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**Fear and Masculinity in the Private Expressions of Soldiers
During World War One**

Abstract:

World War One catapulted the world into modern warfare. Hand-to-hand combat was replaced by trenches, heavy artillery fire, and chemical warfare. Consequently, soldiers entered combat unprepared and left experiencing combat-induced traumas including shell shock. These traumas caused men to physically and emotionally break down which was a stark contrast to the brave and stoic male gender ideal at the time. Most historians argue that shifts in gender ideals didn't occur until after the First World War. However, by analyzing the personal expressions of male soldiers at the front it is apparent that gender ideals were shifting in the trenches during the war.

Key Words:

Adolescence Education Social Studies

World War One

Soldiers

Personal Expressions

Fear

Masculinity

I. Introduction

On January 27th, 1915, Russian soldier Vasily Mishnin wrote a letter to his pregnant wife Nyura Mishnin. In his letter, he described the conditions he was experiencing in Poland.

11 a.m. Soon our lunch is coming. Hot soup, my heart's desire Suddenly a screeching noise pierces the air, I feel a pang in my heart, something whistles past and explodes nearby. My dear Lord, I am so frightened - and I hear this buzzing in my ears... I leave my post and climb into my dugout. It is packed, everyone is shaking and asking again and again, 'What's going on? What's going on?' One explosion follows another...¹

Mishnin describes a “pang” in his heart, feeling “frightened” by the artillery, and how all of the soldiers are “shaking”.² His choice of words and descriptions of their physical reactions relay to his wife the raw fear he felt at the front. Moreover, he says “What’s going on” indicating that he is confused which also contributes to his fear. He did not portray himself as brave or heroic, the qualities men in uniform were meant to exhibit. Instead, he described himself as terrified and confused, the opposite of the soldierly ideal.

Romanticism and Warfare:

Before the First World War, many Europeans subscribed to an innocent and romantic notion of war. Paul Fussell writes about romanticism in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*.¹ Fussell argues that romantic understandings of war ended with the First World War, after which society began to adopt a more pessimistic idea of war and combat.³ Fussell exemplifies this shift in a chapter titled: “A Satire of Circumstance” by contrasting words

¹ Svetlana Palmer and Sara Wallis, e.d, *Intimate Voices From the First World War*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 40.

² Svetlana Palmer ad Sara Willis, 40.

³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 18.

utilized to describe war before and after the First World War. ⁴ Before World War I, he dead on the battlefield were called the “fallen”, and the soldiers were the “brave”. ⁵ Soldiers were instructed that battle was like a game. ⁶ In *The First Hundred Thousand*, a book from 1915, detailing British preparation of soldiers during the First World War, soldier John Hay Beith, “...gives a cheerful half-half-fictionalized account of a unit of Kitchener’s Army, emphasizing the comedies of training and the brave, resourceful way the boys are playing the game and encountering the absurdities of army life with spirit and humor”. ⁷ This innocent and romantic notion of war associated combat and military service with glory and honor and made the First World War seem as though it was, “... taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’”. ⁸

The pre-1914 heroic notion of war also depended on a traditional understanding of gender. Around the time of the First World War, manliness was largely measured by a man's ability to uphold society's values. ⁹ According to historian George Mosse, Western culture understood that a “... true man was a man of action who controlled his passions, and who in his harmonious and well - proportioned bodily structure expressed his commitment to moderation and self-control.” ¹⁰ Within this model, war was seen as an essential part of the male experience and the ultimate “test” of one's manhood. ¹¹ In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter discusses gendered conceptions of male soldiers during World War One. ¹² She argues that the “emotionally incapacitated” men suffering after the First World War contradicted dominant

⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1975), 22.

⁵ Paul Fussell, 22.

⁶ Paul Fussell 22.

⁷ Paul Fussell, 18.

⁸ Paul Fussell, 18.

⁹ George L. Mosse, “Shell Shock as a Social Disease” *Jounral of Contempoary History*, 35, no.1 (2000) 1.

¹⁰ George L. Moose, “Shell Shcok as a Social Disease”, 1.

¹¹ George L. Moose, “Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience”, 21, no.4 (1986) 1.

¹² Elaine Showalter, "Male Hysteria: W.H.R. Rivers and the Lessons of Shell Shock," *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 168-194.

conceptions of masculinity.¹³ She exemplifies this by describing how certain reactions to war did not align with the male gender ideal. Physical reactions to fear, for example, were categorized as male weakness.¹⁴ Showlater also states that “...alternatives to combat - pacifism, conscientious objection, desertion, even suicide, - were viewed as [unmanly]...”¹⁵ With every alternative to fighting considered unmanly and any physical expressions of fear considered weak, war became an essential part of the male experience. Another example is the British white feather campaign in the early years of World War One.¹⁶ Before 1916, the British did not have military conscription.¹⁷ Therefore, the government needed campaigns encouraging men to enlist.¹⁸ The government-sponsored campaigns associated masculinity with brave soldiers and labeled unenlisted male citizens as weaklings.¹⁹ One campaign called for women to join “The White Feather Brigade”, a group of women that would hand white feathers to men dressed in civilian clothing during public demonstrations.²⁰ The objective was to call out men who had not joined the war and shame them into enlisting.²¹

During World War I, media, and propaganda provided Europeans with images of stoic and brave men willing to sacrifice it all. In Great Britain, depictions of aerial warfare were dominated by depictions of the “mythic and heroic ‘ace’”, which connected aerial warfare to romantic notions of chivalry and solidified the male ideal as a stoic protector.²² Furthermore, in Great Britain, depictions of women emphasized femininity as a desire for male protection.²³ A

¹³ Elaine Showalter, 169.

¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, 169.

¹⁵ Elaine Showalter

¹⁶ Nicoletta F. Gullace, “White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War”, *Journal of British Studies*, 36, no. 2 (1997): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/176011>, 2.

¹⁷ Nicoletta F. Gullace, 5.

¹⁸ Nicoletta F. Gullace, 5.

¹⁹ Nicoletta F. Gullace, 5.

²⁰ Nicoletta F. Gullace, 5.

²¹ Nicoletta F. Gullace, 5.

²² Susan R. Grayzl and Tammy Proctor, e.d., *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 173

²³ Susan R. Grayzl and Tammy Proctor 177.

British poster from 1915, for example, depicted a young mother watching soldiers march by with her children.²⁴ The caption read “Women of Britain Say Go!”. The implication was that the woman wanted the men in her life to enlist to protect herself and her children.²⁵ Another poster, created by the Canadian Patriotic Fund, displayed the following statement in bold red and blue: “Some women are sending their men. Some men are giving their lives. What are you doing for the cause of freedom? Fight or pay. Subscribe now to the Canadian Patriotic Fund”.²⁶ The statement “some women are sending their men” gendered military service and associated manliness with protecting women.²⁷ Such posters further solidified the role of men as stoic and brave protectors and associated women with the domestic sphere.

As the First World War progressed, however, the romanticized notion of combat and the male ideal proved unattainable. Combat became less personal. The conflict saw the “...growing use of industrialized weapons: aircraft; chemical munitions: submarines: tank; machine guns; large-scale artillery, enhanced bullets and ballistics, and anti-air batteries.”²⁸ Instead of fighting a man bravely face to face, soldiers were bombarded with artillery and chemical gas from afar. This shift is exemplified in Henri Barbusse’s novel *Under Fire: The Story of a Squad* from 1916 which describes men leaving the trenches during combat.²⁹ As the men exit the trench they are met with heavy artillery fire and many die instantly.³⁰ Barbusse states, “As soon as our pushing and jolted file emerges, two men close to me are hit, two shadows are hurled to the ground and

²⁴ Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor 177.

²⁵ Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor 177.

²⁶ Fig 1, Canadian Patriotic Fund, *Some women are sending their men. Some men are giving their lives. What are you doing for the cause of freedom? Fight or pay. Subscribe now to the Canadian Patriotic Fund*, lithograph, 1915 (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.) Library of Congress.

²⁷ Fig 1, Canadian Patriotic Fund, *Some women are sending their men. Some men are giving their lives. What are you doing for the cause of freedom? Fight or pay. Subscribe now to the Canadian Patriotic Fund*, lithograph, 1915 (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.) Library of Congress.

²⁸ Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor, 170.

²⁹ Merry E. Weisner, Andrew D. Evans, William Bruce Wheeler, and Julius R. Ruff, “Under Fire the Story of a Squad 1916” in *Discovering the Western Past*, (Connecticut: Cenage, 2015), 312.

³⁰ Merry E. Weisner, Andrew D. Evans, William Bruce Wheeler, and Julius R. Ruff, 312.

roll under our feet, one with a sharp cry and the other silently, as a felled Ox".³¹ This description of men dying instantly by artillery fire represents the shift in warfare present during World War One. The modernization of the First World War produced a generation of men suffering from "shell shock" or "combat-induced trauma".³² This never-before-seen "combat-induced trauma" represented the antithesis of the Western conceptions of the male. Soldiers were supposed to be "indifferent to death" and "accustomed" to the terror they endured in the trenches.³³ Therefore, those who suffered from "shell shock" were believed to have failed the ultimate test of manhood and were labeled as unmanly.³⁴ Moreover, "shell shock" acquired a negative reputation because "civilians and military alike looked down upon [the supposed] hysteria", a condition associated with women.³⁵

World War One occurred at a unique point in history where ever-evolving technology changed the face of war. This change challenged gender assumptions and altered the realities of men at the battlefield. With the once brave and stoic man facing fear and combat-induced trauma, the question arises: how did men negotiate and react to the male gender ideal during World War I? Did gender expectations shift to accommodate the changing realities at the front? One way to address these questions is to analyze and chart how soldiers at the front expressed emotions, particularly those that the male gender ideal deemed unacceptable. Chief among these was fear, a feeling that had no place in the ideal of the brave and stoic soldier. Did men at the front articulate fear, and if so, how? What do such expressions reveal about understandings of masculinity during WWI?

³¹ Merry E. Weisner, Andrew D. Evans, William Bruce Wheeler, and Julius R. Ruff, 312.

³² Susan R. Grayzl and Tammy Proctor, 170.

³³ George L. Moose, "Shell Shock as a Social Disease", 4.

³⁴ George L. Moose, "Shell Shock as a Social Disease", 4.

³⁵ George L. Moose, "Shell Shock as a Social Disease", 6.

I have found that, contrary to the present historiography, gendered norms did change in the trenches during World War One. By analyzing soldiers' letters I have seen numerous conversations and expressions of fear that contradicted prevailing gender norms for men at the time. Fear was on the minds of most soldiers at the front and the men expressed this fear to others, an emotion they were supposed to keep to themselves. The brave and stoic male ideal could not survive the war. Moreover, my research focuses solely on the personal expressions of soldiers at the front while the present historiography places greater emphasis on memoirs written after the war. Personal expressions in letters and diaries show that gender ideals were changing in real-time, as the war progressed, rather than simply after 1918.

Historiography:

In discussing the history of fear and gender expectations in male soldiers at the battlefield during World War I, it is important to recognize the present historiography. Many historians argue that gender ideals and culture did not instantly change to fit the new artillery and trench warfare. They instead see a slower change that results in misconceptions regarding shell shock and a lack of understanding surrounding the experiences faced by men at the front. The relevant historiography falls into three categories: gender, shell shock, and the history of emotions.

Historians often address World War One in two ways: the gendered relationships between men and women and pre-existing/shifting notions of masculinity. For example, Nicoletta F. Gullance analyzes the gender roles of men and women in “White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War.” Gullance examines the way the British white feather campaign and military propaganda placed women in the position of building armies and influenced the rhetoric veteran soldiers used when recalling patriotism during World

War One.³⁶ She investigates how the media addressed masculinity and demonstrates that bravery and stoicism were understood as central characteristics of soldiers. In her view, the gender ideals of stoicism and bravery were still dominant during World War One despite the changes in artillery and soldiers' experience.

Michael Roper addresses shifting wartime notions of gender in his "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The "War Generation" and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914–1950". Roper argues that concepts of masculinity changed after World War One. He contends that the British middle class adopted a degree of "reflexivity" about masculinity in light of experiences at the front during World War One.³⁷ At the front, men experienced terror and trauma that then filtered into fields such as psychology.³⁸ Roper explores understandings of masculinity in postwar memoirs and novels and shows that notions of masculinity shifted.³⁹ Men were no longer expected to be brave and stoic but instead had diverse responses to fear.⁴⁰ Roper's argument shows that conceptions of gender were slow to shift. It was not until years after World War One that the soldiers' true experiences and reactions were processed in memories.

Similar to Roper, Susan Grazyl and Tammy Proctor analyze how notions of masculinity changed because of World War One.⁴¹ Proctor and Grazyl argue that "the increased use of new modes of warfare had profound implications for gendered understandings of the spaces in which war was waged, puncturing the borders between 'home front' and "front line".⁴² One way they exemplify this is through technological changes such as poisonous gas.⁴³ Soldiers suffocated to

³⁶ Nicoletta F. Gullace, "White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War", *Journal of British Studies*, 36, no. 2 (1997): 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/176011>.

³⁷ Michael Roper, 345.

³⁸ Michael Roper, 345.

³⁹ Michael Roper, 356.

⁴⁰ Michael Roper, 356.

⁴¹ Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor, ed., *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 170

⁴² Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor, 169.

⁴³ Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor, 173.

death, a fate that stood in stark contrast to the traditional heroic combat they had been prepared for.⁴⁴ This change took away the valor of dying in battle and challenged masculine ideals of bravery.⁴⁵ Proctor and Grazyl show changes in warfare made preconceived gender ideals of stoicism and bravery unattainable.

In “Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience,” George Mosse addresses the pre-existing notions of masculinity as social constructions.⁴⁶ He asserts that after the war men adopted the “myth of the war experience” to help them cope with tragedy and loss.⁴⁷ The “myth of the war experience” included the “cult of the fallen soldier”, created by middle-class officers to revive individuals and the nation, while also attempting to allow men to maintain the masculine ideals of bravery and stoicism. Mosse shows how these ideals of stoicism and bravery for men were slow to change because military officers relied on them to boost morale and aid their soldiers in coping. The historiography surrounding shell shock also addresses gender. In “Shell-Shock as a Social Disease” George Mosse argues that “public attitudes” towards shell shock slowly changed because of its categorization as a “social disorder”.⁴⁸ Meaning that shell shock was viewed as a male social failure. During the war, this understanding of shell shock hindered its acceptance as a legitimate medical diagnosis.⁴⁹ Similar to both Jones and Bourke, Mosse discusses how social and ethnic stereotypes influenced medical and psychological notions of shell shock. However, Mosse seeks to understand how powerful stereotypes maintained relevance while warfare changed to create comparisons between interpretations of shell shock in European nations.⁵⁰ Mosse focused mainly on Germany and utilized diagnosis and treatment to

⁴⁴ Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor, 173.

⁴⁵ Susan R. Grazyl and Tammy Proctor, 173.

⁴⁶ George L. Mosse, “Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21, no.4 (1986): 1.

⁴⁷ George L. Mosse, 2.

⁴⁸ George L. Mosse, “Shell-Shock as a Social Disease”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 no.1 (2000), 108. .

⁴⁹ Mosse, 108.

⁵⁰ George L. Mosse, 108.

compare the timeline of shifting attitudes on shell shock to other Europeans.⁵¹ Shell shock categorization as a social disease represents the impact World War One had on men and how gender ideals failed to change with changes to warfare.

Similar to Mosse, Anessa Stagner compare interpretations of shell shock across time and nations in her article: “Healing the Soldier, Restoring the Nation: Representations of Shell in the USA During and After the First World War”. However, Stagner compares the United States as opposed to Germany to European nations.⁵² Stagner finds that during the war Americans viewed shell shock as temporary it was not until the 1920s that “uncured” veterans began to have a large influence on discussions of mental illness.⁵³ Ultimately, Stagner concludes that American representations [of shell shock] beyond the timeframe of the war demonstrate how constructions of shell shock remained powerful while continuously changing”.⁵⁴ Similar to Mosse’s argument, this constant change represents society's failure in adjusting gender ideals to the conditions of warfare. Moreover, by expanding the study beyond just the “nation-state” historians can see the diversification in interpretation and how that influenced political discourse and treatment.⁵⁵

In my research, I intended to build upon the previous historiography on the intersection between gender ideals and changing warfare during World War One. I will do this by analyzing expressions of fear. The history of emotions is a relatively new field of historical research that analyzing specific time periods or events through a particular emotion. The historiography surrounding the history of emotions is a complicated avenue to explore gaps in historical research and gain a more nuanced understanding of individual experiences. In “The History of

⁵¹ George L. Mosse, 106.

⁵² Anessa C. Stagner, “Healing the Soldier, Restoring the Nation: Representations of Shell Shock in the USA During and After the First World War”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 49, no.2 (2014), 255.

⁵³ Anessa C. Stagner, 255.

⁵⁴ Anessa C. Stagner, 255.

⁵⁵ Anessa C. Stagner, 273.

Emotions: An Interview With Willam Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns” multiple historians discuss their experience with the history of emotions.⁵⁶ These historians explain their research and discuss the theme that the history of emotions filled gaps in their research.⁵⁷ In “AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions” multiple historians similarly discuss their experience working with the history of emotions.⁵⁸ The same theme emerges: historians found the history of emotions to fill gaps in their research.⁵⁹ For example, Jan Plamper shares that, “...by the early 2000s, [she] had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the overwhelming emphasis on language in poststructuralist history-writing...”.⁶⁰ She then began to look for approaches that would place more emphasis on bodily experience.⁶¹ In Plamper’s case, she argues that the history of emotions allowed her to look more deeply into the bodily experiences of Russian soldiers and their experience with fear.

In “Worrying About Emotions in History” Barbara H. Rosenwein surveys the historiography of emotions in Western history and suggests revisions.⁶² Rosenwein touches upon the complications in studying the history of emotions, particularly, the understanding of how emotional expression changes between time and place.⁶³ She exemplifies this through her area of study: medieval history.⁶⁴ Rosenwein states that “... there are many medieval emotional communities. Certain of these applauded historic expressions, some privileged gestures, or bodily symptoms. Certain communities gendered emotions. Some emotional communities

⁵⁶ Jan Plamper, “The History of Emotions: An Interview With Willam Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns”, *History and Theory*, 49, no 2 (2010), 237.

⁵⁷ Jan Plamper, 238.

⁵⁸ American Historical Review, “AHR’ Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions”, *The American Historical Review*, 117, no.5 (2012)1492.

⁵⁹ American Historical Review, 1492.

⁶⁰ American Historical Review, 1492.

⁶¹ American Historical Review, 1492.

⁶² Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying About Emotions in History”, *The American Historical Review*, 107, no.3, (2002), 821.

⁶³ Barbara H. Rosenwein, 844.

⁶⁴ Barbara H. Rosenwein, 844.

overlapped (or were perceived by those living in them to overlap) with others nearby; others called forth very different, sometimes even antithetical, emotional configurations”.⁶⁵ In the case of medieval history, it is hard to distinguish emotions because their expression and categorization were different across communities. Similar to Rosenwein, Joanna Bourke touches upon the complications of studying emotions.⁶⁶ Bourke argues that fear is one of the most important emotions and, “... despite the centrality of emotional experience in the past, analysis of emotions such as fear has remained peripheral to the historical discipline”.⁶⁷ In her analysis Bourke explains the issues surrounding studying the history of emotions in the context of fear.⁶⁸ One of the issues Bourke presents is that historians are not quite sure what emotions are and the definitions provided by the ‘school of emotionology’ can be limiting.⁶⁹

The piece of historiography most closely related to my topic is Jan Plamper's “Fear: Soldiers and Emotion in Early Twentieth-Century Russian Military Psychology”.⁷⁰ Plamper’s inquiry centers around understanding how levels of fear changed between 1812 and 1914 in Russian soldiers, the reasons behind these changes, and how soldiers expressed their fear.⁷¹ Plamper argues that between the years of 1812 and 1914 Russian soldiers increasingly expressed fear for three potential reasons: “...either soldiers at some point began to experience more fear, and in different ways, or the boundaries of what could be and was said about soldierly fear in personal documents profoundly shifted, or a new and real experience of fear came together with a discursive shift.”⁷²

⁶⁵ Barbara H. Rosenwein, 844 and 845.

⁶⁶ Joanna Bourke, “Fear and Anxiety: Writing About Emotion in Modern History”, 55, (2003), 111.

⁶⁷ Bourke, 112.

⁶⁸ Bourke 112.

⁶⁹ Bourke 112.

⁷⁰ Jan Plamper, “ Fear: Soldiers and Emotion in Early Twentieth - Century Russian Military Psychology, 68, no.2, (2009), 259.

⁷¹ Jan Plamper, 260.

⁷² Jan Plamper, 260.

By combining the historiography of gender, emotions, and shell shock I understand the previous work done on my topic. The historiography of gender and shell shock shaped my understanding of gender ideals and their impact on men at the front. The historiography surrounding emotions allowed me to understand how and why different historians approached this field of historical research. Moreover, it allowed me to identify inquiry into fear and soldiers which is most similar to my topic.

II. Sourcing and Method

My research solely encompasses the personal expressions of men at the front. I am utilizing the four primary collections of personal expressions: *Intimate Voices*, *German Students' War Letters*, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*, and *Letters from a Lost Generation*. When engaging with these sources, it is important to recognize their levels of censorship. The first level was individual soldiers choosing what details to include. The second was that military officers eliminated certain letters from soldiers before they could make it home. The third layer is the objective of the editors of primary source collections. With all of these layers of censorship, the information provided is questionable. While primary source documents give us a relatively accurate account of a particular event, it is important to recognize that they still contain some falsities and biases. And yet given these limitations, it is often quite revealing to see what soldiers expressed.

What is fear and how can historians find it in primary sources? Joanna Bourke asserts that defining fear is difficult because individuals express it in many ways. For example, Bourke asserts that fear is expressed both in diction and physically.⁷³ Moreover, Bourke looks for a distinction between fear and anxiety but disregards separating the two because the definition of

⁷³ Joanna Bourke, 112.

fear is abstract. When first considering studying soldiers' letters through the lens of fear I only considered looking at diction and verbal expressions of fear. However, after reading Bourke's work I realized that I was going to have to look wider than that. Additionally, since fear is difficult to define I would have to compile a list of expressions, words, physical reactions, etc., to begin my research with.

After I gained insight into studying the history of fear through Bourke I opened up a thesaurus and typed in the word fear. From there, I compiled a list of "fear words" to look for as I did my research. Some of these words included: terror, fright, horror, alarm panic, and distress. Additionally, I compiled a list of fear expressions which included: shaking, heart beating fast, pale face, and vomiting. I wrote these words and expressions on an index card and kept it next to me as I began to review collections of soldiers' letters.

As I pursued the letters, I created a "fear log". In this log, I recorded and categorized the different expressions of fear. Additionally, I created a section for "common themes" and "research questions" That way as I was researching I could begin outlining my paper. Whenever I saw an expression of fear I highlighted it in my primary source collections as well that way I could easily spot my evidence. By creating a log, I was able to see three main ways fear was expressed: diction, idiomatic expressions, and physical. Moreover, I was able to add to my list of words and expressions. Originally, I only compiled blatant expressions of fear on my log. For example, a soldier using one of my fear words or expressions. I came to realize that all conversations of fear, even soldiers writing that they were not fearful, were expressions of fear. From there, I went back to my primary source collections and began highlighting any indication of fear, even soldiers expressing that they were not fearful. Ultimately, my log grew to four pages in length, and using the evidence I collected I created a rudimentary outline of my paper, thesis,

research questions, and common themes. My common themes all center around language and indications of fear in language.

III. Fear Expressed Through Diction

Letters from soldiers during World War I contain many instances of fear being expressed through diction. By diction, I mean word choice. The most frequent words utilized are terror, horror, panic, frightened, agony, terrible, anxious, fear, shock, nervous, frightful, and eeriness. Terrible may seem like an unlikely word to indicate fear. However, the root word of terrible is terror which according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is “a state of intense of overwhelming fear”. The root “terror” indicates that “terrible” can indicate fear.⁷⁴ Moreover, they are most frequently utilized during soldiers' time in the trenches. For example, *Intimate Voices* shares the letters of soldier Paul Hub to his wife Maria Hub. On October 31st Paul's regiments were on the the outskirts of Ypres.⁷⁵ In this particular letter, Paul detailed the horrors of the war.⁷⁶

My Dear Maria,
I feel so terrible I'd really rather not write to you. That doesn't mean that I've forgotten you through. Every day spent here makes it clearer to me how beautiful home is and what a crowd of feelings that word 'home' brings out in me. I have lived through such horror recently, no words can describe it, the tragedy is all around me. Every day the fighting gets fiercer and there is still no end in sight. Our blood is flowing in torrents. When I think of our 247th Regiment my eyes swim with tears The first and second battalions only have 250 - 300 men left, so more than half are gone. Today only a few of my comrades will be standing...⁷⁷

In this particular excerpt from Paul's letter, he describes the mass death in the trenches. In doing this he utilizes two frequently used words: “terrible” and “horror” to convey his fear. By using strong diction such as “terrible” and “horror” Paul conveys the depth of this emotion.

⁷⁴ Merriam Webster (Massachusetts: G&C Merriam Co, 1831, “Terror”).

⁷⁵ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis e.d., *Intimate Voices* (New York:Harper Collins, 2005), 33.

⁷⁶ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 33.

⁷⁷ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 33.

He also uses these words when discussing the mass death around him indicating that, more specifically, he is scared of dying.

Another example of fear expressed through diction in the trenches is found in *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*. In this letter, Lieutenant Bernard Pitt writes from the trenches to his friend Jacob on March 31st 1916.⁷⁸

Dear Lionel Jacob,
How is the College doing in these hard times? It hardly seems credible that it still exists, with so many of its tutors and students away; and yet, I so often feel that the reality is Education and Fraternity, while all this horror of war is a transient appearance of the impossible. Such a glance into the chaos that man can make, unless love is his guiding principle, is indeed, a terrifying experience. I am now in a hilly wooded region, like the skirts of the Kentish Downs, with corpses full of anemones and delicate periwinkles, and the sapling hazels and willows tasseled and downy with catkins and buds. A mile away is a village, shattered and wasted, and beyond that a sight more shocking than the ruin of human work, a ghastly wood where the broken trunks and splintered branches take on weird and diabolical forms. It is the Bois de Souchez. The ground roundabout is poisoned with human relics, limbs, and bundles of clothes filled with rotten flesh, and even those poor remains of men with pious hands who have been buried are daily disinterred by plugging shells....⁷⁹

In this excerpt of Lieutenant Pitt's letter, he utilizes the word "terrifying" to describe his experience at the front. The word "terrifying" once again contains the root terror indicating intense fear. Additionally, he uses the word terrifying when describing the mass death and destruction caused by artillery indicating that he fears for his life.

A third example, of fear expressed through diction is from *Letters From a Lost Generation*.⁸⁰ On September 18th, 1915 a British soldier Roland sent a letter to his fiance Vera. In his letter, he details his experience at the front in Billets France.

Everything exciting that was expected failed to come off after all. We expected an attack on the day I mentioned; they issued minute orders as to what was to be done when it came; parties went

⁷⁸ Lawrence Houssman, e.d., *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 215.

⁷⁹ Lawrence Houssman, 215.

⁸⁰ Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge e.d., *Letters From a Lost Generation* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 169.

out to reconnoitre the Germans at night; we all slept not only in our clothing as always but hung round with revolvers; haversacks etc. & ready for an alarm; but it never came. Only away on our left in the French area, we could hear what is even at a distance the most terrifying thing on earth - the pounding of heavy guns, now fainter, now louder, but coalescing always into one dull, thundering roar...

In this excerpt from Roland's letter, he uses the word "terrifying" to describe the sound of heavy guns. Similar to the previous two letters the soldier's selection of words conveys fear indirectly. However, by using more descriptive words such as "horror" and "terrifying" instead of just scared or fear, readers of these personal expressions understand how deeply fearful men at the front were. Additionally, the words typically associated with me

IV. Fear Expressed Through Figurative Language

Similar to fear expressed through diction, fear as expressed through figurative language mainly occurs in personal expressions written at the front. By figurative language, I mean metaphors, similies, and idioms. However, this expression of fear occurs less frequently. One piece of figurative language used at the front is similies. In the collection *Intimate Voices* the diary of a French patriot, Paul Tuffrau, is published. On September 5th Tuffrau begins fighting in the Battle of Marne on the Western Front.⁸¹ In his diary entry from September 6th, he details his experience in the battle.⁸²

...What's that I'm stepping on? The dead and wounded, friends and foes. Bullets fly past, then the brutal blast of artillery fire right in front of us. The charge tatters stop. Mullet, the flag-bearer, is on his back on the other side of the road, his head is lying like a sack. Behind a haystack, I come across the flag, a few men, and colonel, shaking like a leaf, his tunic undone, right arm in a sling, shirt covered in blood. He comes toward me; I can't remember what he said.⁸³ All around behind piles of grain, men are lying down, shooting or just waiting.

⁸¹ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 25.

⁸² Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 25.

⁸³ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 25.

In this particular excerpt, Tuffrau details the mass death occurring at the front and the toll it is taking on the fighting men. In his description of the colonel and a few men, he claims they are “shaking like a leaf”. This figurative language is a simile utilized to describe violent shaking, a physical symptom of fear. Moreover, the simile relates a physical reaction to something occurring in nature. By relating men shaking from fear to leaves shaking on a tree, Tuffrau categorizes physical responses to fear as natural. If fear responses are natural then they less overtly contrast the male gender ideal of stoicism and bravery.

Another example of fear expressed through figurative language occurs in *Intimate Voices*.⁸⁴ On January 27th, 1915, Vasily Mishnin wrote this diary entry for his wife.⁸⁵

Dear Nyurochka, pray for me in this terrible hour and forgive me if I am guilty of anything. We will probably never see each other again - all it takes is an instant and I will be no more - and perhaps no one will be able to gather the scattered pieces of my body for burial. Long, agonizing minutes pass. Suddenly our battery begins to speak; at first, the field guns, then the mortars, and finally the entire division battery starts up. There is such a roaring and shaking that I think my nerves will shatter and I'll go mad. Well, now it's our turn to die, I say to Samoudrikhin and he replies: 'Don't talk like that, you've got a death wish.' Dear God, are you really sitting up there in heaven without hearing or saying anything? My body is burning as if it were on fire, I am shaking all over and my head is icy cold. If only I could fall asleep and not hear death taking my soul away....

In this excerpt of Mishnin's time at the front, he uses a simile to describe how his body feels. By comparing the burning sensation he feels to a fire and his head to ice he alerts his wife of his fear of death. It is also important to note that once again fire and ice are naturally occurring phenomena. The link between fear and something occurring in nature again potentially normalizes the emotions of male soldiers. Moreover, the phrase “nerves will shatter” is a metaphor. While this metaphor does not link physical fear to something in nature, it does

⁸⁴ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 40.

⁸⁵ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 40.

magnify the emotion. Shattering implies that their nerves are destroyed which conveys extreme levels of fear.

V. Fear Expressed Physically

The most common expressions of fear were descriptions of physical reactions. Soldiers at the front most commonly reported insomnia, shaking, and rapid heart rates. However, there are other numerous indications of fear. In a letter from *German Students War Letters*, a young soldier expresses fear by writing his physical reaction to combat.⁸⁶ Ulrich Timm writes on October 23rd 1914 to his parents.

Of our battalion 125 men - that is, an eighth part, - have already been killed, and the same thing may happen to any of us. Oh my Parents, whom I love more than everything, last night, when I couldn't sleep because of the violent fighting going on outside, my thoughts flew to you both at home. Who knows, perhaps I shall never see you again, and so I want to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for all the love and devotion you have shown me all my life. I realize more and more about what a beautiful youth I have had in my parent's house and that nobody ever had such dear parents as mine.⁸⁷

In this letter, Timm describes the toll fighting has taken on his sleep. By expressing that the “violent” fighting made sleep impossible Timm conveys his fear. Moreover, Timm emphasizes the loudness of artillery fire. Artillery fire is new with World War One and the sound it creates is emphasized by Timm. This indicates that the new sounds associated with war enlisted a physical fear response.

Similarly, a soldier named Vasily Mishnin reports physical symptoms of fear in his January 27th diary entry.⁸⁸

I have to go and relieve the guard under the cover of fire that's pouring on to the enemy trenches. My heart pounds, it is a terrifying thing to walk to your death. The seven of us climb out of our trench and go up behind the barbed wire boundary...

⁸⁶ Philipp Witkop, ed., *German Students' War Letters*, trans. A. F. Wedd (Pennsylvania: Pine Street Books, 2002), 137.

⁸⁷ Phillip Witkop, 137.

⁸⁸ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 39.

⁸⁹In this excerpt Mishnin reports that his heart is pounding as he leaves the trench. The physical reaction of your heart pounding indicates the emotion of fear. Similar to Timm Mishnin is relies on physical reactions to communicate his emotions. The physical expression of fear could have been utilized to convey fear naturally. Similar to how soldiers used natural phenomena in figurative language, soldiers could also use physical reactions to make their reactions seem natural. By naturalizing fear, the emotion may be more accepted as a part of a male soldier's experience.

VI. Religious Expressions of Fear

Religious expressions of fear were a little different from the other three because they were challenging to recognize. Men used religion to justify their emotions or covertly express their fear. However, it is challenging to discern men who address religion to comfort families and those who gravitate towards it to express fear. One distinct way men covertly expressed their emotions through religion was by calling out to God. On March 1st, 1915 August Hopp writes of his combat experience. In a rather lengthy letter, he details the destruction and death occurring around him. ⁹⁰

... And so came the turn of one after another. In front, by the barrier, one man got a bullet through the chest. I gave him a drink and he died directly after. Yet another got a shell - splinter in the heart; he remained, sitting on the breastwork, as if he were asleep; once or twice in the night, I was just going to wake him up. I told him to fire because Frenchmen were showing themselves down below. Tearfully he answered, 'Sir I can't and held out the sh⁹¹attered stump of his right hand. The cry burst from my lips: 'O God, help us!'...

⁸⁹ Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, 39.

⁹⁰ Phillip Witkop, 57.

⁹¹ Phillip Witkop, 57.

By crying out for God Hopp is expressing his fear for both himself and his fellow shoulder. However, by calling out to God as opposed to using a word such as “horror” and “terror” he appears more noble.

A second distinct way men express fear through religion is through prayer. Lieutenant Gerald William Grenfell wrote to his parents on July 11th, 1915 to inform them of one of his comrade's deaths.⁹²

...My servant is an ex-footman to Lady Beecham. The other day he was getting some afternoon tea when a ‘crump’ crumped most effectually the dug-out in which he repurposes 18 hours out of the 24. I have forbidden him to mention his ‘providential escape’ to me again, under pain of being returned to duty... Darling Julian is so constantly beside me and laughs so debonairly at my qualms and hesitations. I pray for one-tenth of his courage. All love to everyone.⁹³

When discussing his comrade Jilian, he informs his parents that “he prays for one-tenth of his courage.”⁹⁴ Similar to calling out to God, praying for courage is a way to indicate fear while still appearing brave and honorable. In addition to making fear appear honorable, religion was a language everyone could understand. By making references to God and religious practices men are translating their experiences to their families. Their parents or significant others at home may not understand life in the trenches, but they do understand religion and what certain practices such as praying convey.

While all of the expressions of fear I have identified as language differently they serve one goal: to convey emotions and experiences to loved ones at home. In fear expressed through religion, figurative language, and physical men attempt to connect fear to something honorable or natural. In all four categories, men use more than just the word scared or fearful to express the depth of their suffering.

⁹² Lawrence Hossman, 117.

⁹³ Lawrence Hossman, 117.

⁹⁴ Lawrence Hossman, 117.

VII. Public vs. Private Standard of Masculinity

While my research concludes that conceptions of masculinity changed at the front during World War I, it is important to note that public conceptions did not. This is best exemplified by the propaganda posters emerging during the War. One popular propaganda poster created during World War One was titled “Come on boys! Do your duty by enlisting now!”⁹⁵ This poster depicts a man sitting upright on a horse and waving a red and yellow flag. The words “Come on boys! Do your duty by enlisting now!” categorize war as a masculine duty. They are depicted as stoic protectors whose purpose is to defend the nation. This public narrative of bravery and stoicism present in the public is a stark contrast to the fear expressed in private expressions. Therefore, while conceptions of masculinity were changing at the front during World War I, this change was contained in the trenches.

VIII. Conclusion

The contrast between public depictions of masculine ideals and private expressions shows that gender ideals were changing in the trenches during World War One. By analyzing soldiers' letters and diaries for instances of fear I identified four categories where fear was expressed: diction, physical, figurative language, and religion. All of these categories express fear differently but pertain to language and work to normalize or emphasize the degree of their emotions. The analysis of bravery and stoicism in public conceptions of military men is still relevant today. On Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C sits the nation’s World War One memorial. The site was once Pershing Park and contained the American Expeditionary Forces Memorial. The memorial was dedicated in 1981 to those who served in Europe during the First

⁹⁵ Vojtěch Preissing, *Come on Boys! Do your Duty by Enlisting Now!*, 1917, poster, 88 x 63.4 cm, Library of Congress.

World War.⁹⁶ In 2021 the World War I Centennial Commission decided to expand the dedication.⁹⁷ Now the memorial is for everyone who served and civilians impacted by the war effort.⁹⁸ In 2024, officials plan to make a section titled “A Soldier’s Journey”.⁹⁹ This engraving contains images of soldiers helping civilians in distress, carrying our nation's flag, and charging toward the enemy.¹⁰⁰ Men are once again depicted as brave and stoic protectors as their fear is nonexistent in the image. Memorials like these are typically utilized by the American public to learn about a particular historical period or event. However, they are largely inaccurate because they rely on public ideals instead of facts. By engaging in the history of emotions historians gain insight into the the experience of the individual as opposed to the narrative of the nation. This allows us to approach instruction and conversation on particular periods in a more accurate and nuanced way.

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⁹⁶ “World War One Memorial”, American Battle Monuments Commission, 04/27/2024, <https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/americas/world-war-i-memorial>.

⁹⁷ “World War One Memorial”

⁹⁸ “World War One Memorial”

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