

Cendrars, Blaise

By [Laurence Campa](#)

Cendrars, *Blaise*

(Frédéric)

Swiss writer, later a naturalized Frenchman

Born 01 September 1887 in La Chaux-de Fonds, Switzerland

Died 21 January 1961 in Paris, France

Summary

The life and works of the poet Blaise Cendrars testify to a disturbing paradox: while encapsulating the trauma that was the result from his war experience, they also illustrate the creative virtues of disability due to the war.

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During World War I

An avant-garde poet, sharing a certain affinity with [Guillaume Apollinaire \(1880-1918\)](#) and the Cubists, Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) and the Italian poet [Ricciotto Canudo \(1877-1923\)](#) published an appeal to all foreigners living in [France](#) on the eve of the mobilization. Cendrars himself enlisted as a foreign volunteer in September 1914 and fought on the [Somme](#) until the summer of 1915. Having joined the Foreign Legion, his regiment was stationed in the Vosges, then took part in the second [Champagne offensive](#). On 28 September 1915, in the rank of corporal, he was seriously wounded during the attack on Navarin farm. His right arm had to be amputated. Naturalized a Frenchman on 16 February 1916, he had to learn how to live as a left-handed person. After a serious existential crisis in September 1917, he had the revelation that his disability had had such a fundamental impact on his life that he had become a new writer, too. In 1918, he published a work of poetic prose titled *J'ai tué*, illustrated by the painter [Fernand Léger \(1881-1955\)](#), which breaks the taboo concerning deliberately inflicted death, as testimonies usually depicted the received death.

Post-War Writer

Because of his refusal to be a war writer, Blaise Cendrars remained incapable of reflecting on the wounds and traumas he had suffered during the war. Though his novels *Moravagine* (1928) and *Dan Yack* (1929) are haunted by the war, and the fact that he did revisit a military life as a reporter with the British Army in 1940, it was not until his retreat in Aix-en-Provence during the German occupation that he was able to write his memoirs, particularly, *La Main Coupée*. Published in 1946, this literary memorial was dedicated to his lost friends, which also functions as a [cenotaph](#) for his lost hand. It received critical and popular acclaim comparable to [Curzio Malaparte's \(1898-1957\) Kaputt](#). Throughout his life, the one-armed poet never ceased to reinvent himself through writing, rising from the ashes time and again.

Laurence Campa, Université de Paris Ouest-Nanterre

Selected Bibliography

- [Campa, Laurence: **Le Poème mutilé. De La guerre au Luxembourg à J'ai tué**, in: Campa, Laurence \(ed.\): *Poètes de la Grande Guerre. Expérience combattante et activité poétique*, Paris 2010 Classiques Garnier.](#)
- [Cendrars, Blaise, Loignon, Sylvie \(ed.\): **J'ai saigné \(1938\)**, Paris, 2012: Hatier.](#)
- [Cendrars, Blaise: **J'ai tué \(1918\)**, in: Leroy, Claude \(ed.\): *Aujourd'hui \(1931\)*, Paris 2005 Denoël.](#)
- [Cendrars, Blaise: **La main coupée**, Paris, 1946: Société des éditions Denoël.](#)
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Laurence Campa: Cendrars, Blaise, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10306](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10306)

External Links

- [Cendrars, Blaise: Anthologie nègre, Paris, 1919 \(Internet Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Cendrars, Blaise: Du monde entier, Paris, 1919 \(Internet Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Centre d'Etudes Blaise Cendrars / Association Internationale Blaise Cendrars \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Flückiger, Jean-Carlo: Cendrars, Blaise, 16 February 2011 \(Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz\) \(Article\)](#)

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