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War on Humor: Killing Laughter in Times of Strife

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War on Humor: Killing Laughter in Times of Strife

Abstract

This project explores the use of humor as a coping mechanism throughout the first World War. It focuses on three main aspects: (1) the evolution of humor prior to, contemporary to, and after WWI; (2) the contrast between Germany's strict oppression of humor and France's more free approach; (3) and the distinction between civilian and soldier humor.

Keywords

humor, coping mechanism, WWI, laughter

Disciplines

French and Francophone Literature | German Literature | Military History

Comments

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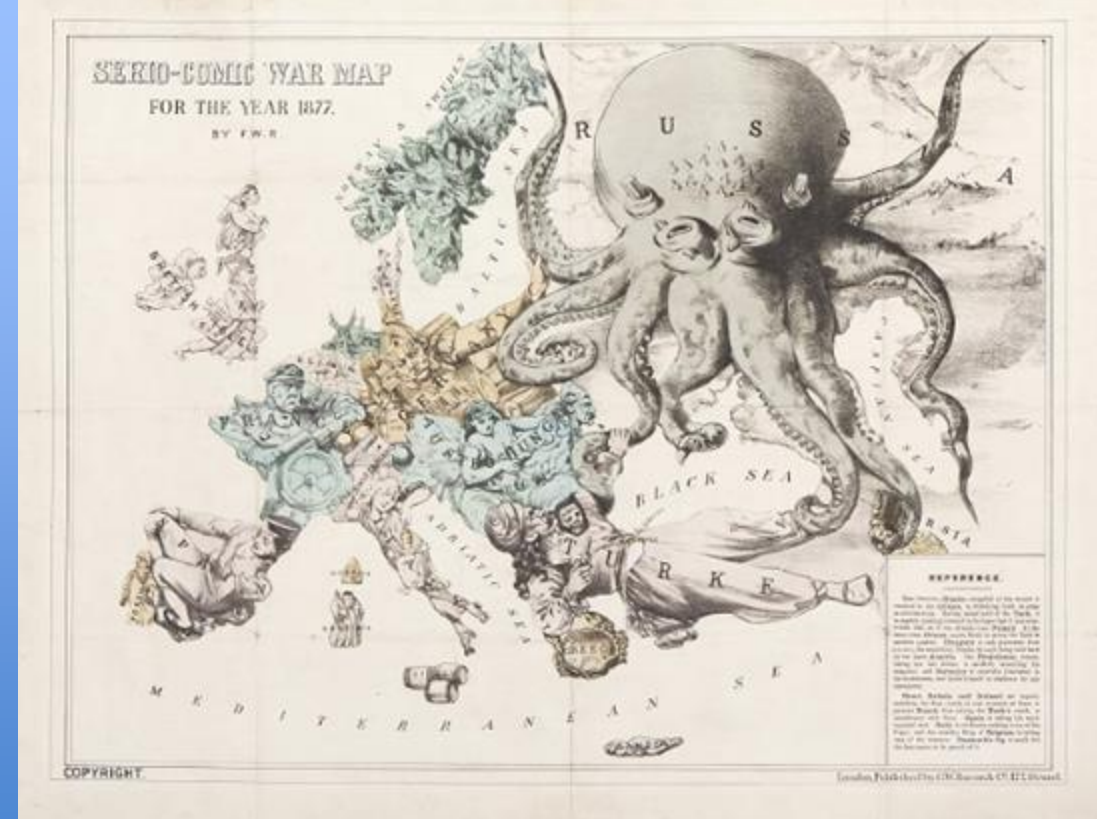


Fig. 1. "Serio-Comic War Map For the Year 1877", Frederick W. Rose

Introduction

In the words of Charlie Chaplin, "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain, and play with it." And for centuries, humor has been used as a mechanism to relieve pain and dissociate from reality, with the oldest joke dating back to 1900 BC.¹ And this very same phenomenon can be seen throughout the perils of the Great War, even if there was a differentiation between civilian and soldier humor. Although humor cannot be applied in the same manner for every person, the opposing evolutions of humor in France and Germany and the respective influences of such different approaches to dealing with laughter during the War coupled with the psychological need for laughter in times of turmoil demonstrate that humor is a successful coping mechanism for emotional health to a great extent.

The Evolution of Humor in WWI

Pre-War Satire

Prior to the war, most Europeans enjoyed reading satirical articles and political cartoons that created caricatures of political leaders, as depicted in Fig. 1 and Fig 3. Being both ironic and informative, Europeans were able to relate and even integrate this humor into their culture, especially in Germany, where satire "encapsulated the city's identity."² As a result, it was even more jarring to see Germany's complete transformation into a strict, no-laughing zone.

Killing Humor with Censorship during WWI

Especially during the early stages of this first modern war, propaganda and censorship who prolific in every participating country. Satire "nearly disappeared from the press," as comedy became an instrument of government control.³ It was no longer meaningful or unique.

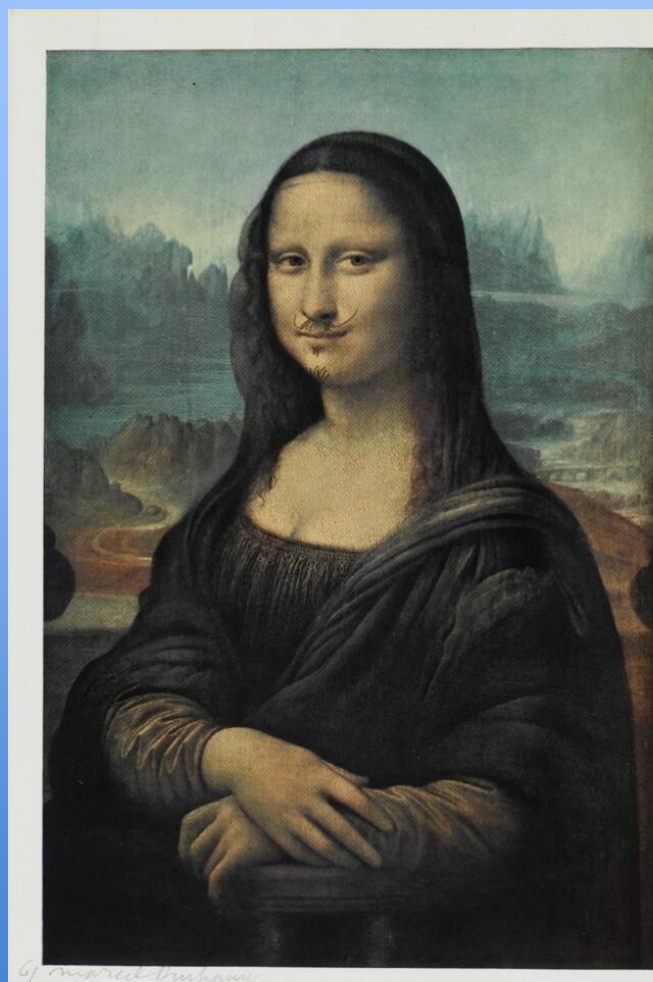


Fig. 2. "L.H.O.O.Q. or La Joconde," Raoul Hausmann

Side Note: What is Humor, Actually?

As this entire project addresses the subject matter of humor, it is important to understand what humor is. And the truth is, we don't know! Psychologists as early as Sigmund Freud have been studying humor, and how and why it manifests remains a mystery. However, we can study the effects of humor, especially as a coping mechanism. Describing laughter as "an expression of the subconscious dealing with suppressed conflicts," Freud notes that humor is an effective means of dissociating oneself from reality.⁴

Art is Dead... and so is Politics

Countries' restriction or lack of restriction continued to feign influence in art and politics even after the end of the war. In Germany specifically, humor magazines such as *Witzblatt* and *Simplicissimus* "had abandoned [their] politically progressive satire of the prewar period and [have] become an organ of reactionary conservatism."⁵ In other words, Germany's censorship during the war continued to have negative effects on humor, as even after the war, there were mass of restrictions and a lack of creativity, and satire as a form of entertainment was still struggling to remerge. The people's opposition to such restriction can be aptly expressed in the avant-garde Dada art movement of the time. Like the name itself, Dada Art, art was ultimately nonsensical and bizarre., as demonstrated in Fig. 2 and Fig. 4. As a result, Germans, desiring to finally express their emotions, adopted extreme liberal ideals, even forming the Dadaist Central Union for World Revolution political party which advocated for "anarchist revolution."⁶ In other words, while the government strived to maintain totalitarianism and control through a conservative ideology, the pendulum swung to the other, opposite extreme. On the other hand, because France, and more specifically Paris, was "swept into a frenzy of pleasure-seeking" during the war, the transition into the post-war period was more stable in terms of humor.⁷ Not only does such ardent desire for entertainment and comedy affirm the instinctive need for humor in times of pain in agony, but it further helps contrast Germany and France. While France eventually recognized the utility of humor in war, Germany remained obstinate and stiff, resulting in a higher morale and more positive mood to be present in France and a morose, pessimistic atmosphere to envelop Germany.

German v. French Approach

German Crackdown

Although all participating nations of the war utilized propaganda and censorship to influence public opinion and maintain an image of superiority, Germany is especially known for its stringent crackdown on humor. German leaders only permitted satire "in close consultation with the military high command," and "if one had to laugh during this war, [...] it was to be 'German laughter.'"⁸ Not only does this demonstrate the authoritarianism of Germany, it also failed to provide the German people with a healthy outlet for their frustrations, as they were not even allowed to voice their concerns and oppositions. Consequently, the shortfalls of the government could not be reformed, as they were not allowed to be acknowledged in the first place. In order to resolve an issue, one must indicate that the problem exists. Therefore, by ignoring the existence of the problem, the German government could not reform their problems. In short, humor lost its originality and comedy and became an instrument of the German government to intimidate rather than encourage people to support the war effort



Fig. 3. "La France Figurée sous un Globe est soutenu du Peuple La Noblesse et le Clergé aide au premier..."

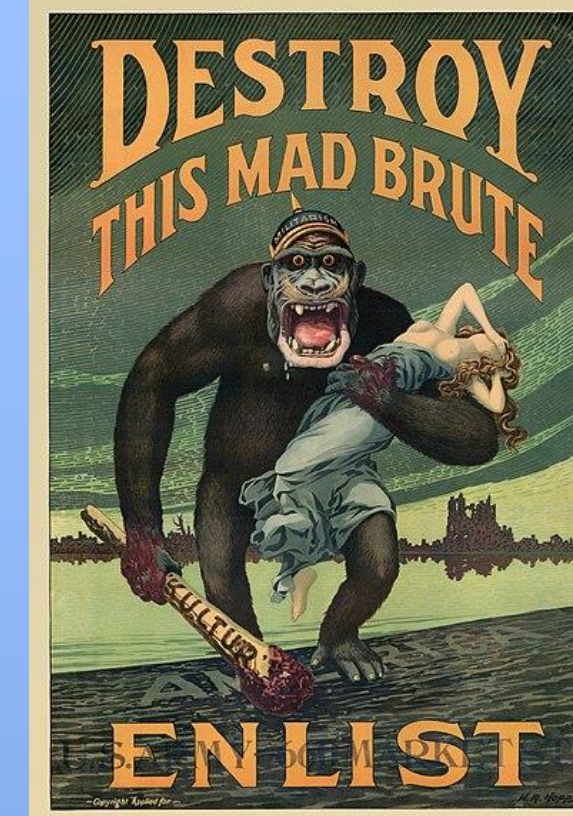


Fig. 4. "Destroy this Mad Brute Enlist - U.S. Army," Harry Ryle Hopps

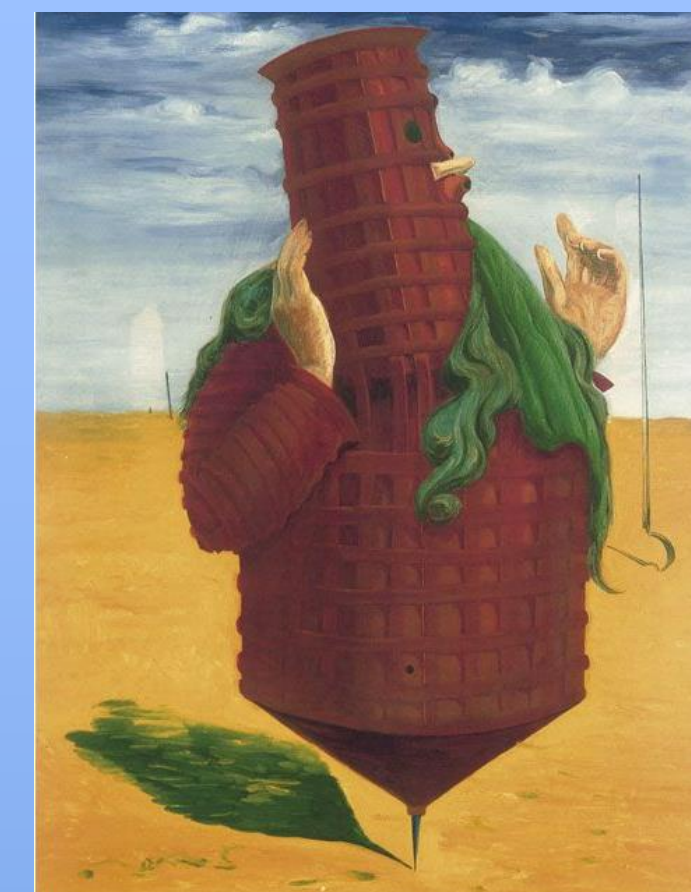
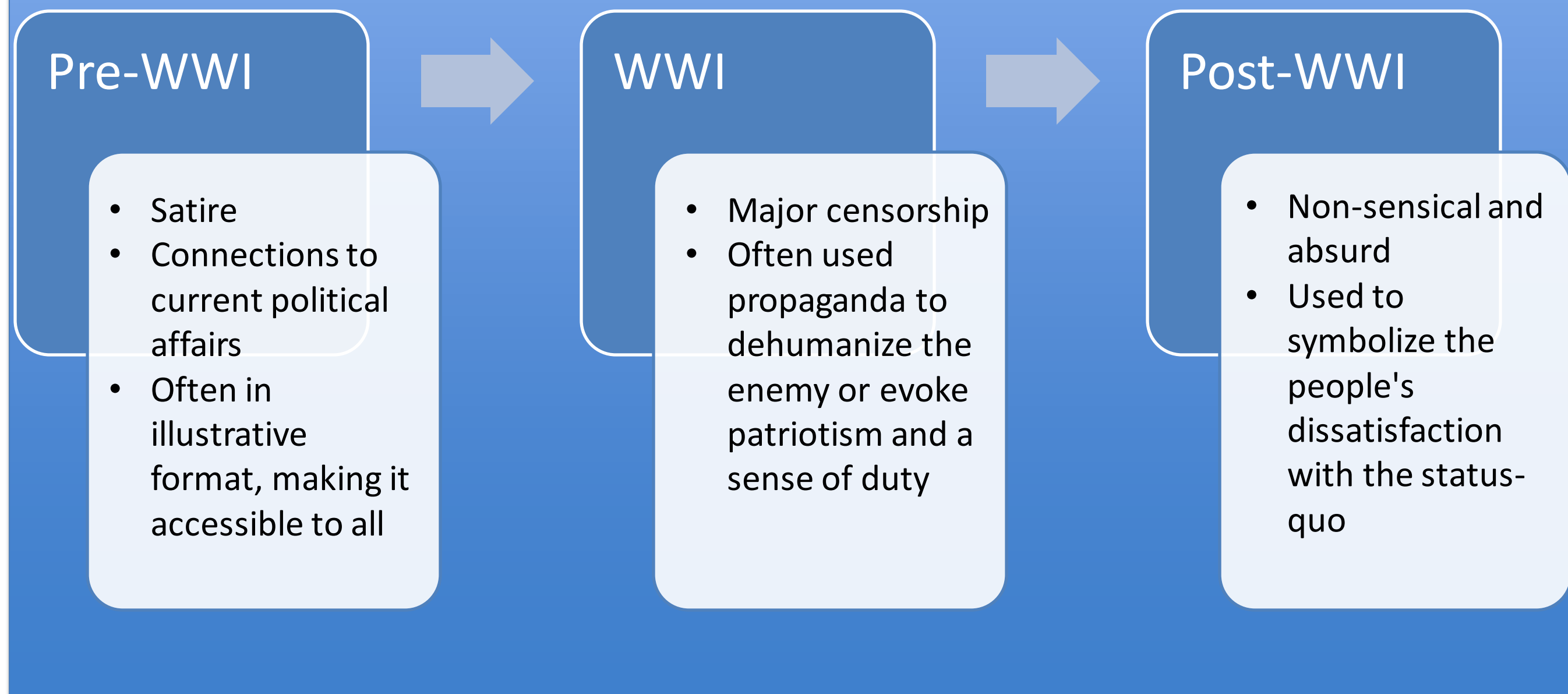


Fig. 5. "Ubu Imperator," Max Ernst



French Liberation

On the other hand, in France, restrictions on the press and humor in general gradually dissipated. The French were even allowed to highlight the flaws of the government, inciting reform, as is evident in fig. 6. The satirical cartoon intends to incite laughter through the means of a clever pun challenging the French moratorium. Just as a leaking roof cannot cover one from the rain, the moratorium initiated by the French government was not efficient in supporting the people. Although the reality of the government's lack of competence in this regard may be frustrating, this political cartoon creates a feeling of recognition and comradeship, as everyone is going through the same hardship together. As a result, the viewer of the drawing becomes more motivated to continue enduring the difficulties of war. Unlike the Germans who were not even allowed to acknowledge the existence of a problem, the French had the opportunity to criticize the government and, as a result, brainstorm solutions to their concerns. It brought people together for a common cause to create a common solution.

Lasting Consequences

As previously touched upon, the consequences of suppressing humor in war permeated into the aftermath of the war through the forms of political unrest and Dada Art. However, the impacts can even be continued to be observed in modern society. One might even propose the argument that the modern-day stereotype of the humorless, angry German stems from the censorship of humor in German history. Even during the war, opposing nations utilized Germany's suppression against laughter "as evidence of diminishing public morale in Berlin.," and therefore the failure of the German army in battle. In other words repressing something that is so integral to humanity is never a healthy outlet to resolve an issue.⁹

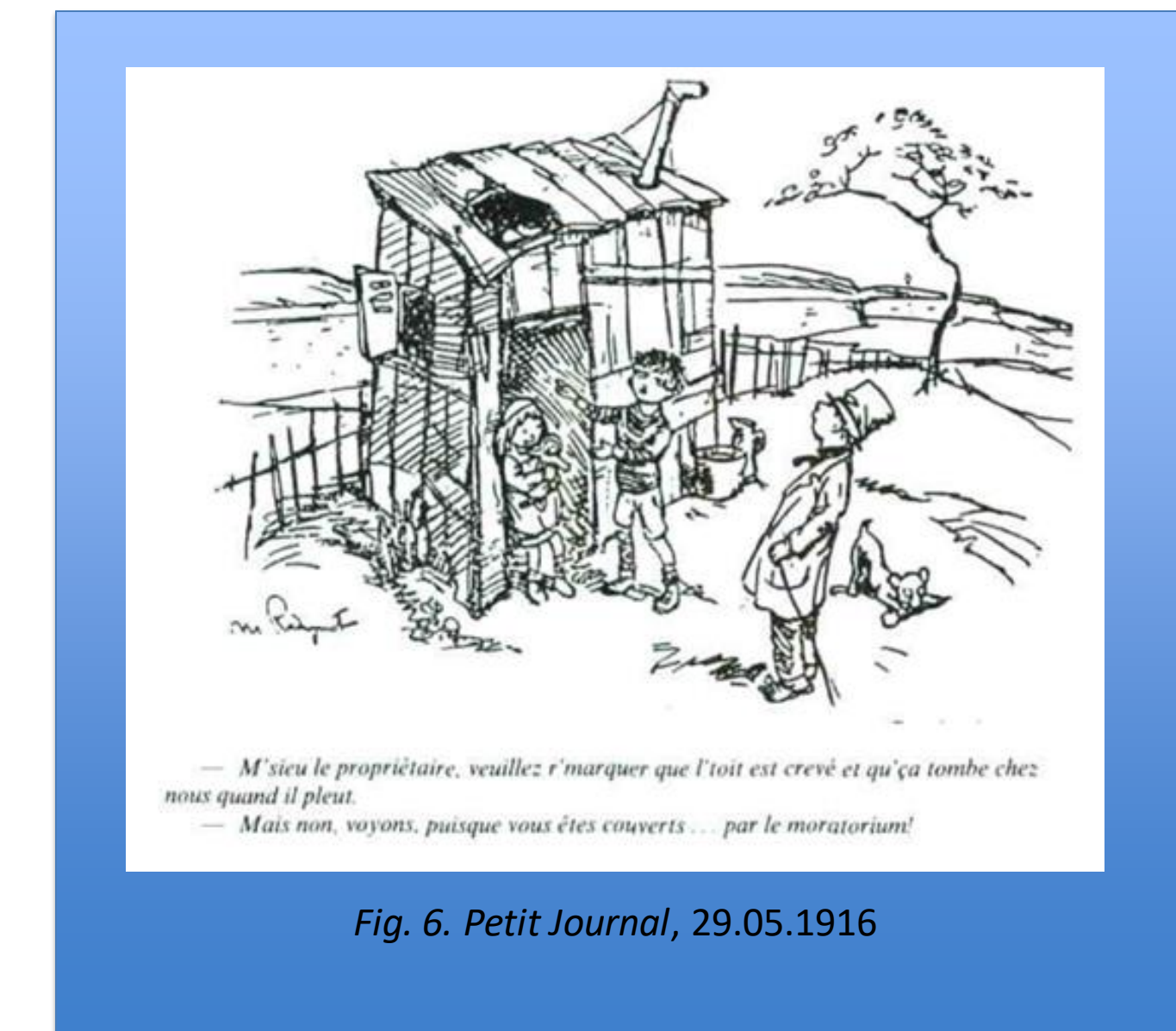


Fig. 6. Petit Journal, 29.05.1916

Humor is Not a Cure All

Although humor certainly diffuses tension and provides as an escape from reality's blunders, it is important to consider the humor is not a universal concept, and a distinction between soldier and civilian humor must be clarified. In short, soldier humor focused more on the shared experiences faced in the trenches, while civilian humor aimed to distract people from reality using absurd exaggerations, often of the enemy. As a result, there formed a dichotomy between how soldiers and civilians responded to the enemy. While the soldier was able to empathize and even feel pity for the opposing side, the civilian could not share the same compassion.

Different Humors, Different Perceptions of the Enemy

While jokes and banter helped civilians defuse tension and confront reality, soldiers were the most adamant about incorporating entertainment in their daily, monotonous lives in the trenches to not only keep from boredom, but to also help maintain sanity. For instance, soldiers began to create 'trench newspapers' in an "overt spirit of mockery, with the blessing of the High Command, since humor was taken to be proof of the troop's morale."¹⁰ This emergence of a distinctive trench-style humor not only expresses the personal desire for light-heartedness in war, but also emphasizes a mutual understanding that soldiers had for one another, allowing them to unite in their suffering instead of being overwhelmed by bottled-up emotions and tensions. For instance, a large portion of trench humor teased the ignorance and innocence of new soldiers, as can be seen in Fig. 7, where a new recruit mistakes a looking lens for scouting No-Man's-Land with a shaving mirror. In other words, such forms of humor utilized inside jokes and a sense of comradeship, allowing them to share a laugh and forget about the painful reality for a temporary time. On the other hand, civilian humor was more distinguished in its ability to exaggerate reality to juxtapose the absurd with the standard, often through demonizing the enemy. As a result, civilians faced a far more difficult time sympathizing with the enemy. Since civilians only faced the repercussions of the enemy without personal experience in the battle, they formed a mutual identity with their fellow non-combatants stemming from the pain and suffering caused by the opposing side, making it difficult for them to sympathize with their foe. On the other hand, soldiers developed a sense of understanding with both the home front and the enemy front because of the realization that every man is fighting in similar trenches, with ravenous rats and detrimental disease

Conclusion

Ultimately, humor was an effective means of maintaining morale and coping with the trauma of war during World War I due to its pacifying qualities that created a healthy outlet for frustrations about the horrific reality of the war. As demonstrated by France and Germany's respective acceptance and rejection of humor, laughter is an intrinsically human trait that cannot be stifled or repressed, especially in times of great turmoil such as war. War is a fight for life, and without emotions one is already dead, as emotions make humans human.



Fig. 7. Listening Post, 1918