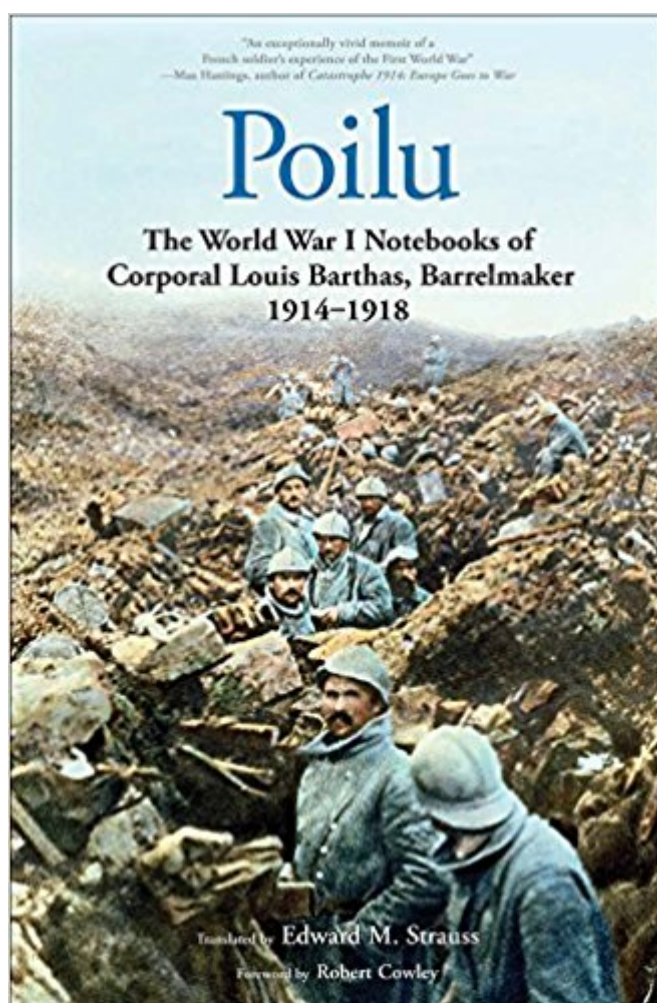


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Poilu: The World War I Notebooks Of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelmaker, 1914-1918



Synopsis

The harrowing first-person account of a French foot soldier who survived four years in the trenches of the First World War. Along with millions of other Frenchmen, Louis Barthas, a thirty-five-year-old barrelmaker from a small wine-growing town, was conscripted to fight the Germans in the opening days of World War I. Corporal Barthas spent the next four years in near-ceaseless combat, wherever the French army fought its fiercest battles: Artois, Flanders, Champagne, Verdun, the Somme, the Argonne. Barthas's riveting wartime narrative, first published in France in 1978, presents the vivid, immediate experiences of a frontline soldier. This excellent new translation brings Barthas's wartime writings to English-language readers for the first time. His notebooks and letters represent the quintessential memoir of a "poilu" or "hairy one," as the untidy, unshaven French infantryman of the fighting trenches was familiarly known. Upon Barthas's return home in 1919, he painstakingly transcribed his day-to-day writings into nineteen notebooks, preserving not only his own story but also the larger story of the unnumbered soldiers who never returned. Recounting bloody battles and endless exhaustion, the deaths of comrades, the infuriating incompetence and tyranny of his own officers, Barthas also describes spontaneous acts of camaraderie between French poilus and their German foes in trenches just a few paces apart. An eloquent witness and keen observer, Barthas takes his readers directly into the heart of the Great War.

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Customer Reviews

"This translation of the diaries and letters of a French corporal on the Western front in World

War I brings the gritty reality of trench warfare to an English-speaking audience in a manner unparalleled even in the best soldier writings from that war. The reader feels and smells and hears the mud, the blood, the fear, the deafening noise of exploding shells, the clatter of machine guns, the cries of the wounded and dying. Here is the war as the men in the trenches experienced it.

•James McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom* “This book shows clearly and viscerally what were the origins of French soldiers’ pacifism. . . .

Barthas’ voice is unlike any other I know in the vast literature on the First World War. The

translation is excellent; the grittiness of the text is captured beautifully, and so is the humanity

of the man who wrote it. •Jay Winter, Yale University “A revelatory book that brings the French experience of the Great War to life as you read. However much we may think the British and Americans suffered, their agony was shorter and less intense than the tragedy that

overwhelmed the French nation in 1914-1918.” •Peter Hart, author of *The Great War: A*

Combat History of the First World War “Ah, the notebooks of Louis Barthas! This book has

profound historic value. It is also a genuine work of literature. •François

Mitterrand, former president of France “Louis Barthas’ stunningly honest, graphic

and gripping narrative has rightly made *Poilu* a classic trench memoir. •Douglas

Porch, author of *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting*

Force “In Barthas’ telling, the fighting men on both sides of No Man’s Land

shared a more natural bond with their fellows than with those career officers who pitted them

against each other. Barthas’ detailed real-time reportage captures instances of informal truces and slowdowns between combatants, as they tacitly aid one another in their shared struggle

to survive the madness. •David Wright, *The Seattle Times* “Among World

War I books being published in this centennial year of that conflict’s start, none likely can connect

readers more directly or vividly to the experience of those who fought it. •Alan

Wallace, *The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*

Louis Barthas (1879–1952) was a cooper in a small town in southern France. Edward M.

Strauss is a fundraising director in higher education and former publisher of *MHQ: The Quarterly*

Journal of Military History. He lives in New York City.

The book REALLY describes war as seen through the eyes of a French soldier. Very detailed and moving. I’m about halfway through and wanted to review it as soon as possible. It described events as if you were there. There are some surprising aspects, such as fraternization with the enemy

troops, that was more common than previously known. I did not realize how close the front lines were to the areas that the troops used to rest (if you can call it that). A matter of meters. The poilu (slang for the French ground troops or infantry from the rural areas of southern France) were sacrificed in a war that was horrific at best. A reluctant corporal, Louis Berthas was diligent in his writings and left us a treasure. He was well read, even though he was only a barrelmaker, and his compatriots wanted to make sure he told their tale. It is amazing his notebooks survived. The photos of the notebooks are amazing. I highly recommend this book.

I stayed up late last night to finish *Poilu*, the WWI diary by a French infantryman who fought in the trenches, which was recently translated by Ed Strauss. It is a fascinating read for anyone interested in WWI history and the book's straightforward recounting of life in the trenches is gripping. This is a contribution to the literature on WWI; I'm sure anglophone scholars will relish it, especially during the centennial celebration period. I personally read it more as a story and couldn't put it down. Just as I was getting ready to post this comment, I read a laudatory review from the New York Times dated April 20, 2014.

I have waited many years for this work to be published in English. I served in the Verdun region for the years 1955-1956 at the Etain-Rouvres AB as part of the NATO buildup across Europe. My literary French is very weak and Edward M. Strauss has done a splendid job of French/English conversion. I knew many of the veterans of the battle and they helped us young military guys with the maps and the terrible feeling of being under fire while suffering from fever, hunger, thirst and terror. Armies are not all the same. This is the French Army of 1914-1918. Military folks! Do not miss out on this epoch work of an intelligent Poilu, Cpl. Louis Barthas who carefully recorded life in the garrison and trenches during those years.

My grandfather served in the US Army during WWI and I shiver to think of the suffering of men on both sides. Barthas gives a no baloney narrative of what war was about and the insanity of the political and military leadership in that "war to end all wars"! It is amazing to read what men did in the name of cause and country, and how the burden of shedding the country's blood fell upon those of a lower socio-economic class while the elite were pampered and the fat cats made their millions. I have read a number of good histories of the first world war and this was a great addition to my library. Well worth the money.

Stupid Generals need stupid privates. Barthas makes an excellent reinforcing case that WWI Generals on both sides were far beyond their competency. What he inadvertently does as well is make the case that for them to continue, stupid privates, and those between, are also needed. In the few cases where there are good officers, meaning officers who actually treat their men like humans, the enlisted personnel respond very well with improved fighting performance. In the US there is a successful consultancy industry built around the concept of treating your staff well to avoid unionization -- and those managements who mistreat their staff get the ugly unions they deserve and the ultimate dissolution of their businesses. Bartha would seem likely to agree -- treat people like you would expect to be treated in similar situations or better. At no point during Bartha's four plus years in the trenches do I recall any indication that he actually fired his weapon. Whether there is some psychological or political correctness (it's WWI -- was that an issue even then?) not to mention firing your weapon is curious. Particularly as he does such a complete job of describing the other aspects of life in the trenches and surviving being shot at and shelled so many times. It is a fascinating read of life at the front for a poilu.

Blow by blow account of a French foot soldier. He fought mostly in the static phase of the war for about 3 1/2 years. He was a Socialist and opposed to the war, and kept a diary to document its madness. It appears to be authentic. It does get a bit repetitive as he documents details that recur in trench warfare. Doesn't detract from the book. Read it and think.

This is a book that was (and still is) extremely difficult to put down and put away. Bartha was a remarkable observer of his environment in hell. Along with others I have read over the years, Bartha's account of life in the trenches leaves images in the mind that give meaning to the sacrifices soldiers on all sides made in this horrible episode in our history. Bartha's understanding of human nature, certainly his own, indeed humanizes those who see war as a game.

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