Laughter in the Trenches

Laughter in the Trenches: Humour and Front Experience in German First World War Narratives

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Humour and War: Two Mutually Exclusive Phenomena?

The first question that many of the readers of this study will probably ask looking at its title is: is there anything at all funny about the First World War? The connection between humour and the topic of the war may appear unlikely, for we are used to regard the conflict of 1914-1918 as grim and serious, one of the lowest points in 20th-century history. Still, is there no place for humour in it? And if there is, of what nature is that humour? Though the first question may seem more baffling initially, if we agree—and I hope most readers will in the course of this study—that some scenes in the narrations about the Great War are able to evoke humorous responses, it is the second question that makes things complicated. How do we come to an understanding about which literary images have the same appeal to all of us: which make us laugh, smile, or express our amusement in any other form? And will the same scenes still be funny when we talk in detail about why they are funny? Doesn't dissecting them kill the joy?

These are just some basic difficulties I encountered while investigating the functions of humour and laughter in German narratives about the First World War. The main reason for the problems is the ephemeral and highly subjective character of humour: the essence of any humorous situation is very difficult to define, and, when defined, loses a lot of its attractiveness. As the American author and prose stylist Elwyn Brooks White summed up the investigative effort in his essay "Some Remarks on Humour": "Humour can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind".[1] Yet despite this discouraging premise, humour and laughter as subjects of study have attracted scholars and writers for centuries and provoked

[1] Elwyn Brooks White, "Some Remarks on Humor," in *Essays* (New York and Hagerstown: Harper & Row, 1977) 243.

countless attempts to create theories about why people find something funny and what the nature of humour and laughter is. Especially since the late 1960s, we can observe a growing interest in humour and laughter in scholarly literature, with significant contributions in the fields of psychology, medicine, linguistics, philosophy, and literary criticism. The emerging interest in humour can be interpreted as a sign of appreciation of the important role that this phenomenon plays in human life—in all aspects of human life, including war.

In this study, I would like to concentrate on the incongruity between the topics of humour, laughter, and war in First World War German literature. My selection of the events of the Great War as the content of the literary depictions is not coincidental. The First World War, with its disregard for individual life on the battlefield and its employment of technology to a degree never experienced in military history before, pushed the limits of the imaginable with the uncovering of the massive character of death and destruction. As Modris Eksteins has put it in the title of his study about the Great War, the shock of this war constitutes the "birth of the modern age."[2] The authors of the literary representations of the military conflict who participated in the war as front soldiers subsequently struggled to find the most suitable language for the depiction of the scale and impact of the killing on the battlefield. The dominance of death and suffering in their—now popular—images of the war is the main reason why the occurrences of humour in the context of the First World War may seem incongruous, perhaps even shocking. Readers usually solve the experience of incongruity by disregarding or downplaying the occurrences of "funniness" (with which humour and laughter are associated) in the "serious" depictions of the First World War. Yet this is precisely what interests me: the controversial area where the juxtapositions of apparently conflicting elements, such as episodes characterized as funny in a setting dominated by extreme violence and death, provoke questions about their purpose and their functional placement in the narration.

In order of procedure, I will first—excuse my joke provoked by the military context—choose my weapon from the wide arsenal of existing humour research. In Chapter Two of this study, I will provide a survey of the terminology used in humour scholarship and describe the attempts to define the phenomena under investigation here. I will discuss the relationship between and outline the main theories of humour and laughter

[2] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1994).

along with most established existing taxonomies of the theories, concentrating on theories of humour and laughter based on incongruity and superiority. Incongruity and superiority, as the main components of those humorous situations commonly associated with inter-social relationships, are located in opposition to more individualistic factors playing a role in humour. They interest me especially because I intend to focus on the social significance of humour and laughter and the impact both phenomena have on interpersonal interactions. The theoretical concerns emerging from the social applications of humour and laughter will also be discussed here.

My study focuses on selected diaries, novels, and short stories based on autobiographical experiences written by German authors during the Great War and in the Weimar era (1919-1933). The especially rich artistic resonance of the war in German literature derives doubtlessly from the fact that Germany was one of the main participants in a conflict that affected, directly or indirectly, the majority of its population. The same can be said, however, about British or French first-hand accounts of the war. What I find especially significant in the context of the literary processing of the war experience in Germany is the early reception of the war works and their instrumentalization in contemporaneous power struggles (that, in return, influenced the works' positioning within the literary discourse). The problem of the interpretation of the Great War—reflected mainly in the German literary representations of the conflict—grew into a dividing issue between the antidemocratic conservative militarist groups and the pacifist left-wing intellectuals and politicians of the time. This will be illustrated in Chapter Three, in which I will provide an overview of the situation on the literary market in Germany in the last years of the war and in the Weimar Republic and describe the debate about the evaluation of the war literature and about the experience of the lost war in the last years before Hitler's seizure of power.

In Chapters Four to Seven, which constitute the main analytical part of my study, I will take a closer look at material selected from the wide range of war literature published between 1914 and 1933. The deciding factor in the selection of the material was the crucial role played by soldier diaries, autobiographical novels and short stories in the socio-political life of Weimar Germany between 1919 and 1933. They are texts for which the "authenticity of the experience" of their author has been assumed by the readers: *In Stahlgewittern* [*Storm of Steel*] (1920) by Ernst Jünger (described in Chapter Four), *Vormarsch* [*The Advance from Mons 1914*] (1916) by Walter Bloem (Chapter Five), *Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa* [*The Case of Sergeant Grischa*] (1927) by Arnold Zweig (Chapter

Six), and *Im Westen nichts Neues* [*All Quiet on the Western Front*] (1929) by Erich Maria Remarque (Chapter Seven). My rationales for selecting the four works and for placing them in this particular order are the following: first, the common subject of the works is the First World War. Given the overwhelming number of works on the First World War that were published on the German market between 1914 and 1933, the starting point for the selection of the material is determined by the participation of the narrators and/or protagonists as German front soldiers in the war. Second, the literary material I selected for the purpose of my study allows me to reflect both main directions in the narrative interpretation of the war experience: the glorification of the usefulness of the military actions for the development of German society (right-wing literary and political formations) and the negation of the meaning of war (left-wing groups). The two most acclaimed and well-known representatives of the two directions frame the study: Ernst Jünger and his *In Stahlgewittern* opens the analytical part of the study, and Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*, the most popular German First World War narration, which has yielded a respectable number of parodies and travesties, concludes it. Between the two poles of the political and literary landscape of the Weimar Republic I place Walter Bloem and his war memoir *Vormarsch* as an intriguing and almost completely forgotten voice of the older generation of conservative nationalists who participated in the war, and *Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa*, Arnold Zweig's successful novel debut that initiated the literary and political debate about the lost war and prepared the ground for the controversial reception of Remarque's novel. The selected works also represent a variety of literary forms and extra-literary circumstances that influenced their publication and success with the readers. They include a first-hand account written as a diary and prepared for publication during the war (*Vormarsch*); a first-hand account that underwent a series of changes and editions and was published in book form directly after the war (*In Stahlgewittern*); fictional material of dramatic origin that was transformed into a novel a decade after first being written (*Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa*); and a fictional text that appeared as an autobiographical novel preceded by a skilfully crafted marketing campaign (*Im Westen nichts Neues*).

All the selected works in my study became—although to different degrees of intensity—objects of the debates and struggles of antagonistic social and political movements in Weimar Germany and were used to support different ideological positions within the Republic. Therefore, the goal of my study is to investigate whether the humour and laughter present in the narratives also contributed to the development of the images of war

that dominated the war discourse and post-war cultural and socio-political debates in Germany. I would like to focus on the relationship between representations of military violence, power, and humour, in order to determine whether the power structures constructed by the narratives are confirmed or questioned by the use of humour and laughter. The most important questions are: first, how are humour and laughter presented in the discussed works? Here, I will use close textual analysis and focus on the representation of humour; my goal is to show in what narrative situations humour and laughter are mentioned and to search for a pattern in the introduction of humorous episodes and laughter scenes in the narrations. This will allow me to establish the narrative conventions in the representation of humour and laughter, conventions exhibited by all selected works about the First World War, regardless of their ideological assignment. Second, I will concentrate on the question of whether humour and laughter confirm or contradict other rhetorical means of the narratives, means that have been emphasized and instrumentalized in the post-war discussion about the war and that have helped place the specific works (along with its authors) in the "pro-war" or "anti-war" category. I believe that the results of my investigation will provide a basis for reconsidering such classifications based on conventional reception history: what the soldiers in the narrations are laughing about provides important yet mostly overlooked clues that help define the narrators' positions towards individual and structural violence, towards the question of the meaning of war, and towards the institutions of military or political power. Analysed from this perspective, the texts reveal that the trenches dug between the pacifist and militarist camps in the Weimar Republic are shallower than they appear.

In order to achieve the goals described above, I will focus on the social relationships in the narrations in order to show how they are determined, expressed, and influenced by humour and laughter. Of special interest are the social interactions between soldiers in the military unit, between soldiers of the same rank, and between soldiers and their commanders. The hierarchical structure of the military allows me to analyse the relations among high-status soldiers who direct laughter towards other high-rank soldiers, low-status soldiers laughing at other soldiers (their commanders and comrades), high-status soldiers laughing at soldiers who receive orders from them, and among low-status soldiers who are laughed at by others. I will show whether the power structures within the closed and hierarchical group of the front military unit constituted by direct and structured violence (manifested, for example, in the form of orders, military drills, penalties, and rules) are confirmed or questioned by the use of humour and

laughter. The question of whether the humour and laughter used by members of the social group have a corrective, subversive, or inversive character and the influencing factors for this character will also be discussed.

In addition, I will describe the soldiers' contacts with their family and friends who do not face the front life and are not able to imagine the extensive use of military technology and massive destruction during the "material battles" of the First World War. I intend to demonstrate the use and functions of humour and laughter when members of two different social configurations (civilian world and martial world) are confronted and attempt to interact with each other during home stays, holidays, vacations, and hospital visits. I will consider the relationships between different generations (fathers and sons) and pose the question of how they use humour to start, re-build, or modify their relationship or to avoid a closer connection. I will further look at another type of intragroup relationship: the social interactions of the German soldiers with the enemy (members of the French, Russian, and English armies), in which laughter and humour are also applied to accomplish certain goals. Here, I will investigate in detail the function of humour and laughter in the reinforcement of national and racial stereotypes.

Recognizing the military as a social structure, I will pay special attention both to esteeming (inoffensive) and disparaging (aggressive) humour—explained in the Chapter Two of this study—and investigate the possible functions they play in establishing and maintaining the relationships within the social group of the military. The question of how to judge the character of humour and how to decide if humour is present in given narrative situations will be answered by analysing the narrator's and/or other figures' assessment of the depicted event. If German lexemes associated with the use of humour (such as "komisch," "lustig," "Komik," "witzig," "Witz," "spaßig," "possenhaft," "Spaß," "ulkig," "lachhaft," "ridikül," "lächerlich," etc.) appear in the narration, the event will be considered humorous, no matter what the reader's reception of the event might be. Lexemes describing the physical activity of laughter (such as "lachen," "grinsen," "lächeln," "schmunzeln," "kichern," "wiehern," "brüllen," etc.) will also be analysed carefully and in consideration of the narrative environment, given the generally accepted position in humour research that laughter is not necessarily connected to a humorous event. I will analyse the communication patterns between the participants in the established humorous relationship in order to determine the character of humour and its functions in the given relationship and setting.

Although there are a number of First World War literary representations authored by German women writers,[3] my selection is limited to works by male authors. The reasons for the selection of war works in regard to gender are twofold. First, during the First World War, the German army was a world dominated by males; women were almost completely excluded from military service in the first line. For that reason, the overwhelming majority of autobiographical texts authored by front soldiers that appeared on the market during and after the war were written by men. Second, assuming that the use of humour and laughter is gendered,[4] the "male" humour and laughter should demonstrate certain patterns in the homosocial group of the German army.[5] The situations described in the narratives are a testing ground for many assumptions about gender that were present in the German social discourse of the time, especially assumptions connecting masculinity with combat and war.[6]

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[3] See, for example, the studies about the German literary works authored by women: Catherine O'Brien, *Women's Fictional Responses to the First World War: A Comparative Study of Selected Texts by French and German Writers* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), or Joan Montgomery Byles, *War, Women, and Poetry, 1914-1945: British and German Writers and Activists* (Newark: U of Delaware Press, 1995). The most analyses are limited, however, to poems and fictional works. For the personal narratives by non-German women authors, see also Margaret R. Higonnet, *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (New York: Plume, 1999).

[4] See Helga Kotthoff, ed., *Das Gelächter der Geschlechter: Humor und Macht in Gesprächen von Frauen und Männern* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988).

[5] I use the term "homosocial" according to the definition offered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "'Homosocial' is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.' In fact, it is applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1.

[6] To the most conclusive research projects theorizing masculinities belong the studies linking combat, the military, and violence with masculinity and investigating the development of militant masculinity models in national societies. Nationalism, according to Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, is a set of cultural constructions. According to that concept, George Mosse in *Das Bild des Mannes: Zur Konstruktion der modernen Männlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997) describes militant masculinity as a centerpiece of all varieties of nationalist movements. The "geobody of the nation" (the image of the homeland as a female

Therefore, I am interested in demonstrating what constitutes the "masculinity" of soldiers, and how this masculinity is affirmed or questioned by the laughter of men. My work is an attempt to connect social theories of humour and laughter with the myths of soldier masculinity and of the "band of brothers"—manifestations of male solidarity, affirmation of heroism, physical strength, sexual potential, and dominant and hostile behaviour towards women, who, in this discourse, are represented by the absent beloved the soldiers fantasize about and "occasional" women the soldiers meet (for example, during visits in occupied towns and villages, home visits, hospital stays). In this context, my study offers interpretations of sexually aggressive jokes and puns, jokes about the "feminized" ("womanish") and "weak" enemy, along with comments about relationships between men and women which are received (presented by the narrator) as funny and humorous. I will take a closer look at how the absence of actual women in the military unit is compensated for and to what extent the typical gender roles are modified or subverted by humorous uses of communication patterns. The role played by soldiers, defined as "masculine," has a performative character and consists of conventions that are constantly repeated, imitated or mimed. I will examine these conventions, and the way they are impersonated, according to the concept of performativity of gender.[7] From this point of view, the performance of gender roles and family roles within the one-gender social system of the military unit is remarkable: male soldiers sometimes take up the role of the mother (confirmed, for example, by witty remarks from other soldiers), while others fit into the roles of the father and children.

What I am not going to do in this study—dodging the bullet shot in the opening questions of this chapter, if I may use the military metaphor again—is conduct an investigation of the present or timeless humoristic appeal of the discussed narrations. This means that I do not intend to look

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body) is a gendered entity, and national narratives often define the duties of men and women in a dichotomous, gendered way. The specialized studies that investigate the relation between masculinity, combat, and their cultural representations include Klaus Theweleit's *Männerphantasien* (Frankfurt am Main: Rowohlt, 1977-78), or David Morgan's *Theater of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities* (London: Sage, 1994).

[7] I am following the concept of performativity of gender proposed by Judith Butler. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

for humour and laughter in places where their use has not been described in the narrative or implied by the genre of the work. I believe that the attempts to answer the question of whether the present reader would judge the depicted scenes as humorous or funny does not yield any productive results that can be used in further theoretical investigation of humour. The reason is simple: the factors that contribute to humour production depend on a plethora of individual differences which defy all survey attempts. Depending, for example, on the individual's life experience, age, gender, race, education, and literary preferences, the social configuration the individual is entering, the repetitive exposure to the scene, and other factors, the reader can find a scene funny that no other reader of the same text would perceive in a similar way. What's more: the same reader may not find the scene funny in a different setting, for example while reading it for a second time, in a different mood or disposition, or in the presence of another person. In short, the question of whether there is something that never ceases to be funny and can be always seen as such—like the universal and extremely dangerous "funniest joke in the world" from Monty Python's *Flying Circus*—has to be answered negatively.[8]

[8] See Graham Chapman, "The Funniest Joke in the World," in *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Episode 1*, DVD, A&E Home Video, 1999.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORIES OF HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER

No attempt to provide a comprehensive theory of humour—that would account for every occurrence of and condition for a humorous situation—has been able to satisfy all scholars involved in humour research. Existing theories of humour are limited to particular disciplines: for instance, their authors aspire to define humour within the areas of medicine, psychology, literature, visual arts, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, while a more interdisciplinary approach is needed. The scholars' problems with analysing humour emerge already with the attempt to create a definition of humour that would encompass the complexity of the phenomenon, explain the enormously broad spectrum of humour appearances, and satisfy all investigators of humour who try to capture the multiple conditions under which humour can be observed. The theorists are therefore divided over the causes, mechanisms, and functions of humour and often offer explanations that are very effective in accounting for certain aspects of humour while completely disregarding others.

The position in humour research of another phenomenon related to humour, laughter, is also disputed. Laughter, which is constituted by a series of physiological reflexes, such as clonic spasms of the diaphragm and face muscle contractions, is often described as the overt expression of humour. A close relationship between humour and laughter is commonly asserted both in general assumptions about the nature of humour and in the specialized literature on the subject. Laughter is interpreted as a behavioral pattern typical for but not limited to human beings that can be observed in the early stages of physical, physiological, and behavioral development.[1]

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[1] See Ruth Wendell Wasburn, *A Study of the Smiling and Laughing of Infants in the First Year of Life* (Worchester: Clark University, 1929); Ambrose, Anthony Ambrose, "The Age of Onset of Ambivalence in Early Infancy: Indications from the Study of Laughing," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 4 (1963): 167-81.

Many scholars assume that laughter, as a typical reaction to humorous situations, is universal across cultures.[2]

Many of the earlier attempts to define humour—especially those dealing with the phenomenon in the 19th century—equate humour with laughter and do not consider the occurrences of non-humorous laughter or of humorous situations that do not culminate in the laughter of any of the parties involved. In the most of the literature about humour in the 20th century, however, humour and laughter are perceived as two different phenomena not necessarily complementary to each other: observations of human behavior during the First and Second World Wars have made clear that non-humorous situations can also induce laughter, especially under conditions of extreme stress and conflicting impulses. Other factors are also in play. According to David H. Munro's study *Argument of Laughter* (1951), the most frequent non-humorous triggers of laughter include: tickling, laughing gas (NO_2), nervousness, relief after a strain, release from restraint, the defense against abuse or peer pressure, the experience of stress or horror (when the recipient "laughs it off"), the expression of physical and emotional well-being, play, make-believe, and the winning of a contest or competition.[3]

On the other hand, there are situations recognized by the recipient as funny that do not necessarily lead to a laughing response, usually in the case when the recipient is alone. In general, laughter is seen as the overt but not as the sole expression of humour and is not limited to humorous situations. Laughter is a response to humour on the level of psychological reflexes and is described as a chain of physiological processes.

Some newer studies still neglect the fact that humour and laughter may be different phenomena, for instance Neil Schaeffer's *The Art of Laughter* (1981), where the difference between humour and laughter is not marked, though the distinction between humour and laughter is currently the most dominant tendency in humour research and is supported by experimental studies. Patricia Keith-Spiegel, in her theoretical overview of humour research "Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues" (1972), makes a clear distinction between humour and laughter and remarks rightly: "[I]f laughter were indeed an exact yardstick with which to measure humour experiences, we might have solved many of the riddles of

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[2] See the overview of anthropological research on humour by Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 1985), 22-23.

[3] David H. Munro, *Argument of Laughter* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 20-34.

humour long ago".[4] In the most recent studies on humour, the division between humorous and non-humorous laughter is respected and problematized, for instance by Paul Lewis in *Comic Effects* (1989), which criticizes sharply Schaeffer's theoretical approach and rejects the assumption that laughter is the only expression of humour.[5] Robert R. Provine, in his sociological study *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (2000), offers an overview of the research on laughter and argues that—contrary to the older notion of laughter—laughs and smiles are most often found in non-humorous social interactions and define the relations between the participants in the interactions.[6]

The discrepancy between laughter and humour, discovered by the fields of sociology and literary studies relatively late, was noticed in the field of medicine starting in the late 19th century. Particularly the pathological, non-humorous variants of laughter have enjoyed the interest of neurologists, but very recently the appearances of laughter that is not associated with brain dysfunctions have also been investigated.[7] In addition, the relationship between humour and smiling constitutes a point of interest for humour scholars, as do the different levels of laughter intensity expressed in a variety of physiological reactions. In my study, I acknowledge the distinction between humour and laughter described above and investigate the occurrences of joking interaction between the figures, the narrator's descriptions of subjectively experienced feeling that he calls "humour," and the depictions of laughter or smiling in the narrations, without assuming that all the occurrences result necessarily from amusement about an event, figure, or other element in the narrative.

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[4] Patricia Keith-Spiegel, "Early Conceptions of Humor: Varietes and Issues," in *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, edited by Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul McGhee (New York, London: Academic Press, 1972) 17.

[5] Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) 5-7.

[6] Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Viking, 2000). See also Robert R. Provine, "Laughter," *American Scientist* 84.1 (1996): 38-47.

[7] For information about research in the field of medicine, see the article "Neural Correlates of Laughter and Humour" by Barbara Wild, Frank A. Rodden, Wolfgang Grodd, and Willibald Ruchoffers, which provides a detailed description of terminology and recent medical assumptions about laughter and humour: Barbara Wild, et al., "Neural Correlates of Laughter and Humour," *Brain* 126.10 (2003): 2121-38.

Terminology

The definition of laughter as a chain of physiological processes and its separation from humour is an important step in providing more clarity to the field of humour research. But what is actually the phenomenon called "humour"? Do we all use the word to describe the same occurrences? Outside of the discipline of clinical medicine, where the nomenclature is precisely set,[8] there is no consensus about the terminology. This is especially true in literary scholarship on humour and laughter. Although "humour" is the broadest and most commonly used term in the anglophone world to describe the phenomenon that may lead to laughter or other expressions of physical comfort and relaxation, there exist many synonymous terms that describe similar occurrences. In addition to the theoretical difficulties with the categorization of the appearances of humour, the dominant attitude towards humour is based on the assumption that there is a general consensus about what is "funny" and that we do not have to negotiate its definition. This intuitive assessment of humour connected with the arbitrary use of terminology contributes even further to the confusion about the subject. Many partial synonyms for humorous occurrences are accounted for by Patricia Keith-Spiegel and in the analysis *Humor and Society: Explorations in the Sociology of Humor* by Marvin Koller (1988). Keith-Spiegel and Koller remark that besides the term "humour," most popular in the English language context are the words "funny," "wit," "comic," "comedy," "joke" and "jokingly," "satiric," "mirthful," "ridicule" and "ridiculous," "ludicrous," "laughable," "amusement" and "amusing." In total, the authors name over fifty words that are used to describe the objects and forms that lead to the production of humour, the characteristics of these objects and forms, and/or the effects of humour production. Often two or more terms are used interchangeably and arbitrarily to describe the complex phenomenon. In the German literature on humour, the terms "Komödie," "das Komische," "Komik," and "Witz," to give just a few examples, are used to describe similar subjects, but the semantic connotations are often different from their English equivalents. The discrepancies result from the different development of the scholarly discourses on humour and the divergences in

[8] See the contributions by K. Poeck, "Pathological Laughter and Crying," in *Handbook of Clinical Neurology, vol. 45*, ed. Frederics, J. A. M. (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 1985), 219-25. Also Barbara Wild, et al., "Neural Correlates of Laughter and Humour," *Brain* 126.10 (2003): 2121-38.

the literary tradition of humorous genres.[9] These differences are discussed in the analytical part of my study. Although I provide the English translation of passages from the original German texts, I recognize that the semantic compatibility of German and English words will vary, depending on the translator's interpretation of the particular German word describing a humorous occurrence (including my own translation of works not yet published in English). In cases where this is particularly problematic, I refer to the German original text and the contextual use of a particular word or phrase as clues about the humorous character of the described interaction.

Theories of Humour and Laughter: A Short Survey

Attempts to give a clear answer to the question of whether humour is a stimulus, a response, or a disposition, bring scholars into theoretical difficulties. Authors often offer explanations that are very effective in clarifying certain aspects of humour but overlook others. While many taxonomies of laughter have been produced, there is no specific theory of humour that would be generally accepted among humour scholars—humour can take many forms and can fulfill many different functions. People exhibit vast individual differences with respect to their responsiveness to humour: while laughter is acknowledged as the universal response to humour across cultures, the spectrum of events that evoke laughter or smiling is practically unlimited. Different characteristics of humour are considered and accented in various theories: they embrace the cognitive, physiological, psychodynamic, social, and behaviouristic elements of humour. Thus, the number of theoretical approaches to humour is difficult to survey, and the theories of humour are classified differently depending on the various criteria used by the authors. Any scholar who wants to thematise humour in his or her research therefore faces the necessity of selecting the theoretical approach that would be most productive in reaching the goal of the particular study. My study does not attempt to specify what humour is and to explain its conditions,

[9] See, for example, the use of the words "das Komische" and "die Komödie" in the prominent German scholarly works on humour: Hans Robert Jauß, "Über den Grund des Vergnügens am komischen Helden," in *Das Komische*, ed. Wolfgang Preisendanz and Rainer Warning (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1976); Bernhard Greiner, *Die Komödie: Eine theatralische Sendung; Grundlagen und Interpretationen* (Tübingen: Francke, 1992).

causes, and mechanisms, but rather to show how humour and laughter construct or contribute to the relationships between figures in First World War works. For this reason, I will concentrate on those aspects of humour and laughter that serve the interests of group relationships and will interpret humour and laughter as social mechanisms with definite social functions. My aim is to present an analysis of the part played by humour and laughter in the social life of the military during the First World War, as depicted in narratives written during and after the War. As the theoretical basis for the analysis of humour in works about the First World War, I will use elements of the sociological approach to humour, with a concentration on the functionalist perspective.

The assumptions about the nature of humour that have been developed in literature usually concentrate on a few basic concepts that explain how a humorous situation occurs. The large number of theoretical attempts reflects the level of complexity of the problem. I will briefly describe the most popular and recent classifications of humour theories in order to provide the ground for the methodological basis of my study, which emphasises only the social aspects of humor as the most productive for the purpose of my analysis.

In her above-mentioned article, Patricia Keith-Spiegel recalls scholarly overviews of theories of humour created prior to the 1970s. She divides the humour theories into eight major groups (she collects over one hundred humour theories). The first group, biological, instinct, and evolution theories—popular until the first half of the 20th century—interprets humour as a necessary biological function of living organisms. According to this view, the humour function is "built into" the nervous system of living organisms and serves the purpose of homeostasis and adaptation to the ever-changing environment. Scholars working within the biological paradigm equate humour and laughter with pre-lingual communication in primitive societies, where they are associated with good news for the community and signals of safety.[10] Another hypothesis traces laughter to aggressive behaviour (exposing teeth and noises that could be interpreted as assaulting) and sees laughter as a substitute for physical assault.[11] Some scholars point out the pleasurable aspect of laughter as an

[10] See Henry C. McComas, "The Origin of Laughter," *Psychological Review* 30 (1923): 45-55; D. Hayworth, "The Social Origin and Function of Laughter," *Psychological Review* 35 (1928): 367-85.

[11] See Horace M. Kallen, "The Aesthetic Principle in Comedy," *American Journal of Psychology* 22 (1911): 137-57; George Washington Crile, *Man: An Adaptive Mechanism* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); Anthony Mario Ludovici, *The Secret*

effect of the development of societies.[12] As we can see, biological, instinct, and evolution theories emphasize the social aspects of humour and laughter and the connection between laughter and aggression against strangers in the group—aspects of particular interest for the present study.

Superiority theories stress humour as the laughing person or group's manifestation of triumph over other people. Central to the humour experience of an individual or group is the conviction of being better than other people who, in the opinion of the laughing person or group, are uglier, less fortunate, or weaker in comparison and whose actions are regarded as foolish.[13] The view implies the existence of constant competition between the members of a group or between groups and presupposes the creation of hierarchical constellations in which the laughing person or group always takes the dominant position. However, not all theorists who associate humour with superiority believe that laughter necessarily has a contemptuous and hostile character—it may be also be combined with empathy or sympathy.[14] Another quite recent modification of the superiority theory is an inferiority theory that looks for the source of humour in self-depreciation, in the demonstrated inferiority of the laughing person.[15]

Incongruity theories rely on the understanding that humorous situations take place when two inconsistent, unsuitable, contrasted events or ideas are confronted with each other. Incongruity theories stress the perception of the contrast of concepts or situations as the condition for humour. When a situation does not fulfill the expectations of the observer, deviates from the "normal" pattern to which he or she is accustomed, humour can occur

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of Laughter (London: Constable Press, 1932); Albert Rapp, "Toward an Eclectic and Multilateral Theory of Laughter and Humor," *Journal of General Psychology* 36 (1947): 207-19.

[12] See J. C. Gregory, *The Nature of Laughter* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1924); Albert Rapp, "A Phylogenetic Theory of Wit and Humor," *Journal of Social Psychology* 30 (1949): 81-96.

[13] See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (København and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), 7-63; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 45-46.

[14] See, for example, Leigh Hunt, *Wit and Humor, Selected From the English Poets* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1846); Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875); Ransom Carpenter, "Laughter, A Glory in Sanity," *American Journal of Psychology* 33 (1922): 419-22.

[15] See Robert Solomon, "Are the Three Stooges Funny? Soitainly! (or When is it OK to Laugh?)," *Ethics and Values in the Information Age*, ed. Joel Rudinow and Anthony Graybosch (South Melbourne: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002).

(although it has to be noted that not every incongruous situation is funny). To give an example from my own experience: one of the incongruous situations I perceived on several occasions while explaining the topic of this study was when my conversation partner exhibited astonishment about the possibility of humour in German literature. The confrontation of the assumption that Germans do not have a sense of humour with my search for humour in German texts creates an incongruity that appeared funny to many an interlocutor. Early incongruity theories stress the importance of contrast, such as that between laughter and fear described by James Beattie, who remarks that "laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them."[16] According to incongruity theories, the observer of a humorous situation comprehends it either by interpolating the multiple inconsistent frames within the structure of the situation or by extrapolating from or referring back to background knowledge. The solution of the conflict—the comprehension that the connection between the contrasting elements is possible—results in laughter. Another well-known theory of incongruity was suggested in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [*Critique of Judgment*] (1790) by Immanuel Kant, who gave one of the best-known definitions of laughter as a result of incongruity: "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."[17]

The incongruity theory of laughter proposed by Kant also includes—as we can easily deduce—the element of surprise. The group of surprise theories emphasizes unexpectedness and shock as necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) for a humorous situation to take place. Like the incongruity theories, the surprise theories imply a breaking up of the routine course that the observer is following. However, the surprise theories also take into account the observer's adaptation to the repetition of the stimulus that unfolded the humorous reaction for the first time and explain the resistance to situations that have been funny before but are no longer when observed for two or more times.[18]

Configurational theories are related to incongruity theories as they see the source of humour in elements previously perceived as unrelated which

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[16] James Beattie, "Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition," in *Essays* (London: Creech, 1779), 348.

[17] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner, 1951), 54.

[18] See Harry Levi Hollingworth, "Experimental Studies in Judgment: Judgment of the Comic," *Psychological Review* 18 (1911): 132-56.

are now combined with each other to produce a humorous situation. The main difference between the two groups is the treatment of the perception of incongruous ideas or situations. Configurational theories emphasise the effect of the subjective "coming together" of elements that were previously disjointed, rather than the perception of the apparent disconnection between them. In a sense, configurational theories focus on conflict-solving and derive humour from the feeling of success in dealing with the problem.[19]

Ambivalence theories proclaim that humour is built on the incompatible emotions and feelings of the observer who is experiencing humour. This group of theories is also connected closely with incongruity theories, but puts more stress on the emotions and feelings emerging from the humorous situation than on the perception of ideas or situations. David H. Munro, in his *Argument of Laughter*, aptly describes the mixture of emotions: "We laugh whenever, on contemplating an object or a situation, we find opposite emotions struggling within us for mastery."[20] The conflicting elements could include love mixed with hate (and so, the German "Hassliebe" ["love-hate relationship"] would be an occasion to laugh), playful chaos mixed with seriousness, mania connected with depression.[21]

Release and relief theories prescribe to humour the function of relief from strain or constraint as well as release of excess tension or accumulated energy. The relaxation is embedded in the physical act of laughing. Herbert Spencer was the first theoretician to state the decisive function of laughter—understood as muscular movements—in releasing the overload of nervous energy.[22]

And finally, the popular psychoanalytic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud, explains humour as a regulatory mechanism of psychic channels. Freud concentrated on the occurrences of "Witz" ["joke/joking"] and distinguishes between "innocent" and "tendentious" jokes.[23] The tendentious

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[19] See Paul H. Schiller, "A Configurational Theory of Puzzles and Jokes," *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 18 (1938): 217-34.
[20] David H. Munro, *Argument of Laughter* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 210.
[21] See G. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923).
[22] See Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," *Macmillan's Magazine* 1 (1860): 395-402.
[23] See Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (London: Imago Publishing, 1940).

jokes have a sexual or aggressive content and are capable of eliciting loud laughter, while innocent jokes have less emotional impact, provoking just a smile. Freud derived the discrepancy from his assumption that sexuality and aggression are strong and fundamental forces that are restrained in the process of socialization. Freud described the tendentious joke as an expression of inhibited tendencies that temporarily abolishes the social restrictions, builds a vent for aggression, and allows for the unloading of sexual tension. When the energy build-up in the psychic channels cannot be utilized (because of the censoring actions of the superego) it is released in laughter—as an action that requires less expenditure of energy.

The purpose of classifications like the one by Keith-Spiegel—and also the purpose of my short summary above—is to bring more clarity to the tangled field of interconnected concepts about humour and laughter. However, Keith-Spiegel's extensive and quite influential classification may in certain instances evoke the impression that the described theories are mutually exclusive and competitive. This is not the case by any means. Other popular classifications created since Keith-Spiegel's critical overview include Viktor Raskin's *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985), John Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (1987), and Salvatore Attardo's *Linguistic Theories of Humour* (1994). These overviews, as well as the survey proposed recently by Herbert M. Lefcourt in his study *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly* (2000), divide the considerations about humour into two or three main groups, with superiority and incongruity as the elements most commonly emphasised in humour perception. The emphasis on superiority seems to be the dominant tendency in contemporary humour research. In the analytical part of the study, I elaborate further on particular aspects of humour theories and the issues arising from them and concentrate on their application in specific narrative situations.

Social Aspects of Humour: Theoretical Concerns

Humour and its functions in various social relations only recently became the subject of sociological studies. The reason for the relative lack of scholarly reflection was, according to Chris Powell and George E. C. Paton, the wide-spread view of humour as "an individualistic and spontaneous expression of sheer creativity," whose "social structural and processual parameters" were deemed "much less tangible and hence not

readily amenable to sociological conceptualisation and theorizing".[24] The recognition that humour does not belong exclusively to the realm of free will, but is, as many other phenomena, conditioned by social configurations and in turn influences social interactions, yielded many important sociological contributions to the field of humour research. The sociology of humour concentrates on the use of humour by social actors as a means of control or resistance to and making sense of social relationships and societies of any kind. Yet within the subject of humour there are many paradigms that aim to provide an explanation of how a humorous situation takes place (for example, structural functionalism, conflict theories, Marxist analyses, social action theory, symbolic interactionism). Similarly, the appearances of humour can be studied on multiple levels, starting with the macro-societal level, where the significance of humour is investigated in relation to a particular society or type of society, and ending with the micro-societal level, where the scholars observe how humour regulates the relationships between group members in small-group situations.

In my study, I will mainly concentrate on how humour works on the micro-societal level and—according to the premise outlined before—attempt to provide conclusions about the negotiated models of soldier behaviour in various social configurations. In the following section, I present the elements of the most popular theories of humour that have impacted the investigation of social relations and the role humour plays in them. This theoretical basis will be used in the analytical part of my study.

Already ancient writers assumed that humour constitutes human interactions, sets the character of those interactions, and, by doing this, is a part of every social system and can therefore be analysed as a social process affecting the system. In *Philebus,* Plato describes how a person is made laughable by his/her self-ignorance. Plato considers that "ignorance is a misfortune," as the ignorant person thinks about him-/herself as having "wisdom or beauty, delusions which are comical in the weak and abhorrent in the strong."[25] Laughter fulfills the function of social corrective and is therefore allowed, but excessive laughter can also have a damaging effect on the laughing person, because he/she can lose rational control over him/herself and become less human. Laughter is, from an ethical point of view, to be avoided and constitutes a guilty pleasure. For

[24] Chris Powell, and George E. C. Paton, *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), xi.
[25] Plato, *Philebus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 116-19.

Plato, the stimulus to laugh is aggression and/or a feeling of superiority towards the objects of laughter—individuals who do not comply with the social norm.[26]

Subsequent theories of humour develop Plato and Aristotle's idea of a socially understood superiority. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) defines the humorous event as a moment of triumph which the laughing people achieve by observing the defects of others and comparing the imperfections of others with "apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."[27] Hobbes's humour has a hostile character, setting up power relations in the social group, but he also allows for a type of humour without offence, which has a group-consolidating function: people can sometimes laugh at outsiders "by observing the imperfections of other men."[28] Humour, as observed by Hobbes, appears to have two sides: on the one hand, it has the power to create hierarchies based on the real or imaginary advantages of the laughing person, on the other hand, it unites people by creating collective superiority.

Francis Hutcheson, in *Thoughts on Laughter* (1758), finds Hobbes's account of laughter as an aggressive self-assertion antisocial (ignoring the more consolidating function of humour) and attempts to interpret laughter as a socializing activity that evokes sympathy and fellow feeling. He is one of the first theoreticians to connect the feeling of superiority of a laughing person with the idea of incongruity: laughter results from "the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas as well as some resemblance in the principal idea," while the "contrary ideas" result very often from differences in social status.[29]

The 19th century brought the development of the concepts of superiority and incongruity. Alexander Bain**,** in his work *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), concludes that all humour involves the degradation of something and expands Hobbes's ideas of superiority by adding political institutions, ideas, and inanimate objects (anything that makes a claim to respect or is respected) as targets for laughter. Bain postulates that one doesn't need to be directly conscious of one's superiority: one can laugh sympathetically with another person who triumphs over his/her adversary. Herbert Spencer, in his *Physiology of Laughter* (1860), follows a similar

[26] In the *Poetics*, Aristotle also describes comedy as "an imitation of men worse than the average." Aristotle, *Poetics* (New York: Norton, 1982), 1449a1-30.
[27] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 45-46.
[28] Ibid., 46.
[29] Francis Hutcheson, *Thoughts on Laughter* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1989), 24.

path: he thinks that all humor can be explained as descending incongruity. Spencer's implied inequality of elements that create humour corresponds with Bain's idea that incongruity always involves a contrast between something exalted or dignified and something trivial or disreputable. In contrast to Bain, Spencer emphasises the incongruity aspect of the situation and not the descent or degradation.

One of the most influential humour theorists, Henri Bergson, in his essay *Le Rire* [*Laughter*] (1911) offers the clearest and most frequently quoted instance of an application of the superiority theory and opens the field for the modern social theories of humour and laughter. Bergson's proposed ideal of human social behavior is elasticity, adaptability, the "élan vital" ["thrust of life"], while the laughable is for him "something mechanical encrusted upon the living."[30] The typical comic character, he says, is a man with an obsession. Such an obsessed figure is not flexible enough to adapt himself to the complex and changing demands of reality. Bergson criticizes the blind, automatic persistence of a professional habit of mind, which disregards altered circumstances, and observes that this behavior of individuals is marked as incorrect by the laughter of the group. He defines humour as a non-emotional social corrective, used by the majority of society to adjust the deviant behavior of individuals. Bergson evaluates humour as an inclusive social mechanism, serving the goal of (re)admittance into the group, which puts this kind of humour in opposition to the exclusive humour which prevents the individual from accessing the laughing group. Such differentiation between the inclusive and exclusive function of humour plays a very important role in contemporary sociological humour research.

A comprehensive analysis of the functions of humour in social situations is offered by William H. Martineau, in his article "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor" (1972). Martineau describes the patterns of humour exchange that create and maintain the relations between the members of the group in intragroup (within the same social group) and intergroup (between members of different social groups) situations.

In intragroup situations, esteeming humour (inoffensive humour) directed towards group members helps to solidify the group and to initiate and facilitate the communication and development of social relationships (social distance between group members is reduced, consensus is achieved). Humour serves as a symbol of social approval. Esteeming

[30] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (København and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), 39.

humour directed towards members of other groups can prevent or introduce a hostile disposition against members of other groups. Disparaging humour (offensive, aggressive humour) directed towards group members has three main functions: first, it helps to control behavior in the group. It is used to express grievances, or it can be directed at someone in the group who either has not learned or has violated the norms of the group. It constitutes a symbol of disapproval and an opportunity to correct the behavior of the deviant and help him/her rejoin the group. This kind of humour can be described as controlled hostility against deviance. Another function of offensive humour within the group is to solidify the social structure: self-disparaging humour works to unify the group. This goal is achieved by the admission of weaknesses or undesirable characteristics by the member(s) who initiated the humorous situation. The third function of offensive humour is to prevent the demoralization and disintegration of the group. Disparaging humour directed towards members of other groups increases morale and solidifies the group, but also establishes a hostile disposition towards others.

In intergroup situations, humour can be judged as esteeming (inoffensive) or disparaging (aggressive) by one or both of the interacting groups. If humour is evaluated as inoffensive, consensus and social integration are achieved: the similarities between groups are maximized and the differences minimized. Humour also helps maintain a friendly relationship between the two groups. If humour is seen as aggressive by one of the groups, it can threaten the relationship and possibly introduce conflict, but in some cases it may help redefine the relationship between the groups.

Robert A. Stebbins moves away from the idea of superiority or inferiority of the social group and offers new insights into the social mobilization role of humour. In his article, "Comic Relief in Everyday Life: Dramaturgic Observations on a Function of Humor" (1979), Stebbins describes what he calls the "comic relief" function of humour. He defines comic relief as "a momentary humorous respite from the seriousness of lengthy concentration on a collective task, a respite that facilitates the completion of that task by refreshing the participants."[31] If the members of the group have no socially acceptable means of escape from the setting of concentration, such as quitting before the task is finished, going into reverie, or even taking a short break, humour allows them to relax and re-

[31] Robert A. Stebbins, "Comic Relief in Everyday Life: Dramaturgic Observations on the Function of Humor," *Symbolic Interaction* 2 (1979): 97.