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Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelmaker, 1914-1918*. Trans. Edward M. Strauss. Introduction and Afterword by Rémy Cazals. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014. xxvii + 426 pp. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-19159-2.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado, Boulder.

Louis Barthas was a man of firm and fervent opinions. Long before circumstances and conscription forced him to report for duty in 1914, his socialist and pacifist principles had convinced him that war was an abomination, and nothing he experienced in the forty months he served in the front lines prompted him to change his mind. The conditions he and his fellow soldiers endured were demeaning at best and terrifying at worst; the officers under whom he served were on the whole arbitrary in their administration of justice, concerned only with their own comfort, and utterly indifferent to that of the men under their command; and the medics (from whom one might have expected an ounce of compassion) were almost invariably brutal, uncaring, and almost criminally incompetent. Indeed, in the notebooks Barthas kept during the war, and then revised subsequently, his unconditional repudiation of the war constitutes a constant—and, dare I say it, almost tedious—refrain.

The Barthas journals are both a record of his service in the infantry, from mobilization in August 1914 through the end of the war, and a political manifesto. As a record of service, they recount an extraordinarily lugubrious tale of suffering and sullen endurance. Mobilized at the very outset of the war, at the age of thirty-five, Barthas served briefly in the barracks of Narbonne and then at a prisoner-of-war camp on the Spanish frontier before being deployed to the Western Front in November 1914. He remained there, with only a few respites of home leave, from 1915 when he saw action in the Artois, through the blood-letting battles of Verdun, the Somme, and the Chemin des Dames. His regiment, having participated in the mutinies that roiled the French Army in May and June 1917, was subsequently disbanded (perhaps as punishment for its mutinous ways), and Barthas ended his active service in a regiment of hard-drinking Bretons. As a southerner, he felt ill at ease with his new comrades-in-arms and longed for the companionship of men from his own region. Having survived until the spring of 1918 without suffering so much as a scratch—though many a close call with death—he was physically worn down by the hardships, inadequate diet, and inclement conditions of frontline service. In April 1918, he was evacuated to a first-aid station near Châlons-sur-Marne, where he had the uncommon good fortune to encounter a compassionate doctor who recognized that he was no longer fit for service. This was truly a blessing, for in the previous forty months Barthas had met more than his share of sadistic medics, who refused to recognize illness when they saw it. Now at last he was able to benefit from a professional judgment that sent him home for an extended convalescence and then returned him to a barracks in Brittany where he remained until the Armistice.

More than a simple record of military service, the Barthas journals are an impassioned anti-war manifesto dedicated to exposing the evils of militarism, affirming the fraternity of the front lines, and denying the existence of patriotism in the French rank-and-file. He despised officers, both for the authority they represented and the callous way in which they exercised it, but he did acknowledge that not every officer in the French Army was a mindless, cruel, and self-serving martinet. In the spring of 1916, when his regiment was still in the Artois, his junior officer led a company of bone-chilled,

exhausted men on a meandering tour of the hinterlands, in search of a train station they never found. When it became evident that the company was hopelessly lost, most of the men raised their voices in anger at the officer's incompetence. For Barthas, however, this was going too far, because although he believed that the officer in question was "a stickler about everything," he "wasn't a bad fellow." To subject him to taunts and insults was unfair. "In general, I have a strong aversion against those who wear gold stripes, who display a bit of authority, of despotism, of the militarism which had us all in its sharp claws. But this time I didn't at all approve of the attitude of my comrades, because they didn't stop at whistling. They hurled all kinds of the rudest imaginable insults upon this officer" (p. 169).

A year later, Barthas found reason again to defend a commanding officer. As the regiment awaited orders to advance into the front lines on the Chemin des Dames, Barthas overheard his colonel challenging a general's order. Whatever the general might have thought to the contrary, the colonel was convinced that his men were in no state to move into battle positions: "Not many colonels would have had the courage to make this kind of reply, to spare the lives of his men, but under his rude, brusque, grumpy exterior, Colonel Robert hid a good, generous, and compassionate heart. He was indeed a rare soul" (p. 312). And there was the rub: for Barthas, at least, most of the officers of his acquaintance were neither good, nor generous, nor compassionate, and few deserved the respect--let alone the affection--of their men.

If Barthas and his comrades-in-arms had little in common with, and almost no sympathy for, their commanding officers, they did feel a deep sense of empathy for one another and for the common soldiers who manned the trenches on the other side of No Man's Land.^[1] "How many of our officers were more distantly separated, more morally estranged from us soldiers than were the poor German devils, who were being led to the same slaughterhouse despite themselves" (p. 247). The fraternity of the trenches has been a recurrent motif in much of Great War literature, captured most famously in *All Quiet on the Western Front* when Paul Bäumer watched with deep remorse as the French soldier he had just stabbed died in the shell hole they both shared. Whether all frontline soldiers felt the same empathy for the enemy that marked Remarque's retrospective rendering of the war is much debated, and there is considerable evidence that during the war (but perhaps not thereafter) hatred of the enemy was as commonplace as compassion. For Barthas, however, fraternity outweighed enmity. In December 1915, he made note of a welcome lull in the front lines: "Our common sufferings brought our hearts together, melted the hatreds, nurtured sympathy between strangers and adversaries. Those who deny it are ignoring human psychology. Frenchmen and Germans looked at each other, and saw that they were all men, no different from one another. They smiled, exchanged comments; hands reached out and grasped; we shared tobacco, a canteen of *jus* or pinard" (pp. 143-144).

Of all the themes to dominate Barthas's journals none has done more to establish his place in the pantheon of Great War pacifism--and to render his journals a subject of intense historiographical controversy--than his denial of front-line patriotism. Perhaps patriotism animated the educated junior officers whose advanced schooling had taught them to love *la patrie* and to perceive in the war a defense of civilization itself; this, at least, is the argument that Nicolas Mariot has recently made, very persuasively, in *Tous Unis dans les tranchées?*^[2] But Mariot, like Barthas, insists that patriotism mattered not a whit to the common man. On this point Barthas was unequivocal and unwavering. In September 1915, as the French Army prepared to launch coordinated assaults in Artois and Champagne, Barthas looked at his rain-soaked companions and wondered what motivated their obedience: "If we suffered so stoically, without raising useless complaints, don't let anyone tell you that it was because of patriotism, or to defend the rights of peoples to live their own lives, or to end all wars, or other nonsense. It was simply by force, because, as victims of an implacable fate we had to undergo our destiny.... At the slightest hint of revolt we would be ground to bits" (pp. 110-111). He reiterated this argument in October 1916, while awaiting deployment to the Somme: "our bosses...knew quite well that it wasn't the flame of patriotism which inspired this spirit of sacrifice" (p. 257).

For some, Barthas suspected, courage in the front lines was an expression of “bravado, to not seem more cowardly than one’s neighbor.” For others, “it was the secret and futile ambition for a medal, or a sleeve stripe.” But “for the great mass, it was the uselessness of protesting against an implacable fate” (p. 257). And thus, when Barthas and his brothers-in-arms had to listen to Nivelles’s rousing order of the day, issued on the eve of the Chemin des Dames offensive in April 1917, they failed to respond as Nivelles would have hoped: “the reading of this patriotic drivel aroused no enthusiasm at all. To the contrary, it only served to demoralize the soldier who heard in it only a terrible menace, more suffering, great danger, a frightful death—a useless sacrifice, totally in vain. No one had any confidence in this new round of killing leading to any useful result” (p. 310).

It is precisely because Barthas denied the existence of patriotism in the trenches that his journals have come to occupy a central place in the ongoing and often acrimonious historiographical debate about endurance, patriotism, and mute resignation in the French ranks. In the more than thirty years since Barthas’s notebooks were first discovered and then published in France, his champions (most notable of whom are Professor Rémy Cazals and other scholars associated with the Collectif de Recherche International et de Débat sur la Guerre de 1914-1918 [CRID]) have endowed Barthas with an iconic status. These scholars argue, with good reason, that it is important to remember that most French soldiers were infantrymen of humble origins. They were peasants, rural artisans (like Barthas, who was a cooper), and laborers. They were not the *Normaliens* whose moving letters from the front have been celebrated as expressions of self-sacrificial patriotism. But more than that, Cazals and his colleagues contend that Barthas should be considered the quintessential *poilu*, a man whose anger, disaffection, and anti-militarism express the authentic—albeit often unexpressed—sentiments of all front-line soldiers. In his repudiation of military authority, his affirmation of front-line fraternity, and his resentful resignation to an authority he could not effectively contest, Barthas becomes the everyman of the French rank and file.

This elevation of Barthas to iconic status is, however, problematic. Without doubt, it is useful to have access to the reflections of an ordinary rank-and-file foot soldier of relatively humble background, because the cultural narrative of the Great War has been forged, in the main, by junior officers whose advanced education gave them the tools to reflect on and then render in moving poetry and prose the horrors of industrialized warfare. In Britain, the poignant poetry of Wilfred Owen and the sardonic reflections of Siegfried Sassoon articulated the profound disillusionment of some (but certainly not all) British combatants who came to believe that their elders had sacrificed the youth of Britain on an altar erected to the false gods of patriotism and profit. For Owen and Sassoon, nothing could endow the war with redemptive meaning. However dissimilar his social upbringing, Barthas clearly belongs to the Owen-Sassoon camp, as Professor Cazals makes evident in his afterward to this edition: “Barthas is in the front rank of those who say ‘Enough!’ alongside the English writers Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen and the German sailor Richard Stumpf” (p. 390).

Scholars no longer insist, however, that Owen and Sassoon speak for and express the sentiments of every simple Tommy; and we should be careful not to claim the same for Barthas. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his anger, his disdain for military authority, and his conviction that the war had no redemptive value, but to claim that he thereby captured the essential spirit of every benighted *poilu* is to over-reach. Juxtaposing Barthas’s journals with the wartime correspondence of Fernand Maret makes this evident. In many regards, Maret resembled Barthas. He, too, was a good student but of limited education, raised in the French countryside, and assigned for the duration of the war to the infantry. He did not hide from his parents his utter disgust with the brutality of war, his flagging morale, and his anger at the military authorities whose misguided strategies were responsible for the deaths of friends and comrades. And like Barthas, Maret took exception to ignorant civilians who parroted patriotic palaver with no knowledge of the reality of war. Indeed, Maret confessed in May 1917 that the war had converted him to socialism. Yet Maret did not believe—as Barthas insisted—that the war was being waged only to line the pockets of profiteers. Whatever his complaints, however profound

his misery and intense his disgust with the butchery of war, Maret continued to believe that he was fighting for a purpose: to defend his family. There were others, he knew, who “do not know even who or what they are fighting for” (12 August 1917), but he was not one of them. [3]

For Maret, the compassion of his family—evident every week in letters and packages that offered tangible, regular reassurance of their love—was essential to his well-being and indispensable to his endurance. One suspects that the same was true of Barthas, too, even though his journals are strangely (and, I think, significantly) silent on this very point. In fact, the Barthas notebooks tell us almost nothing about his contacts with home. We know that he remained fond of his family, because he writes fleetingly of the joys of going home on leave. And on one occasion, while under shellfire, he reflected: “I said to myself...I might as well die here as anywhere else, right now as tomorrow. But at this tragic moment a vision flashed across my mind like a lightning bolt. There, in my distant home, my cherished wife, my two babes with blonde curls, my white-haired mother and father, kneeling at prayer at this very hour, pouring all their hearts, all their souls into it, with grave faces, bent in anguish for the absent one...for me” (pp. 264-265). But we never find him reading a letter from his wife (or writing one to her); receiving pictures or report-cards from his children; or worrying about their well-being. He was away from home for four years, and in that time his children must have caught cold, sent him a Christmas present, or passed judgment on their new teachers. His wife must have struggled at times to make ends meet, worried about his survival, wondered if he had received a package she had prepared for him.

Yet none of this is evident from his notebooks—or, to be more precise, from the version of the notebooks which Barthas produced after the war. By failing to speak of the quotidian facts which mattered so much to almost every front-line soldier for whom we have reliable records, Barthas created in this text the impression that the *poilu* was cut off from, unmoved by, and utterly indifferent to the daily rituals and concerns of family life. He existed in a hermetically sealed environment, where the only civilians worth mentioning were war profiteers, jingoistic journalists, and scandalously-clad Parisian women.

There was no good reason to fight for self-absorbed, self-satisfied, and self-deceived civilians, but there might have been ample reason to fight for wives, children, and parents. What, then, explains their absence from Barthas’s journals? It is possible that the mud-splattered journals which Barthas brought home from the trenches included reflections on and references to his family. And it is equally possible that when he sat down every evening, after the war was over, to transcribe his journals for posterity that he chose to excise such references. We know that he added to the text, creating thereby a hybrid document which is not quite a journal and not quite a memoir, for there are occasional references and observations in the text that clearly were added after the fact. (This, too, is a point of some controversy in the scholarship concerning the Barthas journals.) What we don’t know is whether out of deference to his family (or some other consideration), he chose to eliminate personal references and private reflections. Nonetheless the very absence of such reflections deprives the published document of the intimacy evident in soldiers’ wartime correspondence. What emerges instead is an impassioned political statement excoriating the war, but not a fully personal one.

Because of the central place the Barthas notebooks now occupy in the historiography of the Great War, it is useful to have them available in an English translation. It would have been even more useful, however, if this edition had included an introductory essay explaining for the uninitiated English-speaking student precisely what the controversy is and why Barthas figures so prominently within it.[4]

NOTES

[1] On the significance of fraternity in the notebooks of Louis Barthas, see Alexandre Lafon, “La Camaraderie dévoilée dans les carnets de Louis Barthas, tonnelier (1914-1918),” *Annales du Midi*, 120/262(2008): 219-236.

[2] Nicolas Mariot, *Tous Unis dans les tranchées? 1914-1918, les intellectuels rencontrent le peuple* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

[3] Fernand Maret, *Lettres de guerre 14-18* (Nantes: Siloë, 2001), pp. 197-198, 227.

[4] For example, Jean-Yves Le Naour does this in “Le champ de bataille des historiens,” *lavedesidees.fr* (10 novembre 2008); and Pierre Purseigle offers a comparably balanced overview of the ‘consent vs. coercion’ controversy in “A Very French debate: the 1914-1918 ‘war culture,’” *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 1/1(2008): 9-14.

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