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# GOETHE AND THE SEVEN YEARS WAR

## Topicality and Representation of a Great Power Contest

**Bastian Spangenberg, Ph.D. candidate, Sorbonne Université de Paris**

*Goethe is, without any doubt, the most famous writer of the German language. His autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1810s), is an important book for historians, sociologists and literary scholars alike. However, his representation of the Seven Years War, a conflict that receives ever more importance in academic research, has not yet been analysed in detail. In this article, I explore Goethe's memories of this war, which I consider to be highly relevant in at least three different contexts. Firstly, Goethe's text is a testimony to the destructive power of war on a societal level; Goethe describes how his family quarrelled during the war and the tension in his parents' relationship at this time. Secondly, the writer demonstrates the impact of war on children and their daily routine. Fortunately for Goethe, a boy himself during the war, a number of factors prevented him from bearing the brunt of this hardship during wartime. Third, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* contributes to what is referred to today as the Just War Theory, especially to studies of the *jus in bello*. Goethe's representations are particularly insightful and relevant in that he opposes war propaganda and that he understands the crucial role of mediators during a conflict. The present article, thus, contributes to both literary studies, especially German literature, and political studies, specifically war experiences.*

Seven Years War, Goethe, Children in war, Jus in bello, Mediation

### *Introduction*

Without any doubt, Johann Wolfgang Goethe is the most famous writer of German language. His works continue to rouse interest around the entire world, and Goethe's voice continues to be important in contemporary debates. His experiences of the Seven Years War, however, have not been analysed in any great detail, even though the war which is one of the subjects of his memoirs has benefitted from a renewed academic interest over the last ten years. According to Hamish Scott (2011, 422), we "are now better informed about the Seven Years War than at any point since the nineteenth-century". The ongoing interest in Goethe as a writer, thinker, and historian of his own life and the relatively recently established analysis of the Seven Years War as a decisive moment for modern history, are reason enough for tackling these two topics together in one study.

In this article, I aim to demonstrate that Goethe's representation is not only historically correct, but that it also contains important insights pertaining to contemporary theories of war, such as ideas about justice in war and the situation of citizens, especially children during the war. When the war broke out in the German lands in 1756, the writer was only seven years old. In this article, I focus on Goethe's representation of the war in his book *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit* ("From my Life. Poetry and Truth"). At the time of writing this autobiography, mainly between 1811 and 1814 (he aggregated the last part in the 1830s), Goethe looked back

over half a century. The most illuminating parts concern the years after 1759, during which Frankfurt am Main, Goethe's hometown, was occupied by the French.

In this article, I want to stress three aspects in particular: firstly, Goethe's perception of the privileged role of the bourgeoisie even during wartime; secondly, the destructive impact of wars on the entire society (not just on the military, but also on civilians, especially on children); thirdly, the centrality of *jus in bellum*, incorporated by two French occupiers, both staying in Goethe's home: the interpreter in particular and to a lesser extent the count de Thoranc and Goethe's representation of the latter.

### *The Seven Years War – The First World War?*

In recent years, scholars have rediscovered the Seven Years War and have come to the conclusion that it actually lasted for nine years (Neal 1977, 20). Although Churchill famously referred to this war as 'the first World War', this assertion seems too Anglo-centric (Neal 1977, 20). It is indeed of greater importance to the struggle for imperial supremacy, particularly between France and Great Britain. According to Hamish Scott (2011, 422), the war was undoubtedly "decisive for all the belligerents, while even within Europe the absence of territorial gains by one side or the other certainly did not mean that it was without important consequences".

Scott (2011, 425) states that on the surface the Seven Years War included two distinct conflicts, one European and one global. In Europe, Prussia, with British support, fought against France, Austria and Russia. At the end, Prussia "somehow managed to hold out for a draw, an outcome which had seemed improbable for much of the struggle" (Scott 2011, 425). Beyond the European continent, it was the conflict between Great Britain and France and Spain. However, as Scott (2011, 425) underlines, colonial and commercial wealth contributed to the war in Europe. Eventually, France came closest to suffering a defeat, giving up most of its colonial territories (Scott 2011, 447): "The Seven Years War ushered in a new international order within which France played a much reduced role. Russia and Prussia joined the continental political elite, while Britain became the most dynamic imperial power. France - exactly like Austria - suffered relative decline." (Scott 2011, 448)

Arguably, Goethe's representation of the war is Germano-centric. He does not allude to one of the major catalysts for the war; the Franco-British imperial rivalry to Hanover (Harding 2007, 146; Baugh 2011, 8). Nor does Goethe mention that the war originated in North America (Harding 2007, 146). Nevertheless, the war was indeed devastating to Prussia which lost roughly ten percent of its population (Scott 2011, 429). According to Daniel Baugh, Germany was indeed a decisive battlefield for empire – "America has been conquered in Germany" (Baugh 2011, 27) – and for Prussia's future role in Europe.

### *The Goethe's – a torn bourgeois family during the war*

Goethe's overall representation of the Seven Years War is historically correct. In the second book of the first part of his autobiography, Goethe mentions for the first time the war that would

transform his childhood (Goethe 48sq). In the third book, Goethe describes how the French, “the most powerful nation in Europe and perhaps the world,” (Baugh 2011, 14) occupied his hometown on 2 January 1759.

Goethe belonged to a wealthy and affluent family. He acknowledges the privileges of his family belonging to the bourgeoisie. In the third book of part I, Goethe describes what accommodating François de Thoranc, *lieutenant du roi*, meant for him and his family: “The royal lieutenant's stay in our house gave us the advantage of seeing all the important people of the French army one by one, and especially the first ones whose name had already come to us by reputation”<sup>1</sup> (Goethe 103). For instance, the Goethe family welcomed Charles, Prince of Soubise, minister to Louis XV and Louis XVI and Victor François de Broglie who was ranked marshal of France during the war. However, Goethe’s family was not exempted from the sufferings of war.

In book two of the first part, Goethe recalls his impressions of Frederick II who became known as ‘Frederick the Great’. According to the writer, the “enthusiasm of his admirers became ever bigger” and “the hatred of his enemies became more bitter” (Goethe 77sq). Hence, the opposing views of the emperor would eventually tear apart families and separate the citizens even more who, due to their divergent religious beliefs (Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism), were already divided. Goethe’s own family was torn between supporting Frederick the Great and Maria Theresa from Habsburg: “The world, which found itself challenged not only as a spectator but also as a judge, immediately split into two parties, and our family was a picture of the big picture”<sup>2</sup> (Goethe 49). Goethe’s grandfather and Goethe’s mother were on the Austrian side (Goethe 49). Initially Goethe, following his father’s convictions, joined in the excitement in response to Frederick’s victories. In book II of part I, he remembers how he wrote poems on behalf of the Prussian king or songs to mock the opposing parties (Goethe 50). Hence, the family argued, they quarrelled and as a consequence, Goethe’s father, Johann Caspar, avoided family reunions at his stepfather’s home (Goethe 49).

Even as a young boy, according to his own statements, Goethe despised the ideological partisanship that estranged others: “even then, awareness of partisan injustice made the boy very uncomfortable, [...] by accustoming him to move away from loved and cherished persons”<sup>3</sup> (Goethe 50). The family meals at his grandparents’ house exemplify this discomfort. Before the war, in his childhood, he had cherished these moments. However, the defamations of Frederick had alienated him from this past pleasure and Goethe would not enjoy his meal any longer (Goethe 50). Subsequently, his admiration for his grandparents diminished but this was a tabu subject at home. Goethe describes how he felt rejected and how he questioned the justice of the prevailing society: “Anything that could be cited to the advantage of the opponents was denied or diminished; and since the opposite members of the family did the same, they could not meet each other in the street without setting quarrels in motion, as in »Romeo and

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<sup>1</sup> “Der Aufenthalt des Königsleutenants in unserm Hause verschaffte uns den Vorteil, alle bedeutenden Personen der französischen Armee nach und nach zu sehen, und besonders die Ersten, deren Name schon durch den Ruf zu uns gekommen war, in der Nähe zu betrachten“. All translations into English are mine.

<sup>2</sup> “Die Welt, die sich nicht nur als Zuschauer, sondern auch als Richter aufgefordert fand, spaltete sich sogleich in zwei Parteien, und unsere Familie war ein Bild des großen Ganzen”.

<sup>3</sup> “schon damals war das Gewährwerden parteiischer Ungerechtigkeit dem Knaben sehr unangenehm, [...] indem es ihn gewöhnte, sich von geliebten und geschätzten Personen zu entfernen”.

Julie«<sup>4</sup> (Goethe 50). However, the “true discomfort” (Goethe, 50) came to his family when the French started occupying the city.

### *The impact of war on societies and children*

Goethe remembers how the arrival of the French weighed heavy on his father. Johann Caspar Goethe had just finished renovation works on his house when he was forced to receive foreign military occupants. He had no choice but to expose his belongings to the arbitrariness and the good-naturedness of his political enemy. Seeing the French occupy his rooms “was the saddest thing he could encounter according to his way of thinking”<sup>5</sup> (Goethe 89). According to Goethe, his father should have acted differently in this situation. His good command of the French language could have alleviated tensions and ensure a better relationship with de Thoranc (Goethe 89).

During de Thoranc’s stay at their house, the arguments between Goethe’s parents became even more intense: “The father's bad mood increased, he could not surrender to the inevitable. How he tormented himself, his mother and his father, the councillors, all his friends, just to get rid of the count!”<sup>6</sup> (Goethe 92)

The family tried in vain to convince Johann Caspar Goethe of the advantages of de Thoranc’s stay. Especially for the children, Goethe and his sister, Cornelia, things could have been worse. The children benefitted from the French cuisine and were sometimes exempted from punishments (Goethe 92). For Goethe and his sister, the arrival of de Thoranc came close to being a fortunate coincidence considering that the precursors of the French occupation had been bleak.

When the war broke out in 1756 and when the French marched through Hesse in order to take Hanover, the children were not allowed to go outside and had to play at home. Several children were neglected by their parents and the fear of war had an impact on the youngest members of society. However, in this frightening atmosphere, young Goethe found a foothold in the arts. In book II of the first part of his autobiography, Goethe describes how the children encountered the problematic situation by playing theatre (Goethe 51sq).

Later, when de Thoranc stayed at their home, the fear of the war had somehow diminished. The children could even go out to play, because the French guards who were securing the house did not seem to care about the to and fro of restless children (Goethe 92).

New threats loomed over the relative wellbeing of the family when in 1759 Prussian field-marshal Ferdinand, Prince of Brunswick-Lüneburg made his way to Frankfurt to liberate the city. Goethe’s parents reacted differently to the Prussian approach: his father showed some optimism, but his mother, Katharina Elisabeth, who had recognized the risk of a deterioration of their situation, was rather pessimistic. She communicated her fears to de Thoranc who, via his interpreter, sought to calm her (Goethe 104). During the holy week in 1759, the battle finally

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<sup>4</sup> “Alles, was zum Vorteil der Gegner angeführt werden konnte, wurde geleugnet oder verkleinert; und da die entgegengesetzten Familienglieder das gleiche taten, so konnten sie einander nicht auf der Straße begegnen, ohne daß es Händel setzte, wie in »Romeo und Julie«”.

<sup>5</sup> “es war das Traurigste, was ihm nach seiner Denkweise begegnen konnte”

<sup>6</sup> “Des Vaters üble Laune nahm zu, er konnte sich nicht in das Unvermeidliche ergeben. Wie sehr quälte er sich, die Mutter und den Gevatter, die Ratsherren, alle seine Freunde, nur um den Grafen los zu werden!”

occurred. Once more, the children were forbidden to leave the house. Just a few hours later, the first wounded and mutilated soldiers passed Goethe's house. Both French and German soldiers benefitted from the support of the local residents who brought beer, wine, bread, and money (Goethe 105). This brings to mind Balzac's saying "misery gives birth to equality" ("la misère enfante l'égalité") (Balzac 1972, 131). However, when those wishing for a Prussian victory, like Johann Caspar Goethe, learned that the French would impose themselves, the mood changed. Goethe's father only wanted to support German – that is the Hanoverians, Hessians and Brunswickers, "the king's allies" (Baugh 2011, 567) – soldiers: "He also made many a donation to those passing by; but only the Germans were to receive them, which was not always possible because fate had packed friends and enemies together"<sup>7</sup> (Goethe 106).

Goethe, his sister and their mother, on the contrary, were happy when they learned that the French would prevail. Goethe recalls how they had spent a relatively calm day before de Thoranc returned from the battlefield. In stark contrast to his father, Goethe found himself relieved and happy, seeing the *lieutenant du roi*: "Our joy, however, was not disturbed; the matter was decided; the king's lieutenant, who had been on horseback that day against his habit, finally returned, his presence at home was more necessary than ever. We jumped out to meet him, kissed his hands and showed him our joy. He seemed to enjoy it very much. 'Well,' he said more friendly than usual, 'I am happy for your sake too, dear children!' He immediately ordered to give us sweets, sweet wine, the best of everything, and went to his room"<sup>8</sup> (Goethe 106).

In conclusion, Goethe and his sister did not appear to suffer from the mental sequelae which are often associated with children's exposure to war (Werner 2012, 553). On the contrary, a number of factors prevented them from experiencing the more negative outcomes of war. The young Goethe came through the war relatively unscathed, apart from the increase in family disputes. On the one hand, this was due to the protective character of Goethe's bourgeois family. On the other hand, it was largely due to the French occupier who treated the family respectfully and who would let the children enjoy their childhood. Another factor was the discovery of the theatre and the distraction it offered to the children who were forced to stay at home. In his study on children and war, Werner mentions strong family bonds between the primary caregivers and the children, the mental health of the mother, the availability of additional caregivers and the social support of members in the community who are also exposed to hardships as protective factors (Werner 2012, 555). In Goethe's case, all of these factors applied. In some cases, the experience of war "contributed to their personal growth and their strong sense of coherence in later life" (Werner 2012, 555). Whether Goethe's discovery of the theatre can be counted as such, is open for discussion.

### *Jus in bello – the just representation of the opponent and the importance of mediators*

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<sup>7</sup> "Auch er ließ den Vorbeiziehenden mancherlei Spende reichen; aber nur die Deutschen sollten sie erhalten, welches nicht immer möglich war, weil das Schicksal Freunde und Feinde zusammen aufgepackt hatte".

<sup>8</sup> "Unsre Freude ward indessen nicht gestört; die Sache war entschieden; der Königslieutenant, der diesen Tag gegen seine Gewohnheit zu Pferde gewesen, kehrte endlich zurück, seine Gegenwart zu Hause war nötiger als je. Wir sprangen ihm entgegen, küßten seine Hände und bezeugten ihm unsre Freude. Es schien ihm sehr zu gefallen. »Wohl!« sagte er freundlicher als sonst, »ich bin auch um euertwillen vergnügt, liebe Kinder!« Er befahl sogleich, uns Zuckerwerk, süßen Wein, überhaupt das Beste zu reichen, und ging auf sein Zimmer".

Another topical aspect of Goethe's depiction of the Seven Years War is his idea of a just conduct during a war. Despite the fact that there is not a single elaborated version of the *jus in bello* theory, there are some features in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* that touch on this subject.

Even though the classic Just War Theory as applied in the field of International Relations is more closely related to the behaviour of states (Shapcott 2014, 205), the *jus in bello* can broadly be characterised as "the law governing the conduct of war once launched" (Reus-Smit 2014, 282). In the same vein, Goethe's representation of the father's enemy and the importance he gave to de Thoranc's interpreter who acted as a mediator, can be understood as a part of the Just War Theory.

Throughout the sections relating to the Seven Years War and especially the French occupation of Frankfurt and his home, Goethe represents the occupier in a rather positive way. Count de Thoranc is described as an amiable and respectful man who is interested in the arts, particularly in local painters (Goethe 90). If anything, Goethe seems more critical towards his own father who did not revise his opinion of the French occupier, despite his manners and the common interest in arts. If it had been possible to brighten up his father, resumes Goethe, this new situation, living together with the French, would not have been so grim (Goethe 90sq). In stating this, Goethe questions the clear distinction between friend and enemy, which is normal in the context of war (Inghilleri & Harding 2010, 167). Goethe's representation of de Thoranc finds his culmination at the beginning of book III of the first part: "Count Thoranc, however, was exemplary. He didn't even want his maps nailed to the walls so as not to spoil the new wallpaper. His people were clever, quiet and orderly"<sup>9</sup> (Goethe 90). A bit further on in the text, Goethe represents de Thoranc as an example of selflessness (Goethe 91) and as incorruptible (Goethe 92). Overall, de Thoranc is said to have had a "wonderful character" (Goethe 93).

Together with de Thoranc lived a servant and an interpreter. The atmosphere at home depended in large part on the latter. Even if de Thoranc is depicted as a gentle occupier, he suffered from time to time from hypochondriac attacks and lost his temper momentarily. However, the interpreter was most important in his role as a mediator between Goethe's father, Goethe's mother and count de Thoranc. The interpreter, "a handsome, corpulent, cheerful man who was a citizen of Frankfurt and spoke good French, knew how to get into everything and had fun with all sorts of little inconveniences"<sup>10</sup> (Goethe 90). It was the interpreter who managed to prevent further tensions at home. For instance, when asked to tell count de Thoranc how Goethe's father felt about the French occupiers, the interpreter managed to ~~put~~ defend Johann Caspar Goethe without insulting the French: "he had represented the matter so wisely; the new, not even fully furnished house, the natural seclusion of the owner, the preoccupation with the upbringing of his family, and everything else that could be thought of needed to be considered, so that the count, who took pride in the highest justice, incorruptibility, and honourable conduct, took it

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<sup>9</sup> "Graf Thoranc indessen betrug sich musterhaft. Nicht einmal seine Landkarten wollte er an die Wände genagelt haben, um die neuen Tapeten nicht zu verderben. Seine Leute waren gewandt, still und ordentlich".

<sup>10</sup> "ein schöner, wohlbeleibter, heitrier Mann, der Bürger von Frankfurt war und gut französisch sprach, sich in alles zu schicken wußte und mit mancherlei kleinen Unannehmlichkeiten nur seinen Spaß trieb"

upon himself to behave as an exemplary lodger, and really kept it steadfast under various circumstances during the several years he stayed there”<sup>11</sup> (Goethe 92).

The interpreter not only relieved tensions, he also cheered up Goethe’s mother. Goethe remembers that rarely a day passed without the interpreter telling anecdotes in such a lively manner, that Katharina Elisabeth felt better (Goethe 93).

The interpreter can, thus, be seen as a mediator. This is not surprising, given that “the translator as mediator is a familiar theme within translation studies” (Inghilleri & Harding 2010, 167). In “times of conflict, it is often the translator who plays the role of mediator as all parties attempt to justify and legitimise their actions” (Translators 2015). He played a multi-faced, complex and highly significant role. Translators “are able to broaden and clarify people’s understanding of a conflict” (Translators 2015). They often embed themselves into the situation to deliver narratives of the inflicted parties. In that sense, Goethe’s interpreter is an important influencer of thought and perception who, as what Shapira (2016, 86) terms a “narrative mediator”, seeks to renew confidence and, moreover, contributes to a more just conduct of the conflicting parties. Inghilleri and Harding (2010, 166) recall the difficult position of interpreters and translators during times of conflict:

At all stages of a conflict, ethical decisions are required of interpreters and translators that extend beyond the translation of a spoken utterance or a written text. Interpreters and translators experience violent conflict through the interplay of a number of intersecting realities – historical, cultural, personal and political – all of which contribute to determining the scope of their participation. Working in conflict situations requires interpreters and translators, professional and non-professional alike, to confront their personal, political and professional beliefs. Like other participants in war, they must form an understanding of the conflict situation and commit to its purpose.

### *Conclusion*

Goethe’s representation of the Seven Years War still has something to tell us about our modern condition, even though it was written some 200 years ago, and refers to an international conflict that took place over 250 years ago. In this analysis, I focused on three aspects in particular: the relative advantage of wealthier families during times of conflict; the special roles of children during the war; and the importance of a just conduct during times of war.

As a child of a bourgeois family, Goethe, his sister and their parents accommodated an educated and well-mannered occupier, count de Thoranc. As a result of this, their house was well protected and young Goethe and his sister mostly seemed to enjoy the time they spent with the French occupiers.

This advantage of a bourgeois upbringing moderated the effects the war had on other members of the community or on children. Since “it cannot be denied that the needs of children are radically different from those of women, men and the elderly” (ICRC 2011, 1164), it was also interesting to see that young Goethe and his sister appeared to be satisfied with the gift of a theatre play for their house.

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<sup>11</sup> “er hatte die Sache so klüglich ausgemalt, das neue, noch nicht einmal ganz eingerichtete Haus, die natürliche Zurückgezogenheit des Besitzers, die Beschäftigung mit der Erziehung seiner Familie und was sich alles sonst noch sagen ließ, zu bedenken gegeben, so daß der Graf, der an seiner Stelle auf die höchste Gerechtigkeit, Unbestechlichkeit und ehrenvollen Wandel den größten Stolz setzte, auch hier sich als Einquartierter musterhaft zu betragen vornahm, und es wirklich die einigen Jahre seines Dableibens unter mancherlei Umständen unverbrüchlich gehalten hat”



Finally, Goethe, even as a boy, did not appreciate partisanship and criticized his father's stubborn rejection of de Thoranc, whom the writer described as a perfectly amiable guest. Thus, he challenges the fixed identities which are commonplace during wartime (Inghilleri & Harding 2010, 167) and praises the role of de Thoranc's interpreter. The latter conducted himself according to what today is called "preventive diplomacy" (Widmer 2018, 403), for instance his conversations aimed to ease tensions between Goethe's father and the French count. In this, he facilitated<sup>12</sup> the conflict for all involved parties, that is the Prussian-minded Johann Caspar Goethe, the French *lieutenant du roi* count de Thoranc, and also Goethe's mother, Katharina Elisabeth who found herself, as the daughter of a man who supported the Hapsburg monarchy, in between the Franco-Prussian rivalries.

Overall, Goethe's representation of the Seven Years War, even if it is slightly Germano-centric, is historically correct. He calls into question the Us vs Them Dichotomy and gives an insight into some important consequences of war that are still relevant today. These passages are yet another good example of why literature is a useful source for learning about war and politics.

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<sup>12</sup> "The term 'facilitation' was taken from psychology. It means that a third party facilitates the contact between two conflict parties" ("Aus der Psychologie übernommen wurde der Begriff ‚Fazilitation‘. Er bedeutet, dass eine Drittpartei den Kontakt zwischen zwei Konfliktparteien erleichtert") (Widmer 2018, 407).

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