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The Song of Craonne

By [Guy Marival](#)

The song now known as the "Chanson de Craonne" ("Song of Craonne") remains one of the most well-known First World War songs in France. Several months before the mutinies in spring 1917, its text expressed weariness due to the seemingly endless war and alluded to mass disobedience.

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Modern-Day Impact

"*Adieu la vie, adieu l'amour...* Good-bye to life, good-bye to love / Good-bye to all the women / It's all over now, we've had it for good / With this awful war." The "Song of Craonne" has become an important part of the French collective memory of the Great War during the last thirty years. It is irrefutably today the most well-known of the songs associated with the war: the most recorded and the most often cited in school textbooks.

Origins

The song takes its name from a village in the Chemin des Dames region, the scene of the disastrous Nivelle Offensive (April-May 1917) and subsequent mutiny amongst French soldiers. The song's text was standardized in the years following the conflict and emerged from the movement of left-wing war veterans. It is noticeably different from earlier versions, which have been recovered in family

archives or in letters seized by military [censors](#).

The melody is the slow waltz composed in 1911 by [Adelmar Sablon \(1871-1928\)](#) for a song, "*Bonsoir M'amour*" ("Good Night, My Love"). During the war, the lyrics of many popular songs were adapted to express the experience of war, in most cases by authors who have remained anonymous. "*Bonsoir M'amour*" inspired songs linked to the Battles of Lorette in Artois (1915), [Champagne](#) (1915), and [Verdun](#) (1916). These versions circulated simultaneously. In 1919, the song appeared under the title "Song of Lorette" in a collection entitled "The War of Soldiers."

The exact date and circumstances of the composition of "Song of Craonne" remain unclear. Speculation about its authorship has sometimes been fanciful, at other times deliberately misleading: The text has been attributed to the communist journalist [Paul Vaillant-Couturier \(1892–1937\)](#), despite the fact that he made no claim to have written it. The differences in style and vocabulary among verses suggest more than one author.

Lyrics and Meaning

The song expresses weariness at the prospect of a seemingly endless war and contains an element of fatalism, depicted in the line: "We've all been sentenced to die." Its themes are rightly viewed as pacifist. But with its references to "well-heeled shirkers" ("*ces embusqués*") and "fat cats" ("*messieurs les gros*"), its [pacifism](#) is linked to a social critique of class-based society: "It'll be your turn, you fat cats, / To go up onto the plateau. / 'Cause if you want to make war, / Then pay for it with your own skins." The song reflected the mood of soldiers and received big praise from the trenches. One soldier from the 114th Infantry Regiment wrote to his wife in February 1917: "It's the only song I really like."

The song alludes to mass disobedience several months before the mutinies of spring 1917: "...The grunts / Are going to go on strike." But reports by officers about the mutinies make reference to soldiers singing the socialist anthem, the "*Internationale*," and never mention the song now known as the "*Chanson de Craonne*."

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Selected Bibliography

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Citation

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