

The Age of Expectancy and Anxiety: Cultural Modernism and the Coming of the Great War – STEVEN L. WRIGHT

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“Expectancy and surprise are the notes of the age. Expectancy belongs by nature to a time balanced uneasily between two great periods of change. On the one hand is a past still showing faint survivals of vitality; on the other is the future but hardly coming to birth. The years as they pass still appear as years of preparation, a time of waiting rather than a time of action.”

C.F.G. Masterman,

In Peril of Change: Essays Written in Time of Tranquility, 1905

Few question the immediate cause of The Great War. Gavrilo Princip’s accurate shots and each government’s implementation of long-held and pre-planned diplomatic and military maneuvering guaranteed destruction and death. Throughout the summer of 1914, political leaders, soldiers and civilians expressed greater support with events than disagreement. Throughout England and the Continent, enthusiastic crowds filled grand rail depots, cheering and hugging soldiers leaving for the front. Reflection and questioning came only years later.

Nationalism and a 19th century view of “adventure” motivated many to support unconditionally the call to arms. While these jingoistic and redemptive spirits help explain initial support, how did citizens and governments possess the stamina to continue? Was there something deeper, an intangible perhaps that enabled the combatants to rationalize the carnage and prolong the fighting?

Although a glacial movement, “cultural modernism” by 1914 was in the ascent, transforming art, literature, music, philosophy and architecture. On the eve of world war, Europe and England had encountered some aspect of “things” modern. Many intellectual esthetes of the avant-garde embraced modernism, and believed it to be the

vanguard of the new century that would purify and make anew. Politicians, members of the “academy,” and the establishment bristled at the “new” regardless of venue, relegating it to a radical fringe movement. If even aware, the masses cared little about what “modernism” meant because everyday life kept them too busy to ponder such trivialities.

Once the carnage began, nations justified their respective causes by labeling the enemy’s culture as decadent and impure. Vilifying the “foreign” elements of modernism that had infiltrated their own society soon followed. This tirade was more than simply propaganda. By 1914, modernism had penetrated so deeply throughout English and European societies that belligerents ironically were fighting not only the first “modern” war, but also a war *against* modernism. By 1918, modernism triumphed. The 20th century had begun.

Although modernism’s nascent beginnings antedated the war, the most protean reaction that arose from the ashes was a nostalgic waxing for “The Edwardian Era” or “Le Belle Epoque”. Disillusionment arrived with the peace, not the war, and the pervasiveness of the “new” throughout the 1920s abetted the longing for the era that paradoxically had nurtured modernism.