

FI71

The First World War and the French Novel

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Keywords

armchair nationalism; disillusionment; the First World War; the horrors of war; the PCF; veteran associations

Q. What impact did the First World War have upon France?

A. The impact of the First World War on France was inevitably immense, given that a great part of the war took place on French soil, affecting France socially, politically and culturally. In 1914 France relied heavily on a conscript army, the professional army having largely been discredited in the eyes of many through its treatment of Alfred Dreyfus. The presidential pardoning of Dreyfus, an Alsatian army officer of Jewish origin, falsely convicted of passing classified information to Germany, and the subsequent campaign by the left-wing and Republican press allied with key intellectuals, such as Emile Zola, meant that many suspected the army of anti-Republican sentiments. To ensure loyalty to the regime of the Third Republic, and to counter ever-increasing German militarism, France introduced a compulsory two-year period of military service which was then increased to three years in 1913. This meant that when, on 2 August 1914, the French authorities declared the general mobilization of the army, nearly 3 million men left their homes and workplaces to join their units. Within the first two weeks of the war, some 2,800,000 men had mobilized, leading to disruption of railway services, the closure of some factories, and leaving many rural families to gather the harvest without the help of able-bodied young men. This was rectified due to the realization that autumn that France would require munitions and other key workers and a partial recall of some skilled workers followed. The overall result, however, was that many villages were emptied of their young men. In towns and cities, much of France's economic activity was now directed towards the war effort with women and immigrants increasingly being called upon to join the workforce.

The shape and landscape of France were also profoundly altered by the war. By the end of autumn 1914 the war had reached a stalemate. Following the lightning war of the Schlieffen Plan, marked by rapid German advances through Belgium and the north-east of France, the Germans were pushed back towards France's borders at the Battle of the Marne in October 1914. The German troops now dug in, preparing for a protracted war of attrition. The trenches that formed the frontline stretched from the North Sea to the Swiss Alps, but, over the course of the war, certain regions of France were to see more military activity than others. Thus, Champagne and the Marne continued to be the main arena of conflict in 1915, before Verdun and the Somme took centre stage in 1916. In 1917 Le Chemin des Dames became the focus of a massive and disastrous French assault. These sectors became the site of prolonged combat involving millions of artillery rounds and relentless infantry attacks. Entire towns or villages were destroyed, some of the latter never to be rebuilt. To many of the conflict's critics and opponents, the destruction of Rheims cathedral was

particularly symbolic of the war's assault on the values and very foundation of Western civilization.

The conditions of trench warfare led to enormous casualties which were to impact considerably on post-war France. William Fortescue estimates that 1,397,800 Frenchmen died or were missing as a consequence of the war in 1918. This amounts to approximately 10 per cent of the active male population in France at the time and the vast majority of these men were aged 18–30 years. A further 4,266,000 Frenchmen were wounded, 1,040,00 being classified as disabled as a consequence of the war. The effects on civilian society were also enormous. The war resulted in 719,000 children becoming orphaned and created 630,000 widows (Fortescue, 2000: 136–8). At the same time, the end of hostilities brought economic hardship for France; the many munitions factories now shut, leading to renewed unemployment problems in French industry. Returning soldiers could not always be guaranteed work, which created social unrest and disillusionment. The 1920s, therefore, saw the formation of many veteran associations, many of which were overtly pacifist, some of which were prepared to align themselves with new radical political parties such as the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), which was established in 1922.

Furthermore, France's infrastructure had suffered as a consequence of both neglect and the physical damage inflicted by war. The French economy was slow to re-adapt to peacetime activities. All this was coupled with an overall decline in the population which continued to fall even after the war and despite France reacquiring its former territory in Alsace and Lorraine under the Treaty of Versailles.

The impact of the war was also felt culturally. Before the war, Cubism and Dadaism had challenged the culturally established media of representation. This process was accelerated by the war. Although many of the Surrealist poets, for example, rarely wrote about their war experiences, the challenges that Surrealism threw at French society and its many bourgeois institutions were partly inspired by the war experiences of authors such as Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard. The war had taught many of these young intellectuals that society and its structures were essentially a mask, an artificial construct of the bourgeoisie, hiding the chaos and baser instincts of the human mind. Only by abandoning the guiding principle of rationality and the traditional values of *patrie, famille* and *religion*, André Breton was to argue, could the human subconscious be set free to express itself. These conditions could only be achieved through engagement with revolutionary politics which would finally cast aside the old structures and strictures of the Third Republic. Both culturally and politically, therefore, the war engendered a dualistic response among French intellectuals; on the one hand, it generated disillusionment and a fundamental and widespread pessimism. On the other, this led to a radical re-engagement with French political and social life. In art this took the form of formal experimentation, while in politics it took that of a flirtation with alternatives to the conservative politics of the Third Republic, often through allegiance to the fledgling PCF. The majority of war veterans, however, continued to support the status quo. Parliamentary politics in the 1920s were dominated by the *Chambre bleu horizon*, largely made up of newly elected veterans seeking to return France to the pre-war idyll they had often imagined in the trenches. The result was political stagnation and an inability on the part of successive governments to deal with both domestic economic difficulties and, in the late 1920s and 1930s, the new challenge from the Fascist states.

Q. What novels were written during the First World War? How did they represent the war and how were they received?

A. In the course of the war approximately 1,000 professional writers were mobilized. Of these, Maurice Rieuneau estimates that nearly half were killed or injured (Rieuneau, 1974: 13). This mass mobilization of the intelligentsia necessarily meant that many writers suspended their activities during the war, while older, more established, and usually more conservative writers, such as Paul Bourget and Maurice Barrès, used their writing as a way of promoting patriotic values. The work of Barrès in particular became synonymous with a form of armchair nationalism which, while naïvely depicting the enemy as a nation of bloodthirsty savages, saw nothing but nobility in the *poilu* (the civilian term for the infantryman). To Barrès and other nationalists, the war was part of an age-old conflict between French civilization and German barbarity that was rooted in the identity and ancestral inheritance of each nation. Never having visited the trenches, other than on an official government-sponsored tour, these writers were often ignorant of the real horrors of the conflict, continuing to evoke in their writings a war that recalls the patriotic *images d'Epinal* of the pre-war period rather than a modern scientific and technological conflict.

The first novelistic account of the war to emerge by a combatant was Henry Malherbe's *La Flamme au poing* (1915). This was followed later that year by René Benjamin's *Gaspard*. The two novels are very different, but both are broadly nationalist in tone. Unlike the accounts of armchair nationalists, however, both novels contain the first truly graphic depictions of combat during that war. *La Flamme au poing* is one of the first novels that tries to make ideological sense of the war, using its nationalism as a response to the brutality of war rather than as a justification for it. Its characters are therefore fortified by their faith in the nation, but express a sense of the nation's fragility and the brutality of war, rather than masking this behind the rhetoric of bourgeois patriotism. Malherbe's narrative oscillates between old-style patriotic grandiloquence and a modern, absurdist understanding of the war.

Gaspard is significant for other reasons; predominantly a comic novel, it establishes the literary type of the ever-resourceful *poilu* able to conjure up a meal from nothing, to get the better of his superior officers without ever displaying disloyalty, and bound to survive the chaos and atrocities that surround him. He therefore represents the eternal resilience of the French working class, but is curiously immune to, or ignorant of, class politics.

Other nationalist combat novels published during the war include Adrien Bertrand's *L'Appel du sol* and Gabriel-Tristan Franconi's *Un Tel de l'armée française*. These novels, while very different from the naïve nationalism of Barrès, still offered an ultimately reassuring image of the French infantryman and of the war to a public which still knew very little of the reality of war. This ignorance of the real conditions of warfare was possible due to two factors: first, up until 1917 French soldiers usually had to wait a year before receiving their first period of leave and, second, the wounded and those on leave rarely wanted to discuss the war when back among their loved ones.

This began to change with the publication of Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* which was initially serialized in *L'Œuvre* in 1916 before being published as a novel in 1917. Barbusse's novel is the first French novel to contest dominant, patriotic narratives of the war. These continued to depict the war as justified and, therefore, in some way a noble undertaking. *Le Feu* questions the justification for war, seeing the war as the logical outcome of liberal capitalism and the Western powers' obsession with imperialism. Barbusse himself chose to join the army, however, in order to combat German militarism, which he considered an even greater evil than French

imperialism. The real interest of *Le Feu* for the readers of 1917, though, was its depiction of the squalor and brutality of conflict. Barbusse's characters are little more than sketches, but the novel still impresses through its evocation of the bestiality to which his combatants have sunk. The war evoked in *Le Feu* is a constant struggle not only against an unseen enemy, but also against an inhospitable, apocalyptic universe reflected in a landscape of mud, water and poisonous gases. Barbusse relentlessly depicts the physical reality of warfare: the men's fatigue and hunger, their terrible wounds and drawn-out deaths. In many ways, *Le Feu* established what were to become the familiar tropes of anti-war art. Arguably, its influence stretches from the poetry of Sassoon and Owen, who were both among the first to read the English translation of *Le Feu*, through the art of Otto Dix, who used the novel as the inspiration for some of his war paintings, to more recent cinematic representations of the horrors of war. There is nothing in the horror of the first 20 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* that cannot be found in *Le Feu*.

Le Feu's criticism of the war's origins, management and aims is also notable for the fact that it is grounded in the author's political ideology. Barbusse was already a committed socialist before the war, but the war confirmed in Barbusse's mind the need for social revolution rather than reform. The war, as the surviving characters of *Le Feu* observe, has proved the fundamental hostility of the bourgeoisie towards the French working classes who make up the ranks of the French army. The only way to prevent future war, to make this *la der des ders* (the war to end all wars) to use the popular pacifist expression of the time, was to ensure that the war led to social revolution at home. The concluding chapter to *Le Feu*, therefore, ends on a note of optimism with Barbusse's combatants re-emerging from the mud intent on revolution. In this sense, *Le Feu* is a truly apocalyptic text: the destruction engendered by war leads to the promise of peace and of a renewed relationship with the world through the adoption of a revolutionary praxis. Barbusse became closely associated with post-war pacifism, establishing in 1919 the left-wing review *Clarté* and was one of the first French intellectuals to join the PCF in 1923.

Q. What novels were written about the war between 1919 and 1939? To what extent did they have a political perspective?

A. Like *La Flamme au poing* and *Gaspard*, *Le Feu* was both highly successful in terms of sales and critical reception. Sales worldwide now surpass 2 million and the book was translated immediately into English and German. The financial success that Barbusse enjoyed thanks to *Le Feu* led to a plethora of war novels being published by veterans who were either new to the profession, such as Roland Dorgelès and Jean Bernier, or reasonably well-established writers, such as Georges Duhamel. More generally, there was also a huge market for war memoirs and *carnets de route* (campaign diaries) by even the most obscure infantryman.

The war novels of the inter-war years can be divided broadly into two groups. The first group is published in the period 1919–24. Writers in this group are all veterans who, to a greater or lesser extent, base their novel upon their own war experiences. The most famous among this group is without a doubt Dorgelès, who wrote *Les Croix de bois* (1919). This novel shares many of the themes of *Le Feu* and is strongly critical of the war without embracing the same ideological conclusions. Dorgelès' novel is more obviously structured along the lines of an apprenticeship, however, with a greater interest in character development, focusing predominantly on the war as the young student Jacques Demachy experiences it before being killed in

battle. Others in this group include Léon Werth's *Clavel soldat* (1919), which gives an anarchist's perspective of the war, and Jean Bernier's *La Percée* (1920). These novels belong to a growing chorus of criticism of the war's management and outcomes. To these we could also add various other best-sellers of the day which are rarely read these days, such as Joseph Jolinon's *Le Valet de gloire* (1923) and Ernest Florian-Parmentier's *L'Ouragan* (1920).

Yet, despite the realization of the truth about the war which the majority of the French population had now accepted, as regards the great losses endured during the conflict, there was still a great demand for nationalist novelistic representations of the war. These too knew a certain popular success, but have fared even worse than many of the above texts in terms of longevity. Of most interest is Henry de Montherlant's *Le Songe* (1924) which examines the tensions in the relationship of Bricoule, its main character, and Dominique, a nurse who falls in love with him. The influences of Nietzsche on Bricoule is obvious; exempt from military service due to an earlier wound, Bricoule decides to rejoin the army in order to impose his personal will upon the war and history. Dominique becomes an obstacle to be overcome on the way to achieving the perfect conjunction of will and self. Ultimately, however, he fails, experiencing fear in the face of death and unable to perceive his own part in the general chaos that surrounds him. Other less complex analyses of the nation at war include Jean de Granvilliers's *Le Prix de l'homme* (1919), Raymond Escholier's *Le Sel de la terre* (one of the rare Catholic novels of the war), and Philippe (son of Maurice) Barrès's *La Guerre à vingt ans* (1924).

As René Pomeau (1963: 83) has observed, 1924 and the publication of *Le Songe* mark the end of public interest in the combat novel as a literary sub-genre. Montherlant's novel is the first by a veteran to use the war as a means of exploring wider themes. Radiguet's *Le Diable au corps* goes further and relegates the war to focus entirely on the relationship between a bored housewife, whose husband is at the front, and an adolescent. From the mid-1920s the war recedes in many novels to become only a backdrop or memory.

The theme of war, and the representation of the Great War, come to the fore again in the novels of the 1930s. The reason for this is the increased threat of war with Nazi Germany and the aggressive attitude towards the democracies demonstrated by Fascist Italy. The fear and inevitability of war are not only evident in the number of novels which again write about war, but suffuse many novels of the period which do not depict war itself. Some of the most memorable and canonic anti-war novels were written in the prelude to Second World War. Jules Romains's *Prélude à Verdun* and *Verdun* (both 1938), which are part of his enormous *roman-fleuve*, *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, remains one of the most impressive and influential texts concerning the war. Through its opposition of different viewpoints, it creates an overview of the events surrounding the Battle of Verdun in 1916, evoking the horror of war, but also, through its use of intersubjectivity, suggests a new approach to depicting war. It is this narrative technique that Sartre will try to emulate in his trilogy of novels *Les Chemins de la liberté* (1945–49). We must also mention here Jean Giono's acclaimed pacifist treatment of the war in *Le grand troupeau* (1931), where many of the techniques of earlier anti-war writers are revisited and revised, as well as the epilogue to Roger Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault* (1940) which, in the prolonged suffering of Antoine Thibault, a victim of a gas attack, reminds the French public on the eve of the Second World War of their prolonged suffering of 20 years earlier.

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