

Identity, the State and Sacrifice

By Jean Bethke Elshtain

(1991)

When I was at work on my book, *Women and War*, a realization slowly but irrevocably grew on me. It was, in some respects, a happy dawning; in other ways, my crystallizing convictions troubled, vexed, haunted. Enough beating around the bush. Let me just get to it. One incessant and insistent theme emerged from all the dozens, growing to several hundred, 'war stories' I encountered—the theme of sacrifice. The Young man goes to war not so much to kill as to die, to forfeit his particular body for that of the larger body, the body politic, a body most often presented and re-presented as feminine.

The reason that this realization was, in some sense, a relief lay in the fact that the many—I can only call them 'Manichean'—texts, some but not all by feminists, which laid the blame for war, as well as the causal explanation of war on the doorstep of male aggressivity, came under compelling pressure and grew less and less believable the more I read, pondered and studied. Some aggressive drive peculiar to the male sex did not surface as the most potent theme that drove men to their deaths in time of war. A relief, then, that my own young son was probably not a beast just lurking for the chance to bare his fangs and shed some blood, not his own.

But a terrible sadness, too, a foreboding recognition that Plutarch's [*Sayings of Spartan Mothers*](#), repeated by the essential Jean-Jacques Rousseau—essential not just or only to professional political theorists and civic philosophers but to anyone interested in the emergence of country-love and war-time sacrifice for the body politic in the modern West—might linger yet, just beneath the surface of everyday, conscious recognition, poised, ready to emerge full-force should this country ever again find itself in a full-fledged war.

I have in mind the Rousseau who honors Spartan mothers whose sayings Plutarch detailed in Volume III of his [*Moralia*](#), reproducing tales, anecdotes and epigrams that constructed the Spartan woman as a mother who reared sons to be sacrificed on the altar of civic need. Such a martial mother was pleased to hear that her son died "in a manner worthy of [her] self, his country, and his ancestors than if he had lived for all time a coward." Sons who failed to measure up were reviled. One woman, whose son was the sole survivor of a disastrous battle, killed him with a tile, the appropriate punishment for his obvious cowardice.

Spartan women shook off expressions of sympathy in words that bespeak an unshakable civic identity. Plutarch recounts a woman, as she buried her son, telling a would-be sympathizer that she had had "good luck," not bad: "I bore him that he might die for Sparta, and this is the very thing that has come to pass for me."

Mother and mother's milk serve as a foundation for civic-spiritedness and willingness to die. Just as the adult man who lacks respect for his mother is a wretch, [Rousseau says](#), "a monster unworthy of seeing the light of day," so the citizen who does not love and adore his

country, and every day “feel the eyes of his fellow-countrymen upon him every moment” is no real citizen. The authentic citizen is “so completely dependent upon public esteem as to be unable to do anything, acquire anything, or achieve anything without it.”

And creating such citizens is the primal and primary female-civic task. [Rousseau describes](#) the female “citizen” as follows: “A Spartan woman had five sons in the army and was awaiting news of the battle. A Helot arrives; trembling, she asks him for news. ‘Your five sons were killed.’ ‘Base slave, did I ask you that?’ ‘We won the victory.’ The Mother runs to the temple and gives thanks to the gods. This is the female citizen.”

The potent love of mother country, and willingness to serve and protect her, will shrivel on the civic vine if mothers no longer figure overpoweringly in the affections and upbringings of their children. This was Rousseau’s conviction and it is one repeated, deeply inscribed, in the political thought and consciousness of the West, nowhere receiving a more grandiose elaboration than in the philosophy of Hegel and in his theory of the triumphant *Kriegstaat*.

We all know, in broad strokes, [the story Hegel tells](#). Born in 1770, Hegel as a young man celebrated the national ideal to which the French Revolution gave birth with its *levee en masse*, the first mass mobilization of men, women, and children for all-out war. His vision of the family, civil society, and the state is densely textured and impossible to characterize simply.

As a state-identified being, the being of the male citizen is fully unfolded and made complete. The state is the arena that calls upon and sustains the individual’s commitment to universal ethical life, satisfying expansive yearnings through, the opportunity to sacrifice “in behalf of the individuality of the state.” For with the state comes not simply the possibility but the inevitability of war.

War transcends material values. The individual reaches for a common end. War-constituted solidarity is immanent within the state form.

But the state, hence the nation, comes fully to life only with war. Peace poses the specific danger of sanctioning the view that the atomized world of civil society is absolute. In war, however, the state as a collective being is tested, and the citizen comes to recognize the state as the source of all rights. Just as the individual emerges to self-conscious identity only through a struggle, so each state must struggle to attain recognition.

The state’s proclamation of its sovereignty is not enough: that sovereignty must be recognized. War is the means to attain recognition, to pass, in a sense, the definitive test of political manhood. The state is free that can defend itself, gain the recognition of others, and shore up an acknowledged identity. The freedom of individuals and states is not given as such but must be achieved through conflict.

It is in war that the strength of the state is tested, and only through that test can it be shown whether individuals can overcome selfishness and are prepared to work for the whole and to sacrifice in service to the more inclusive good. The man becomes what he in some sense is meant to be by being absorbed in the larger stream of life: war and the state. To preserve the larger civic body, which must be “as one,” particular bodies must be sacrificed.

That is the great and terrible story. For many who yearn for a transformed world, these Hegelian formulations no doubt sound pretty awful—archaic and bellicose state worship—and, they might insist, we’ve put sure and certain distance between ourselves and Hegel in this matter. I am not so sanguine.

Before Rousseau, before Hegel, before the modern nation-state, the idea and ideal of sacrificial political identity had been forged in the hoplite warfare of the Greek phalanx where the will to sacrifice was also a triumph of the will—what B.H. Liddell Hart calls the “chief incalculable” in warfare.

Writes Victor Hanson: “Along with regimental spirit, an even better incentive for hoplites to stand firm was the sight of their own commanding officer, the *strategos*, fighting alongside them in the very front ranks of the army” (from [The Western War of War](#)). This preparedness to die was much enhanced by the sight of gray-bearded grandfathers fighting alongside smooth-faced grandsons. The affair was overwhelmingly familial and tribal.

The Spartans, the model for later civic republicans and state-builders, honored but two identities with inscriptions on tombstones—men who had died in war and women who had succumbed in childbirth: both embodied the sacrificial moment of civic identity. In Athens, too, death was anonymous on the funerary *relievs* with the exception of the soldier and the childbearing woman.

Ernst Kantorowicz, in his classic, [The King’s Two Bodies](#), traces the ideal of “*pro patria mori*.” He begins by reminding us that the word *patria* referred initially to a hamlet, village, township. The warrior died for loyalty to his lord rather than some abstract juridical ideal or territory.

But around the twelfth-thirteenth centuries the concept underwent a transformation and began to refer to kingdoms, nations, and to have deep, emotional and symbolic content. He writes: “Neither from the idea of polity-centered kingship nor from that of the state as *corpus morale, politicum, mysticum* can there easily be separated another notion which came to new life independently of, though simultaneously with, the organological and corporational doctrines: the *regnum* as *patria*, as an object of political devotion and semi-religious emotion.”

The community having been endowed with a “mystical” character—the *corpus reipublicae mysticum*—sacrifice in her name grew more exigent, not only defensible but obligatory. The Christian martyr who had sacrificed for an “invisible polity,” becomes the soldier who remained faithful unto death—the model of “civic self-sacrifice.” Christian doctrine, then, having transferred the political notion of *polis* to the city of God and honoring those who died in her name, now transmutes to underwrite (not without tension) the “new territorial concept of *patria*. Kantorowicz speculates that much of the force of this new patriotism derived from “ethical values transferred back from the *patria* in heaven to polities on earth.”

The death of the warrior *pro patria* was interpreted as self-sacrifice for others, a “work of *caritas*.” (Greater love hath no man than this) The theme of brotherly love was struck again and again. Men who were killed in a campaign (the example is the crusades) died “for the love of God *and his brothers*” and received “eternal beatitude according to the mercy of

God.” Citing a letter by Pope Urban II). In the thirteenth century, Kantorowicz continues, “the Christian virtue of *caritas* became unmistakably political” and was “activated to sanctify and justify, ethically and morally, the death for the political ‘fatherland’.”

This love for the wider body is declared by St. Thomas to be founded “in the root of charity which puts, not the private things before those common, but the common things before the private ... the *amor patriae* deserves a rank of honor above all other virtues.” The magnanimity of the soldier’s sacrifice is celebrated in verse and song for, to the soldier, his brothers and his “fatherland” are dearer than his life. “Thus it happened that in the thirteenth century the crown of martyrdom began to descend on the war victims of the secular state.”

A rapid leap to the twentieth century: J. Glenn Gray, [*The Warriors*](#), examines the impulse to self-sacrifice characteristic of warriors who, from compassion, would rather die than kill. He calls the freedom of wartime a communal freedom as the “I” passes into a “we,” and human longings for community with others find a field for realization. Communal ecstasy explains a willingness to sacrifice and gives dying for others a mystical quality.

“Such sacrifice seems hard and heroic to those who have never felt communal ecstasy,” writes Gray. “In fact, it is not nearly so difficult as many less absolute acts in peacetime and civilian life. It is hardly surprising that few men are capable of dying joyfully as martyrs whereas thousands are capable of self-sacrifice in wartime.” Nor are women exempt from the sacralizing of sacrifice. There are hundreds of hair-raising tales of bellicose mothers, wives and girlfriends writing the combat soldier and requesting the death of the enemy as a tribute, or gift, to her. But I am more interested in the construction of the non-combatant female’s will-to-sacrifice her loved ones.

How did it come about that war for the king, then for country, then for abstract ideals and demands got intermingled and all served to frame the horizon within which the will-to-sacrifice was ongoingly forged? Max Weber writes of the “consecrated meaning” of death for the warrior, the conviction that his death has honor and purpose. Indeed, for Weber the very possibility of such a death alone provides the needed support.

Instantiated in all its fullness, devotion to the political community and only such devotion affords any dignity to a politics that would otherwise turn on brute force. Although a state cannot survive if it attempts to embody a universalistic ethic of *caritas*, without some such ethic coercion alone reigns. Hence the importance of the “consecrated meaning” of the warrior’s death.

The constructions of sovereignty allow us to make more sense of the will-to-sacrifice as it shifts from personal liege loyalty to a feudal lord to an abstract, juridical, imagined tie that nevertheless calls for sacrifice in its/his (the sovereign’s) name. But another dimension must be added to this rich mulch. I noted above that most modern nation-states are construed in feminine terms.

The Sovereign may bear a masculinized ‘face’ but the nation itself is feminized, a mother, a sweetheart, a lover. One can rightly speak, as Anderson does, of “political love, a love that retains the fraternal dimensions of medieval *caritas* but incorporates as well a maternalized

loyalty symbolized domestically: the nation is home and home is mother. No more than one chooses one's parents does one choose one's country and this adds even greater force to the nature of political love. We fall in love early through language, "encountered at mother's knees and parted with only at the grave," and through this language "pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed." Demanding but well-nigh irresistible a force majeure.

One of the most poignant and horrible instances of sacrifice and obedience in our time is the terrible blood sacrifice demanded by the sovereign gods of the fascist state who construed their nation not so much in language as in blood. And loyalty reverted to a personal bond, an oath to a god-like leader.

We all know of the Final Solution, but few know of the Final Sacrifice (the term is Gerhard Rempel's from his book, [*Hitler's Children: The Hitler Youth and the SS*](#).) Starving, bewildered Hitler Youth were thrown into the final months of the war when Hitler and "determined SS officers conspired to generate a children's crusade to shore up crumbling defenses and offer thousands of teenagers as a final sacrifice to the god of war." The schemes were brutal; the results horrifying.

Thousands of children between the ages of 8-9 and 17 perished in suicidal sabotage attempts and last-ditch stands. 5,000 young people, male and female, were thrown into the "twilight of the gods" in the last spasm of the agony of Berlin; 500 survived. What was most astonishing to observers was the determination of these children to "do their duty until they were literally ready to drop.

They had been fed on legends of heroism for as long as they could remember. For them the call to ultimate sacrifice "was no empty phrase." The grotesquery of all this signifies, in admittedly extreme form, the macabre dimension of the will-to-sacrifice as it has been constituted in the politics of sovereignty.

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