

World War I: Intellectuals and Enlisted Men

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Did French soldiers really experience a *union sacrée* (“sacred union”) in the trenches of the First World War, or did intellectuals simply erase their memories of the social distinctions they encountered at the front? Through an analysis of intellectuals’ discourse about other social classes, Nicolas Mariot revisits the myth of the Great War as a patriotic melting pot—an analysis which merits further exploration, on the eve of the First Armistice’s anniversary.

Reviewed: Nicolas Mariot, *Tous unis dans la tranchée ? 1914-1918, les intellectuels rencontrent le peuple* [United Together in the Trenches? 1914-1918: When Intellectuals Encountered the People], Paris, Seuil, coll. L’Univers historique, 2013, 496 p., 24 €.

The idea of a union forged in the trenches, resulting from a shared experience of suffering, was, as Nicolas Mariot reminds us, widely held in the interwar period. According to Mariot, a historian at the CNRS, this myth is in fact the product of two screen effects: nostalgia, grounded in veterans’ inability to convey their experiences to those who remained at home; and the suppression of memories of social distinctions experienced on the front, due to a commemorative process which valued the virtues of the dead over those of the living.

Mariot revisits the myth of the war as a patriotic melting pot by analyzing the discourse that intellectuals held on the social classes they met in the trenches. He rejects, however, the notion of an even temporary fusion of social classes. In this way, he builds on the work of [the historians of CRID 14-18](#) (the *Collectif de Recherche International et de Débat sur la Guerre de 1914-1918*, or the International Research and Debate Group on the First World War), who dispute the claims of Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, and the scholars of [Péronne's Historial Museum of the Great War](#). For the latter, French soldiers shared a “culture of war,” founded on, among other things, hatred of the enemy, sacrifice, the banality of death, and an enduring acceptance of war. Criticizing the frequent use of elite narratives, Mariot challenges these sources and concepts on their own terrain.

Social Encounters in the Trenches

The structure of this sociological study, which is presented in the annex and allows one to follow its historiographical and technical method, makes for interesting reading. Of the 733 published veterans' testimonials that he was able to identify, Mariot selected 42 on the following criteria: these writers went to the front, primarily in the infantry; other soldiers saw them as "intellectuals"; and their writing made a lasting impact. Furthermore, Mariot emphasizes the fact that, in 1914, most were common soldiers. Among them, one finds Guillaume Apollinaire, Henri Barbusse, Marc Bloch, Georges Duhamel, Maurice Genevoix, and Fernand Léger, to name the best known.

Mariot also chose them because they possessed what Edmond Goblot called the "indicators of membership (particularly cultural ones) in the early twentieth century bourgeoisie" (p. 42). Thus 2% of each age group (7,000 individuals out of 300,000 conscripts) had completed the baccalaureate (i.e., the high school diploma): all soldier-intellectuals had necessarily crossed paths with common people, though the reverse was not the case. Mariot seeks to identify, within the publications he has chosen, every reference to these encounters across social boundaries. He wants to understand whether or not these intellectuals had shared reactions towards the *poilus* (WWI French soldiers). Rather than describe their behavior in all its diversity, he seeks to identify, "through comparison, [these writers'] modal behavior" (p. 21), to see if they displayed class reflexes towards their comrades of working-class origins.

First, Mariot analyzes the material dimension of these encounters. A very real encounter did occur between these two groups whose lives, during peacetime, intersected but shared little in common. Yet while pre-war class relations could be mitigated through shared suffering, they were not abolished: uniforms in no way eliminated classist perceptions of the world. An officer's rank clearly distinguished him from an enlisted man in terms of function, remuneration (a second lieutenant's pay was 147 times greater than that of a soldier and ten times that of a sergeant), the content of delivered packages, and an order entitling them to the domestic servants they had in civil society.

Moreover, trench life served to "crystallize social distance" (p. 10). In practice, the intellectuals felt isolated and out of place among men who were far less culturally sophisticated and with whom they often had little to talk about. Feeling defensive, intellectuals sought out their own: shared interests "shook up hierarchies" (p. 66), since soldiers who were no more than literate could talk and debate more easily with their cultured officers than could their peasant and worker comrades.

Bridge and Wine

Mariot turns next to the "upside down world of the trenches." When it came to daily activities (such as working the land, marching, military exercises, and so on), men who were "used to having their way, 'knowing best,' and even leading were forced to admit their own incompetence before workers and peasants" (p. 25). Writers had to deal with men whom, before the war, they

had often viewed with superiority and condescension. Their status as intellectuals was confirmed negatively, through mockery and marginalization. It was, in this way, socially constituted.

During the war, their view of soldiers of working-class origin did not change. To the contrary, the harshness of the ordeal entrenched them in their habitus, giving rise to a class ethos: hierarchies persisted, while their attitude towards their lower ranked comrades was marked by paternalism and morbid fascination. This distance was preserved in cultural practices pursued during periods of rest. While intellectuals, like other *poilus*, read, played cards, and drank, their practices differed and clearly revealed their social origin. They preferred solitary reading—which turned them inward—to participating in group games. They were drawn to bridge rather than manille, and wine—consumed in moderation—rather than spirits (pp. 218-219).

Mariot clearly rejects, finally, the notion that all soldiers shared in the prevailing patriotism. There was a clear dichotomy between the writers, who largely shared a sense of patriotic commitment, and men who, for the most part, had little understanding of what they were fighting for. He sees their attitude, full of resignation and fatalism, as resembling what the sociologist Richard Hoggart once called the “culture of the poor.”

Faced with an “apparent lack of any national sentiments” among ordinary soldiers (p. 24), intellectuals could not refrain from lecturing them, thus reinforcing an authoritative discourse which met with indifference, if not hostility. Drawing on his reading of Léon Werth, Mariot describes patriotism as a habit that was inculcated at school, “a mental feature that is external to the individual” (p. 369). This is what, in his view, distinguished the intellectual from the enlisted man: the former professed a considered patriotism, while the latter invoked it only to color his forced participation in the war effort.

Patriotism: A Ready-Made Idea?

Through songs, material objects, and the press, patriotism is internalized as a ready-made idea. It is a referential framework which intellectuals consciously make use of, whereas other classes internalize them submissively, reluctantly, and unthinkingly. This adds a new twist to the debate over the “culture of war.”

In conclusion, Mariot rejects the notion that the republican regime managed to blend a diverse population through their “recognition of citizenship as it was embodied by electoral, educational, and military institutions” (p. 377). Against this conception, embraced by the Péronne historians, which implies consent and self-consciousness on the part of the combatants as they renegotiated relationships and the social and political contract during the war, Mariot sees generally indifferent individuals adapting and integrating their actions into a patriotic framework imposed by the dominant elite.

Mariot’s position on the myth of social blending and his contention that consent can only have been socially differentiated is plausible, and his description of the diversity of social practices

preserved in the trenches seems accurate. However, his conclusion, which projects the conduct of writers onto every elite (bourgeois, managers, and the nation-states' civil servants) is more debatable.

By comparing sources from a fraction of the elite with a few examples from the working class and by privileging comparisons between officers and enlisted men, which are premised on a dichotomy between dominated and dominant groups, the book sidesteps the issue of the diversity of social attachments. It also overlooks the role of non-commissioned officers and subordinate officers, who did not necessarily come from social elites. Access to these levels—as he reminds us while quoting the work of Jules Maurin and William Serman—has, since the mid-nineteenth century, been democratized.

Much work remains to be done on the military's social make-up. It would be interesting to know how, at each level of the military hierarchy, those who were commanded were viewed and how higher ranked soldiers were talked about. As for patriotism, it seems likely that the way in which it is expressed depends on one's social class and varies over time, ranging from effusiveness to indifference; that said, the notion that it is nothing more than it is a ready-made, conformist idea imposed by elites deserves further discussion.

Ultimately, by introducing a perspective that lies at the intersection between the social and the cultural, Mariot rightly emphasizes the representations associated with various social groups. In this way, he has paved the way for studies of the social groups that experienced the ordeal of the Great War.

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