

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

# Cru, Jean Norton

By [Rémy Cazals](#)

Cru, *Jean* Norton  
French Historian  
Born 09 September 1879 in Labatie-d'Andaure, France  
Died 21 June 1949 in Bransles, France

**Jean Norton Cru did not consider himself a historian. Yet his life's work, *Témoins* (Witnesses), written for historians, is an exceptional book of historiography of 1914 to 1918 and a pioneering reflection on the testimony of social actors at that time. Cru was a maverick who was uncompromising towards those people with an established reputation. He sparked heated debates.**

## Table of Contents

[1 Background](#)

[2 First World War](#)

[3 Témoins](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## 1. Background

Jean Norton Cru (1879-1949) was influenced in his youth by a liberal Protestant upbringing; a life of liberty on the island of Maré in the Pacific Ocean where his father was a missionary; and the accumulation of wrongs committed by the anti-Dreyfus side during the famous Dreyfus Affair. Starting in 1908, Cru taught at Williams College in Massachusetts, where he remained until 1945 (except during the First World War).

## 2. First World War

Arriving as an [infantryman](#) at the front in October 1914, Cru became a sergeant in February 1915. Two years later, he was sent to work as interpreter for the British Army, and later, the U.S. Army. He stayed in the trenches for twenty-eight months. There, he discovered the reality of war: attacks and bombings alternating with quieter periods in which the living conditions remained very harsh. His [letters](#) describe the fear he had to overcome; the hatred that was less frequent on the front than in newspaper headlines; and the feelings of the soldiers who condemned the brainwashing and [censorship](#) that accompanied war. When he was appointed interpreter, he knew how to describe the simple joy of having survived and the satisfaction of having overcome trial by fire, both of which helped to shape his personality.

## 3. Témoins

Seeing his [comrades](#) write to their families, Cru understood self-censorship and employed it himself with his mother. (Meanwhile, his sister Alice was his confidante, "so that someone, at least, knew that I risked death.") He read stories by [Maurice Genevoix \(1890–1980\)](#), [Henri Barbusse \(1873–1935\)](#), and others when they were published. His research project on the eyewitness accounts of the war was born in the trenches, out of the comparison between the "legend of war" and lived experience. At first, he wrote:

You may have seen me express opinions while still tainted by these preconceptions, or literary, traditional ideas, which constitute what I call the 'legend of the war.' It was only gradually that I replaced these dogmas with the facts of experience.<sup>[1]</sup>

He harshly criticized works that were nothing more than literary exercises in style. "I consider it a sacrilege to use our blood and our anguish merely as the material for making literature,"<sup>[2]</sup> he wrote, adding that one could, however, read the eyewitness accounts of righteous spirits, lovers of simple truth.

That is in fact what happened, and Jean Norton Cru dedicated ten years of his life to reading and comparing 300 eyewitness accounts published between 1915 and 1928. His method was rigorous. He verified the reality of each individual's experience. He rooted out literary effects and borrowings from heroic tradition. He sought to understand why some people had altered their testimony (which was mostly done to please the public or to satisfy political desires).

The book was highly controversial: authors of bestsellers became furious after reading his harsh criticism; many veterans who were intellectuals approved. Jean Norton Cru said about the eyewitness accounts of the First World War that, when freed from the patina of [propaganda](#) literature, "they represent a unique manifestation of French thought, and access to collective sincerity, a confession that is both bold and poignant, and an energetic repudiation of millenary pseudo-truths."<sup>[3]</sup>

Section Editor: [Alexandre Lafon](#)

## Notes

1. † Letter to his sister Alice (22-1-1917), in Cru, Jean Norton: *Lettres du front et d'Amérique (1914-1919)*. Aix-en-Provence 2007, p. 212.
2. † Letter to his sister Hélène (14-4-1917), in Cru, *Lettres du front et d'Amérique* 2007, p. 240.
3. † Cru, Jean Norton : *Témoins, essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*. Paris 2006, p. 13.

## Selected Bibliography

Cazals, Rémy: **500 témoins de la Grande Guerre**, Portet-sur-Garonne 2013: Editions Midi-Pyrénéennes; Edhisto.

Cru, Jean Norton, Attard-Maraninchi, Marie-Françoise / Caty, Roland (eds.): **Lettres du front et d'Amérique (1914-1919)**, Aix-en-Provence 2007: Publications de l'Université de Provence.

Cru, Jean Norton: **Du témoignage**, Paris 1930: Librairie Gallimard.

Cru, Jean Norton: **Témoins essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928** (3 ed.), Nancy 2006: Presses universitaires de Nancy.

Rousseau, Frédéric: **Le procès des témoins de la Grande Guerre. L'affaire Norton Cru**, Paris 2003: Seuil.

## Citation

Cazals, Rémy: Cru, Jean Norton , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10471**.

## License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works](#).