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Failed Men
The Postwar Crisis of Masculinity in France 1918-1930

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Abstract

Masculinity has been viewed by scholars as a concept which was concerned with becoming as opposed to being. One could not achieve the state of being a man and become complacent. One needed to continuously prove one’s masculinity to oneself, other men, and women.

With its emphasis on the core values of masculinity such as strength, duty and above all, courage, the First World War was seen in France as the ultimate test of manhood. However, confronted with the horrors of modern industrial warfare, men were put into a situation where they were bound to fail that test. This led to a gender crisis in France during the immediate post-war period.

Historians who have studied this crisis have focused on French women’s resistance to reverting to their pre-war positions in the home after filling positions made by men fighting at the front and the threat that this posed to men and the traditional gender roles which they desired. However, I will argue that the post-war gender crisis was not solely caused by women resisting the authority of men, but also by the returning soldiers’ inability to retake their pre-war positions of power.

To support my argument I will use a large collection of primary sources such as soldiers’ memoirs/letters, socio-political cartoons, and newspaper and journal articles. I will also use the available secondary sources concerning masculinity studies, shell-shock/emotional trauma, and the general war experience in France.

Key words: French, France, World War 1914-1918, shell-shock, trauma, masculinity, gender, emotional, psychological.
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The First World War was arguably one of the most traumatic experiences in modern French history. In 1918, after four years of industrialized warfare, France began the difficult task of rebuilding. However, the war had not only caused great physical destruction, but had damaged French society itself. One aspect of the social turmoil caused by the war was a gender crisis during which traditional gender roles were feared to have been irreparably distorted. A number of historians have examined the experiences of French women during this period and they argue that the crisis of masculinity was caused by the reluctance of French women, who had taken on traditionally masculine roles during the war, to relinquish them once the war was over. However, due to the physically and emotionally traumatic nature of the war, one could argue that the crisis was also caused by the inability of the returning poilus\(^1\) to reclaim their pre-war roles.

Introduction & Background: Gender in Crisis

French society at the time of the First World War was structured with specific roles assigned to both men and women. These roles were tested in times of war when greater demands and sacrifices were required. Men were believed to be more warlike, while women were thought to be peaceful, and this divided French society along gender lines, with an

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\(^1\) The French nickname for soldiers during the First World War. Literally means ‘hairy ones.’
emphasis on masculinity at the front and femininity at home.\(^2\) The established gender roles were viewed in the minds of the French as the fundamental aspects of the civilization for which they were fighting. Therefore, any threat to these established gender roles was seen as a threat to society.\(^3\) A threat of this type occurred during the war when men were required to live and fight in the hyper-masculine environment of the front, and, at the same time, women were expected to take on roles usually reserved for men, such as farming and factory work. Therefore, all of society shifted towards the masculine, but with the expectation that it would shift back to pre-war norms once the war was over.\(^4\) This temporary distortion of gender roles led to anxieties, especially among the men at the front, and a strong desire for “a return to normalcy” and the peace that it represented.\(^5\)

These anxieties included the attitudes of the civilians. A cartoon [see figure A] published in the trench newspaper *Rigolboche* shows a well-dressed French couple outside of the theater asking an official why there isn’t a play that night. The man answers, “Because we are at war.” The couple responds, “Ah! At war! Since when?”\(^6\) In another trench newspaper, *Le 120 Court*, a *poilu* writes a related article. “Look at the theatres! They offer just now an incalculable number of reviews where scantily clad little women sing in succession...Ah well! People get used to war... it is just that the rear has quietly got used to the idea that people are dying about 100


\(^4\) Higonnet, *Behind The Lines*, 7.


kilometres from Paris.”7 Another cartoon [see figure B], also from Rigolboche shows a rich couple telling a French soldier, “You guys have the luck, you don’t have any maids.”8 There was a strong fear among the poilus at the front that those back home were ignorant or worse apathetic to their efforts and sacrifices. One writes in the trench newspaper Tacatacteufteuf, “In our letters, in our conversations on leave, we must make them understand, those who still value us and have some regard for our lives, that their stupid negligence threatens to destroy the gains of our three years of resistance and sacrifice.”9

Other anxieties concerned the work that awaited the men once the war was over. An article written in the trench newspaper Le Filon predicts that after the war, “There will be trade to set up again, industries to awaken, lands to clear... The cripples, the failures who will have made fortunes exploiting our industries will have to give us back our places.”10 Concerns about war profiteers also proliferated. A soldier writes in L’Echo de tranchees-villes, “And then there is the sad category of profiteers. They do not sound gloomy, and they are certainly smiling, I can assure you. They willingly adopt a heroic stance as craftsmen of the nation’s defense, selling for fabulous prices essentials that have grown in the earth, been fished from the sea, or manufactured, under conditions very little different from those of normal times.”11 The poilus were anxious to get back to their everyday jobs away from the front, yet they felt marginalized and isolated. If their jobs were being performed by others who were in fact benefiting from the

8 Turbergue, Les Journaux de Tranchées, 138.
9 Audoin-Rouzeau, Men at War, 110.
10 Turbergue, Les Journaux de Tranchées, 149.
11 Audoin-Rouzeau, Men at War, 116.
horrors of the war, then the poilus found it difficult to feel supported in their duty as masculine defenders of society.

Also undermining the moral of the poilus was the hated embusqué or shirker. These were men who found ways to not be sent to the front. To call a Frenchman an embusqué was the worst of insults.12 In Le Bochofage, a poilu, imagining the creation of the embusqué in heaven, quotes God as saying, “Run and fetch me the heart of a rabbit... I am going to make an embusqué.”13 The embusqué is portrayed as being cowardly and effeminate. Cartoons [see figures C & D] drawn by poilus show them as being tall and thin, with a large nose held aloft, sometimes wearing a monocle. One cartoon [see figure C] printed in L’Echo des Marmites compares the lives of an embusqué and a poilu. Under the phrase “supper with music,” the poilu eats out of a can, sitting on a log, while shells explode in the distance. The embusqué eats in a fine restaurant while a violinist plays nearby. Under the phrase “spectacle,” the poilu peers across no-mans land while the embusqué attends the theater, and under the phrase “the offensive,” the poilu bayonets a German while the embusqué seduces a young woman.14 This leads to another aspect of the embusqué. Although they were portrayed as the opposite of masculine, they were also perceived as a sexual threat. Anxieties about the faithfulness of their wives led soldiers easily fed their negative feelings towards the embusqués. A cartoon [see figure D] printed in Le Bochofage shows a young woman waving her handkerchief at a departing poilu while hidden from view an embusqué kisses her neck.15

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14 Ibid, 140.
15 Ibid, 139.
In her discussion of men’s anxieties during the First World War and the immediate postwar period, historian Mary Louis Roberts focuses on those which deal specifically with women. She argues that the poilus at the front, threatened by the perceived changes in gender roles, exaggerated the extent of women’s liberation and happiness back home.\textsuperscript{16} This also led to fears of marital infidelity, as seen in the two most prominent French war novels, Barbusse’s \textit{Le Feu} and Dorgeles’s \textit{Les Croix Des Bois}.\textsuperscript{17} Overall, these anxieties showed a widespread feeling that women were indifferent to the sacrifices being made at the front.\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, the masculine world of the front seemed disconnected from the feminine world of the home.\textsuperscript{19} The soldiers dreamed of this home but were plagued by worries that the women had changed.\textsuperscript{20}

Roberts argues that after the armistice, the returning poilus discovered that their fears had not been unfounded. After four years of war they were ready to enjoy the domestic life they had been fighting for. However, women, who had enjoyed the relative freedom allowed them during the war, were not as keen on giving up their independence and returning to their places in the home.\textsuperscript{21} This rejection of domesticity was seen by the returning poilu as an insult to their manhood and the sacrifices which they had made during the war.\textsuperscript{22}

As evidence of this rejection of domesticity, Roberts points to the marriage crisis which occurred after the war.\textsuperscript{23} Marriage was seen to perform two vital functions as the basis of society. First, it organized society in the desired way, with the man as the master and provider.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] Roberts, \textit{Civilization Without Sexes}, 29.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Ibid, 27, 28.
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Ibid, 34.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}] Ibid, 22.
\item[\textsuperscript{20}] Ibid, 26.
\item[\textsuperscript{21}] Ibid, 139.
\item[\textsuperscript{22}] Ibid, 141.
\item[\textsuperscript{23}] Ibid, 138.
\end{itemize}
for the family and the woman as the caretaker and nurturer. Second, marriage led to the production of children, which were much-desired after the destruction of the war. Both of these functions made marriage the most obvious path for “a return to normalcy.” Roberts argues that this vision of marriage re-established soldiers’ moral equilibrium and became a symbol of society and everything which the soldiers had fought for.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, refusal to marry was seen as a rejection of the sacrifices of the war.\textsuperscript{25} The combination of these factors thus lead to a crisis of masculinity in France in the immediate post-war era. However, Roberts’ arguments about this crisis are simply a small portion of her larger work on post-war feminism. She focuses solely on how the actions of women influenced this crisis. She does encourage further masculinity-based research, because the image provided of the underlying factors which contributed to the crisis is incomplete.\textsuperscript{26} This article attempts to remedy that incompleteness.

In the growth of gender studies as a sub-field of history, it has been argued that the male gender is static. The female gender, on the other hand, has been controlled and molded by the pressures of patriarchal society and women’s resistance to them.\textsuperscript{27} However, it is now recognized that both genders change and respond to social pressures.\textsuperscript{28} Not only do they work in a complementary and fluctuating way in relation to each other, but also internally, as new social factors appear.\textsuperscript{29} Therefore the issues affecting the male gender from within were equally if not more important in causing a crisis of masculinity than the actions of women presented by

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 140.
\item\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 141.
\item\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 223n.24.
\item\textsuperscript{27} Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 11.
\item\textsuperscript{28} Higonnet and others, *Behind The Lines*, 4.
\item\textsuperscript{29} Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor*, 12.
\end{itemize}
Roberts. The experiences of the First World War traumatized men to the point where they were unable to reclaim their pre-war gender roles in the immediate post-war period.

**The Traumatic Effects of Industrialized Warfare**

First it must be understood that the nature of war itself changed between 1914 and 1918. The regulated, noble warfare of the past, with an emphasis on honor and such details as respect for the wounded, had been replaced by an intensification of violence that has come to be called total warfare.\(^{30}\) Death and destruction had never been seen on such a large scale, and this had a profound effect on the men experiencing it firsthand.

The major contributing factor to total warfare was the introduction and/or first widespread use of several new weapons and technologies. The most prominent of which were heavy artillery and the machine gun. A poilu describing the effects of artillery shelling in *La Saucisse*, a trench newspaper, writes, “Soon the noise becomes hellish; several batteries thunder out together. Impossible to make out anything. Shells fall without interruption. He feels that his head is bursting, that his sanity is wavering. This is torture and he can see no end to it. He is suddenly afraid of being buried alive. He sees himself with his back broken, smothered, digging out of the earth with his clenched hands. He imagines the terrible agony of death, wishes with all his strength that the shelling would end, that the attack would begin…”\(^{31}\) Shelling could last for days at a time, isolating small groups of soldiers, and turning the

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\(^{31}\) Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, 73.
landscape into a mud-churned wasteland. While heavy artillery was in use long before the First World War, the weapons had become much more deadly and accurate. Subsequently, more than two-thirds of all wounds suffered during the war were inflicted by artillery.\textsuperscript{32} Other new technologies included the machine gun, poison gas, barbed wire, hand grenades, airplanes, and tanks. Machine guns capable of firing 600 rounds per minute threatened those soldiers who left their trenches.\textsuperscript{33} A \textit{poilu} recalling a charge in the trench newspaper \textit{L’Argonnaute} writes, “I crossed the wire, jumped over holes, crawled through shell-craters still stinking of explosives, men were falling, shot in two as they ran; shouts and gasps were half muffled by the sweeping surge of gunfire.”\textsuperscript{34} Poison gas, although it only caused 1\% of wartime casualties had a strong psychological effect.\textsuperscript{35} A description of a gas attack from the trench newspaper \textit{Le Filon} reads, “We had seen everything: mines, shells, tear-gas, woodland demolished, the black tearing mines falling in fours, the most terrible wounds and the most murderous avalanches of metal-but nothing can compare with this fog which for hours that felt like centuries hid from our eyes the sunlight, the daylight, the clear whiteness of the snow.”\textsuperscript{36} The combination of these new industrialized forms of combat intensified the violence of war to previously unimaginable levels.

The violence of the First World War made previous wars pale in comparison. Where more men had died from wartime illness than violence during the nineteenth century, only one-sixth did so between 1914 and 1918. Combat injuries also became much more horrific.\textsuperscript{37} Men no longer worried about being shot or stabbed, but also about being dismembered or

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{France and the Great War}, 85.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Audoin-Rouzeau, \textit{Men at War}, 69.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{France and the Great War}, 88.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Audoin-Rouzeau, \textit{Men at War}, 72.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{14-18}, 23-25.
\end{itemize}
completely obliterated. A military physician, surveying a group of wounded on a ship writes, “That one over there, a Senegalese, has had both legs broken. His comrade, a Black from Saint-Louis or Dakar, had a lot of his face blown off, and his chin is gone. From a bloody crater he emits unintelligible sounds while splashing us with blood.”

French army records count 2,800,000 men wounded during the war, although half of those wounded were wounded multiple times. Medical technology advanced as well, but not fast enough to keep up with the augmentation of violence. Also, delays in receiving treatment also caused many deaths, as men could lie wounded in no-man’s land for hours.

When the war finally ended in 1918, the human cost was astounding. 1.3 million Frenchmen had been killed. This averages out to about 890 men killed per day for the duration of the war, although this figure hides the important fact that more than half of those 1.3 million were killed during the first year of the war. Death became a commonality in French life. For those at the front, violent death was an everyday occurrence. A French soldier writes in the trench newspaper *Le Poilu de 37*, “The storm passed, we found nothing in the red tide but a head, a few remains of limbs at the bottom of the shell-hole and some unidentifiable fragments plastered over the parapet. That is all that remained here of our poor friend.” Another soldier writes in *On progresse*, “I can see now those men who just now were two living beings and now, one is nothing but a mass of mud and blood, the other this long stiff body, with blackened face and three holes, in his face, his stomach and his thighs, and his two fists up in front of his

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40 Ibid, 24-25.
43 Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, 78.
face as defense, two fists demanding mercy and trying to ward off his death. The awfulness of this body! None of those who were his friends felt it was him any more, for human feelings no longer exist in the bodies which war has crushed.”  

For the women at the home front, death was a constant fear of news from the front. By the end of the war France was home to 600,000 widows and 760,000 orphans.  

Using modern demographics and the concept of ‘circles of mourning’ one could estimate that 39 million people experienced the death of a loved one during the war, practically the entire French population.  

A cartoon [see figure E] printed in Le Charivari commented on the destruction with an image of Death and the caption, “I am the only one still doing well.”  

Such widespread exposure to violent death had serious emotional and psychological effects on the French population. Those who suffered the worst were the men at the front experiencing the horrors of war first-hand. The effects which the violence of modern industrialized warfare had on these men were augmented by the concepts about manhood and masculinity with which they had been instilled. In fact, the very ideals towards which all French men were expected to strive set them up for failure. The way in which the war contradicted the established image of man was the fundamental cause of the post-war crisis of masculinity.

44 Ibid.  
45 Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, France and the Great War, 70.  
46 Ibid, 71.  
**French Masculinity in Crisis**

Prior to the First World War, France had already experienced a recent crisis of masculinity.\(^{48}\) Brought about by France’s defeat by Prussia in the 1870-71 war and the burgeoning women’s rights movement, the crisis inspired a series of measures meant to curb the perceived threat to masculine superiority and traditional gender roles. The first of these measures was an emphasis on the human body. The relative luxuries of late-nineteenth century life gave rise to concerns that the people of France were growing physically weak.\(^{49}\) This was exacerbated by the shameful defeat in 1871 at the hands of a larger, more populous nation. The emphasis on the human body led to the creation and promotion of sporting organizations. It was thought that sports, by simulating warfare, taught honor, teamwork, and courage.\(^{50}\) Honor, which had previously been thought of only as a noble quality, was being instilled systematically into the French population. This led to scientific and sociological studies of honor and courage. It was argued that courage was a man’s prime characteristic. A survey performed in 1910 asked twenty French intellectuals if they had ever been afraid. Only one admitted to a fear of the dark. Cultivating courage was seen as the ultimate method to restoring France’s standing in the world, to reaffirm male dominance in French society, and to prepare for any future conflicts with Germany.\(^{51}\)


\(^{50}\) Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor*, 218-220.

\(^{51}\) Ibid, 224-226.
The French also constructed a link between masculinity and civilization. They equated men with reason, technology, and modern development. Much of this thought was used to support colonialism and the assimilation of sub-cultures within France itself.\textsuperscript{52} This emphasis on civilization and its link to masculinity was increased in the lead up to the First World War when French propaganda began to disseminate images of German barbarity.\textsuperscript{53} Stories of German atrocities in Belgium became widespread.\textsuperscript{54} These further promoted the concept that the French were civilized while the Germans were barbarians.\textsuperscript{55} Thus the First World War became a war in defense of civilization within the French mind.\textsuperscript{56} The Germans were labeled as an inferior race.\textsuperscript{57} Hatred and prejudice on the racial level spread throughout France, with prominent scientists presenting their work on the ‘inferiority of the Germans.”\textsuperscript{58} This image of the barbarian German was contrasted with the image of the civilized Frenchman. The brave poilus who would defend their home, their women, and civilization itself from the invading hordes. With this contrast between the French and the Germans, the French were constructing a mindset where failure was not an option. Courage, masculinity, and civilization all relied on the each other. If one failed, the others would fail as well. Therefore, each poilu needed to exhibit the utmost courage in battle in order to be both masculine and civilized. If their courage faltered, so would all of French society.

\textsuperscript{52} Christopher E. Forth, “La Civilisation and its Discontents,” 85-86.  
\textsuperscript{53} Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{14-18}, 137.  
\textsuperscript{54} Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{France and the Great War}, 57.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 111.  
\textsuperscript{56} Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{14-18}, 113.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 146-147.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 103-104.
The most important aspect of this construction of masculinity and the focus on courage as its core was that it made the masculine ideal unobtainable. A man’s honor needed to be earned, and a man could not do this without showing courage in the face of some type of challenge to that honor. This could be achieved in the world of sports, but this was a poor substitute for the ultimate test of one’s honor, which was combat. However, the traumatic conditions of the First World War proved to be too much for many men. These men, when the test of their courage proved to be too great, succumbed to psychological and emotional afflictions known as traumatic shock.

Traumatic shock appeared almost immediately once the war began. Soldiers suffering from acute psychological or emotional strain manifested their distress physically in a number of different ways. These included tremors, seizures, local or total paralysis, disruptions of one or several of the senses, and impotence. They could be continuous, periodical, or be brought about by certain sounds or images. Many of these symptoms were also symptoms associated with hysteria, the quintessential feminine malady. This link between the supposed strength of men and the assumed weakness of women threatened traditional gender roles. The British, because of a belief in the absolute differences between the sexes, could not believe that men were suffering from a form of hysteria. However, in France, Jean Martin Charcot had

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60 Ibid, 168.
established a unisex definition of hysteria at the end of the 19th century.\textsuperscript{61} This allowed French doctors to adapt hysteria treatments to the needs of soldiers suffering from traumatic shock.

Paul Sollier did this in a way that the doctor-patient relationship was similar to the officer-soldier relationship. This was an adaptation of his treatment of hysterical women where he would enforce a father-daughter relationship. He also focused on the trauma as a medical problem as opposed to a social or moral problem which removed the soldiers from blame.\textsuperscript{62} By treating soldiers this way, Sollier was in practice treating men like women. Elaine Showalter has studied how treating traumatized men like hysterical women affected gender roles in England, and her results can be adapted to France as well, at least in regards to Sollier’s work. Although the British initially blamed the trauma on physical causes, hence the term “shell-shock,” they eventually had to admit that these men were emotionally and psychologically injured by the horrors of war.\textsuperscript{63} As the men were being treated, they were aware that they were being treated like women. They felt helpless and unmanned. The war had taken away their sense of self-control. They were angry with the female qualities that they found within themselves. Showalter argues that this anger towards what they saw as internal female qualities led to anger and aggressiveness towards women in general.\textsuperscript{64}

These emotions of shame, anger, and resentment were present in French men as well. However, in France, one could argue that they were more extreme because the treatment became more extreme. Joseph Babinski, a French doctor, had created a new approach to


\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 259-260.

\textsuperscript{63} Showalter, \textit{The Female Malady}, 168-170.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 172-173.
treating traumatized men that put the blame on the men themselves instead of the sickness. Babinski had developed a theory of competing influences, suggestion (evil) and persuasion (good). He argued that both hysteria and traumatic shock, since there were no physical wounds, were subject to a patient’s will power. Thus, a soldier “injured” themselves through the power of suggestion, while the doctor convinced the soldier that they were cured through the power of suggestion. Babinski’s methods were quickly adopted by the French military. The heads of the army liked that the treatment was the same for both those legitimately suffering from traumatic shock and those who were suspected of faking. There was a strong fear among the generals of a mass exodus of men faking traumatic symptoms. This was the reason that the traumatized were not allowed to be discharged.

Doctors used many different methods in their attempts to stimulate the willpower of their patients. The more difficult and unreceptive the patient was, the harsher the treatment became. These could range from reasoning, surprise, and authoritative intimidation to electroshock therapy for the more extreme cases. The trauma was viewed as a moral problem and it was the doctor’s responsibility to persuade the patient that they were not physically wounded. This treatment for traumatic shock had a strong emphasis on gender. Soldiers who behaved as men were supposed to did not suffer from traumatic shock in the minds of the doctors. Through their treatment, they attempted to shame the men, to make them realize that they were behaving in ways unbecoming to courageous men. In fact, they were behaving as women were thought to act. The doctors realized this and considered feminine influences to be

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67 Ibid, 275.
pathogenic factors. On November 15, 1916 the French army banned all women from facilities where traumatized men were being treated.

Through this treatment, the doctors became the gatekeepers of their patients’ honor. The doctor decided whether the man was faking or legitimately traumatized. Also, since the trauma was considered to be self-inflicted, the patient was forced to make an impossible choice. They had to choose between an non-traumatized hero or a traumatized coward. Since the men could not possibly will themselves rehabilitated from what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder, they were forced to be labeled in their minds and the minds of their doctors as cowards. Since courage was considered the most prominent of all manly characteristics, these men were essentially being denied their manhood. Through their collapse under the extremes of modern industrialized warfare, French men were failing to live up to the established requirements of men, and were being made “unmen.” To add insult to injury, by placing the blame for their condition of the soldiers themselves, the doctors were also forcing their patients to either cure themselves and once again become noble poilus, or continue their traumatic symptoms and be labeled embusqués who avoided fulfilling their masculine and national duty.

However, in 1916 a famous trial brought traumatic shock and its treatment to national attention. Baptiste Deschamps had been wounded in 1914 and had spent time in several different military hospitals before being transferred under the care of Dr. Clovis Vincent. Vincent had taken Babinski’s methods and made them even more harsh, a version he called

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68 Ibid, 263.
69 Ibid, 266.
70 Ibid, 270.
71 Ibid, 268.
torpillage or torpedoing. Deschamps had heard rumors of the painfulness of the treatments, and when Vincent approached him with two electrodes, he struck him several times in the face. The trial was quite heated, with the medical community supporting Vincent and the press and public supporting Deschamps. Vincent argued that Deschamps was “able but not willing to recover,” but the public viewed him as an innocent wounded. Deschamps was found guilty of striking a superior officer, but his public support earned him a reduced sentence. The trial caused an outpouring of public support for traumatized soldiers and the military doctors were forced to decrease the harshness of their treatments. In the two years following the trial, more lenient centers were constructed. However, the focus was still on returning the men to the front as quickly as possible, using Babinski’s methods, including electro-therapy.\textsuperscript{72}

During the war, the army refused to discharge men suffering from traumatic shock over fears of creating a way for men to fake their way out of the war. Because of this, men were simply moved from hospital to hospital. After the war, some men suffered from such severe trauma that they spent the rest of their lives in military hospitals.\textsuperscript{73} However, the majority of the men were discharged along with the rest of the army. For the physically wounded, during the final year of the war and in the immediate postwar period, private organizations had to be created to provide support. War-wounded were seen begging on the city streets, and soon groups such as the \textit{Association générale des mutilés de la guerre} (AGMG) were created. More specific groups for men wounded in specific areas such as the eyes, face, or lungs (from poison

\textsuperscript{72} Shephard, \textit{A War of Nerves}, 103-104.  
\textsuperscript{73} Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{France and the Great War}, 94.
gas) were created as well.\footnote{Antoine Proust, \textit{In the Wake of War: ‘Les Anciens Combattants’ and French Society: 1914-1939}, trans. Helen McPhail, (Providence: Berg, 1992), 27-40.} This was followed by military pensions and reserved seats on public transportation. However the French government refused to grant pensions to men suffering from traumatic shock. There was the fear that pensions based on symptoms would give men an incentive to not recover.\footnote{Shephard, \textit{A War of Nerves}, 152.} It was also difficult to provide for any more than the most severe cases of trauma when the symptoms were so diverse. A framework of conditions to determine at what level of trauma a soldier could qualify for aid was not considered feasible. In all reality, it was difficult to determine how widespread traumatic shock actually was within the ranks.

The official military account of traumatic shock attempts to marginalize it, yet official records show that the percentage of patients in military hospitals suffering from traumatic shock was over ten percent in all areas. In some areas, close to the heaviest fighting, they reached as high as 50-60\%.\footnote{Roudebush, “A Battle of Nerves”, 253-254.} These figures still under-represent the truth. Using modern information about post-traumatic stress and statistics, it is likely that almost half of all survivors suffered “more or less serious psychological disturbances.”\footnote{Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 25-26.} With the intensity of modern industrialized warfare combined with the emphasis on courage as the primary masculine trait, it is not a stretch to assume that many, if not the majority, of men suffered some form of emotional or psychological trauma without being treated for it.

Evidence for this can be found in the trench newspapers. A large list printed in \textit{Le Bonhomme Gris-Sale}, of what will seem most difficult after the war contains both the anticipation of home and the after-effects of the war. The list begins with, “to choose what to
wear” and “to bathe everyday,” but continues into heavier topics. Under the sub-heading of “Bad Habits” the list includes, “to ask, when visiting an apartment, if there are multiple exits” and “to duck and cover when a tire blows.” The ever-present fear of war stayed with these men, in spite of their cultural focus on courage as the essence of masculinity. The effects of this trauma can be seen even more so in the immediate post-war period, when soldiers found themselves unable to express their feelings or recount their experiences.

For the first few years after the war, the poilus were unable to publicly communicate what they had just experienced. A combination of fear, trauma, and general fatigue kept them from sharing their horrors, except with each other. Antoine Prost argues that, “It took about ten years for memories to settle, and for the soldiers to begin evoking their war.” This would seem to be contradicted by both Barbusse’s Le Feu and Dorgelès’s Les Croix de bois which were published in 1916 and 1919, respectively. Both were phenomenal bestsellers. In his analysis of these two novels, Leonard V. Smith argues that both express the emasculation and victimization that men experienced during the war. However, both authors then attempt to reconstruct their protagonists by developing alternate ways of viewing the war. Smith argues that Barbusse links male redemption to socialism, while Dorgelès links it to artistic expression, or the telling of the experiences. Smith also emphasizes the focus on expressing a cultural

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79 Prost, In the Wake of War, 11-12.
80 Ibid, 13.
81 Ibid, 255.
82 Ibid, 257-259.
truth that both authors exhibit.\textsuperscript{84} However, Prost argues that both novels failed to evoke the anguish, the emotional remnants of violence felt by the veterans. Several of Barbusse and Doregelès’ contemporaries felt the same, particularly Jean Norton Cru and Georges Scott.\textsuperscript{85} It wasn’t until the late 1920s and early 1930s that the trauma had healed enough for communication to begin.\textsuperscript{86} However, few soldiers initially wanted to. A young girl, a member of the youth branch of the largest veteran society wrote in 1930, “The veterans have nothing to help us understand their life during the war years. They cut out of their lives those years which remind them only of hardships or, when they recall them, they avoid all painful details.”\textsuperscript{87}

The trauma experienced by the \textit{poilus} had undermined their accepted notions about courage and what it meant to be a man. This failure to achieve the ideals established before the war was integral to causing the crisis of masculinity in the immediate postwar period. However, once the \textit{poilus} began to mentally and emotionally digest their experiences, they began to overcompensate for their insecurities. In order to reassert their manhood, the men needed a target on which to focus their energies. The women’s movement served nicely as Roberts and others have explained thoroughly. Annelise Mauge argues that the war was the reason that the women’s movement, which had been making advances during the early 1900s, was suppressed until after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{88} It is possible to be more precise in saying that the effects which the war had on the concept of masculinity led to the reassertion of masculine dominance in the interwar period. The reaction of the men would in fact push the issue of women’s

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 261-263.
\textsuperscript{85} Prost, \textit{In the Wake of War}, 12.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 13.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{88} Mauge, \textit{L’identité masculine en crise}, 215.
suffrage to 1946, and diminish the women’s movement until the publishing of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* in 1949.\(^8^9\)

To conclude, prior to the First World War, French masculinity had been both made synonymous with the concept of civilization and based on the celebration of courage and heroism. Thus, masculinity was both essential and falsifiable. Men were required to prove their masculinity to others. However, when faced with the new technologies and industrial horrors of modern warfare, this gender construction broke down. Men failed to achieve the unobtainable level of manhood required of them by society. In the many cases, this failure presented itself as emotional and psychological trauma. The most extreme forms were diagnosed as traumatic shock. This combination of courage-based masculinity and modern industrialized warfare and the failure it caused in men’s pursuit of honor and manhood caused the postwar crisis of masculinity. Other historians, notably Mary Louise Roberts, have argued that this crisis was reactionary in nature, and caused by the war-time empowerment of women. However, the experiences of men during the crisis have not been adequately explored. Hopefully, this article has made the record of the French postwar masculinity crisis more complete and will lead to further examination.

\(^{8^9}\) Ibid, 219.
— Il n'y a plus que moi qui fait de bonnes affaires.
Bibliography


Plans For Dissemination

I am scheduled to present my paper at this year’s Great Lakes History Conference on October 17. When I apply to graduate schools next winter, I hope to use this paper as a writing sample as well. I also plan on submitting it for publication with the historical journal *The Historian*. 