Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War Study Guide

Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War by Paul Fussell

Contents

Plot Summary

The author presents a critique of the culture and literature produced during and after World War II, often using the Great War as a contrasting phenomenon. The focus on culture and literature suggests that these aspects of human existence effectively mirror common existence. The author develops each chapter as a topical examination of a particular aspect of wartime understanding. Subsequent chapters tend to further develop themes or topics presented early in the book. The basic premise of the book is that war—particularly World War II—is not about anything intelligible, does not construct any significant meaning, and is too violent to comprehend. The book briefly examines several commonly held beliefs about the rationale of World War II and dispels them as localized paradigms without enduring validity when applied to the entire scale and scope of the conflict. The book also considers the ultra-violent modern battlefield where confusion and chaos are rampant and logical thought is worse than useless. The book finally suggests that modern warfare is too violent and too complex to be about any definable thing. This horrific truth is subsequently ignored by most participants amidst a concerted effort to construct artificial meaning around prolonged, violent, and senseless mass events. This is because people like meaning and prefer to experience the world in a way that can be seen as rational.

During World War II, several techniques were utilized to construct a shield of meaning around World War II to isolate the senselessness of warfare from public support for the war effort. Politicians and military leaders seemed to realize that if the general public became cognizant of the entire wartime combat experience they would not support future war efforts. For the most part, public and private media reporting self-censored to align with official military reporting about the war effort. The war thus become constructed in the media as a high-minded affair, a sort of Herculean 'good-v-evil', or 'us-or-them' effort that demanded significant sacrifice in all aspects of life. Meanwhile, military conscripts were subjected to an endless process of official hazing—the author refers to it as 'chickenshit'—meant to demean them and assert the complete ownership of conscripts by the established military power. Faced with such constant institutionalized hazing and the inconceivable violent and destructive reality of wartime experience, it is not surprising that most soldiers were unable to mentally survive more than a few months time in combat. Secondary effects include rumor-mongering and the creation of idiomatic expressions—both topics considered in the book. The basic of thesis of the text is developed topically by enumerated and named chapters. The book is presented in a scholarly format with several photographs and extensive end notes. The book successfully defends its thesis, defying the conventional wisdom that World War II was about freedom and national identity, and that it was fought by America's greatest generation.

Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 1, "From Light to Heavy Duty", the book opens with a description of a pre-war iconic image—young, handsome soldiers bounding along in a jeep, pulling a thin-barreled fieldpiece mounted on rubber tires. The image suggests youth, vitality, mobility, and military readiness. This image is said to epitomize the 'light duty' for which America was prepared. The assumption that war, should it come, would be a series of easy victories due to America's preparedness and youthful esprit de corps. In fact, when war came, as it did, it was full of mangled bodies and terrified men huddled into stinking trenches for protection against advanced modern weaponry.

The chapter considers the difficult transition from 'light' to 'heavy' duty—the transition of American public opinion from an imaginary war to a real war. The transition was halting —initially many refused to believe the reports of violence, chaos, and casualty figures; for others, Pearl Harbor seemed an aberration, not a hallmark of things to come. Most Americans believed the entire war effort would be over in a few months, or maybe a year or two. Most Americans expected an immediate string of decisive American victories. Official media and public media both presented a sanitized view of the war effort that left most civilians unsure of the war's actual proceedings. The chapter also presents additional material concerning this transition. Most weapons available to American and Allied forces were of insufficient quantity and often of insufficient quality. Many were obsolescent, and several were ineffective. This unpreparedness cost many lives and took a considerable amount of time and effort to rectify. The disparity in arms is illustrated in comparative photographs on pp. 10 and 11—one shows a petite British mechanized cavalry unit, the other shows a German "King Tiger" tank. Though separated by a period of six years, the different in power is obvious.

Chapter 2, "Precision Bombing Will Win the War", suggests that one initial American response to World War II was the belief that superior American technology and 'know-how' would prove decisive in the war. This was epitomized in the belief that American heavy bombers, using the innovative Norden bombsight, were capable of precision bombing that would soon end the war by destroying the enemy's capacity for weapons production. A photograph of a cased Norden bombsight is presented on p. 15. During the early days of World War II, aerial combat still was viewed with a sort of romantic charm; aerial combat was deemed full of chivalry and sport. Heavy bombers were new, mobile, and apparently invincible. Americans believed that Japan and Germany would soon be bombed into submission. Reality was quite different. Casualties among bomber crews were very high, and though accurate, the Norden bombsight was not really a precision delivery solution and German resilience proved remarkable. Often, aerial support was so inaccurate that friendly troops were bombed or strafed—one infamous incident is discussed and illustrated on p. 18; it is primarily infamous because of a concerted cover-up attempt. In short, the concept of precision bombing proved invalid during wartime—bombing was generally accurate but by no means precise. Bombs

were often dropped without regard to targeting, and even when diligently dropped on target, the bombs would routinely land hundreds or thousands of yards from the target. To thus assign some malign intent to a specific bomb seemingly dropped 'on purpose' on a particular building without military value is spurious reasoning.

The incident discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 18) involving casualties from 'friendly' fire introduces the primary topic of Chapter 3, "Someone Had Blundered". The chapter presents a variety of blunders known to have occurred. The chapter is the first in the book to feature extensive literary quotations, a trend that continues throughout the remainder of the book. The chapter establishes that military blunders are rather commonplace—and in any operation as vast, fluid, and violent as warfare, one must assume blunders to be rather common. Blunders range from the small—a single soldier sent to the wrong type of hospital—to the large—an entire division routed to the wrong destination. Blunders range from the nearly inconsequential—a single soldier going through a course of training twice—to the catastrophic—a recognition error results in a company being shelled by friendly artillery. While recognition errors were unfortunately common within a single nation's service, they increased between friendly nations' services—the book recounts a story of a downed Allied Polish airman being beaten to death by enraged English civilians who mistook him for a German because of his foreign language.

Within the framework of World War II, the general tendency for military media was to present all blunders resulting in casualties as resulting from enemy hostilities. Thus, mistaken strafing was officially reported as an enemy attack; explosives accidents as enemy artillery; incidents of friendly fire as hostile contact with enemy forces; and so forth. Most reporters attached to the service followed similar paths, partly because they were heavily censored by the military, but also partly for the desire to portray the war effort in a positive light to American civilians. Similarly, official reports of blunders often omitted or downplayed the incident. Because of this, most contemporaneous war histories present Allied military efforts as carefully crafted and perfectly executed—blunders simply did not occur very often, and when they did they were funny and benign. In retrospect, it is much easier to see costly military blunders for what they were —mistakes. Julian Maclaren-Ross, a literary figure much discussed in the book, is presented as a "British connoisseur of service error" (p. 29) and some of his material is presented as examples of blunders.

Chapters 4 - 6

Chapters 4 - 6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 is entitled "Rumors of War", an obvious double-entendre. Generally speaking, people prefer to feel that their life and effort have a purpose. In wartime, with heavy and constant violence coupled with incessant blunders, meaning and purpose are often difficult to see or simply non-existent. This absence of logical purpose is nearly intolerable to the human mind over the long term and thus a rational narrative is provided—even if that narrative is nothing more than rumor. The book presents numerous rumors, some entirely fanciful—for example, German sympathizers using sheep herd 'formations' to point out Allied troop locations—to the credible but incorrect. Seemingly, the believability of a rumor was not directly tied to its success. Many rumors were started in jest, or even as a counter to boredom. One common rumor had the military food service adding saltpetre to food so dampen young troops' sexual ardor in an attempt to get them to focus more on combat. Many rumors putatively were spread by agents working for the Axis—the most-common being that all soldiers' wives were being unfaithful back at home, another common rumor being the Axis sent women purposefully infected with venereal disease to serve the Allies as prostitutes. Given that the typical soldier received virtually no factual news about his personal location or purpose in the war, it is not surprising that rumors would appear to fill this gap. Rumors were thus used to give purpose; they were likewise used to defame the enemy: many rumors circulated about the Axis' various atrocities—as if the reality was not sufficient. Rumors were both small-scale and large-scale. Rumors of massive invasions and entire combat fronts were circulated and apparently believed by large numbers of soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Akin to rumors were talismans—objects that soldiers believed would protect them in combat. Bibles, babies' shoes, wives' underwear, and other ephemera were held to be mystically protective. Especially interesting were the large number of steel-backed New Testaments carried in breast pockets over the heart in order to deflect an otherwise fatal bullet.

In Chapter 5, "School of the Soldier" the book considers the education process used to convert a citizen into a soldier. The stark reality of World War II, as well as nearly all other wars, is that soldiers are boys. For the Allies, the typical age was about nineteen, for the Axis perhaps slightly younger. Toward the end of the war the Axis was fielding soldiers as young as twelve. Soldiers in their thirties were routinely called "pop" or "dad". Given this level of maturity mingled with the constant violence of warfare, it is not surprising that confusion reigns supreme on the battlefield. This situation was not a mistake—all military organizations realize that the rigors of combat are best served by young, healthy men, and the irrationality of combat is least questioned by inexperienced youth. Older soldiers are less combat efficient and far less likely to wage aggressive, offensive war. Young soldiers universally believe they will survive and become heroes; older soldiers know better. Particularly in England, the military service training was much like the public school experience. Combat training replaced organized sports to a large degree, but units fostered a schoolboy enthusiasm and camaraderie. The chapter

presents a large selection of wartime verse that compares combat preparations to public school experiences.

Chapter 6, "Unread Books on a Shelf" continues the motif of inexperienced youth. In World War II, soldiers became faceless automatons, each comparable to the next. This was possibly due to the huge numbers of casualties and the constant flow of replacements. Each soldier killed was most likely a young man with all of life ahead of him. This contrasts markedly with World War I, where each soldier was still held—at least theoretically—to be a unique young man with a distinct identity. The book presents verse and quotations from each major conflict to demonstrate this distinction. One notable exception to this facelessness of the 'G.I.' is the writing of Ernie Pyle, which was always careful to list names and even towns of origin. The military structures themselves enforced the facelessness of the common soldier by the superposition of an entitled officers' class with individualism above the faceless ranks of the enlisted.

Chapters 7 - 9

Chapters 7 - 9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7, "Chickenshit, An Anatomy", examines the pervasive but unofficial methodology used by the Allied military services to establish and maintain control of enlisted personnel by privileged officers. In the American service the idiomatic expression used to encapsulate routine hazing by superior officers was 'chickenshit', and the author adopts—and uses—the term throughout the remainder of the book. Examples of petty hazing at nearly all levels of service are provided through verse and quotations. Many of the best-known novels about World War II are, essentially, novels about petty hazing. Although most hazing was of the tedious and demeaning type, some was far more dangerous—disliked soldiers were far more likely to be deployed in the most-dangerous combat roles and areas. The hazing was institutionalized and can be seen in the unofficial vocabulary of the war—terms such as dogface, pup-tent, and dog-tags serve to illustrate the point that the common soldier routinely was demeaned. Other aspects of this behavior are inveterate use of profanity, routine minor sabotage of officers' interests, and constant meaningless and petty tasks assigned to soldiers.

The reality of non-combat life in wartime is examined in Chapter 8, "Drinking Far Too Much, Copulating Too Little". The typical conscript suffers from constant contempt and damage to his self-image that some anodyne is necessary. During World War II, the most commonly used anodyne was alcohol, consumed on a vast scale and generally to excess when available. Heavy drinking for most conscripts began during stateside training and ended only with deployment to areas where alcohol was unobtainable. In Britain, drinking was routine in the Royal Navy, where servicemen were issued a daily ration of rum. Americans seemed to prefer whisky, and Germans liked Schnapps. Much media was used to counter the stateside image of young conscripts as brawling drunkards—with questionable success. Next to binge drinking, the typical soldier's next-favorite pursuit was sexual intercourse. Prostitution and ephemeral romantic relationships were common and constant. Preoccupation with sexual adventure was rampant among the troops. Only in combat—where both drinking and sex were unobtainable—did the focus wander from women as objects of sexualized desire. Obviously, heavy drinking and freebooting copulation led to many health complications for many soldiers.

Chapter 9, "Type-casting", considers the preconceived stereotypes common during the war. One common example is the belief that the Chinese—then America's allies—were dependable in combat and could survive indefinitely on a handful of rice each day. On the other hand, the Japanese were held in contempt as untrustworthy vicious beasts. At the commencement of the war, the Japanese were considered inefficient soldiers and most Americans believed the war would end in months. Gradually, and begrudgingly, the Japanese were believed to be preeminent soldiers, but still uncivilized and shifty. Germans were held generally to be unthinkingly loyal and not innovative; Italians were considered to be more interested in the high-life than fighting the war. This type-casting

is common to most conflicts in all ages, where the military complex institutionalizes type-casting of the enemy in order to dehumanize opposing forces and inspire soldiers to hatred and violence against them.

Chapters 10 - 12

Chapters 10 - 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 10, "The Ideological Vacuum", considers the common soldier's rationale about fighting the war. The typical soldier had no ideas about the meaning and purpose of the war. Most of the time, the average soldier didn't even know what his direct purpose was in the big picture. Instead, the war was simply inconvenient, brutal, violent, dangerous, and uncomfortable—but it wasn't about anything definable. This lack of meaning is clearly evident in the many prose and verse quotations provided in the book. The ideological vacuum was also evident on the home-front where advertisers sought to link their products to the war effort. In this way, the war can be seen as a sales devise for contemporaneous products.

The long Chapter 11, "Accentuate the Positive", considers the media's tendency to forget the negative aspects of war and put forward the positive aspects of war. This is purposefully done to maintain esprit de corps, both at the front and at home. While the common soldier didn't know what he was fighting about (see chapter 10), they were often told what they were fighting for—nebulous but good things like safety, freedom, and democracy. In this way, the official and public medias presented only positive outcomes, suppressed negative outcomes, and presented only happy, constructive soldiers. While the things reported were not necessarily fictive, they were only a small part of the story. Reports of massive casualties and young men being dismembered and killed did not appear in the media; reports of great victories and young men being brave were reported. The chapter presents many examples and quotations from both verse and poetry to support the contentious argument that the official and public medias colluded essentially to mislead the American public about the nature of warfare by only presenting the positive aspects in detail.

The long Chapter 12, "High-mindedness", continues to develop the theme presented in Chapter 11; the war was said to be about something in the official and public media. It was about such intangibles as freedom and happiness. A purpose was imputed to the war and the nation's citizenry's suffering was said to be linked to lofty ideals. When a young man was blown to pieces, his death was not meaningless—it was in defense of liberty. Exactly how his death was inextricably linked to the intangible ideal of liberty was never established. Instead, the media portrayed the war effort as a high-minded good-versus-evil apocalypse. Many soldiers reached the front eager to defend freedom or liberty—few left combat with their illusions of meaning intact. As the war progressed and Allied victories became more common, the media presented the accomplishment as the triumph over godlessness and evil—not as the triumph of mass production and sound strategy. God was clearly on the side of the Allies, and the media portrayal of the war, as well as the political interpretation of it, became high-minded and detached from reality.

Chapters 13 - 15

Chapters 13 - 15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13, "With One Voice", examines the tendency of wartime media to adopt the tone and texture of official media such that the media and public portrayal of the war is homogeneous and sanitized. During World War II, radio and print newspapers were the predominant sources of media, supported by film, books, and magazines. Access to war zones by media staff was controlled by the military, and reporters who would not adapt to military guidelines were excluded from war zones. Most media organizations voluntarily helped to portray a homogenized and sanitized war, feeling that this was a patriotic duty. To a marked extent, fiction and poetry also adapted to the affected style of high-minded interpretation of a meaningful war effort. Various verse and prose quotes are provided to illustrate the point. Other forms of 'one-voice' expression are considered, including the contemporaneously popular practice of group-singing popular wartime songs.

In Chapter 14, "Deprivation", the book next considers the deprivation of material comforts and commercial goods and services brought about by the war. The global economy had been in depression prior to the war and the burgeoning economy of the war effort was focused toward wartime production. This led to a continuing shortage of creature comforts and exotic foods. This deprivation was primarily faced at home, because soldiers on the front were in any case deprived of the niceties of life. Various efforts in America and Britain are considered; these efforts were aimed at reducing use of products or at gathering used products for wartime recycling efforts. Civilians who would not or did not participate in recycling efforts were considered subversive elements. Nearly everyone got used to using substitute products such as ersatz coffee made from a variety of substitute materials. There were other considerations, too—in England, roadway signs and building addresses were purposefully removed to frustrate a potential invasion force. While not faced with the severe deprivation of war zone civilians, the American and British civilians of World War II did experience a sort of constant low-level deprivation.

Chapter 15, "Compensation", considers a very few things emerging during the war years that in some small way compensated for the deprivation experienced by all. The book suggests the vast majority of wartime prose, poetry, and reporting fundamentally to be marred by high-mindedness and uniform presentation. Thus, most enduring war novels were written after the war when a wider range of expression was tolerated. There were few exceptions to the drab materials produced during the war, but one such exception is said to have been the literary journal Horizon, edited by Cyril Connolly. The chapter considers a few novels and poems, but is nearly entirely devoted to a description of Horizon and its history. The tone of this chapter varies notably from the rest of the book inasmuch as it is positive and enthusiastically considers Connolly's work. The author's background in literary criticism is here quite evident as Horizon is considered in depth. The chapter is somewhat out of place in the book and is quite

lengthy. The writing probably is of less general interest than the remainder of the book. However, the chapter does illustrate in positive example that which the book contends was entirely lacking in other venues during the war—originality, distinctness, and excellence. The continuing impact of Horizon after the war is also considered, albeit briefly.

Chapters 16 - 18

Chapters 16 - 18 Summary and Analysis

Beyond Chapter 15's Horizon, Chapter 16, "Reading in Wartime", examines the typical civilian and soldier experience of reading during World War II. The primary sources of information to soldiers were official military publications. These focused on wartime efforts and presented the war as a meaningful, high-minded, event. Combat depictions were homogenized and sanitized, leaving most frontline soldiers confused about 'which' war was being reported in the journals. Most wartime media, novels, and poetry adapted the same voice and viewpoint as the official media. Because of this, most civilians and soldiers read the same type of thing, over and over. One safe route of escape lay in reading older books, produced before the war, when difference of opinion was not so frowned upon. Reprints of classics gained considerable popularity. The wartime reading experience also revolved around restricted use of rationed products in publication—paper, binding twine, glue, and binding boards were all relatively scarce. Many wartime publications were poorly produced of inferior paper—even Horizon in production occasionally resembled newsprint rather than a professional journal. For soldiers, special editions of books were published that were sized to fit into service pockets. This new style and size of soft-bound book proved so useful that it endured after the war in the now-ubiquitous paperback book, one example being the Penguin Pockets line of books. The chapter presents dozens of titles that enjoyed wide circulation, and notes that censorship—which novels were not printed—was commonplace and accepted. As most soldiers spent inordinate amounts of time bored and unoccupied, reading materials of nearly any type or topic were eagerly grabbed, read, and passed on. Several post-war writers of repute are said to have gained their primary literary education by reading books between combat episodes.

Chapter 17, "Fresh Idiom", is fairly short. It considers the new terms and expressions which evolved during World War II. Some of the idioms are official—such as RADAR—but most are the unofficial slang terms and expressions used by American and British soldiers. Some terms are limited to wartime and did not penetrate into general use—such as creepback to describe a phenomenon of aerial bombing. Other idioms entered the general vocabulary of the nation. The chapter is primarily focused on the terms that gained wide, general, and enduring acceptance. In general, these terms are said to be either alliterative, hence 'fun to say', or somehow capture the essence of a given paradigm. The most-crude forms of idiom were simply profanities used in creative combinations or situations. Other forms of idiom were graphical, such as the British 'Chad' and the American 'Kilroy'. Idiom was also frequently adapted to song, a common trope being the substitution of crude or funny words for the lyrics of popular tunes. The chapter gives numerous examples, and some are quite crude.

Chapter 17, "The Real War Will Never Get in the Books" is a long chapter considering the contemporaneous soldier's view that actual wartime experience would never be accurately reported, anywhere. This belief was prevalent among frontline troops who

experienced combat often and compared their experiences to the published accounts of their experiences—the two had little in common. Combat soldiers quickly came to realize that war reporting was homogenized and sanitized. War reporting was presented in one voice and was high-minded in the interpretation of events. War reporting did not use idioms and did not represent the soldier's concerns or experiences. In effect, war reporting seemed to invalidate wartime experience by ignoring the reality of the suffering and real costs of war. The press used various euphemisms to deflect attention from the worst aspects of war while simultaneously and enthusiastically reporting the best aspects of victory. The common perception of veteran troops was that real war experience would never be published. And in fact, during the war years, this was indeed the case. It was only after the war that variance of opinion was tolerated, and that critical analyses of the war effort appeared in the media. One preeminent example of 'real-war' experience appearing in print is Eugene B. Sledge's memoir of the war, With the Old Breed at Peliliu and Okinawa. There are others and indeed the current book is itself an attempt to dispel some of the high-minded attitudes that have accreted around the history of the war. The book concedes that this phenomenon is not limited to World War II, but suggests that the extent to which the phenomenon was experienced was greatest during World War II.

Characters

Paul Fussell

Paul Fussell, born 1924, is the author of the book and a widely known cultural and literary historian. He is professor emeritus of English literature at the University of Pennsylvania and is the author of numerous books concerning English literature, war, and social class. Fussell was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, and during October 1944 he landed in France with the 103rd Infantry Division. He experienced front-line combat as a lieutenant and was wounded in France. Fussell received a Purple Heart and the Bronze Star. His return to civilian life from wartime was marked by depression, attributed to dehumanizing experiences during military service. Fussell has long been a critic of the way that popular culture and official media have romanticized warfare and glorified conflict. Fussell earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University, and has taught at Connecticut College, Rutgers University, the University of Heidelberg, King's College London, and the University of Pennsylvania. Fussell's 1975 The Great War and Modern Memory won the National Book Award for Arts and Letters and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism.

Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill

Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965) was a British politician known primarily for his leadership of the United Kingdom during World War II. He served as Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945 and also from 1951 to 1955. Churchill saw military action in India, in the Sudan, and during the Second Boer War, worked as a war correspondent, and later wrote books about his military experiences. He served in the British Army on the Western Front during World War I. Churchill held numerous political positions, including First Lord of the Admiralty, but within the book he is referred to almost exclusively because of his role as Prime Minister, a role that gave him unprecedented power due to the war effort. The book assumes the reader to have a passing familiarity with Churchill's life and accomplishments—no biographical material is supplied but he is often cited as an example. In the book, he is often cited as a political leader.

Cyril Vernon Connolly

Cyril Connolly (1903 - 1974) was an English intellectual, literary critic, and writer. His father was an infantry officer and his childhood largely was passed in South Africa. He knew George Orwell during school and received a good education, attending Eton on scholarship. He later attended Oxford University, where he started gaining a reputation as a writer. He also enjoyed travel and was widely traveled. In 1940, Connolly founded the literary magazine Horizon, and acted as editor until 1950. He also published some poetry and additional articles and one book, but today he is remembered primarily as a literary critic. Within the book, Connolly is held to be the most-influential literary

personage during the wartime years in the United Kingdom, an influence felt through his leadership of Horizon. Connolly and his work are considered extensively in "Chapter 15 - Compensation", where he is the exemplar of good literature during the wartime years. Of the people discussed in the book, Connolly receives the most biographical treatment and the most sympathetic presentation.

Dwight David Eisenhower

Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890 - 1969) was a five-star general in the US Army, the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II, and the 34th President of the United States, serving in that capacity from 1953 to 1961. Eisenhower's early military experiences were extensive though primarily administrative—he had no combat experience and never held an active command prior to 1942 in World War II. Subsequent to World War II, Eisenhower enjoyed an influential political career, though this is not developed in the book. Within the text, Eisenhower is often used as an example in support of various themes—his portrayal is similar to that of Churchill and Roosevelt, inasmuch as the three men are fairly abstracted leaders of politico-military systems. Eisenhower, as Supreme Commander, is held in obvious high regard by Fussell, who especially notes Eisenhower's personal bravery in preparing in advance a message should the Normandy invasion prove unsuccessful. The book assumes the reader to be familiar with Eisenhower and his accomplishments, as little biographical material is provided. In the book, he is often cited as a war leader.

Thomas Stearns Eliot

T. S. Eliot (1888 - 1965) was a poet, playwright, and literary critic. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. He was born in the United States but emigrated to the United Kingdom, becoming a British subject in 1927. He received a master's degree from Harvard but studied at several universities. He spent the war years of World War I in London. Eliot is today remembered for his poetry, canonical by today's standards but deemed quite shocking upon publication. During his lifetime, Eliot was widely known as both a poet and a literary critic and Fussell refers to him in both capacities, though generally as a poet. The book assumes the reader is familiar with Eliot and his poetry, as virtually no biographical information is provided. His work is often cited in the book.

Ernest Miller Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway (1899 - 1961) was an American writer and journalist. Hemingway had combat experience in World War I as an ambulance driver and was seriously wounded. He spent time in Spain during the Spanish Civil War as a correspondent. He also spent time during World War II as a war correspondent and was present during the Normandy landings on D-Day. Hemingway later wrote about his experiences in various military conflicts. His writing style often has been described as infused with a journalistic sensibility. Hemingway is today considered one of the greatest English-language writers

of all time. The book assumes the reader is familiar with Hemingway as virtually no biographical information is provided. In the book he is often cited as a literary figure.

Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler (1889 - 1945) was a German politician and the leader of the National Socialist German Workers Park, or Nazi party. A combat veteran of World War I, Hitler led Nazi Germany into World War II and believed that the national German spirit would compensate for any shortages in matériel or manpower. The book refers to Hitler almost exclusively as the abstracted embodiment of the Axis powers. Hitler's Germany was marked by totalitarian control of media and an attempt to force public opinion to conform to the State's political will. The book assumes the reader has passing familiarity with Hitler and his policies, as virtually no biographical information is provided. In the book he is often cited as a politician and war leader.

Julian Maclaren-Ross

Julian Maclaren-Ross (1912 - 1964) was British novelist of considerable repute and influence during the World War II period. His personal life was full of conflict and turbulence. The book assumes the reader has considerable familiarity with the work of Maclaren-Ross and he is often cited as a literary figure. His contributions to Horizon, in particular, are often discussed. The book provides virtually no biographical information about Maclaren-Ross, beyond a consideration of some of his literary output.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882 - 1945) was a central figure in world politics during the World War II era. He served as American president for four terms—nearly sixteen years, from 1932 until his death in 1945. During his 1940 election campaign, Roosevelt promoted an agenda of keeping America out of the war. As president, Roosevelt exercised nearly unprecedented influence over national development during his lengthy term in office. During World War II, especially, Roosevelt's influence was felt around the free world. The book cited Roosevelt as both an individual president and as an abstraction of American politics during the war years. The book provides little biographical information about Roosevelt but assumes the reader will have a fairly strong understanding of the man's political career and policies. The book frequently cites Roosevelt as both a political leader, a visionary, and a military leader.

Arthur Evelyn St. John Waugh

Evelyn Waugh (1903 - 1966) was an English writer, best known for his darkly satirical novels. Many of his novels satirize British aristocracy and society. In addition to novels he wrote short stories, biographies, and travel literature. He was successful and admired in his lifetime, though many of his works were controversial. Waugh leveraged

his influence to gain a commission during World War II, where he served as a largely ineffectual leader. He spent the latter years of the war serving in minor political appointments. Most of his best-known works, produced after the war, contemplate the wartime period. The book assumes the reader is familiar with Waugh's life and work and cites him fairly extensively as a literary figure of significance. Little biographical information is provided about Waugh.

Objects/Places

Heavy Duty

The introductory chapter of the book considers 'heavy duty' and 'light duty'. Light duty was that wartime experience the American public anticipated—gallant young men in light new military equipment dashing about in a spirited war of mobility. Heavy duty was that wartime experience the American soldier actually experienced—frightened young men being blown apart or suffering traumatic amputation in stinking mud-filled holes. The transition from light to heavy duty was especially shocking to the American public.

Blunders

Much of the book considers military blunders, from simple ineptness in supply to catastrophic failures of command. Numerous examples are described, including several egregious 'friendly' fire incidents. Because of the chaotic and fluid nature of warfare, the book argues that military blunders are largely unavoidable.

Rumors

During the war years, media was tightly controlled by the government and military hierarchies. This left most people—especially combat soldiers—with little idea of what was actually occurring beyond their immediate surroundings. This void of information led to the rampant circulation of rumors, some seemingly plausible, some quite fantastic, but all entertaining. The book discusses both classes of rumors and specific common rumors.

Chickenshit

Military hierarchies and command structures are rigid and not subject to dispute from below. Superior officers hold a degree of influence and power over their underlings that is almost impossible to understand unless it has been experienced. This is especially true during wartime. This absolute power causes many men who wield it to haze and abuse men under them. The institutionalized hazing during wartime is conceptualized in the word 'chickenshit' which is presented and defined in the book and also used as a word in its own right.

Ideological Vacuum

The book argues that during wartime, the State exercises control over public and private media to present a homogenized and sanitized view of the war effort. This single-minded utilization of media leads to a singular, conformant worldview that exists without

criticism and without contrasting viewpoints—hence creating an ideological vacuum. The book is especially critical of the ideological vacuum existent in the US and the British Empire during World War II.

High-mindedness

The war usually was and is portrayed as a noble effort—a sort of apocalyptic fight of pure good against utter evil. Obviously, the Allies were good and the Axis was evil. The public and private media portrayed the war effort in highly stylized terms that often ignored the realities of war—the book encapsulates this portrayal as high-mindedness, and returns to the theme frequently.

One Voice

The national media, both public and private, was so controlled during the war that the author argues all media was presented as with one voice—the party voice. This control was so consistently and strongly exercised that even literary voices came to conform to the one voice considered appropriate for wartime use—several examples of fiction and poetry are provided that illustrate the uniformity of thought present during the war.

Compensation

During the wartime, high-mindedness and political control of the media led most literary output to conform to a single voice of political ideology. There were exceptions—some satiric, some anti-war, and some simply a continuation of excellent literary criticism. These anomalies are considered 'compensation' for the otherwise dull and drab years of wartime. The book presents several compensations, but only one is fully developed—Horizon, a literary magazine edited by Cyril Connolly.

Wartime Reading

During the war, reading continued as a prominent and enjoyable pastime. Also during the war, many writers were combatants, paper and binding were at a premium, and transportation of new titles to market was difficult. For all these reasons, new material was difficult to obtain. In addition, nearly all new materials were produced with a uniformity of vision—one voice—that promoted a high-minded attitude toward the war effort—a uniformity that was often insipid and dull. The book considers the wartime reading experience from a wide variety of perspectives, including the production methods and processes used to get reading materials to frontline troops.

Idiom

During any war, and especially during World War II, a variety of idioms arise to describe certain situations, people, events, or attitudes. The book considers these idiomatic expressions in a chapter full of often humorous and frequently fun-sounding words and their definitions. The most-prominent fresh idiom considered in the book is 'chickenshit', to which an entire chapter is devoted.

Themes

The War News Was High-minded

The book repeatedly examines the methods mass media used to portray the wartime effort. Media is held to be highly censored, sanitized, politically controlled, and directed toward fostering an attitude of victory and sacrifice. This consistent focusing of media resulted in a high-minded view of the world with a consistent voice of presentation that led to private media being very much similar to official military media. Within this construction of public opinion, the war was interpreted as a great quest of apocalyptic significance—the good Allies fighting against the evil Axis. Thus, the war became not a geopolitical struggle for power and economic control, but a veritable crusade against wickedness. This interpretation led any home-front sacrifice to be viewed as not only necessary, but in fact well-aligned with wartime efforts. Goods rationing was widely practiced, commodities were managed, ersatz substitutes were common, and the public was remarkably tolerant with the entire war effort. Citizens are said to have spend inordinate time and effort in preserving existing goods and in recycling efforts that were believed to help the war effort in some way. The book lists several specific examples of recycling or collecting programs aimed to garner critical wartime supplies from what would otherwise be waste. This phenomenon is not limited to wartime, but the book suggests that the level to which it was practiced during World War II was unprecedented. These efforts were made possible in American and Great Britain because the war was presented as a high-minded affair, and not as an economic struggle. People were glad to participate in a crusade against evil and tyranny—they likely would not be glad to participate in an economic struggle of nations. The book argues, in its primary thesis, that wartime media and in particular news media, both public and private, were high-minded in their presentation of the war.

The War Was Too Violent to Comprehend

The book contrasts the high-minded media portrayal of the war with military combat experience. Instead of dashing young men zooming around in mobile jeeps with slender-barreled cannons, miserable and frightened young men were blown into pieces in stinking jungles and feted mud holes. They were killed in the thousands and tens of thousands, and they were killed in incredibly violent ways, from firearms, to bombs, to fire, to random accidents. Many were killed by military blunders that placed artillery strikes on one's own units, or strafing and bombing runs against one's own civilians and soldiers. The violence of modern warfare is so great and the confusion so profound that actual combat is unintelligible. The vast scale on which World War II was prosecuted threw many millions of people into a violent and incomprehensible struggle to survive and kill. It was nearly impossible to derive any kind of personal meaning from experience in such situations and the author concludes that warfare itself is largely unintelligible because of the violence. This void of rational interpretation is in turn filled by a sanitized and homogenized media portrayal of the war as something directed,

controlled, and essentially meaningful—a high-minded portrayal of warfare. The book suggests several evidences to support the thesis that the violence of modern war is incomprehensible—from the near total lack of meaningful war reporting to the nearly total lack of realistic post-war literature dealing with the violence of warfare. The few exceptions are noted and they are almost singular. The book also comments upon the large numbers of psychological casualties—shell-shock being a common term, and notes that the average soldier can spend only a few days in actual combat before becoming mentally broken down and nearly useless as a fighting force. This partially explains too why governments prefer to send fresh troops into combat.

The War Wasn't About Anything Intelligible

The book cites numerous examples of opinions claiming that World War II was about something—either access to natural resources such as rubber and gasoline, or the possession of expanded frontiers for future settlement. Others argue that the war was about national hegemony, racial ideologies, institutionalized hatred, political power struggles, or in some cases simply the desire for national survival. Some argue the war was about retribution, revenge, or malice. Others argue the war was a crusade of righteous forces against vile wickedness. Indeed, explanations as to the cause of World War II are common and diverse, as were explanations of the Great War and other conflicts. The author argues that all of these rationales are essentially spurious because whatever spark of energy that ignited the war hardly explains in a rational way why the entire world engaged in violent conflict for many years. Instead, the author suggests that a single, rational, intelligible explanation of the war is unobtainable. Instead of discussion a few causes of war, the author suggests that a proper analysis of wartime experience can be conducted only from the vantage point of history, participants being too close to the events to clearly understand them. And certainly for the common soldier or the average citizen there was hardly any 'point' to World War II from a personal perspective. Although this posits that World War II wasn't really 'about' anything, the author contends that this lack of intelligible explanation is correct. This argument has been quite controversial since the book's publication.

Style

Perspective

Paul Fussell, the author, when twenty-years-old, served as an Army lieutenant, leading a rifle platoon in the 103rd Infantry Division in France. He was severely wounded in early 1945. He earned a Ph.D. from Harvard and has since pursued a career as a literary scholar and critic. He has published nine other books before publishing the current book and has held the Donald T. Regan Chair of English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. The author's experiences and education yield an instant credibility and authoritative tone to his presentation of the book's theses. Each chapter builds on the book's primary theses and presents a clearly-defined scope within which citations and quotes are used to support the developing thesis. The author clearly believes that warfare is unintelligible in any ordinary sense of the word and that wartime violence is too intense to be comprehended, fully, as a sane process. He concludes that wartime experience deliberately and systematically is sanitized, standardized, and scripted to infer meaning, rational goals, and assurances of ultimate victory in a 'good-v-evil' milieu. This process is done by the military itself, political power centers, and the cooperation—often enforced—of traditional media reporting to garner public support for the war effort and maintain the status quo.

Tone

The book is presented in a professional and generally reserved tone commonly found in critical essays. The author is an obviously capable writer and literary critic with a great deal of experience in writing and publishing. The author, when twenty-years-old, served as an Army lieutenant, leading a rifle platoon in the 103rd Infantry Division in France. He was severely wounded in early 1945. He has since pursued a career as a literary scholar and critic. The authorial experience instantly yields a credible and authoritative tone to the book. The book is presented from the detached, third-person point of view common to reviews and draws upon a vast range of sources; the tone assumes the reader is educated, familiar with a great deal of literature, and familiar with general literary criticism. The book has been criticized for being overly pessimistic of the war, but the tone does not vary from an even-handed consideration of the primary theses and the author, insofar as possible in any text, remains objective. The book does not present much material of a contrasting viewpoint, but such material is extensive—nearly universal—and easily obtained. And in any event, the book would not benefit from attempting to supply a contrasting point of view.

Structure

The 297-page book is divided into eighteen named and enumerated chapters, and includes about twenty pages of endnotes and a comprehensive index. The chapters are

arranged in an order to support the development of the major theses of the book, and latter chapters often refer back to earlier chapters. The book's topics proceed, quite generally, from a general view of the war to specific aspects of wartime experience. The book's analysis of events draws heavily on literary sources in favor of military sources and even news media sources. Thus, quotations of fiction, poetry, and song are frequent, while quotations from official reports and news media reports are rare. The author argues throughout the book that official portrayals of war are worthless as history and that the actual wartime experience must be obtained from less formal venues. However, even wartime literature is criticized as conformist, high-minded, and propagandistic—post-war memoirs, novels, and volumes of poetry are held to be more realistic and accurate. The book constantly compares and contrasts the Second World War with the Great War, and within that general framework compares and contrasts the American experience as distinct from the British experience. Occasionally, the German experience also is discussed. The book contains several photographs and numerous quotes, some quite extensive. Note the book also contains a large amount of profanity, usually couched in critical terms in those segments of the text that consider wartime language and its development.

Quotes

"Watching a newsreel or flipping through an illustrated magazine at the beginning of the American war, you were likely to encounter a memorable image: the newly invented jeep, an elegant, slim-barreled 37-mm gun in tow, leaping over a hillock. Going very fast and looking as cute as Bambi, it flies into the air, and behind, the little gun bounces high off the ground on its springy tires. This graceful duo conveyed the firm impression of purposeful, resourceful intelligence going somewhere significant, and going there with speed, agility, and delicacy—almost wit." p. 3

"It is hard to embrace ironies like this because the human mind, avoid for clear meaning, experiences frustration and pain when confronted by events which seem purposeless or meaningless. Hence the all-but-universal impulse during the war to impute specific malign intent to every dropped bomb." p. 16

"A world in which such blunders are more common than usual will require large amounts of artful narrative to confer purpose, meaning, and dignity on events actually discrete and contingent. During moments when clear explanations of purpose and significance seem especially unavailable—as in "What did the pilot thing he was doing?" or "What are we doing here?"—demotic social narrative and prophecy flourish as compensations." p. 35

"'All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys.' Thus Melville in his poem 'That March into Virginia.' War must rely on the young, for only they have the two things fighting requires: physical stamina and innocence about their own mortality. The young are proud of their athleticism, and because their sense of honor has not yet suffered compromise, they make the most useful material for manning the sharp end of war. Knowledge will come after a few months, and then they'll be used up and as soldiers virtually useless—scared, cynical, debilitated, unwilling." p. 52

"To recall the sights and sounds and smells of the war is to invoke the memory of crowds everywhere—in trains and restaurants, bars and pubs, theaters and bus stations. Especially bus stations. The bus, indeed, can be thought of as the Second War's emblematic vehicle. At least on the American scene." p. 69

"The soldier, especially the conscript, suffers so deeply from contempt and damage to his selfhood, from absurdity and boredom and chickenshit, that some anodyne is necessary. In Vietnam drugs served the purpose. In the Second World War the recourse was to drunkenness. In its alcoholic culture, this war was very different from its 1914-18 predecessor, at least as that earlier one was experienced by Americans." p. 96

"[T]he soldierly imagination rudely consigns people to four categories:
1. The female, consisting of mother, grandmother, and sister, on the one hand, and, on the other, agents of sexual solace.
2. Elderly men, who are running the draft boards, as well as the rationing, transportation, and propaganda apparatus.

3. The infantine, who will be in the war if it lasts long enough.
4. And the most despised of categories, the 4-F or physically unfit and thus defective, the more despicable the more invisible the defect, like a heart murmur, punctured ear-drum, or flat feet." p. 116

"For most of the troops, the war might just as well have been about good looks, so evanescent at times did its meaning and purpose seem. The puzzlement of the participants about what was going on contrasts notably with the clarity of purpose felt, at least in the early stages, by those who fought the Great War." p. 129

"For those brought up in the neighborhood of the Great War, with its presumably clearer ethical purposes, a rather spare definition of morale had sufficed. The first edition of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, published in 1936, defines the term this way: "Condition as affected by, or dependent upon, such mental or moral factors as zeal, spirit, hope, confidence, etc.; mental state, as of an army." But between the moment of that definition and 1951, when the revision titled Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary appeared, the Second World War had taken place, and now the definition of morale has swollen into a virtual treatise, even an aria..." p. 144

"It might be going too far to suggest that every public relations officer aspired to the condition of Dr. Josef Goebbels, but it should be noted that a person performing the functions of Dr. Goebbels would hardly be imaginable in any earlier war. To have a Goebbels you have to have an atmosphere where presentation replaces actuality—that is, you have to have something like what we now recognize as the media world, where things are conventionally asserted to be true which smart people know are false. Goebbels conceived that absolutely anything could be believed, so long as it was asserted officially with a straight face." p. 154

"Because in wartime the various outlets of popular culture behaved almost entirely as if they were the creatures of their governments, it is hardly surprising to find that they spoke with one voice. Together with skepticism, irony, and doubt, an early casualty was a wide variety of views about current events." p. 180

"Disappointment threatens anyone searching in published wartime writing for a use of language that could be called literary—that is, pointed, illuminating, witty, ironic, clever, or interesting. What one finds, rather, is the gush, waffle, and cliché occasioned by high-mindedness, the impulse to sound portentous, and the slumbering of the critical spirit." p. 251

"What was it about the war that moved the troops to constant verbal subversion and contempt? It was not just the danger and fear, the boredom and uncertainty and loneliness and deprivation. It was rather the conviction that optimistic publicity and euphemism had rendered their experience so falsely that it would never be readily communicable. They knew that in its representation to the laity what was happening to them was systematically sanitized and Norman Rockwellized, not to mention Disneyfied. They knew that despite the advertising and publicity, where it counted their

arms and equipment were worse then the Germans'. They knew that their automatic rifles (World War One vintage) were slower and clumsier, and they knew that the Germans had a much better light machine gun. They knew that despite official assertions to the contrary, the Germans had real smokeless powder for their small arms and that they did not. They knew that their own tanks, both American and British, were ridiculously under-armed and under-armored, so that they were inevitably destroyed in an open encounter with an equal number of German Panzers. They knew that the anti-tank mines supplied them became unstable in sub-freezing weather, and that truckloads of them blew up in the winter of 1944-45. And they knew that the greatest single weapon of the war, the atomic bomb excepted, was the German 88-mm flat-trajectory gun, which brought down thousands of bombers and tens of thousands of soldiers. The Allies had nothing as good, despite one of them designating itself The World's Greatest Industrial Power." p. 268

Topics for Discussion

Fussell suggests that the American and British public and politicians entered the war with the conception that it would somehow be easily won without great cost. By the end of the war this misconception had been proved wrong. Fussell uses the phrase "From Light to Heavy Duty" to describe the process. What are some of the events described in the book that led Americans and British to conclude that the war might not be so easy after all?

Fussell maintains that war is full of military blunders that often cause great loss of life. What mishaps does the text present in support of this thesis? Is it possible to interpret at least some of these events as something other than a blunder?

Much of the book discusses the literature before, during, and after the war, and Fussell argues that a society can be understood by an analysis of its literature. Do you agree that one can learn nearly everything about a society by referring to its collective literature—nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and news media reporting? Why or why not?

Fussell frequently uses the word chickenshit. Within the context of the book, what does 'chickenshit' describe?

Fussell suggests that ideology and nonconformity were sacrificed to a vapid high-minded portrayal of warfare. Since the time the text was published, would you agree that times of war are generally portrayed in a single methodology meant to garner public support for the war effort? Has the advent of the internet changed that paradigm? Discuss.

Wartime publishing was severely restricted in America and Britain. Content was often censored or suppressed, and even the printing materials—paper, glues, bindings—were often substandard and in scarce supply. Do you think that modern publishing methods, heavily utilizing computers, would suffer the same setbacks in a modern world war? Why or why not?

In Chapter 18, Fussell proposes that the real experience of war cannot be conveyed through any book—including his own book—and that most war-related media is devoid of any actual attempt to realistically portray a soldier's wartime experiences. If that is indeed the case, then why would Fussell attempt to write a book about wartime experiences? Discuss.

Throughout the book Fussell compares and contrasts the Second World War with the Great War (e.g., WW II with WW I). Based on your reading of the book, what were some of the essentially similarities between the two world wars? What were some of the essential differences?