

Article

Enemy and Officers in Emilio Lussu's *Un anno sull'Altipiano*

Dario Marcucci

Department of Comparative Literature, The Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, NY 10016, USA;
dmarcucci@gradcenter.cuny.edu

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Abstract: This essay explores the concept of enemy in Emilio Lussu's WWI memoir *Un anno sull'Altipiano* (A Soldier on the Southern Front, 1938). The memoir portrays the conflict on the oft-forgotten Alpine Front, where Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies clashed from 1915 to 1918 in a series of battles fought at high altitudes. I argue that two crucial dynamics of modern warfare shape the concept of enemy in WWI literature: the impossibility of close-range encounters, which was due to the superiority of defensive firepower, and hatred for one's own officers, which stemmed from the corrosive environment of the trenches, where the aggressive attitude of high-ranking officers often led hundreds of thousands to pointless death. I show how, in Lussu's memoir, these dynamics subvert the traditional image of the enemy as imposed by military propaganda, and finally elicit feelings of empathy.

Keywords: World War I; Italian Front; memoir; Emilio Lussu; trench warfare

WWI mechanized warfare deeply transformed key military concepts such as combat, battlefield, and enemy. Two groundbreaking studies from the 1970s, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) and Eric Leed's *No Man's Land. Combat and Identity in World War I* (1979), address these transformations by focusing on their consequences on soldiers' mindset and perception of the war. In this article, I examine the concept of enemy in Emilio Lussu's WWI memoir *Un anno sull'Altipiano*, (A Soldier on the Southern Front, 1938), and I frame my analysis with Fussell and Leed's observations on the subject. I argue that the two dynamics of modern warfare that Fussell and Leed relate to the concept of enemy are particularly evident in Lussu's memoir, and strongly characterize the narration. These dynamics are hatred for one's own officers (Fussell 1975, p. 83) and the invisibility of the enemy (Leed 1979, p. 124).

The former refers to the widespread internal conflict provoked by the aggressive attitude of high-ranking officers, who generally considered their troops cannon fodder. On all the fronts, Staff officers, who conducted the operations from behind the lines, ignored the change in warfare that made offensive tactics bloody and worthless. Except for rare cases, and especially during the early stages of the conflict, the officers' strategy (or lack of it) consisted of hurling men against fortified trenches powerfully defended by machine guns. The distance between the troops who lived and died in the trenches, and the officers who conducted the operations from safe positions, resulted in suspiciousness and, often, in hatred (Fussell 1975, p. 84). These feelings shaped the combatants' perception of the enemy.

The latter refers to the drastic change in warfare that occurred in September 1914, when, after the first battles on the Western Front, the incontrovertible superiority of defensive firepower led to a general stalemate. Soon, the stalemate resulted in unprecedented trench warfare, and the battlefields turned into what Germans called "menschenleere" ('unpopulated'). Leed relates this expression to the

dreariness and solitude of the landscape at the Front, and the invisibility of the enemy, entrenched somewhere beyond no-man's-land (Leed 1979, pp. 19–20).

On the Italian Front—where Lussu fought as a lieutenant in the Italian army—both the dynamics I have described were particularly evident. Indeed, along with modern warfare, it was the very geography of the Front—stretching over 400 miles across the Alps, at the border between Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire—that made the enemy a not tangible entity. Furthermore, in the Italian army, the harshness of the officers and the iron discipline they demanded were perhaps unmatched, and often resulted in a conflict within the conflict. In Lussu's memoir, the combined pressure of the disappearance of the enemy and brutality of the officers finally elicits feelings of commiseration with the enemy. For the author, such feelings pivot on the awareness that the Austrians were making the same pointless sacrifice, led by equally blind and ruthless officers.

Considering the context in which Lussu wrote his memoir, during the Fascist Regime, more than twenty years after the events took place, this representation is politically significant. Lussu, who after serving in WWI became a committed antifascist, exposed the actual dynamics that regulated human interactions at the Front. In so doing, his work took a clear stand against the Regime, which, since its formation in the early 1920s, imposed itself as the “only legitimate heir” of the conflict (Janz 2002, p. 627), and manipulated the memory thereof by authorizing only an idyllic picture of the army. *Un anno sull'Altipiano* completely rejects the picture imposed by the political propaganda. Lussu depicts daily life in the high-mountain trenches, the struggles and the fights endured by the soldiers in a hostile environment, and the ambivalent feelings for the enemies beyond the front line and those who commanded from behind.

The narration opens in June 1916, during the Austro-Hungarian offensive known as *Strafexpedition*, which aimed to encircle the Italian army by breaking through the Asiago Plateau, in the Venetian Pre-Alps. To reinforce the line, the Italian Command sent the infantry division to which the author belonged—Sassari Brigade—to counter the attack. Lussu's memoir chronicles the year the brigade spent on the Plateau, from June 1916 to July 1917. The author, who experienced fighting first-hand, recounts in first person events and people, never indulging in digressions but prioritizing facts. Yet, these facts are emblematic, as they exemplify crucial dynamics of modern warfare. The first passage that engages with the concept of enemy is a description of trench warfare in chapter VII. This description illustrates the dynamic historians define as “live and let live” (Heyman 2002, p. 52):

“Opposite the enemy trenches, at varying distances between fifty and three hundred meters, following the lay of the land and the edge of the forest, we set about building our own trenches. They were our homes, which the Austrians, now on the defensive, surely didn't think of attacking.” (Lussu 2014, p. 84)

Here, the unnerving proximity between contrasting units that characterizes trench warfare results in rejecting any offensive drive, therefore in “days of calm” (Lussu 2014, p. 84). Among frontline soldiers, days of calm such as those were quite common; the live and let live attitude—namely the tendency of avoiding useless fighting through unofficial agreements—caused long cease-fires, especially during pauses between major battles. Tacit pacts generally included not shooting during prearranged times, allowing the enemy to venture into no-man's-land to recover bodies, and even to use the latrine without risking their life. Live and let live could be a reaction to the ferocity of commanders, whose offensive spirit often led hundreds of thousands to pointless death; or a reaction to weather conditions, especially on the Alps, where fighting was frequently impossible because of snow storms, avalanches, hard rain, and fog. More accurately, live and let live was a reaction to trench warfare overall, and to the treacherous paradox it entailed: the enemy was close and invisible at the same time.

This paradox triggered a radical transformation in the combatants' mindset. Leed refers to German military historian and officer Wilhelm Von Schramm's theory. Von Schramm, who fought both on the western and eastern fronts, maintains that the invisibility of the enemy, combined with the

hardship of life in trenches, and the defensive nature of the war, weakened the aggressive spirit of the soldiers (Leed 1979, p. 111). In his 1990 study *A War Imagined*, Samuel Hynes comments on a review of Robert Nichols' *Ardours and Endurance* by British writer and essayist Edmund Gosse. Gosse stresses that, in Nichols' poems, there is "no anger against the enemy. There is no mention of the Germans from beginning to end; the poet does not seem to know of their existence." (Hynes 1991, p. 190). Despite the propaganda aimed at dehumanizing the enemy, modern warfare itself and its specific dynamics prepared the logistic and psychological conditions that led to limitations on fighting and to feelings of indifference for the enemy.

For the first soldiers who experienced it, the invisibility of the enemy triggered a psychological shock, the intensity of which depended on their complete unawareness of modern conflict, and on their early attitude toward it. Throughout Europe, among the first wave of volunteers, the predominant feelings at the outbreak of the conflict were exaltation and enthusiasm. In analyzing the cultural roots of these feelings, German historian George L. Mosse emphasizes the role of artistic and intellectual movements that dominated the cultural atmosphere of the mobilizing nations (Mosse 1991, p. 54). Interventionist avant-gardists and intellectuals were able to sense the needs of this generation of young men, and played a decisive role in shaping their fighting mindset.

For instance, in Italy, the Futurists welcomed the war as the epochal event that projected the nation into modernity. For them, the spectacular display of technology that was changing the face of the countryside at the Belgium–France border epitomized the archetype of a new aesthetic experience grounded on the interaction between modernity and violence, two sides of the same coin. The Futurist picture of the war mirrored the manners and aims of the military propaganda and had its fundamental principle in the individual aggressive spirit.

Yet, such an aggressive spirit, along with the Futurist ideals of movements and aggression, soon clashed with a reality made of deadlock, "menschenleere", and invisibility of the enemy. This clash was the turning point of modern warfare, and it triggered the psychological shock that transformed the approach to the fight. Like a counteraction to the aggressive posture of August 1914, this shock could result in the live and let live attitude described by Lussu, or in the indifference towards the enemy found by Gosse in Nichols' poems. More importantly, this psychological shock was the first, necessary step toward more solid feelings of commiseration, that is, the repudiation of the concept of otherness imposed by political propaganda, and the ultimate acknowledgment of the enemy's humanity.

Trench warfare's paradox fostered indifference but precluded commiseration as an invisible enemy is impossible to hate, but also impossible to empathize with. In the early chapters of Lussu's memoir, all references to the Austrians attest to the impossibility of humanizing an enemy without identity. To humanize the fight, it is necessary to abandon trench warfare, which allows close-range encounters only during the deadly assaults that took place in no-man's-land. The chance occurs when the Sassari Brigade is sent to resist the *Strafexpedition* on the Asiago Plateau. For Lussu and his comrades, the event, welcomed as a relief, marks the beginning of mountain and maneuver warfare:

We would finally be liberated from that miserable life, lived fifty or a hundred yards from the enemy trenches, in that ferocious promiscuity [. . .]. We would stop killing each other, every day, without hate. The war of maneuver would be something else. A successful maneuver, two hundred thousand, three hundred thousand prisoners, just like that, in a single day, without that horrific, generalized slaughter; just the success of an ingenious strategic encirclement. (Lussu 2014, p. 10)

What stands out in this passage is the desire to defeat the enemy without shedding their blood. To achieve this goal, Lussu evokes a type of warfare in which close-range encounters were human and bloodless; a type of warfare that modernity made outdated and impossible. Lussu's idealization of the maneuver tactic mirrors the feeling that, at the outbreak of the war, misled thousands of young middle-class men from all the mobilizing nations into volunteering. Joining a war that everyone, on every side, thought would be brief and victorious; the first volunteers who reached the fronts clung

to a romanticized idea of fighting, and were totally unprepared for what modern warfare turned out to be. The ultimate expression of this idealization was the myth of the duel, a fight one on one that fostered individual values and skills. These myths and misconceptions died only a few weeks after the declarations of war, when the armies built the first trenches. Dueling demands actual encounters, which allows one to acknowledge the antagonist's humanity. Lussu's attempt to overcome the enemy's invisibility epitomizes the attempt to overcome modern warfare's dehumanization.

In *Un anno sull'Altipiano*, the construction of a mindset predisposed to commiseration revolves around the necessity of establishing visual contact with the Austrians. Yet, the very geography of the front frustrates such a necessity as mountain warfare destabilizes the traditional structure of the battlefield. In chapter III, as soon as the brigade reached the Asiago Plateau, the author notices the great confusion that reigns on that sector of the front:

On the edge of the plateau, at thirty-five hundred feet, it was pure chaos. We'd arrived there on June 5 via Val Frenzela from Valstagna, under the tightest security measures, because it wasn't clear where our guys were and where the Austrians were. (Lussu 2014, p. 17)

The "pure chaos" of mountain battlefields affects the emotional state of the soldiers, whose first tasks are to control, organize, and map the space. Despite any optimistic prevision, mountain warfare exacerbates the invisibility of the enemy as it deprives the troops not only of the sight of the enemy, but also of the knowledge of their position. On the plateau, Lussu meets a Lieutenant-Colonel commanding a battalion stationed there. The dialogue between the two soldiers explores this aspect:

It's more than a year now that I've been fighting in this war, on just about every front, and I've yet to look a single Austrian in the face. Yet we go on killing each other every day. Killing each other without even knowing each other, without even seeing each other! It's horrible! That's why we're all drunk all the time, on one side and the other. (Lussu 2014, p. 35)

The Lieutenant-Colonel's speech emphasizes the lack of human factor that typifies the fights of WWI; there is no hate or empathy between antagonists as modern warfare prevents actual encounters. The Lieutenant-Colonel asks:

"Have you ever killed anyone? You, personally, I mean, with your own hands?"

"I hope not."

"Me, nobody. I mean, not anyone I've seen." (Lussu 2014, p. 35)

Modern warfare made fighting and killing mechanized acts that turned men into cogs of a machine that they could not control. The Lieutenant-Colonel's remark—"with your hands"—conveys the tragedy of a generation of soldiers who lost their identity as fighters, stuck in a limbo where both hatred and empathy were impossible.

The invisible enemy signifies invisible danger. In Lussu's memoir, the first invisible danger is artillery, which in WWI "dictated those laws that regulated life and death" (Leed 1979, p. 97). The piece of artillery most commonly used by the Austro-Hungarian army was the mountain howitzer Skoda 75 mm Model 15, which had a maximum range of more than 9000 yards. For the troops, for whom a considerable part of life consisted in huddling in narrow dugouts while undetectable weapons fired from miles away, facing such distant and invisible threats was psychologically draining. Disorientation and a sense of impotence were fundamental factors of attrition warfare, and revolved around the impossibility of controlling the surrounding space. The confusion that reigned on the battlefield frequently led to episodes of friendly fire. Extremely common on the Italian Front, friendly fire was another decisive element in shaping the combatants' psychology, and consequently in defining the notion of enemy. Lussu and the Lieutenant-Colonel touch upon the theme:

"Quite often, our own artillery pounds us into the ground, shelling us instead of the enemy."
 "The Austrians artillery fires on its infantry all the time, too." (Lussu 2014, p. 35)

The danger of being bombed by one's own artillery creates a bond between Italian and Austrian troops; both face an invisible enemy that is not on the battlefield, but somewhere in the rear lines.

The rear line is a particular space of warfare; it does not participate in the atrocity of the battlefield; therefore, it does not belong to the front-soldiers' reality. The "sharp division between Staff and troops" that Paul Fussell points out (Fussell 1975, p. 83) is fundamentally a spatial one. In war, what makes the greatest difference is being or not being at the frontlines. The presence of someone who supervised the action from safe positions, namely high-ranking Staff officers, unavoidably affects the interaction between soldiers of opposing sides. Lussu portrays an environment in which, for soldiers who live and die in the trenches, it is easier to empathize with those who are experiencing the same conditions than with their own commanders, whose main role is to send troops to die in no-man's-land. Proximity to death bonds more than uniforms divide. In discussing the famous truce of December 1914, Modris Eksteins stresses how "trench conditions spurred the development of a friendly feeling between the warring parties, but the deteriorating relationship between officers and men" (Eksteins 1989, p. 106). Then, in an investigation on the psychological conditions of those who experienced the Great War, a distinction between troops and Staff officers appears to be more significant than a distinction between contrasting troops.

The history of the Italian Front proves that often commanding officers were, for their own soldiers, more dangerous than the enemy. Until he was in charge, Italian Chief of Staff Luigi Cadorna based his strategy on his military treatise *Frontal Attack and Tactical Training*. Issued only a few months before Italy's mobilization and feared by the troops, who nicknamed it after the cover "libretto rosso" (little red book), the treatise promoted suicidal aggressive spirit as the first requirement to win the war. Despite countless reports on the nature of modern warfare and the dangers it entailed, Cadorna—like many generals of all the belligerent armies—waged the war through a blind offensive strategy, which resulted in frequent and fruitless mass slaughter. Deeply convinced of the indolence of his army, Cadorna imposed hard disciplinary methods that included arbitrary executions and the ancient, cruel practice of decimation. Informed by such mentality, Cadorna's subordinates, both Staff and frontlines officers, were as harsh as their Chief. In the attempt to please Cadorna, they imitated his methods zealously, and generally had little concern for their men, whose difference in social class made them even more distant. Cadorna's favorite motto was "the superior is always right, especially when he is wrong" (Schindler 2001, p. 109), and this principle regulated the relationship between men and officers on the Italian Front during the conflict.

Such a corrosive polarity reached a breaking point during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, better known as the Battle of Caporetto. On October 1917, heavily reinforced by German units, the Austro-Hungarian army was able to break through on the eastern sector of the front, conquering miles of ground and pushing back the Italians. While the High-Command experienced the defeat as a mutiny, some Italian intellectuals interpreted it as a general strike from work that nobody wanted to do; work imposed by the ruling class. Writer and soldier Ardengo Soffici, for instance, titled a famous article about Caporetto *The Strike of the Peasant-Soldiers* (*Lo sciopero dei contadini soldati*, 1934). Military historian John Keegan emphasizes the importance of Cadorna's harsh discipline and of the social distance between men and officers in the Italian army's collapse at Caporetto (Keegan 1999, pp. 343–50). Additionally, Italian historian Mario Isnenghi underlines how one of the causes of the defeat was the ultimate failure of propaganda aimed at creating an enemy that the troops did not perceive as such (Isnenghi 1967, p. 14). In the confusion of the retreat, the notion of enemy blurred. Reportedly, Italian soldiers welcomed the defeat by shouting "viva l'Austria!" (long live Austria), and fraternized with German and Austrian troops; for those made prisoners, the war was over. In contrast, Italian officers reacted to what they perceived as mass desertion by harshly punishing their own troops. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway gave a memorable account of those chaotic days, recounting the summary executions endured by the troops. At Caporetto, for those who faced a firing squad, the perception that the real enemy was behind the lines was undoubtedly strong.

Lussu illustrates the officers' practice of using firing squads against their troops in Chapter XVIII of his memoir. This sequence describes a bombardment in preparation for an attack. When a company of Italian soldiers leaves their position pummeled by friendly fire, a Major, "overwhelmed by a surge of rage" (Lussu 2014, p. 240), orders the executions of twenty of them for mutiny in the face of the enemy. Yet, the firing squad deliberately misses the targets. Then the Major decides to punish the soldiers himself and starts shooting, but the firing squad kill him immediately. The bitterness of the setting—the deafening artillery barrage before an assault—mirrors and underlines the officer's frenzy, which turns into madness when the firing squad refuses to obey. In this passage, Lussu portrays the obsession for discipline and the carelessness for human life that dominated soldiers' life at the Front; in representing the Major as "enraptured and unable to pay attention to anything but his own voice" (Lussu 2014, p. 242), the author stresses the unbridgeable distance between officers and troops.

Such a theme peaked with the memorable character of General Leone, inspired by the actual General Giacinto Ferrero. Leone is a frontline officer, who operates in the trenches in close contact with troops and commands the infantry division stationed on the plateau. Having an officer such as him in their own trenches signifies, for the Sassari Brigade, having an enemy in their own home. With his fanatic, harsh, sadistic, and pointlessly daring temperament, he perfectly embodies the prototype of the Italian Army's high-ranking officer. Since his first appearance, General Leone terrorizes his men with disdain and carelessness for life. One episode of Chapter VII stands out as significant. While inspecting the trenches, Leone climbs upon a pile of rocks to look at the enemy lines with his binoculars, and, voluntarily, exposes himself uncovered from chest to head. Austrian snipers start shooting, but surprised by the exceptionality of the event, miss the target. After a few seconds, Leone comes down, composed and untouched, and turns to one of the several soldiers who witnessed such an exhibition of arrogance:

"If you're not afraid," he said, turning to the corporal, "do what your general just did."
 "Yes, sir", the corporal replied. And leaning his rifle against the trench wall, he climbed up on the pile of rocks. Instinctively, I grabbed the corporal by the arm and made him come down. "The Austrians have been alerted now," I said, "and they certainly won't miss on the next shot." With a chilling glance, the general reminded me of the difference in rank that separated me from him. I let go of the corporal's arm and didn't say another word. (Lussu 2014, p. 55)

Naturally, when the corporal exposes himself out of the trenches, Austrian snipers do not miss. What role does the enemy play in this sequence? They do not have an identity, yet they are merely the invisible executor of a deterministic reaction: if a soldier exposes himself outside of a trench, he triggers a mechanism that unavoidably kills him. The process does not involve a direct human factor.

A deeper and more significant human involvement between the opposing troops can be found in the description of a failed offensive, in Chapter XV. What Lussu depicts in this famous sequence is a typical WWI assault: as the Italian infantry advance into no-man's-land, Austrian machine guns shoot at point blank, mowing down the defenseless men. It is a situation seen countless times on the battlefields of the Great War; but this time something different happens:

Suddenly, the Austrians stopped shooting. I saw the ones who were in front of us, their eyes thrust open with a terrified look, almost as though it were they and not us who were under fire. One of them, who didn't have a rifle, cried out in Italian, "*Basta! Basta!*" "*Basta!*" the others repeated from the parapets. The one who was unarmed looked like a chaplain. "Enough, brave soldiers, don't get yourselves killed like this!" We came to a halt for an instant. We weren't shooting, they weren't shooting. The one who seemed to be a chaplain was leaning out so close to us that if I had reached out my arm I could have touched him. He had his eyes fixed on us, and I looked back at him. From our trench a harsh voice cried out, "Forward! Men of my glorious division, forward! Forward against the enemy!" It was General Leone. (Lussu 2014, p. 123)

For the first time, human interaction occurs. Finally, the enemy is not an invisible entity, manifesting itself only as mere executor of warfare mechanics; they have a voice—incredibly speaking their opponents' language—and they are so close that they can be touched and looked at in the eyes. The sudden and unexpected proximity leads to an exceptional event: commiseration arises, and the Austrians cease fire. Meanwhile, from his safe position behind the parapet, General Leone commands his men forward, against the machine guns. This sequence is emblematic as it epitomizes the dynamic shaping the notion of enemy: when those beyond the lines cease to be an invisible entity referred to as “the enemy”, the war mechanisms jam. By overcoming the enemy's invisibility, a close-range encounter between combatants allows identification, and paves the way for empathy.

Chapter XIX illustrates the ultimate stage of this dynamic by chronicling an Italian expedition in no-man's-land. After the failure of the maneuvers, on the Asiago Plateau, trench warfare has started again. In preparation of the imminent assault, an Italian squad leaves the trench to observe the Austrian emplacements. Assisted by darkness, Lussu and one comrade find a good observation post from which they can look safely into the Austrian trenches. After a whole night spent on the spot, at dawn, they see the enemies.

The Austrians were right there, up close, almost at arm's length, calm and unawareness, like so many passersby on a city sidewalk. A strange feeling came over me. Not wanting to talk, I squeezed the arm of the corporal, who was on my right, to communicate my amazement to him. He, too was intent and surprised, and I could feel the trembling that came over him from holding his breath for so long. An unknown life was suddenly showing itself to our eyes. Those indomitable trenches, against which we had launched so many futile attacks, had nevertheless ended up seeming inanimate, like dismal empty structure, uninhabited by living beings, a refuge for mysterious and terrible ghosts. Now they were showing themselves to us, in their actual lived life. The enemy, the enemy, the Austrians, the Austrians! There is the enemy and there are the Austrians. Men and soldiers like us, in uniform like us, who were now moving, talking, making themselves coffee. (Lussu 2014, p. 159)

In *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle posits that the feeling we call uncanny “can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context” (Royle 2003, p. 1). There is nothing more ghostly and unfamiliar, in the battlefields of the Great War, than the enemy trenches; they represent the ultimate boundary before the “paradoxical otherness of enemy terrain” (Fussell 1975, p. 76). Yet, in this utterly unfamiliar dimension, something familiar arises: men making themselves coffee. Lussu is astonished.

Bizarre! So why shouldn't they be making themselves coffee? Why in the world did it seem so extraordinary to me that they should make themselves coffee? And, around ten or eleven, they would have their rations, exactly like us. (Lussu 2014, p. 160)

The revelation of the enemy's humanity exposes the mystifications of military propaganda, which nourishes the conflict by imposing the “us versus the others” mindset. Having such a mindset is necessary to bear the devastating slaughter of modern warfare; the encounter between Lussu and the nameless Austrian soldier challenges the essence of war itself.

As in the passage previously reported—where the Austrians cease fire because they look at the Italians “as though it were they who were under fire”—the key concept of this sequence is identification. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922), Sigmund Freud terms identification as “the earliest form of an emotional tie with another person” (Freud 1989, p. 46). These emotional ties hold members of social groups or mass movements together; therefore, the very existence of social groups hinges on the identification among its members. An army is a particular type of social group; Freud defines it as “artificial group” as its integrity is not spontaneous but requires human intervention in the person of the Commander-in-Chief. By directing his men's emotive impulses to the right targets, namely hatred to the enemy and dedication to the officers, the Commander-in-Chief promotes identification and protects the integrity of his army.

The unprecedented size and complex structure of WWI modern mass armies complicated the process of identification, especially for a young nation such as Italy. In the Italian army, the linguistic and social segmentation interfered with the construction of a solid artificial group (Isnenghi and Rochat 2018, pp. 148–49). In such a problematic context—where individual impulses were strong and potentially dangerous for the integrity of the group—the military propaganda reacted by attempting to trigger what Freud calls “suggestion” (Freud 1989, p. 26). The suggestion is a deep emotive alteration of the members of a group, who, guided by the authoritative figure who leads them, end up feeling the same emotion, like a contagion. One of the most effective forms of suggestion at hand of military propaganda is the denial of enemy’s humanity, which leads to the construction of that “us versus them” mentality that fosters the fight. Yet, modern warfare itself triggers counter-suggestions: dynamics such as identification with the enemy and hatred for one’s own officer destabilize the ethical structure of the army and make commiseration possible.

Bewildered by the sudden appearance of the enemy and the revelation of his humanity, the soldier is faced with an internal struggle. Yet, it is not a struggle between empathy and sense of duty, but a struggle between empathy and suggestion. In mechanized warfare, suggestion triggers automation, which overcomes sense of duty; fighting means merely reacting to mechanisms that cannot be controlled and understood. As soon as he sees the enemy, the soldier reacts mechanically and starts taking aim.

I had all the time I wanted to take aim. I planted my elbows firmly on the ground and started to aim. The Austrian officer lit a cigarette. Now he was smoking. That cigarette suddenly created a relationship between us [. . .] In an instant, my act of taking aim, which had been automatic, became deliberate. I became aware that I was aiming, and that I was aiming at someone. [. . .] I had a man in front of me. A man! (Lussu 2014, p. 162)

The cigarette triggers a dramatic change in Lussu’s mindset, for it disintegrates the sense of otherness intrinsic to the concept of enemy, that is, the suggestion that ties him to the artificial group he belongs to. In the middle of the mechanized hell of WWI, everyday objects such as a cup of coffee or a cigarette are emotional signifiers that remind the author of his own and his enemy’s humanity. Finally, the uncanny stemmed from the presence of familiar elements within an unfamiliar context turns into commiseration.

“you know . . . like this . . . one man alone . . . I can’t shoot. You, do you want to?”
“Me neither.” (Lussu 2014, p. 164)

Both Lussu and his comrade refuse to murder the Austrian soldier, who keeps on smoking his cigarette, unaware of the danger. Italian soldier poet Fausto Maria Martini recounts a similar episode that occurred to him at Pal Grande, on the eastern sector of the front, on 17 November 1916. The poem describing the event is titled *Perché non t’uccisi* (Why I did not kill you, 1917), and its last lines illustrate synthetically the process of identification experienced by Lussu:

I did not kill you,
Unknown sad-eyed enemy,
For I was afraid of dying with you. (Martini 1969, p. 205)

The three episodes of the memoir addressed in this essay—General Leone commanding a soldier to expose himself to enemy fire, the failed assault, and the final sighting of the Austrians—represent the enemy’s progressive acquisition of voice and human essence. In the first sequence, the enemy is the invisible executor of a mechanical reaction; in the second, they are bodily men, able to perceive the atrocity of war and empathize with their opponents; in the third, the enemy is finally an individual, whose humanity is conveyed through everyday actions and objects. Peaking with the soldier’s refusal to kill, this progression gradually disintegrates the fundamental trait of mechanized warfare, the disappearance of the enemy, and finally resolves the paradox of a system where fighting does not

involve hate. Additionally, these episodes illustrate how trench warfare's dynamics direct hate to the wrong target: the officer. In *Un anno sull'Altipiano*, the officers are the first source of danger for their own troops; therefore, they are represented as the real enemy.

By defining all these forces at work, Lussu exposes what Mosse calls the "Myth of the War Experience" (Mosse 1991, p. 7), that is an ideological approach to the memory of the conflict, promoted after the war by German and Italian propaganda especially. This approach aimed at purging the remembrance of the conflict of any dissonant antimilitaristic impulse, thus constructing a legacy of positive memories that the arising totalitarianisms could exploit to establish their position in the society.

Although in his memoir's foreword Lussu claims he merely depicted life and death at the front without any ideological filter—"the war as we actually lived it" (Lussu 2014, p. vii)—his depiction takes a clear political stance, and contrasts Fascist ideology by standing as the Anti-Myth of Italian WWI literature. In their 1991 monograph *1916–1917, mito e antimito: Un anno sull'Altipiano con Emilio Lussu e la Brigata Sassari*, Italian scholars Paolo Pozzato and Giovanni Nicolli question the historicity of Lussu's work, and state its hybrid nature between novel and history. Yet, what makes *Un anno sull'Altipiano* one of the most realistic literary depictions of the Alpine Front is its dry and essential portrayal of modern warfare dynamics, which, by transforming the mindset and personalities of those who fought, convey the complexity of the psychological experience of WWI.

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