Rites of Spring

By Modris Eksteins (1989)

When one thinks of World War One the image that comes to mind is the one of futile trench warfare that characterised the long and bloody conflict. However there is another image that is harder to imagine today but is of perhaps greater significance and that is of the enthusiastic crowds urging on their respective leaders to proclaim war in July and August of 1914. What lay behind this enthusiasm is the focus of this important work by Modris Eksteins.

He sees in the outbreak of World War One the beginning of a modern consciousness, centred on transience and inwardness that is still very much with us today. Of course thinking about the development of ‘Modernism’ we associate this with the movement which expressed itself artistically in opposition to the traditions of the past and which emerged in the late nineteenth century. World War One is also a part of this modernist world in the sense that it created something new that broke with the past. That something new centred on the involvement and endorsement of the people of the European nations. Previous wars such as the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 or the Boer War of 1901 or even the American Civil War can be seen as having a clear political and diplomatic focus. They conform to Clausewitz’s aphorism about war being the continuation of politics by other means. All sides knew for what they were fighting for. Notwithstanding the attempts of historians to give World War One a similar purpose and focus it is clear that it was qualitatively different. Beginning with the shooting of the Archduke in Sarajevo and ending in four years of global conflict it has all of the characteristics of an irrational and almost suicidal self destructive episode. It is this irrationality that is the focus of Eksteins book.

In exploring the performance of Stravinsky’s ‘The rite of spring’ in Paris in 1913 Eksteins is able to show the unconscious connections that exist between art and the wider society. For Diaghilev of the Ballet Russes the attempt to create a ‘total art form’ represented something that transcended reason and morality and gave to the aesthetic performance itself the only means to achieve true freedom. Of course the performance of May 1913 caused a sensation with many in the audience horrified by the deliberately unsettling music and the themes of suicide and of paganism. But as Eksteins demonstrates the avant garde artist is really just articulating a latent feeling that is already present in the wider society. There was a sense that the old certainties of the nineteenth century world had run their course and that something new was about to emerge.
In many respects that ‘something new’ was represented in concrete terms by the rise of Germany. Only united in 1870 and newly industrialised and urbanised Germany was a new force in Europe that was keen to break out of the British dominated nineteenth century world. It represented something new and unsettling that at the same time found it difficult to articulate what its actual aims and objectives were. In order to transcend the bourgeois British world of law and commerce Germany tended to turn to new forms ‘not of laws and finiteness but in terms of symbol, metaphor and myth.’ This is why the war was seen in Germany as one representing a war for a way of life and a cultural war which would finally allow Germany to fulfil its destiny and end the stultifying bourgeois liberal world for ever. For Eksteins ‘the faustian moment that Wagner and Diaghilev and other moderns sought to achieve in their art forms had now arrived for society as a whole.’

For the British the war was a war to preserve a system of order, national and international. Germany threatened the moral basis of Pax Britannica, which had given the world a century of peace and so for Britain was more of a practical necessity. The British took with them their sporting fetish and their passion for rules and for ‘playing the game’ while the Germans believed that they were on a spiritual quest to create something new and intangible. It is clear from Eksteins writing that Germany was the country most inclined to conduct the war in a different way. In that sense there is an element of truth in the account of the treatment of civilians in Belgium in that Germany viewed the distinction between civilians and the military as being outdated and old fashioned. Even if the wilder stories reported in the British press may have been motivated by propaganda the facts are shocking enough and show that a new dehumanising sensibility was being born. Eksteins also shows us that Germany was the first to develop and use gas and submarines in a systematic way paving the way for the new total wars of the Twentieth century. All of which could count as a conventional war history ascribing guilt to the German side but Eksteins is writing a cultural history and is much more interested in delving deeper into the zeitgeist of the time.

In his chapter called ‘Reason in Madness’ Eksteins investigates some important issues that arose as the war progressed. In general the British and German troops remained loyal right to the end. For Eksteins literature about the war does not accurately reflect this. He contends that incidents such as the mutiny at Etaples in 1917 were isolated incidents and didn’t have any general significance. It is clear that we view the war through the prism of today’s contemporary attitudes which find it difficult to appreciate the values of the time. The values which held society together at that time were centred on a conception of Duty which is almost
entirely lacking in our modern therapeutic age. Duty required sacrifice for the greater good, something inconceivable in a society that preaches personal well being and happiness as the highest achievement. Even viewing the war as an Imperialist war can create a false picture of the time notwithstanding its wider validity as an explanation of the forces at work. On this reading the soldiers on both sides were duped by their respective Ruling Classes into fighting a war that was against their class interests and therefore it was only a question of time before this became apparent and a European wide revolution could have been the result. But this is to read history backwards from a left wing viewpoint that only developed later on. For anyone like myself attracted to this view it is very easy to see the mutiny at Etaples, represented in dramatic fashion by Alan Bleasdale in the Drama ‘The Monocled Mutineer’ as a true picture of the situation rather than as a drama using dramatic licence to make good TV. Far harder to represent the reality of the war as a catastrophic experience that was itself perpetuated by the people’s willingness to endure it. For Eksteins society was held together by a ‘positivist ethic of accomplishment’ and the population was for the first time enveloped by the institutions of the State which meant a high degree of social control. Where this was lacking in countries such as Russia it was there that the first breakdown in discipline occurred.

Of course the concept of Duty that was present at the beginning did not survive the slaughter and what emerged was a very different way of seeing the world. But as Eksteins points out it did not mean that people necessarily sought out political solutions and answers to what had happened. Rather people were more prone to retreat from the external world all together and seek escape into a private world. The stimulus that came after the war was to the personal imagination rather than to any social creativity. For Eksteins ‘reality, a sense of proportion and reason’ were the major casualties of the war. This is the key to the modern world that we also inhabit. There has been a split between the social and the cultural realms so that the individual is able to live a life of spiritual liberality whilst the social realm remains outside of their control. A connection between the individual and the society of which they are a part has been broken and World War One is when this occurred.

This broken sense of reality is traced by Eksteins through to its most extreme manifestation in Nazi Germany. But the crisis of values that the Great War heralded affected all of western society. Disciplines such as History lost their bearings as instead of the rational documenting of reality it became an individual experience or more often portrayed as an individual nightmare. The Nazis were only the most extreme form of a common social malaise
represented by the retreat from reality and the consequent need for spectacle and events to hide behind.

Eksteins leaves us with a conundrum. It seems we have been living the past 100 hundred years with a broken social world that has not fully recovered from the damage done during the course of World War One. There have been attempts to move on and forget the war and its consequences and at times it seems we have recovered. After all we have advanced technologically in terms of health and wealth and we have put a man on the moon and achieved great things. But we have yet to recover and renew perhaps the greatest casualty of the war. That casualty was the Enlightenment faith in human progress based on reason and an optimistic belief in our common humanity.