factor of the conflict's course. This individual fights for an idea that he considers more important than himself, thus bringing into the conflict rationality and creating a metaphysical connection with the similarly disposed enemy. Military conflict is characterized by a tension between irrational animal instincts and rational effects of the idea with most soldiers following the former without adopting a truly conscious attitude to the war. The committed knightly fighter, who consciously serves the idea, forms his own attitudes and regulates the natural fighting instinct. He recognizes the same disposition in the enemy, with whom he shares a metaphysical bond that can be manifested through visible gestures of respect. This formal connection exists despite fundamental differences in content between the ideas that the individuals fight for. The shared disposition brings the enemies closer to each other and distances them from "friends" who do not share it. Conscious service to the idea does not mean the end of enmity, since the conflict continues until the dispute is resolved. The metaphysical community of knightly fighters does not eliminate the fighting instinct but provides it with a rational framework. The fight represents a divine judgement over competing rational designs that are fundamentally at odds. The fact that in the end only one of them prevails does not depreciate the individual fighter's effort. The metaphysical bond persists despite the different measure of the ideas' veracity: the enemies shape the course of history together. The poetics of the individual knights' fight for the idea and the metaphysical overcoming of the division into friends and enemies is disrupted by the rise of the working mass that produces and controls the technical part of the war. The individual disappears in the enormous fight of the machines, and technology conceals the human face of the enemy. Jünger insists on the key role of the individual knight while admitting his defeat in the confrontation with the working mass and its technological basis. The idealized vision of the knights jointly building the future is swept away by an avalanche of lethal war material.

In *Total Mobilization* the personal disposition of the individual fighter does not play a substantial role anymore. As a *knight* representing fighting virtues he has no place in the industrial-technological conflict. As a *worker* he has no uniqueness and his personal disposition is standardized. If the individual is to contribute to the victory of the collective, he must fulfill the tasks assigned to him by the collective. He must become an efficient component of the mass. Although the increasing uniformity of working masses brings about the rule of conformism and unfreedom, the victory of mass societies in World War I paralyzed alternative social structures. Egalitarian progressive societies succeeded in achieving total mobilization of human and material resources while more traditional societies relied on particular

watchwords and achieved only partial mobilization. Mass movements represent an adequate expression of the zeitgeist, and their victorious campaign continues even after the war. Even though the knightly individual is the victim of this campaign Jünger does not expect a coordinated effort of such individuals that would lead to an emergence of an alternative social project. However, Jünger's resignation—which consists primarily in recognizing the dominance of the mass and in the vision of progressive standardized Germany—is not absolute. He demands that the individual unmask the manipulation to which he is exposed, as the watchwords of massification rely on dangerous illusions. Yet, Jünger does not suggest a constructive attitude that the individual should adopt after the illusions have been unmasked. The mass apocalypse becomes destiny.

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