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“Pierre Brossolette: From Pacifism to Resistance”¹

Guillaume Piketty

War is “almost as ancient as man himself, and reaches into the most secret places of the human heart, places where self dissolves rational purpose, where pride reigns, where emotion is paramount, where instinct is king.”² Practitioner of reason and master of emotion – or, at least, instinct – the figure of the intellectual would appear to contradict Keegan’s assertion, especially in the case of those intellectuals who had been marked by the experience of the First World War. This simple picture, however, does not stand up to closer examination.

The case of Pierre Brossolette nicely illustrates this observation. From the early nineteen-twenties until his death in 1944, this *normalien* thought ceaselessly about war. Indeed, the question of war was to play a determinant role in his intellectual development. In the quarter-century following the First World War, Brossolette passed by stages from what Michael Howard³ has called an “idealism” of peace to a partisan support for war. Then he became a warrior himself. By the time of his heroic death for the liberation of France, he had become its eulogist.

Dense and sometimes astonishing, Brossolette’s trajectory is an example of the way in which several French intellectuals who participated in the resistance lived and conceived the “warrior phenomenon” before and during *les années noires*.⁴ This trajectory can be divided into three stages of unequal length: Brossolette’s development from pacifist militant to officer (1922-1939); his transition from officer to member of the resistance (1939-1941); and, finally, his emergence as “crusader” (1941-1944). I shall now consider each of these stages in turn.

¹ A first version of this text has been presented at the 9th Group for War and Culture Studies (GWACS) International Conference : “Intellectuals and War from Verdun to Baghdad”, University of London - Institut français de Londres, 14-15 October 2005.

² John Keegan, *History of War*, p. 3, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1994), 432 p.

³ Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War*, Profile Books (London, 2002).

⁴ I write at length on this subject in my doctoral thesis. See Guillaume Piketty, *Itinéraire intellectuel et politique de Pierre Brossolette*, Ph.D. dissertation, l’Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris (under the direction of Professor Jean-Pierre Azéma), 2 vol., 1196 p., 1997, bibliog., index. Those interested may also consult my mémoire d’Habilitation, which is founded on the analysis of intellectuals’ private journals. See Guillaume Piketty, *Résistances pionnières en zone libre (1940-1942)*, unpublished mémoire prepared under the direction of Professor Serge Berstein, 2 vol., 355 p., 2002, bibliog., index. To be published in april 2009.

From Pacifist Militant to Officer (1922-1939)

Admitted to the *Ecole normale supérieure* in 1922, *agrégé* in History three years later, Pierre Brossolette opted for a career in journalism⁵ at the end of his period of military service. He rapidly came to specialize in international political analysis. At the same time, he participated actively in politics, first as a member of the Radical Party and then within the SFIO. At once professional and militant, Brossolette was obliged to put war at the center of his preoccupations. Through Summer 1939, his thought evolved in three stages.

Horrified by what he called the “bestial massacre” of 1914-1918 and convinced that a bloodied France should avoid a new war at any price, Brossolette struggled until 1933-1934 for a peaceful international order governed by law, for disarmament, for the Society of Nations and for collective security, for Franco-German rapprochement, and, at last, for the European Federation that had been proposed by Aristide Briand. In this respect, he lived and saw himself as the representative of a “generation” of intellectuals who, though too young to have known the trenches, were nevertheless profoundly marked by the experience of the Great War.⁶ The perspective of these intellectuals was largely shaped by the painful “aftermath” of the First World War. In the troubled period of “cultural demobilization”⁷ which followed it, they drastically revised the image of the “traditional” enemy.

From 1934 to 1938, Brossolette had to come to terms with a relative contradiction. In July 1934, his fierce hostility to Hitler’s Germany led him to break with Jean Luchaire and *Notre Temps*. In the aftermath (Summer 1935 – Summer 1936) of the Ethiopian, Rhineland and Spanish crises, he could not help but notice that recourse to force and the threat of war had returned to the European political scene. All the same, as a loyal socialist⁸, he forced himself to follow the “party line”, especially when expressing himself on national radio.⁹ While his tone seems to have been eloquent from the very beginning, Brossolette’s radio address only gradually moved to a firm statement of his position.

At the beginning of 1938, the “growing threat”¹⁰ of war cleared the way for the third and final step in Brossolette’s transition from pacifist militant to officer. The Anschluss, the Munich Crisis and the death throes of the Spanish Republic did the rest. Fierce opponent of the Munich accords, well-known foreign policy editorialist

⁵ More particularly, Brossolette’s columns through 1939 consist in contributions to the *Progrès civique*, the *Renaissance politique*, *Notre Temps*, *Marianne*, *L’Excelsior*, *L’Europe nouvelle*, *La République*, and the *Populaire*.

⁶ His article, “Le pessimisme de notre temps” particularly illustrates this point. See *Notre Temps*, 15 mai 1930, pp. 29-34 in Pierre Brossolette, *Résistance (1927-1943)*, texts collected and presented by Guillaume Piketty, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998, 218 p.

⁷ This concept was first introduced by John Horne. See John Horne, “Introduction”, pp. 45-53, in John Horne (ed.), “Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre”, special issue of *14-18 aujourd’hui, today, heute* no.5, May 2002.

⁸ Brossolette was a member of Jean Zyromski’s “Bataille socialiste” movement (late 1935 – late 1937), director, in 1936, for the département of Aube’s section of the SFIO federation, and a member of Léon Blum’s circle.

⁹ Which he did for the first time in late October 1936.

¹⁰ Pierre Brossolette, “La montée des périls”, *L’Europe nouvelle*, 6 November 1937.

for *Populaire*¹¹ often criticized for his firmness and founding member of the “Agir” movement in the SFIO¹², Brossolette reconciled himself to war in Spring 1939 because he saw no other means of opposing the schemes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. He pleaded for an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance in preparation for a conflict which had become, in his view, inevitable. The mobilization order of August 1939 found him ready to fight. And to cap it all, he was ready to fight in accordance with the tactical-strategic models of the First World War that he had held in contempt for such a long time.

A decade of disillusion had been necessary to transform this paragon of “cultural demobilization” into a resolute partisan of firm action, even at the risk of war. The patriotism of this *normalien* and school teacher’s son, together with his radical hostility to fascism and Nazism, had definitively won out over the pacifism born in the aftermath of 1918. It is worth emphasizing, finally, that, though he was not obliged to do so and whatever may otherwise have been his engagements, reserve officer Brossolette had conscientiously performed all required periods of military training¹³.

From Officer to Member of the Resistance (1939-1941)

As his private correspondence testifies¹⁴, Pierre Brossolette’s resolution to fight weakened neither during the *Drôle de guerre* nor over the course of the débâcle. Despite the long period spent waiting for combats to begin, so dangerous to morale, and despite his clear-eyed recognition of the ignorance and mediocrity surrounding him, Brossolette proved to be vigorous and dynamic in the field, first as lieutenant and then as captain. He even considered volunteering for combat in Norway. From June 13th to the 25th, he retreated in good order over 527 kilometers to the southwest under apocalyptic conditions. His conduct earned him the Croix de Guerre. The intellectual had become an authentic soldier capable of swimming free in mid-shipwreck.

At the beginning of summer 1940, a moment when many Frenchmen already considered the War over and Brossolette was himself awaiting official demobilization, he was still thinking of the front :

“We have entered into the adventure [...] we find ourselves in the Thirty Years War, and [...] as a consequence, it is simply a question of taking upon ourselves the souls of *Condottiere* – which excludes all possibility of hope but also all possibility of pessimism.”¹⁵

The pacifist of the 1920’s had been well and truly transformed into a diehard warrior committed to pursuing the battle whatever the cost. At the beginning of March 1941,

¹¹ Where he signed his first article on December 4, 1938.

¹² Agir sought to renew the SFIO in order to reform France and advocated firmness in international affairs in an effort to save the peace.

¹³ A certain number of short periods of several days, completed in three 21 day training phases: April 1929, September-October 1935 and March-April 1939.

¹⁴ AN 72 AJ 2216

¹⁵ Letter from Pierre Brossolette to his wife Gilberte, 7 July 1940. AN 72 AJ 2216.

Brossolette joined the resistance organization known as the “Musée de l’Homme Group”.¹⁶ Ranking first among his motives was a fierce patriotism in the Gaullien – and not the Pétainiste – sense of the term¹⁷ supported by a clear recognition of the global character of the struggle for liberty. Equally important was his desire to resist the occupier, Nazism and the collaborationist regime of Vichy as well as the wish to strive for the renewal of France. Finally, there was his irresistible desire to respond to the fact of national collapse.

In thus joining the new shadow army, Brossolette assumed a series of transgressions. He departed from his past and his habits, passed beyond convention and pushed away familial and professional responsibilities. He took considerable risks. In the long run, he went underground. He was thus engaged body, mind and soul in a war that he conceived of as total. What’s more, this intellectual and militant chose concrete action and practical efficacy in the context of a *network* of resistance rather than individual reflection, debate and clandestine writing within the context of a *movement*. Following the collapse of the “Musée de l’Homme Group”, Brossolette neither joined the Comité d’Action Socialiste in the northern zone nor the Libération-nord movement, with which he was nevertheless in contact. In November 1941, he joined Colonel Rémy’s “Confrérie Notre-Dame” (CND) network. His path recalls that of Jean Cavallès, René Char and Jean Prévost.

Once defeat had been consummated in the “classical” way, Brossolette thus opted for another way of waging war, one which hardly conformed to the usual norms of western society¹⁸ and thus largely up for grabs. Exclusively consisting of volunteers, the Resistance was few in number. Now that the notions of “frontline” and “homefront” had lost all meaning, the members of the Resistance created new forms of sociability and, with them, a very particular type of camaraderie. Shadow soldiers, they *consented* to obey leaders of their own *choice*¹⁹ and not in accordance with a rigid and largely intangible military hierarchy. Combatants without uniforms, they accepted specific risks. It was necessary to learn how to submit to *and* inflict violence; in both cases, the violence in question was most often a solitary experience.²⁰ Torture, like the possibility of winding up in a shallow grave, very quickly became part of their universe. Every day, they confronted fear and struggled against nervous tension. Having himself lived this life, Pierre Brossolette was able to find the words for a BBC radio broadcast to describe his resistance comrades’ war experience, that of those he called the “coal-trimmers of glory”.²¹

¹⁶ See Julien Blanc’s upcoming dissertation (under the direction of Laurent Douzou), “Le réseau du Musée de l’Homme et les débuts de la Résistance en zone occupée”.

¹⁷ Liberate France and *then* renew it rather than the converse.

¹⁸ On this question, one should consult, for example, the stimulating work of Victor Davis Hanson: *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, New York, 1989; and, by the same author, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*, Doubleday (New York, 2001).

¹⁹ See Laurent Douzou, “La démocratie sans le vote. La question de la décision dans la Résistance”, pp. 57-67 in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no.140, December 2001.

²⁰ See, in particular, François Marcot (ed.), *La Résistance et les Français. Lutte armée et maquis*, Actes du colloque international de Besançon – 15-17 June 1995, Les Belles Lettres (Paris, 1996), 549 p., bibliog., index.

²¹ “Salute them, Frenchmen! They are the coal-trimmers of glory”, speech given by Pierre Brossolette on BBC radio, 22 September 1942, in Pierre Brossolette, *Résistance (1927-1943)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-144. Also see the British radio columns for May-July 1943. AN 72 AJ 2215.

In such a context, the resisters' view of death was profoundly transformed. Let's recall that, with the armistice, the prospect of dying in combat was removed from the field of possible outcomes for Frenchmen. Entering into resistance thus meant once again giving way to death. Whether it involved learning to kill or preparing to die, death determined the resisters' relation to life. And yet this death was different from that of soldiers at the front, both anonymous killers and anonymous victims. *Theirs'* was often solitary death, sometimes leaving no trace.²² It was a death that demanded meaning, and became a search for overcoming through self-realization. Let's remember that Pierre Brossolette had mocked the soldier's sacrifice on the battlefields of the First World War, and that, in 1939, he had donned the soldier's uniform and decided to fight at the risk of his own death. Then, on 18 June 1943, he spoke at London's *Royal Albert Hall*, saluting "the dead of combatant France", these "men to whom death had been forbidden as a capital crime", who had to "risk it to aspire to it" and who "with only one gesture moved from the banal [...] and entered into the sublime." It was with these words, which surpass commentary, that Brossolette concluded his remarks:

"On this anniversary of the day on which General de Gaulle convoked them to the sacred banquet of death, what they demand of us is not to complain but to continue. What they expect of us is not regret but an oath. It is not weeping; it is vigor."²³

For the members of the Resistance, this radically new mode of combat and existence gave birth to an equally new relationship to war, and thus a specific experience of war.

From Resistant to Crusader (1941-1944)

On December 1st, 1941, Pierre Brossolette engaged with the Free France forces *via* the CND. Over the winter that followed, he wrote several reports for *Carlton Gardens* on the state of opinion, the French political class and the nascent resistance in the occupied zone, putting London in contact with the Libération-nord and Organisation Civile et Militaire (OCM) movements. On the night of 27-28 April 1942, he reached England on a *Lysander*. Strengthened by his political experience, his knowledge of occupied France and his status as precursor to the Resistance, he quickly assumed a prominent role among Free France decision-makers. Once again, the War had led Brossolette to take what was, *a priori*, an improbable step: enlisting under a general who, though republican, inspired mistrust in many rather than joining other French socialists in the strictly obedient, London-based Groupe Jean Jaurès.

²² Recall Albert Camus' remarks in *Combat*, 28 October 1944: "anyone can be shot in the forehead, the worst of us like the best. But during the past four years, only the best have volunteered and fallen, only the best have won the right to speak at the same time that they've lost the ability to do so."

²³ "Hommage aux morts de la France combattante", speech by Pierre Brossolette, 18 June 1943, in Pierre Brossolette, *Résistance (1927-1943)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-216.

The intellectual he still was continued to reflect *in* and *through* war. He conceived the development and organization of the interior Resistance and its coordination both with De Gaulle's secret service - in which he played a leading role - and the Gaullist cause. Putting his words into action, Brossolette carried out three clandestine missions on metropolitan territory: a mission to strengthen Free France's political forces in summer 1942²⁴; a mission to coordinate the Resistance's political, paramilitary and intelligence activities in the northern zone in winter 1943²⁵; finally, in the course of the following autumn and early winter²⁶, a mission to basically reconstruct a civil and paramilitary resistance following the rude shocks of Gestapo efforts to root it out. Finding himself in England between two missions, Brossolette pursued his political activities. In his view, the defeat had interrupted the decadence of France and thus provided the occasion for wiping the slate clean. In a way that had little to do with the determinism and classificatory schemes of the 1920's and 30's, Brossolette reflected on the future of liberated France, envisaging the war as a means for renewing his country, and even for saving it from itself.

Fully engaged in the War effort, Pierre Brossolette well appreciated the symbolic aspect of things. Commandant in the Free French Forces, he was on several occasions cited and decorated. On October 17, 1942, General de Gaulle bestowed upon him the status of Compagnon de la Libération. Eleven days later, on October 28, he was named to the Conseil de l'Ordre. This appointment attests to his pride in belonging to what was a modern knighthood: had he not "played the game", he would never have been rewarded in such a way. As a man of the word, he never ceased to glorify the warrior epic of the Free French and of interior Resistance. On numerous occasions, he served as the eulogist of their heroism and military glory. He thus totally validated a "moral economy"²⁷ of gratitude²⁸ at which he would have likely laughed in the 1920's.

Though he never lost his caustic lucidity, Brossolette nevertheless showed himself ever more sensitive to the ambiance created by the War – to the point of fully savoring, whatever the vicissitudes of clandestine combat, the joy and happiness of what the great resistant, Jacques Bingen, in his last letter called a "heavenly period of hell".²⁹ It is for this reason that, despite the risks, Brossolette left on a third mission: he wished to put his ideas and his actions to the test on the "battlefield". It was thus

²⁴ 3 June – 13 September 1942.

²⁵ 27 January – 15 April 1943.

²⁶ 18 September 1943 – 22 March 1944.

²⁷ See E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century", *Past and Present*, 1971, pp. 76-136.

²⁸ I.e., the finely structured collection of rituals and gestures – medals, speeches, celebrations, ceremonies and commemorations, display of arms and military parades, objects of memory, and so forth – thanks to which veterans manage to feel and believe that the "collectivity recognizes its debt and that the years of suffering, written into their flesh and spirit, have been given meaning". See Claude Barrois, *Psychanalyse du guerrier*, Paris, Hachette, 1993, p.261. On the Free French and Resistance economy of gratitude, see for example Guillaume Piketty, "Génération résistante à l'épreuve de la sortie de guerre", pp. 151-163, in *Revue historique*, no.641, January 2007; « [Economie morale de la reconnaissance. L'ordre de la Libération au péril de la sortie de Seconde Guerre mondiale](#) », *Histoire@Politique. Politique, Culture et Société*, www.histoire-politique.fr, no.3, November-December 2007.

²⁹ "Cahier Jacques Bingen, Compagnon de la Libération, 1908-1944", in *L'Espoir, Revue de l'Institut Charles de Gaulle*, no.48, Plon (Paris, October 1984).

that he was devoured by the war. Arrested in Brittany on 3 February 1944, identified on 16 March and dreadfully tortured, he committed suicide on 22 March in order to avoid talking. He thus took his place in the ranks of those intellectuals who showed themselves capable of making the supreme sacrifice in the service of their convictions.

Conclusion

Broadly painted, such was the role of war in Pierre Brossolette's career. Over some twenty years, this engaged intellectual completely revised his conception of the resort to arms: from absolute horror, he came to see it as a necessary evil for vanquishing Nazism and finally as a useful ordeal in the effort to "remake France". Moreover, Brossolette never hesitated to pay the price of these ideas in his own life – that is, to commit himself physically to the struggle. At the same time, he gave meaning to the warrior's engagement. Gradually seduced by the War, he ultimately was swept away by it, and never saw the Liberation.

Such an itinerary reveals the extent to which the torments of the *années noires* troubled European minds and hearts. In the French case, it also serves as illustration of an intellectual posture according to which the defeat of 1940 represented a triple salvation: it brought to an end the difficulties of the 1930's; it permitted France, which had been bled white during the First World War, to find itself once again at the victor's table at the relatively reduced price of the losses of May-June 1940, those of the Resistance, and those occurring in the final stages of the War between June 1944 and September 1945; finally, in the crucible of interior and exterior resistances, it permitted the development of the programs of profound reform and renovation that would be set in motion upon Liberation.

L'auteur

Guillaume Piketty est directeur de recherches au Centre d'histoire et professeur associé à l'École doctorale de Sciences Po Paris. Spécialiste de l'histoire et de la mémoire de la Résistance française et de la France libre, ainsi que de l'histoire du gaullisme, il a collaboré à François Marcot (dir), *Dictionnaire historique de la Résistance. Résistance intérieure et France Libre*, Paris, Robert Laffont, collection Bouquins, 2006. Avec Claire Andrieu et Philippe Braud, il a dirigé la publication du *Dictionnaire de Gaulle*, Paris, Robert Laffont, collection Bouquins, 2006. Depuis quatre ans, il anime avec Bruno Cabanes (Yale University) un séminaire de recherche sur les sorties de guerre. Celui-ci a notamment débouché sur la publication du dossier « [Sorties de guerre au XX^e siècle](http://www.histoire-politique.fr) » dans la revue *Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société* (www.histoire-politique.fr, n°3, novembre-décembre 2007).

Abstract

From the early nineteen-twenties until his death in 1944, Pierre Brossolette thought ceaselessly about war. He passed by stages from an "idealism" of peace (Michael Howard, 2002) to a partisan support for war. Then he became a warrior himself. By the time of his heroic death for the liberation of France, he had become its eulogist. Dense and sometimes astonishing, his trajectory is an example of the way in which several French intellectuals who participated in the resistance lived and conceived the "warrior phenomenon" before and during *les années noires*.

Guillaume Piketty, « Pierre Brossolette : from Pacifism to Resistance », *Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société*, N°6, septembre-décembre 2008, www.histoire-politique.fr

Résumé

« Pierre Brossolette : de l'engagement pacifiste au sacrifice dans la Résistance »
Du début des années vingt à sa mort en 1944, Pierre Brossolette ne cessa de penser à la guerre. « Idéaliste » de la paix (Michael Howard, 2002), il devint progressivement un partisan, puis un acteur et enfin un chantre de la guerre, jusqu'à mourir en héros pour la libération de la France. Dense, parfois étonnant, son parcours illustre la façon dont quelques-uns des intellectuels français qui devinrent des résistants vécurent et pensèrent le « phénomène guerrier » avant et pendant les années noires.

Key words : First World War ; Intellectuals ; Pacifism ; Resistance ; Free France.

Mots clés : Première Guerre mondiale ; Intellectuels ; Pacifisme ; Résistance ; France libre.

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