Marching Happily into Certain Death

During late June of 1914, 70 million men marched into nations unknown to them; over three years nearly half would become casualties of the war, and 16 million of these men would not return. Each nation managed to provide a supply of warm bodies to the war effort through the use of propaganda often playing to nationalist spirit within their country. The willingness of each soldier to fight and die for their country in a glorious display of firepower raises the question of whether the war was what the soldiers had expected or not. While the implications of a world war may appear obvious, accounts from the soldiers themselves as well as records of the actions of those in power display the expectations of heroism and merriment the soldiers had, which differed greatly from the realities of the war that are exemplified by letters soldiers wrote during the war and accounts of the atrocities that resulted from the fighting.

Although it could be argued that the soldiers expected exactly what was to come because the implications of a war fought on a global scale appear to be obvious, soldiers who left to fight in the war were oblivious to the enormity of casualties that would take place and instead of fear or worry, these soldiers displayed enthusiasm, excitement, joy, and other emotions opposite of human instinct. Public reaction to those going off to war, captured in a letter written by Captain Andre Cornet-Auquier, swayed the soldiers into a delirium that clouded their thoughts making rational fear impossible. The public cried out “you are our saviors” repeatedly to the soldiers upon their departure drawing an overwhelming amount of “enthusiasm [out] of the troops” (Cornet-Auquier 181). Effects of this enthusiasm were incredible; each soldier’s morale increased greatly and more young men enlisted to fight because they too wanted to be treated like heroes. A long