
P A R A D I G M S

The Memoirs of the Great War General Considerations

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*Memoirist documents
constitute genuine pleas
against the war.*

A MAJOR EVENT in the history of humanity, the Great War—as World War I is known in historiography—had a profound impact on the contemporary world, on the destinies of those who experienced it. The years of the first global conflagration and its immediate aftermath represented a period of profound changes, including those that occurred at the level of the history of mentalities, as domestic existence in a well-established society and traditional mentality were dislocated by the war.¹

Memoirs have retained their value of documentary-testimonials, remaining one of history's fundamental sources: their acknowledgment as historical sources should be placed in connection with their capacity to restore or recon-

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struct individual or collective destinies, as well as to offer glimpses into the mentality of an era. When the events preserved in memory are transposed in the form of a written text, so that they may be conveyed to those around, memoirs make their appearance. A literary species close to both history and literature, the former providing the documentary foundation and the latter invoked for aesthetic effect,² memoirs are characterized by their confessional, authentic strain, and it is within them that one's experience may gain contour.³ The discourse is thus authenticated, enhanced by the vivid testimony of the protagonist, who relives the past by recounting it and invests it with elements of veracity and genuineness. Direct participation in an event transfers the information about it into a personal narrative that is intrinsically linked to autobiographical memory.⁴ Memory becomes encapsulated in a representation of the past, offering an accurate picture of it.⁵ All the types of writing that may be included within the memoirist genre (diaries, memoirs, memories, autobiographies, correspondence) bring into debate the human area of experience, the human need for self-definition and retrospective justification, so much so that the human dimension—as a central coordinate—explains the reception of this genre.

Through memoirs, memories become the necessary link between the past—lived by the narrating subject—and the future, the latter perspective belonging to the descendants, with the mention that the memoirist-protagonist always considers his account to be necessary and useful for posterity and, above all, for his or her direct successors, who are thus invited to keep the image of those times alive and to retrieve useful teachings from such memoirs.

Memoirist writing seeks to capture those hypostases that fall within the scope of social psychology, the history of mentalities, intercultural socialization and social history, and which, together, can provide a complete picture of a particular era. The emphasis shifts thus from military history onto the destinies of the humans who lived at a particular time, activating the equation foregrounded in the writings of Paul Ricœur, which includes three essential elements: memory, history, and oblivion. The complexity entailed by the reconstitution of the past is predicated on an osmosis between different research fields, connected by interdisciplinarity, as well as by the multifaceted entwinements between history, sociology, psychology, the history of mentalities, cultural history, historical anthropology, and oral history. An approach to war memoirs may unveil multiple collective dilemmas, allowing for a confrontation with the past, for its elucidation, and for overcoming the “difficulties” of past times. In the context of war, the center of interest is transferred onto “bad memories,”⁶ as Timothy Garton Ash has called them, with reference to aspects that are regrettable, monstrous, or inhuman.

The return to memoirist sources encourages introspection, offering the witnesses who were contemporaneous with those times the possibility to share their

own experience: their testimonies condense a privileged vantage upon the past, which can fill the gaps that remain after other sources have been studied to the point of exhaustion.⁷

Memory becomes a fundamental historical source that permits the disclosure of the lived event, correlated with the emotional effect it engendered, which entails the fact that research may move towards the field of human psycho-sociality.

The analysis of memoirs allows for an in-depth investigation of behavioral types manifested in extreme situations, in exceptional circumstances, as well as for an identification of the sensitivities of the war generation, in particular the generation that fought in the trenches, and may recreate the state of mind that prevailed at the time.⁸ Events are explored through the participants' own perspective,⁹ the past being reconstructed on a personal note, authenticated by a recourse to memory. Autobiographical memory requires, therefore, one's involvement, one's participation in an event as an actor or as a witness,¹⁰ and all these individual, personal memories contribute to shaping collective memory,¹¹ outlining the overall picture of the events. As such, the subject of memory is only partially the first-person singular "I," because one person's memories may reveal a complex spectrum within which myriad other individuals—together with whom this person lived and experienced his or her memories—may be juxtaposed in direct correlation with this subject. Inside the events, which are subsequently shared by the recourse to memory, the main character maintains a central, privileged place, to which all the other factors are related. Individual memory is thus also social memory, because personal recollections are supplemented with the aid of the others' memory.¹² Our memories are interrelated with and influenced by the society to which we belong and by its members, who may experience a particular moment in time together with us.¹³ The notion of memory-memoirs partakes thus of a happy symbiosis, which results in the activation of the former, producing a memory that "speaks."¹⁴ The latter is transposed into the text of the memoir, providing the final outcome which Ricœur designates as "narrated time."¹⁵

The reference point in this study is the Great War, which is revealed through a multifaceted presentation, capturing a diversity of experiences, distributed across a complex behavioral and emotional range, as they are reflected in the memoirs of the combatants and as they marked the destinies of those who empathetically experienced the event.

Through autobiographical discourse, the narrative of human destinies becomes an exercise in collective memory,¹⁶ which generates cultural values and unveils a picture of the events at the macro-historical level.

The Romanian memoirs about World War I confirm the integration of our space within the European context, a sphere to which Romanians have always

felt attached, considering themselves included within the structures of European civilization, despite their geographical location and the frequently hostile political contexts. The publication of war memoirs may highlight mentalities and cultural identities that may lead to a retrieval and valorization of the Romanian cultural heritage, which may thus be projected into the European continental context. Introducing the Romanian war memoirs into the European historiographical circuit facilitates intercultural contacts, attesting the connectivity between Romanian and continental historical writing, with an emphasis on interdisciplinarity, multifaceted research domains, and the adoption of modern research methods in which history blends harmoniously with related fields of research.

MUCH HAS been written about World War I as a historical event. International historiography has focused on the subject, attempting to reveal details about the historical context, the motivation underlying the outbreak of the conflict, the military operations, and the personalities that played an important role in the whole equation. In the historical literature written about the Great War, there stand out three main tendencies, marked by an interest in one particular perspective or another: the military-political-diplomatic perspective, followed by the economic and social one and, finally, the perspective of the new cultural history, which is the most recent of these approaches. The first historiographical productions, focusing mainly on the technical aspects of the event, appeared in the immediate aftermath of the war and were authored by former soldiers—mainly generals and military commanders—and politicians. The diplomatic documents of the conflict were published, the interest focusing on those responsible for triggering it. During this historiographical stage, memoirist texts were of little interest to the specialists or to the general public, everyone manifesting an appetite for the military, political and diplomatic context. Analysis was not leveled at the large masses of soldiers, who had been the real protagonists of the war, or at the civilians, who had actively experienced the disaster. The perspective adopted by historiographical analysis was thus unilateral, being channeled from the upper echelons towards the base. After the outbreak of World War II, the angle changed. A line connecting the two major military events of the century was drawn, and the social and economic aspects acquired another dimension, explained through the changes occurring in the global context after 1945, including elements like the level of school attendance and literacy, which revitalized this outlook and invited a different approach. Over the past few decades, a particular interest has been aroused by the impact exerted by this event on human psychology and the manner in which it acted on the collective psyche, the emphasis being laid on the “lived” life and the “lost” life in the

context of the conflict. European specialist literature has attentively approached these issues, as evinced by the excellent collaboration between historians, sociologists and anthropologists, which has resulted in the publication of books and studies that have revealed little known facets of human nature, shaped as it was by this conflict: human destinies have thus been recovered and the clichés of traditionalist approaches have been overcome. European historiography, especially the French School, has excelled in this regard, publishing several such works.¹⁷

Regarding the history of armed conflict, some works claim to reveal the whole truth about the war,¹⁸ while others explore the international relations from the turn of the twentieth century, seeking to elucidate the causes underpinning the outbreak of the conflict.¹⁹ The testimony of the former Prime Minister of France during the war, Georges Clemenceau,²⁰ is a genuine proof of that manner in which the conflict was perceived and approached at the highest levels of European politics, but also illustrates the catastrophic effects of this conflagration in Europe, both in the defeated and in the victorious countries. A special category consists of works that deal primarily with the military history of the event, written throughout an entire century, from the time of the war until nowadays.²¹

Insofar as the Romanian space is concerned, we consider that the publication of the memoirs written by politicians and former combatants represents a fortunate opportunity, as they provide a valuable source for the historiography of the subject. Such works began to be published in the early years of the interwar period and have continued to be reprinted in recent decades.²² Despite the fact that some information is parsimonious, the records, notes and correspondence of these authors offer important glimpses onto the daily life of the period and highlight the scaffolding of the political world as it was shaped by the power holders. A whole series has been dedicated to volunteers and to the prisoners of war.²³ The texts published during the communist regime had a militant character, being written at political command. Using a triumphalist discourse, the communist historiography channeled its efforts towards illustrating the just, dignified and heroic character of Romania's participation in the war. After 1990, the discursive language changed and became connected to that of European historiography, addressing the event by opening towards domains adjacent to history.²⁴ There are just a few studies on the psychology of war in Romanian historiography: Dumitru Caracostea, with his volume on the psychology of war,²⁵ was one of the promoters of the genre. By extrapolation, the same can be said about approaches to the phenomenon of collective memory, memoirist literature and historical imagology, most of the volumes that have addressed these issues belonging, chronologically, to the past two decades. The books published after 1990 have evinced a responsiveness to the European historiographical undertakings.²⁶ The contact with the European his-

toriography on the subject has also been facilitated by several translations of consecrated works in the field.²⁷

The technique for exploring testimonies and memories resides in a comparative interpretation, which may schematize causal relations and their logical consequences. Multiple facets are brought into consideration, in a particularly complex, multidisciplinary framework, outlining a picture in which several fields of study are intertwined and several issues are concurrently addressed. The publication of war memoirs betrays an intention of overcoming the barriers of a discourse entrenched in factology and descriptive history. One may thus detect the mutations registered at the mental level, the transformations that human personality underwent in its contact with war. The area of interest has been redirected from the military events themselves onto the history of mentalities, with regard to the combatants' experiences, feelings, and perceptions about those events. This transfer consists in a representation of individual life experiences, providing personal reflections on shared experiences, lived directly and disclosed in a realistic and dramatic manner, which means that second place is granted to the reconstruction of the armed conflict—a type of approach that historiography was previously largely committed to for a long period of time.

The anonymous victims of those terrible years may choose to confess their traumatic experiences in memoirs, and their testimonies contribute to rounding off the image of the conflagration, as well as to the complexity of its representation. This kind of analysis uses a commonly applied standard model, in which perception moves from the particular to the general, having, as a starting point, a personal destiny, impregnated with remarkable and extraordinary elements and incorporated within the macro-history of the Great War.

The model is applicable not only to the memoirs of the former combatants, who were truly on the battlefield, but also to memoirists belonging to all categories of the civil society: the refugees, those who were deported and those on whom the war left indelible traces.²⁸

The working methodology involves a complex set of research methods, applied in analyzing the texts of the memoirs. Aiming to capture the metamorphosis that occurred at a psychological level, this approach is carried out from the perspective of cultural history and the history of mentalities.

The memoirs of the former combatants cover several dimensions of the war, depending on the experience the protagonists went through: the psychological impact of mobilization on the front; separation from the loved ones, who were abandoned in uncertain circumstances; the break with the past and the entry into a new universe, a world of armed conflict, with all its facets. Memoirist texts reveal the experiment shared by each and every one: the frontline, for the combating soldiers; hospital life, for the wounded; camp life, for the prisoners; the

atmosphere in the country, in the case of the refugees; the responsibilities of the military priest, primarily related to two central actions: firstly, the administration of last rites, which included religious burial services, as well as keeping accurate records of the dead Romanian soldiers and their resting places, the second major task concerning the offering of spiritual assistance to the soldiers, together with the provision of liturgical services on various occasions. All these aspects converged towards a strong emotional impact, composing a broad image of the history of mentalities for that period, but also illustrating the common ground underlying the memoirs of all the characters, namely the dramatism of those years and the devastating impact of the conflict on all those who experienced the war. It is a generally valid reality, upon which everyone involved agreed, reminding us of the paradigm Jürgen Habermas has developed in relation to the validity of precepts, in his ascertainment that any norm can claim validity as long as all those involved approve of this conception.²⁹

In memoirs, the dramatic tone of the presentation is designed to register a crescendo, as the effects of the battles reveal their devastating consequences. Mind-shattering descriptions are presented, which shock the reader by capturing the protagonists' suffering, despair, demoralization, and their behavior in front of death.³⁰ This is a different outlook on death than the usual, ordinary one, as it overwhelms those who experience it; it is death by suffering, perceived first hand, and the images of those who are dying become traumatic memories. The phenomenon of death³¹ loses many of its religious overtones, becoming routine, an organic part of the war. Many protagonists reconsider the role of divine providence,³² regarded, in that context, as the only salvation. A peculiar spirituality of the war is outlined, created in the wake of individual and collective trauma, which causes a recalibration of the relations with the divine, giving the church the opportunity to recover the ground it lost in the face of secularization.³³ A new mystical dimension is highlighted, in relation to the sacrifice that the subjects deem they were forced to embark upon, which is reflected in the metamorphosis of the religious connotations of death, leaving a mark on the meaning of spirituality and the religious history of those years.

The first poignant memory is intrinsically linked to the soldiers' departure for the front, which is always recorded with utmost precision, revealing the strong emotional impact of the moment. There occurs a rupture with the previous life of the character, who lives intensely the sentiment of his detachment from civilian life. It is a change faced by all combatants when they enter the tumultuous world of conflict and marks their first contact with the harsh reality of the war. The painful feeling of separation from the loved ones is amplified by the soldiers' heading towards the unknown, towards an obscure, foreign zone, which enhances their anxiety.³⁴

The war created a common denominator among the subjects who experienced—at a communal level, inside the conflict—the drama of the first global conflagration, translated into feelings such as fear, terror, dread, despair, and anguish. What is revealed is a new type of community, created on the frontline: the combatants' community, united through an emotional identification and through a common symbolism of the conflict, to which all the authors were receptive, which confirms the fact that the attitudes and feelings they experienced were the same on all the fronts, regardless of the army to which the combatants belonged. Individual identity was diluted into the unity of the group, into the common matrix of that social body which is the corps of soldiers.³⁵ There emerged a common attitudinal pattern in front of death and disaster among all those involved. The sense of community was based on several seminal elements, two of which represented: membership in the group, achieved at a concrete level, effectively, and the emotional level, materialized in the mental states of the individuals composing that group.³⁶

All societies preserve their own experiences in the idiosyncratic profile of their memory,³⁷ and individual memories gain shape inside such collective structures: they may become distinguished by the personal style of storing memories, by one's intellectual background and professional evolution, or by the social environment from which the individual comes, etc.

However, when the subjects turned memoirists share their experiences and the multitude of feelings that experienced during those years, they do this differently: this is reflected in their written texts, which bring to the fore the profile of the memory bearer, reflected in a concept developed by Philippe Lejeune—that of “writing well.”³⁸ Memoirs do not reflect the reality of the war but their authors' representations thereof, their personal manner of perceiving it. The social category to which they belong, their educational level, the profession they practice, their own personality, hence, the “quality of the characters”³⁹ who recount such narratives—all these leave their mark on autobiographical discourse, as well as on the authors' manner of reflecting upon events, especially upon those of a political nature. The authors of memoirs may have been actors or witnesses, but they are aware that they are writing history, so many feel the need to report this. For most of the subjects there is a feeling that they lived through the most important moment of national history, having witnessed the creation of national states, but also that they saw the collapse of a world, alongside the genesis of another.

THE FORM of publication for these memoirs was adapted to the era, the authors opting for volumes of memoirs or the press of the time. In the Transylvanian area, religious calendars were the medium of choice, giv-

en that the Romanian churches encouraged the publication of such texts; they were followed, in the authors' preferences, by local magazines or newspapers and, at times, by small volumes.

The character of these memoirs was sometimes influenced and at other times flawed by the epoch in which the memoirist texts were written. Undue influence could come from the political sphere, meaning that the political options of the present could be criticized or justified through memoirist writings. Therefore, these texts lend themselves to two levels of analysis: one that deals with the years of the conflict and another that belongs to the period in which the text of the memoirs was written.

The time span when the memoirist texts were written covered a broad chronological frame. The first memoirs appeared after the war, in the context of the appearance of national states on the European map. The past was invoked in support of various political positions adopted by the representatives of different social categories. Memoirs continued to be written until the establishment of the totalitarian regimes. In the Romanian space, after 1968, in the context of the cultural thaw, the authorities made efforts to recuperate the "memory" of the war by encouraging the publication of the memories and notes of those who were still alive; hence, some of the materials fall into the pattern of official texts, written at the request of the political authorities, and they are marred by this feature, which distorted or amplified the events they described. After 1990, the editing of the memoirs about the Great War was resumed, in a collective effort to reconstruct the event.

The portrait of the memoirist-subject, the one who decides to publicly display the experience he has undergone, is embodied by the main character of the narrative, who witnessed the events he recounts. That is why memoirist accounts should be read and analyzed from a critical perspective, without omitting several coordinates that may crop up, unintentionally or not, in the literary production, such as the degree of subjectivism, the tendency to overestimate a certain set of circumstantial factors, the responsiveness to the rumors that are likely to be exacerbated in such situations, the inability to grasp the complex essence of the events in the "heat" of the moment, while they are underway, etc. In other words, direct involvement in events inevitably affects the degree of objectivity of the memoirist approach.

The evocation of personal life is a method that is often used to facilitate the reconstitution of the personal or collective past. As such, the ability to "archive" memory becomes essential in the study of history, as the past becomes a lesson for present and future generations. We reach thus another facet of the subject: the motivation underlying the publication of memoirist texts. As regards the memoirs dedicated to World War I, the causes were many, ranging from hon-

est impulses to the pursuit of a political career or the satisfaction of one's own ego. For many memoirists, the publication of their memoirs was perceived as a pious duty to those who had passed away. We are dealing with a phenomenon pertaining to the cult of the heroes, a tendency that was strongly supported by the church, through its representatives, especially at the level of the small communities, where the priests were the ones who encouraged the survivors to put their memories down on paper.

In another type of situations, memoirs were commonly used as an antidote to oblivion, the aim being that of creating a connection, through memories, between the present generation and the past. To some extent, this approach may have had a psychological justification, based on the fact that the experience of writing could help one overcome the major trauma created by the global conflict. Confessions shared through memoirs are meant to liberate one, to eliminate posttraumatic stress.⁴⁰

In the period immediately following the conflict, when some contested the creation of the Romanian unitary state and voiced threats against the new state structure, memoirs represented a support for the legitimation of the new national territory. In this case, the texts emphasized the Romanian sacrifices behind the Union of 1 December 1918, contributing thus to the construction of a historical consciousness.

To another category belong the texts of some of the memoirists who, through the written word, expressed their desire to correct the inaccuracies spread about the event. This is the case of those former combatants who, in publishing their memoirs, only wished to recover the historical truth, seeking to dismantle the history "fabricated" by the new profiteers of the era, whose sole purpose was to construct a glorious past based on which to climb the political and social ladder. The result of such an approach was the politicization of language, as memoirist texts had to justify political options. Such characters wrote memoirs in which they assigned themselves inexistent merits, distorting historical events. There emerged thus a conflict among the former allies of yore, who had fought for a common cause during the war, but were now separated for political reasons.

Not least, memoirist texts appeared from the desire of some of the protagonists to come out of anonymity and make their own lives known to the public. For them, the war had been the major event of their otherwise insignificant existence, and the opportunity to share their experience was also an occasion for making themselves known. The context was correlated with the rural mentality involving respect for those who published in the newspapers of the time;⁴¹ hence, some authors saw this as an opportunity to gain visibility, to gain the appreciation of their peers, and to reach validation in their community. The ordeal they had experienced irreversibly left its mark on the survivors' subsequent life,

particularly in light of the malignancy of the end-of-the-war period, as depicted in memoirist writings.

The consequences of the Great War were countless. In the aftermath of the conflict, a new world was born, in which the destinies of the protagonists remained marred by impact of the war. The first register envisaged psychological consequences, with their visible effects among both the combatants⁴² and the ones left behind, on the “home front,”⁴³ and the posttraumatic circumstances extended beyond the return from the front of those marked by this terrible experience.⁴⁴ Political consequences fell within a different matrix. This was an era in which a new political class emerged, providing scope for an interesting research perspective, namely the manner in which the former soldiers related to the new political situation. From this point of view, we are dealing with two types of situations. First, there was the case of those who endeavored to legitimize themselves in the new structures, aspiring to and justifying their political ascent, and recreating—if necessary—their biography, adapting it to the new circumstances, in such a way that it might be useful for their promotion in the new society. Those who contested this direction denounced the abandonment of unionist ideals at the expense of personal advantage, especially since most of the characters who desired to seize power were perceived by the others as being inept politically and professionally, as well as morally questionable. The second type of situation concerned those who failed to fit into the new prototype, those who were marginalized and who experienced the bitter feeling of the futility of all their efforts and the privations they had suffered during the war. This tendency illustrated the fracture between the universe of societal functions and that of individual interests, an idea developed in societal psychology.⁴⁵

In the troublesome years from the aftermath of the war, there also emerged forms of social violence, whose protagonists were some of the soldiers who had returned from the front.⁴⁶ This unrest was reflected in demonstrations, social incidents or sizable rallies, which were also related to the turmoil affecting political life during that period, when the map of Europe had substantially changed following the formation of national states and the political world was experiencing major upheavals. A special category included the memoirs of the volunteers who had fought on the fronts of Russia, France and Italy. Once the conflict had ended, the former volunteers displayed a sense of frustration as they saw themselves ousted from the new political context, but also because of the abandonment of the ideals for which they had fought: their memories are pervaded by nostalgia for the old national solidarity that had been manifest before and during the war. These texts are filled with echoes of their authors’ efforts to draw the attention of the public to the sacrifices they had made, attempting to keep the memory of the war and its human toll alive.

The symbolism of the war that transpires from the memoirist texts—a domain that has been rarely exploited in Romanian history but which complies with the standards of European historiography—reveals a discourse that resorts to certain symbolic patterns in order to oppose the war and contest it. The invocation of nature is essentially aimed at challenging the war. The antithesis between war and nature reflects the struggle of human nature between good and evil, as well as the denunciation of the absurdity and futility of the war and the preference for peace and calm. An identical pattern could be encountered throughout European historiography, in which nature was a symbol of peace, the expression of the natural order that was contrasted with the violence of fighting, with the infernal war, which signified the destruction of the previous order.⁴⁷ Adjectives like “good,” “beautiful,” etc. belonged to the symbolism of war and were frequently used to emphasize the calm harmony of nature, uncorrupted, untainted by conflict. Along with nature, another symbolic element that was frequently reiterated in these memoirs was blood. An emblem of life, the representation of blood encapsulated a protest against the war and its aftermath, the overall suggestion being that in the context of the dramatic events that had taken place on the front, blood was no longer worth anything, since it had been wasted without remorse. A symbolic trope that was very much present among the Transylvanian Romanians was the image of the imperial house and the metamorphosis its representation had registered in the mentality of some of the combatants. In contact with the horrors of the war, the idea that took shape concerned the uselessness of the sacrifice the Romanians had made for foreign interests. This is the perception that may be detected in the memoirist texts of the Transylvanian war defectors, a category of combatants for whom the only worthwhile sacrifice envisaged the accomplishment of Greater Romania and national unity. This was a significant change in the mentality of the Transylvanian Romanians who, for several centuries, had been characterized by their loyalty to the Viennese Court.

The images retained in memory were in direct correlation with the intensity of the events experienced, which were transposed as such and preserved in the intimate sphere of remembrance; hence, the task historians must assume is to interrogate and interpret the past. The attempt to reconstruct events in a fully accurate manner may be offset by a major impediment, characteristic of the human spirit—forgetfulness. We can nonetheless speak about a scale of forgetfulness, about it representing a gradual process. There is a temporary form of oblivion, when certain characters or events currently experienced revive, in the mind, events that occurred long before, which the subject thus recollects. At the opposite pole there is definitive oblivion, the irrevocable obliteration of all the traces of the past, which is therefore experienced as a threat to memory.⁴⁸ There is also

a positive side of the latter process, since forgetting has an important role in the mental organization of the personal present and future, providing an opening by creating a free space, necessary for the storage of new memories. In other words, forgetting is a prerequisite for keeping memory alive,⁴⁹ or, as Maurice Blanchot pithily noted, he who wants to remember should entrust himself to oblivion. Reflections may thus be altered by the passage of time, which weakens the contours of memory, which is why those who wrote the texts of the memoirs several years after the events had occurred had difficulty in reliving the past, in order to retrieve it into the present. Permanently under the threat of oblivion, memory often resorts to a selective process, sorting out the experienced events according to their intensity and the emotional imprint they leave on the subject. This equation entails a selection and preservation of the events deemed to be remarkable, faithfully kept in memory with their original contours, undistorted,⁵⁰ by contrast with the trivial ones, which may be transferred to the hinterlands of forgetfulness. In this category may be included “flashbulb” memories, intense, poignant, traumatic memories,⁵¹ which are very detailed and have a great impact on the narrator, which involve strong emotions that last a long time, being preserved unchanged in memory of those who experienced them.⁵² It is that state of “wakefulness” that Serge Moscovici speaks about,⁵³ which does not allow memory to forget the events that marked it, leaving their mnemonic trace therein.

In addition to their capacity of conveying evental occurrences in an organic manner, memoirist texts confer a greater capacity for understanding the souls of the soldiers on the front, the radical transformations of the human personality in contact with the hideous reality of the war, with the global and technological war, or with what Antonio Gibelli calls the “total war.”⁵⁴ In fact, the Great War presaged the primacy of technology, a technology that was then put in the service of destructive purposes, having a major impact on the collective psyche, one example being the new weapons used, including gas attacks. This is what Vittorio Foa summarily described as “death as a sacrifice for progress.”⁵⁵ In the context of war, the victory of technology was associated with barbarism,⁵⁶ with the destruction of the human, of humanitarian feelings for one’s fellow beings, with a generalized dehumanization, translatable as man’s ability to destroy the other and his lack of compassion for the latter, amounting to an “abandonment” of civilization⁵⁷ and cultural regression. Moreover, the depiction of the genuine image of death, as it appears in the memoirs, was a protest against the war and its methods of mass destruction. Hurling into the maelstrom of the conflict, individuals were unable to decide their fate, being forced to accept it. This entailed a “deprivation of control,”⁵⁸ since these subjects were involuntarily locked in a given situation, without the possibility of escaping from that context or acting according to their own will.

Through memoirs, a case for micro-history may be argued, given their dynamic concern for the individual and his emotional universe: these become themes that are placed at the core of historiographical analysis. Memoirist documents constitute genuine pleas against the war. Writing them is converted into an undertaking that affects sensitivities and activates memories, leading to a remembrance of the past with the deliberate aims of providing access to it and of avoiding another such catastrophe.



(Translated by CARMEN-VERONICA BORBÉLY)

Notes

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2. Silvian Iosifescu, *Literatura de frontieni* (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică Română, 1971), 29.
3. Paul Ricœur, *Memoria, istoria, uitarea*, trans. Ilie Gyurcsik and Margareta Gyurcsik (Timișoara: Amarcord, 2001), 178.
4. Constantin Ticu, *Memoria autobiografică: Definierea sau redefinirea propriei vieți* (Iași: Institutul European, 2004), 18.
5. Alin Gavreliuc, *O călătorie alături de "celălalt": Studii de psihologie socială* (Timișoara: Ed. Universității de Vest, 2002), 330.
6. In the original, "bad memories," without an exact Romanian semantic equivalent, translated as "unpleasant memories" or "poor memory." Timothy Garton Ash, *Istoria prezentului: Eseuri, schițe și relatări din Europa anilor '90*, trans. Cătălin Constantinescu (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 221.
7. Jean Norton Cru, *Du témoignage* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1967), 87–99.
8. Paul Tuffrau, *1914–1918 quatre années sur le front: Carnets d'un combattant* (Paris: Imago, 1998).
9. Apud Arturo Morselli, "Psichiatria di guerra," *Quaderni di psichiatria* (Milan) 3, 3–4 (1916): 67–68.
10. Ticu, 18.
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Abstract

The Memoirs of the Great War: General Considerations

War memoirs reveal the human destiny of the protagonists, for in them the emphasis is transferred from military history onto the daily life of those who lived during that particular period. The subjects share their own experiences, their testimonies presenting the advantage that they can be used to fill in the information gaps on the topic. The analysis of memoirs may reveal a cross-section of behavioral types manifested in extreme situations; it may also explain the decisions reached and the attitudes adopted during the war years. Individual memories are thus integrated in the collective efforts of autobiographical writing and are transformed into a collective memory that produces cultural values. Human and collective destinies can therefore be reconstructed, along with the mentality of the time. Memoirist reports should be analyzed from a critical perspective, taking into account the fact that direct involvement in the events may affect the objectivity of the approach.

Keywords

World War I, memoirs, history of mentalities, autobiography, psychology of war