

The New York Times
CURRENT HISTORY

March, 1915

A Paradox of War

[By a British Officer]

The following reflections on the effects of war upon character are from a letter written to his wife by a British officer at the western front:

GENERALLY we all feel in much the same way—the British soldiers at the front. I was telling a Chaplain yesterday of a raid that had been made on the German trenches, and had added: “I suppose about sixty Germans were killed.” “Is that all?” he said, with a real sorrow and disappointment in his voice. If I could have said six hundred he, a Christian priest, would have felt more content. Yet he was a gentle-hearted man.

Talking with him before, he had been exchanging with me observations going to show the great growth of tenderness, of chivalry, of dutiful generosity among the soldiers. We both could cite instance after instance, some of which brought a quaver to the voice and a dimness to the eyes. Put down side by side these two facts: (1) That in the main the British soldier at the front is a better man for his present experience, better in his thought of his family, to his mates, to the civil population around him, to the animals who serve him, to his German prisoners, and that he is also, clearly, a “softer” man; (2) that he is sternly (cruelly, if you like) set upon destroying Germans, and talks of Hun-killing as the most desirable thing in life.

There appears between the two a chasm of paradox. And I suppose it would be very hard by any process of logic to bridge the chasm. Go behind logic, however, and search in the deeper

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motives of instinct, and the position is plain enough. A deep, passionate instinct teaches the man in the fighting line that all that makes for the betterment of human life, chivalry, generosity, candor, fair dealing, is threatened with extinction, and he finds himself unconsciously striving to cherish and foster the gentler side of life at the same time as he sets himself with savage sternness to exterminate the forces which are working for its destruction.

For the German as a prisoner there is a kind welcome. "Tommy" will give him his own rations and tobacco and lend him his coat. For the German as a combatant in the cause of anti-civilization there is a stern hatred which would make it the most welcome of Christmas treats if we were allowed on the 25th to bombard every place which was supposed to shelter a German and to raid every German trench.

There is no "tenderness for Germany" at the front, though there is, to the most careless observation, an increase of human tenderness, and the more it increases the more savage becomes the mood of resolution to finish, once for all, with the enemies of the humane side of life. Imagine a physician facing an outbreak of plague among a population of his friends and his attitude toward the bacillus of the plague. That represents our feeling toward armed Germany. You need not fear for a "disgraceful peace" coming from fatigue on the part of the fighting men. It is the resolution of the talking men you will need to look to.