

A century since the publication of Henri Barbusse's antiwar novel, *Under Fire*

By Sandy English
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In January 1917, French novelist Henri Barbusse published his novel *Under Fire: The Story of a Squad* (*Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade*), [1] which related the experiences of a French army unit in the First World War. The book was based on the writer's own experiences in the trenches facing the German lines in northern France, where he served for 17 months. The novel had been published in serial form toward the end of 1916, and appeared as a book in the first month of the new year.

After the passage of 100 years, *Under Fire* remains one of the most compelling works of art from the early part of the 20th century, and the first—and, in some ways, the most psychologically revealing—of the antiwar novels that the war of 1914-1918 produced in Europe and America over the next two decades.

Perhaps more importantly, the novel itself became a factor in the struggle against the war. It expressed, in the very middle of almost unimaginable destruction, the thoughts and feelings of millions of workers, small tradesmen and farmers from Europe, Canada, Australia and the colonies, and soon from the United States, as those around them were dying in fetid trenches, by poison gas, artillery bombardment and sniper or machine gun fire. *Under Fire* provoked an immediate reaction from hundreds of thousands of readers, and mirrored the revival of an antiwar movement in the French working class.

After the war, Lenin was to remark that Barbusse's novels [*Le Feu* and *Clarté* (*Clarity*)], "may be cited as particularly graphic corroborations of the mass phenomenon, observed everywhere, of the growth of revolutionary consciousness among the masses." [2]

A year and a half of war produced a monumental shift in the opinions and sentiments of millions of people in Europe, both soldiers and civilians. It was inevitable and necessary that artists began to treat these earthshaking experiences in their fullest human dimension.

1916 was the bloodiest year in European history up to that point. The Russian Brusilov Offensive during the summer, in what is now Ukraine, cost 1,600,000 lives, mostly Russian and Austro-Hungarian.

The Battle of the Somme (from the River Somme, in northwestern France), fought from July 1 to November 18, 1916, killed 1 million Germans, French, British, Australians, Canadians, Indians and New Zealanders. On the first day of the battle alone the British suffered 57,470 casualties. The Somme was notable for one of the first military uses of the new horror of air power.

The Battle of Verdun (February 21 to December 18, 1916)—fought in northeastern France primarily between German and French forces—was the lengthiest battle of the war and drew in nearly three-quarters of the French army. Estimates of the dead range from 700,000 to 900,000 men, about half German and half French.

One historian of the latter battle, Alistair Horne (*The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*), notes: "Though other battles of the First War exacted a higher toll, Verdun came to gain the unenviable reputation of being the battlefield with the highest density of dead per square yard that has probably ever been known." [3] By the end of the year, over a million

French soldiers (out of a male population of 20 million) had died in the slaughter of the first imperialist war.

French government censorship did not allow accurate reports of the scale of destruction to reach civilians behind the front lines, but reports trickled in from soldiers on leave. And by 1916, living standards behind the lines in France were deteriorating, with food shortages and steep price increases for staples such as flour and eggs.

Rank-and-file members of the Socialist Party were increasingly discontented with the abject pro-war attitude of their party's leadership. Party officials sought to suppress knowledge and discussion of the socialist antiwar conference held in Zimmerwald, Switzerland in September 1915. Dissatisfaction among French workers would erupt in a strike wave the next year. The French government sought to ban Leon Trotsky's antiwar Russian language newspaper *Nashe Slovo*, and succeeded in expelling Trotsky from France in March 1916.

Barbusse enlisted in the French army in 1914, at the age of 41, in the midst of the patriotic fervor. In a letter that month to the pro-war Socialist Party newspaper *L'Humanité*, he wrote that he supported the war as a fight against "the sabre, the jackboot, and the crown" of German militarism.

Barbusse was raised in a household devoted to the ideals of the Enlightenment. He lived in the artistic Bohemia of the pre-war years, had a career as an editor and published poems in the symbolist style. His one early novel, *Hell* (*L'enfer*, 1908), is about man in a boarding house who can spy upon his fellow-boarders through a hole in the wall. What he sees is generally unflattering to humanity, although there are passages critical of nationalism and militarism, growing tendencies in France at the time.

During the war Barbusse served as an enlisted man, not an officer, and was awarded the Croix du Guerre for bravery and reassigned from the front for health reasons in 1916 (pulmonary damage, dysentery and exhaustion). By all accounts by 1915 he had become thoroughly disillusioned with the war and began to take a pacifist attitude. While working in a clerk's position behind the lines, Barbusse began to turn his painful experiences into a novel.

The characters in *Under Fire* make up a single army squad (14 to 16 men), each from a different region of France and each a worker, farmer or small tradesman. A soldier who is apparently an intellectual narrates, but he stays in the background for the most part, letting the experiences and thoughts of his comrades take center stage.

The novel begins with the mundane details of life in the trenches for the *poilu* (ordinary French soldier): the dirt, the cold and the disease. Soldiers write letter to their wives, search for food, grumble about rations.

Generally, the soldiers show a mixture of sympathy for and anger at their German counterparts. Many blame the war entirely on German militarism. Some of them are not above killing a stray German for his matches, but German soldiers smuggle one French soldier, a fellow Alsatian, who has helped them bury their dead, behind the lines to see his family.

The novel progresses through more and more devastating scenes, both emotional and physical. The chapter called “First-Aid Post” shows a field hospital full of the wounded and dying. It is bombarded and light comes through the demolished roof: “In it you can see the faces flaming or morally pale. Eyes closing in agony or blazing with fever, bodies wrapped in white, patched in monstrous bandages. All these things that were hidden are brought into the light.” [4]

The violence of the war reaches its climax in the chapter “Dawn,” one of the most harrowing depictions ever written of the hell of the First World War, or indeed any war. After a bombardment and a heavy rain, the trenches have been decimated and the ground is strewn with dead men, many of whom who perished by drowning.

Of the dead, both German and French, the narrator says: “All their efforts to escape from the ditch, with its sticky embankment, slowly, fatally filling up with water, only served to drag them further to the bottom. They died holding on for support to the earth as it slid away from them.” [5]

The chapter is especially tragic because the beginnings of an understanding among the soldiers of the meaning of this experience, that is, of the real character of the war, has begun 60 pages earlier.

The narrator, as he wanders in “the midst of this dark chaos,” [6] meets Corporal Bernard from his squad who is sitting on the embankment of a trench. He has recently killed German soldiers in battle and says, “How will they who come after us ... how will they think of these massacres, these deeds, when even we who commit them don’t know whether they are like the exploits of heroes ... or the doings of bandits! ‘And yet,’ he went on, ‘there is someone who has risen above the war and who will shine out for the beauty and extent of his courage ...’ He exclaimed in a clear voice: ‘Liebknecht!’” [7]

Critics have termed this scene “incongruous.” [8] But it is just the opposite: it bears, more than almost any artistic depiction of the First World War, the imprint of the historical logic at work in the war: the emergence of the social revolution.

This logic was fully apparent only to a few in 1916, including the man named in this passage, the German Marxist Karl Liebknecht, leader of the antiwar tendency in the German working class. The handful of internationalist socialist leaders included Liebknecht’s comrade, Rosa Luxemburg, imprisoned since 1915; the Bolshevik leader, V. I. Lenin, who was still in exile in Geneva; and Leon Trotsky, who would shortly be expelled from France by a government which could sense where events were heading.

In March 1917 the Russian working class would begin a series of revolutionary actions that would cumulate in the seizure of power in November under the leadership of the Bolsheviks. At the end of April 1917 large sections of the French army would be racked by mutinies as a result of the failed Nivelle Offensive, although the March Revolution in Russia and antiwar dissent in the working class behind the lines were also influences. In one protest, French soldiers bleated like sheep as they paraded past their officers to show they knew they were being led to the slaughter. The role of *Under Fire* in fanning this sentiment cannot be discounted.

Under Fire ends with a passionate discussion among the squad—those who remain alive—about social equality. “‘The people are nothing and should be everything,’” one soldier says. [9] The narrator remarks, “These men of the people ... are the Revolution greater than the other [the French Revolution of 1789], with themselves as its source—rising already, rising in their throats, repeat ‘Equality.’” [10]

The novel sold tens of thousands of copies, and won the most prestigious French literary award, the Prix Goncourt. Many French soldiers testified to the authenticity of *Under Fire*’s descriptions. Particularly striking for the time was the frank language of the *poilus* that he reproduced. Because of the popularity of the novel and because of his

exemplary war record, Barbusse could not be persecuted by the government.

After the war the novelist identified himself with the Russian Revolution and the young French Communist Party. His association with the October Revolution was part of a broader tendency of opposition not only by the French working class, but also artists who ranged from bourgeois pacifists such as the novelist Roman Roland to the poet and revolutionary syndicalist, also later a prominent member of the French Communist Party (and still later a supporter of the Left opposition), Marcel Martinet. [11]

Barbusse used proceeds from the novel to found a veterans’ association, which had an antiwar outlook. He also founded in 1919 a league of artists sympathetic to the Communist International called *Clarté*. In November 1922, Lenin—now seriously ill—wrote to the group, “It is worth devoting one’s whole life to the struggle against this kind of war; it is a struggle in which one must be ruthless and chase to the furthestmost corners of the earth all the sophistry that is uttered in its defence.”

Barbusse published another novel, also entitled *Clarté*, about the growth of socialist sentiment in a young clerk who joins the army. After the occupation of Germany by French troops during the Ruhr crisis of 1923, which brought Germany to the brink of socialist revolution, he formally joined the Communist Party.

Unhappily, the rest of Barbusse’s history is bound up with the tragic bureaucratization of the official Communist movement under the impact of Stalinism. He seems to have been initially sympathetic to the Left Opposition inside the Russian Communist Party, led by Trotsky, but by 1927 he was merely waiting to see which way the wind was blowing in the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. Barbusse was “concerned, above all, to disguise opinions he could no longer express openly,” according to Victor Serge. [12]

Barbusse eventually threw in his lot with the Soviet bureaucracy and, what’s worse, became the official biographer of Stalin. He died in 1935 before he could further disgrace himself by supporting the Moscow Trials. Recent scholarship has indicated that he played a more prominent role than has previously been believed in subordinating the struggle against war after 1932 to the foreign policy needs of the Stalinist bureaucracy. [13]

Under Fire remains his greatest work, although a great deal can be learned from *Clarté* and his short stories of this period. The former book is one of the great indictments of imperialist war, one of the first, and one of the most insightful.

[1] All references to *Under Fire* are to the 2003 translation published by Robin Buss: Barbusse, Henri. *Under Fire*. Translated by Robin Buss. Penguin Books, 2003.

[2] Lenin, V.I. *Collected Works*, Volume 29. Progress Publishers, 1980, p. 509.

[3] Horne, Alistair. *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*. 1962. Penguin Books, 1993, p. 1.

[4] Barbusse, p. 269.

[5] *ibid.* p. 298.

[6] *ibid.* p. 236.

[7] *ibid.* p. 237.

[8] King, Jonathan. “Henri Barbusse: *Le Feu* and the Crisis of Social Realism.” *The First World War in Fiction*, edited by Holger Klein. Macmillan Press, 1979, p. 216.

[9] Barbusse. p. 311.

[10] *ibid.* p. 312.

[11] The revolutionary antiwar poems of Martinet, also published during the war, can be found in: Pazais, George. *Marcel Martinet: Poet of the Revolution*. Francis Boutle Publishers, 2007.

[12] Serge, Victor. *Memoirs of a Revolutionary: 1901-1941*. Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 238.

[13] Ducoulombier, Romain. "Henri Barbusse, Stalin and the making of the Comintern's international policy in the 1930s." *French History*, Volume 30, Issue 4, pp. 526-545.

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