

Aladár Schöpflin, "The war of words," *Nyugat* no. 20 (1914)

The war is taking place not only on the battlefield, but in hearts as well. Back when army and war were still for the most part the private matter of rulers and other great men, it could happen that it was only their business and concerned mercenary soldiers, while those who remained at home did not much worry about truly experiencing its every beauty and horror. Today however we so-called peaceful civilians are only at home in a physical sense, spiritually we are experiencing the entire war, along with all of its passions, beauties, exertions, and moments of enervation, its crowning jubilation and its crushing despondency. Within this total experience, that does not prevent us from not knowing anything properly about the events proceeding on the battlefield. On the whole we get only winning data and facts which provide no nourishment at all, or surely meager for those abilities with which we are able to endure events: our imagination, our feelings, and our judgment forming some of the pictures into a whole. Indeed in this we are only becoming more like the soldiers fighting on the battlefield, who, aside from some of the chief figures, know virtually nothing about the actual events and their connections.

This spiritual association of the civilian population with the combatant soldiers is the army's last reserve, which fights not with weapons, but with its nervous system, its thoughts, its hopes, and its concerns. Mocking the coffeehouse strategists who sketch battle plans on marble tables or lunch tablecloths and comment on the operations of Moltke and Conrad is a cheap pastime that soon becomes vulgar, and it is completely unfair. Those who mock them are mocking themselves, for who has not made tactical maneuvers in these times? Is there a man so hardhearted whose internal anxiety—once his argument and imagination have not gotten sufficient positive nourishment—would still not give rein to his conflated imagination? What of this whole useless, vaporous talk? Every domestic or societal conversation of private individuals that goes beyond the circle of their mastery and personal interests is more or less empty talk. What is the influence on politics if in front of my friends I express my approving or condemning opinion about the current government's actions? Is there utility or harm to literature if the lawyer's wife picks an argument with the dentist's wife about the new novels they have devoured? It is indeed the essence of conversation that it is irrelevant, has no [inherent] interest, is art pour l'art. It is simply only the expression of what interests people. Now it is only the war that truly interests people, so they converse about the war. It would be a big problem if they didn't talk about it, because this would then mean that the interior does not feel they have something to do with the war and that they do not feel together with the soldiers.

This domestic torrent of words is part of the war that does not make, but expresses the public mood. Everyone experiences the war according to his own temperament as pessimist or optimist, but so long as it is in him, because as soon as one gets together with other people, sharing and supporting the public mood, one already no longer takes up matters individually, but becomes a supporter of crowd sentiments. Here in Hungary, for example, news of the battle of Grodno and the Germans' difficulties on the French battlefield indisputably produced a certain depression in the public mood, and at the news of the Russians' breakthrough in the Carpathians this depression reached its peak, becoming genuine consternation. In those days the most diehard optimists could not maintain their firmness, or if so—we have seen all the newspaper articles—well that was a certain sort of masterful, forced optimism beneath which a shivering fear was crying out. Now however under the influence of the new victorious news who dares show the image of the pessimist? As in every matter like this, in which a common great feeling stews together many people, now individuality is disappearing and the crowd takes its place, everyone's behavior is not that of individual psychology, but is subsumed to the laws of crowd psychology. We could have stated in examples: it is just these

crowd moods that were in the soldiers as well. The depression just like the sigh of relief and jubilation that follows are above all the hard-won nourishment from the stories of the soldiers returned from the battlefield. The very unity of the crowd mood is what jointly occupies the warring army and the bourgeoisie sitting at home, each of them acts mutually back on the other. And these moods, passing from person to person and onward in the air, are not bound to any place, nor to a certain category of people: they take the same form in the capital as in the provincial city or the village, and they are completely unfair and falsehood is spoken by those who in their hours of defeatism make the capital's bourgeoisie into the scapegoat of the depression, and seized the occasion anew for their assertions that the capital is not the heart of the nation and does not express the nation's mood. During this very time I was speaking at random with people from all different ranks of life and parts of the country and saw that people everywhere were thinking and speaking the same way. Only those spoke differently—I don't think they would have thought differently too—who were imposing this different-speech on themselves like a role or vocation, and there surely were moments when these also were disturbed from their roles.

And if people are talking, can we really take it amiss of them when that is the only means to ease somewhat the huge tension which the excitement of the war entails for every single person? And that they speak inanities? Or in time of peace if they say smarter things about politics, literature, theater, or art, in which they are just as much laymen as in [military] strategy? In particular it is not essential what they say and how they say it, but how they speak their minds. It is precisely in hard times that it is important that people can speak their minds, that in the course of speaking they dress up their inaction with the appearance of doing something, that they reassure themselves time and again that they have something to do with what is happening.

It is a basic law of every crowd psychology that the crowd impressionist leads, not by thoughts, but influences and drives, and that in a crowd the person is at a lower intellectual level than outside it. Crowd impressionism appeared and appears in all of us to some degree in these days and attaches itself to the strongest elements too. How would it be possible otherwise that prominent elements now talk so much about matters beneath their own capacities? They are also awash in crowd feeling and do not express themselves, but rather the crowd expresses itself within them. It is precisely here that one can best sense the grand significance, how might one say, of all of humanity being divided up into two crowds [masses] of approximately uniform intellectual capacity behind the front lines of the belligerent armies and in every respect the million-fold different capacities of each person being rendered uniform with the war. Great individuals who stand out are now only on the battlefield, because the only greatness which can prevail and holds interest today is the soldier's greatness. The only thing in which the scholar, the writer, or the artist differs from other people is fuller power over the tools of expression.. This is why, while every intellectual prominence in Germany, France, and England promptly spoke out in the matter of the war, we have not gotten from a single one of them the kind of message which would have been worth the light of day. Writers more or less managed to write articles which were in no way more important than any of their other articles, scholars are showing what dilettantes they are in politics—a transforming, great historical message has not been pronounced anywhere. It is interesting to watch the elderly Wundt in his Leipzig speech scold the English with great irritation and want to take away factories from them, which only by the emphasis of his sentences, the force of its forms shows the prominent element. He speaks crushingly about those Englishmen who actually discovered his own science, psychology, and who count the most skillful disciples of his scientific method among them. The physicist Lenard stamps English science as some sort of plagiarist enterprise, although what would have and will become of physics today without English researchers? French writers in the grasp of the German man have still not been able up to now to get as far as Tacitus—they want to depict the Germans [*németiség*, i.e., *Deutschtum*] and have them depicted by others as some ruinous barbarian

horde, when the Germans better appreciate, better absorb, and more intensively experience their French culture than they do themselves. Romain Rolland, still under suspicion of Germanophilia, also seems to think that the Germans laid waste to Louvain with definite relish—as for the rest of the French, if a person didn't know that the momentary and thoughtless temper of the crowd was speaking through them, one would think they take the Germans for some sort of dog-headed Tatars who rejoice if they can raze the Rheims cathedral, if they can murder women and infants. Kipling, who in particular apart from his every literary prominence has also never represented the more sober and clever traits of the English spirit, directly calls the children by name: he lines up the Germans in a row with the Huns. Kipling, whose name on the Continent would not mean more than the name of any London grocer, if the Germans with their own boundless intellectual thirst for knowledge had not been so skillfully among his benefactors. And those who sought an excuse for themselves for the ensuing peaceful period located that strange dualism which isolated the German people from the German army, juxtaposed German militarism with German culture, and were unashamed to say the stupidity that with the destruction of the German army they still wanted to save German culture from German militarism! Truly we do not need to be ashamed of ourselves as strategic private scholars, if Europe's intellectual leaders of today can only sate our element, starving for morals, for a deeper understanding of affairs, with empty, unserious philosophies. All of European science and literature taken together cannot utter the message that would be worthy of the situation and the significance of the things taking place.

That is why no one can take away from us, neither by prohibition nor by mockery, our right to chatter about half-baked notions. It is a relief and consolation, too, that we can give voice to our own excitement, and in these times it is also cruelty to take away from people anything that can serve as their consolation and relief.

Translation: KH