

Telling about extreme experience: autobiographical writings as sources for the history of the Great War

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Introduction

The present study questions the use and the usefulness of autobiographical writings as sources for the historiography of the First World War and more largely their contribution to our understanding of all „great tragedies of the 20th century“. For the last two decades “ordinary people's” stories have been expanding in public and editorial space (comparative statistics established for France, Czech Republic and Austria). The Great War Centenary have only accelerated the trend as various officially coordinated remembrance-related programmes such as exhibitions, documentaries – using photos and personal tales extracts – but also numerous more or less specialist web sites and scholarly publications focused on “history from below” started to emphasise the personal dimension of war experience. Yet, especially in France, the exploitation of this particular kind of source has provoked a controversy opposing a “cultural” and a “social” approach in First World War historiography. In connection with this debate this study asks: Have the testimonies brought and can they still bring new explication patterns susceptible to shatter actual dominant theories and views? How can they amend the traditional paradigm of military history? How should they be used and if they are which methodological frames should be adopted?

A short historical review of using of soldiers' tales in historiography of World War I: case Norton Cru

In the very beginning of the war in all belligerent countries, where the literacy rate was sufficient, war-involved people started to lay on paper and publish their personal experiences, feeling they were participating in an extraordinary, unprecedented event. Thus the First World War can be seen as the seminal era for personal testimonies, a genuine “cry of a generation¹”. Jean Norton Cru, French-born professor of literature in the USA, started collecting those writings during his own stay in the field. In 1929, he published the results of his research in *Témoins*², an unprecedented repertoire of 300 war-related personal narrations published in French between 1915 and 1928. As a veteran, he elaborated and applied a specific critical methodology to analyse and evaluate the autobiographical writings. With the ethic aim to prevent the war from repeating³ he endeavoured to show the real face of the battle, which was totally different from pre-war romantic and heroic representations. Therefore, the status of an eye-witness telling what he had really seen and experienced was a key criterion of evaluation. This process, considered as too positivist and subjective caused him a rash criticism from his contemporaries⁴. The “the great quarrel of combatants⁵” of the early 1930s brought about the debate about the legitimacy of memory keepers to participate in the construction of scholarly narration of the collective tragic past. After the World War II, the debate burst out again as Nazi camps survivors emerged in public space. Still in France, it had a substantial influence on the *négationniste* approach. Even though the *négationnistes* claimed they were applying Norton Cru's critical method⁶, their conclusions were totally different. Whereas Norton Cru tried to elaborate a reliable methodological framework in order to distinguish “truthful” narrations from myths and remained open to revise any of his sometimes really unjust verdicts, the *négationnistes* presumed that the incapacity of eye-witness to remember some factual details of their experience and general unreliability of human memory invalidate all survivors stories as reliable historical sources⁷. In Western historiography, especially in France, the controversy broke out again in the 1990s when a group of historians protested against the presumed “dictatorship of testimonies⁸” accusing

memory keepers to elude on purpose some key issues – such as their consent to the war and an interpersonal violence⁹. Since then, the debate about the rapport between memory and history and about the legitimacy of memory keepers' stories have been mobilising scholars from miscellaneous research fields¹⁰. However, in non francophone historiographies the echo of this controversy has remained rather weak¹¹.

Some examples of actual work with testimonies

In the actual praxis, several different approaches to personal writings exist. We can sum them up in three theoretical categories although they are often interlaced. First, personal stories can be quoted to illustrate an already established historical narrative. In this perspective, the informations they may contain do not intervene to the interpretative process. This use is typical for popularising narratives, promoted by the Centenary, such as documentaries and exhibitions but can be found as well in some publications. E.g. alongside with statistics of heavy losses of a battle there is a quotation of an eye witness telling about how infernal the battle really was. The main aim is to bring the spectator back to the past, to create an illusion that he can identify himself with the experience. Such quotations are chosen more for their emotional capital than for their documentary justness and they tend to be presented within no conceptual framework¹². The second approach consists in the confrontation of personal tales to other “traditional” sources. It is the case of commented editions of original personal diaries, correspondences or photographs, that have become ever more popular for the last two decades. The original text is re-diffused with all its imperfections in order reconstitute the genuine atmosphere of the past. Additional sources are used to explain some passages or to add some data facilitating reader's orientation. The main risk of this operation is to slip to négationnisme, invaliding personal versions of an experience that cannot be proved by other sources. Third, memory keepers' tales can be used to fill the gaps left by traditional sources. There is also a confrontation with factual narratives but in this constellation, it is the second that can be modulated or corrected. An emphasis is put on the contextualisation of the production of the narratives and an effort is made to find relevant questions to accede to those parts of history for which no other documents are available. Recently, several scholars from different countries have shown that switching perspectives can invalid some dominant thesis¹³.

How can we use testimonies in history? Methodological considerations

Analysing different current approaches to personal writings let us define three main problematic issues. First, personal tales are never exact records of the past (nor is a photography or a film). They all are always biased by the prism depending on cultural capital and personal aims of the person creating them. In 1990s the “linguistic turn” showed that all narrations about the past are determined by language, time and place¹⁴. Compelling an experience into a narrative is always connected with conscious or unconscious searching of signification supposed to corroborate a sensation of coherence between one's past and present identity¹⁵. However, even factual sources keep a part of subjectivity as far as they are produced in specific contexts by people engaged in their specific strategies. A comprehensive analysis of multiple contexts is essential. Second issue is the reliability of human memory. No doubt, nobody can recall a scene that is over with all factual details such as names or dates, nor can anybody reconstitute an overwhelming view of the event. It is not troublesome as far as we ask relevant questions. Third issue – the representativity. For decades scholars have been attempting to write a global history. Inspired by sciences, they tend to operate inductions leading to generalisation of specific cases. Very useful to describe natural phenomena, this process is completely unfit to analyse human actions. E.g. Quoting a French POW in Germany whose only aim was to flee and return to the battlefield we can create an illusion that it was

a typical attitude of all French POWs. However, if we add that this story was written by a young officer Charles de Gaulle, who was undoubtedly an extraordinary, highly ambitious person, for whom the wartime military service meant an unexpected career opportunity, it seems very unlikely that he could represent the totality of French soldiers. But then who can? In reality, an “ordinary soldier” does not exist. Reading numerous testimonies, we find that each destiny is different and each person interpreted his/her war experience in a particular manner. Therefore, using testimonies we cannot produce any global preview. Only the repetition of some patterns or the highly regular absence of another can indicate some more general tendencies. This conclusion does not mean that personal tales are of no interest. To the contrary, the knowledge of several concrete individual cases can invalidate some traditional general, conceptual and abstract interpretations. Personal writings can help us to reconstruct the interactional dynamics in concrete social contexts.

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 - 2 Cru, Jean Norton, *Témoins, Essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*, Paris, Les Étoiles, 1929.
 - 3 Cru, Jean Norton, *Témoins*, préface et post-face de Frédéric Rousseau, Nancy, Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2006 (1929), p. 1-3.
 - 4 Rousseau, Frédéric, *Le procès des témoins de la Grande Guerre: l'affaire Norton Cru*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2003, p. 137-172.
 - 5 *Ibid.* p. 136.
 - 6 Rassinier, Paul, *Le Mensonge d'Ulysse*, éditée par l'auteur, 1955 (1950), p. 313 ; voir aussi : Igounet, Valérie, *Histoire du négationnisme en France*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2000, p. 47.
 - 7 Rousseau, Frédéric, *Le procès des témoins de la Grande Guerre...*, p. 268.
 - 8 Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane, Becker, Annette, *14-18, retrouver la guerre*, Paris, Gallimard, 2003, p. 52.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 - 10 For philosophy : Piwnica, Jean, *L'Histoire : écriture de la mémoire*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014 ; Ricoeur, Paul, *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, Seuil, Paris, 2003 ; History : Ginzburg, Carlo, *Un seul témoin*, Paris, Vacarme, Bayard, 2007 ; Pollak, Michael, *L'expérience concentrationnaire, essai sur le maintien de l'identité sociale*, Paris, éditions Métailié, 2000 ; Winter, Jay, *Remembering War. The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2006 ; Sociology : Dulong, Renaud, *Le témoin oculaire*, Éditions de l'EHESS, Paris, 1998 ; Psychanalyse : Cyrulnik, Boris, *Sauve-toi, la vie t'appelle*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2012 ; Littérature : Lacoste, Charlotte, *Le témoignage comme genre littéraire*, thèse de doctorat soutenue à l'Université Paris Sorbonne, 2012.
 - 11 Excepted for British and German researchers connected to Centre de recherche international de l'Historial de Péronne. Eg. Prost, Antoine, Winter, Jay, *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie*, Paris, Seuil, Points d'histoire, 2004.
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 - 13 Rousseau, Frédéric, *La Guerre censurée*, Paris, Edition du Seuil, 2003 ; Ziemann, Benjamin, *War Experience in Rural Germany*, Oxford-New York, Berg, 2007 ; Weber, Thomas, *La Première guerre d'Hitler*, Perrin, Paris, 2010 ; Mariot, Nicolas, *Tous unis dans les tranchées ? 1914-1918 les intellectuels rencontrent le peuple*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013.
 - 14 Winter, Jay, *Remembering War...*, p. 48.
 - 15 Piwnica, Jean, *L'Histoire : écriture de la mémoire...*, p. 19.