

Barbusse, Henri

By [Laurence Campa](#)

Barbusse, *Henri*

French Writer

Born 17 May 1873 in Asnières, France

Died 30 August 1935 in Moscow, Russia

Summary

Fulfilling the archetype of the war writer, Henri Barbusse is the embodiment of pacifist activism. His book *Le Feu* (1916) paved the way for a new genre, that of literary testimony. Acclaimed as soon as it was published, it has been considered as a classic of French war literature ever since.

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Barbusse during World War I

A journalist, novelist, literary editor for various publishers and chairman of the *Société des Gens de lettres*, Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) was already a recognized writer when the war broke out. Despite being forty-one years old already and in poor health, he enlisted as a private in order to fight for his convictions. A socialist by temperament, he intended to wage a social war against capitalism and [militarism](#) for progress to triumph in Europe. It did not take long before his experiences on the front quickly turned his idealism into a rebellion against [warfare](#) and useless sacrifice of human life. At first, he fought in Artois with the 231st Infantry regiment. Suffering from serious dysentery though, he became a stretcher-bearer and so took part in the offensive of 25 September 1915. Awarded the Military Cross and honored several times, he left the front line in November and became a staff headquarters secretary, interrupted by stays in hospital at various times (he was discharged in June 1917). He wrote *Le Feu – Journal d'une Escouade*, which was first serialized in *L'Œuvre* in the summer of 1916, then published as a single volume. In December, it was awarded the Goncourt Prize, praised by the public for its realism and authenticity, a far cry from official patriotic [propaganda](#). Barbusse reached his goal but propaganda might have paradoxically

succeeded too, by using the book in its own strategy of warfare. Although French writer [Jean Norton Cru \(1879-1949\)](#) criticized its excessive use of slang and literary fantasy, the book remains the most popular French war novel.

Post-War Life

Enjoying immense prestige, Henri Barbusse founded the *Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants* in July 1917 together with [Raymond Lefebvre \(1891-1920\)](#) and [Paul Vaillant-Couturier \(1892-1937\)](#). In 1919, he created the international intellectual movement *Clarté*, whose revolutionary agenda inspired him to disagree vehemently with [Romain Rolland \(1866-1944\)](#), who disapproved of the use of violence and fought for an idealistic [pacifism](#). *Clarté* was also the title of his politically-committed novel about the impact of the war and ideology, published in 1922. For Henri Barbusse, [literature](#) and [revolution](#) were part and parcel of the same overarching idea. He joined the Communist party in 1923 and became literary editor of the daily paper *L'Humanité* three years later, remaining a true fighting writer until he died.

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Selected Bibliography

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External Links

- [Barbusse, Henri: Le feu, Paris 1916 \(Gallica\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Barbusse, Henri: Under fire: the story of a squad, New York 1917 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Dutton, Philip: The French soldier novelist and the British cycling journalist: some notes on 'Le Feu' by Henri Barbusse, and its first English translator, William Fitzwater Wray \(World War I Centenary\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Grayzel, Susan: Teaching Le Feu/Under Fire by Henri Barbusse \(H-France\) \(Article\)](#)

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