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The Psychology of War

Alexander Berkman

1916

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The fundamental cause of all wars is undoubtedly to be found in the military organization of society. The formation of an army is always prompted by the intention of an aggressive or a defensive war. To be a real military man one has to give up every ideal of human right, and have no other goal than the duty of authority. The primary condition for the strength and efficiency of an army is discipline, by which is meant the absolute submission of the individual will to the order of a leader. In other words, the man becoming a soldier ceases to be a man, and becomes a machine.

But human personality cannot be destroyed altogether, especially in the partly civilized epoch in which we are living. If you take away from the individual the spiritual force that underlies every deep human emotion, you must give him some other basis for his activity. For this purpose, the evil genius of despotism has invented for the soldier the glory and the honor of the flag. With that, it satisfies the idealism that grows in every heart. This gives a noble and holy glamor to the sacrifice which is demanded from the soldier, and at the same time forges the strongest link in the long chain by which despotism holds the nation in slavery.

The monotonous life in the barracks doesn't fulfil this purpose. It therefore becomes necessary to stimulate the courage and ambition of the soldiers by inspiring the hope of great battles and wonderful victories over the enemy. When the defender of the home country is thus excited to the proper patriotic pitch, thinking and dreaming only of murder, blood and violence, in order to win a medal or a title, it merely remains to cry: "Down with the Prussians!", "Down with the French!" These wild mottoes are repeated everywhere by peoples who — far from having any cause for mutual destruction — in reality have every reason to love each other. Instead, their passion of hatred is aroused by telling them that one nation has injured the honor and glory of some other.

Periodic wars are therefore primarily the product and forced result of military organization.