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# Humanization of the Enemy: The Pacifist Soldier and France in World War One

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**Humanization of the Enemy: The Pacifist Soldier and France in World War One**

By

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A culminating senior thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and Cultural Studies.

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies, Religion, Philosophy, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and Cultural Studies. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## Abstract

Not all French citizens were enthused by the prospect of war in 1914, nor were they all so willing to embrace a dehumanized view of the enemy. Some French citizens believed the “Great War” to be a patriotic endeavor. Propaganda encouraged this nationalism and the dehumanization of the enemy. “Political” pacifism existed within the French Third Republic psyche following France’s defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. However, these pacifistic undertones were systematically undermined as France began to militarize itself. Drawing from a series of notebooks, and established academic sources, this paper shows that some French soldiers endured a world at war by their pacifism and war resistance, despite being called to defend their nation against invasion. The individual soldier’s resistance and “spiritual” pacifism is contrasted with aspects of “political” pacifism. A key example of this sort of resistance is found in the diaries of a wine barrel maker from southern France, Louis Barthas. Barthas saw action from the beginning of the war until its conclusion (1914-1918). He was a self-described pacifist soldier. An essential quality of a pacifist soldier is an ability to humanize the enemy. The nature of the pacifist soldier’s ability to humanize an enemy demonstrates the qualities of humanity necessary to resist the degradations of warfare on philosophical grounds. As such, modern parallels with World War One and Barthas’ individual example also show the relevancy of humanization in today’s world.

## Introduction

Warfare has always influenced the course of human civilization. It has been incessantly studied by virtually all academic disciplines for different reasons. Unfortunately, the human practice of warring against itself is not subsiding. War is still thought by many leaders to be a viable solution to the world's problems. There is still strong debate over whether or not wars are justified, and various aspects of society still struggle to resist their respective nation's inclination to war. There is advocacy for peace, but when war looms over a nation's people, such voices are often drowned out by those sounding the righteousness of their war. There remains fear and contempt for perceived enemies who must be "destroyed," and this fear often outweighs those who advocate peace.

One of the most notable instances in history where such voices were frequently silenced was the First World War (WWI). Instead of examining the reasons why the war took place, the focus is on examples and philosophical arguments for pacifism in the face of such bitter conflict. There are two different conceptions of pacifism examined in this paper: "spiritual pacifism" and "political pacifism." Spiritual pacifism describes those methodologies that are mostly individually engaged: humanizing the enemy, coping with warfare, and promoting an alleviation of suffering. Political pacifism describes institutions and political organizations which advocate peace through activism, but nonetheless still frequently advocate nationalism, defensive measures, and patriotism at the same time. "Political pacifists," such as Jean Jaurès (a prominent French Socialist prior to WWI), had a strong following among their socialist brethren. French soldiers



who were at least philosophically aligned with the French Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste Français*) of Jaurès prior to the war would take these sentiments into combat with them. An exemplar of engaged “spiritual” pacifism in the trenches of WWI was Louis Barthas, a cooper from southern France. The militarization of the French Third Republic in the late nineteenth century contributed to the undermining of political pacifism and the promotion of a dehumanized view of France’s German enemy. Humanization of the enemy in warfare is an essential quality of the pacifist soldier, and it serves to strengthen resistance to militarism and the practice of warfare. Louis Barthas’ individual example shows how a single soldier’s humanity can successfully survive under circumstances of warfare which frequently threaten to destroy one’s moral compass. Barthas’ example is examined in light of his nation’s policy of militarism and the promotion of a dehumanized view of Germany. Along with the militarization of France’s Third Republic prior to WWI, and Louis Barthas’ individual example, modern parallels are drawn in order to demonstrate the relevancy of these historical lessons alongside philosophical arguments for the conception of the pacifist as a soldier.

## Historiography

On the topic of the *poilu* (the nick-name for French soldiers in WWI), few firsthand accounts stood out as much as those of Louis Barthas. Rémy Cazals, a French professor of history at the University of Toulouse, first collected and put together the notebooks of Louis Barthas in 1978. Since then, Edward Strauss and Robert Cowley, both military historians with *The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, have translated these notebooks into English. The observations and methodologies of these three men (Cazals, Strauss, Cowley) are as valuable as the primary source of Louis Barthas. Cowley describes the notebooks of Barthas as “part diary, part memoir” (vii). Barthas assembled his writings from the war after being discharged from service in 1919 (Cowley vii). The general thesis of Cowley and Cazals is that Louis Barthas was an observer of war unlike any other recorded of the day, because he was both a pacifist and a soldier. Barthas often respected enemy soldiers more than his own officers and frequently fraternized with them. Cazals notes Jean Norton Cru’s<sup>1</sup> argument from his 1929 *Témoins* (Witnesses) that it is the combatant who truly describes war. What also makes the account of Louis Barthas stand out then is that he was such a low rank (a corporal) and served on the front from August 1914 to February 1919.

Louis Barthas was a single soldier in the French army; his views certainly did not reflect that of every soldier. Nevertheless, his views and behavior can be extrapolated to speak for a certain portion of the French army. Cazals describes a number of French veterans of WWI who were moved to tears, or remembered vividly the feelings and

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<sup>1</sup> A French historian and *poilu*.

thoughts of the war in reading the recollections of Barthas (xxiii). One may ask at this point: “How can such an extrapolation be made?” Throughout the recollection of Barthas, he notes the attitude of his comrades as being of like mind, and following his non-violent principles. Even if the comrades of Barthas were not as devoted to pacifism, they still respected his commands. In one such instance, while on outpost duty at Champagne during the summer of 1916, Barthas describes a soldier who looked to him before killing a German:

The sentry took a grenade and was about to toss it at this intruder, looking at me for approval. I held his arm. I will always be faithful to my principles as a socialist, a humanitarian, even a true Christian, even if they cost me my life, of not firing on someone unless in legitimate self-defense (237).

Cowley also notes that a “deep change in the attitude of the ordinary *poilu* was becoming evident” as the war took its toll, and that Barthas was not alone in his resistance to fighting a senseless struggle (xii). Barthas' comrades also echoed the need for him to write their story, telling Barthas that he has “to tell it all” (vii). Therefore, the testimony of Barthas is already in and of itself an invaluable asset in the assessment of a French soldier's psyche in WWI. In addition, Barthas provides startling insights into his time, and one garners a distinct sense of certain psychological qualities that constituted the mind of the *poilu*. There are weaknesses in this recollection (such as inconsistencies on a few dates and locations), but none of them detract from the relevancy of Barthas' personal testimony. Indeed, Cazals notes: “The few people who have sought to discredit

the barrel maker's story are thwarted by the way it corresponds with newly emerging pieces of evidence" (xxiii). Barthas did not speak for every *poilu*, but in Barthas' story, there are lessons about how one should treat fellow humans that apply universally.

When considering the testimonies of soldiers like Louis Barthas, it is important to also examine their veracity. In *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (2007), Leonard Smith, a professor of history at Oberlin College, examines the narrative of the war and the psyche of the French soldier. Smith's work deals with the metanarrative of the "Great War" as a tragedy. Smith claims the experience of the individual soldier became structured through narrative practices. Specifically, Smith discusses the skepticism that many historians have about the accuracy of "firsthand" accounts. There is discussion of the "juridical model," in which the historian examines the account as a lawyer examining a witness (14). Smith argues that the search for juridical truth in WWI recollections is essentially useless because "true testimony meant so many different things to different people" (14). Smith relies heavily on Jean Norton Cru's previously stated combatant argument, Tim O'Brien (an American Vietnam veteran and writer), and various other writings from French soldiers and intellectuals of WWI. Smith admits that he has not made a scientific study of the body of testimony that surrounds France's involvement in the war, only that he has attempted to gather a representative sample of work to support his thesis that firsthand accounts of French soldiers in WWI are still valuable as primary sources. This may be a weakness, but the depth and detail of Smith's accumulated sources are enough to corroborate and support his general argument.

The antiwar psyche of French soldiers like Barthas had roots in the politics of pacifism in the French Third Republic. Barthas derived much of his pacifist temperament from political pacifism in the French Third Republic and socialist publications such as *Le Midi Socialiste*. Elisa Marcobelli, a historian with the *Deutsches Historisches Institut* in Paris, provides context in the article, “Pre-War Socialist Pacifism,” written for the *WWI Online Encyclopedia* (2016). This article deals primarily with the nuances and history behind the French Third Republic's socialist party, their advocacy of pacifism, and their antimilitaristic qualities. However, Marcobelli poses an apt question: “Is it really possible to speak of socialist pacifism?” Marcobelli argues that despite the socialist advocacy of pacifism and antiwar sentiment, they still adhered to patriotic ideals and the *L'union sacrée*, or “Sacred Union” of France, which united France with their main allies, the United Kingdom and Russia (an alliance known as the “Triple Entente”), against the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Marcobelli relies on two volumes of socialist party history in Third Republic France: *The Histoire générale du socialisme de 1875 à 1918* (1974), by Jacques Droz, and *La Deuxième Internationale, 1889-1914* (1964), by Georges Haupt. This source supports the idea of “political” pacifism in the French Third Republic, because as Marcobelli notes, socialist leaders “were not ready to sacrifice the ideals of the fatherland and its defense for the ideals of international peace” (par 3.3). This “political pacifism” is contrasted with “spiritual,” or engaged pacifism and war resistance, which has more to do with humanization of the enemy for moral reasons on an individual scale rather than for political reasons on a global scale. If there are any weaknesses in this article, it is its relatively short length which summarizes many aspects

of the topic rather than going into depth.

These three sources (Barthas, Smith, and Marcobelli) provide the overall foundation for this paper. The observations from the editors (Cazals, Strauss, Cowley) of Louis Barthas' notebooks expound upon the example of Barthas' individually engaged pacifism and humanism. Leonard Smith examines in detail the nature of the "Great War" metanarrative, and the role first hand recollections have played in shaping that history. Smith helps to corroborate the validity of firsthand testimony from French soldiers of the war. Smith also examines the French soldier's psyche and provides a scholarly lens on the recollections of French soldiers, while simultaneously noting their pacifistic qualities. Elisa Marcobelli's article examines socialist pacifism in the French Third Republic.

*“To ensure peace by a plain policy of wisdom, moderation and rectitude, by the definitive repudiation of all aggressive enterprises, by the loyal acceptance and practice of the new methods of international law which are capable of solving conflicts without violence; on the other hand, to ensure peace, courageously, by the establishment of a defensive organization so formidable that every thought of aggression is put out of the mind of even the most insolent and rapacious.” – Jean Jaurès, Democracy and Military Service, 1907.*

### The French Third Republic and Militarization

On 10 May 1871, the Treaty of Frankfurt was signed. The treaty ceded the French region of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. France was defeated in a short but costly war. The defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war sowed tensions that resonated in the French psyche all the way to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The Third Republic faced immense difficulties. The nation was unsure of how to deal with the blow to its national identity and economy, and it became largely divided. Some citizens of France advocated revenge against Germany to reclaim their lost territories; other citizens sought peace. Rachel Chrastil, a professor and historian of modern Europe at Xavier University, mentions Jules Claretie, a pro-Republican journalist who worked for the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*. Claretie argued in the 1870s that France should approach the world “not with a sword, but with a torch of liberty in our hands” (44). Chrastil states, “Republicans during the 1870s realized that they needed to embrace peace if France were to regain allies in Europe and glory on the world stage” (44). Much of the initial French Republican (*Gauche Républicaine*) power structure advocated peace and pacifism in the wake of France's humiliating defeat, but notions of pacifism in the general French psyche

diminished over time.

There was great confusion over which way to handle France's future: should the people of France stick with the traditional conservative monarchy, or put their faith in the Republicans who advocated peace and stability? (Chrastil 44). Ultimately, the Republicans seized power in the wake of France's defeat during the 1870s. Regardless, a strong sense of *revanchism* (a desire to reclaim lost territories) emerged among French hawks and nationalists in subsequent decades. Those who advocated a policy of *revanchism* wished to strike back at the Germans, and reclaim the lost territories on the border with Germany. The revanchist sentiment was compounded by obvious insults from the Germans, such as the 1871 proclamation of a Germanic Empire in the Palace of Versailles' Hall of Mirrors. Chrastil elaborates on the Republican party's pacifism saying that their consolidation of power rested upon their ability to convince the electorate that they stood for peace (39). There was advocacy of political pacifism in certain aspects of French society from the foundation of the Third Republic in 1871 that carried over until the *L'union sacrée* formed at the beginning of WWI. In time, this pacifism was overshadowed by militarism.

Despite the Republican party's advocacy for a peaceful approach in relations with Germany, an intense modernization of France's military took place in the decades following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. Olivier Cosson, a French military historian, speaks of France's militarization prior to WWI: "The feeling of the duty of patriotic defense widened and emerged as a road to redemption for the nation" (par 2.1). The militarization of France was opposite to the Republican party's original peace



platform. The French public gradually put aside pacifism and came to believe that national defense was a top priority in peacetime (Chrastil 112). Gymnastic societies, shooting clubs, financial markets, and militaristic rhetoric all emerged from the 1880s onwards. These cultural institutions had the goal of modernizing France's military. Similar to modern training societies, these groups appealed to a wide range of male citizens and flourished in urban areas (Chrastil 113). According to Chrastil, training societies which were operated by French citizens, had the goal of "creating robust soldiers" and "to form able young men for the rigors of military service to the state." Chrastil notes that these shooting and training societies were sometimes mixed with citizens and soldier citizens (113). What better way to prepare a nation for war than to attract their youth to its practice, and instill them with patriotic fervor in the process? The Third Republic took up a policy of *si vis pacem, para bellum*, "If you want peace, prepare for war." Cosson writes similarly: "For the military, peace is only a respite. This view was largely held in France before the securing, in the 1880s, of the eastern border by a new defense system. Globally, this assertion can be argued as characterizing the whole military mentality and profession" (par. 2).

Not only was the Third Republic's initial policy of pacifism gradually diminished through militarization, but a distinct propaganda campaign took shape in France during the 1880s. The rhetoric of war was on the rise, and the French Republican government, under leaders such as Jules Simon and Jules Grévy (a government also called *République des Jules* or "Republic of the Juleses"), launched a campaign in the 1880s to rally the nation around a nationalistic cause. Chrastil describes commemorative events in the

1880s that looked beyond the Franco-Prussian War in preparation for an “undetermined future conflict,” frequently promoting the idea that France should “adequately prepare for war” (94). This propaganda campaign only increased once the conflict manifested itself in the form of WWI. Troy Paddock, a professor of history at Southern Connecticut State University, mentions one well-known theme running through the Third Republic psyche: The 1918 image of two women dressed in traditional attire from the Alsace-Lorraine region heralding victory.

Figure 1. “*Alsace-Lorraine.*”



The two women stand with arms around each other, one with her arm in the air, and both with enthusiastic smiles on their face. As Paddock notes, such propaganda served to remind the French people of their goal in the war which had they had been fighting for over four years – the reacquisition of Alsace-Lorraine (Paddock 199). The French also

smear the Germans as murderous barbarians who were ravaging and destroying civilians in occupied territories during their invasion of France (Paddock 203). In this instance, there is some degree of truth behind the propaganda. The “Rape of Belgium” refers to a number of war crimes the German army is guilty of during their occupation of Belgium in 1914, and the allies utilized these instances to dehumanize their German enemy through propaganda during WWI.

Jean Jaurès and other socialists saw the militarization of their nation as a threat to their ideals of pacifism. Marcobelli notes that Jaurès had the goal of international arbitration in order to mediate disputes between the major European powers (par. 3.1). The goal of arbitration for Jaurès was to prevent the outbreak of hostilities. At the same time that Jaurès and fellow socialists advocated antimilitarism and pacifism, they also believed in defending France against foreign enemies. Jaurès stated in 1907: “To ensure peace, courageously, by the establishment of a defensive organization so formidable that every thought of aggression is put out of the mind of even the most insolent and rapacious.” The political pacifism for which Jaurès fought is quite different from the pacifism of individual French soldiers who fought on the frontlines. Jaurès, despite all of his antimilitaristic views, believed in the necessity of a large and professional defensive force. Socialist political pacifism was usually backed with an intense profession of their patriotism and love for France. Marcobelli notes, “Jaurès combined socialist universalism with his love for France: the fatherland was to be defended in case of danger” (par. 3.3). Jaurès argued for nationalism and the need for a defensive army to deter aggression. Nevertheless, Jaurès died for his pacifistic views. On 31 July 1914, Raoul Villain, a

French nationalist opposed to Jaurès' pacifist message, assassinated Jaurès. In opposition to the pacifistic notions of Jaurès, were those formulating the *L'union sacrée* (Sacred Union). When France and Raymond Poincaré (France's President throughout WWI) formed this *Sacred Union*, the socialist notions of pacifism and universal humanism were gradually put aside in order to prepare France for the looming invasion from Germany.

It was not enough for the Third Republic to justify war and undermine any remaining bastions of pacifism solely through propaganda; they also relied on their philosophers, such as Henri Bergson. In a discourse, entitled *Life and Matter at War*, given to the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (Academy of Moral and Political Sciences) in December 1914, Bergson crafted a philosophical justification for continuing the struggle against Germany. For Bergson, Germany had turned away from the spirit and clung to a rampant, unbridled, materialistic lust. This is arguably a strange position, considering every imperial power of the day, including France, had taken similar steps as the German Empire. Bergson described German political philosophy as something that led to "her moral humiliation," saying also, "I see in it nothing more than a philosophy doomed to translate into ideas that were, in essence, insatiable ambition and will perverted by pride" (29). Regardless of whether or not one agrees with Bergson's argument, such rhetoric perpetuated the war and the harsh penalties imposed upon Germany after WWI. Bergson criticized the German Empire and its entire basis for existing. Bergson attacked Germany on philosophical and spiritual grounds, systematically creating an argument for war and placing chief blame on Germany and not on Great Britain, France, and Russia.

When the war finally broke out across France, it was largely up to the individual French citizen and soldier to retain any previously sought after humanistic qualities. Under the ineluctable nature of global war and invasion of one's homeland such a task is extremely difficult. French politicians had failed to create the peace some citizens desired. The French government pressed even the most peaceful of French citizens into military service. The initial stages of France's involvement in the war made it hard to oppose the conflict. After all, the French Republic had been invaded by the Germans. Regardless of the war's justification, not every French soldier believed in dehumanizing their German enemy. The individual soldier's humanity took on an altogether different quality, one rooted in his own identity and spirituality, upon the killing fields of WWI.

*"I had to leave, just like everyone else. I no longer belonged to myself. I belonged to the fatherland, like a soul condemned to Satan's power."*

– Louis Barthas

### Sustaining Personal Humanity in War

Soldiers fight because they are ordered to or because they are prepared to die for others – country and comrades. Some fight, thinking they will find glory on the killing fields. Many soldiers enter war simply because they are forced to fight. A soldier kills because war mandates that it is often a “kill or be killed” scenario. In the midst of these bitter struggles between disparate factions of human beings, it is often quite the task to maintain one’s moral compass. During the course of war, the morality of an individual can be steadily eradicated by the nature of the conflict or the pressure to perform his duty without remorse or compassion. In other words, a “successful” soldier performs his duty without consideration of their foe’s humanity. Is it because there is a fear that humanizing the enemy is indicative of weakness? Is passivity in the face of global war considered too feminine for the male? Margaret Darrow, a professor of history at Dartmouth, succinctly describes the problem of war as a “zone of pure masculinity” where “the feminine should cease to exist” (15). Some would perhaps argue that the soldier who does not heed the call of duty to defend the fatherland (or motherland), engage the enemy, destroy the enemy, hate the enemy, and protect his country at all costs is no soldier at all. On the contrary, this type of soldier will be considered to be weak. Human civilization constantly teeters on the edge of global war since the dramatic rise of the nation-state and in spite of

Westphalian sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> It should not matter whether the cause is just anymore – it matters more how the individual soldier maintains his humanity during the course of conflict. The “pacifist soldier” is one who does not let the nature of war confound and destroy his moral sensibilities, thus diluting his humanity.

A prime example of such a soldier is the French *poilu*, Louis Barthas. The pacifist spirit that filled Barthas contrasted with aspects of the political pacifism of the *Gauche Républicaine* party's platform in the 1870s and subsequent socialist party rhetoric. As mentioned before, Barthas was an avid reader of *Le Midi Socialiste*<sup>3</sup> (Cazals xix). The pacifistic rhetoric of such papers certainly influenced some French soldiers, who put the ideal to practice in the trenches. On fraternization with the Germans, for example, Barthas elaborates: “It’s a matter of taste. Some will consider this sublime; others will call it criminal. It depends on whether you place the ideal of humanity above or below the ideal of patriotism” (244). Barthas appropriately distinguishes the two ideals. On one hand, there is the patriot who remains unquestioning in carrying out his duty through zealous reverence of his homeland. On the other hand, there is a soldier aware of his interconnectedness to the rest of the world in an increasingly globalized society. Regardless of globalization, Barthas’ never-ending humanization of the enemy (despite the risks to his own well-being), serves as an example not just to soldiers on the frontlines of wars, but as something essential to being human.

Louis Barthas’ origins were simple enough. He was a wine-barrel maker from

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<sup>2</sup> The idea that a nation-state operates under its own laws in equal consideration on the world stage.

<sup>3</sup> A socialist newspaper in circulation in southern France from 1908-1944.

Peyriac-Minervois in southern France. He had a wife and two sons, and at the age of 35, he heeded the call of France's general mobilization. On the surface, there is nothing particularly remarkable about Louis Barthas. However, it is exactly his humble origins which help make Louis Barthas stand out as a soldier. Despite his profession, Barthas had a distinct intellectual interest in philosophy and literature. Over the course of the war, Barthas scribbled in diaries and wrote letters as artillery shells exploded around him, shrapnel disintegrated friends, and rains flooded the trenches around him. Leonard Smith relates, "The metanarrative of tragedy gave the soldier of the trenches two seemingly contradictory but actually complementary identities: the simple victim and the brute" (9). It is possible, given this context by Smith, to view Barthas as a victim of forces beyond him. It is much more difficult to view Barthas a brutish soldier, though, and it is more appropriate to shed any such conceptions of Barthas altogether. The more appropriate view of Barthas and his story is that of the essential qualities of humanity successfully surviving amidst circumstances which are absolutely contradictory to them. The stories Barthas relates capture the essence of engaged "spiritual" pacifism during the extraordinarily horrific circumstances of warfare. A pacifist soldier never ceases to humanize his enemy, and in this sense he shows a form of love towards his "state mandated" enemy. The pacifist soldier is also constantly on guard against any rhetoric that promotes hatred or disdain for other groups of human beings. Louis Barthas exemplifies these humanistic qualities in a profession (that of the soldier) that frequently frowns upon them.

Smith notes in a general sense that French soldiers had become pacifists. Smith



attributes this pacifism to their increasing awareness of the world and its methodologies (141). Far from being cowardly or undisciplined, French soldiers had an independent streak in line with their heritage. Smith describes the war having made the *poilu* a pacifist, albeit in a “narrow sense” of the word. The *poilu* had become a pacifist because he had a “broader awareness of the world” and was thus more aware of the consequences of contemporary politics. Georges Bonnet<sup>4</sup> had seen the *poilu* as a soldier unlike any other of the war, who had a “pacifism less blind, less confident, but more active which wants new methods” (Smith 141). The growing awareness of the geopolitical machinations of imperial powers made *poilus* more inclined to resist the notions of superiors who would have them follow the embraces of jingoism, patriotism, and disdain for the enemy of the state. The idea was that as French citizen soldiers became aware of the world’s political *modus operandi*, they became psychologically more resistant to militarism and the promotion of war. Indeed, Smith’s observations are corroborated by Barthes himself:

Exasperated and in despair, some men surrendered to the Germans, and some Germans surrendered to the French. “What cowards!” say the patriots in the rear. But if all the soldiers, on both sides, had done the same thing, wouldn’t that have been sublime? The generals would have had to fight each other. Poincaré could have gone a couple rounds in the boxing ring with the Kaiser. That would have been hilarious (323).

A goal of Louis Barthes, and of fellow soldiers, was to combat the propaganda of their era. Cazals describes the French veterans of the trenches resisting the *bourrage de*

*crâne*<sup>5</sup>, or the brainwashing of their day (xxi). Wartime propaganda was something with which *poilus* were all too familiar. Propaganda frequently showed the life of the *poilu* as one of valor, duty, eventual reward, and happy homecomings. A well-known print of such a homecoming was by Adolphe Willette, a French caricaturist. In Willette's *Journée du Poilu* (1915), a French soldier returns home on Christmas leave to a welcoming wife and a cheerful dog.

Figure 2. “*Journée du Poilu.*”



The propaganda piece is eerily similar to videos showing soldiers returning home to their pets and families in modern times. Such propaganda creates a sense of potential joy for

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<sup>4</sup> A French Politician and a member of France's Radical Party. 1889-1973.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, “stuffing the brain with rubbish.”

the soldiers and their families, but often distracts the mind from the greater issues surrounding the conflict. In any case, furloughs were few and far between for *poilus*. In some instances, soldiers risked court-martial and potential execution to go and see their families before shipping out (Barthas 18). Soldiers like Barthas were not fooled. They saw through the jingoism of their day, and the nationalistic war rhetoric that attempted to drive the French people into hatred of their enemies. As an example, while escorting a group of German prisoners via train in October 1914, Barthas mentions a propagandist newspaper in Perpignan, France: “[The paper] persuaded the Catalans<sup>6</sup> that it was their patriotic duty to come and shout their hatred at these disarmed soldiers. From Perpignan, at each level crossing, at each station, a furious crowd awaited us, spewing imprecations and curses upon the uneasy prisoners” (10). Barthas was dismayed by these dehumanizing actions, viewing them as a failure of the greater society which they fought to defend. Barthas was more than pleased to defend the German prisoners from his own people. Barthas describes how the French people of the town shared with them goods and told the French soldiers not to share anything with the German prisoners. Barthas writes: “But once the train started up, we wasted no time in sharing all of it with the prisoners. This act of camaraderie made up for the odious demonstrations against disarmed enemies” (11).

Already having had a strong humanitarian streak since before the mobilization of 1914, Barthas had no problem fraternizing with the enemy. As the war dragged on across the world, the pointlessness of it all became increasingly apparent to soldiers on the front.

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<sup>6</sup> An ethnic group residing in Northern Spain and Southern France.

Instead, Barthas developed a respect for his German opposite far more than he typically did for leaders on his own side of no man's land.<sup>7</sup> Barthas' superiors frequently had no consideration for the preservation of human life, enemy or otherwise (Cowley xiii-xiv). It was not uncommon, as Barthas notes, to have conversations with German counterparts, exchange goods, and smoke together. Barthas actually encouraged this sort of behavior. Barthas describes instances while on campaign in the Neuville-Saint-Vaast Sector from November 1915 – February 1916 of fraternization with the enemy. Barthas notes, “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 coffee or pinard (wine)” (144). The British made a firm effort to stop fraternizing with the Germans, but the French were notoriously independent. Barthas, a key example of this French spirit of independence, was keen on ensuring that even his enemy would not be mistreated if at all possible. The most notable example of such fraternizing between soldiers on the frontlines is the famous Christmas truce of 1914; though, it is certainly not the only example. The senseless loss of life was increasingly apparent to soldiers, and a “weary fatalism” took place where the primary goal for soldiers on both sides was to “live and let live” (Cowley xiii). In the minds of many soldiers, the goal was no longer destruction of the enemy, but the preservation of life, enemy or not.

The mentality behind fraternization disturbed the higher commands of each army, and they took measures to stop fraternization. The most common measure was

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<sup>7</sup> The battleground between two opposing armies.

threatening death by firing squad. On admitting to fraternization with the enemy, Barthas notes, “A firing squad could well have been the response to such a suggestion. It’s as if, in the time of the inquisition, a poor fellow had confessed that he had just had a conversation with Satan” (245). Another way which the French command attempted to limit the effects of fraternization was by censoring reports from the frontline. Gregory Thomas, a professor of European history at the University of California Berkeley, describes that medical journals and reports from the French frontline sometimes had to pass through censors who removed any notion that their soldiers were fraternizing with the German enemy (49). The idea was that such news reaching the public portrayed their army as weak. Regardless of efforts by high commands to limit fraternization, either through censorship or threats of execution, it did not stop.

Fraternization frequently occurred at sections of the front where outposts were located close to the Germans. Barthas speaks of fraternization, saying, “You can be sure this gesture of fraternity occurred in more than one place, in fact, wherever the proximity of outposts allowed it” (244). Barthas’ heartfelt respect for the common German soldier demonstrated a key quality of spiritual pacifism: humanization of the enemy. His notebooks show exactly what is meant by the notion of a “pacifistic soldier.” A pacifist soldier is primarily spiritually engaged with his enemy, who can be anyone (even those wearing the same uniform), rather than with feats of arms.

In one instance during the 1916 Champagne campaign, Barthas was more inclined to rebuke his own superiors than his German enemy. A fellow soldier informed upon Barthas and his men for fraternizing with the Germans. His squad suddenly found

themselves under increased observation and scrutiny from superiors. Barthas' squad warned their newly found German friends that their officers were keeping a close eye on them. Barthas speaks of the peaceful dynamic between supposed enemies after this incident:

Among those who have not suffered through the crisis of the trenches, many won't be able to understand this tacit entente, this fraternity of adversaries whom they thought were always on the alert, fingers on the triggers. But they should think seriously about the fate of men whom a long, common suffering of dangers has brought together, by the strength of an irresistible instinct of human nature (248).

It is this "instinctual human nature" which Barthas speaks of that is constantly under assault in the wars of humankind.

Besides fraternization, Barthas and friends took every opportunity to perform duties and tasks which did not include wielding the weapons of war. In one instance during the Verdun campaign of spring 1916, Barthas volunteered to be a runner<sup>8</sup>, despite the risks that came with such a role. Barthas writes:

If I had to be there I would a hundred times rather die with a dispatch in my hand than with a rifle which had just killed a fellow workingman like me, a brother in misery and suffering. No, I'm not going to perish with that on my humanitarian, socialist conscience (204).

In another instance, Barthas makes note of a fellow soldier who "professed the most

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<sup>8</sup> A messenger charged with running dispatches between trenches.

absolute scorn for his murderous firearm, the rifle, and treated it so negligently that he was slapped with eight days of prison” (55). Some soldiers on the frontlines of WWI were not fighting an enemy that they viewed to be universally evil, despite what the propaganda of their day tried to promote. Instead, they saw their enemy as someone quite similar to them. Their humanization of each other stands as an important lesson in the history of warfare.

By May 1917, low morale in the French army resulted in widespread mutiny. Barthas mentions that these mutinies were partly inspired by the Russian Revolution: “The whole world was stupefied, petrified by this revolution, this collapse of the immense empire of the czars. These events had repercussions on the Western Front and throughout the French ranks. A wind of revolt blew across almost all the regiments.” (326). Marilyn and Frans Coetzee, both professors of history at Yale and George Washington Universities, note that the mood of soldiers and workers in France by 1917 had shifted from resignation to frustration (133). Not every regiment mutinied, but Barthas’ regiment, the 296<sup>th</sup>, eventually did. Martha Hanna, a professor of French history at the University of Colorado, Boulder, describes how the mutinies were not universal throughout the French army (217). Marilène Henry, a professor of French history at the University of Virginia, mentions the famous *Zouaves*.<sup>9</sup> A primary reason the *Zouaves* did not mutiny, as Barthas’ regiment did, was that they had leadership who cared a great deal for the well-being of their men. Henry describes mainline French army regiments as “having been led like lambs to the slaughter” while the *Zouaves* had officers who

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<sup>9</sup> Elite colonial units in the French army.

“respected their men, and the men looked to their officers for guidance” (44). Hanna corroborates this point saying that many of these mutinous units “would not fight in ill-conceived campaigns that offered little prospect of success” (218). These mutinous units refused to follow orders that would lead to their senseless slaughter. In the initial phases of war, French army doctrine was primarily focused around frontal assault attacks in the form of human waves.<sup>10</sup> This doctrine led to enormous casualties for the French army. During the First Battle of Champagne (December 1914 – March 1915), which Barthas’ unit participated in, the French suffered over 93,000 casualties – more than double that of their German counterparts. French military doctrine had not caught up with the twentieth century weapons of war, most notably the machine gun, layers of barbed wire, and precision artillery fire. Instead of creating breakthroughs in the enemy front, human wave attacks were systematically eradicated by German machine-gun and artillery fire. In opposition to these continuing orders, many *poilus* flat-out refused to fight. Barthas himself questions: “What in the Lord's name would happen if the soldiers refused to kill each other?” (144).

Eventually, strict measures were put in place in order to ensure discipline in the ranks. Instead of soldiers fraternizing and refusing to fight, they were punished (even executed in some instances), if they resisted the order to kill fellow human beings. In spring 1917, Marshal Philippe Pétain was called in to restore order to French ranks, and was largely successful in doing so. Under Pétain, forty-seven soldiers were executed for their mutinous behaviors (Hanna 218). Such tragedies likely could have been avoided if

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<sup>10</sup> A type of military assault in which large portions of densely formed infantry attack an enemy front.



French soldiers had been under the command of officers who had a more humanizing view of their men, such as those that led the *Zouaves*.

Despite these dramatic upheavals, Barthas and his comrades endured the hardships of the war. Barthas survived the horrors of the frontlines and now infamous battles, such as Artois, Champagne, and Verdun. Barthas and his men endured modern warfare on a scale never seen before: gas attacks, flame-throwers, and constant artillery strikes were a normal part of life on the frontlines of WWI. Barthas bore witness to the beauty of Earth turned black, incalculably cratered, and littered with untold numbers of human corpses. The idea of any single individual enduring these hardships is an astonishing testimony to the human will and its ability to deal with suffering. The fact that Barthas not only endured the awful nature of WWI but sustained his humanity throughout it is a testament to the remarkable quality of his individual humanitarian spirit. At the end of the war in 1919, Barthas was placed in an infirmary. At this infirmary, Barthas summarized his pacifism:

I began my peaceful duties as assistant gardener, watering the cabbages and lettuce, pulling up potatoes, all kinds of things which appealed much more to my pacifist temperament than handling a rifle, grenades, and other homicidal devices (377).

*“NATO’s policy with regard to Russia has remained unfriendly and opaque. One could go as far as to say that we have slid back to a new Cold War.”* –Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, February 2016.  
(David Rising, U.S. News).

### Modern Parallels and the Pacifist Argument

According to César de Prado of the Global Governance Program at the European University Institute, a sense of prosperity and peace began to take root in the West following World War II (35). Despite the Cold War and the various related proxy wars (Korea and Vietnam being key examples), the latter half of the twentieth century was relatively peaceful compared to the first half. However, it is unwise to think that the relative stability and peace which followed WWII will necessarily remain. The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a dramatic rise in global tensions that arguably began with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City. These attacks led to a globe-spanning conflict labeled the “Global War on Terrorism” still unfolding to this day with no foreseeable end in sight. Richard J. Evans, a professor of history and president of Wolfson College at Cambridge, England, notes some startling parallels to the modern world’s situation and the events leading up to WWI:

In 1914 the superpower that dominated the world, controlling the seas and ruling over a global empire of colonies, dominions and dependencies – Britain – was being challenged by a rival that was overtaking it economically and building up armaments on land and sea to assert its

claim for a “place in the sun” – Germany. All of this is alarmingly close to the situation today, when America’s global supremacy is increasingly being challenged by the rise of China (par. 1).

Evans also notes, “China and Russia are lining up behind one side while NATO<sup>11</sup> and the US line up behind the other” (par. 4). Evans draws parallels to the tumultuous nature of the Balkans prior to WWI. The strife in the Balkans drew world powers into conflict with each other in WWI. The modern situation in the Middle East threatens to do the very same thing. Given these parallels, and the nature of events unfolding over the modern geopolitical landscape, one can begin to see the importance of the personal testimony of soldiers like Louis Barthas. The pacifistic/humanistic approach to modern foreign relations is thus important, both on an individual level and the global stage.

Barthas and company were actively engaged in pacifism while simultaneously serving in a combat zone. What is meant by “engaged pacifism” philosophically, though? John David Geib, a professor of Biblical studies and theology at Malone College, Ohio, elaborates on the nature of pacifism: “Because the term ‘pacifism’ carries connotations of non-patriotic weakness, cowardice, and a fear of dealing directly with evil, I am going to rename the view I hold as ‘engaged Christian pacifism’” (387). Barthas himself viewed his pacifistic tendencies on the front as hallmarks of a “true Christian” (237). The conception put forth by Geib supports the view held by Barthas. The basis for this pacifism, as Geib describes it, is that the central thesis of the New Testament was

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<sup>11</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization

demonstrated by Christ in the form of “non-violent agape<sup>12</sup> love and goodness” (388). Geib’s idea of engaged pacifism is individual, and encourages one to follow the same example Christ set forth in demonstrating this non-violent, agape love, even towards their enemies. Barthas himself did not engage in physical violence with his enemy unless it was absolutely required to preserve his life. With every chance Barthas had, he took the non-violent approach, even at the risk of his own well-being. One may argue that Barthas did not fully live up to the idea of engaged pacifism if he was willing to defend himself at all, even if it were an absolute last resort. However, Barthas was a soldier, being forced to defend his nation against an invading army. The fact that he viewed the use of his weaponry in all circumstances as a failure stands as a testament to just how powerful his example of engaged pacifism is. Furthermore, there is a spirit of humanism in the type of pacifism being put forth by Geib, and as demonstrated by Barthas.

Regardless if one believes in following the example of Christ or not, there is both a spiritual and intellectual truth behind the idea of humanizing one’s enemy. Barthas knew that it was important for him to stay alive if possible so that he could continue to resist violence, protect his comrades, return home to his family, and combat the hateful inclinations of his superiors constantly trying to undermine the humanization of their enemy. Moreover, Barthas knew that he had to relate the story someday, as did his comrades who pleaded with him to share their agony with the world. The figure of Christ provides humanity with an example of someone who demonstrated agape love towards both friend and foe. The Christ example provides a spiritual idea of selflessness in the

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<sup>12</sup> Agape: the idea of universal, unconditional, selfless love, typically found within Christian doctrine.

face of persecution. In the man of Barthes, there is an example of a man, who despite the horror of battle surrounding him, maintained the “Christ-like” spirit to the best of his ability. In this sense, the Christ figure is an ideal to reach for, whereas in the grounded and clearly real man of Barthes, the practical results of reaching for the “Christ ideal” in the face of global war are demonstrated. Even if everyone falls short of the Christ ideal, Barthes’ example shows it is not at all futile to reach for it.

A key aspect of the French soldier’s psyche, in particular Barthes, was that which led them to question the rhetoric of war put forth by their nation’s leaders. In order to facilitate rhetorical awareness in modernity, it is increasingly imperative that individuals become aware of the exact nature of this rhetoric. Piotr Cap, a professor of political science at the University of Lodz, Poland, describes the nature of modern American war rhetoric. In particular, Cap puts forth the idea of the “9/11 analogy” and how a conception of a “direct threat” was used to legitimize the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (56). Cap describes how the rhetoric which formulated the basis for the Iraq war was “a representative example of the US war-on-terror rhetoric in general” (56). Taken a step further, the idea of the “direct threat” concept can be applied over the entirety of the Western world as a result of the attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL). Surely, the United States is not the only country to employ such means in justifying violent action against foreign states, but they are a powerful Western example. Awareness of war rhetoric is still significant due to the consequences of the actions that result from the wars it promotes. If individuals and nations truly wish to promote global prosperity and peace, it remains essential that they question the reasons put forth to

justify their military actions against each other, no matter how just a cause may seem. In other words, rhetorical awareness is a key part of participating in engaged pacifism, spiritually motivated or otherwise.

Dehumanization of other groups remains a threat to global prosperity, spiritual truth, humanism, and the well-being of human life overall. Michael W. Brough, a professor of philosophy who has served in the U.S. Army and taught at West Point Academy, explains the nature of dehumanization in the 2007 book *Rethinking the Just War Tradition*. Brough writes: “Dehumanization is something of a universal wartime tradition and it found willing participants in its perceptual viewpoint throughout the twentieth century” (151). Brough adds, “The idea that the enemy is subhuman is powerful, and it strikes me that the idea is both a catalyst for and a result of the environment of killing” (151). Can war be prevented by removing the dehumanization of perceived foes? In truth, the answer to this question may never be fully known. However, it is clear that dehumanization in any form is an abhorrent tendency of humanity at war. Since the nature of war rhetoric, both modern and historical, carries with it the undertones of the subhuman nature of one’s foe, it is crucial to remain on guard against allowing these notions to captivate one’s mind. The first step to lessening the practice of warfare is to bear in mind the humanity of all.

## Conclusion

Louis Barthas' harrowing account of war shakes one to the bone:

Another [French] soldier who was crawling up suddenly leapt and fell right in the middle of us, but we were frozen with horror. This man had almost no face left. An explosive bullet had blown up in his mouth, blasting out his cheeks, ripping out his tongue (a piece of which hung down), and shattering his jaws. Blood poured copiously from these horrible wounds (44).

Barthas relates how this incident led to reprisals from fellow soldiers, who sought revenge against their enemy. Barthas observes: "That's the way that war, with the reprisals it provokes, annihilates every sentiment of generosity in the heart of man, taking him back to a primitive state" (44). In an age of humanity where pundits, politicians, leaders, and commoners alike frequently cite the "progress" of their species, how can war still exist? If there is anything that calls into question the progress of humanity, is it not the practice of warfare, which always takes the human back to that primitive state which Barthas describes? Despite all the technology, science, or societal "advances" that may result from war, is it not more important to consider the nature of the human condition, and the corruption that stems from dehumanizing and killing others "legally"? It remains to be seen if the human being is capable of coming out of the primitive and animalistic ways of warfare. Still, the cause is not without hope. In examining the militarization of Third Republic France, soldiers like Louis Barthas, and modern parallels with global conflicts of the past, humanity may yet see some semblance of a higher way.

In modernity, once again, global institutions and governments compete, vying for influence over the world through whatever means possible to them. As Richard Evans notes, “The Middle East, the Balkans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, still threatens to explode into a wider, more dangerous conflagration” (par. 35). The dehumanizing rhetoric of entire peoples from all perspectives is as prevalent as ever. In the face of these tumultuous enterprises, what place is there for one individual voice? Does the opinion of a single pacifist soldier like Louis Barthas matter to the world’s nations? What can be said of those, who instead of being willing to die in defense of some vain nationalistic idea, are instead willing to die for peace, humanism, and global solidarity? These small voices may yet face the scorn of society which label them cowards, or accuse them of weakness, but should the world not take heed of their message? Why is humanity so quick to forget the events, the rhetoric, and the horrific nature of their past wars? It is time to remember the past, and incorporate its lessons more fully into the modern human condition. Such lessons are as relevant as they were when Barthas and other young soldiers were sacrificial lambs on the killing fields of imperial powers. Humanizing “the other” or one’s enemy is not indicative of weakness. On the contrary, humanization, especially during war, is an unparalleled strength of spirit. By bearing in mind the humanity of other groups of humans, no matter the potential cost to one’s own well-being and livelihood, it is hoped that the dark age of conflict and strife will be gradually lessened to the point that it becomes as a melancholic requiem passed through future generations of humanity – a constant reminder of war’s ultimate folly.



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