The Road Out is Tough, and We Go Together

Both Erich Maria Remarque's novel *The Road Back* and Chris Hedges' novel *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* describe survivors' return to civilian life. In Remarque's novel, Ernst, a German soldier, returns home after World War 1, only to find that the end of the war did not bring him peace. In Hedges' novel, he reflects on the meaning of the suffering he saw as a war correspondent. Remarque wrote *The Road Back* in 1938; Hedges wrote *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* in 2002. Remarque was a soldier; Hedges was a reporter. Though written more than sixty years apart, both works are effective in making the reader understand the emotional experience of surviving war and recovering from it. I believe that both Hedges and Remarque can achieve this effect because of their own experiences with war.

In both books, people returning from war have difficulties adjusting to peace. Though survivors are at first overjoyed, cracks in the normalcy they return to appeared rapidly. In *The Road Back*, the company hears of the war's end and is ecstatic. Almost immediately, however, the soldiers feel out-of-place and unsuited to civilian life. Remarque foreshadows this before the war even ends. At the beginning of the book, Ernst remembers being unable to fit into his civilian clothes while on leave because they were "much too small for [him] now," (Remarque 5). Hedges explicitly expresses the same sentiment: "the world we once…longed to return to stands before us, alien, strange, and beyond our grasp," (Hedges 162). Leaving the familiar for the unknown is never easy. Something is always left behind. Upon leaving the Front, Ernst and his comrades mourn that the bodies of their dead friends remain. Ernst recalls how the dead never seemed dead because "the shells would bring [the bodies] back among us again," (Remarque 18). For Ernst's company, the end of the war cements its reality.

People returning from war have expectations of peace, but they rarely pan out. In Remarque's novel, many of the soldiers have communities that they dreamed of returning to during the war. Upon arriving home, however, the company finds that, much like Ernst's old clothes, nothing from civilian life fits anymore. Their manners are rough—Ernst's mother is scandalized by his swearing (Remarque 131). Old authority figures are unable to understand the experiences that the former soldiers have faced, and so let them down in peace after pushing them into war. For instance, Ernst's old schoolmaster makes a speech about "the heroic struggle of troops…and of courage," glorifying the deaths of Ernst's comrades (Remarque 112). This complete disconnect between those who fought in the war and those who did not isolates the returning soldiers. Hedges describes other soldiers experiencing the same torment, observing that the "tensions between those that were there and those that were not…feed into the dislocation and malaise after the war," (Hedges 176). Those away from war are ill-equipped to understand it. While it is not fair or right to expect an intimate understanding of war is not from those not exposed to it, the lack of understanding isolates the survivors of war.

Faced with this isolation, Ernst and the other men dream of returning to the trenches, where at least "so long as a man was well, all was well," (Remarque 131). One of Ernst's comrades even becomes a soldier again in an attempt to escape peace. This phenomenon was not unique to Remarque's World War 1 soldiers—a photographer Hedges worked with in El Salvador returned to the US and could not stand the peace. To the photographer, "life…was flat, dull, and uninteresting," (Hedges 157). Perhaps the intensity of war drains a person of their tolerance for peace.

Yet a return to war does not comfort those who cannot find peace. The man who became a soldier again in Remarque's book did not find his disappointment eased. As he confesses to

Ernst, he "thought to find some remnant of comradeship there…but it was merely barbarized gang spirit," (Remarque 285). Hedges' photographer friend did not find peace at war either; upon the photographer's return to El Salvador, Hedges remembered "it was clear [that] he had returned to die," (Hedges 158). Neither man found any life in a return to war. They both left war again, one way or another. As Hedges writes, "I do not miss war, but I miss what it brought. I can never say I was happy in the midst of the fighting…but I had a sense of purpose," (Hedges 159). A literal return to war does not renew a person's feeling of purpose.

What does give people respite is company. Throughout *The Road Back*, the company wishes that they could retain the comradeship formed in war. Indeed, when they do manage to stick together, the situation is generally improved: by working together as a company again, they are able to change the education requirements so that they are not made to retake their examinations (Remarque 140). When Ernst can feel real connection with his company, he does not sink into despair. After all, whether they are "cursing or resigned… [they are] all together," (Remarque 68). And that is the heart of the matter: company. Although Hedges and Remarque call companionship different names and focus on different types of it, they both hold it as necessary to surviving through and recovering from war. Ernst, Remarque's soldier protagonist, frequently expresses a desire and a commitment to remaining close to his wartime comrades. In Hedges' experience, one of the few sanctuaries in war is provided by those who are in love, and that even being in proximity to those people gives a person great solace (Hedges 160-161). Although each author uses different language to address this matter, they are both speaking of the healing provided by human connection.

As similar as Hedges' and Remarques' opinions on the positive effects of having companionship are, their opinions on the detrimental effects of *not* having it are essentially

identical. At his lowest, Hedges recalls that he "felt profoundly alone," (Hedges 160). It is telling that the description of his intense misery is loneliness. On Remarque's side, one of his characters makes a speech with the same root idea. It accuses the people of Germany of committing the crime of "leaving [them] alone in the worst time of all, when [they] had to find a road back again," (Remarque 297). This effectively shows what Remarque be crucial to recovery: to *not* be left alone. Hedges also states this quite plainly, stating that "the isolated individual can never be adequately human," (Hedges 161). Remarque and Hedges both propose that isolation is antithetical to humanity, and so imply that social contact is necessary to have humanity, or to recover it.

At the end of both books, the authors speak directly to the audience to describe the key to their recovery process. Hedges, in the final page and a half of the book, speaks directly and states that the key to recovery was found in love. His experience leads him to conclude that "To survive as a human being is only possible through love." (Hedges, 184). Remarque, in the final three pages, uses Ernst's voice describe his own path to recovery. To Remarque, recovery was a matter of persistence. He keeps on living after the war because despite it all "life remained in [him]. And that in itself is enough." (Remarque 311).

Reading both works provides an extra dimension to the wisdom they each provide. Although both works imply similar trauma responses and recovery processes, each work concentrates on different aspects of the same conclusion. Remarque focuses on the endurance aspect of recovery. Ernst's view of his recovery is that he will "often stumble and fall. But I will get up again…I will go on and not look back," (Remarque 312). Hedges, however speaks more of holding onto one's humanity through love. He concludes that while "love may not always triumph…it keeps us human," (Hedges 168). Taking the conclusions together provides a more

complete description of how a person recovers. If Remarque's conclusion was taken individually, it would be quite possible to come away thinking that recovery leads only to a continued state of existence. That is not a very hopeful conclusion. It is also not representative of Remarque's portrayal of recovery. At the end, when Ernst is contemplating his own recovery, he is not alone; he has just come back from a reunion with his comrades (Remarque 310-311). Although he is not happy, Ernst is not miserable either. Hedges, on the other hand, seems to paint a very romantic picture of recovery towards the end of his novel. While it is true that he spends much of his novel detailing the suffering of war and the difficulty in escaping it, his conclusion does not encapsulate this idea independently. It would be entirely possible to finish the final section of his book and feel as though love is the only thing required in recovery. This would also probably not be representative of Hedges' thoughts—he is certainly not one to romanticize suffering. Reading both works provides a more well-rounded picture of the recovery process that both men portray.

Both authors are effective in relating the emotional experience of war and the recovery from it. This is because they draw from personal experience and speak honestly. They do not try and distill war and recovery into something comfortable or into something simple. I cannot speak to the accuracy of their portraits of war, not really. I have never been to war. I could, however, say that they must have something right about recovery. When you can't understand how life will go on, all you can do is live anyway. You realize eventually that you don't have to know how life will go on because it will go on regardless. And that the going is easier with company. And you feel foolish, because, as Remarque puts it, "How simple it is—but how long it has taken to arrive there!" (Remarque 312).

Works Cited

Hedges, Chris. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. PublicAffairs, 2014.

Remarque, Erich Maria. *The Road Back*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013.