

**SPACES OF WAR: THE INTERPRETATION OF
LANDSCAPES ON THE WESTERN FRONT BY FIRST
WORLD WAR GERMAN SOLDIERS, 1914 - 1918**

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ABSTRACT

Although there has been much historical research on the environmental culture of Germany during the pre- and post-World War I periods, there is a substantial gap as far as the war itself is concerned. This paper takes a small step towards addressing that issue by examining middle-class German soldiers' interpretations of the landscape. It explores the relationship between the utopic vision of the home front and the dystopic vision of the frontline, but it also demonstrates that a complex heterotopic vision of the battlefield's landscape emerged as an inspiration for post-war cultural regeneration.

Keywords: Landscape, World War I (1914 -1918), Germany, Heterotopia.

DEDICATION

To Audrey,
I could never have done this
without your love, support, and
encouragement. I love you.

This is also dedicated to my three
boys, Josh, Ben, and one yet to
come.

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Lest we forget....

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Introduction: Mud, Blood, and Steel

The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space.¹

(Michael Foucault 1967, Berlin lectures)

In the years before August 1914, faith in science and progress led many Europeans to believe that “the sun was only just rising, but already its light had begun” to bring about the climax of human accomplishment.² The experience of the First World War radically shifted this optimistic discourse and effectively demarcated a distinct historical shift in European cultural history. This positive faith in progress was decimated by the destruction of modern war; by 1918 German soldiers noted “*Wir siegen nuns zu Tode*” and discussed the idea that the war would go on until all the dirt in France was shovelled into sandbags.³ An important, yet rarely examined, aspect of change relating to the experience of the First World War is the role of environmental discourses and interpretations of landscape. When soldiers came to the Front, they left behind farms, towns, and cities, and they understood the space of warfare to be a part of, and separate from, understood notions of landscape. Pre-war conservationist discourses influenced the cultural understandings of space which formed the basis for soldiers’ comprehension of wartime landscapes on the Western Front. The First World War has often been associated with the mud, blood, and steel of the Western Front; however, a more complete picture of the war is found in an analysis of soldiers’ views of the landscape in which they included flowers, trees, and birds. Descriptions of the landscape connected soldiers to regenerative aspects of nature and differentiated the space of the Western Front from understood notions of normalcy. Soldiers’ descriptions of warfront landscapes thereby allowed them to communicate their experiences in a way that contradicts simplistic over-arching narratives. The physical space of the First World War must be

¹ Quoted in Rob Shields, Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity (New York: Routledge, 1991), vii.

² Laurence Lafore, The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1965), 26.

³ Translation: “We’ll conquer until we are all dead”, in Stanley Weintraub, A Stillness Heard Round the World: The End of the Great War November 1918 (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985), 3.

analysed as a space in which many middle-class German soldiers celebrated the regenerating power of nature within the destructive space of the First World War experience.

While the First World War has been addressed in thousands of pages of print, many historians have failed to examine how the concept of landscape played an integral role in the formulation of wartime experiences.⁴ The primary aim of this paper is to explore the complex impact of war upon the soldier by focusing upon the ways in which a significant minority of middle-class German soldiers of the Great War constructed and interpreted the landscape of the Western Front.⁵ By analyzing the ways in which middle-class German soldiers perceived and understood the landscape, it will be argued that the battlefield landscape was understood by soldiers to be distinct from surrounding spaces. Within this divergent space, soldiers constructed meanings of the war experience that often contradicted understood notions of war on the home front. Observation of the ways in which middle-class German soldiers perceived the landscape of war will not only contribute to a better understanding of the war itself, but to a better understanding of inter-war environmental culture and its impact upon the Nazi regime, making landscape history a fundamental component of twentieth century European history.

In order to address the role that landscape played in structuring meaning for middle-class German soldiers on the Western Front, it is important to define the space of the Western Front, and then further address the impact pre-war environmental discourses had upon popular understandings of warfare. The landscape of the Western Front will be analyzed as an apocalyptic landscape of industrial war that contrasted with the feminized utopia of the home front. Following these points, it will be argued that the Front acted as a space in which the regenerative power of the environment enabled soldiers to understand

⁴ For further definitions of landscape, see Simon Schama Landscape and Memory (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), Kraft von Maltzahn, Nature as Landscape: Dwelling and Understanding. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), William Norton, Explorations in the Understanding of Landscape: A Cultural Geography. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), and William Rollins, A Greener Vision of Home: Cultural Politics and Environmental Reform in the German *Heimatschutz* Movement 1904-1918. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁵ The decision to base this paper upon middle-class German interpretations of the landscape was primarily based upon the availability of source material. Further reasons for this choice were based upon the growing influence of German middle classes to formulate social debates regarding issues such as the environment. The implications of these discourses on conservationist involvement in the Nazi Party is of great interest, and therefore the pre-war discourses which defined environmental discussions is therefore important to look at. While there are a number of sources which allow for a comparative study to the Eastern Front, and a greater number of sources relating to English and French interpretations of the environment these issues have been excluded for the sake of brevity.

landscape as a positive cultural force. It is the purpose of this essay to define the ways in which discourses of landscape influenced the real experiences of middle-class German soldiers, and how they incorporated these understandings of landscape within the new context of industrial warfare.

Landscape history is a growing field that incorporates a 'way of seeing' the physical environment in which space and its interaction with culture is recognized as playing an integral part of history. In 1925, building upon the concepts of German and French geographers, the American geographer Carl Sauer radically invigorated academic discourses of landscape in his article "The Morphology of Landscape".⁶ Sauer argued that landscape, as a concept, refers to the ways that culture has ordered and given meaning to specific natural environments. For Sauer three factors were regarded as basic to understanding landscape, namely "the physical environment, the character of the people, and time".⁷ The emphasis on landscape within the discipline of geography produced the 'landscape school'. Historians tended to ignore the concepts and advances of geography until the 1960s and the emergence of environmental and cultural history. Since the 1960s, the idea that culture and nature are interdependent and reflexive rather than separate has reshaped discourses and historical debates within environmental history. While there have been a large number of monographs written on the subject of landscape history and cultural geography, an important aspect of influence has been curiously overlooked. The impact of warfare upon perceptions of the environment has been essentially missing from historical debates within landscape history. Andrew Biro has argued that understandings of nature are always rooted in determinate social conditions, and appeals to nature are always projections of social values.⁸ If trees, mountains, rivers, and fields therefore do not exist outside of culture, but are intrinsically related to political, social, and cultural processes, then it is possible that conceptions of landscape could play a fundamental role in the ways that the experience of warfare is constructed. If landscape is both material and symbolic, then it is essential to address the ways that cultural meanings of the material landscape were reshaped in wartime.⁹

⁶ William Norton, Explorations in the Understanding of Landscape: A Cultural Geography (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 36.

⁷ Norton, Explorations in the Understanding of Landscape: A Cultural Geography, 37.

⁸ Andrew Biro, Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 125.

⁹ Norton, Explorations in the Understanding of Landscape: A Cultural Geography, 2.

While landscape history has greatly expanded due to the work of American and British environmental historians, the lack of research concerning the influence of warfare to shape perceptions of landscape is an important gap in World War I history. Thomas Lekan and Thomas Zeller have further claimed that there is a significant lack of focus upon landscape history within 20th century German historiography.¹⁰ Ann Linder's article "Landscape and Symbol in the British and German Literature of World War I" is an example of the over-simplification of landscapes in the narration of the war experience. Linder understands the landscape of the front as a 'hell-on-earth', and fails to address the complex ways that soldiers perceived the environment of the trenches.¹¹ By ignoring positive descriptions of the landscape of the Front, Linder erroneously confirms over-arching narratives of the war experience as 'hell' and concludes that this perception directly led to events that culminated in the Second World War.¹² This failure of historians to recognize the importance of the Great War landscape rests on their inability to 'see' nature in the space of war. It is therefore important to recognize that wars are fought on, over, and in the natural world. What this essay attempts to do then is to complicate Linder's conclusions, and to respond to Lekan and Zeller, by explaining the importance landscape played in the narration of experience for German soldiers during the First World War.

For over four years, in thousands of kilometres of trenches, German soldiers debated the meaning of space in the context of industrial warfare. In this space of the Western Front, shells and bullets reshaped the physical landscape while the cultural meanings attached to that landscape were constantly in flux. Meanings, justifications, and discourses shifted and changed on a seemingly daily basis. It is in this space of the Front that landscape history is able to present more complex analyses of middle-class German soldiers' experiences in the First World War.¹³ However, in order to analyse the ways in which cultural, physical, and psychological spaces shifted from 1914 to 1918, it is of foremost importance to define the concept of landscape to understand the processes in which middle-class German soldiers redefined specific cultural meanings of wartime landscapes.

¹⁰ Thomas Lekan and Thomas Zeller, Germany's Nature: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental History (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 2.

¹¹ Ann P. Linder, "Landscape and Symbol in the British and German Literature of World War I", *Comparative Literature Studies* Vol. 31 No. 4 (1994): 351-369.

¹² Linder, "Landscapes and Symbol in the British and German Literature of World War I", 359-361, 365-366.

¹³ Celia Malone Kingsbury, The Peculiar Sanity of War: Hysteria in the Literature of World War I (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2002), xii.

Methodology: Landscape and Space

Addressing interpretations of the wartime experience, and its relation to perceptions of landscape, remains a complex endeavour. The sheer number and diversity of combatants limits the ability of the historian to coherently present a narrative of wartime experience, particularly when it comes to interpretations of the environment. The size and scope of the Western Front further limits the historian's ability to construct a coherent argument regarding changing environmental concepts. The focus of this paper will be upon the influence environmental culture had upon interpretations of wartime spaces by middle-class German soldiers on the Western Front. William Rollins has argued effectively that environmental concerns within the middle class expanded through the influence of the educational system and public debate.¹⁴ The environmental movement in Germany stood for a reconciliation between bourgeois and proletarian movements, but there were rhetorical, institutional, and political differences between middle-class conservationists and working-class writers and advocates.¹⁵ As a result, middle-class soldiers often framed and organized environmental discussion within the space of war in fundamentally different ways from working-class soldiers. The importance of looking at middle-class interpretations of the environment is therefore based upon the influence of these soldiers on the narration of the First World War experience, the post-war rebuilding process, and the environmental movement during and after the traumatic events of the war. Furthermore, the environment allowed middle-class soldiers to construct and define concepts such as *Heimat* within a nationalist discourse, while simultaneously acknowledging regional differences, an important contribution to nationalist discourses in the years following the war. Understanding the ways in which middle-class soldiers constructed their surroundings calls for an analysis of landscape as a concept. Observing the ways in which landscapes were understood highlights changing environmental concerns and cultural values in the years leading up to, and during, the First World War.

¹⁴ Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*, 156-158.

¹⁵ Thomas Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity: 1885-1945*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 23, 30, 204.

A basic understanding of landscape begins by addressing the concept of space and how its definition affects the construction of landscape principles. Space has been perceived as simply the physical environment that surrounds the historical subject.¹⁶ This assumption demarcates a distinct boundary between the historical subject and the material objects that occupy the surrounding space, thereby constructing landscapes as “something out there.”¹⁷ This framework, which relegates landscape to simple physical properties, is unable to incorporate social, cultural, and psychological influences. In such a framework of separation, the concept of landscape has often been understood as “signify[ng] a region (or space) that surrounds something in which there exists a sense of separation while simultaneously exhibiting a sense of intimacy.”¹⁸ Landscape is therefore defined as a structure to be perceived, observed, and controlled.¹⁹ Recently, historians such as Simon Schama have redefined the relationship between space and the historical subject, articulating the idea that landscapes are not separate from subjects, but human beings act in reciprocal relationships with the environment. Landscapes are, in this understanding, never defined, but act in flux with changing historical and cultural conditions. Landscapes thus exist as a “way of seeing”, allowing the environment to be understood as a site of “ideological debate and social contestation”.²⁰ Simon Schama has described this relationship between human culture and the physical environment: “Landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.”²¹ Thus for Schama, it is human agency that transforms the physical environment into landscape in order to fulfil a specific cultural need. He argues it is our “shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape”.²² The relationship between the physical entities that inhabit the environment and changing definitions of landscape is therefore able to reflect large scope “modifications in technology and philosophical outlook” and can be seen as a product of changing material

¹⁶ Arnold Berleant, Living in the Landscape (Lawrence Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 1997), 29.

¹⁷ Barrie B. Greenbie, Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), ix.

¹⁸ Berleant, Living in the Landscape, 29.

¹⁹ Andrew Biro, Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 138-9. Also, see Rob Shields, Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

²⁰ Thomas Lekan and Thomas Zeller, Germany's Nature: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental History (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 5.

²¹ Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 7.

²² Schama, Landscape and Memory, 10.

interests, perceptions, and philosophies.²³ These meanings are able to change based upon differing cultural values across geographic and social divisions in historically specific ways.²⁴ Objects and ideas that are being analyzed must be understood to be the product of social discourses that order meaning and value in a given society.²⁵ For this study, the value that soldiers granted to the physical landscape reveals that the debates surrounding the role of technology and culture, which had been ongoing before the war, intensified during the war.²⁶ Therefore, wartime descriptions of battlefield landscapes can be analyzed as “imaginative geographies” which reveal cultural discourses on the role of the environment in modern society.²⁷

Although environmental history has greatly expanded in the last few decades, the ways in which understandings of landscape impacted soldiers’ interpretations of the First World War experience have not been properly evaluated. One of the most interesting tools to apply in analyzing the processes of narrating landscape and wartime experience can be found in Michael Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. Heterotopic spaces can be defined as spaces that are “in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the sets of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.”²⁸ A heterotopic space thereby is defined by the sets of relations that exist with other spaces. Furthermore, Kevin Hetherington has argued that heterotopias are “places of otherness...

²³ Edward Relph, Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography. (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 65. A further important address of landscape history has been made in regards to changing philosophical perspectives regarding the environment. For more information see Rob Shields, Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29; Michael Foucault, “Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias” Michael Foucault Info. <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> Accessed: February 10, 2006; Catherine Howett, “Where the One-Eyed Man is King: The Tyranny of Visual and Formalist Values in Evaluating Landscapes”, in Understanding Ordinary Landscapes ed. Paul Groth and Todd Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 88-89; Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 188; and William Rollins, A Greener Vision of Home, 6, 28-9, 155.

²⁴ Lekan and Zeller, Germany’s Nature, 18. Also see Wolfgang Natter, Literature at War, 1914-1918: Representing the “Time of Greatness” in Germany (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 29.

²⁵ Kraft von Maltzahn, Nature as Landscape: Dwelling and Understanding (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 5.

²⁶ Maltzahn, Nature as Landscape: Dwelling and Understanding, 5, 114.

²⁷ Joan M. Schwartz and James Ryan, eds., Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 5.

²⁸ Quoted in Vincenzo Guarrasi, “Paradoxes of Modern and Postmodern Geography: Heterotopia of Landscape and Cartographic Logic”, in Postmodern Geography: Theory and Praxis ed. Claudio Minca, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 228.

sites constituted in relation to other sites by their difference.”²⁹ Heterotopias are, therefore, spaces that organize the social world in differing ways from spaces that surround them. For Hetherington, the heterotopic space is a peripheral space; it is defined as a space which is related to the central space (the space in which normalcy is defined and understood) but defines relations in differing ways.³⁰ Michael Foucault defined heterotopia in his lecture entitled “Of Other Spaces” (1967), in which he argued that heterotopias are real spaces in which cultural meanings are in a process of change, and thus act as “counter-sites.”³¹ The application of the concept of heterotopia to the Western Front allows for the analysis of a distinct geographic and topographical space, which was also constructed imaginatively in relation to the cultural values attached to the landscape of the homeland, in turn allowing these values to be reshaped or reversed in response to wartime experiences. The impact of new technological innovations, the destructive power of modern warfare, and the mass participation in the war, allowed the environment to be defined in various contradictory ways. It is these changing sets of relations between soldiers and the landscape that permit the Western Front to be understood as a heterotopic space, both as a counter-site and a site of otherness.

Foucault addressed the concept of heterotopic spaces and changing definitions of place by observing the involvement of utopic and dystopic discourses in defining spaces. The notions of dystopia and utopia are key concepts to understanding a heterotopic space and will be emphasized throughout this paper. If utopias are understood as unreal sites because of the impossibility of perfection, then dystopias represent the notion of absolute destruction and deprivation and are therefore also unreal. In contrast to these ideas, Foucault argued that heterotopias do exist in a real space, but contain both utopic and dystopic elements in a process of cultural definition. The contradictory notions of perfection and deprivation allow ideas of both utopia and dystopia to permeate the meanings associated with a given space, in this case the Western Front. As reflections of other sites, both real and imagined, heterotopic spaces act as “mirrors of society” in which definitions of space are in flux and unstable.³² When soldiers encountered new technological and destructive powers at

²⁹ Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (New York: Routledge, 1997), viii.

³⁰ Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity*, 46.

³¹ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

³² Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

the Western Front and witnessed the effects shells, gas, tanks, and flamethrowers had upon men and land alike, they were often forced to challenge previously understood notions of warfare and landscape. In the resulting discourses the relationship between the Front and other spaces (and between human beings and the environment) could be radically altered.

Heterotopias act as sites that are able to reflect cultural changes by juxtaposing utopic and dystopic environments within a real geographic location to create spaces of discourse in which meaning is constructed and reconstructed.³³ The heterotopic space of the Western Front was perceived as being ‘outside’ both previously established notions of warfare and the established social relations of Germany. The landscape of the Western Front can therefore be understood as existing outside ‘normalcy’. While it exists within a perceivable geographical location, the heterotopic space of the Front is constructed through references to utopic and dystopic elements, and it is defined by its changing cultural relations with other spaces. In this space of discourse, German middle-class soldiers could use their interpretations of the wartime landscape to construct their own understandings of the First World War. In order to define the changes in the interpretations of landscape on the Front it is imperative to frame this discussion through an analysis of pre-war environmental culture.

Pre-War Environmental Culture in Germany

In the two decades before the First World War, a growing number of middle-class German citizens began to participate in political and cultural debates that sought to reinterpret the role of the environment in German society. The “life reform” (*Lebensreform*) movement emphasized national renewal and regarded environmental reforms as a central element of their reform campaign at the turn of the century. Environmental preservationist groups, as well as German Youth groups, actively articulated the idea that the natural environment offered an authenticity (*das Echte*) that could not be found in the increasingly industrialized, urbanized image of Germany.³⁴ The impetus for such a movement was the increasingly obvious negative impact human beings were having upon the environment. Population growth, rapid industrialization, and new technologies combined to reshape the

³³ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

³⁴ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 23, 219.

environment with unprecedented speed. Urban sprawl, air and water pollution, and the ever-expanding railways and electric lines worked to destroy perceived understandings of natural landscapes.³⁵ An analysis of pre-war environmental culture then is enlightening, for in observing the ways in which discourses regarding the environment were framed in the years leading up to the war, we are able to understand how pre-war discourses influenced the ways in which German soldiers understood the landscape of the Front after 1914.

Historians and contemporaries have both claimed that pre-war environmentalists were working to ‘turn back the clock of time’. Yet in 1904, the Freiburg economics professor Carl Johann Fuchs defended the movement against this charge:

We have no intention of jamming the spokes of the ‘wheel of time’, or indeed of trying to turn it back. But we can and will steer it so that it does not run over the beauties of our homeland, and does not drive us up the creek of affectation and pretentious superficiality, but rather takes us up to the heights of real culture.³⁶

Fuchs argued that a fundamental tenet of modern civilization was environmental conservation, and contended that environmental preservation was not in conflict with industrial and political progress within Germany. Additionally, Fuchs contended that until German society controlled environmental degradation German *Kultur* would fail to be ‘real’. Fuchs assumed a radical divide between dystopic and utopic images of the environment, in which either the environment is pure (and thus reflected German culture) or it is being destroyed (which also reflected German values). This discourse regarding the state of the environment grew significantly in the years leading up to the First World War, as indicated by the number of references in German newspapers to environmental issues (which rivaled the number devoted to the issue of education).³⁷ The plight of the environment was a fundamental issue in early twentieth century Germany. An understanding of environmental conservationist movements and the German Youth League reveals that environmental discourses did not suddenly emerge during the war, but were products of earlier cultural discussions relating human beings to the environment. If, as Rudy Koshar has argued, “how people experience has much to do with the meanings they derive, the memories they

³⁵ Raymond Dominick III, *The Environmental Movement in Germany: Prophets and Pioneers, 1871-1971* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3.

³⁶ Quoted in Matthew Jefferies, *Politics and Culture in Wilhelmine Germany: The Case of Industrial Architecture* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995), 60.

³⁷ See Dominick, *The Environmental Movement in Germany*, 66. (Dominick used three newspapers in order to compare the increase in references to environmental issues. He used *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Vorwärts*, and *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*.)

preserve, and the anticipation with which they approach the future,” an analysis of pre-war experiences, pre-war memories, and ideas of the future is essential to understanding the way in which the German soldier framed the environment during the First World War.³⁸

From the late 1880s to the early 1910s, a number of conservation groups such as the *Bund Heimatschutz* (League for Homeland Protection) and the *Naturfreunde* (Friends of Nature) emerged to focus public attention upon the landscapes of Germany. Raymond Dominick has argued that the rise of environmental conservationist groups can be attributed to both environmental degradation and to the rise in leisure time from 1880 to 1914. With less than a 10-hour workday, an enforced one and a half day rest each week, and the growth of infrastructure that allowed for travel, more and more Germans were able to experience differing landscapes within Germany.³⁹ The growth of leisure time, tourism, and the explosion of outdoor activities reveals the extent to which German citizens were beginning to focus upon the environment as a relaxing alternative to the urban-technological lifestyle that many middle-class Germans lived.⁴⁰ While not every individual participated in conservationist groups, the emerging popularity of outdoor recreation allowed for a renewed emphasis upon environmental issues.⁴¹ Matthew Jefferies has claimed that although records for membership in conservation groups are difficult to obtain, an estimated 100,000 people belonged to the *Heimatschutz* movement in 1906, with their number drastically rising in the years between 1906 and 1914.⁴² Dominick bolsters Jefferies’ evidence by stating that in 1900, four other conservationist groups had less than 5000 members, yet by 1912, they had an excess of 50,000 members. While Dominick admits that these numbers are comparatively low in a nation of 60 million, the sharp rise in membership reflects an important shift in

³⁸ Rudy Koshar, “Seeing, Traveling, and Consuming: An Introduction”, in *Histories of Leisure*, ed. Rudy Koshar (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002), 20.

³⁹ Dominick, *The Environmental Movement in Germany*, 71. See also the work of Rudy Koshar and his discussions relating changing workplaces to changing notions of leisure and travel. See Rudy Koshar, *German Travel Cultures*. (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000) and Koshar, “Seeing, Traveling, and Consuming: An Introduction”, in *Histories of Leisure* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002), 1-26.

⁴⁰ Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*, 73.

⁴¹ This concept is supported by the work of William Rollins. If the environmental movement was supported primarily by the middle-class, and more middle class citizens were able to travel, it can be argued that there is a relationship between travel, leisure time, and involvement in preservationist groups such as the *Heimatschutz* movement. See: Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*, 73-74.

⁴² Jefferies, *Politics and Culture in Wilhelmine Germany*, 53-55.

focus upon environmental issues.⁴³ Along with the sharp increase in membership in environmental movements, increased discussions in newspapers widened the impact of discourses regarding environmental issues in pre-war Germany.⁴⁴ In observing the ways in which conservation groups attached meaning to the environment, we can understand how they may have influenced the ways in which middle-class soldiers perceived the landscape of the Western Front. In order to do so it is first important to define the ways in which landscape and the environment were formulated within pre-war German culture.

Conservationist groups used anthropocentric reasoning to justify environmental preservation and to expand the social impact of their message.⁴⁵ Arguing that protection of the environment allowed for a sustainable economy, improved public health, and upheld a moral obligation to future generations, conservationists were able to gain a popular audience for the protection of the environment.⁴⁶ Using anthropocentric arguments for environmental conservations and preservation allowed pre-war environmentalists to respond to the arguments of politicians like Freiherr von Wolff-Metternich, who stated in a parliamentary debate regarding a bird protection bill in 1912, “Animals are not ends in themselves; on the contrary they should serve Man, the king of creation.”⁴⁷ The lack of intrinsic value placed upon natural objects and beings led conservationists to argue that conservationist measures would improve European society. More amorphous reasoning included the view that the destruction of the environment led to the degradation of non-

⁴³ Dominick, The Environmental Movement in Germany, 56. One of the many criticisms levelled at Dominick is the fact that he de-emphasizes the role of preservationist groups, specifically the *Heimatschutz* movement, and his numbers are far too low and do not give preservationists enough weight. It should be noted that these numbers are probably much too low but not enough evidence is available (regarding the four groups that Dominick mentions here) to say by how much. Because of the lack of sufficient written evidence, I will use Dominick’s number of 50,000 but it should be assumed that this is a very low estimate. See: Rollins, A Greener Vision of Home, 211.

⁴⁴ Dominick, The Environmental Movement in Germany, 3.

⁴⁵ The importance of these movements in Germany has been discussed at length by William Rollins. Rollins has argued that the *Heimatschutz* movement grew to 30,000 members by 1914 and statistically was largely composed of middle-class citizenry. Rollins has argued that the largest membership job identification came in the form of general commerce (7.5%), general administration (6.0%), and education (6.0%). By contrast the lowest three groups defined by their jobs were mining (less than 0.1%), metal processing (less than 0.1%), and chemicals (less than 0.1%). What this reveals is that only those with expendable income and leisure time were able to participate in environmental preservationist movements. However it is also important to note that poor participation came from upper classes such as professors (0.6%) and lawyers (1.9%), which suggests that environmental preservation was almost exclusively a middle-class venture. Taken from Rollins, A Greener Vision of Home, 108-9. Also see: Rollins, A Greener Vision of Home. 24-26, 28. Lekan. Imagining the Nation in Nature. 5.

⁴⁶ Dominick, The Environmental Movement in Germany, 8.

⁴⁷ Dominick, The Environmental Movement in Germany, 4.

material German values. On the collective level, it was argued that the degradation of the environment reflected deteriorating cultural strength and vigour. On the individual level, nature could encourage creativity, rejuvenate the spirit, and provide aesthetic enjoyment.⁴⁸ Conservationist discourse in the early twentieth century therefore built upon the ideas of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, who held a “bitter hostility to industrial capitalism and metropolitan life, seeing both as corrosive of the moral solidarity he thought inherent in traditional work and community.”⁴⁹ Changes in the environment were seen as reflecting changing cultural values, and social critics and conservationists argued that the degradation of the environment and the growth of urban centers reflected the degradation of ‘German’ value systems.

By framing environmental protection within moral anthropocentric discourses, conservationist groups articulated a mental topography that associated specific customs, idioms, and identities with images of the German landscape. The science of ecology was therefore supplanted by cultural debate. In doing so, preservationist groups transformed environmental developments such as the disappearing forests (*waldsterben*) into cultural icons that acted as referents to the supposed decay of German *Kultur*.⁵⁰ In framing geographic locations and topographies within the language of moral and cultural protection, German preservationist groups were able to not only protect important environmentally sensitive areas, but were able to articulate cultural meanings in which the landscape could be morally invigorating and stimulate emotional attachment to the nation of Germany.⁵¹ This language of moral elevation assumed that “environmental degradation thus produced not only the death of nature, but also a loss of memory, destroying the ties between selfhood and *Heimat* deemed necessary for emotional and physical development.”⁵²

According to William Rollins the term *Heimat*, which is loosely translated as ‘homeland’, refers to a description of a place beyond the immediate sensible elements of a landscape. *Heimat* resonates “powerfully at more emotional-affective levels of meanings,

⁴⁸ Dominick, *The Environmental Movement in Germany*, 8.

⁴⁹ Riehl constructed two distinct definitions of the German national identity. The first type of community was *Gemeinschaft* (an organically bonded community), corresponding to a landscape in which citizens exist in a constant and balanced relationship with the environment. Riehl contrasted this to a *Gesellschaft*, which he defined as “an aggregate of individuals connected only by material interests”. See Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 113.

⁵⁰ Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 61, 95.

⁵¹ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 2-3 and Matthew Jefferies, “Heimatschutz: Environmental Activism in Wilhelmine Germany”, in *Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Ed. Colin Riodan (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 42.

⁵² Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 34.

connotating psychological comfort as well as a wider social cohesiveness and rootedness.”⁵³ Defined as a local and often pastoral traditional landscape, the term *Heimat* allows for what Alon Confino has called a “common denominator of variousness”.⁵⁴ Confino claims that the concept of *Heimat* provided a framework for negotiating regional distinctions without compromising the concept of a political, social, and cultural nation. Conservationists used terminology such as *Heimat* in order to construct associations between the idea of a ‘German’ landscape and a national identity defined by moral, ethical, and cultural purity. As a result, the landscapes of Germany were infused with spiritual meaning, and the German citizenry became protectors not only of the physical landscape but also protectors of Germany’s supposed moral and cultural superiority. Such cultural associations made aesthetics a fundamental concept within environmental culture.⁵⁵ In using aesthetics and *Heimat*, conservationists could lobby for environmental reform by creating a distinct national discourse associating German *Kultur* with the aesthetic value of landscapes and ecological responsibility.⁵⁶ In this social commentary the individual was seen as an essential part of the collective whole, and it was argued that the individual’s ‘selfhood’ (identity) could only be located within the national community defined in terms of local *Heimat* landscapes. In such an argument, the individual and the collective whole were interdependent. In using such argumentation conservationists insinuated that landscape could be appreciated by anyone, no matter the social, cultural, geographic, or economic differences among them, and therefore included every German citizen in the environmental discourse, bolstering the idea of a German homeland.⁵⁷ These discourses of aesthetics and environmental preservation were available to middle-class German soldiers as they narrated their own experiences of the wartime landscape from 1914 to 1918.

⁵³ Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*, 5.

⁵⁴ Alon Confino, “The Nation as Local Metaphor: Heimat, National Memory, and the German Empire: 1871-1918”, *History and Memory* 5, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1990), 56.

⁵⁵The success of environmental groups within Wilhelmine culture in focusing public debate upon the environment can be seen in the trickling of their ideas down into architecture. Domestic architecture and then industrial buildings were built to reflect environmental concerns and styles, yet Heimatschutz members bemoaned even this when a reinforced concrete chimney was designed to look like one of the area’s trees complete with a trunk and branches. See: Jefferies, *Politics and Culture in Wilhelmine Germany*, 93-94.

⁵⁶ William Rollins has noted that a number of historians have perceived environmental movements in the early 20th century as ‘backward’ and ‘romantic-escapism’. Rollins argues that such claims are not valid and do not properly address ecological changes during the period before the First World War. Rollins is responding to Walter Schoenichen’s 1954 study, as well as the studies of Klaus Eder (1990), and Raymond Dominick (1992) among others. For more information on this see Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*, 23, 217-219.

⁵⁷ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 6.

A further development that brought environmental concerns to the fore in the years before 1914 was the growth and development of German youth groups within the middle-classes. The appearance of such groups reflected deeper concerns relating the individual to the state. Often anti-urban and anti-industrial, these groups were an essential element of cultural criticism (*Kulturkritik*) in the Wilhelmine age.⁵⁸ One of the most important of these groups was the *Wandervogel*, which numbered 2 million members by 1914.⁵⁹ *Wandervogel* clubs shared conservationists' criticism of the detrimental effects of urban industrial life, and belief that the natural environment could elevate the individual. What kept these two groups apart is the emphasis in the *Wandervogel* upon the individual while conservationists discussed the role of *Heimat* in forming a national community.⁶⁰ While the two groups had their differences, conservationists provided the inspiration for *Wandervogel* participation in environmental protectionism.⁶¹ The conservationist ideas of the *Heimatschutz* movement filtered down into youth groups, and spread the concept of the landscape as part of German *Kultur* and identity.⁶² In their hiking and outdoor trips, the *Wandervogel* movement reiterated the importance of the environment in shaping the individual and the state. Youth groups simultaneously argued that environmental conservation should be a popular discourse and thus stayed out of high politics.⁶³

Involvement in conservationist groups and youth groups was primarily a middle-class affair, yet their ideas trickled down throughout Germany and influenced architecture, politics, and cultural discourses. With roughly two million German middle-class boys involved in youth groups, the possibility that these values were brought to the Western Front is important to recognize. The focus upon the environment that was shared by conservationist and youth groups allowed a vast number of middle-class soldiers to understand the landscape as central to their identity under the pressures of war. The celebration of the individual within the context of the national community allowed soldiers to articulate individual experiences of the Front without subtracting from ideas of national community. Middle-class German soldiers simply argued that the space of the Western

⁵⁸ Peter Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900-1945: An Interpretive and Documentary History*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 13-14.

⁵⁹ Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 35.

⁶⁰ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 70.

⁶¹ Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*, 211.

⁶² Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*, 227.

⁶³ Walter Laqueur, *Young Germany: A History of the German Youth Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 9, 13-15.

Front established a community of experience that bonded the millions of men together. The pre-war *Kulturkritik* movement of 1880-1913, which criticized urban-industrial society, re-emerged during the war as military technology destroyed both earth and man in the landscape of the Western Front. The experience of the First World War therefore cannot be separated from pre-war environmental concerns and specific pre-war discourses which equated the landscape with culture.

The Landscape of War: German Soldiers and the First World War Experience

The First World War was understood by participants in a diverse number of ways- as a cultural mission, a defence against territorial invasion, a spiritual struggle (*geist* versus materialism), an imperialist war waged for the ruling classes, a tragic event devoid of meaning, and the generator of a new Germany.⁶⁴ For the millions of soldiers who fought in the First World War, one of the challenges was constructing a narrative of experience with respect to the events of modern industrial warfare. The lack of historical precedent meant that they lacked the language to express this experience. What a great number of soldiers did, then, was to initiate a discourse which contrasted the experience of the war to preceding experiences. The summer of 1914 thus assumed the status of a lost innocence that could not be regained, a common theme in early narrations of wartime experiences by German soldiers.⁶⁵ One soldier, Walter Roy, addressed this image in his letter of November 14th, 1914:

...Oh how suddenly everything has changed! First the free, sunshining, enchanting summer, golden happiness, a life of liberty, enthusiasm for Nature, poetry, music, brightness and joy, all the effervescence of youth: oh, what a lovely summer it was! And now cold, cruel, bitter earnest, stormy winter, death and misery! And everything vanished so suddenly. How I lived and loved is now like a dream, a passing mood, the sweet remembrance... Only one thing is real now- the war!⁶⁶

For Roy, the summer of 1914 was an idyllic landscape of youth, nature, and happiness that radically shifted with the beginning of the Great War. The experience of warfare deeply contrasted with Roy's pre-war experiences, and he communicated his experience by

⁶⁴ Natter, *Literature at War*. 11.

⁶⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 24.

⁶⁶ Walter Roy, November 14th 1914, *German Students' War Letters*, ed. Dr. Philipp Witkop, Translated by A.F. Wedd. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 69.

contrasting utopic images of the summer to dystopic images of winter, death, and war. The space that the war occupied is then literal and symbolic. The landscape of the war and the relationship between individuals and their surroundings contrasted with 'normal' sets of relations. Soldiers' observations that society had radically altered with the advent of war allowed the Front to be understood as a space that existed in relation to, yet separate from, notions of normalcy.

Through the use of comparison, middle-class soldiers were able to separate the space of the Front from normal patterns of social life, yet in doing so simultaneously constructed a distinctive community of experience in order to regain some sense of meaning from the war. Placed within the context of a modern industrial war, many turned to traditionally understood tropes in order to convey their experiences using utopic and dystopic imagery. The polarization of language often used by soldiers allowed the landscape of the Western Front to be understood as reflective of an ongoing discourse relating the environment to technological innovation. For many soldiers this discourse reached a climax in the war experience and the landscape itself was seen as the epitome of this war. The Front became a space where the landscape was understood as the ultimate test of boundaries in cultural and geographic terms.⁶⁷ Nicholas J. Saunders encapsulated this argument in claiming that the landscape of the Western Front (both during and after the war) was a contested place of discourse in which discussions of the war were essentially addressing pre-war concerns regarding technology and the environment.⁶⁸ Within the space of the Front, many soldiers portrayed the landscape as apocalyptic while simultaneously describing the landscape of home as utopic. The contrasting descriptions of wartime landscapes enabled soldiers to incorporate individual experiences within a larger shared experience of war.

The divergence of the First World War from previously accepted notions of warfare, and the role of the environment in shaping this experience, can be found in a letter written by Walter Limmer on September 9th, 1914: "I am writing this letter in a sort of grave-like hole which I dug for myself in the firing-line".⁶⁹ Limmer asserts that his experience of warfare is drastically different from other wars based on his position of static placement under the ground, a space that is often associated with the grave and its proximity to death.

⁶⁷ Svend Erik Larsen, "Landscape, Identity, and War", *New Literary History* 35 no. 3 (2004), 484.

⁶⁸ Saunders, "Material Culture and Conflict", 7.

⁶⁹ Walter Limmer, September 9th 1914, *German Students' War Letters*, 3.

Limmer makes a comparison that associates the landscape with death rather than the generation of life. For many soldiers like Limmer, the First World War occurs in a place in which mobility is hampered and living men exist underground with their deceased comrades, a radically different experience of warfare than had been predicted by pre-war propaganda. Changing military technology shifted meanings and understandings of warfare, and communicating these differences became an important challenge for many combatants. As soldiers fought on the Western Front and related those experiences to those at home they constructed an “imagined community” of soldiers’ experience.⁷⁰ The narration of a ‘community of experience’ suggests that justifications for the war were not solely constructed ‘from above’, but soldiers themselves participated in the “mobilization of the imagination” from below.⁷¹

Omer Bartov has suggested that from 1914 to 1918, millions of narratives were constructed in order to understand the grim reality of “baptism by fire”.⁷² During this period 10,573,242 German soldiers served in the war effort.⁷³ In utilizing the cultural resources at their disposal, middle-class German soldiers were able to respond to the sense of dissolving selfhood that massive conscripted armies and technological innovation had produced, while simultaneously reinforcing the cultural values attached to Germany for which they fought, important elements within middle-class German culture. Building upon traditional notions of German *Bildung*, soldiers’ attempted to communicate personal experiences in order to convey the radical changes they were experiencing, especially with regard to technology and

⁷⁰ Here I am referring to Benedict Anderson’s famous work *Imagined Communities*. While Anderson’s work essentially addresses nationalism, I believe that the reference is important. The difference of experience allowed for the construction of a community of experience that was imagined- that is the experience was understood to be overly simplified for narrative purposes. The landscape of the Western Front, even in its various geographic make-ups and intensities of battles, was narrated as a single story of experiencing the catastrophe of industrial warfare. The importance of this myth is further demonstrated in its impact when Ernst von Salomon watched the soldiers’ return in 1918 writing, “These men were not workers, farmers, students... These men were soldiers... united in the bonds of blood and sacrifice. Their home was the Front... that is why they could never belong to us. That is the reason for this stolid, moving, spectral return.” Quoted in: Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 103-104. Even young men who had not experienced the war recognized the difference between themselves and the soldiers. This difference was not simply recognized, but was constructed and narrated by soldiers themselves. For more on Benedict Anderson see: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Revised Edition (New York: Verso, 1991).

⁷¹ Elisabeth Domansky, “The Transformation of State and Society in World War I Germany”, in *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework*, ed. Amir Weiner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 49.

⁷² Omer Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.

⁷³ Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 6.

the environment.⁷⁴ Landscape was a central motif which middle-class German soldiers used to narrate their experiences. Soldiers' descriptions of the landscape allowed them to re-invigorate environmental and cultural concerns that modern technological processes had begun in a new wartime context. These discourses, however, were often contradictory and complex.

Diaries, letters and even photographs reflect the importance of landscape in understandings of the war and this study will draw particularly upon letters as source material. With little information reaching citizens other than government publications, *Feldpostbrief* (war letters) written by soldiers to family and friends were a crucial source of information about the war. The importance of *Feldpostbrief* was evident even in the opening months of the war when the *Kriegsministerium* became heavily involved in the collection of letters.⁷⁵ In September 1914, the Ninth Army Corps announced that Lieutenant Lorenz was to collect letters from soldiers and civilians “to prepare the project of writing the history of the present war...Everything is to be reported honestly and nothing needs to be concealed.”⁷⁶ Importantly, during the first two years of the war there was little censorship of letters although stringent censorship was enacted from 1916 to 1918.⁷⁷ While the process of wartime collection and editing of letters does not lead to a transparent portrayal of the war experience (a problem exacerbated by the destruction of the largest collections of letters in the Reich archives by the bombings of the Second World War), these primary documents are an essential source for a discussion of wartime environmental perceptions.⁷⁸

One of the most important collections of letters was published in 1928 by Dr. Philipp Witkop (Professor of Modern Literature at Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg), who assembled a collection of First World War letters from primarily middle-class soldier-

⁷⁴ Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 88.

⁷⁵ Natter, *Literature at War*, 79-80.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Wolfgang Natter, *Literature at War, 1914-1940: Representing the “Time of Greatness” in Germany*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 80.

⁷⁷ Natter, *Literature at War*, 79-81. Linda McGreevy, *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 7-8.

⁷⁸ Wolfgang Natter, *Literature at War*, 79-81. Natter has noted the importance of letters in his study, yet recognizes the limitations that these letters have previously had upon historical interpretations of the war. The large number of letters lost due to the Second World War, the ravages of time, and the inability of archives to gain access to family letters limits the number of letters that are able to be analyzed by historians. This, however, does not detract from their importance and representative abilities. For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that the collection of letters represents the ideas, interpretations, and hopes of middle class German soldiers.

students. This collection, *German Students' War Letters*, serves as the basis for much of this paper, and Dr. Philipp Witkop therefore deserves some attention. Witkop's first publication was his dissertation, *Die Organisation der Arbeiterbildung* (the organisation of worker education). Published in 1903, the dissertation addressed the "social question" from the perspective of education.⁷⁹ Witkop argued that social issues could be solved with education, however, his idea of education is based upon bourgeois concepts. Witkop bluntly phrased his paternalistic ideas of education stating:

The goal of the social question is to help the working man reach an existence worthy of human dignity. What else does this mean but to elevate him to a state of conscious existence; to lift him from a condition of dullness and animal urges toward a clear, conscious way of life that would enable his full participation in the achievements of human culture and education?⁸⁰

Witkop's paternal perception of the working classes is present throughout his career as he consistently argued that education will enable students and workers to overcome class differences.⁸¹ The war, for Witkop, was a kind of *Bildungsstätte* (site of education), where the camaraderie would help solve the "social question" and raise Germany as a nation. In 1916, Witkop was called up by the army and became the editor of a soldier newspaper, offered education classes, and built up his concept of educating workers and celebrating the soldier-students. Witkop began thinking of collecting the letters of soldiers in 1915, and published four volumes of letters, the first in 1916, the second in 1918, a widely popular 1928 edition, and an expanded 1933 edition. These collections of letters were selected from over twenty thousand letters he had amassed, nearly all of them letters by soldier-students. What Witkop's work suggests then is that he was diligently focused upon the future growth of Germany, arguing this would only be possible through the solution of the "social question". This paternalistic view of working-class soldiers taints the collection of letters upon which this paper is based; however, what it does allow is a portrait of middle-class views of the war. Wolfgang Natter has recognized problematic elements found in the usage of wartime letters noting the processes of wartime censorship and the questionable ability of letters to represent the "real experience of war". He also suggests that Witkop never explicitly explains

⁷⁹ Natter. *Literature at War*. 91.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Natter. *Literature at War*. 92.

⁸¹ Natter. *Literature at War*. 92.

by “what standards or aesthetics a letter was or was not included.”⁸² Although the letters do present problems, the advantages of using the letters of middle-class soldiers outweigh the disadvantages, since they provide direct evidence of how these soldiers interpreted their environment. Letters, therefore, are important sources for discovering the ways in which these soldiers narrated their experience of industrial warfare.

Although a number of these letters discussed the problems of class, politics, and economic disparity, the great number of letters that address the landscape of the First World War cannot be ignored as anomalies. The variety of letters written by soldiers suggest that changing environmental conditions within the space of war were, for middle-class soldiers, reflective of widespread changing conditions within German culture during the war years. Witkop’s 1928 collection compiled 202 letters written by 91 student-soldiers. These letters include 61 direct references that address the environment, the landscape, and/or descriptions of the home landscape. What this means is that a full 30.2% of the letters address the environment and/ or the landscape of the Front and the home, which constitutes a significant minority of middle-class German soldiers represented in the collection. One of the problems regarding Witkop’s selection is the lack of letters from after 1916. Although there are some letters from 1917 and 1918, the bulk of Witkop’s letters are from the first two years of the war. David Welch has addressed the issue of censorship during the First World War and has made a compelling argument which notes a radical increase in German censorship after August 29th 1916 when a military dictatorship was established with Paul von Hindenburg and Erich von Ludendorff at the helm.⁸³ With an increase in censorship in the public domain, the military censorship of letters from the Front followed. The result of such censorship left many soldiers unable to describe their surroundings, activities, and understandings of the war in ways that they had previously been allowed, leading to a decrease in the number of letters that appealed to Witkop’s literary inclination. WM. K. Pfeiler has argued that almost none of the soldiers in *German Student’s War Letters* become pessimistic after 1916, rather their enthusiasm was transformed into determination. However, it must be noted that Pfeiler wrote his argument in 1941 attempting to understand the mind of the German soldier and this may have tainted his

⁸² Natter, *Literature at War*. 120-1, 203.

⁸³ David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War 1914- 1918: The Sins of Omission*. (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 162-9.

argument and assumptions.⁸⁴ The lack of letters after 1916, and the accompanying lack of landscape references, could be attributed to increased pessimism regarding the war; however, the existence of censorship clouds such a definite conclusion.

The letters that do contain references to landscape written by middle-class German soldiers in the first years of the war, portray the landscape of the Front as both dystopic and utopic, and these discussions of the landscape enabled soldiers to organize the space around them in a multitude of ways. In using contrasting dystopic and utopic language, soldiers constructed the landscape of the Front through a specific cultural discourse that related the landscape of the peripheral (the Front) to that of the central (the home- Germany).⁸⁵ Thus in defining the space of the Front as dystopic, soldiers were able to communicate and critically analyze their experiences of industrial warfare.

The Apocalyptic Landscape of Industrial War

By the time the First World War ended in November 1918, the landscape of the Front had been decimated. Nations from all over the world had thrown all that military technology could offer at the enemy for over 1500 days. On the Western Front 80 percent of the Aisne and Ardennes regions had been reduced to wasteland, 1000 villages or towns had been razed, and 2000 others virtually destroyed.⁸⁶ The physical territory of the Front had shown the world the destructive power of technology and its effects on the pastoral landscape of France. After observing the Western Front, the American Robert Dunn highlighted its apocalyptic character by stating, “H.G. Wells or Dante did seem anaemic beside one drenched and glistening space we saw between those close lines.”⁸⁷ Shells, bullets, gas, and mortars had turned the earth into the “degree zero” of history in which all traces of human ‘civilization’ and natural elements had been destroyed.⁸⁸ The German painter Otto Dix, who served for nearly the entire war, described the Front as “endless and bleak, running this way and that before a pair of dark, shot up broken down pines, a white, grey, yellow

⁸⁴ WM. K. Pfeiler, War and the German Mind: The Testimony of Men of Fiction Who Fought at the Front. (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1941), 66, 79.

⁸⁵ Hetherington, The Badlands of Modernity, 20, 25.

⁸⁶ Romy Golan, Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 8.

⁸⁷ Robert Dunn, Five Fronts: On the Firing Lines with English, French, Austrian, German, and Russian Troops (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1915), 164.

⁸⁸ Golan, Modernity and Nostalgia, 8.

landscape of death extended.”⁸⁹ For Dix, the landscape of the Front was defined by destruction. The physical environment could only be conceived by its lack of ‘normalcy’ and its association with death. The destruction of the natural environment allowed soldiers like Dix to describe the Front as fundamentally different from previous experiences of landscape. As opposed to the idyllic landscapes preserved by German environmental preservationists, the landscape of the Front “was more suggestive of the moon than the earth, as heavy shelling destroyed not only men but nature, a devastation that would haunt the imagination of those forced to live in the trenches.”⁹⁰ The environment of the Front was a new and previously unimagined landscape of death and destruction. In order to construct meaning in relation to this new landscape many middle-class soldiers built upon the discourses of pre-war environmental conservationists and re-conceptualized the landscape of the Front as a symbol of the destructive power of technology, progress, and modernism. The very forces that were to have brought about the zenith of civilization and culture were now associated with death and destruction.

Soldiers’ diaries, letters, and correspondence repeatedly drew comparisons between the destruction of the land and the destruction of human bodies. Soldiers described the ‘murder’ of forests in the same type of language that they described the violence inflicted on the human body.⁹¹ Soldiers on the Western Front saw millions of men perish, but also watched as the land was tied down with barbed wire, poisoned with gas, exposed by trench, and cratered by shells. Nicholas J. Saunders has argued that the destruction of the landscape at the Front was constantly being compared to the destruction inflicted upon the armies of Germany. In the worst areas 1,000 shells fell per square meter of land, over 330,000,000 square meters of earth was displaced for trenches, and 375,000,000 square meters of barbed wire were spread across the mud and earth.⁹² Personal accounts of this process of environmental and humanitarian destruction are telling. In a letter from November 5th, 1914 Fritz Franke wrote:

⁸⁹ Linda McGreevy, *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 37.

⁹⁰ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.

⁹¹ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 80-81.

⁹² Nicholas J. Saunders, “Material Culture and Conflict: The Great War, 1914-2003”, in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

I myself can hardly believe that such bestial barbarity and unspeakable suffering are possible. Every foot of ground contested; every hundred yards another trench; and everywhere bodies- rows of them! All the trees shot to pieces; the whole ground churned up a yard deep by the heaviest of shells; dead animals; houses and churches so utterly destroyed by shell-fire that they can never be of the least use again. And every troop that advances in support must pass through a mile of chaos, through this gigantic burial-ground and reek of corpses.⁹³

For Franke the devastation of the land was equated with the rows of dead soldiers. The destruction of trees was as distressing as the deaths of soldiers. Similarly Georg Stiller contrasted the previous beauty of the landscape with devastating effects of modern warfare:

Nature wears its most beautiful spring dress, the sun laughs from the blue tent of heaven, but through blossoming, green-growing Nature fly the shells, destroying trees and fresh bushes, tearing deep holes in the earth, and annihilating young, blossoming human lives.⁹⁴

Both these descriptions reveal the way that numerous accounts from German soldiers described the destruction of both the landscape and human beings by war. In using language that described the barbarity of war, and contrasting this to the “blossoming” landscape, the writers begin to construct the landscape of the Front as a dystopic space devoid of meaning, in essence creating a figurative and literal wasteland.⁹⁵

Thomas Lekan has argued that pre-war discourses defining the landscape greatly influenced the ways that soldiers understood their relationship to the environment. Lekan claims that pre-war discourses defined landscapes as a conglomeration of both natural and man-made elements. This definition of landscape allowed soldiers to articulate a metaphorical connection to the environment; that is, soldiers saw the destruction of men and land as related. Soldiers could argue that both they and the landscape were exposed to the same barbarity of violence, leading many of them to associate themselves with the landscape itself. Gerhard Gurtler expresses this idea in a letter from the Front on August 10th, 1917: “The battlefield is really nothing but one vast cemetery. Beside shell-holes, groups of shattered trees and smashed up farms, one sees little white crosses scattered all over the ground- in front of us, behind us, to right and left...”⁹⁶ Gurtler describes the landscape of

⁹³ Fritz Franke, November 5th 1914, *German Students' War Letters*, 123.

⁹⁴ Georg Stiller, May 16th 1915, *German Students' War Letters*, 126.

⁹⁵ Rudolf Binding, *A Fatalist at War*, Translated by G. Ian Morrow (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929), 18.

⁹⁶ Gerhard Gurtler, August 10th 1917, *German Students' War Letters*, 363.

the Front as a cemetery, not only one in which soldiers are buried, but in which the landscape itself has died. The connection between the death of men and the environment is important, for creating a connection between soldiers and the land might lead to the conviction that the land and the soldier might regenerate themselves in a reversal of the war's destructive impact. Otto Dix's 1917 sketch "Grave (Dead Soldier)" suggests this idea visually by outlining the body of a soldier that appears to fade into the earth with growing poppies emerging from the earth and the body (see Appendix 1).⁹⁷ This sketch appears to capture the intertwined relationship that German soldiers had with the earth they fought in and under. The blending of the body with the earth communicates the sentiment that the living and dead live in a constant relationship with the landscape, an idea that is highlighted by the impact of a destructive war.

The connections between the war experiences of soldiers and pre-war ideas of landscape were often articulated using dystopic imagery and language. This process enabled soldiers to describe destructive aspects of warfare as intrinsically valuable, for only in understanding the absolute depravity of modern warfare could soldiers critically analyze the culture which had created the destruction. As middle-class German soldiers lived and died in the carnage of the First World War, many looked to the landscape to give meaning to their experiences. Paul Rohweder commented on the landscape of the Front in October 1914: "Under a golden poplar lies a dead comrade. In the peasants' farmyards lie dead cattle. The windows are broken by shell-fire. Not a bird is to be seen. All nature holds its breath with fear. The air is heavy with the reek of gunpowder. The sun is setting, blood-red."⁹⁸ For Rohweder, not only did men bleed and die, but so too did the landscape. The 'blood-red' sun then becomes a signal that the environment reflects the destruction taking place on the Western Front. Similarly, August Stramm's (1874-1915) poem *Patrouille* (Reconnaissance Patrol) makes reference to the death of nature and men (See Appendix 2). At the end of the poem, Stramm writes "*Äste würgen...Gellen/Tod*" and it is assumed that the death is of the

⁹⁷ Otto Dix, "Grave (Dead Soldier)", 1917 © Estate of Otto Dix / SODRAC (2006).

⁹⁸ Paul Rohweder, October 29th 1914, German Students' War Letters, 67.

soldier, however, the three references to the natural environment in the six-line poem can also refer to the death of the natural in warfare.⁹⁹

Their lack of proximity to the violence prevented many civilians from understanding the experiences soldiers faced on the front lines and their relationship to the landscape. Visitors to the battlefield were unable to connect this landscape to their common conceptions of the natural environment. The film journal *Der Kinematograph* reported that the modern battlefield was impossible to film because “hardly anything can be recognized clearly... the whole field of battle gives the impression of a landscape that is almost completely dead” (August 30th, 1916).¹⁰⁰ To this author, the “dead” landscape is aesthetically worthless because it is unrecognizable in comparison with understood notions of a utopic landscape. In contrast to this, soldiers’ used dystopic language to describe the Front in order to create value out of a decimated landscape. German soldiers described “a field and wood of horror” and “seas of mud”, but also understood that in the face of cataclysmic destruction the environment was persistently revitalizing itself, pushing up new grass even as bursting shells destroyed the earth. Observing the regenerative nature of the landscape in the face of modern war, many soldiers saw the landscape of the front as not entirely dystopic and drew close connections between themselves and the land in the hopes for personal and collective regeneration following the ending of hostilities.¹⁰¹ By contrasting nature’s generative capacities with technology’s destructiveness, soldiers were able to characterize technology as detrimental to German *Kultur*. The difference in descriptions of the landscape is telling, for while the civilian was able to see the landscape only as ‘dead’, many soldiers were able to observe natural elements at work within the context of the Front. This, in turn, allowed those natural elements to act as symbols of psychological consolation. Thus, rather than disregard the landscape of war, the soldier imbedded meaning within the dystopic landscape in order to argue for the value of traditionally understood forms of landscape. The distance of the battlefield landscape from conventional notions of *Heimat* landscapes can

⁹⁹ Translation: “Branches choking... Yelling/ Death.” August Stramm, “*Patrouille*”, in German 20th Century Poetry Reinhold Grimm and Irmgard Hunt eds. Translated by R. Grimm (New York: Continuum, 2001), 18-19.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in: Peter Jelavich, “German Culture in the Great War”, in European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914-1918, Ariel Roshwald and Richard Stites eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 38.

¹⁰¹ Friedrich Georg Steinbrecher, March 13th 1916, German Students’ War Letters, 320. Gerhard Gurtler, August 10th 1917, German Students’ War Letters, 359.

also be seen in the soldiers' use of the concept of wilderness in describing aspects of their war experience.

Definitions of wilderness have fluctuated over thousands of years. Simon Schama specifically addresses contrasting perceptions of the wilderness through an observance of the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus, whose *Germania; or; On the Origin and Situation of the Germans* had been written around the year 98.¹⁰² Tacitus' account of the decimation of 25,000 Romans under Publius Quinctilius Varus by Arminius in the German forests embodies conflicting definitions of the wilderness. For the Germans, the environment was sacred, life-giving, and a protector; however, the Romans perceived the environment as unknown, primitive, and fearful (highlighted by the difficulty Germanicus had in convincing his Roman troops to enter the forests to pursue Arminius).¹⁰³ Thus, for Tacitus, the wilderness environment is both sacred and profane, and it is this idea that allows Schama to argue that the meanings of landscape and wilderness are culturally constructed.

During the late 19th century, American writers such as Richard Muir and Henry David Thoreau argued that "in wilderness is the preservation of the world"; constructing an image of wilderness which could act as what Simon Schama called the "antidote to industrial society."¹⁰⁴ These writers argued that the physical environment could act as a counter-balance to the negative aspects of industrial society. For many middle-class German soldiers fighting on the Western Front, the landscape of the homeland was often portrayed as utopic (in the tradition of Muir and Thoreau); however, profane definitions of landscape and wilderness were also used to define the space of the Front. Faced with the technologically decimated landscape, many soldiers described a natural environment that had become the unknown and unrecognizable. Rudolf Binding seemed to highlight this understanding of wilderness in commenting: "The English are separated from us by the wilderness which we created in our retreat."¹⁰⁵ Binding characterizes the space between the German and English lines as a 'wilderness' in language that describes the physical landscape as lacking any natural or built elements. For soldiers such as Binding the wilderness landscape is constructed by the destructiveness of modern technology. The unrecognizable wilderness landscape is therefore

¹⁰² Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 76.

¹⁰³ Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 88- 91.

¹⁰⁴ Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Rudolf Binding, *A Fatalist at War*, Translated by G. Ian Morrow (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929), 163.

not the wilderness of Muir and Thoreau, but rather one which lacks any 'natural' references within the landscape. The chaos and unrecognizability of the Front is further described by Paul Hub in a letter dated October 31st 1914:

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.... All around men the most gruesome devastation. Dead and wounded soldiers, dead and dying animals, horse cadavers, burnt out houses, dug up fields... all this is scattered around me, a real mess.¹⁰⁶

Amongst dead men and destroyed fields, Hub associates chaos and destruction with a negatively defined concept of wilderness that exists in stark contrast to utopic images of the homeland.

As soldiers debated the chasm between expectation and experience, the thin, inflexible strip of land of the Western Front where "bullets and shells buzz[ed] like bumblebees" led many to re-conceptualize the space of the Western Front. As men fought underground amidst their dead comrades, many soldiers began to characterize the landscape of the Front as 'hell'.¹⁰⁷ For many German soldiers 'hell' was defined as a space of ultimate suffering, where nothing could live and where God did not exist. Although religious leaders in Germany consistently argued that 'God was on their side', many German soldiers could not believe that such an idea could be true for their experience proved otherwise.¹⁰⁸ Soldiers such as Richard Schmieder wrote that the war was "a gigantic murder, by means of bullets, shells, axes, and bombs, and there was such a thundering, crashing, bellowing and screaming as might have heralded the Day of Judgment."¹⁰⁹ For many soldiers, these experiences represented the limit of human endurance, "it was hell".¹¹⁰ Some soldiers, faced with the catastrophic experiences of their perceived 'hell,' would recognize themselves as *Mussulmen*, or "walking dead".¹¹¹ Touched by the destruction which surrounded them, many soldiers

¹⁰⁶ In this letter Paul Hub he also consoles his fiancé, assuring her that he is fine, unafraid, and safe- he effectively communicates his fears of the unknown and death while also assuring her of his safe return. What Hub reveals then is the level of narration, communication, and self-censorship that is contained in letters. Hub notes the death of land and men, communicates his fears, notes his love of home, and simultaneously assures the reader of his purpose and safety- all within a few lines. Paul Hub, October 31st 1914, Quoted in: Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis eds., *Intimate Voices From the First World War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2003.), 33-34.

¹⁰⁷ Helmut Zschuppe, October 25th 1916, *German Students' War Letters*, 365.

¹⁰⁸ A.J. Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: A Study in Clerical Nationalism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 12-13.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Schmieder, March 13th 1915, *German Students' War Letters*, 208.

¹¹⁰ Karl Gorzel, October 1st 1916 (after the Battle of the Somme), *German Students' War Letters*, 374.

¹¹¹ Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity*, 14.

recognized the dystopic landscape as representative of the war experience on the Western Front.¹¹² This process of understanding the Front as a dystopic environment builds upon the early 20th century writings of the architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg who argued that human culture would be destroyed by its own technology.¹¹³ Schultze-Naumburg's ecological argument for nature preservation stated that:

When man has gained everything that can be gained using his technology, he will realize that the resulting easy life on a disfigured Earth is no longer worth living; that we have torn up everything that our planet has handed to us, that this subversive activity has destroyed [the planet] and thereby ourselves.¹¹⁴

Many German soldiers seemed to agree that Schultze-Naumburg's prediction had come true during the First World War and blamed the carnage of the war on technology. Although many soldiers held the technological advances of war in contempt, often those very developments highlighted the space of the Front as distinct from surrounding landscapes.

As the First World War progressed, one of the reasons for shifting views of the landscape was the increased use of planes and air power. This shift, while an important military move, also significantly changed the ways in which German combatants viewed the landscapes of war. Alyson Booth has argued that the immensity of the battlefields shifted geographic perceptions so that maps of the Front became simplistic, preventing generals from understanding the full scope of warfront conditions. Similarly, it can be argued that pilots in the air also developed very different points of view based upon their aerial vantage point.¹¹⁵ From the air, pilots were granted a distinct view of the landscape wherein they viewed the landscape as unlike any other 'natural' environment (See Appendix 3 and 4). Pilots were further able to place the ravaged landscape of the Front in relation to surrounding landscapes, highlighting the distinct space that the Western Front occupied. One such pilot, Martin Hieber, flew above the Somme and was able to construct a dichotomous landscape that was both dystopic and utopian. While lengthy, the description of the landscape in his letter is revealing:

¹¹² Linda McGreevy, Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2001), 222.

¹¹³ Lekan, Imagining the Nation in Nature, 59-62.

¹¹⁴ Lekan, Imagining the Nation in Nature, 60-61.

¹¹⁵ Alyson Booth, Postcards from the Trenches: Negotiating the Space Between Modernism and the First World War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 88.

My heart swells when I look down on the sunlit earth and see the mountain ranges stretched below me and the streams finding their way through the marvelous colour-scheme of green woods and meadows, dark blue sea, violet mist on the vanishing horizon, and pink cloud. The almost flat landscape here on the Somme is exceptionally beautiful from above. The broad valley with its shimmering marshes; the villages with their lush meadows; the yellowish-gold of cornfields; the roads penciling delicate lines through this mosaic; the intertwining shadows of hills: all this constitutes such a wealth of colour and form that one can hardly take in all the details at once.

But beyond the Somme and farther north- the raging battle; the churned up earth; the blazing and smoking ruins; the never-ceasing flashes and explosions of shells; the suddenly rising columns of smoke; the constant roar of drum-fire which smothers everything in dirt and smoke: this is a gruesomely beautiful spectacle.¹¹⁶

The point of view of the author allows him to understand and describe the landscape in a very different way than is often observed in letters written by the infantry. What Hieber effectively describes is a landscape of war in relation to the surrounding environment. If the aerial perspective placed the destruction of modern warfare upon a small strip of land that existed within a larger picturesque landscape, then this landscape exists outside of apparent 'normal' understandings of landscape. Hieber defines the space of the battlefield as "gruesomely beautiful", a distinct space which acts as a counterpoint to conventional views of landscape. The aerial vantage point allows him to place the dystopic landscape of the Front within the context of a utopic picturesque 'untouched' landscape, solidifying a bi-polar definition of landscape. Hieber's description of the Front emphasizes the fundamental visual contrast between utopian and dystopian visions of landscape which many soldiers used to narrate the relationship between the Western Front and surrounding landscapes.

The Central Landscape- Home Front as Utopic Landscape

Building upon the language of landscape and monument preservationists in Germany, middle-class soldiers perceived landscapes to be a symbol of personal and communal identity. Conventional landscapes were understood by soldiers to be guardians of spatial and ethnic identity. During the First World War, the geographic position of the Front outside the German homeland allowed soldiers to see it as a barrier that defended the concept of *Heimat* and demonstrated the superiority of German *Kultur*. The separateness of the home-landscape and the Front-landscape allowed soldiers to see their activities in

¹¹⁶ Martin Hieber, December 4th 1916, German Students' War Letters, 347.

wartime as existing outside of normal conventions. The Front became a dystopic vision of the impact of technology on the environment that had departed from traditional understandings of landscape. German soldiers could mourn the destruction of the landscape in France while communicating the idea that the German *Heimat* (and therefore their notions of personal and collective identity) remained intact. The distinctions that soldiers made between the space of the Front and that of the homeland suggests that these spaces could be separated conceptually. Yet the complex ways that soldiers perceived the relationship between these spaces highlights the importance conventional landscapes had in soldiers' narrations of their experiences.

When German soldiers crossed the Rhine River they traversed a definitive cultural outside/ inside topographical distinction.¹¹⁷ However as they fought in this foreign territory many middle-class German soldiers found echoes of the landscape of their homeland. This might be a stimulus to remember “how beautiful Germany is” or the landscape of the Western Front could be reconceptualised as a German space based upon the deaths of millions of German soldiers.¹¹⁸ Elizabeth Marsland has stated that this process of attributing cultural value to landscapes in warfare allows the land to assume a mantle of holiness and to be raised to a principle. Marsland goes on to quote Ronald Peacock who argued that wartime landscapes construct “associations between the state and the individuals” and that the concept of the nation is intricately connected to the desire to protect one’s physical surroundings.¹¹⁹ This idea suggests that German soldiers could perceive their surroundings on the Western Front as intrinsically related to the nation of Germany. While most German soldiers did not believe that the space of the Front was in fact part of Germany, it can be argued that the space of the Front was perceived as a representative of German ideals and culture. Marsland argues that the experience of war and the thousands of dead buried on the Western Front solidified connections between soldiers and the landscape within the space of the Front. Soldiers connected the landscape of the Front with their justification for the war thereby connecting the space of the Front to that of the home. Thus in depicting the landscape of the Front using *Heimat* imagery, soldiers were able to support a sense of

¹¹⁷ Natter, *Literature at War*, 39.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Mann, “*Gedanken im Kriege* (Thoughts in Wartime)”, November 1914, Quoted in: Roshwald and Stites, *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914-1918*, 45.

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Marsland, *The Nation’s Cause: French, English, and German Poetry of the First World War* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 36.

collective mission even as they experienced the full force of destruction that the war inflicted upon the landscape of the Front.¹²⁰

The key contributing element that affected these discourses during the years from 1914 to 1918 was the fact that the landscape of the Front existed not in Germany but in France and Belgium. The landscape of the Front could be understood as peripheral to the predominant value of the homeland, yet it was central in the circumstances of war when the battlefield acted as a protective barrier for the *Heimat* landscape. The formulation of a hierarchy of value for these distinct landscapes by these soldiers suggests the complex relationship that the heterotopic space of the Front had with the landscape of the home front. The landscape of the Front could in specific terms be deemed more valuable than the landscape of the home, but only within the context of war. This constructed hierarchy of landscape was only able to exist within the confines of a war fought outside of Germany, enabling the individual to justify their participation within the destructive process of industrial war.

Understanding the Front as a protective barrier allowed soldiers to perceive their actions as defending German middle-class cultural values, a discourse which emerged in discussions of landscape. Soldiers like Helmut Aschuppe saw the spaces of the Front and *Heimat* as separate, yet understood that they were intricately interdependent upon each other in times of war. Wounded behind the Western Front, Aschuppe writes of his excitement to be back on the Front, “I should like to push the landscape aside as if it irritated me. I must get to the Front...I must live once more in the realm of death.”¹²¹ Importantly, Aschuppe understands the landscape of home as intact, and desires to ‘push the landscape aside’ in order to commit himself to the war in order to protect his *Heimat*. In his letter of July 22 1917, Johannes Philippsen articulates this idea and uses it to justify his participation in the war and possibly calm the readers of his letters:

My eyes have been gladdened with the sight of Germany’s beauty, and I have a home that I can truly love. This shows me where I belong when it is a case of defending that land. That is how I felt when I went to the Front for the first time, and it is just the same now.¹²²

¹²⁰ Marsland, *The Nation’s Cause*, 75.

¹²¹ Helmut Aschuppe, September 10 1917, *German Students’ War Letters*, 368.

¹²² Johannes Philippsen, July 22 1917, *German Students’ War Letters*, 370.

For Philippsen, it is his emotional connection to the German landscape that seems to justify his participation in the war. In participating in the war, Philippsen sustains his belief in his own personal identity and humanity by defending the landscape that embodies his concept of normalcy.

In the early months of the war, one of the most important ways that German soldiers articulated a hope for renewal following the destruction was through nationalist discourses in which landscape played an important role. Alfons Ankenbrand appealed to the nation in his letter of March 11th 1915, describing Germany as a utopic landscape of woods and mountains. Ankenbrand justified his participation in the war as an act of protecting that landscape which epitomized his personal and collective identity. Ankenbrand states “Fatherland! Home! How often have I rejoiced in your woods and mountains! Now you have need of your sons, and I too have heard the call....”¹²³ Ankenbrand builds upon *Heimat* discourses of nation, highlighting the relationship between the individual and the nation. Significantly this process of using the environment to support the idea of the nation is mobilized in war without addressing the state. The photographer and Director of the Urania theatre in Berlin, Franz Goerke, portrayed the German landscape as full of

Magic in the lowlands, lovely and charming the mid-lying hills and majestically exalted in the high mountains- this German landscape, which in this time of struggle and battle is for us the greatest thing we have to defend... for this your sons summon life and blood to protect it for you.¹²⁴

This utopian portrayal of German landscape in 1915 was built upon the discourse of landscape preservationists in the years before the war. The war was not simply fought for political and economic gain, but more importantly for the protection of German *Kultur* and identity, a notion that was easily complicit with nationalist discourses.¹²⁵

The meanings attached to the home front and battlefield were gendered as the Front was conceived as an exclusively male space and the homeland as female. As such, German soldiers viewed the home front with gendered terminology that described its untouched meadows and streams as objects deserving of protection and beckoned soldiers to vigilantly protect them from Germany’s enemies who threatened to desecrate the innocence and

¹²³ Alfons Ankenbrand, March 11th 1915, *German Students’ War Letters*, 73.

¹²⁴ Franz Goerke, Preface to Wilhelm Blosche’s *Die Deutsche Landschaft in Vergangenheit un Gegenwart* (1915). Quoted in Thomas Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 74.

¹²⁵ See endnote #14: Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 252.

splendor of the German landscape.¹²⁶ One anonymous bricklayer encapsulated this belief, “What, indeed, is the meaning of the Fatherland? It is the Holy Land! It is the soil on which we were born, where we spent our childhood, where we grew up, and where we shall establish or have established our lives.”¹²⁷ Wolfgang Natter has argued that while there was some opportunity for female participation in the support zones (*etappen*), the *erlebnis* (experience) of the Front was exclusively male and was perceived as sacred in the literature both during and after the hostilities.¹²⁸ Through the use of religious, environmental, and gendered language, soldiers were able to define the landscape of the Front as a masculine space meant to defend the feminized utopia of the *Heimat* landscape. In constructing the landscape of the Front as such, soldiers were able to incorporate specific justifications for their involvement in the war, and further understand and communicate their experiences on the Western Front.

The way in which the landscape of the Front was related to *Heimat* ideas of landscape could also often be found in artists’ renditions of the landscape in propaganda posters. These images reveal the importance that the landscape had for German soldiers. One such recruiting poster was drawn by Fritz Boehle in 1915 and entitled “Thanks be to God” (See Appendix 5).¹²⁹ The image is that of a Christian medieval knight on his horse with his hands in prayer with an inscription that reads, “Thanks be to God, Givest thou a mite, be it ne’er so small, thou shalt be blessed by God”. While obviously playing upon the myth of the crusader, what makes the image interesting is the landscape in the background. In the foreground behind the knight is a burning building; however, this is flanked by a sublime landscape of a winding river, the rising sun, and a medieval town surrounded by the natural environment of rolling hills and forests. While hinting at the constant presence of destruction that is consistently associated with an eternal spiritual struggle, it is the landscape behind the knight that appears to strengthen and support the knight. Another recruiting poster (see Appendix 6) portrays a traditional rural landscape with abundant fields, a man ploughing the earth, and a jutting church tower beside the pristine seaside. Above the small town the sun pours its rays out upon this landscape as if God himself was pleased with the

¹²⁶ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 75.

¹²⁷ Taken from *Feldbriefe Katholischer Soldaten*, Georg Pfeilschefter ed., (1918), 83. Quoted in: Hafkesbrink, *Unknown Germany*, 79.

¹²⁸ Natter, *Literature at War*, 12.

¹²⁹ Fritz Boehle, “Thanks be to God”, *The First World War in Posters* Joseph Darracott ed., (New York: Dover Publications, 1974), 52.

people and the land. The message is clear in this poster, for framing this image are the words “Do you want this?...Defend our land.”¹³⁰ The landscape contained within the image portrays a perfectly balanced community including some industrial imagery but anchored in a romanticized vision of continuity including the peasant farmer and the centrality of the church.

It is these sorts of discourses that many middle-class German soldiers could utilize as they explained their individual and collective understanding of the war. The war was being fought to defend the landscape of Germany and to protect a German way of life. Although these images are important contributors to the nationalist rhetoric justifying the war, the importance of landscapes in these images is revealing. The fact that the artists chose to make the landscape central to their pieces relays the fact that before and during the war, the landscape was a fundamental part of a common cultural vocabulary. The environment and landscape acted as social codes through which soldiers communicated the concept that the German landscape represented a way of life. The dystopic image of the Western Front thereby acted as a separate space, acting as a barrier which protected the utopic landscape and cultural ideals of the homeland. For conservationists, the advantage of using the concept of landscape rests in the idea that environmental culture was prevalent enough in German discourses that anyone, no matter the geographic or economic background, would be able to visualize an ideal *Heimat* landscape. Landscape thereby formed a cultural language through which soldiers were able to construct the space of the Front as distinct from the utopic images of German landscapes.

The idealization of the *Heimat* landscape greatly influenced the ways in which soldiers viewed the landscape of the Front. When German soldiers imagined their *Heimat* landscapes they contrasted that landscape to their experience in war, but still constructed a close relationship between the different spaces of home front and front line. When Hans Martens wrote home to Charlottenburg he imagined the landscape of his home: “I imagine you lying in a meadow beside the brook, letting the May wind play about your brow and gazing into the blue, spring sky, while ranunculus and foam-weed have nothing better to do than to form the gaily coloured frame for this charming picture.”¹³¹ For Martens’ this sublime image

¹³⁰Unknown artist, “Do you want this?”, What did You do in the War Daddy? A Visual History of Propaganda Posters The Australian War Memorial (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983), 68.

¹³¹ Hans Martens, May 12th 1915, German Students’ War Letters, 142.

of the landscape sustained his spirit on the Front. Another example of constructing the picturesque landscapes of Germany is found in Willy Hölscher's letter of February 20th, 1916. Hölscher describes the landscape of the Front and then asks that his family literally send him some of the German landscape to him on the battlefield in Champagne.

One thing more: Would you be so kind as to send me flower seeds? There is nothing very nice to look at round my billet, and, as I don't know how long I may be stuck here, I want to grow some flowers. Please send me sweet-peas, convolvulus, sunflower, flax, mignonette, etc. I want to cover the unsightly earth with verdure.¹³²

The landscape of the battlefield is so lacking in flora that he literally seeks to bring the utopic landscape that justifies his presence in the war, to the Front in order to bring about a sense of normalcy. It is this 'normalcy' that many soldiers sought in the Western Front in order to make sense of their experiences in the war.

Although soldiers on the Western Front attempted to explain the vast differences in experience that the First World War presented, many soldiers continued to describe the landscape of the Front using positive language, motifs, and imagery that they were exposed to before the war. Ernst Gunter Schallert compared his experiences during the war to those experiences he had as a member of the German Youth groups in writing, "I enjoyed the march just as if it had been a walking tour for pleasure. We marched right over the mountains... They [his fellow soldiers] lit great fires and lay around them singing."¹³³ The description of hiking, lying around fires and singing songs could easily have been a discussion of a youth group hiking trip before the war. In comparing these experiences Schallert seems to bring to the Front his previous understandings of camaraderie and appreciation for outdoor activity.

What makes such a comparison interesting is the number of similar descriptions which compared the experience of war to pre-war ideas regarding the place of the environment. Rudolf Fischer describes the environment in similarly positive terms: "The sun was just rising in a wintry-red sky... It was quite home-like—the white-veiled landscape, the groups of fields and trees and the pretty village, the cold fresh air."¹³⁴ Many positive descriptions of the landscape of the Western Front depicted traditional *Heimat* imagery within the context of modern industrial warfare in order to portray the landscape as an

¹³² Willy Hölscher, February 20th 1916, *German Students' War Letters*, 301.

¹³³ Ernst Gunter Schallert, January 10th 1915, *German Students' War Letters*, 102.

¹³⁴ Rudolf Fischer, November 18 1914, *German Students' War Letters*, 14.

utopian image that sustained soldiers' belief in their own personal identity and humanity. German soldiers' descriptions of the light of the stars during battle, the beautiful sunrises, the beauty of clouds, waving grasses, and wildflowers were not simply longings for their homes and pre-war experiences, but were built up in order to articulate the idea that the soldiers still saw the beauty of the natural landscape in the midst of industrial warfare.¹³⁵ Peter Barton's work on panoramic photographs of the Western Front reinforces the contention that such positive visions of the wartime landscape could indeed be sustained during the war years. He suggests that the landscape of the Front was not completely decimated, but much of the landscape (other than specific sections that were utterly devastated by intense fighting) remained intact throughout the war. Furthermore, images of soldiers planting vegetables in unused communication trenches reiterates the importance of natural elements not only for sustenance, but suggests a practical acknowledgement of the life-giving force of nature in the midst of the destruction of war.¹³⁶ While the technological was associated with death and destruction, the persistent existence of the natural offered some psychological consolation to many soldiers who noted this process of regeneration.

The landscape of Germany was a central image in the construction of a discourse regarding the physical environment. The image of an idyllic and pristine home landscape allowed for a polarization of perception in regards to landscape. The death and destruction of the battlefield landscape existed outside of normalcy for German soldiers, allowing them to contrast the devastation to images of a feminized, picturesque landscape of the home. Even as many soldiers associated their personal homes with urban environments, the image of the pastoral countryside remained a fundamental descriptor of the nation, a concept that highlights the influence of pre-war conservationists.¹³⁷ Soldiers' fundamentally differentiated between the spaces of the Front and that of the Home, and in doing so constructed an image of the Western Front as the epitome of environmental degradation, an embodiment of 'hell'. However, the ability of the landscape to re-grow and regenerate itself gave many German soldiers the hope that following the war Western Civilization, and particularly German society, could do the same. Interpretations of the landscape therefore

¹³⁵ Karl Aldag, November 11th 1914, German Students' War Letters, 29; Ludwig Finke, December 19th 1914, German Students' War Letters, 88-9, and Franz von Drathen, June 1st 1917, German Students' War Letters, 335.

¹³⁶ Peter Barton, The Battlefields of the First World War: From the First Battle of Ypres to Passchendaele (London: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 16-17, 27, 54.

¹³⁷ Lekan, Imagining the Nation in Nature. 59, 67-70.

fundamentally framed both individual and collective understandings of the environment and the experience of the war.

Western Front as Heterotopia: Landscape as Positive Force

While German soldiers often addressed the landscape of the Western Front with dystopic language, reserving idyllic portrayals of the landscape for the homeland, a complicating factor in this discussion is the interaction of both dystopic and utopic elements within soldiers' descriptions of the Front. Robert Otto Marcus describes the interaction of idyllic landscapes with the devastation of war in a letter dated March 27th, 1915:

The Argonne is a beautiful forest- in summer it must be unique- but the everlasting crashes, the howling of shells over our heads, the whistling of stray bullets all around us and the noise they make striking the tree-trunks after a time quite spoil one's enjoyment.¹³⁸

Observing the landscape of the Argonne forest was seemingly a moment of inspiration for the young medical student; however, the enjoyment was tainted by the devastation of war. On the Western Front the “unspoiled” and the “devastated” interact within the space of war, allowing soldiers to narrate the experience of war as one which contains contradictory dystopic and utopic elements.¹³⁹ The existence of contradictory definitions of landscape within a single space allows the soldier to redefine relationships between the Front and the Homeland and between himself and his surroundings.¹⁴⁰ At the crux of this process was a perceived division between technology and the natural environment, a division that allowed soldiers to argue that usages of modern technology held some responsibility for the devastation of the First World War. German soldiers often articulated the idea that the landscape was reflective of German *Kultur*, thereby arguing that the decimation of the landscape of the Front signalled a departure from cultural ideas of the *Heimat* landscape. Observing the destroyed landscape of the Western Front, German soldiers attached themselves to the plight of the landscape in order to construe positive imagery within a narrative of environmental regeneration. Soldiers articulated a hope that, as the environment could regenerate itself in spite of the destruction, so too could both the individual and society regenerate themselves and shed the negative attributes that had led to

¹³⁸ Robert Otto Marcus, March 27th, 1915, German Students' War Letters, 78.

¹³⁹ Maltzahn, Nature as Landscape, 19.

¹⁴⁰ Maltzahn, Nature as Landscape, 50.

the carnage of the First World War.¹⁴¹ Thus, the landscape of the Front was constructed as a dystopic landscape, but simultaneously was perceived as a positive symbol for middle-class German soldiers who narrated their experiences through an observance of natural elements. The space of the Front is complicated by the co-existence of chaos and inspiration, creating a space in which soldiers were able to reconstruct personal and collective identities by using the symbol of environmental regeneration. In observing landscape as a positive force, middle-class German soldiers expressed the idea that the experience of the war was not simply mud, blood, and steel, but was also birds, trees, and flowers.

The relationship of the environment with the space of modern war is a complex one, one in which understood modes of landscape are able to communicate both destructive processes, and the hope for restoration. The complexity of this landscape has been argued by Rudy Koshar to be based upon the disjunction between “the ‘horizon of expectation’ and the ‘space experience’”.¹⁴² In the example of the First World War, it is in the space of the Front where expectation and experience collide, forcing soldiers to address both ideas of destruction and regeneration. Landscape thus provides a space in which soldiers were able to redefine personal and collective understandings of the war. The concept of regeneration could be used to relate the dystopic front-line environment to utopic images of the home front. Some middle-class German soldiers would argue that the landscape of the Front was decimated but not permanently destroyed, given their belief in the ability of the environment to regenerate itself. In using landscape as a positive force, soldiers were able to link pre-war expectations with their wartime experiences. Focusing upon utopic images of the home and the regenerative abilities of the landscape allowed German soldiers to imagine a post-war world based upon ideas of a purified German *Kultur* and *Heimat* that had shed the negative aspects of technology and progress. This again was not romantic escapism, but a vision of a world where ideas of progress and technology co-existed with the protection of tradition and culture. These ideas had emerged in pre-war environmental discourses but were accentuated during the hostilities of 1914 to 1918.

The connection that many soldiers perceived between themselves and a landscape which contained both dystopic and utopic imagery, produced more complex narrations of

¹⁴¹ Hafkesbrink, *Unknown Germany*, 65.

¹⁴² Rudy Koshar, *Germany's Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 18.

the war experience. Battlefronts were often described as a natural environment that offered soldiers moments of solace and the psychological consolation of regeneration. For a number of soldiers the war was their first lengthy foray into the environment outside of urban centres, and some found aspects of this experience rewarding. Rudolf Fischer was one such soldier who articulated the close association he felt with nature on November 18th 1914: “[n]ever before have I been so inspired to meditations by the sight of the starry heavens; never have I lived so close to nature.”¹⁴³ Nature was inspiring for Fischer, for it was the aesthetic value of the natural environment that gave him a sense of purpose. In a similar fashion, Rudolf Moldenhauer describes the

beautiful sunset over the watery marshes of the Somme; when a beautiful, cold, December morning breaks through the mist of dawn and the red clay of the trench glows in the sunshine; then we are happy and rejoice like children over the beauty of it... their [the soldiers] bodies seem to be bursting with health and fitness. They are all young, and full of joy in Nature...¹⁴⁴

Moldenhauer idealizes both German soldiers and the landscape by associating the young, healthy bodies of the soldiers with the beauty of nature while interestingly including the trench in his picturesque portrayal of the landscape. Other soldiers similarly communicated the importance of the environment in their experience of the Front. Martin Drescher described how he was cheered “by the sight of the glittering stars”, and Karl Adag also described how “the stars shone so quietly and brilliantly down upon the battle- that was really beautiful.”¹⁴⁵ The focus on the stars and their beauty as an inspiration built upon pre-war discourses of nature as offering enlightenment and healing. Franz von Drathen further celebrated the natural, noting in a letter the larks that sang above him and becoming ecstatic when “in front of the work of destruction- a purple crocus!”¹⁴⁶ For von Drathen, the crocus was a symbol of his ‘home’; thus the utopian landscape of Germany had permeated all the destructive power of war and was able to impose itself in a hostile environment.

By framing discourses regarding the war within notions of landscape, soldiers and civilians were able to construct metaphors that enabled the war to be understood and

¹⁴³ Rudolf Fischer, November 18th 1914, German Students’ War Letters, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Rudolf Moldenhauer, December 9th 1914, German Students’ War Letters, 16.

¹⁴⁵ Martin Drescher, not dated (September/October 1914), German Students’ War Letters, 10. Karl Adag, November 11th 1914, German Students’ War Letters, 29.

¹⁴⁶ Franz von Drathen, May 3rd 1917, German Students’ War Letters, 333.

justified within culturally defined notions of normalcy. The war was not an anomaly but part of a discourse regarding the development and progress of Germany and the place technology and the environment had within the notion of progress. Alfred Richard Meyer's poem "*An Meine Erde*" (To my Earth) is a work that discusses these ideas relating the destruction of war to the natural environment. Meyer's poem does not criticize the war but celebrates the land, noting that it is the soil of the trench which protects the soldier.¹⁴⁷ The soil then is not understood to be part of the alien French landscape, but rather, is perceived as the guardian of the German soldier. When Meyer writes in hopes that the earth may be laying "*in der Ebene eines Frühlings*" (in the smoothness of a springtime), he communicates the hope for both environmental and cultural regeneration.¹⁴⁸ The idea of a distinct connection between the environment and the soldier is essential; however, the importance of this idea rests on soldiers' beliefs in the regenerative powers of the natural.

The fluidity with which soldiers were able to portray the death brought on by industrial war and the regenerative processes of nature highlight the Western Front as a space that is fundamentally different from previous notions of landscape. The landscape of the Western Front was frequently portrayed as containing seemingly contradictory elements of violence and regeneration. This conflict can be perceived in two contrasting quotations; the first discovered on the body of a dead German officer:

After crawling out through the bleeding remnants of my comrades, and through the smoke and debris, wandering and running in the midst of the raging gunfire in search of refuge, I am now awaiting death at any moment. You do not know what Flanders means. Flanders means endless human endurance. Flanders means blood and scraps of human bodies. Flanders means heroic courage and faithfulness even unto death.¹⁴⁹

In the death and destruction of the Western Front this officer understood the destructive aspect of warfare, yet celebrated the stoic endurance of soldiers. The landscape was perceived to be both a place of death, pain, and destruction, but also of endurance and determination. This image of a dystopic landscape can be contrasted with the comments of Herbert Jahn as he walked through the woods around Verdun on May 4th 1915

¹⁴⁷ Marsland, *The Nation's Cause*, 193.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Marsland, *The Nation's Cause*, 193.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991), 60.

The landscape looks so peaceful. Soon I plunge into the green sea: wonderful old beeches and oaks... Suddenly, in the midst of the wilderness, a grave, with a simple wooden cross! And over there another! The inscription is obliterated... How long will it be before the last traces of the grave have vanished- disappeared like the name!¹⁵⁰

In the midst of the woods Jahn wonders how long it will be before nature obliterates the last traces of the war, highlighting the ability of the environment to regenerate itself after the destructive processes of modern war. This portrayal of the landscape of the Western Front as both a space of death and regeneration provided an explanatory model for the war experience. The tragedy of environmental destruction and the human cost of the First World War can be reintegrated into visions of redemption in which the environment played a central role.

Landscapes formed a basis for understanding the war experience in which the concepts of *Heimat* and *Kultur* are bound to the mechanized and modern world of the early twentieth century.¹⁵¹ The positive descriptions of the Front gives credence to the idea that a significant minority of middle-class German soldiers simultaneously addressed the landscape of the Front in both dystopic and utopian images in order to participate in wider cultural debates relating ideas of progress and technology to ideas of tradition and the environment. According to Herbert Jahn who died of wounds in 1916, the natural provided the impetus for individual and cultural stimulation in the midst of a destructive war. Jahn emphasized the power of nature and celebrated hope for the future stating "...not even this war can rob us of Nature, and as long as I still have that I cannot be altogether unhappy."¹⁵² The solace that Jahn takes from the environment is based on aesthetics, for as long as he can observe some form of the natural he can see the potential for personal and collective redemption. Jahn articulates the idea that the destruction of war was based upon an ignorance of the value of the environment, and it is the natural that will inspire the future.

The impact of modern technological elements upon the landscape of the Western Front led many German soldiers to address the relationship between technology and the natural environment. Otto Dix described the lines of artillery guns as "forests", while other

¹⁵⁰ Herbert Jahn, May 4th 1915, *German Students' War Letters*, 177.

¹⁵¹ Eberle, *World War I and the Weimar Artists*, 33. Also see: Lekan and Zeller, *Germany's Nature*, 125, 195.

¹⁵² Herbert Jahn, May 1st 1915, *German Students' War Letters*, 176.

soldiers described the *stacheldraht* (balls of barbed wire) as organic thickets.¹⁵³ Soldiers were thus naturalizing the technological thereby shifting the meanings of warfare. Helmut Aschuppe used this kind of language when he wrote, “Our shells were flying one above the other like flocks of birds.”¹⁵⁴ Soldiers like Dix and Aschuppe compared the ways in which shells and bullets affected both the landscape and human beings, and began to naturalize the technological in order to understand and communicate the experience of living on the Western Front.

In a similar way Gotthold von Rohden, a soldier fighting on the Western Front in 1915, was attentive to both the detrimental affects of shells and bullets, but also the existence of flowers that some soldiers brought into the trenches. Rohden details this writing;

I came upon a bit of trench which was decorated in a highly original manner: the bays and breastwork were adorned with pots of flowers... their frail delicacy seems particularly out of keeping with the surrounding shambles.... Even the church has been shot to pieces by the French... even the dead have no rest beneath the earth, for the shells plunge deep into the ground and blow up the graves; at such spots one realizes to the full the misery of war.¹⁵⁵

Rohden describes the atrocity of war and its continued effects upon men even after death, yet simultaneously frames this by recognizing the flowers that decorated the trench in one section. Rohden recognizes both the fragility of the flora and similarly posits the fragility of the soldiers themselves. The fragility of life itself, and the way that Rohden recognizes this is through observation of the environment. Werner Liebert further encapsulates this idea in his letter of December 4th 1914, writing “how beautiful life is one only realizes out here, where one has constantly to risk losing it.”¹⁵⁶ While Liebert does not specifically address the landscape, he notes that not only soldiers were at risk of destruction, so too was the land that they fought on and under.

The melding of the technological and the natural within the space of the Front appears as a contradiction; however, upon further analysis the co-existence of dystopic and utopic images within soldiers’ descriptions of the landscape suggests that this was often intentional. Soldiers connected themselves to the landscape, arguing that the environment

¹⁵³ McGreevy, *Bitter Witness*, 48. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 42, 237.

¹⁵⁴ Helmut Aschuppe, October 25, 1916, *German Student’s War Letters*, 366.

¹⁵⁵ Gotthold von Rohden, February 19 1915, *German Student’s War Letters*, 159-160.

¹⁵⁶ Werner Liebert, December 4th 1914, *German Students’ War Letters*, 25.

was being destroyed in as barbaric fashion as human beings were. Because of the regenerative power of the environment, this connection suggested to middle-class German soldiers that German culture and society could also be resurrected following the ending of hostilities. In their descriptions of landscape, soldiers not only narrated their experiences of the First World War, they articulated their hopes for the future, anticipating a world in which ideas of technological progress were kept in check by concepts such as *Kultur* and the environment. Analysis of soldiers' descriptions of the landscape of the Front thereby highlights the importance space holds for the historian. In observing the ways that the meanings of space change, it is possible to emphasize the ways that human beings have understood the past and narrated their experiences and hopes for the future.

When the war finally ended in the fall of 1918, that “narrow, though certainly endless, strip of ground, which seems much, much too narrow for its gigantic significance” was no longer shelled, covered with wire, or strewn with bullets for the first time in over four years.¹⁵⁷ In the weeks following the cessation of hostilities, one soldier looked at the environmental catastrophe and asked, “How will they smooth out the land?”¹⁵⁸ In the following years the fields began to spit up their metal; new trees, bushes, and flowers began to grow, and armies of men tried to fill in and flatten the lunar landscape.¹⁵⁹ The effect of the First World War upon the landscape of the Western Front had truly been great. As a man-made environmental catastrophe it was unprecedented. What remains clear from the evidence available is that perceptions of the landscapes of Germany and the Western Front were the object of important cultural discourses that fundamentally affected the ways in which soldiers perceived themselves, their place in the war, and personal and collective justifications for the war. Although large collections of letters and correspondence from the First World War collected by the German government were destroyed in the Second World War, the amount of evidence available suggests that a significant minority of middle-class German soldiers believed that the landscape was a central component in understanding the war experience.

¹⁵⁷ Herbert Weisser, April 6th 1915, *German Students' War Letters*, 110-111.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 69.

¹⁵⁹ Eksteins, “War, Memory, and the Modern: Pilgrimage and Tourism to the Western Front”, 154-158.

Conclusion

The First World War has long been associated with the mud, blood, and steel of the Western Front. Countless monographs have captured the space of the Western Front in a portrayal of absolute destruction. The reasons for this portrayal of the First World War experience are complex. That said, the failure of positive descriptions of the Front to emerge leads to an oversimplified portrayal of the war experience for German soldiers. Confronted with the carnage of the Western Front, many middle-class German combatants viewed the landscape of the Front as both dystopic and utopic. For some of these soldiers, the landscape of the Front was constructed as a space where the decimated landscape was understood as a positive force and a symbol of hope. Writing after the war, Ernst Jünger described his experience in an enlightening paragraph which highlights the complex ways soldiers narrated the First World War through ideas of landscape and space:

And so there came about, as part of my diary, a conscientious account of life in C- sector, the small zigzag part of the long front where we were at home, where we knew every overgrown bit of trench and every ramshackle dugout. Round about us in the mounds of earth rested the bodies of dead comrades, every foot of ground had witnessed some sort of drama, behind every traverse lurked catastrophe, ready day and night to pluck its next chance victim. And yet we all felt a strong bond to our sector, as though we had grown together with it. We had seen it when it was a black ribbon winding through the snowy landscape, when the florid thickets round about flooded it with narcotic scents at noontide, and when pallid moonbeams wove webs round its dark business. We sat on long summer evenings cheerfully on its clay ramparts, while the balmy air wafted the sounds of our busy hammering and banging and our native songs in the direction of the enemy; we plunged our beams and chopped wire while Death with his steel club assaulted our trenches and slothful smoke slunk out of our shattered clay ramparts.¹⁶⁰

For Jünger, the experience of the First World War was fundamentally shaped by the space in which the war occurred. The Front (specifically because of its static nature) existed within a relatively small space in which soldiers attempted to articulate meaning and reconstruct identity in a multiplicity of ways. Through an analysis of soldiers' letters, distinct themes emerged in relation to their understandings of the space of the Western Front. Because of the catastrophic destruction caused by the increased mechanization of war, middle-class soldiers perceived the Front as a dystopic environment in contrast to idealized

¹⁶⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, Translated by Michael Hofmann (New York: Penguin, 2003), 51-53.

and utopic images of the German *Heimat*. Soldiers were, however, also able to incorporate pre-war ideas of landscape into their understanding of the battlefield, focusing on the regenerative aspects of the environment in order to foster the psychological consolation that ideas of regeneration (both of the environment and the concept of cultural regeneration) offered.

The ways that middle-class German soldiers organized and defined their surroundings reveal their understanding of their experience of the First World War. The Front can be understood as a heterotopic space based upon differing conceptions of landscape and the relationships that form these conceptions. As another cultural construct, the landscape of the home was idealized as utopic, a process that began in pre-war environmental culture, but climaxed with the opening of hostilities in 1914. As the destructive processes of industrial war ravaged the French and Belgian landscapes on the Western Front, middle-class German soldiers began conceptualizing the Western Front as a dystopic landscape in contrast to the utopic *Heimat* landscape of Germany. This contrast of meaning allowed the Front to be understood as a distinct and separate space from all surrounding spaces. In this sense, the landscape of the Front embodied a heterotopic space that acted as a space that suspended, reversed, and circumvented ideas of normalcy for German soldiers.¹⁶¹ In defining new cultural boundaries and definitions of landscape, German soldiers fundamentally shaped the narration of their experiences through their perceptions of the physical environment. What this paper has sought to articulate then is three-fold. Firstly, upon experiencing the ravages of modern warfare, middle-class soldiers constructed a space that was understood as dystopic in relation to pre-war conceptions of landscape. Secondly, these soldiers conceptualized the home landscape as utopic in contrast to the hellish landscape of war. Finally, following this polarization, soldiers complicated this relationship by perceiving elements of the utopic landscape within the dystopic landscape of the Front, thereby conceptualizing the landscape of the Front as a positive force.

Middle-class German soldiers' interpretations of the landscape was an essential element that shaped their narrations of the war experience. While soldiers observed the ways in which a mechanized society influenced the environment during a lengthy industrial war,

¹⁶¹ Vincenzo Guarrasi, "Paradoxes of Modern and Postmodern Geography: Heterotopia of Landscape and Cartographic Logic", in *Postmodern Geography: Theory and Praxis*, Claudio Minca ed (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 228.

they also understood the space of the Front to contain both utopic and dystopic elements which reflected cultural debates regarding the roles of technology, the environment, and the state before and after the war. The physical environment of the Western Front allowed middle-class German soldiers to associate themselves with the landscape based on a shared experience of physical and symbolic decimation. Simultaneously, soldiers were able to reflect upon pre-war notions of the *Heimat* landscape and argue that the space of the Front acted as a protective barrier which kept the destruction of the Western Front from affecting the utopic landscape. What this allows is the complication of the dystopic/ utopic polarization; soldiers incorporated utopic elements of landscape within the context of the Front in order to construct a regenerative landscape. By highlighting the regenerative aspects of the landscape and connecting themselves to it, soldiers were able to give meaning and articulate individual and collective identity within the space of the Front. With the German defeat in 1918, the hope for cultural regeneration that many German veterans had adhered to during the war became increasingly difficult to believe in.

With the ending of the war in 1918 the environment on the Front began to heal itself from the trauma it had experienced for over four years. Visitors to the Front noticed as scarlet poppies covered Flanders, grass grew over the shell holes at Ypres, and surprised tourists at the speed at which the scars on the landscape disappeared. Other observers noted the burial sites of thousands and imagined those spaces as gardens from which a new and better world would emerge.¹⁶² Both soldier and civilian looked to the landscape as a symbol of hope and renewal; however, the speed at which the environment regenerated was far greater than the speed of cultural and political ‘regeneration’.

When soldiers’ returned home they took the space of the Front with them. Their naturalistic language of renewal and their images of dystopic landscape were infused into social discourses regarding the future of Germany. Soldiers spoke of an “inner healing” and argued that the landscape reflected this process.¹⁶³ After the catastrophe of military defeat, soldiers re-formed preservationist movements and some such as Konrad Guenther argued that the defeat had occurred because the German people had not remained rooted enough in the “soil of *Heimat*.”¹⁶⁴ As soldiers returned home, the rhetoric of conservationism was

¹⁶² Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 81.

¹⁶³ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 86.

¹⁶⁴ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 87.

infused into popular discourses, contributing to what Thomas Lekan has called the “militarization of *Heimat*”.¹⁶⁵ Even though growing numbers of individuals did use the environment as a discourse through which to debate the future of the nation, the growth of conservationist movements was held at bay by political instability, economic uncertainty, and changing social codes. The introduction of Article 150 in the Weimar Constitution had placed “monuments of art, history, and nature, as well as landscape” under state protection; however, a lack of financial and political support hindered the implementation of conservative proposals.¹⁶⁶ The inability of the Weimar government to deal with the encroachment of industrialism upon natural environments led many conservationists and their supporters to turn towards popular political groups such as the NSDAP. The integration of conservationist groups into the Nazi Party came from the disappointment with the Weimar government which failed to pass a national conservation law. Furthermore conservationists believed that a popular authoritarian regime would be better able to carry out conservationist measures.¹⁶⁷ The faith that conservationists had in the ability of the environment to bring about cultural, political, and national regeneration led them into a political party that fired most conservationist leaders by 1937.¹⁶⁸ Although some historians have argued that the modern environmental movement begun in the late 1880s “started out green and ended bloody red” in the Nazi period, the complexity of the issue highlights the need for further analysis.¹⁶⁹ The ways that German soldiers incorporated pre-war definitions of landscape into their experiences on the Western Front emphasizes the important influence environmental culture had upon popular ideas of war, culture, and the state. Although the history of the environmental movement within Germany from 1880 to 1945 is complex, the importance of the subject resides in the fact that discussions of landscape reflect cultural discourses regarding the relationships between the state, nation, and region, as well as addressing the ways in which human beings interacted with the environment

Through the use of landscape history, this paper has articulated the idea that the Western Front was not simply a ‘hell’ of mud, blood, and steel. The space of the Western

¹⁶⁵ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 76.

¹⁶⁶ John A. Williams, “Between Democracy and Dictatorship: The Changing Ideology of the Bourgeois Conservation Movement 1925-1935”, in *Germany’s Nature: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental History*, Thomas Lekan and Thomas Zeller eds. (New Jersey: Rutgers, 2005), 187.

¹⁶⁷ Williams, “Between Democracy and Dictatorship”, 196-7.

¹⁶⁸ Williams, “Between Democracy and Dictatorship”, 200.

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in: Williams, “Between Democracy and Dictatorship”, 183.

Front was far more complex. It was a space understood to exist outside of normalcy; it could be seen as both dystopic and utopic; it was a place of connection to the environment; and it could give hope for the future of Europe. Analysis of letters, artwork, and other evidence allows a more subtle portrayal of the landscape of the Front to emerge, allowing the complex discourses which surrounded the war to find definition. The First World War experience of German soldiers cannot simply be perceived as homoerotic, nationalistic, or romantic escapist, but must be addressed in a far more complex fashion. The ways that soldiers observed their surroundings, gave them meaning, and articulated their place in the war experience were often shaped by certain perceptions of the landscape. Treating the space of the Front as a heterotopic space, and in that space observing the ways that soldiers defined the landscapes that surrounded them, gives a much clearer understanding of the various ways in which many middle-class German soldiers articulated their war experiences. Furthermore, understanding the ways that German soldiers shaped their experiences and hopes for the post-war years highlights the difficulty some soldiers had when they returned to a defeated Germany in which the ideas of regeneration they had constructed did not develop as they had anticipated. Further use of environmental and landscape history will provide a more complete portrait not only of the First World War, but also of the problems that faced defeated soldiers, and the attraction that the Nazi Party held for many conservationists. The use of landscape history can enrich our understanding of the First World War experience and the complex multi-faceted relationship human beings have with the natural world.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1) Otto Dix "Grave (Dead Soldier)" 1917.



Otto Dix. *Grave (Dead Soldier)*, 1917. Black Crayon, 39 x 40.4 cm.

© Estate of Otto Dix / SODRAC (2006), by permission.

Appendix 2) August Stramm, “Patroville”.

Patroville / Reconnaissance Patrol

August Stramm (1874 – 1915)

Translated by Reinhold Grimm

Die Steine feinden

The Stones inimic

Fenster grinst Verrat

Window grins betray

Äste würgen

Branches choking

Berge Straucher blättlern raschlig

Screeny bushes leafing rustly

Gellen

Yelling

Tod

Death.

Appendix 3) Fort of Douaomont, August 1916.



Fort of Douaomont (August 1916) p20 © Michelin *Verdun: Argonne-Metz (1914-1918)*;
Permission No. 06-US-005, by permission.

Appendix 4) Vaux Fort, August 1916.



Vaux Fort (August 1916) p75 ©Michelin *Verdun: Argonne-Metz (1914-1918)*;

Permission No. 06-US-005, by permission.

Appendix 5) Propaganda Poster: Fritz Boehle, 1915.



Fritz Boehle "Thanks be to God" 1915, © The Imperial War Museum, London, by permission.

Appendix 6) Propaganda Poster: "Do You Want this? Defend our Land".



GERMANY 1914-1918 76 x 50 cm

Artist unknown

A war poster featuring a peasant farming scene. The poster says: 'Do you want this? ... Defend our land.'

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