



2013-051

Marc Bloch, Reflections of a Historian on the False News of the War.

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Marc Bloch's essay "Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre" first appeared in the 1921 volume of the Revue de synthèse historique. It was later included in a compendium of his work entitled Écrits de guerre (1914-1918), edited by his son Étienne and published by Armand Colin (Paris 1997). For permission to use the reprinted French text in preparing my translation, I am grateful to the publisher. Though the piece has been rendered into Italian and Spanish, this is, to my knowledge, its first appearance in English. Citations in Bloch's footnotes have been regularized and sometimes (silently) corrected. I am much indebted to my friend and colleague Prof. em. Benjamin W. Palmer for his expert assistance with points of French semantics and syntax. If errors or infelicities remain, they are my own doing entirely. — JPH

I

Historians have followed with keen interest the progress made in recent years by the psychology of eyewitness accounts. It is a very young science, barely twenty years old. At any rate, it is hardly more than twenty years since it became an independent discipline. It is fair to add that historical criticism, a much older discipline, has paved the way for it. The first witnesses to be systematically interrogated were documents examined by scholars. In this regard, psychologists have had to take for their point of departure rules applied in practice, rather than formulated in theory, by Papenbroch, Mabillon, Beaufort, and their emulators. But they have developed these principles with their own methods. In particular, they have not confined themselves to using the terribly complex material that the past provides them. They have taken up actual experiences—thanks to which they have been able to isolate various problems from each other in order to introduce some order into their research and discern the elements of future solutions.¹

By a fair reciprocation, the results of their work, incomplete as they may seem, provide historians today with a precious help. Our mistrust up to now has been mostly instinctive; increasingly, it will be founded on reason. Our doubt is becoming systematic. In so doing, it will discover its true limits. There is no good eyewitness; hardly any account is correct in all its details. But on what points does a sincere witness who thinks he is speaking the truth deserve to be believed? This is an infinitely delicate question, to which there is no hard and fast answer, valid in each case. One must examine carefully every instance and decide each time according to the requirements of the case. But the specific solutions will only have a serious basis if they are inspired by general principles. These directives—what do they require if not observations about eyewitness accounts? What light the work of psychologists has already shone on the great dramas of history: the affair of the Templars, for example, or that of Gilles de Rais,² or that dreadful tragedy in a thousand acts of the witchcraft trials!

What's more, the systematic criticism of eyewitness accounts seems to have a very serious, if little remarked, consequence: it has delivered a rude blow to picturesque history. Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, in

1. The literature of the psychology of eyewitness accounts is already very considerable and, since it consists mostly of journal articles in a large number of periodicals, it is difficult to catalog and follow. Julien Varendonck, *La psychologie du témoignage* (Ghent: Maison d'éditions & impressions, 1914), though devoid of original ideas, is a convenient guide and contains a good bibliography. Cf. André Fribourg, "La psychologie du témoignage en histoire," *Revue de synthèse historique* 12 (1906) 262, and "Nouvelles expériences sur le témoignage," *ibid.* 14 (1907) 158. F.C. Bartlett of the Psychological Laboratory, University of Cambridge, has published an interesting article entitled "Some Experiments on the Reproduction of Folk-Stories," *Folklore* 31 (1920) 30-47. I have not been able to read G. Belot, "Comment observent jeunes et vieux," *Bulletin de la Société Alfred Binet* (1919).

2. Cf. Salomon Reinach, "Gille de Rais" [1904], rpt. in *Cultes, mythes, et religions*, vol. 4 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1912) 266-99, 319. Mr. Ch.-V. Langlois, like Reinach, believes in the innocence of Gille de Rais; see his "Notice sur la vie et les travaux de M. Noël Valois," *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions* (Paris 1918) 156.

his *Life of Saint Bernard*, reports that when the saint was a monk at Cîteaux he did not for a long time know how light entered the chapel where he routinely said mass. He was surprised one day to learn that three windows, not one, as he had till then believed, were letting the light in.³ The hagiographer is surprised and marvels at these features. What a great saint a similar indifference to earthly vanities would presage! We know today that to be mistaken about the appearance of things is, it seems, more familiar to us and does not require a Church Father or prince of mysticism. The students of Professor Claparède at Geneva have proved in the course of famous experiments that they were as ill aware of the great architectural lines of their university as Bernard formerly was of the chapel or refectory of his monastery.⁴ In a typical account—that is to say, a mixture of the true and the false—it was common for nothing to be so imprecise as what concerned small material details. Everything occurred as if most people were turning half-closed eyes on the surroundings of an exterior world that they disdained to notice. How, from now on, can we take seriously the descriptive details in chronicles—the depiction of clothing, gestures, ceremonies, scenes of combat, all the, in a word, bric-à-brac that so seduces romantics—when among ourselves a witness cannot retain as a whole the small facts about which he so eagerly interrogates the old authors?⁵ Here is a lesson in skepticism that the psychologists have given us; but we must add that about the only things affected by this scepticism are truly superficial: legal, economic, and religious history have not been affected. What we think of as more profound in history might be merely what is more certain.

Thus, thanks to the psychology of eyewitness accounts, we may hope to cleanse our image of the past of the errors obscuring it with a more adroit hand. But critical work is not everything for the historian. Error is not for him only a foreign body that he must eliminate with all the precision of his instruments. He also considers it when he must understand the chain of human events. The masses are aroused by false stories. Items of false news, in all the multiplicity of their forms—simple gossip, deceptions, legends—have filled the life of humanity. How are they born? From what elements do they take shape? How do they propagate themselves, gaining strength as they pass from mouth to mouth or writing to writing? No question should fascinate anyone who loves to reflect on history more than these.

But history has cast only too little light on these questions. Our ancestors scarcely posed themselves problems of this sort. They rejected error when they recognized it as such; they did not interest themselves in its development. This is why the indications they have left us do not allow us to satisfy our curiosity, of which they knew nothing. The study of the past should rely on the same material as the observation of the present. The historian who seeks to understand the origin and development of false news, disappointed by the reading of documents, will naturally think of turning to the laboratories of psychologists. Will the experiments currently conducted there on witnessing suffice to provide him the education that research denies him? For many reasons, I do not believe so.

Consider, for example, the first experiment, if I am not mistaken, at any rate the most striking among them: the simulated attack that the criminologist Litz organized in his seminar in Berlin.⁶ The students who assisted in this little drama and took it seriously were interrogated, some the same evening, others a week later, and still others five weeks after the fact. By the last interrogation, the truth had ceased to be hidden from them; they learned precisely what had taken place (since the scenario had been meticulously arranged in advance) and that it was a game. Thus, the false news was arrested in the course of its growth. Other

3. *Sancti Bernardi Vita* 1.4.20 = J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 185, col. 238.

4. Fribourg 1907 (note 1 above) 158. It is only right to add that Saint Bernard seems all the same to have been more distracted than the typical man. He happened, it is said, to walk along Lake Geneva for a whole day without realizing it; the fact is indicated by the Abbot Elpège Vacandard, *Vie de Saint Bernard*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Lecoffre, 1902) 1:60, with a false reference that I have not been able to identify.

5. Of course, a witness in the past, like a witness in the present, deserves in general to be believed when he is describing a particular, easily perceived object to which his attention has already been drawn in advance, but not when he is depicting the ensemble of the physical environs where the action he is relating took place.

6. See F. von Liszt, "Strafrecht und Psychologie," *Deutsche Juristenzeitung* 7 (1902) 16–19, reviewed by S. Jaffa, "Ein psychologisches Experiment im kriminalistischen Seminar der Universität Berlin," in W. Stern, ed., *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Aussage*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Barth, 1903) 79–99; cf. Varendonck (note 1 above) 42–43.

tests of this sort have had the same outcome. The interval of time that in each case separated the moment when the “subjects” observed from that when their depositions were recorded varied, to be sure, but always remained of the same order of magnitude. In addition, the number of people to whom the inquest extended was most often limited to a quite restricted group. What’s more, usually only direct witnesses are included; secondary witnesses, who speak only by hearsay, are excluded. In real life, by contrast, without such secondary witnesses, what would become of so-called “public reputation?” In the experiments of the psychologists, false news never attains that magnificent plenitude that only long duration and innumerable voices can give it.

Above all, perhaps the most essential element of historical false news is missing from these laboratory creations. False news is probably born of imprecise individual observations or imperfect eyewitness accounts, but the original accident is not everything: by itself, it really explains nothing. The error propagates itself, grows, and ultimately survives only on one condition—that it finds a favorable cultural broth in the society where it is spreading. Through it, people unconsciously express all their prejudices, hatreds, fears, all their strong emotions. Only great collective states of mind—I will have occasion to return to this later—have the power to transform a misperception into a legend. How could laboratory experiments, however well constructed, succeed in recreating these profound social tremors?

One can present the observations I am going to outline under another, more comprehensive and perhaps precise form. The psychology of eyewitness accounts, as I have tried to conceive of it here, has remained, by the very nature of things, confined to the realm of individual psychology. And yet, it is from group psychology that false news arises. Is there between these two branches of psychological science a difference in nature regarding the substance of the object of study? I will take care here not to raise this purely philosophical or metaphysical problem. It is enough that there has been between them a noticeable difference in spirit: neither their methods nor their results precisely overlap. Experimental study is practically inconceivable when it comes to states of collective consciousness. That is why the results of the experiments I recounted earlier, as interesting as they may be, remain quite limited from our point of view. Our understanding of perception, memory, and suggestion have been much enriched. At the same time, historical criticism has received a very efficacious support; but, having read the accounts of such well constructed experiments, we do not know much more than before about how a legend is created and lives on.⁷

The preceding remarks apply to experiments properly speaking, that is, artificial works of human ingenuity. We are limited in this kind of work by the very boundaries imposed on the activity of a scholar, who is patently unable to modify in a laboratory the make-up of society or to recreate great common emotions. But, in this regard, the last few years have produced a kind of vast natural experiment. One may, in effect, consider the European War an immense experiment in social psychology of unheard of richness. The new, very strange living conditions, so intense in all particulars, into which men found themselves suddenly thrust, the singular strength of feelings that stirred peoples and armies—all this upheaval in social life and, I dare say, this magnifying of its traits as if seen through a powerful lens should, it seems, allow an observer to grasp without much trouble the essential connections between different phenomena. Undoubtedly, he could not himself, as in an experiment in the ordinary sense of the word, alter the phenomena to better understand what unifies them. That means it is the facts themselves that exhibit these variations, and on what a scale! Now, among the questions of social psychology that the events of the last few years can elucidate, those relating to false news are at the forefront. False news reports! For four and a half years, everywhere, in every country, at the front as in the rear, we saw them being born and proliferating. They troubled minds, sometimes overstimulating them and sometimes sapping them of their courage. Their variety, their

7. What I am going to say pertains, of course, only to those works of psychologists that rely on their own experiments. By contrast, historians interested in better understanding the operation of false news will find much to take from the observations of certain psychologists bearing on actual social facts. For example, one may consult with much profit a very remarkable memoir by Mr. Julien Varendonck, “Les témoignages d’enfants dans un procès tétentissant,” *Archives de psychologie* 11 (1911), rpt. in Varendonck (note 1 above) 147–48. One reads these pages with all the more pleasure as one sees how sound critical methods were able to save an innocent person. And—even though the piece is essentially concerned with the testimony of children and, consequently, with a specific aspect of the larger problem of testimony—one will find in it more than one interesting indication about the genesis of collective errors.

strangeness, and their strength still astonish anyone who can remember and remembers having believed them. The old German proverb is relevant: “When war enters the land, then there are lies like sand.”⁸

The idea of studying these extraordinary efflorescences of the collective imagination has already occurred to more than one author concerned with psychology or history. We will survey the principal works that have taken false news in wartime as their subject.

II

The literature of war is immense and, for many reasons, difficult to catalog. As far as I know, four studies relating to false news seem to demand attention.⁹

The first of these is the book by Dr. Lucien Graux, *Les fausses nouvelles de la Grande Guerre*. Seven stout volumes appeared between 1918 and 1920.¹⁰ They were very cleverly marketed in bookstores, which requires us to mention them at probably greater length than necessary. The title is full of promises, but the text disappoints. Neither in its documentation nor its way of posing problems does this vast compilation satisfy the historian.

The documents Dr. Lucien Graux uses, apart from some personal souvenirs and letters, are almost entirely newspapers. A long anthology of bits and pieces, borrowed from this or that source, seemingly divided day by day and set end to end ... and, behold, the book. I leave aside digressions and rhetorical flourishes. Now, false news in the press certainly has its interest, but only if one recognizes its particular characteristics. It ordinarily represents something quite unspontaneous. Of course, it sometimes arises as a rumor, spreads through the country or a particular social group, and is then reproduced in all innocence by a journalist; it would be naïve to deny any naïveté to reporters. But more often, false news in the press is simply a fabrication, crafted by the hand of a worker in a predetermined plan—to affect opinion or to obey an order—or simply to embellish a story with those curious literary precepts that impose themselves so strongly on modest publicists or with recollections of texts lying around: Cicero and Quintilian have more disciples in editorial bureaux than we commonly believe.

Mr. Graux has gathered the information given by different newspapers concerning the replies Mr. Malvy made to the last question by the president of the High Court concerning the death of Bolo-Pacha,¹¹ during the final hearing of the Toqué case.¹² The contradictions in them are striking and amusing. We never really know if Bolo’s hat was brown or black, round or soft, whether Mr. Malvy spoke with a curt or weak voice certain words of which *Le Matin*, for example, and the *Petite République* give very different texts. Must we see in such disparities a new illustration of those imperfections of human witnessing on which the psychologists have shed light? I would not venture to say so, since perhaps most of these accounts were simply prepared in advance. Which may very well explain why they reproduce inexactly the events announced in their headlines, but the small details of which cannot have been foreseen.¹³ Nothing would be more instruc-

8. “Kommt der Krieg ins Land,/ Dann gibt’s Lügen wie Sand”—cited by Fernand van Langenhove, *Comment naît un cycle de légendes* (Paris: Payot, 1916) 1.

9. Authors of works relating to the psychology of the soldier, such as Louis Huot and Paul Voivenel, *La psychologie du soldat* (Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1918), or Georges Bonnet, *L’âme du soldat* (Paris: Payot, 1917), have in general completely left aside the aspect of the psychology of war that interests us here. The suggestions given by Gustave Le Bon, *Enseignements psychologiques de la guerre européenne* (Paris: E. Flammarion, 1916), are in fact altogether insufficient. A German financier, William-Levis Hertslet, published first in 1882, under the title *Der Treppenwitz der Weltgeschichte* (Afterthought in World History), a kind of corpus of common historical errors. It has since been published from time to time in new, revised, and enlarged editions. The ninth edition (Berlin: Haude and Spener, 1918), due to the care of Dr. Hans S. Helmolt, includes a very short, perfectly insignificant chapter entitled “Der Weltkrieg.” Dr. Helmut indicates there the appearance of a journal entitled *Archiv für Kriegsselenkunde* and issuing from the Seminar of Science and Literature (Literaturwissenschaftliche Seminar) of the University of Kiel; I have not been able to consult it.

10. Paris: L’Édition française illustré. Vols. 1–3 (1918), 4–5 (1919), 6–7 (1920).

11. Graux, *Les Fausses Nouvelles*, 5:414n2.

12. *Ibid.*, 7:375.

13. Bolo was to have been shot on 6 April 1917; this was postponed at the last minute and the deferred execution took place only on the 17th. However, if Mr. Graux is to be believed (5:414n2), on the 6th there went on sale “a special edition giving all the details of what was supposed to take place eleven days later.” Unfortunately, this fact is quoted without citation, which makes verification diffi-

tive than a good study, relying on specific examples, of the press in wartime, its tendencies, methods of composition, and effects. The bits and pieces selected by Mr. Lucien Graux give us nothing like that. Source criticism is absent.

The items of false news are listed haphazardly in only a loosely chronological order. The rear and the front are mixed. In fact, the front very seldom appears in the collection; its abundance of good stories is neglected.¹⁴ The specific conditions that life in the trenches imposed on the propagation of every sort of information are not described at all. In general, no effort is made to analyze the environments where rumors are born and spread. What would we say about investigations of the Napoleonic legend that omitted newsmongers or about medieval traditions that took no account of the role played in a still sparse population by jugglers, pilgrims, merchants, itinerant monks? Undoubtedly, that they neglect essential issues. The same must be said about this book on *Les fausses nouvelles de la Grande Guerre*, where the supply officer, the liaison officer, the regimental postmaster—"all the little people wandering the roads, the paths, and the back allies"¹⁵—where the soldier on leave, the living link between the legendary soul of the front and that of the rear, barely appear and see no part of their role seriously studied.

In contrast to the forbidding work of Mr. Lucien Graux is the agreeable essay by Mr. Albert Dauzat, *Légendes, prophéties et superstitions de la guerre*.¹⁶ This pleasing little volume belongs here only tangentially. The superstitious rites that came out of the war or were revived by it deserve a separate study; I will not touch on them in the present article. Mr. Dauzat gives them an important place. To false news properly speaking, he dedicates only a hundred pages. In regard to legends or even superstitions, his attitude is that of the eighteenth-century philosophes. With them, he prefers to see such things as less the natural fruits of the popular mind than as fictions cleverly invented by ingenious men with the intent of swaying public opinion to their views or, quite simply—if it is a question of certain fetishes such as the famous couple Nénette and Rintintin—in order to launch a business.¹⁷ If one were to consult only certain Romantic minds, one would think the formation of legends is entirely spontaneous and unthinking. It is good that from time to time a skeptic comes along to remind us that there have been clever liars in the world who have succeeded in imposing themselves on the masses. One reads Mr. Dauzat with pleasure, as one listens to a brilliant conversationalist who recounts his memories and comments on them with some perceptiveness. Always amusing, he sometimes stirs reflection. We do not require of him any deep research, reliant on serious source criticism. He prefers to touch lightly on rather than delve deeply into problems.

So, can we be surprised that Dr. Lucien Graux and Mr. Dauzat have not treated the subjects that preoccupied them in their full scale with all the precision one has the right to expect of works of history? A comprehensive synthesis is only possible after good monographs have prepared the material ground. What we lack at the moment regarding false news during the war is detailed, careful, focused studies. We lack typical cases considered in isolation or well defined cycles of legends followed by their genesis and ramifications.

cult. A special edition? Of what newspaper? This negligence is distressing, since it seems that we have here a perfectly clear-cut proof of the habit of the press that I indicated above. It goes without saying that such a story can only be considered as an extreme case, a borderline case. A good managing editor of a newspaper might well have had a story written in advance in order to issue it early, but would have awaited confirmation of the event before publishing it. I suppose that usually things happened as follows: the reporters, preoccupied with being the fastest, write in anticipation. They arrive at the location with their "piece" ready written. After observing, they modify major points if necessary, but never really alter the incidental details that are considered indispensable to the "color" of the story, but the falsity of which shocks no one, since no one, or almost no one, recognizes them. At least, that is what I imagine, perhaps wrongly. It would be extremely useful if a journalist were to give us a good, serious, and honest study of the methods of reporting. Nothing would be more valuable to source criticism as it applies to contemporary history.

14. Here, in particular, is a passage that seems obviously inexact to me: "The infantrymen and officers were subject to the effect, beneficial or harmful, of false news. But the false news that fed their conversations was most often born, not far away, but on ground affected by shell-fire. That is to say, it dealt not so much with what could be called the grand directives of the war, but with *local* considerations and questions that developed within the visual field of the soldier" (Graux, *Les Fausses Nouvelles*, 2:249). I believe the "visual field of the soldier" is much vaster than Mr. Graux thinks it is.

15. Jérôme and Jean Tharaud, *Une relève* (Paris: Émile-Paul frères, 1919) 3.

16. Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1919.

17. See, in particular, chapter 5, "Légendes utilitaires religieuses et politiques," 113–14, and 250. Need I add that Mr. Dauzat never thought he would explain *all* legends in this way? I only wished to indicate a mental tendency.

This is what two authors, accustomed to good methods, have sought to give us—an English historian, Mr. Oman, and a Belgian sociologist, Mr. van Langenhove.

As president of the Royal Historical Society in 1918, Mr. Oman was called on to deliver the customary address to the plenary session. He chose false news for his subject or rather, in his own words, he endeavored “to illustrate the psychology of Rumour from incidents that have occurred during the present war.”¹⁸ One will find in this short disquisition, alongside often acute (if too rapid) general remarks, a rather detailed study of a celebrated legend: that of Russian reinforcements.

One remembers this rumor, which, toward the end of August 1914, spread like wildfire in Great Britain and France. Tens of thousands of Russians disembarking, some said, in Scottish ports, or, others said, in Marseille, were coming to swell the ranks of the Western Allies. As far as I can judge, this was a piece of false news in the rear. I do not know if on certain points it spread to the armies, but I do not believe it originated there. Mr. Oman analyzes very well the state of mind that found expression in it: the fervent desire to see the reinforcement of the front, for which one feared, and the prestige of Russia, conceived of in the popular imagination and depicted in the press as an inexhaustible reservoir of people. But what was the first incident that gave birth to the error? The snap of the fingers, so to say, that set imaginations in motion? The hypotheses that Mr. Oman hesitatingly proposes on the subject—the presence in Edinburgh of high Russian state officials, in Liverpool of Russian reservists arriving from America—satisfy me only in part; or, better put, I think that no single hypothesis will suffice. Mr. Oman seems to overlook that the false news spread simultaneously through France as well as England, it seems. This is, in my opinion, the crucial fact.

Was it borrowed from one country to the other? Detailed research permits us to answer with some certainty. A chronological comparison between the English and the French accounts will form the crux of the debate. One must also try to determine whether it appeared in France first in areas in contact with British armies. I have not been able to do this work, but my impression is that, far from having crossed the Channel, it arose at the same moment in France and England at several places in both countries. The collective psychosis was the same everywhere: the incidents that were in each particular case the occasion for false accounts were similar in their essentials, though different in details. That is, the sight of unfamiliar uniforms and the unknown language spoken by strange soldiers. Perceptions correct in principle but misinterpreted—always distorted to conform with the ardent desires of all—such were undoubtedly the origin of the false Russian news, as of so many others.

Finally, I turn to the study of Mr. Fernand van Langenhove, *Comment naît un cycle de légendes: Francs-tireurs et atrocités en Belgique*.¹⁹ You cannot read it without emotion. Throughout, the rigor of its methodology and the rare psychological intelligence in it would have won the work a prize, but what makes it so admirable is that it was written by a Belgian in 1917. If the legend of the snipers, instead of appearing stained by still very fresh blood, had been one of those innocent old myths at which folklorists smile, Mr. van Langenhove could not have spoken with more integrity and composure. The profound good faith that animates this small book has not only given it, at the moment of its composition, a persuasive force that the most consummate orator’s art could not have equaled. It transcends the circumstances from which it arose and places in the very first rank among works on collective psychology.

Mr. van Langenhove insisted on consulting only German sources: the accounts of soldiers, newspaper articles, official reports. Most of these documents were already amassed in Germany itself before he came along. From the first battles, atrocious stories spread among the front-line troops and in the rear, which, according to the strong words of the *Hannoversche Courier*, depict “the Belgians of both sexes as blood-thirsty beasts.” In this discordant symphony of gossip and deception, one theme stands out: the soldier’s imagination placed priests at the head of the spies, snipers, killers of the wounded, women firebombers. Catholic Germans were upset. This anticlerical legend, which threatened to stir up fearful hatred against

18. C.W.C. Oman, “Presidential Address,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th ser., 1 (1918) 23. Part of Mr. Oman’s memoir is devoted to the superstitious or, perhaps, purely literary legend of the “Angels of Mons”; cf. Dauzat, *Légendes*, 32.

19. Paris: Payot, 1916. One may find an analysis (published before the appearance of the book itself) by F. Passelecq, under the title “Un cycle de légendes allemandes: Francs-tireurs et atrocités belges,” *Le Correspondent* (25 Dec 1915) 997.

them in their own country, could not leave them indifferent. Whence the inquests like those conducted by the *Pax* office in Cologne and a book, *Der Lügengeist in Volkskrieg* [The spirit of lies in the people's war], by the Jesuit Father Dahr, who was already known for similar historical studies. No love of absolute truth inspires these works. That the Belgian people en masse were made culpable or even unjustly defamed was not the issue. It was necessary only that the clergy be recognized as innocent; so long as the honor of the priests was avenged, nothing else mattered. But in a cycle of legends, everything is interrelated: to remove one stone is to make the whole edifice crumble. Mr. van Langenhove took from the hands of the German apologists the documents they collected and that, in their opinion, were not to serve strictly religious purposes; however, he used them for a much broader purpose. By classifying them systematically, by endeavoring to trace their filiations, and by subjecting them, in a word, to the rules of sagacious criticism, he was able, thanks to the documents, to illuminate the group of legends he set out to study.

Since the whole force of such a book consists in the precision of the critical instrument and the keenness of its analyses, it hardly admits of easy summary. But one can try to extract from it the principal results, which are of a very general importance. When you compare the many images provided by Mr. van Langenhove, their fundamental features overlap and you see a sort of schematic design of the false reports of "atrocities." I would like to try to reproduce this schematic design here. Of course, only sincere false news matters. Simple lies do have their place, but deliberate deception in itself presents nothing very curious to the eyes of a historian or psychologist.²⁰

At the beginning, we encounter a collective state of mind. The German soldier who entered Belgium as the war had barely begun was suddenly removed from his fields, his workshop, his family, or at least from the regular life of the barracks. This sudden displacement from country, this abrupt severing of essential social connections gave rise to a great moral unease. The marches, the poor lodgings, the sleepless nights all badly fatigued bodies that had not yet had time to adjust to these terrible ordeals. As new troops, the invaders were haunted by a terror all the stronger for its being necessarily vague: "nerves are strained, imaginations overexcited, the sense of reality shaken."²¹ Furthermore, these men had been nourished on stories about the war of 1870; from childhood, their ears had been filled with the atrocious exploits attributed to French snipers. These stories had spread in fiction and imagery. Military works conferred on them a kind of official guarantee; more than one manual that the ranks carried in their rucksacks instructed them on how they should conduct themselves toward civilian rebels. It is a given that there will be some. The resistance of the Belgian troops, the hostility of the Belgian population profoundly shocked the typical German. He believed he was making war only against the French. In most cases, he was not aware of the response of the Belgian government to the ultimatum of 2 August. If he was, he did not understand it. His surprise easily became indignation. He readily believed that the people who dared rise up before the chosen nation were capable of anything. Finally, add to these minds susceptible to unconscious recall a mass of old literary motifs, the ones that the basically impoverished human imagination has always nourished from the dawn of

20. On the other hand, nothing is more curious than to see a falsehood arise from a spontaneous error. A good example of this transformation of sincere error into a deception is perhaps furnished, outside of Belgium, by the story of the "Airplane of Nuremberg." The declaration of war sent on 3 August 1914 to the president of the French Council by the German ambassador invoked, among other pretexts, the following: a French airman had "dropped bombs on the railroad near Karlsruhe and Nuremberg" (*Livre jaune*, 131). It is known that long afterward, the municipality of Nuremberg denied this absurdity (cf. Fernand Roche, *Manuel des origines de la guerre* [Paris: Éditions Bossard, 1919] 275n2). No one would think that the German government ever believed the story, because it possessed all the means of verifying it. As the deception probably did not arise ready-made from the mind of an inventive civil servant, one supposes that it originated as an item of popular false news. It is indeed possible that a French plane, in the course of a peaceful flight, undertaken right before the declaration of war, had innocently overflowed Nuremberg on 1 August 1914 (cf. *Le Temps* [9 Oct 1919]). The thing is not at all certain. It has been denied. A small critical inquiry is required. If it were to bring out the truth of the matter, an interesting conclusion could be drawn. There is no doubt that, if Nurembergers had seen a French plane appear in their skies, they would have feared that it would drop bombs. From that fear to believing that it had in fact dropped them would have been a step that minds overexcited by the emotions of an approaching war would certainly have taken. The false news was bound to reach the ears of the government in Berlin. There it would have seemed unlikely, but rather than verifying it, they preferred to make use of it. Imagination is a less widespread quality than one sometimes thinks. Many liars possess little of it, and deceptions often enough probably consist of repeating a genuinely erroneous story, knowing it to be false.

21. Cf. van Langenhove, *Comment naît un cycle de légendes*, 117.

time—stories of acts of treason, of poisonings, of mutilations, of women gouging out the eyes of wounded warriors—of which bards and troubadours used to sing and which serials and movies popularize today. Such are the emotional states and the intellectual representations that prepare the way for the formation of legend. Such is the traditional material that provides the legend its elements.

From this point, a chance occurrence may give rise to a legend: a misperception or, rather, a misinterpreted perception. Here is a typical example among many others: “narrow openings, closed by means of metal plates, are pierced in most of the façades of houses in Belgium.”²² They are “plastering holes used for holding the plasterers’ or painters’ scaffolding on the façade,” corresponding to the system of brackets that serve the same purpose in other regions. This construction technique seems to be peculiar to Belgium or at least unfamiliar in Germany. The German soldier notices the openings. He does not understand the reason for them and seeks an explanation. “At this point, he is living among images of snipers.... What explanation will he imagine that this *idée fixe* does not suggest to him?” The mysterious eyes that pierce the façades of so many houses are those of snipers’ slits. Anticipating guerrilla and ambush war, the Belgians have had them installed by “special technicians,” as mentioned in a brochure sold, alas, to benefit the Red Cross. These people are not only homicidal; they have premeditated their assassinations. And so an innocent architectural detail passes for proof of a skillfully devised crime. Now suppose that in a village built in this way, some stray shots are fired from an unknown location. How does he not think they have been fired through the “snipers’ slits”? No doubt, he did think that in many cases. And the troops meted out swift justice to the houses and those living in them.

Other conjectures led to punishments similarly well founded. Therefore (and this is a point that seems to have escaped Mr. van Langenhove), from the moment that the mistake caused blood to be shed, it was definitively established. Men moved by a blind and brutal but sincere anger set fires and fired shots; this caused them from then on to harbor a perfectly stubborn faith in the existence of “atrocities” that could alone give their rage an appearance of fairness. We may suppose that most among them would have recoiled in horror, if they had been required to recognize the profound absurdity of the panic and terror that had enabled them to commit terrible acts. But they never recognized any such thing. Even today, most Germans are probably persuaded that their soldiers fell victim to Belgian ambushes in large numbers—a conviction so very unshakeable that it resists every examination. One easily believes what one needs to believe. A legend that has inspired such sensational and cruel acts is very nearly indestructible.

All these items of false news took shape in the armies themselves, under fire. Mr. van Langenhove has shown very well how they were transmitted to the interior of the country. Initially at first hand by the letters of combatants and reports of the wounded. (Who, in these first days of the war, would have dared contradict a soldier struck down on the battlefield?) Then at second hand in the accounts of journalists and nurses. Of course, in passing from one person to another, it had every chance to be amplified and embellished. Above all, the *milieux* of the rear, often more reflective and more educated, elaborated them in such a way as to make them cohere and to confer on them a sort of rational quality. It surprised some that the seemingly good-natured Belgians should be shown to be so vicious. One scholar has demonstrated that all the atrocities of the snipers had already been, for those who knew how to read, potentially depicted in Flemish art.²³ A profound unity animated all these legends, born at the front of a common state of mind. The methodical and somewhat pedantic mind of the German bourgeoisie had made a system of errors both well constructed and grounded in history.²⁴

22. *Ibid.*, 185–86.

23. Professor B. Händecke of Königsberg, in an article entitled “Die belgischen Franktireurs und die Kunst Belgiens,” *Nationale Rundschau* 1 (1914–15). Cf. van Langenhove, *Comment naît un cycle de légendes*, 251–52. I have not been able to see Händecke’s article.

24. Popular imagination always distorts. Whatever “atrocities” had, alas, actually been perpetrated by the Germans on French soil, they were mixed with stories that made facts even of legendary dross. Such, if I am not mistaken, is the legend of the “severed hands.” Therein would be the subject of a very appealing study for an honest and brave spirit. It would also be appropriate to draw up a precise balance-sheet of German crimes, eliminating all items of “false news” or even doubtful information. Such a work would be useful, not only for objective history, but also for our own propaganda, for which, since the peace, there still remains a useful task to be accomplished,—in Alsace-Lorraine, in friendly or allied countries, in Germany itself? The truth loses its strength when it is mixed with errors.

III

Relying on works that I will analyze and my own personal experience, I would like to make some brief remarks on false news in war and the problems it poses. Consider first an item of false news whose genesis I myself was able to observe very precisely. It is a legend small in magnitude and range, quite modest and nearly insignificant. But, as simple cases often do in every level of science, it strikes me as perfectly typical.

In September 1917, my infantry regiment was stationed on the Chemin des Dames plateau, north of the small village of Braisne²⁵ in the sector called l'Épine-de-Chevregny. We did not know what units were facing us, but we needed that knowledge because the commander, who was then preparing an attack in the same region on Malmaison, could not allow gaps in what we knew of the enemy's battle plan. We received the order to take prisoners. A surprise attack in force was mounted—one of those luxurious attacks in force, as they were then organized, by a great reinforcement of every caliber of artillery. In the ruins of a small German position crushed under the shellfire, the assault team captured a sentinel and brought him back to our lines. I had the opportunity to interrogate this man. He was a soldier who was already elderly, a reservist, of course, a member of the civilian middle class of the old Hanseatic town of Brême [Bremen]. He was hurried to the rear under a good escort, and we never thought we would hear any more of him. After a short time, bit by bit, a curious story reached our ears. As artillerymen and provisioners told it, it ran something like this: "These Germans! What marvelous organizers! They have spies everywhere. One was taken prisoner at l'Épine-de-Chevregny. Who was he? An individual who, in peacetime, was set up as a shopkeeper a few kilometers from here, at Braisne."

Here the first accident that gave rise to the false news is obvious on the evidence: the misperception of the name "Brême," or rather—by an act of interpretation inseparable from perception itself—the substitution in the mind of listeners profoundly ignorant of geography for the precise sound lacking among them a sort of meaningful analogue, since it designated a little town known to everyone. To this first attempt at interpretation, a second was quickly added: this agent, who, after having kept shop in France, suddenly reappeared in the clothing of an enemy soldier, could only be a spy. And, since the Germans were commonly thought to be capable of any ruse, the news thus formulated easily gained credence and spread like wildfire. In truth, this second conclusion was already implicit in the original error. That the Germans would have enveloped our country with a vast espionage network, no one among us doubted. This idea depended on an unfortunately all too large number of specific observations. But the popular voice had strangely exaggerated and dramatized the exact information. During the months of August and September 1914, the desire to attribute our defeats to extraordinary causes had made the cry of treason ring out everywhere. Little by little, belief became a sort of dogma that had almost no non-believers. At the time, the troops were haunted by it. Who had not then taken the most innocent lights for suspicious signals or even (I can vouch for this story) the alternating shadows cast on a church steeple by the erratic flight of a couple of owls? Everyone was on the lookout for something to confirm a common prejudice. Ordinarily, uneducated people hardly concern themselves about understanding a geographical name. If one hears "Braisne" instead of "Brême," that's likely because most soldiers unconsciously tend to distort the accounts that reach them to fit a generally accepted opinion that flatters the romantic imagination of the masses.

Once more we have to do here with a very important fact toward which all works on the legends of war draw us. It is a general conclusion which future studies will undoubtedly take as a guiding idea in order to verify whether it applies in all cases. One may state it as follows: an item of false news always arises from preexisting collective representations. It is fortuitous only in appearance, or, more correctly, all that is fortuitous about it is the initial incident, something that sets the imagination in motion. But this setting in motion occurs only because imaginations have already been prepared and are secretly fermenting. An event or misperception, for example, that does not go in the direction where all minds are already tending can at most constitute the origin of an individual error, not a popular and widespread instance of false news. If I

25. Braisne, district of Soissons. However, the "s" is not pronounced.

may use a term which sociologists have given, for my liking, a too metaphysical value but which is convenient and, after all, rich in meaning, false news is a mirror wherein the “collective consciousness” contemplates its own features.

The reasons why war has been so fertile in false news are for the most part too obvious to justify the effort of insisting on them. One cannot say at what point emotion and fatigue destroy the critical faculty. I only remember that when, in the last days of the retreat, one of my superiors told me that the Russians were bombarding Berlin, I lacked the courage to resist this seductive image. I vaguely sensed the absurdity of it and I would surely have rejected it, had I been able to reflect on it. But it was too attractive for a depressed spirit in a tired body to have the strength not to accept it. Methodical doubt is ordinarily a sign of good mental health. That is why harried soldiers, troubled at heart, cannot exercise it.

The role of censorship was considerable. Not only did it gag and paralyze the press during all the years of the war. Its intervention, suspected even when it had not occurred, never ceased to render unbelievable in the eyes of the public even the true reports that it allowed to leak through. As one humorist well put it, “The opinion prevailed in the trenches that anything could be true except what was allowed in print.”²⁶ Whence—in the absence of newspapers, to which was added at the front sporadic, badly regulated, ill-supervised postal connections—a wonderful renewal of oral tradition, the ancient mother of myths and legends. By a bold stroke that the most audacious of experiments would not have dared to dream of, censorship abolished past centuries and transported the soldier from the front to the methods of information and the state of mind of ancient times, before newspapers, before broadsheets, before books.

We have just seen how one day, by virtue of imaginations stirred up by stories of espionage, a citizen of Brême was transformed into a spy, treacherously settled in Braisne. Where did this transformation first take place? Not quite at the front line, but a little farther from the enemy, in the batteries, the convoys, and the kitchens. From this relatively “rear” area, rumor flowed back to us. Such was the route that false news nearly always followed. The reason is clear: false news arises only where men from different groups are able to meet. One cannot imagine a more isolated existence than that of the soldier at the front, at least during the war of position. Individuals did not, it is true, live completely alone. They were split up in small fragmented groups clearly separated from each other. To move was usually to risk death. Moreover, the soldier had no right to move without an order. History is familiar with societies dispersed in this way, where contact between different social cells happened only rarely and with difficulty through (in various eras) vagrants, mendicant friars, and peddlers, at fairs or religious festivals. The role of peddlers and vagrants of all kinds, those intermittent travelers whose passage was altogether unpredictable, was played at the front by liaison officers, telephone operators repairing their lines, and artillery observers, all of them people of importance whom officers eagerly questioned but who seldom consorted with simple soldiers. Much more important periodic communications were necessitated by worries about food. The “agora” of this small world of the trenches was the kitchen. Provisioners arrived there once or twice a day from various parts of the front; they met and gossiped among themselves or with the cooks, who usually knew a great deal, because they had the rare privilege of exchanging a few words every day with the conductors of the regimental train, fortunate men who sometimes billeted near civilians. So, for a moment around fires in the open air or in the shelter of “field kitchens,” tenuous links were built between singularly dissimilar mileux. Then the work details moved off along trails and allies, carrying back to the lines, along with their soup pots, false information all ready for further elaboration. On a map of the front, a little to the rear of the interlaced lines designating in their infinite detours the leading positions, one can shade in with crosshatching a continuous zone of legend formation.

All in all, a very loose society where connections between the diverse elements composing it are made only rarely, imperfectly, and indirectly through the intermediation of certain specialists—such appears to us what may be called the society of the trenches. In this too, as in what most oral tradition is concerned with, war gave the impression of drawing us back to a very remote past. Now it seems as well that the socie-

26. Pierre Chaine, *Les memoires d'un rat* (Paris: Payot, 1923) 61, cited by Graux, *Les fausses nouvelles*, 2:277n1.

ty so constituted uniquely favored the creation and expansion of false news. Frequent contacts between people facilitate the comparison of different accounts and, by the same token, stir the critical sense. But one very readily believes a storyteller who comes infrequently from an actual or perceived distant region by difficult paths. These are some indications that historians would do well to take account of.²⁷

Studying the effect of different environments at different periods of the war on the origin, diffusion, and transformation of stories seems to be one of the most important tasks confronting anyone curious about collective psychology. The war of position had its items of false news, the war of movement had its own as well, no doubt of the same type. The errors of the rear and the front were not the same. A distinct folklore blossomed in each allied or enemy army. One does see, it is true, some legends endowed with a very strong vitality crossing quite diverse social groups, but with each passage they were colored with new tints. Nothing would be more instructive than to follow them in their wanderings. The most remarkable of these were connected with certain individuals whose actions or situations made them especially likely to strike the common imagination. Around these figures, charged in the eyes of the masses, some with glory, others with opprobrium, a mighty flowering of almost mythic representations developed. The Crown Prince, for example, had his own cycle in Germany, it seems, as well as in France.²⁸

But for the moment, the most urgent work is to gather the material. It is time to open a serious inquiry into the false news of the war, since its four terrible years are already receding into the past and, sooner than one believes, the generations who lived through them will little by little begin to disappear. Whoever is able to do so should collect his notes and put his memories into writing. Above all, we should not leave the care of this research to those with no preparation for historical work. On a similar matter, the truly precious observations are those that come from persons well versed in critical methods and accustomed to studying social problems. The war, as I stated above, was an immense experiment in social psychology. To console oneself for its horrors by being pleased with its experimental interest would be to affect a dilettantism of very bad form. But, since it has taken place, it is appropriate to use its lessons for the betterment of our science. Let us hasten to take advantage of an opportunity that we must hope will be unique.

27. Or, if one sometimes takes the storyteller's statements as suspect, this doubt is as absurd and deprived of method as the most blind faith. Thus, at the front one saw the same man alternately accepting, mouth agape, the most fantastic stories or dismissing scornfully the most solidly established truths; skepticism there was not more than a form of credulity.

28. Cf. the suggestions of some questions to deal with given by Camille Jullian in a note entitled "Folklore en temps de guerre," *Revue des études anciennes* 17 (1915) 73. See also, on military folklore, a questionnaire prepared by the Swiss professor E. Hoffmann Krayer and reproduced in *Revue des traditions populaires* 30 (1915) 107. One can find some information on German false news in A. Pinguad, "La guerre vue par les combattants allemands," *Revue de Deux Mondes* (15 Dec 1916); cf. Dauzat, *Légendes*, 103.