

CONTEXT

Paul Valéry was a French poet and critic who lived through WWI and died at the very end of WWII. In the excerpt below, Valéry attempts to describe how WWI deeply affected the European people.

DOCUMENT

The storm has died away, and still we are restless, uneasy, as if the storm were about to break. Almost all the affairs of men remain in a terrible uncertainty. We think of what has disappeared, we are almost destroyed by what has been destroyed; we do not know what will be born, and we fear the future. Our fears are much more precise [and clear] than our hopes; we confess that the charm of life is behind us, but doubt and disorder are in us and with us. There is no thinking man who can hope to dominate this anxiety, to escape from this impression of darkness.

We are a very unfortunate generation, whose lot has been to see our life coincide* with the arrival of great and terrifying events, the echo of which will resound* through all our lives.

One can say that all the fundamentals of the world have been affected by the war; something deeper has been worn away. You know how greatly the general economic situation has been disturbed, and the [political organization] of states, and the very life of the individual; you are familiar with the universal discomfort, hesitation, apprehension. But among all these injured things is the Mind. The Mind has indeed been cruelly wounded. It doubts itself profoundly.

SOURCE

Paul Valéry: On European Civilization and the European Mind, c. 1919, 1922.

Glossary:

*Coincide – to happen at the same time

*Resound – sound loudly and clearly

CONTEXT

Agnes Smedley was an American journalist who covered many important international events over the course of her life. In the excerpt below, she describes what life was like in Germany in 1923.

DOCUMENT

The week has witnessed looting* of many shops in various parts of the city, unrest in most cities throughout the country, and actual street fighting in many. Looting and rioting are [looked upon favorably by the] Communists and the reactionaries* alike. The Communists take advantage of it and preach their [beliefs]; the reactionaries do the same. They smile when they read of the frightful increase in the cost of living and say, "It has not yet gone far enough. It must be worse still before the masses realize the mistake they have made in establishing a republic*! We shall wait a bit longer." But most of the townspeople are so weary, so destroyed by uncertainty and long years of nervous strain, that they do not care what happens. They are tired of it all.

SOURCE

Agnes Smedley, *The Nation* (28th November 1923).

Glossary:

- *Looting – stealing during wartime or a riot
- *Reactionaries – a person opposed to social or political change that is considered liberal or radical
- *Republic – a government in which people elect representatives to govern them

CONTEXT

Philip Gibbs served as one of only five official British reporters during WWI. He continued with his career in journalism after the end of the war. In the excerpt below, Gibbs describes a scene in Russia several years after the end of the war.

DOCUMENT

In other houses they were still keeping themselves alive by a mixture of brownish powder made of leaves ground up and mixed with the husks of grain. Others were eating some stuff which looked like lead.

It was a clay of some kind, dug from a hillside name Bitarjisk, and had some nutritive quality, though for young children it was harmful, making their stomachs swell. Everywhere we went in these villages peasant women, weeping quietly, showed us their naked children with distended stomachs, the sign of starvation at its last stage. From other cottages they came to where we stood, crossing themselves at the doorways in the old Russian way and then lamenting. Only once did we meet with a wild desperation which made the women fierce and frightening. They seemed to think we had brought food and they came shrieking and clawing at us like starving animals, as indeed they were! Mostly they were quiet, even in their weeping, and we went into homes where the little ones looked like fairy-tale children but with the wolf outside the door waiting for them.

SOURCE

Gibbs, Philip. "Famine in Russia" October 1921.

CONTEXT

Germany faced a period of extreme inflation during the 1920's. In this excerpt, the author describes some of the common situations and emotions of the time.

DOCUMENT

There is not much to add. It pounds daily on the nerves: the insanity of numbers, the uncertain future, today, and tomorrow become doubtful once more overnight. An epidemic of fear, naked need: lines of shoppers, long since an unaccustomed sight, once more form in front of shop, first in front of one, then in front of all. No disease is as contagious as this one. The lines have something suggestive about them: the women's glances, their hastily donned kitchen dresses, their careworn, patient faces. The line always send the same signal: the city, the big stone city will be shopped empty again. Rice, 80,000 marks a pound yesterday, costs 160,000 marks today, and tomorrow perhaps twice as much; the day after, the man behind the counter will shrug his shoulders, "No more rice." Well then, noodles! "No more noodles." Barley, groats, beans, lentils – always the same, buy, buy, buy. The piece of paper, the spanking brand-new note, still moist from the printers, paid out today as a weekly wage, shrinks in value on the way to the grocer's shop. The zeros, *the multiplying zeros!* "Well, zero, zero ain't nothing."

They rise with the dollar - hate desperation, and need – daily emotions like daily rates of exchange.

SOURCE

Kroner, Friedrich. "Overwrought Nerves" in *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (August 26, 1923).