

CAPITAINE CONAN  
(French, 1996, 130 Minutes, Subtitled)

World War I extended far beyond the Western Front and continued in various forms and locations after the Armistice in November 1918. Bertrand Tavernier's epic *Capitaine Conan* is a historically based drama depicting French forces on the nearly forgotten Salonika front in the fall of 1918 trying to break through crumbling Bulgarian defenses. The French *poilu* has no idea what fighting in the mountains of Macedonia has to do with defending France. When the war against the Central Powers ends, the men are eager to go home after many years. Instead, they are transferred to guard duty in Romania and then ordered to repel the emerging Bolshevik threat – an early precursor to the Cold War.

Conan, the son of a haberdasher, is a maverick and a charismatic leader from Brittany revered by his men. He is lost without war and unable to adjust to the banality of civilian life. Together with his deputy, Lt. Norbert -- an educated Parisian – he struggles constantly against the hypocrisies of the French officers who seem more occupied with preserving their system and rigid sense of order at the expense of the men they are supposed to lead. Tavernier portrays war as expression of the contradictions, animosities, suspicions, and injustices that exist below the surface during peace. The film has some parallels with *Paths of Glory*. Note the chaotic and often confused battle scenes. To emphasize Conan's uniqueness in a sea of mediocrity, Tavernier uses as a title song an ancient hymn sung in a Celtic dialect spoken only in Brittany. The film's sub-theme that only a relatively small percentage of soldiers make a real difference in combat makes this film unique and worth reflecting upon during the study of any war.

The film is based on a novel by the same name written by Roger Vercel in 1934. The novel received the *Prix Goncourt* for its candid assessment of the toll brutal combat had taken on the youth of France. Vercel participated in some of the events he relates in the novel. As a conscripted university student, he was assigned to the French military court in Bucharest, Romania. The character Conan is based on the exploits of Vercel's friend Jean des Cognets, to whom the novel is dedicated. Vercel explodes the myth that soldiers of democratic governments behave better in wartime than troops of authoritarian regimes. There are no virtuous armies. Issued a weapon and a license to kill, the soldier compensates for the risks by indulging his worst instincts.