

The Good Soldier Švejk: A classic satire about World War I

By Isaac Finn
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The centenary of World War I has been met with patriotic declarations and celebrations from the governments of the same imperialist powers—the US, Britain, Germany, France, Canada, Australia—who washed their hands in the ocean of blood in 1914-18.

Forgotten—or intentionally ignored—is the fact that millions of working people who went through the experiences of the Great War at home or in battle reacted to the slaughter with an attempt to tear down the capitalist system as a whole.

The one successful overturn, the Russian Revolution of 1917, was the progressive response of the working class to the insoluble contradictions of the existing social order.

The social psychology of the European peoples was transformed by the war, what it unleashed and what it portended. Hatred for militarism and imperialism was widespread and absorbed not only by broad layers of workers, but also by many writers, artists and intellectuals.

Among this generation of artists is a group, particularly of writers, that is closely associated with the experiences of the war itself: the poets Wilfred Owen (killed on the front in France in October 1918) and Siegfried Sassoon, and the novelists, Henri Barbusse (*Under Fire*, 1916) and Erich Maria Remarque (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929). Other writers of the time contributed notable works about the war, including Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929) John Dos Passos (*Three Soldiers*, 1921) and Ford Madox Ford (*Parade's End*, 1924-28).

Of the novels that directly concern the war, only one among the first rank is a satire (unless one counts portions of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*), not only of the war itself, but of official society as a whole. That is *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921-23) by the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek.

The central character in the novel, Josef Švejk, a dealer in stolen dogs in civilian life, is a Czech soldier who makes himself appear a fool to get around his superiors and fights a peculiar and often hilarious war of attrition against the difficult circumstances he finds himself in. As Cecil Parrott notes in the introduction to a 1974 edition: “Švejk speaks most of the time in double-talk. He pretends to be in agreement with anyone he is dealing with, particularly if he happens to be a superior officer. But the irony underlying his remarks is always perceptible.” Švejk appears desperate to get to the front, for example, “by protesting his patriotism and devotion to the monarchy, when it is clear that his actions only impede the achievement of his proclaimed objective.”

The novel is one of the classics of 20th century literature. The German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht praised the novel highly and adapted it into a play set during the Second World War. American author Joseph Heller is rumored to have said he would not have written his novel *Catch-22* if it not for reading *Švejk*.

The novel was so influential that variations of the word “švejk” were adapted in the Czech lexicon to indicate idiocy and military absurdity. Nationalists and right-wingers throughout Europe despised the work, and by 1925 it was already banned in the Czech military, while the Nazis later publicly burned the German translation.

The novel opens in 1914 in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a semi-feudal agglomeration of disparate nationalities, including Germans, Hungarians Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians and other Slavic peoples. It was ruled by the rotting Hapsburg monarchy, with the Emperor Franz Joseph I as its figurehead. The assassination of the heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by a Serbian nationalist on July 28, 1914, on a state visit to a Sarajevo, was the incident that provided the immediate impulse for the outbreak of the first imperialist war.

It is worth quoting from the first lines of the novel. Švejk is talking with Mrs. Mueller, a charwoman, who informs him that “Ferdinand” (i.e., the Archduke) has been killed. Švejk asks, “Which Ferdinand, Mrs. Mueller? ... I only know of two Ferdinands. One of them does jobs for Prusa the chemist, and one day he drank a bottle of hair oil by mistake; and there’s Ferdinand Kokoska who goes around gathering manure. They wouldn’t be any great loss, either of ’em.”

This is typical. While Švejk officially declares his devotion to the throne, his comment about “Ferdinand” on the very first page allows his (and Hašek’s) real opinion of the monarchy’s worthlessness to come through. Even after he finds out that it is the Archduke who has been shot, Švejk continues in the same apparently naïve vein: “I wouldn’t mind betting that the man who shot the Archduke put on his best clothes for the job. You know, it wants a bit of doing to shoot an archduke; it’s not like when a poacher shoots a gamekeeper. You have to find out how to get at him; you can’t reach an important man like that if you’re dressed just anyhow.”

And this establishes the tone of the novel. Švejk, who was previously discharged from the army for idiocy, is subsequently arrested for his comments and redrafted into the army to serve in the war effort.

The hero, despite his absurd actions and blissfully unaware demeanor, is placed within a realistically depicted Austro-Hungarian society, with its ethnic divisions, corrupt military bureaucracy and population fearful of the war.

The novel is a scathing portrayal of that tottering society. Hašek drew from his personal experiences, including his time in prison, his travel and his former employment as a dog seller.

First assigned as personal assistant to army chaplain Otto Katz, a convert to Catholicism for career reasons, Švejk has the job of looking after the man who is almost always drunk. Katz eventually loses Švejk in a game of cards, forcing him to be “reassigned” to Lieutenant Lukáš. Under Lukáš, a womanizer, Švejk’s attempts to help the lieutenant set off a chain of events that makes both their lives worse.

An ongoing occurrence throughout the book, Švejk’s actions lead to a tipping point that exposes corruption, police repression and fragile ethnic relations within the empire. A hypothetically ideal soldier, Švejk prefaces all statements to superior officers with “Humbly reported, sir” and often states agreement with whomever he is around.

Švejk, however, is the comic exception to those suffering during the war, many people around him fall victim to the police-military apparatus and young men frequently attempt to injure themselves to avoid being sent to fight in the war.

Hašek occasionally breaks the comedic tone. A striking example of this is his remark about the officers at police headquarters:

“With the exception of a few people who were ready to admit that they were sons of a nation which had to bleed for interests completely alien to it, police headquarters presented the finest collection of bureaucratic beasts of prey, to whom jails and gallows were the only means of defending the existence of the twisted clauses of the law.”

Hašek, who was already an established writer by the time he wrote *The Good Soldier Švejk*, took the novel extremely seriously and considered it his masterwork.

Born in 1883 in Prague, son of a high-school math teacher, Hašek’s family relocated several times in his youth. While studying in Prague, he witnessed the anti-German riot of 1897 and participated in ethnic clashes, forming a Czech gang with his classmates.

He was eventually forced to drop out of school at the age of 15 because of his father’s death two years earlier. He briefly worked as an apprentice to a pharmacist and as a bank clerk, while pursuing a career as a freelance writer and journalist.

In 1906, Hašek joined the anarchist movement, and the following year became editor of the anarchist journal *Komuna*. While he dropped out of radical politics to marry his first wife, Jarmila Mayerová, and win acceptance from her family, he maintained an outlook hostile to the Austro-Hungarian government and all of its political parties.

During the war, he was captured by the Russian army and as a prisoner joined the Czech Legion, under the promise that an Allied victory would allow for the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia.

Influenced by the October 1917 revolution in Russia, Hašek began arguing that only a workers’ revolution could liberate

Czechoslovakia. He soon left the Legion to support the new Soviet government, one of a handful to do so. The Czech Legion later became infamous for fighting alongside the White Army against the Red Army during the Civil War of 1918-22.

Hašek went on to become a commissar in Bugulma, a small town in the southwestern region of Russia. He also worked to recruit ethnic minorities and foreign prisoners of war to support the Bolsheviks by working on a variety of journals.

Returning to Prague in December 1920, immediately after the new Czech government had suppressed an uprising of workers and had imprisoned leading Communists, Hašek faced a certain amount of skepticism from Czech Communists because of his questionable pre-war activities. The authorities also pursued him on charges of bigamy, since he remarried in Russia without divorcing his first wife.

The defeats of the first wave of post-war revolutionary struggles, with the exception of the Russian Revolution, apparently discouraged Hašek somewhat. He would later return to his old bohemian circle of friends and to excessive drinking. In private correspondence, he claimed that a socialist revolution in Czechoslovakia was not possible because the workers there were too passive.

In 1921, Hašek began work on *Švejk*. Initially, publishers would not take Hašek’s work because they viewed it as Communist propaganda. Once he did get it published, however, the first volume sold so well he was pressured by the publisher and his friend František Sauer to continue writing.

Hašek was slow and inconsistent as a result of his alcoholism and related health problems. Eventually encouraged to move to the rural Lipnice, he died at the age of 39 having only completed a fraction of what he intended to write and leaving his major work unfinished.

Brecht noted in 1940 that Hašek’s realism consisted of a knowledge of human nature, a knowledge that “involves that clear sight of the oppressed regarding the oppressor with whom he must live, it involves that most sensitive ability to feel out his weaknesses and vices, the profound knowledge of his (the opponent’s) real needs and embarrassments, the constant and alert allowance made for the unpredictable and imponderable, etc.”

The Good Soldier Švejk is a work that ought to be widely read. In it Hašek comically and ironically distilled the experience of the oppressed derived from great historical events, which led to a vehement opposition to patriotism, bureaucratic careerism and authoritarianism. Its truths are perhaps more necessary than ever.

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