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OBJECTS AND MATERIAL ASPECTS OF WAR

Barbed Wire in Wartim: Uses and Memories

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ABSTRACT

Barbed wire, which is associated in mental representations with the worst totalitarian systems of the twentieth century and with deprivation of the most fundamental liberties, was born in the 1870s in the large prairies of the American Midwest. During World War One it became an essential albeit little-known weapon, and represents a symbol of mass death, which only imperfectly renders the historical conditions of its use.

Liberation of children by Soviet troops from the camp of Auschwitz in January 1945, photography by Alexander Voronzow.

A wire spiked with metallic points, barbed wire—called artificial bramble—was invented in the mid-1870s in the United States. At the time it was intended to enclose the gigantic properties of the Wild West, and to allow farmers to save on the labour needed to watch over livestock. However, the military quickly took interest in the properties of this new material, which was soon used on battlefields, notably during the Boer wars and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Yet it was during The Great War that this artificial bramble was the most massively deployed.

A Not So Accessory Defence

An example among many others is the area of Saint-Laurent-Blangy, a village north of Arras held by the 47th infantry regiment of Saint-Malo during the winter of 1914-1915, which gives a precise idea of the quantities of barbed wire that were placed by the warring countries during the course of the conflict. The maps in the unit's war diaries give an overview, with the hatched sections representing barbed wire encircling even the smallest thoroughfare dug in the battlefield, so as to protect against enemy incursion. Combatant testimonies help depict this vast protective network from *ground level*, one that was interspersed with metal stakes such that the wires erected a spiky, sharp, and impassable rail of sorts, able to lacerate possible intruders.

The generic term barbed wire in fact ultimately conceals a number of objects serving approximately the same function. Often arranged on either side of the no man's land, *chevaux-de-frise* resembled a kind of large wooden X wrapped in barbed wire. Similarly, the famous Brun entanglement, a large coil of iron wire spiked with tips, was stretched across the length of the trench or the tunnel needing protection. Less well known is the *hérisson* [hedgehog], a kind of metallic star that is barely visible in a bed of leaves or branches, and the pig-tail stake, a coiled stem ending in a sharp point; both of them represent formidable obstacles when planted in the ground. All of these elements are part of the "accessory defences" category, which in military jargon includes any of the objects placed in front of trenches to protect against enemy attacks.

Jacques Meyer, a war veteran and graduate of the École normale supérieure who became a historian of The Great War in the 1960s, pointed out that the placement and maintenance of these weapons was among the worst chores that could be assigned to infantrymen. This particularly dangerous form of work could only be done at night or on foggy days to avoid the risk of enemy snipers. In doing so, barbed wire and other accessory defences relate to the very nature of trench warfare, a tactical equation that, in many respects, resembles a sort of reciprocal siege warfare in which both sides lay siege to the other.

A Two-Edged Weapon

Limey. Coils of barbed wire, 5 March 1916.
Source: BDIC; VAL 166-053, Inventory number of the Photographic Section of the army: 35765

Yet this reality does not fit well with ideological and strategic precepts that impose offensives. A formidably effective fortification when used defensively, barbed wire was, on the contrary, highly penalizing in an offensive situation. Not only do these metal defences force troops to make breaches to exit from their own lines, but the Brun entanglements, pig-tails and other hérissons were moreover resistant to even the most violent artillery preparations. For example in May 1915, after an attack in the area of Saint-Laurent-Blangy, the editor of the war diary of the 47th infantry regiment accounted for the operation's stinging failure by the fact that the enemy's "barbed wire" was still intact.

Unlike human beings, whose vigilance can always be caught off guard, accessory defences are continually effective, even when the assault has ended and the survivors have returned to their trenches. Barbed wire thus

developed into a formidable psychological weapon, a kind of clothesline on which the corpses of combatants dried for days, as though pinned up like a sinister hunting trophy. The effect on the men's morale was disastrous, so much so that shame of ending up hanging from the enemy's accessory defences constituted a genuine *topos* of combat literature.

Numerous authors insisted on the dehumanizing character of the violence practiced on the battlefields of World War One. Barbed wire certainly had an essential role in this process, which at least unconsciously did not escape contemporaries. It is notable how much the wordage for accessory defences—*chevaux-de-frise, hérisson,* pig-tails—make use of animal vocabulary, thus relegating infantrymen to the rank of livestock caught in their own trenches.

A Weak Memorial Impact?

Walking on battlefields a century after the events, one can still find some of these metallic vestiges, which incidentally can offer reminders of their intact effectiveness to the clumsy. Nevertheless, although barbed wire is not absent from the collective memory of World War One, it paradoxically seems to relate more to the memory of captivity than to trench warfare. This is probably a consequence of our mental representations that tend to establish barbed wire as the absolute symbol of imprisonment and, more generally, of totalitarian systems. Here we have the undeniable mark of competing memories, with the representation of a World War Two circumscribed to Auschwitz quite often imposing itself over any other form of memory.

We can subsequently examine the relevance of this symbol, which in fact proves not to be very nuanced. A penitentiary such as Fresnes or Fleury-Mérogis, a death camp such as Treblinka, a Soviet gulag or a Chinese *laogai*, or a stalag, all share the use of barbed wire. Yet they are all part of radically different historical meanings, which this shared symbol does not make it possible to appreciate at their true value. And what should be said of Amnesty International, the organization fighting for human rights, whose logo depicts a candle intertwined with barbed wire?

We can find the same ambiguity when barbed wire materializes a hermetically closed border. Although it could seem anachronistic in the context of a Cold War determined by the nuclear weapon and the balance of terror, it was nevertheless a curtain of barbed wire that was erected during the night of 12-13 August 1961, the first stage of the construction of the Berlin Wall. What was no more than an accessory defence during World War One later served to keep citizens of the East German capital inside the communist space, an illustration of the iron curtain evoked by Churchill in his famous Fulton speech. Over fifty years later, during the summer of 2015, Hungary built a huge barbed wire fence, 175 km long, along its border with Serbia. Yet the objective is no longer to prevent the flight of European citizens, but rather the entry of "migrants" into the Schengen space—an arresting semantic inversion.

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