The Great War: from witnesses to historians, from memory to history?

La Grande Guerre : du témoin à l'historien, de la mémoire à l'histoire ?

De Grote Oorlog: van getuigen naar historici, van herinnering naar geschiedenis?

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The Great War : from witnesses to historians, from memory to history?

The opposition between witnesses and historians as figures, narrators and as authors united by their interest in narratives of the past and reflecting in part the canonical opposition between memory and history, is commonly accepted. In the crystallization of these two entities and of their opposition, the Great War plays a role that cannot be neglected, at least for France. With the death in 2008 of Lazare Ponticelli, the “last remaining *poilu*”, and at a time when there are only a few centenarians still alive in the world who lived the First World War as children, the

era of witnesses of the Great War seems definitely to have given room to historians. And the coincidence between the deaths from the 1990s onwards of the last generations having lived the Great War and the historiographic revival, founded mainly on the criticism of testimonial voices, seems at first glance to give evidence of this.¹

We can observe, indeed, since roughly twenty years, a very keen public interest in the Great War² and a significant increase in the study of historiography along with debates³ (on consent, the culture of war, soldier testimonies) of which we can wonder if they don't owe as much to the renewed interest in the memory conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s than to science. We shall nevertheless follow Henry Rousso with the following remark as he compares the links between the memory and the history of both conflicts:

Whereas the controversies surrounding the memories of the Occupation and, more precisely, the involvement of the French state in the genocide of the Jews, steadily increased in the 1990s, the field of historiography was experiencing a form of consensus. The authors favourable to the regime or attempting to defend its results, as it was the case until

the 1960s and 1970s, proved to be more and more rare because of the lack of solid arguments. Conversely, the polemic that recently raged among (French) historians to determine whether the soldiers in the trenches had accepted unusual degrees of violence by consent or by force, has merely had a weak echo in the public and political sphere. People, as it seems, are mobilized rather by the commemoration of this war, as of now without any survivors left, and by the meaning that could be conferred to the event a century later.⁴

Now with full attention on the commemorations of the centenary, the interest has never been greater. There is undeniably a very keen social demand and a creativity for the memory of the Great War. The main figures of this memory are the millions of men that fought the war at the front and who, literacy allowing, were both actors and narrators of their experience providing a key contribution to the elaboration of a great memorial narrative. In this perspective, it seems interesting to retrace in broad outline the history of the occasionally tumultuous relation between historians and witnesses, between history and memory, from 1914 to 2014.

As Antoine Prost and Jay Winter wrote, “the war in 1914 does not belong to anyone, not even to historians”.⁵ In fact, since it begun, we have not ceased telling and explaining the Great War, exercises in which historians have only played a minor role. In fact, they were early on confronted by other writings of the Great War and, namely, to the voice of witnesses who very quickly, as early as 1914-1915, were consid-

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ered just as legitimate to talk of the war. From then, the relation that historians maintained with this kind of expression was for a long time ambivalent, or of a competitive nature. Still, it cannot be reduced to a simple opposition.

THE EMERGENCE OF TESTIMONIES AS A SOURCE...

If we follow Jay Winter and Antoine Prost,⁶ the historiography of the Great War articulates itself chronologically around three main writing periods closely related to their political uses and to the memory preoccupations of their contemporaries. Within these

historiographic, as well as memory configurations, the place of witnesses and of testimonies would have evolved.

The first configuration, starting during the war and confirmed immediately after 1918, would essentially be political and military. Its goal was to study the causes of the Great War, to understand why such or such battle – or even the war – was either lost or won. All that concerned domestic or international politics was added later. The highly controversial (especially in Germany) article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles proposed no more no less than a historical analysis of

– All photographs in this article are taken from the exhibition *Fields of Battle / Terres de Paix 14-18*, on display from 4 April to 4 August 2014 on the railings surrounding the Jardin du Luxembourg and directly in front of the Palais du Luxembourg. Photographer: Michael St Maur Sheil.

the causes of the conflict. It stipulated indeed that “Germany and its allies are responsible, since they caused them, for every loss and all the damage suffered by the governments of the allies, associates and their nationals as a consequence of the war that was forced upon them by Germany and its allies’ attack”. Many historians, whether explicitly ●●●

(6) *Ibid.*

(1) Beaupré, Nicolas, Christian Ingrao & Anne Duménil, ‘Des Guerres 1914-1918 et 1939-1945 à l'étude des expériences de guerre de 1914-1945’, in *Id.* (eds.), *L'Ère de la guerre T.1: Violence, mobilisations, deuil (1914-1918)* [The Era of War, volume 1: Violence, Mobilisation, Mourning], Paris: A. Viénot, 2004, 11-13.

(2) Offenstadt, Nicolas, *14-18 aujourd'hui. La Grande Guerre dans la France contemporaine* [The First World War today. The Great War in contemporary France], Paris: Odile Jacob, 2010.

(3) For a clarification on these debates see namely Beaupré, Nicolas, *Les Grandes Guerres 1914-1945* [The Great Wars 1914-1945], Paris: Belin, 2012, 1046-1050.

(4) Rousso, Henry, ‘Preface’, in Nicolas Beaupré, *Les Grandes Guerres 1914-1945*, op. cit., 7.

(5) Prost, Antoine & Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie* [Reflections on the Great War. A historiographical essay], Paris: Seuil, 2004, 9.

... or not, have since then taken a position on this article.⁷

The goal was to study the causes, the consequences and the development of the conflict. This was a way to write a very political history that corresponded then to the triumph of the so-called positivist or methodical history. In this configuration, little regard was given to history from the bottom. What's more, even historians that are former soldiers like Henry Contamine,

(7) In the case of Germany, see Majerus, Benoît & Nicolas Beaupré, 'Écrire la Grande Guerre. L'historiographie allemande face à la "catastrophe originelle" du XX^e siècle', in P. Causarano et al. (eds.), *Le Siècle des guerres. Penser les guerres du premier XX^e siècle* [A century of war. Reflections on the wars of the first half of the 20th century], Paris: L'Atelier, 2004, 443-450.

(8) Regarding the case of Pierre Renouvin, see Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane, *Combattre. Une Anthropologie historique de la guerre moderne (XIX^e – XX^e S.)* [Combat. A historical anthropology of modern warfare], Paris: Seuil, 2008, 93-102.

(9) Quoted in *Penser la Grande Guerre*, op. cit., 27.

(10) Beaupré, Nicolas, 'Du Bulletin des Écrivains de 1914 à l'Association des Écrivains Combattants (AEC): des combats à la mémoire, 1914-1927', in *La Politique et la guerre. Pour comprendre le XX^e siècle européen, Hommage à Jean-Jacques Becker* [Politics and war. Understanding the 20th century in Europe. A tribute to Jean-Jacques Becker], Paris: A. Viénot/Noësis, 2002, 301-315. On the polemic see Rousseau, Frédéric, *Le Procès des témoins de la Grande Guerre, L'affaire Norton Cru* [The witnesses of the Great War on trial. The case of Norton Cru], Paris: Seuil, 2003 and the republishing of Norton Cru's *Témoins* [Witnesses] from 1929 (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2006).

(11) *Ibid.*

(12) Becker, Jean-Jacques, 1914. *Comment les Français sont entrés en guerre* [How the French went to war], Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques (FNSP), 1977; Prost, Antoine, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française* [The former combatants and French society], Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1977.

one of the most renowned specialists of French military history or even Pierre Renouvin,⁸ founder of a new approach to international relations, distrusted the voice of former soldiers and witnesses. Even though Renouvin lost an arm, he wrote in 1939: "The testimonies of soldiers, though very useful to read in order to understand the atmosphere of the battle, can seldom give any information on how operations were conducted, as the horizon of the witnesses was too limited."⁹ However, the war period and, to a lesser extent, the time that immediately followed, was marked by the plethora of publications of "testimonies" in a broad sense. At the end of the 1920s a lively debate even opposed their most fierce critic, Jean Norton Cru, to a certain number of what was then called "soldier poets".¹⁰ Historians felt a form of disinterest for these narratives, even though abundant, that were founded on the testimonies of soldiers. As if history had begun with a divorce rather than a wedding.

The second configuration would seemingly have emerged at the end of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. The focus was then redirected toward the social actors of the war, firstly to the soldiers. Qualified as "social", this period was indeed marked by the emergence of social history and of Marxist interpretations shifting the attention toward actors other than diplomats, politicians and generals. Yet, according to Winter and to Prost, this social shift from the field of historiography was essentially due to the success of one book: *Vie et mort des Français* [Life and death of the French] published

by Hachette in 1959, co-written by Jacques Meyer, Gabriel Perreux and André Ducasse, three former students of the Ecole Normale who passed the *agrégation* in history and who were also former soldiers. The book was only accepted by the publisher because it was prefaced by a fourth former soldier who was better known than his comrades, Maurice Genevoix. This "hybrid work", a combination of "academic historiography and an anthology of the writers-combatants"¹¹ profoundly renewed the way the conflict was viewed by focusing on society, at the front and at home, and by providing new questions. The place of witnesses and of testimonies remained no less ambiguous in the works of historians, even if the interest in the attitudes of the French, from the beginning until after the war – we recall here namely the doctoral theses of Jean-Jacques Becker and Antoine Prost both published in 1977¹² – progressively contributed in making testimonies recognized as all other documents, destined to be both submitted to critical analysis and also incorporated into historiographic writing.

The third configuration that occurred in the late 1980s and beginning 1990s was both social and cultural. We still find ourselves at this period today. It is namely a period founded on a pronounced interest for "representations", the intimate, individual stories woven into the larger history, the practices, the experiences, the suffering, the wounds, the traumas... A privileged source for this type of history, testimonies and witnesses seemingly occupy a central place precisely at a time when they were

dying. The two editions of *Témoins* [Witnesses] by Jean Norton Cru in 1993, then in 2006, exemplify this. Moreover, many studies are now specifically dedicated to the voice of soldier testimonies thus becoming not only a source, but also an object of history, a subject for doctoral projects, books and articles.

Nevertheless, our reading could be reversed. Indeed, the centrality of testimonies has led Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, who have abundantly examined testimonial sources, to call in year 2000 for freedom from the "dictatorship of testimonies".¹³ It is true that the death of witnesses is paradoxically not characterized by a diminishing of their voice nor of their influence. Until today,¹⁴ there is an increase in all sorts of testimonies and this undoubtedly will not cease with the Centenary. Their publication encourages certain publishing houses to specialize in this kind of text. In fact, by writing this, both historians were certainly not calling for the abandonment of testimonies as a source, but rather to more critical attention in the face of this editorial surge.

... OR THE RETURN OF WITNESSES

This is how we could retrace in broad strokes the story of what could be a progressive integration of testimonies within historiographic discourse. According to Prost and Winter, the transition from the period of witnesses to the period of historians, from memory to history, is neither progressive nor linear. Both these writings, one testimonial, the other historiographic, are developed in parallel,

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coexist and cross over at times. This is the case for Ducasse, Perreux and Meyer or even for Jean Norton Cru who, however, proposed a supposedly uncompromising criticism of the testimonies that he considered "scientific".¹⁵

Thus, it is necessary to nuance Winter and Prost's affirmation that the beginning of the Great War marked the beginning of a political, diplomatic and military era within the field of historiography and, thereby, a distancing of the voice of witnesses by historians. Yet, it now turns out that the public voice of the soldiers has become a highly legitimate narrative of the

war and represents a strong voice that the public immediately listens to. An interest has developed at least as much, if not more, for the daily lives of the soldiers, for the shape modern war takes. Now, the voice of the soldiers, responding to a social demand, is considered legitimate. We would be mistaken to believe that it is a marginal phenomenon. A few hundred testimonies, in a broad sense, were published during the war in France. A comparable phenomenon took place in the other engaged countries. To such an extent that certain historians who took part in the war also judged it useful to write their own war narrative as Marc Bloch did. However, Bloch decided not to publish it and following the war he became interested, in an article published in 1921, in the circulation of "false news" during the war. This was a way to return to a criticism of testimonies from a historian perspective, whilst being preciously ahead of its time, to an analysis of the social function of the circulation of information during ...

(13) Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane & Annette Becker, 14-18, *Retrouver la Guerre*, Paris: Gallimard, 2000, 52. (14-18 : *Understanding the Great War*, New York: Hill & Wang, 2002.)

(14) In his thesis, Benjamin Gilles did some calculation that demonstrate this. In a published book, he mentions 1,265 French testimonies published from 1914 to 2011. See Benjamin Gilles, *Lire dans les tranchées* [Reading in the trenches], Paris: Autrement, 2013.

(15) Norton Cru, Jean, *Du témoignage* [On testimony], Paris: Gallimard, 1930, 9.

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war time.¹⁶ In any case, if historical and testimonial voices seem perfectly distinct, historians, on the contrary, have not lost interest in the work of soldier writers. Thus, Ernest Lavisse – believing that historians ought to be engaged in their day – accepted to preface at least three books written by soldiers during the war. Along with the sociologist Emile Durkheim, he created at the publishing house Armand Colin the “*Études et documents sur la guerre*” [Studies and documents on the war] collection with the aim of defending the social justice in France. Whereas in this collection, he did not publish any testimonies strictly speaking, his prefaces still reveal his interest for a “genre” that was then successful. In the same vein, *La Revue historique*, though orthodox in its relation to methodical history, regularly gave between 1914 and 1918 reviews of narratives and testimonies of war.¹⁷

Concerning the immediate post-war period, disinterest for war

literature was not specific to historians. We easily notice a decline in the quantity of testimonies being written at the beginning of the 1920s, only picking back up at the end of the decade. The decline in the publication of war narratives ought to be analyzed in parallel to historical works pertaining to the conflict. This was perhaps due to a broader disinterest than just for the conflict itself. Moreover, at the beginning at the 1930s, soldier writers more readily chose to write fiction. It is thus not surprising that historians turned away from these texts that had a more ambiguous status, lying between narrative and journal, testimony and fiction. If it seemed logical to do reviews in history journals, either of a testimony or of a war narrative, this was very much less so the case for a novel, even if it had a testimonial dimension and vocation.

Let's recall now the main outline of the debate on testimonies initiated by Jean Norton Cru. A

French, English and American academic and a former soldier,¹⁸ he proposed in two books, *Témoins* and *Du témoignage*,¹⁹ published at the very time when there was a revival of war literature, a critical review of more than three hundred French works gathering testimonies. Though not a historian by trade, his book was published in a renowned collection of history books subsidized by the Carnegie foundation for peace but was poorly received in France. However, Jean Norton Cru intended this work as a historian to be useful at least for historians, by selecting among the three hundred works he had studied. In order to do so, he used the methodology of historians by basing his analysis on the external and internal criticism of the sources, in which his own subjectivity also emerged. As more than one historian had correctly suggested, Jean Norton Cru, wishing at first to write his own testimony, was unable to and *Témoins*, followed a year later by *Du témoignage*, can be considered as an indirect testimony. We here have the example

(16) These writings are gathered in the work by Marc Bloch, *L'histoire, la guerre, la résistance* [History, War, Resistance], preface by Annette Becker, Paris: Gallimard, 2006.

(17) Prochasson, Christophe, 'Les Mots pour le dire, Jean Norton Cru, du témoignage à l'histoire' [Finding the words, Jean Norton Cru, from testimony to history], *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 48, 2001, 161-189. See also *Penser la Grande Guerre*, op. cit., 30-31, for the period after 1919.

(18) His war letters were recently published with a detailed presentation of the author: Norton Cru, Jean, *Lettres de guerre et d'Amérique 1914-1919* [Letters from war and from America], Aix-en-Provence: Presses de l'Université de Provence, 2007.

(19) Norton Cru, Jean, *Témoins* and *Du témoignage*, op. cit.

of a hybrid work that is neither history nor testimony and yet that is both at the same time. Additionally, if the scandal provoked by Jean Norton Cru's reception in literary circles is well known, the reception of his work by historians is much less so. We already notice that historians did not remain distanced from the reception of Jean Norton Cru's work even if it were essentially men of letters who reacted. In the resource supplement published in the second edition of *Témoins* in 2006, we note that some historians, and including famous ones (Pierre Renouvin, Jules Isaac), participated in it, as did former soldiers who passed the *agrégation* in history (André Ducasse, Charles Delvert).²⁰

In a certain way, beyond Prost and Winter's reviews on the meekness and the absence of the war experience in the academic historical discourse of the time, we know very little on how war literature and testimonies were received in historical journals and by historians. What is certain, is that in 1914-1918 and after 1918, the voice of soldiers and testimonies could not be qualified as marginal. Quite the opposite.

After the Second World War however, things seemed to operate in reverse. As the interest of historians came closer to the experience of soldiers, namely from the 1960s, the direct voice of witnesses struggled to be heard and the publication of testimonies and of war narratives about 1914-1918 lessened. Admittedly, the success of *Vie et mort des Français* (1959) shows all the potential interest in addressing soldier testimonies as a historical source, but the three

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authors intervened more in the field as historians and as popularizers than as former soldiers. Whereas they had, before 1939, published their testimonies, Meyer and Perreux published in the 1960s a daily life at the front and another at home, and these were presented as history books.²¹ Even Maurice Genevoix who wrote the preface, involved himself personally in the foundation and the discourse of the Museum of the Battle of Verdun. Benefiting from his fame, he comes back to his war experience with a short narrative, *La Mort de près* [Death at first hand].

The memory of the Second World War, its presence today and the debates that surround the event surely contributed to a certain fading of the memorial figure of “moral witness” of the Great War.²² A moral witness whose ethical protestation could not prevent a new conflict, more brutal than the previous one, from being triggered. Even worse, the pacifist discourse upheld by former soldiers in the 1920s was able to hinder the understanding and correct

apprehension of the nature of the Nazi threat. Whereas historians progressively grew interested in their testimonial writings as sources, the former 14-18 soldiers became ambivalent figures as the sketches *Papy Mougéot* or *L'ancien combattant Dumoulin* by Coluche testify by presenting the *poilus* as ridiculous rambling fools. From the side of historians, the men at war staged at the centre of their preoccupations, but more as a mass than as individuals caught in the maelstrom of the violence of war.

From the beginning of the 1990s, the relationship between historians and witnesses has further evolved just as the respective place that each person's narratives take. The passing of the “last *poilus*” coincides with a return to Sarajevo of European history. On an epistemological level, other ways of writing history had established themselves, thus allowing a more methodical exploitation of the testimonial sources. The history of mentalities was followed by a cultural history founded on the study of representations. Think also of micro-history or even textual

(20) Norton Cru, Jean, *Témoins*, op. cit., S57-S59.

(21) Meyer, Jacques, *La Vie quotidienne des soldats pendant la Grande Guerre* [Everyday life of the soldiers during the Great War], Paris: Hachette, 1967; Perreux, Gabriel, *La Vie quotidienne des civils en France pendant la Grande Guerre* [Everyday life of the civilians in France during the Great War], Paris: Hachette, 1966.

(22) Winter, Jay, 'Le témoin moral et les deux guerres mondiales' [The moral witness and the two world wars], *Revue européenne d'histoire sociale* 8, 2003, 99-117. On the moral and social dimension of testimonies, see Dulong, Renaud, *Le Témoin oculaire. Les Conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle* [The eye witness. Social conditions of personal testimony], Paris: EHESS, 1998.

●●● critique using the new tools of the Linguistic Turn or of the study of “collective memories”.

The new identical editions of *Témoins* by Jean Norton Cru in 1993, followed by a critical edition in 2006, and also of his second book *Du témoignage* in 1966, 1989 and 1997, reveal this return of testimonies at the centre of the writing of history. They are also accompanied by the publications of “new” testimonies. In reality, these testimonies were not strictly speaking “new” – since the last witnesses were dying –, these were the publications of the writings of soldiers, that had remained until then unpublished or that had not been reedited since the 1920s. This wave of unpublished texts retrieved from the attics of families is hardly likely to diminish and we should be pleased about it, because some incredible troves have been discovered. This interest from historians, publishers, the public, has also made it possible to have access to testimonies of non-soldiers, namely of occupied journals.

THE DEAD CAPTURE
THE LIVING

Testimonies became, from that point, central to the writing of history and to such an extent that certain books – in particular those relating to the history of the *poilus* and of soldiers – massively resorted to them,²³ not to say exclusively. But they have also become central well beyond the historical sphere. Comic books, films, heavily draw on testimonies or at least on types of narration that are inspired from them, namely surrounding the figure of the soldier in the trenches or the “primary group”.

Surfing the wave of renewed interest for soldier testimonies, other projects less scrupulous on a historical level have exploited the interest for testimonies that also corresponded to the transformation of the *poilu* from hero to victim. The climax was reached with the anthology *Paroles de poilus*²⁴ which was first published in 1998 and which to this day, with more than three million copies sold, remains by far the most widely sold book in France on the Great War, despite the questionable quality of the collection of letters and of shortened testimonies, at times without even mentioning the cuts that were made.²⁵ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker warn against this excessive use in year 2000. Leonard V. Smith amongst others, agreed with their warning and criticized more precisely the use of testimonies as a form of proof in argumentation, showing that it is possible to twist a corpus of testimonies to say both one thing and its opposite. Part of a larger debate opposing historians of the Great War then focused on the place of witnesses and on the work by Jean Norton Cru. Some historians, like Rémy Cazals and Frédéric Rousseau²⁶ have defended Jean Norton Cru’s position and his method that intended to approve the good and the bad witnesses, even pursuing his work with a dictionary of witnesses published on the internet and continually supplemented with new notices “like a continuation of the pioneering work by Jean Norton Cru”.²⁷

We are now at a time when the voice of the *poilus* is sought after and heard as never before, when testimonies, and particularly sol-

dier testimonies, are central. Its social and historiographic uses continue to cause a stir. But as we can observe, we did not pass in a linear manner from a writing of history by witnesses to a writing of history by historians. To this day, works written by witnesses and other soldier writers, posthumously, remain privileged ways of accessing the Great War and their books often sell much better than those by historians. Mnemosyne has not yet definitely handed over to Clio. ■

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(23) See for example : Rousseau, Frédéric, *La Guerre censurée : une histoire des combattants européens de 14-18*, [1999; The censored war. A history of the European combatants of the First World War], Paris: Seuil, 2003 and Cazals, Rémy & André Loez, *14-18, Vivre et mourir dans les tranchées* [2008; Living and dying in the trenches], Paris: Tallandier, 2012.

(24) Guéno, Jean-Pierre & Yves Laplume (eds.), *Paroles de Poilus* [Writings of *poilus*], Paris: Librio, 1998.

(25) Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane, ‘La Grande Guerre, le deuil interminable’ [The Great War, the interminable work of mourning], *Le Débat*, 104(2), 1999, 117-130.

(26) Cazals, Rémy & Frédéric Rousseau, *14-18, le cri d’une génération* [The First World War, the scream of a generation], Toulouse: Privat, 2001.

(27) See <http://www.crid1418.org/temoins/> directed by Rémy Cazals. For the paper version, see Cazals, Rémy, *500 Témoins de la Grande Guerre* [500 Witnesses of the Great War], Portet-sur-Garonne & Mœyennoutier, Éditions Midi-Pyrénées/Edhisto, 2013.