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La Grande Guerre

For my HST 201 class (Historical Methods), I was assigned to read a book titled *1914* by Jean Echenoz and write a reading response. The work was originally written in French and translated to English by Linda Coverdale. I thought the book was interesting although tragic. As an author of historical fiction, Echenoz wrote about the French experience during the Great War through the eyes of characters he geniusly placed in his story to show the many struggles the French people, soldier and citizen alike, suffered through. Rather than focusing on a hero who stands up to and defeats a great evil, the story is focused on highlighting the horrors of war through the eyes of the French.

In the beginning, the main character, Anthime, his brother, and his friends are citizens called to war. Then, the common view was that the mobilization would only last two weeks. This view of naive optimism was quickly replaced with terror and uncertainty. The French citizens-turned-soldiers were clearly ill-prepared for the well-trained force they were up against. Echenoz clearly showed this in his description of Anthime's first combat experience. The men were marching down a road, when enemy soldiers, behind the cover of trees, opened fire on the men. Taken by surprise, the French attempted to charge at the enemy. While the men charged against a strategically positioned enemy, the company band formed together and played "La Marseillaise". Anthime's actions and thought process pointed to the likelihood that he and his fellow soldiers were insufficiently trained for battle. As he ran toward the enemy, adrenaline surged, and all that went through his head was shooting or stabbing anything in his way. He saw men shot down beside him. Band members playing in the background were picked off one by one. Nothing about this scene showed combat-ready soldiers among the French, but rather the

reality of regular, ill-prepared citizens. Although the initial charge was unsuccessful, the French were able to drive the enemy back in another charge with their bayonets. As horrific and tragic as this scene was, this fight was nothing compared to the pure terror in the trenches that followed. Through the fates of Anthime and his friends, Echenoz showed different ways that French soldiers suffered throughout and even after the war. Two of them were left with wounds that lasted and impaired them through the rest of their lives. The other two were killed: one in battle and the other by the much despised gendarmes. This man, Arcenel, was camped with his company in a town as a quick break from the war when he started walking down a path. There was not much going through his head as he walked. He enjoyed the silence as well as the sounds of nature. He strayed further from camp without thinking until he ran into a group of gendarmes. These were officers tasked with keeping soldiers in line killing anyone they decided were guilty of desertion or any other form of treason. One could assume that the French soldiers hated the gendarmes as much as the enemy as both shot at them undeservedly. Assuming that Arcenel was a deserter and clearly not caring regardless, they tied his hands and locked him up at camp, where he spent the night without food or water. The next day, he was sentenced to death in a mock trial and shot. This scene seemed to show that Arcenel was suffering from PTSD at this point as he was not thinking clearly when he wandered. It is infuriating to think that the gendarmes were so arrogant that they did not consider the mental status of their men and at least offer encouragement rather than shoot them at the drop of a hat.

For Anthime, he was sent home as a hero after losing his arm in battle. At home, he was unable to return to work at the shoe factory, but was given a sort-of honorary administrative position. He

felt ghost pains in his absent arm, and Echenoz never clarified whether or not the pains went away.

Through the eyes of the characters he placed in the war, Echenoz clearly showed the views, ill-preparedness, and sufferings of French soldiers in the Great War. While I would not necessarily recommend *1914* for recreational reading due to its tragic story and graphic detail, I would recommend it to anyone interested in history and this time period as it gives insight that a regular history book would not provide.

May God bless the men and women throughout time who fought for freedom against great evil and may He protect those who continue to fight to preserve the free world.