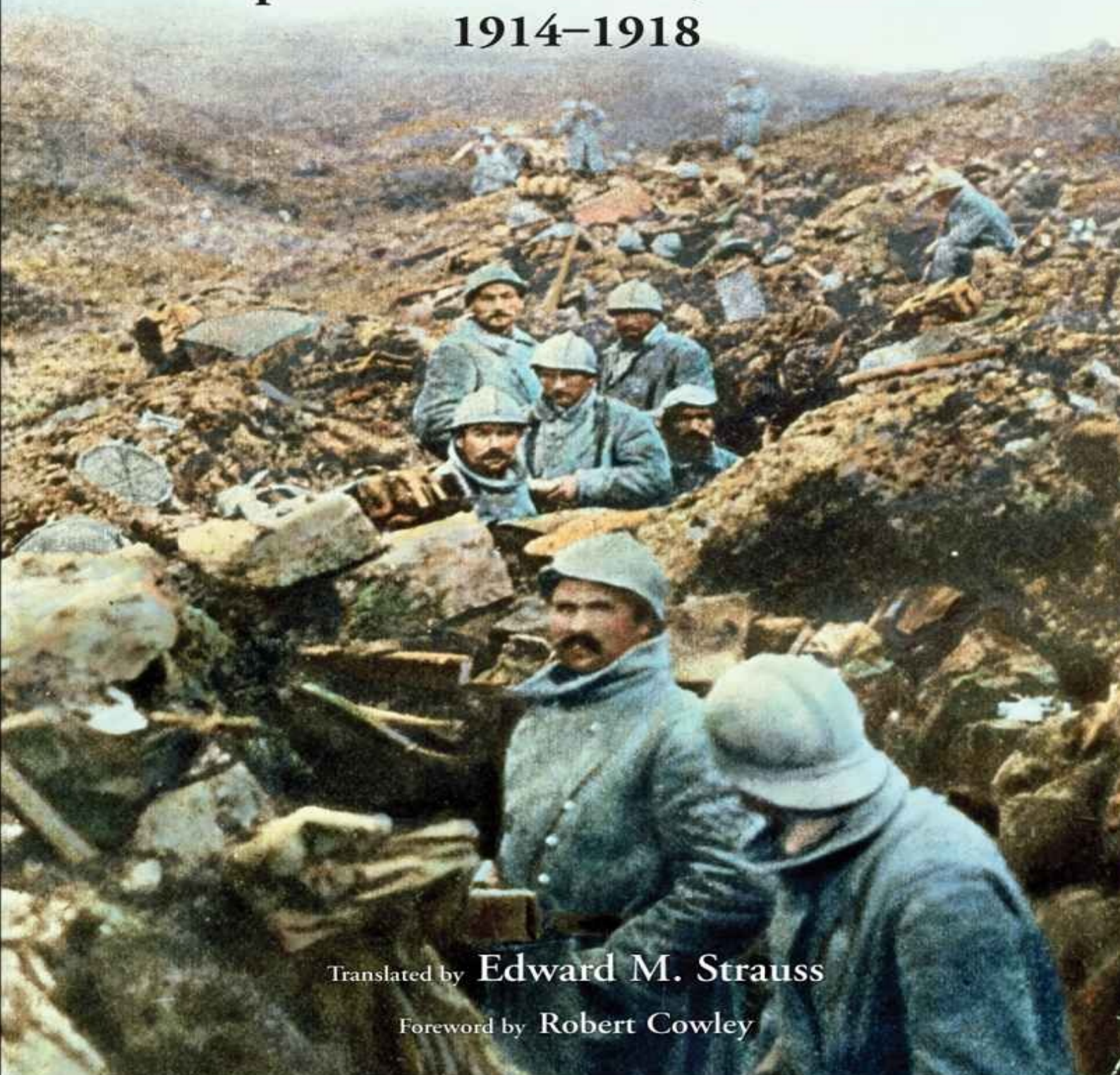


"An exceptionally vivid memoir of a
French soldier's experience of the First World War"
—Max Hastings, author of *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*

Poilu

The World War I Notebooks of
Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker
1914–1918



Translated by **Edward M. Strauss**

Foreword by **Robert Cowley**



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Introductions and Afterword by Rémy Cazals

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Frontispiece: Louis Barthas, circa 1914

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Foreword:

“You’ve Got To Tell It All”

Few documents from the Great War are as remarkable as the war notebooks of Louis Barthas, published in English for the first time in Edward M. Strauss’s fine translation. They are special for a number of reasons. Their author left a record of four years of service at the front, an unusual span of survival. He was not an officer but a common soldier, a corporal, a man approaching middle age who in civilian life had been a barrelmaker from the Languedoc region of France, a wine-growing center.

Men in the ranks were not ordinarily chroniclers, and we’ll never know what started Barthas on his singular project. He apparently began it as a diary, which over the war years came to fill many volumes. You have to suppose that he carried the most recent ones home with him, each caked with battlefield mud and chewed by rats, on his infrequent furloughs. He probably didn’t want to risk leaving them behind, where they might be pilfered, inadvertently destroyed, or appropriated by the officers he so readily criticized and used against him in possible court-martial proceedings. (Some of those hostile superiors had seen to his brief demotion from corporal to private, on the flimsiest of evidence.) After he was mustered out in February 1919, Barthas began to assemble a narrative describing his time on the Western Front that would eventually run to nineteen notebooks. He would work on it after he finished a long day of barrel-making, fleshing out the original diaries with quotes from letters home, official reports and orders that he had kept, and accounts by fellow soldiers that he had written down at the time, as well as with ephemera such as postcards and newspaper clippings. Those sources he put together in the book you read here, one that is part diary, part memoir. The men in his squad encouraged their corporal’s literary efforts:

“And you,” said Ferié to me, “you who are writing about the life we’re leading here, don’t hide anything. You’ve got to tell it all.”

“Yes, yes, everything, everything. We’ll be there as your witnesses. Maybe we won’t all die here,” added the others.

“They won’t believe us,” said Mondières, “or maybe they won’t even give a damn.”

Barthas was a natural writer, even if he had only one book in him; it did not come to light until the late seventies, when he had been dead for more than two decades, as Rémy Cazals recounts in his introduction. If I have any criticism, it is that Cazals is too modest about his discovery. There are few accounts of the experience of war on the Western Front equal to that of Louis Barthas; I sometimes think that it may be the best.

The barrelmaker was a keen observer who had a way with words and homespun images. Of an inept trench guide he comments, “The poor guy read his map like a carp reading a prayer book.” Describing an overcrowded dugout, he remarks, “It was hot enough to hatch chickens in there.” After a bombardment, he remembers “sharp, piercing sounds, first the whistling, sometimes like a cat meowing, then crashing down like a steady rain of steel.” Of the corpse of a young and seemingly untouched German soldier, he observes that “death had brushed him with its wing, and preserved the smile which still marked his youthful face.” There is a primitive vigor here. Think of an Henri Rousseau of the trenches. The perspectives are sometimes inexact but the compositions are true and original, and the colors always vivid.

Intelligent and obviously well read—circumstances had forced him to leave school early—stoic and forgiving (except of the officers he ridiculed as the “new noblemen of the twentieth century”), Barthas was a man who suffered much in return for little. The aging corporal was plainly popular with his

squad mates, whom he regarded as a little family. Though he always did what was expected of him, he nonetheless refused to shed the blood of his German counterparts. He was a confirmed socialist who regarded them more as comrades than as enemies. But for all his good qualities, Barthas exhibited a countryman's lack of sophistication and prudishness—witness his shocked reaction to the “bare arms and shoulders” of Parisian women.

There are numerous accounts of the Great War by French officers with a literary bent, and not a few are memorable. But their war was different from that of Barthas. Even sergeants inhabited another world. As he says of his superiors, “To them, the soldier doesn't open up, is mistrustful, and any officer who will want to try, like me, to describe the strange life of the trenches will have never known, except by accident, the real sentiments, the true spirit, the clear language and the deepest thoughts of the soldier.”

You would hardly grasp that perception from reading a book that has long been venerated as the most useful, indeed indispensable, study of the French literature of experience in the Great War, Jean Norton Cru's 1929 *Témoins—Witnesses*. Norton Cru's quirky but authoritative work cites 252 writers sketching their biographies and their roles in the war, and evaluating their personal accounts, which run the gamut from letters and diaries to memoirs and novels. He even ranks them. Norton Cru, a combat veteran himself, was a great man for lists. Almost all the writers he mentions were educated men from the middle or upper class; almost all were officers. He names not a single individual from the lower class, not a single one who was, in August 1914, a laborer. War accounts by such people apparently did not exist: in any assessment of Barthas' notebooks, can there be a fact more telling?

For a military historian, *Poilu* (I'll use Strauss's absolutely accurate title) is a treasure trove: pick your cliché. There was hardly a sector from Flanders to Verdun where Barthas didn't show up at some point in the fifty-four months in which he served. In that time he witnessed warfare making its fearsome leap into a new century. Within the framework of stalemate, we sometimes forget how much warfare did change on the Western Front. Barthas began his four years with night dashes across fields swept by rifle and machine gun fire to a single front-line trench and ended them in tunnels lit by light bulbs. (“Power stations in the trenches! But then they were thinking that the war would go on for years and years.”) He took part in the infantry assaults of 1914 that still had the feel of charges out of the Franco-Prussian War, suffered the unimaginable rigors and dangers of the trenches (and those of their next evolution, fighting from shell hole to shell hole), sweated out artillery barrages that never seemed to end, prepared for poison gas attacks, was momentarily rendered wild-eyed and incoherent by the searing blast from a flamethrower, and went to ground in the deep dugouts and scattered outposts that characterized the undermanned defensive zones of 1918. He fraternized with his German opposites, seeing nothing wrong in doing so, and joined the mutinies of 1917, believing that they were justified. Louis Barthas was never less than an ideal soldier.

The late fall and winter of 1914–15 is a period largely missing from the histories of the Great War, those of the French especially. It was not one that they are proud of. They did their best to reverse their great victories at the Marne, the Grand Couronné, and, most recently, Ypres. While the British scraped the bottom of their replacement barrel and waited for their New Armies to take shape, the French expanded their leadership in the war. Their Western Front generals pursued what they called *la guerre d'usure*, “the war of wearing down,” day after day sending men against the Germans and their plentiful machine guns, their thickening networks of barbed wire, probing for a new weak spot, an unturned flank to turn. The era of the breakthrough—*la percée*—was not to be. An angry former lieutenant, the novelist Jean Bernier, would later write of “the unpardonable offensives of that first winter” and of “the mud, and the rain, and the veritable jelly of corpses.” Joffre, the French

commander in chief, ruthlessly sacked generals who spoke their minds about what was happening. On a planned attack, Marie-Émile Fayolle, then a corps commander, confided in his diary, “I believe it will be a bloody failure.” The future marshal of France kept his doubts to himself. In the event, no word about the disasters leaked out.

Louis Barthas was one of the few who actually described taking part in those attacks, two of them on successive days, and his account didn’t surface for six decades. He left a record of the patriotic madness that still seized both sides, and would do so for several months more. There is an almost cinematographic quality about his description of the attacks that initiated his ordeal on the Western Front. The date is December 16, 1914, and the scene is a railroad embankment in French Flanders outside a coal mining village called Vermelles, one of those otherwise forgettable places that briefly earned notoriety a century ago. Men in red trousers and dark blue greatcoats advance in the direction of what Barthas calls “the disagreeable tic-tac of machine guns.” They flatten themselves against a faint artificial rise that offers little protection from machine guns firing from the upper stories of a neighboring village. Just as he arrives, out of breath—he never skimps the small details—“I saw one of those guys who had already taken cover there get hit in the back with a bullet. I’ll never forget the sight of that hole, like it was made with a drill—a little whiff of smoke from burnt cloth, the man’s violent somersault, a groan, and then the stillness of death.”

When the troops spread out along the embankment refuse to budge, an officer yells out from the safety of a trench that if they don’t move forward, he’ll order them fired on. “Terrified, we crept a little farther along the embankment, like earthworms.” An orderly approaches Corporal Barthas, carrying a message. “Hey,” he said, “are you scared?” He had hardly spoken when a bullet pierced his chest and he pitched forward. “He didn’t say a word. He just stuck out his hand to us. The guy closest to me and I both took it, but it was already motionless. He was dead.”

There was more of the same the following afternoon. Finally, there was only one officer left standing. He called a halt.

The scene now switches a few miles south to a place called Notre Dame de Lorette, a long, five-hundred-foot-high hill that in 1915 witnessed some of the most brutal fighting on the entire Western Front. A chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary, where pilgrims came to pray, crowned its summit. In 1914, the Germans, who had a knack for appropriating high ground, had established a considerable foothold there; the French spent the first nine months of the following year trying to evict them. Perhaps a hundred thousand men from both sides died contesting those heights. Firsthand accounts of the long struggle are rare, which makes Barthas’ all the more noteworthy. But then, there were probably few survivors with the stomach to write about experiences ready-made for PTSD.

Today a national cemetery occupies much of the long hilltop. It is a rectangle of thirty-two acres with twenty thousand marked crosses crowding in on a nondescript white stone basilica and an adjacent observation tower. Low-walled enclosures surround grass-covered boneyards, containing the remains of another twenty-two thousand, all unknowns. There are cemeteries everywhere in the Artois: death is a major industry in this part of the world. Barthas called Notre Dame de Lorette a “charnel house.” It would be hard to dispute that phrase. Once, years ago, I strolled from one end of the national cemetery to the other, occasionally glancing at my wristwatch. With scarcely a pause, my walk consumed nine minutes.

The British, who took over the sector from the French, were appalled by what they found at Notre Dame de Lorette (or Loretto, as the Germans called it). The original church had been pounded to smithereens. That was predictable. But the killing fields of the butte, which had not yet been cleaned up, were not. An Irish infantry officer, F. C. Hitchcock, described the place as it looked in October

1916:

Passed numbers of skeletons on my way down the sunken road.... A rusty and twisted rifle barrel stuck into the ground, surmounted by the familiar képi, indicated the grave of some unknown *poilu*. Skulls and bones bleached white lay strewn throughout rank grass. Twisted French rifles and equipment lay rotting everywhere. A skull was lying on top of Uhlan Alley communication trench. Some wag had stuck a derelict képi on it in grim humour.

For all their losses in the year they contested Notre Dame de Lorette, neither side accomplished anything of operational, let alone strategic, value. Barthas was one of the thousands who took part in what must be reckoned as the consummate meaningless trench battle. By June 2, 1915, when he began his first perilous climb up those hideous slopes, he would have been wearing a new, but already muddied, sky blue uniform. (The characteristic ridged Adrian helmets, with the flaming grenade stamped in front, would not be introduced until midsummer.) “Right away,” he wrote, “we found ourselves in a forest of cut-down, twisted, uprooted trees; in this inextricable mess we could barely follow the trace of what looked like a communication trench.” Death was everywhere:

Where the connecting trench joined in, an unfortunate fellow was stretched out, decapitated by a shell, just as if he had been guillotined. Beside him, another was frightfully mutilated... I saw, as if hallucinating, a pile of corpses, almost all of them German, that they had started to bury right in the trench ...

“There’s no one here but the dead!” I exclaimed.

Soon after, flames and “bitter smoke” filled his trench. “At my feet two miserable creatures are rolling on the ground, their clothes, their hands, their faces on fire.” The Germans had unleashed a flamethrower attack. Barthas had arrived in a new world, the revolutionary zone of the industrial battlefield. “The time will come,” wrote the German novelist Ernst Jünger (who also survived all four years of the war), “when the single unprotected rifleman will be ground between the millstones of machinery... It is a question no longer of launching men en masse but machines.”

Barthas’ Artois ordeal wasn’t over. He spent the fall of 1915 in the downlands to the south of the butte. The area had become trench warfare’s Holy Land, dominated by shrines of lethality with names like the Labyrinth, the Pimple, and the Ouvrages Blancs, German defensive networks behind deep belts of barbed wire, with underground dugout shelters armed with machine guns that intersected one another in a kind of puzzle maker’s maze. Behind them loomed the densely fortified slopes of Vimy Ridge. On September 25, the French launched a new offensive, which finally drove the Germans from Notre Dame de Lorette before it inevitably bogged down. Barthas’ 296th Regiment waited in reserve. “At daybreak,” he wrote, “we could see, to our horror, that in front of the trench and behind it the ground was covered with hundreds of French bodies ...”

A deep change in the attitude of the ordinary *poilu* was becoming evident. Barthas—and he was not alone—openly spoke of “the incoherence of the high command.” Common soldiers were increasingly reluctant to sacrifice their lives for remote commanders whose goals they no longer trusted or endorsed. *Poilus*, and not the men who led them, began to break off attacks on their own initiative. As the military historian Douglas Porch has written, “The sacrificial *élan* of the first year was gone, not to return in this war—or in the next.”

The battlefield was changing, and so was the nature of warfare. In the spring of 1916, Barthas and his regiment found themselves at Verdun, holding the highlands on the west bank of the Meuse. As a colonel who ran the Verdun battlefield museum once told me, “People who speak about trenches here don’t know what they are talking about.” Men sheltered in, and fought from, shell holes. Artillery had become the weapon of choice. Shellfire rarely let up. The Germans, Barthas wrote, seemed determined “to pound us into marmalade.” In this disjointed combat, you never saw your adversaries: “Our firing

line was broken, with gaps of as much as four hundred meters between sections and companies. No one really knew whether we had Germans or French in front of us.” The only human forms you saw were likely to be corpses.

Somehow, in “this monstrous avalanche of metal,” this “veritable curtain of steel and fire,” Bartha continued “cheating death.” One day a heavy shell—what the poilus called a *marmite*, a “cooking pot”—burst almost on top of him. “I had just felt the death wind,” he wrote. “Some say it’s chilly; I found it hot and burning. It coursed through my whole body, from my rattled brain, to my heavy heart and lungs, all the way down to my rubbery legs.”

In four years, that may have been the closest he came to being killed.

Through the last half of 1916 and all of 1917, Bartha served (with rare furlough breaks home) in the Champagne, the Somme, and the Argonne. The hard, dangerous life in the open remained a constant, but, for common soldiers of both sides, something had changed. The killing may not have stopped—i anything, death had become more mechanized and impersonal—but the desire to kill, along with the acceptance of your own death, had lost whatever attraction they once might have had. The sacrificial élan was indeed a thing of the past; a weary fatalism had replaced it, one that Bartha’s narrative increasingly reflects. All that really mattered now was survival, live and let live.

Fraternization was a symptom of this new attitude. The Christmas truce of 1914 was the most famous example, with its football games between British and Germans that probably never happened. The British high command, which regarded fraternization as detrimental to the fighting spirit, made a strenuous, and mostly successful, effort to prevent a repetition. With the French and the Germans it was different, as the common soldier often took charge. Bartha (whose regiment had not observed the Christmas truce) first recorded an incident of fraternization in the Artois on December 10, 1915. Rain had been falling for days. “At many places along the front line, the soldiers had to come out of their trenches so as not to drown,” Bartha wrote. “The Germans had to do the same. We therefore had the singular spectacle of two enemy armies facing each other without firing a shot.” In their unofficial truce, soldiers “smiled, exchanged comments; hands reached out and grasped; we shared tobacco, a canteen of ‘jus’ [coffee] or pinard [cheap red wine].”

Bartha returned to the subject of fraternization in his account of life on the Champagne front in the summer of 1916. Unofficial meetings usually occurred where listening posts of the two sides were close. Bartha recorded the sight of “French and German sentries seated tranquilly on their parapets, smoking pipes and exchanging bits of conversation from time to time, like good neighbors taking some fresh air at their doorsteps.” The practice was passed on from relief to relief.

Officers, who were often disliked by the men who served under them, tended to take a dim view of fraternization. At one point a lieutenant who had caught wind of the socializing came to the trenches to investigate. When a German sentry responded to the officer’s attempt to lure the enemy into the open by “coughing loudly, speaking at high volume, and chuckling,” the lieutenant grabbed a rifle and shot the man through the head. “Our sentries aren’t doing their duty,” the officer said to the dumbfounded corporal Bartha, who wrote: “As a result, the Germans blasted away at us all day long with rifle shots which tore our sandbags to shreds and made all surveillance impossible. We were quite lucky that none of our sentries had his head blown off.”

Bartha also witnessed fraternization on the Somme that fall. His narrative makes it abundantly clear that the four-and-a-half-month struggle wasn’t just a British battle—as it is usually portrayed. (The French actually captured more territory and suffered half the British casualties.) Can there be a moment more moving in this book than Bartha’s description of an early morning attack that dissolve in an outburst of good feeling? The date was October 23, 1916, and his regiment had been ordered to

take the German trench immediately in front of it. The French had dug attack trenches in No Man's Land to shorten the distance they would have to cross. In the fog and darkness one group had dug closer to the Germans than they had intended. But the enemy troops were apparently so fatigued that they heard nothing. Most of them simply raised their arms in surrender, shouting, "Comrades! Comrades!" The French took fifty-two prisoners. They also found a dead officer, his head beaten in, and, beside the body, the bloody shovel which one of his own men had wielded to dispatch him. "It seemed clear that, when he didn't want to surrender, his men had gotten rid of him."

For France, no interval of the war was potentially more ominous than May 1917, which followed the calamity of the Aisne offensive, where the French army lost more than a hundred thousand men attacking the highlands known as the Chemin des Dames. This, they had been assured by General Robert Nivelle, the commander in chief of the French army, would be the offensive that would break open the German defenses and win the war. The attack gained almost nothing. Troops mutinied and refused to return to the front. They demanded more pay, more and better food, more leave, and no more vain bloodbaths. The Russian Revolution was beginning, and in the manner of the Russians they formed Soldiers' Councils and marched, arm in arm, singing "The International," that universal anthem of the working class. It is generally assumed that these mutinies had taken place mostly in the sector of the failed offensive—though new evidence makes it clear that the disturbances were more widespread than that.

The notebooks of Louis Barthas are part of that new evidence. Barthas and his regiment were at the time stationed in the Argonne, long a quiet sector. That made no difference to the present mood of the French army. "A wind of revolt blew across almost all the regiments," he wrote. He went on to describe demonstrations near Sainte Menehould that were indeed mutinous, as well as the near killing of a general who attempted to order the regiment to return to the front. Barthas himself was offered the presidency of a "soviet" that "would take control of the regiment." A mere corporal would replace the colonel in command: that had to be an indication of the respect with which other poilus regarded him. "Of course I refused. I had no desire to shake hands with a firing squad, just for the child's play of pretending we were the Russians." He did, however, write a "manifesto" protesting the delay in furloughs.

Though the mutinous activities resulted in a relative handful of executions and other severe disciplinary measures, the French army did listen to the mutineers' most pressing demands. General Henri-Philippe Pétain, who replaced Nivelle, saw to more frequent leaves, better food, an improved medical service, more sanitary and comfortable rest areas, and, most important of all, a scaling back of costly offensive actions. But as punishment for its too-overt protests, the French high command dissolved Barthas' regiment and merged it with a Breton unit, the 248th Regiment, thought to be more reliable. Barthas himself would end the war as an infantry instructor, teaching tactics to Breton recruits. His new role probably saved his life. Open warfare always kills more men than the stationary combat to which he had become accustomed. Barthas was fortunate to miss the war of movement that characterized 1918.

Still, how did he manage to survive four years in which he was so constantly under fire—in the words of the old Socialist, "fifty-four months of slavery"? Fighter pilots have a phrase for that singular capacity: "situational awareness." According to a British aviation authority, Michael Spick, situational awareness is "the mysterious sixth sense that enables a pilot to keep track of everything happening around him in the middle of a confused dogfight." Men who can handle sudden change—and foresee it—survive. Louis Barthas spoke in much the same language. "Throughout the course of this war I had, on many occasions, a mysterious intuition, an instinct about the imminence of danger.

At this very moment, from the very bottom of my being, a voice told me that it was time to flee.” He talked of fellow soldiers who didn’t listen to his warnings, men who moments later would be, in his phrase, “pounded into marmalade.”

Infantrymen, too, can be blessed with situational awareness. Like Louis Barthas, they are the survivors.

Robert Cowley
Military historian and founding editor, *MH*
The Quarterly Journal of Military History

Translator's Note

I undertook this translation at the suggestion of my friend Rob Cowley, founding editor of *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, on which we worked together in the mid-1990s. I'd commented to Rob that firsthand accounts of the First World War from the French side available to English-speaking readers were quite rare, and that the available histories, memoirs, and novels were virtually monopolized by English writers (and a handful of Americans) as well as by Germans (Eric Maria Remarque, Ernst Jünger). I had asked Rob to recommend a French memoir of the First World War that, in his opinion, deserved to be translated for English-speaking readers but had not been, and which I might undertake. He immediately replied: Barthas! After sampling the French text in its 1999 paperback edition, I contacted the French publisher, La Découverte, and the editor of the Barthas *Carnets de guerre* [War Notebooks], Professor Rémy Cazals of the University of Toulouse, and learned that, to their knowledge, nobody else was working on a translation.

Further encouraged about the worthiness of the project by several of the Great War's leading historians—Jay Winter at Cambridge and Yale, Robert Doughty at West Point, Leonard Smith at Oberlin, and later Hew Strachan at Oxford and John Horne at Trinity College Dublin—I got to work, part-time, over the next decade, cheered on by my family—wife Anne, daughters Louisa and Ellie—and by friends such as James Bednarz and Stella Paul, Peter Carry, David D'Arcy, Robert Farré, Jacques and Anne-Marie Guy, Leigh and Eleanor Hoagland, and Professor James and Pat McPherson. Rob Cowley has provided unflagging and cheerful support and encouragement throughout the process, as have Professor Cazals and Delphine Ribuchon at La Découverte in Paris. I've enjoyed the professional collaboration with Chris Rogers, Jeff Schier, and Christina Tucker at Yale University Press, and with Bill Nelson on the maps.

As the centennial of the war's outbreak in 1914 approaches, I am proud to make this remarkable account of one Frenchman's experience in the First World War accessible to readers of English. I dedicate this translation to the memory of my parents—Francophiles late in their lives—and to the teachers of French language and history who inspired me at Shady Side Academy in Pittsburgh, 1964–68 (T. C. Adams, Miles Charest, Jack Cousins, Don Moisdon), and at Princeton University (Robert Darnton, André Maman).

Louis Barthas was meticulous about chronicling personal names and place names, calendar dates, weather, and times of day. There are occasional inconsistencies and variances in his manuscript. Alternatives are offered in the translated text and on the maps. The terms “communication trench” and *boyau* (plural *boyaux*) are used interchangeably, meaning a trench leading to the front lines (see note to 2nd Notebook, p. 395).

Introduction to the English Translation (2014)

Rémy Cazals

Louis Barthas does not belong to the category of history’s “Great Men,” whether civilian or military. A simple barrelmaker (in French, *tonnelier*) by trade, in a village of the Aude *département* in the Languedoc region of France, he never sought promotion above his rank of corporal in the army. He accomplished no earth-shattering deed which would have brought him great renown. All he did was write about his experiences in the First World War—1,732 manuscript pages, resulting in a big book which has now become a classic: *Les carnets de guerre de Louis Barthas, tonnelier, 1914–1918*. This book brought him to the French nation’s attention. Now its reach is international, with translations into Dutch (1998) and English and Spanish (2014).

The Life of Louis Barthas

“Do you know a work about the life of Louis Barthas?” asked an enthusiastic reader after the first edition of the book came out in France. Apart from the very complete autobiography of the war years we know little about his life, but enough to place his testimony in its context.

Louis Barthas was born on Bastille Day—July 14, 1879—in the town of Homps. His father was a barrelmaker and his mother a seamstress. The family settled in Peyriac-Minervois, in the same *département* of the Aude. Louis was an excellent pupil in school, ranking first in his district in the exam for the *Certificat d’études primaires* at age thirteen. He did not advance to the level of secondary education, but he had acquired solid, fundamental knowledge and an openness of mind which led him to further his education on his own. This shines through clearly in the *Carnets de guerre*, with numerous allusions to history, literature, and even classical Greco-Roman mythology. A proud and dedicated craftsman, he became a militant trade-union activist and secretary of the local branch of the Socialist Party, where he worked side by side with his boyhood friend Léon Hudelle. Hudelle had been to university, and in 1914 had become editor in chief of the regional daily newspaper *Le Midi Socialiste*, which Barthas read regularly. At the time of mobilization, in August 1914, Barthas had the rank of corporal in the army reserves, while Hudelle was an officer. (On the front lines, Corporal Barthas and Captain Hudelle called each other “*tu*” for “you”—highly uncommon practice between an officer and an enlisted man). At that time Barthas was thirty-five years old and married, with two sons, Abel (age eight) and André (age six). Brought up in the Catholic church, he lived according to Christian precepts though he did not attend religious services.

In the mobilization of August 1914, men of Barthas’ age belonged to the reserve Territorial Army, which explains his initial posting to Narbonne while the younger reserves and regulars went right up to the front lines. Corporal Barthas escorted some of the very first German prisoners of war in the opposite direction, to the fortress of Mont-Louis in the Pyrenees, which allowed him a day trip into Spanish territory: crossing a simple stream took one from a world at war to a land at peace. The mass slaughter of the war’s first months tore huge holes in the ranks of regiments fighting on the front lines, and reinforcements were levied from the older reserves. Louis Barthas arrived at the Western Front lines in the Artois, northeastern France, on November 8, 1914. He was not evacuated to the rear until April 1918, completely worn out. It was his luck to escape the two terrible phases of the “war of movement” (August–October 1914 and April–November 1918), but he lived through the whole period of trench warfare—in the Artois up to early 1916, to Verdun that May, then in Champagne and on the

Somme, and in 1917 on the right flank of the ill-fated Spring Offensive (the Chemin des Dames), the in the Argonne. All in all, he spent fifty-four months under the colors, forty-one of which were in an infantry regiment right on the front lines, as a corporal (and even some time as a private, being summarily broken in rank). To be clear, let us note that the infantry suffered the army's heaviest losses, to the order of 22 percent killed (versus 6 percent for the artillery), and bore the most severe hardships, as recounted throughout the narrative. Let us furthermore note that a corporal lived amid the twelve or fifteen men of his squad, that he shared their daily life and knew their most intimate thoughts. "The squad," writes Barthas, "is like a little family, a center of affection where deep feelings prevail, of solidarity, mutual devotion, intimacy, and from which the officer and even the sergeant are excluded. To them, the soldier doesn't open up, is mistrustful, and any officer who will want to try to describe the strange life of the trenches, as I'm doing, will never have known, except by accident, the real sentiments, the true spirit, the clear language and the deepest thoughts of the soldier."

After the war, the corporal went back to his life as a barrelmaker in Peyriac-Minervois, in a renowned wine-growing region. The final page of his notebooks tells us that, from then on, he savored all the little pleasures of peacetime, as a survivor and as someone who had truly suffered. A postcard from the postwar years shows Louis Barthas, with his son Abel as a barrelmaker's apprentice, and some friends on the village square. The outbreak of a new war, twenty years after the peace treaty of 1919, was heartbreaking for the socialist pacifist who had just turned sixty. Abel, himself a socialist, joined the Resistance and became mayor of Peyriac-Minervois at the Liberation. Louis Barthas died on May 4, 1952.

The person pictured on the postcard has faded away. But he left behind, for his family and for posterity, a veritable treasure: his manuscript.

The Life of a Manuscript

In his analysis of three hundred eyewitness accounts written by combat veterans of 1914–18, the critic Jean Norton Cru¹ posed the same question to each one: Is the author truly qualified to speak as an eyewitness? The months Barthas spent at the front and in the trenches vouch for him. Our corporal belonged to the category of "notebook *poilus* [French infantrymen]," those who sought to keep a written record of their experiences. Furthermore, he was considered by his own comrades as their spokesman. "You, who are writing about the life we're leading, be sure not to hide anything," his buddy Ferié told him. Just like Gayraud, another comrade, everyone knew that he was writing the "true story" of their "doleful calvary." In the summer of 1917, at La Harazée in the Argonne, not far from the home of Académie Française member André Theuriet, Barthas noted: "In the shade of a linden tree, I've written these lines while sitting on a stone bench where perhaps the gifted writer himself wrote those books which tell about the surrounding countryside." He truly wrote his notebooks "right on the spot."

Like many other veterans of the trenches, Louis Barthas sought to do battle against what they called "stuffing the brain with rubbish" [*bourrage de crâne*], the lies put forth by wartime propaganda. His testimony had the mission of truth-telling. It was addressed to posterity, even if that notion was never concretely defined. It was a cry of protest for dignity. Jean Norton Cru was right to say that a genuine eyewitness account should be subjective: here is what I saw, what I felt, what I was told. That of Barthas is of steadfast, consistent honesty. Pacifist that he was, he could well have embroidered his account of the Christmas cease-fires of 1914. But, that night of December 25, entrenched in the second line, he simply noted: "In fact, something unusual happened at the front line. You could hear songs, clamors, numerous flares were set off on both sides, but no firing at all." He subsequently described

other scenes of fraternization and tacit cease-fires which he himself experienced firsthand.²

This is not the place to recount the corporal's full testimony. Its richness is for the reader to discover in the pages that follow. Let us just note here that Louis Barthas' capacity for reflection permits him to rise above the mud of the trenches, to comment on the infantryman's war: "In a war like this one, combat meant mostly being a target for shells. The best leader wasn't the cleverest tactician, but rather the one who knew best how to keep his men alive." The capacity, too, to reflect upon and judge a society which propelled its young men into "the accursed, infamous war, which forever dishonored our century and blighted the civilization of which we were so proud."

A survivor, demobilized on February 14, 1919, Louis Barthas found himself back home with his pocket diaries—mud-stained, chewed by rats, as described to me by his son Abel in 1978. He needed to "clean them up," a good schoolboy's reflex which other veterans recall sharing. Relying on letters and postcards he sent home to his family throughout the war, filling up the same hundred-page notebooks he had used in the schoolroom, the barrelmaker undertook his written narrative every evening after the day's work was done. The truthfulness of the author's genuine experience of war is immediately apparent, and concrete evidence backs it up, as related below. The few postwar amendments are clear, and in no way detract from the narrative, whether it's a reference to an author whom Barthas considers a "*bourreur de crâne*" (Henri Bordeaux) or to the death of a comrade, or to the subscription undertaken to build a *monument aux morts* [war memorial] in Peyriac.

With the close of the nineteenth and final notebook, how to reach the "posterity" to whom this testimony is bequeathed? At the end of the First World War, the world of a village artisan and that of book publishers were hermetically sealed off from one another. It would not have entered the mind of a barrelmaker to submit his manuscript to a publishing house the way professional writers did (such as Henri Barbusse, Roland Dorgès, Maurice Genevoix, et cetera). The notebooks therefore sat in the back of a drawer, and son Abel Barthas kept them as well. Abel's son Georges became a teacher of drawing and sculpture at a lycée in Carcassonne. He consigned the notebooks to a colleague, a teacher of history, who read to his students passages of Louis Barthas as part of his coverage of the First World War. Hearing about this, I had some excerpts published by a local historical society, the *Fédération audoise des œuvres laïques*. I then sounded out the Paris publisher Maspero, with whom I was working on another book. François Maspero, to whom I wish to pay homage in these few lines, could immediately see the extraordinary quality of the manuscript, supported by the author's style, humor, spirit, and convictions. He enthusiastically agreed to take the risk of publishing a lengthy book written by an unknown author on a subject unlikely to draw a huge readership.

The Life of the Book

The bet paid off. Four thousand copies went on sale in France on November 11, 1978 (exactly sixty years after the war's end). A second printing followed quickly, before Christmas. Since then, *Barthas* is a book that has remained—and been constantly replenished—on bookstore shelves. The publishing house La Découverte succeeded François Maspero; *Barthas* came out in paperback in 1997 and received a newly designed cover in 2003. Counting all editions, one hundred thousand copies will have been printed by 2014—a key symbolic milestone and anniversary. Among its many admirers has been the late president of France, François Mitterand. On a visit to the Aude he was given a copy. On a subsequent visit he made the following comment: "Ah, the *Carnets* of Louis Barthas! This book has great historical value, and it's truly a work of literature as well."

The reactions of veterans of 1914–18 to the book's first edition were not systematically surveyed. But the many letters of support included one from Jacques Meyer, himself author of a book about the

daily lives of combatants.³ Auguste Bastide, a veteran whose political views were far from those of Barthas, nevertheless wrote me: “[The story] of the trenches, and really of the whole war, is describe in a way that is simple and totally authentic by Louis Barthas, barrel-maker. This book is a marvel, a veritable fresco of ’14–’18 by a poilu who lived through it. This book is so fine and so true that I cried several times while reading it.” And again, from Adrien Béziat: “I read this book from beginning to end in one day. I’ll read again, often, because it represents a whole period of my life... . I find myself in the same situations, because I (like Barthas) was an infantryman and I had a tough time of it, as they say.” Or the widow of Fernand Tailhades: “See what Barthas writes. They were equals. They both say the same things.”

I won’t list the many historians who have welcomed the book by Louis Barthas. Their opinion is exemplified by this quote from Pierre Barral: “Its quality and its originality, which immediately struck every reader, place it among the narratives recognized as the most reliable, and thus give it a value of the first order.”⁴ The few people who have sought to discredit the barrelmaker’s story are thwarted by the way it corresponds with newly emerging pieces of evidence. The *Journaux des marches et d’opérations* of the successive regiments in which Barthas served confirm the accuracy of his dates and facts. The account of Léopold Noé, who also served in the 280th Infantry Regiment in 1915, is often identical. On September 23, for example, after having heard the patriotic speech by a colonel announcing an upcoming offensive, Barthas wrote: “An impressive silence greeted the colonel’s final words.” Noé: “A sad silence followed the end of his speech.” The two men in the trenches tell of the December floods which obliged the French and Germans to come out in the open, which led to scenes of fraternization. Many other soldiers in the same sector, as well as a medical officer at a field hospital, have left accounts which confirm these episodes. The collection of photographs belonging to Captain Hudelle illustrates the life of the 280th Regiment in the Artois, particularly around Vermelle—the same life as described in the corporal’s notebooks. In various archives, researchers have found letters from Barthas to the government minister Marcel Sembat (complaining, on behalf of his comrades, about the poor quality of bread), to social-work agencies on behalf of young soldiers without families, and even to the Socialist deputy Brizon, requesting pacifist brochures to distribute and discuss among his front-line comrades.⁵

Finally, the publication of the barrelmaker’s *Carnets* marked a key date in the historiography of the Great War. The book’s own inherent power and the publication of excerpts in numerous textbooks have motivated a number of teachers and ordinary readers to undertake research among veterans, including notebooks, diaries, and letters home from the front. And publishers have followed. Some, reluctant to take risks, have reissued the accounts which Jean Norton Cru deemed the most reliable, or have brought into print the unpublished accounts of intellectuals (Jules Isaac, Robert Hertz, Étienne Tanty, etc.). But this flowering includes the work of ordinary combatants: workers, artisans, farmers, rural schoolteachers ... the shelves of bookstores and libraries are now full of such works.⁶ As a forerunner, Barthas’ book has led to the discovery that “ordinary people,” even without officers’ stripes on their sleeves, participated in history and, even without diplomas or degrees, knew how to bear witness to it.

At that same moment in December 1915, after the floods which brought fraternization between Frenchmen and Germans, Louis Barthas wrote: “Who knows? Perhaps some day, in this corner of the Artois, they’ll raise a monument to commemorate this spirit of fraternity among men who shared a horror of war and who were obliged to kill each other, against their wills.” One can easily understand that building such a monument was out of the question for a long time. But on November 11, 1992, Marie-Christine Blandin, president of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais *région*, finished her speech with this very quote from Barthas and proposed the construction of just such a monument, “on this ground where, seventy-seven years ago, in the space of a few short hours, humanity triumphed over folly. Li

won out over death.” This was still too early, and the idea fell victim to vigorous opposition. Christian Carion, producer of the film *Joyeux Noël*, which brought to life the 1914 Christmas truce among Germans, British, and French, revived the idea in 2005. Meanwhile, an active association in Peyriac-Minervois installed a Peace Garden and a monument to Louis Barthas. The book has itself become a “monument” in its multiple editions and in the number of other publications it has initiated. Plays and documentary films have drawn on the *Carnets* of Barthas. They have been a source of inspiration for the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Jeunet, shooting scenes in the trenches for his film *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (A Very Long Engagement). Jeunet gave copies of the *Carnets de guerre de Louis Barthas* to the whole cast, to put them in the right mood, and everyone came back to him saying, in so many words, “God dammit, I never imagined it was like that!”⁷

Introduction (1978)

Rémy Cazals

Documents, even written documents, that can constitute popular memory are perhaps more numerous than we might think. A small organization in the *département* of Aude, [southwestern] France, the *Fédération audoise des œuvres laïques*, has taken on, among its many missions, seeking out such documents and making them known. In the course of two years it has brought out, from the cupboards where they slept, some remarkable documents, notably the written accounts, day by day, of schoolchildren in a village in the Corbières [mountain range] under the Occupation, and then the war notebooks of Louis Barthas, socialist militant of a village in the Minervois [wine-growing region north of Carcassonne].¹

The original manuscript of Barthas consists of nineteen schoolboy's notebooks (*cahiers d'écolier*), each from eighty to a hundred pages, written in pen and, for the most part, in purple ink. The notebooks are abundantly illustrated by postcards sent by the author from the front to his family, and by other cards or photos found in German trenches after their occupation by French infantry. The family of Louis Barthas has given us some information about the author, now deceased, and on the writing of the notebooks.

We present these specifics here, briefly; the work speaks for itself, and does not require a lengthy presentation.

Louis Barthas was born on July 14, 1879, in Homps, in the *département* of Aude. He therefore was thirty-five years old at the time of the declaration of war in 1914; he was married, the father of two boys, Abel (eight years old) and André (six). From a modest family, he was an agricultural laborer at first, then a barrelmaker (*tonnelier*) and owner of several plots of vineyards. He settled in Peyriac-Minervois.

In order to write—very properly—the hundreds of pages of war memoirs, what education did he have? In fact, he left school with a *certificat d'études primaires*. But let us make clear that he ranked first in his district and won the *Prix du conseil général*. Thereafter he was an avid reader, eager to learn, curious about everything, assiduous reader of Victor Hugo, Émile Zola, Anatole France, and even Karl Marx and Jules Guesde. For Louis Barthas soon subscribed to socialism and to militant trade-unionism [*syndicalisme*]. In Peyriac-Minervois, he participated in the creation of the *syndicat des ouvriers agricoles* (agricultural workers' union). A member of the Socialist Party, he was active in the Minervois alongside his future army captain in 1914, Léon Hudelle; Dr. Ferroul, of Narbonne; and Jean Jaurès, deputy from the Tarn.

In one of his notebooks, he writes: "I will always be faithful to my principles as a socialist, a humanitarian, even a true Christian." Louis Barthas was a Catholic, but not an observant one. Tolerant, he became anticlerical due to the opposition of the Church to syndicalism and socialism. It was this Christian socialist, syndicalist, pacifist, and antimilitarist who remained under the colors from August 4, 1914, to February 14, 1919—that is, for four and a half years, mostly on the front lines, as a corporal in the infantry (and even some time as a simple private, after having been broken in rank for political reasons).

From the first day, he kept his notebooks, and his comrades soon knew that he was writing down "the story of [their] Calvary." He wrote on whatever paper he had, on various pages sewn together with thread; his son has seen these first-draft notebooks, which were spattered with mud, gnawed by rats. At the same time, he sent numerous letters and postcards to his wife and his children, asking them

they be preserved. The notebooks, letters, and cards then helped him, once demobilized, to properly write up the nineteen school notebooks (*cahiers*). He took on this task as soon as he returned home. It was his evening work, a duty to which he devoted himself: to put down what he had witnessed.

Was Louis Barthas a good witness? Around 1930, a scholar, himself a war veteran, Jean Norton Cru brought out two books, *Témoins* (Witnesses) (1929) and the more accessible *Du témoignage* (1939).² In these works, a scrupulous analysis established the fanciful character of certain successful works, and defined the qualities of a “good witness” (*bon témoin*). Louis Barthas possessed these qualities: he really knew the life on the front lines; his daily notes permitted him to not give himself over to his imagination; he knew how to see, showed himself to be curious about everything around him, noted things down with precision, reflected, and sought to understand.

Louis Barthas is a good witness. But do we need any more witnesses? We already know that the infantry was mainly cannon fodder, that the poilus lived in the mud, among rats and lice, that the attacks launched by Joffre in 1915 were criminal acts (throwing infantrymen in front of enemy machine guns without artillery preparation), that fraternization between Germans and Frenchmen took place along the front lines, that mutinies broke out in 1917, etc. It’s true. But with the accounts of Barthas, we are there! One remarkable account, among many others: that of fraternization between flooded trenches; it ends up in Occitan [the dialect of southwestern France].

Louis Barthas isn’t the only good witness. Before him, a great number of war memoirs have appeared, including high-quality ones. Jean Norton Cru quotes extracts from them, and Jacques Meyer has used them, in addition to his own, to write the *Vie quotidienne des soldats pendant la grande guerre*.³ But Barthas becomes an extraordinarily precious witness because he is an ordinary witness: simple corporal, a barrelmaker in civilian life. Jean Norton Cru felt that no one above the level of captain really knew what trench life was like. Even among the good witnesses, most were lieutenants or at least sergeants. “Among the two or three hundred authors studied by Norton Cru, only two or three were not *bacheliers* [graduates of French lycées who had earned the *baccalauréat* certificate] when they wrote about the war. At least two-thirds had the *licence* [first-level university degree] or an equivalent degree and education. Two of them wrote their doctoral theses in the trenches.”⁴ One can immediately see the interest in an eyewitness account by a manual laborer, a corporal, living for a long while in the midst of his squad. As Barthas wrote, “The squad is like a little family, a center of affection where deep feelings prevail, of solidarity, mutual devotion, intimacy, and from which the officer and even the sergeant are excluded. To them, the soldier doesn’t open up, is mistrustful, and any officer who will want to try to describe the strange life of the trenches, as I’m doing, will never have known, except by accident, the real sentiments, the true spirit, the clear language and the deepest thoughts of the soldier.”

And that Barthas comes from Peyriac-Minervois is also of particular interest: his squad, the “Minervois squad,” speaks and thinks in Occitan.⁵



France, 1914–18



Inset map 1: Midi-Pyrenees

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