

'They Shall Not Grow Old' and the Rise of Moral Nihilism

[They Shall Not Grow Old](#) is an extremely painful film to watch. I've seen most of the major war films but I can't recall one that is more powerful overall – powerful in the sense that it shakes you to your spiritual core.

This film puts you right there as a middle-class Briton in the midst of the Great War, step-by-step from regular civilian to the killing fields of the Western front, from the onset of patriotism at the beginning to the shattered hopes and lives of the end.

You are left with a deeply unsettling number of questions to which there are no obvious answers, questions such as where does war come from and why can't it be stopped and why, after this experience, did humankind ever allow it to happen again? The whole thing seems too unbelievable to be true. And yet somehow this movie makes it too true to ignore, try as one might.

Audiences are wild for the film (99% on Rotten Tomatoes). It exudes integrity in every frame.

The headline pitch for the film is the technology that made it possible. The producers took old black-and-white spotty footage and colorized it, added sound, and removed the rough edges, seemingly bringing the dead back to life. It's jaw-dropping for sure, and enough reason to keep watching. If you have had any moments of regret concerning the effect of CGI on modern filmography, this movie might change your mind.

But this is far from all that the film offers. The narrative is genius storytelling, somehow taking this ghastly, complex, ignored series of events with strange beginnings and turning it into a deeply engaging human drama about the mystically

evil event we call war which baptizes mass murder and death in the cleansing waters of patriotic fervor.

Why do people choose to give up their normal, happy lives to risk debilitating injury and death in steamy swamps of the warzone, a life of sleeping while standing up in terrifying trenches while suffering gangrene and dysentery with the only hope of escaping resting with the obliteration of people just like yourself but for accident of geography who are living the same way just over the hill?

True, Britain had a draft. It was [instituted](#) in January of 1916. From the telling we receive here, however, it's not obvious that it was necessary. The nation was calling and that was enough. Propaganda posters were everywhere. The pressure must have been unbearable. You surely do not doubt the superiority of your nation or distrust the claims of its leadership. Your friends and colleagues were going. Were you just going to let them risk their lives for the great cause of...something...while you languished at home as a cowardly shopkeeper?

I wondered what I would have done, but it seems rather obvious given the times. I too would have signed up. I'm sure every viewer was thinking the same. From that moment of mental decision making, you feel deep empathy with all the subsequent events: the disease, the terror, the heartache, the sense of betrayal after the war.

The world had never seen total war before, but these were also times of the advent of the total state that knew no limits to its power. The age of laissez-faire was said to be over, and scientific planning would take its place. We had the intelligence. We had modern technology. We had central banks to generate the necessary funds out of thin air.

Why stop with domestic policy? The total beckoned to be tested on the battlefield. From the Middle Ages through the

Napoleonic and Colonial wars, the conflicts between nations were between states and those who worked for them. But with the Great War, it was different. Whole nations were now at war, not just governments. Not one was excluded from the massive mobilization.

As Ludwig von Mises [wrote](#), “The first step which led from the soldiers’ war back to total war was the introduction of compulsory military service. It gradually did away with the difference between soldiers and citizens. The war was no longer to be only a matter of mercenaries; it was to include everyone who had the necessary physical ability.”

And so it began, almost as if by accident. The noble and heroic legend of wars past was summoned up in support of a new kind of war in which, as people soon discovered, individual bravery mattered hardly at all. The difference between those who came home in one piece and the many millions who were slaughtered was purely accidental. How can you fight bravely from a trench? Your main goal was survival and there was very little you can do to make it more or less likely.

Every viewer will be affected differently but here are the parts that stood out to me. I had read about mustard gas but had not seen or fully realized the implications. I had known that the soldiers in the war were young but as young as 15 years old? Remarkable. I hadn’t fully realized what a remarkable invention the tank was for war. I’ve heard stories of the tragedy afflicting returning soldiers from Vietnam but hadn’t known that it affected those returning from the Great War too.

There is a moment near the end in which a soldier is telling the story of successfully pushing through the German line and pouring into a trench occupied by German soldiers. Enemy combatants came out with their hands up. The aging soldier continued with the story: “at that moment, we had to decide what to do, so of course we...” – and if the audio had stopped

there I had no way to predict what he would have said. He continued: "we captured them and led them back to camp." Whew: four fewer murders that day than one might have expected.

You read every manner of speculation concerning the mysterious appearance of moral nihilism in the 20th century. Rarely is the Great War named as a culprit, but this film leaves no doubt. Hundreds, even thousands, of years of struggle to develop and cultivate a sense of decorum, decency, peace, human understanding, and, poof, in a seeming instant it is all gone.

The veneer of civilization slipped away, to quote one memoir. You either kill or be killed, on a scale not seen since the Black Death wiped out half of Europe's population. It's one thing to be killed by disease; another to manufacture with industrial equipment the means to inflict mass death on a population by design.

It's no wonder that following this war, humankind's hold on the idea of fixed moral categories became tenuous at best. The claims made by the ruling class that this war was conducted for righteous reasons, complete with mandatory church attendance during training, came to be revealed very obviously as a tissue of lies.

"Each chief of the murderers causes his colors to be blessed," wrote Voltaire, "and solemnly invokes God before he goes to exterminate his neighbors. If a chief has only the fortune to kill two or three thousand men, he does not thank God for it; but when he has exterminated about ten thousand by fire and sword, and, to complete the work, some town has been leveled with the ground, they then sing a long song in four parts, composed in a language unknown to all who have fought, and moreover replete with barbarism. The same song serves for marriages and births, as well as for murders."

Every idealist hopes that humankind can learn from history.

There is plenty of evidence that we do not. Voltaire failed to stop war, despite valiant efforts. Still, we must face history, even its most brutal chapters, if there is to be any hope of finding our way back to peace and civilization. [They Shall Not Grow Old](#) makes a mighty contribution to that goal.

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