

Literature (France)

By [Nicolas Beaupré](#)

Behind the lines, writers largely supported the war effort in their countries. A few exceptions nonetheless voiced their disapproval of the war, although this came mostly from authors in exile. The conflict gave rise to a new literary trend in several of the countries at war; in France, this phenomenon is often referred to as “soldiers’ testimony”. Indeed, hundreds of writers went to the front; and conversely, some regular soldiers discovered their penchant for writing in the trenches. These “soldier-writers” used literature—both poetry and prose—to describe an experience stamped with the mark of industrial war and mass death. Attempts to write about the war experience culminated during the war years, but also continued beyond 1918 and even spurred heated debate about the ultimate goals of such writing.

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Introduction

“And he stood up, as if in defiance of the shots, seeming almost to summon the death he so glorified in verse. At that very moment, a deadly bullet shot through this noble forehead. He fell on his side, without a cry, unleashing only a quiet moan, having glimpsed the ultimate vision of victory so longed for and finally within reach.”^[1] Following the appeal by [Maurice Barrès \(1862-1923\)](#), the lines above

were written in 1916 by soldier [Victor Boudon \(1882- ?\)](#) to describe in a commemorative book the death of his lieutenant on 5 September 1914, near Villeroy, during the [battle of the Marne](#). The lieutenant was [Charles Péguy \(1873-1914\)](#) and it was of little importance whether or not this narrative was true: his symbolically loaded death was already a myth. Péguy was a socialist converted to Catholicism, the perfect embodiment of the “[Union sacrée](#)”, and his death during the battle of the Marne made it possible to talk of a sacrifice to herald pending victory; it also quickly revealed the extent to which writers were involved in several facets of the Great War. Between the eulogy writers who, behind the lines, turned this death into a symbol and Péguy who was killed at the front after a short campaign, this episode indeed underscored the different views of the war held in various literary spheres.

The suddenness with which the war broke out, its scope and the extreme violence of the first battles, followed by its duration, ensured that the First World War had a profound effect on its contemporaries. Very quickly – as early as 1914, actually – it was referred to as the “Great War” in France. Intellectuals in general and writers more specifically played a central role in representing the conflict underway. Faced with political upheaval and war on an unprecedented scale, they sought literary tools to describe it. They were indeed fully absorbed by the events of the war. While not all historians agree on the degree to which the Great War was a “[total war](#)”, there is no doubt that the literary field was massively consumed by the conflict and, in return, actively engaged with the war being waged.

Behind the Lines

Writers – like other intellectuals and artists – initially engaged massively with the war for the homeland from behind the lines. This devotion to the homeland was multifaceted. In the early 20th century, the print media was central to the dissemination of information, and writers played a prominent role. Maurice Barrès wrote almost daily in *L’Echo de Paris* to galvanize soldiers and non-combatants alike, and to glorify the “Union sacrée”. The *Bulletin des Armées de la République*, the main channel for official [propaganda](#) aimed at soldiers, recruited numerous writers and intellectuals for its columns. Many renowned writers – like [Anatole France \(1844-1924\)](#) at the start of the war and [André Suarès \(1868-1948\)](#) – also vehemently lampooned the enemy in their writing and conferences. French philosopher [Henri Bergson \(1859-1941\)](#) did not hesitate to declare on 8 August 1914, “The struggle underway against Germany is that of civilization versus barbarism.”^[2] Indeed, there were not many “dissidents of the Great War”.^[3] The first to strongly oppose the nationalist war were small groups of exiles, most often in Switzerland, like [Romain Rolland \(1866-1944\)](#), [Pierre-Jean Jouve \(1887- 1976\)](#), [Marcel Martinet \(1887-1944\)](#) and [Henri Guilbeaux \(1885-1938\)](#). Romain Rolland and his friends founded several political and literary anti-war journals, and published texts in the Swiss press including the famous *Above the Battle*. They were in contact with [pacifists](#) across Europe, some of whom – like [Stefan Zweig \(1881-1942\)](#) – adhered to their cause.

[Switzerland](#) was also a melting pot for French and German writers. Rolland as such met the Alsatian

René Schickele (1883-1940), among others, who strived to cultivate a European spirit that surpassed national antagonism. He notably had Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) and Georges Duhamel (1884-1966) translated into German. Switzerland was also a place for experimentation: for example, the Cabaret Voltaire which preceded the founding of the Dada transnational artistic movement that used the absurd to criticize the ongoing war, and whose ramifications were felt throughout and especially after the war, particularly in Berlin and Paris.

And yet artistic and literary novelty was not limited to writers in exile. While it is true that *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, the leading literary publication, was not published during the war, others, like *Mercure de France*, continued to be published after a short interruption at the start of the war. Some avant-garde publications were even created during the war, like *Le Mot* (1914-1915) published by Paul Iribe (1883-1935) and Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), and *L'Élan* (1915-1916) created by Amédée Ozenfant (1886-1966) which combined avant-gardism, patriotism and anti-Germanism. *SIC (Sons, Images, Couleurs)* (1916-1919) created by Pierre Albert-Birot (1876-1967) and *Nord-Sud* (1917-1918) founded by Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960) also point up the vitality of works that, for their part, sought rather to cultivate a type of autonomy. All of these journals notably published the war poems and calligrams of Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). The latter and his artist friends were involved in group projects that transcended different artistic genres: for example in 1917, with the staging of Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias* or the Parade ballet by Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie (1866-1925). Already described as surrealist, these works were naturally quite controversial.

Literary life was as such very much alive, although it also fell into step with the war, especially by late 1914 and early 1915, when people realized that the war was going to last. Publishers began to publish numerous books on the current war and even created entire collections devoted to the war. Literary prizes were also most often awarded to books that dealt with current events. Indeed, following the example of the *Prix Goncourt* (France's most prestigious literary award), the winners were often part of a new breed of authors that became known as "soldier-writers"^[4].

At the Front

Since France relied on conscription, numerous writers were mobilized. This was the case for Péguy, a reserve lieutenant born in 1873, who was still eligible to be called up. The same was true for Henri Alain-Fournier (1886-1914), also a lieutenant in the reserve; Jean-Richard Bloch (1884-1947) was called up as a lance corporal; and Georges Duhamel and Luc Durtain (1881-1959) served as doctors.

Others chose to join or enlisted prior to being called up, for example older writers who could have avoided going to the front like Catholic poet Adolphe Retté (1863-1930) who enlisted as a nurse. At the other end of the political spectrum, Henri Barbusse, a socialist, used the following words in the newspaper *L'Humanité* on 9 August 1914 to justify his enlistment: "This is a social war that will be a great step—perhaps the definitive step—for our cause. It is directed against the same despicable

enemies as always: militarism and imperialism, the Sword, the Boot, and I would add: the Crown.”^[5] This sentiment was also shared by another left-leaning author, Léon Werth (1878-1955), who described in his novel *Clavel Soldat* (1919) the defensive sentimentalism that consumed his compatriots and himself as he shed his antimilitarist and pacifist beliefs before slowly renewing with them over time.

In addition to these French figures that were too old or too young, who chose to enlist before being called up or were unfit for service - like Roland Dorgelès (1885-1973) or Jean Cocteau, who signed up to work as a Red Cross nurse – a number of foreigners also chose to join the ranks of the French army. Paris was indeed the elected home to many artists and writers from around the world in the early 20th century. Guillaume Apollinaire, Alan Seeger (1888-1916) and Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) were among the most famous foreigners who enlisted. The latter, with his Italian friend Ricciotto Canudo (1879-1923) and other foreign artists and writers published an appeal to foreigners to “offer their force” and group together as “a strong pool willing to serve the broadest France.”

Famous or less known (and often forgotten today), hundreds of writers were called up or enlisted to fight at the front. The phenomenon was so widespread that in November 1914 a *Bulletin des écrivains de 1914* (“1914 Bulletin of Writers”) was created to keep all of these “soldier-writers” in touch with the literary world behind the lines. Many, like Péguy, gave their lives fighting the war. The *Bulletin des écrivains* began to systematically publish the obituaries of writers killed in the war. An association of soldier-writers was created in 1919 and undertook the publication of a five-volume anthology of writers killed in the war. This followed on from an initial anthology published starting in 1916 and contained 560 names that were later engraved on plaques on the walls of the Pantheon, in Paris, in 1927.^[6]

Writing in the War, Writing about the War

The enlisting of writers, their participation and death in the war worked to greatly legitimate the soldier-writers’ war literature, in both prose and poetry. The public, too, ensured the success of these authors as people were indeed avid for information about life at the front and quite suspicious of “brainwashing” by the media behind the lines. While war literature was also censured, the censoring bodies were nonetheless generally more lenient with this type of writing than with newspaper articles. Rightly or wrongly, “soldier-writers” quickly came to be seen as more reliable “sources” than journalists or other war reporters, and even as spokespeople for the regular soldiers whose troubles they portrayed. The tone used in the works published between 1914 and 1918 also helped to ensure their success. While openly pacifist works remained rare during the war—due to censorship, but also, and above all, to the steadfast patriotism of most intellectuals – such writing nonetheless offered a vision that was often far more realistic than most of what was written behind the lines.

The writers themselves actually worked to kindle the legitimacy of their own accounts. It was as such that Pierre-Alexis Muenier (1886-?) wrote in his book *L’angoisse de Verdun* (“The Anguish of

Verdun”), published in 1918: “Only war can truly speak about war. Only great horror can fully explain what a soldier’s true soul looks like.”^[7] Indeed, in addition to writers who fought in the war, some soldiers also became writers. The near-daily habit of letter or journal writing, as well as the boredom of life in the trenches likely encouraged this flourishing of a generation of soldier-writers, even if the act of publishing a book, and even more so a work of literary ambition, was obviously different from that of writing letters.

Whether famous or unknown, these authors achieved writer status with the publication of their texts and their acceptance by reviewers and the public. They attempted to transcribe their war experience and tackle via their writing what was already being called the “Great War”. They published narratives, war diaries, fiction and poems from the trenches.

While poetry was an important genre, with prominent figures such as Guillaume Apollinaire who wrote several dozen war poems as well as hundreds of lesser known poems,^[8] for the most part patriotic verses, war literature was unquestionably dominated in France by prose and by war narratives more specifically, although a few works of fiction, like *Under Fire* by Henri Barbusse, winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1916, were immensely successful (at least 200,000 copies sold). Barbusse’s work was also undoubtedly the most popular book among troops during the war. Virtually all of the soldiers at the front were literate and many were avid readers. They did not read war literature exclusively, but also the classics, light reading and, above all, the written press.^[9]

Barbusse’s novel was first published in serial form in the daily paper *L’oeuvre* and it as such reached a broad readership even before its publication in book form. It was subtitled *The Story of a Squad* to underscore (indeed, with a degree of ambiguity,) the authenticity of its author’s experience at war. It was also the first internationally acclaimed war literature of 1914-1918 and was translated ten times between 1917 and 1919, including into German in 1918 when it was published in Switzerland.

By describing war in the trenches, the large battles, the suffering of soldiers, but also their hopes, war literature in some respects spoke on behalf of the troops to a population that wanted to know more about what their fathers, husbands, fiancés, brothers and mobilized sons were experiencing. This literature also helped make the “poilu” the central figure of the war and a pillar that would gradually support the collective memory of the “Great War” during and then after the war. As heroes, martyrs or victims, the *poilus* were the main “characters” of these works, which were perpetuated in the post-war period by a second wave of publications, once again by soldier-writers. Léon Werth as such published three books about the war between 1919 and 1920. While Marcel Proust (1871-1922) took the 1919 Prix Goncourt with *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, Roland Dorgelès’s *Wooden Crosses* nonetheless won the Femina award. In the immediate aftermath of the war there was a decrease in the number of publications about the war, including in terms of war literature. The number of books published and the print runs were greatly reduced, although books about the war were still published. The post-war period also saw a return to pre-war political divisions. Indeed, 1919 and 1920 were filled with political debate over the meaning to give to the war, which resulted in the publication of vehement manifestos in the press. These notably opposed Henri Barbusse and

Romain Rolland on one side, who advocated for a pacifist interpretation of the war, and [Henri Massis \(1886-1970\)](#) and right-leaning writers on the other side who called in *Le Figaro* for a rejection of internationalism and for intelligence based on the patriotic values defended during the war. Given the divisive atmosphere and decreased public interest, some soldier-writers decided to organize themselves and created the *Association des écrivains combattants* (AEC—Association of soldier-writers) in July 1919. This association quickly reached a membership of over 300 and attempted to at once preserve the spirit of the “Union sacrée”, defend the interests of writers who were now also war veterans and, above all, honour the memory of comrades killed at war.

During the 1920s and 1930s, there was a revival of war literature in France and in many other countries, but these works often combined literary research and pacifist or antimilitarist leanings – in a similar vein to the international best-seller *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) by [Erich Maria Remarque \(1898-1970\)](#), translated from German. Novels gradually began to surpass narratives: e.g., *Fear* (published in French in 1930) by [Gabriel Chevallier \(1895-1969\)](#), *To the Slaughterhouse* (1931) by [Jean Giono \(1895-1970\)](#) and the first pages of *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) by [Louis-Ferdinand Céline \(1894-1961\)](#). In 1932, *Capitaine Conan* by [Roger Verceel \(1894-1957\)](#) won the Prix Goncourt. This period was also marked by the controversy surrounding the publication in 1929 and 1930 of *Témoins* and *Du témoignage* by [Jean Norton Cru \(1879-1949\)](#) who, as a veteran and professor of literature, closely examined and critiqued 300 works of war literature. His normative belief that war literature should adhere to an imperative truth was divisive. Some authors—notably Roland Dorgelès, president of the AEC at the time—felt personally attacked and did not hesitate to recall that at least some soldier-writers saw themselves more as creative forces than as “witnesses” in the strictest sense. In any case, this debate highlighted one of the fundamental issues of wartime literature as both a means to confront the war’s paroxysm and as an attempt to write about the catastrophe.

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Reviewed by external referees on behalf of the General Editors

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Notes

1. † Boudon, Victor: Avec Charles Péguy. De la Lorraine à la Marne, Août-septembre 1914, Paris 1916, p. 146, translated by JS.
2. † Prochasson, Christophe / Rasmussen, Anne: Au nom de la Patrie. Les intellectuels et la Première Guerre mondiale (1910-1919), Paris 1996, p. 131, translated by JS.
3. † Ibid., p. 142, translated by JS.

4. † For more on this topic see Beupré, Nicolas: *Ecrire en guerre, écrire la guerre*. France, Allemagne 1914-1920, Paris 2006.
5. † Barbusse, Henri: *Paroles d'un combattant*, Paris 1920, p. 7-8, translated by JS.
6. † Beupré, Nicolas: *Du Bulletin des Ecrivains de 1914 à l'Association des Ecrivains Combattants (AEC): des combats à la mémoire, 1914-1927*, in: Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane / Becker, Annette / Cœuré, Sophie / Duclert, Vincent / Monier, Frédéric (eds.): *La politique et la guerre. Pour comprendre le XXe siècle européen, Hommage à Jean-Jacques Becker*, Paris 2002, pp. 301-315.
7. † Muenier, Pierre-Alexis: *L'angoisse de Verdun*, Nancy 1991 (1918), p. 108, translated by JS.
8. † Over 2,000 according to Willard, Emile: *Guerre et poésie. La poésie patriotique française de 1914-1918*, Neuchâtel 1949.
9. † Gilles, Benjamin: *Lectures de poilus 1914-1918. Livres et journaux dans les tranchées*, Paris 2013.

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Citation

Beaupré, Nicolas: Literature (France) , 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/ie1418.10390](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-63864-p0103-9). Translated by: Serveau, Jocelyne

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