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Supplying the Front. French Southern Wine Wholesalers Facing World War I

Working Paper

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Intro:

This communication intends to present how, in a context of tensions and crisis, a sector (here the wine merchants from Languedoc) and a market can simultaneously face difficulties and sustain its activity during WWI.

First, I'd like to present the region studied, Languedoc, composed of 3 departments (doc 1).

Then the context : when the war broke, the Languedoc wine market is emerging from 15 years of turmoil, characterized by the irregularities of the production and of the prices¹, which lead the sector to considerable concerns and trouble (doc 2 +3).

Now let's present the role of the merchants (or wholesalers), whose position on the market is inevitable (doc 4). Indeed, they assume the role of cogs between demand and offer.

Objectives of this communication:

- Present the disruptive effects of the war
- Show the different types of responses
- Analyze how the war restructured the sector

I. General Mobilization and its disruptive effects

The question of the general mobilization and its effects on the economy more specifically is well known by the historians, especially with the works of several researchers. For instance, in a Companion to World War I, edited by John Horne, Theo Balderston states : " Few before 1914 anticipated a long war, and even those who did it rarely thought it in economic terms²". Thus, the war in august 1914 is a shock and plunges the French economy into a

¹ For further and broader analyses, see Pech R., *Entreprise viticole et capitalisme en Languedoc-Roussillon du phylloxera aux crises de mévente*, Toulouse, Publications de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1975.

² Balderston T., "Industrial Mobilization and War Economics" in Horne J. (Ed.), *A Companion to World War I*, John Wiley & Sons, 2010, p. 217.

certain chaos, even in Languedoc, 800 km from the Front. This for several reason.

1. On men

- Mobilized

Mobilization in France draws 3.8 Millions of young and less young Frenchmen to the Front³ (8.4 % for the entire war).

The wine trading industry is deeply affected by the mobilization. During the 21st of august session of the Regional wine syndicate, its president Marius Leroy d'Audéric wants to "pay homage to all our colleagues who answered the call from Motherland and who are today fighting for the right and sacred cause of our flag"⁴. Indeed, the examples of merchants or sons of merchants called to duty are numerous, as well in rural or urban areas, small or bigger cities : in Montpellier, the secretary of the local syndicate Gustave Malet is one of them. In Montbazin, Marcel Collière, son a rural wholesaler, working with his father is mobilized as well from 1915 to 1918⁵. In Sète, Maurice Roux (doc 5a) joins his regiment as soon as august 1914. We could multiply the examples.

But the family of the merchants are not the only ones who suffer from the mobilization. Other professions are deeply disturbed with, unsurprisingly a tremendous impact on the transactions and the sector.

In Sète, Auguste Malaval, a worker from the society "B. Tous" is appointed as a male nurse in the city military hospital⁶.

Alphonse Artignan, a carter, is integrated to the 24th battalion as a stretcher bearer and is wounded several times (at least 5 times)⁷.

In Montpellier, the service of official watchers affected to the surveillance of the transactions on route, is troubled by the mobilization of one of its guard, leading the local syndicate to complain about the reducing in speed of the controls⁸.

In the vineyards, the effects of the mobilization are deep as well, especially during the times

³ Becker J.-J., *1914, comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre*, Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Paris, 1977.

⁴ Bulletin mensuel du Syndicat regional (BMS), août-sept. 1914, p. 121.

⁵ Information from the website <http://www.memoiredemontbazin.fr/des-hommes/guerre-1914-18/morts-pour-la-france/>

⁶ Macone G., *Sète, mémoire en image*, Tome IV, Saint-Avertin, Alan Sutton Ed., 2006, p. 49.

⁷ <http://www.memoiredemontbazin.fr/des-hommes/guerre-1914-18/morts-pour-la-france/>

⁸ BMS, déc. 1914- janv. 1915, p. 146.

of high activity like the vendanges (grapes-harvest), pushing land owners to ask for temporary exemptions for their workers fighting up North⁹.

Nonetheless, regarding the affectation, we could notice that a significant quantity of the merchants -especially the urban ones - were affected to non-fighting units, especially the automobile units. This could be explained by two main reasons : first, the merchants were members of the French bourgeoisie and thus were, through different means, affected to "protected" units. The other reasons is that most of them owned a car and were some of the few who could drive on the front (M. Roux ou M. Jeanjean).

- Deaths

Unfortunately, like thousands of French families, the families of wine merchants had to suffer from the loss of relatives, weakening threatening the activity and the future of the society. Death hits renowned and less famous families. In Montbazin, Leon Carrière, aged 21, the son a local merchants, is killed in june 1918 in Chaudun (Aisne)¹⁰. In Sète, we have here the examples of two sons of famous local families killed as well on the front (doc 5b)¹¹.

2. *On material*

The mobilization affects as well the material question, especially through the use of military requisition.

These concerns more specifically 5 domains.

First the horses : thousands of them are requisitioned for the army and for the food supply in the region as well (doc 6).

Related to the horses, carts are demanded by the army as well¹².

The combination of these 2 requisitions disturbs deeply the sector because horses and carts are vital in the vineyard and in the expedition process since the productions journey in 600 liters barrels stacked on cart called "charroi".

More contemporary means of transportations are requisitioned as well : cars and trains

⁹ Archives municipales de Frontignan, 3 F 13, Lettre de L. Koester, 28/08/1917.

¹⁰ <http://www.memoiredemontbazin.fr/des-hommes/guerre-1914-18/morts-pour-la-france/>

¹¹ Information from the website <http://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/>

¹² BMS, oct.-nov. 1914, p. 136-138.

mainly¹³. Here to carry military supplies as well as food supplies for both military and civilian populations.

In most town, vast buildings are requested by the army to host wounded soldiers or store merchandises and military stocks. Since the merchants owns large and convenient (near means of communication) warehouses, they are the targets of the army demands. Therefore, lots of wine depots are turned into ammunition storehouses, soldiers housing or temporary hospital like in Mèze (doc 7)¹⁴.

Ultimately, because of the increase of military demands in chemical products, their use is restricted which causes a lack of Phytosanitary products in the fields and in the warehouses. Consequently, vineyards and stocked wines cannot be treated and suffer from disease and deterioration¹⁵.

Facing all these disturbances and disorders, let's see how the merchants react.

II. Individual and collective responses

To respond to the demanding effort caused by the war, the answers are on two levels : the one of the company and the one of the syndicates.

1. Coping as fast as possible

On the company level, the wine wholesalers in Languedoc follow the patterns of thousands of other shopkeepers, tradespeople or farmers.

- Family in support

First, they rely on their family, especially the women and the youngsters.

On the doc 8, we can read the following caption : "As the war goes on, the women, who for twenty-nine months learnt so many new jobs, dedicated to the most unforeseen activities. They are invested in easy and remunerative works which most will want to continue after the war."¹⁶ Comment on the picture and caption : here is a grotesque and distorted vision of the woman (look at the man behind + woman only made for easy jobs) but it symbolizes the new place of woman in the wine industry. As in many other industries, they step up to replace -

¹³ BMS déc.-janv. 1915, p. 142.

¹⁴ Bulletin d'informations de la ville de Mèze, avril 2012.

¹⁵ ADH 10 R 356, enquête sur la situation agricole dans le département, 1918.

¹⁶ *Le Miroir*, 07 janvier 1917.

temporarily - men.

This is recurring in the sector, especially in small or rural societies. For instance, the example of the Jeanjean Family in Saint-Félix-de-Lodez (Hérault)¹⁷. When François is joining his regiment, his wife, Cecile stand up to sustain the familial activity and replace her husband. This one continue to give orders from the front, but the daily routine is managed by Cécile with some reluctance nonetheless from their former commercial partners. Letters from Rouané who complains about the wife lack of abilities and expertise.

In other cases, the activity is took on by other members of the family, mostly the elders, or the youngsters, sometimes sick or estranged siblings, most of the times with difficulties and complications. In Saint-Chinian, Jules Viste hand the direction of the society to his sick brother and Abel Dessup from Gabian is forced to leave his 15 year old son in charge, helped by his brother, a civil servant living 20 km away, both ignorant of the uses in the industry¹⁸.

To avoid these complications, and the loss of capital, some merchants are compelled to close down their house.

- Closing down

This mainly concerns rural societies like one Henri Chabbert in Saint-Chinian who's driven to close his firm from august 1914 to February 1919 as he states in this letter¹⁹. The closing down is due to his impossibility to find a substitute and his inability to run his house far from it, without losing customers, hence money. It's then better off for him to shut down the firm during the conflict, limiting the risk to lose money. Other firms are in his situation, experiencing difficulties after the war.

The other cases of closing down are the one of foreign merchants and especially from german or german-originated family. This is a recurring situation in Languedoc since in the XIXth century, many german merchants installed their youngest sons in the region, to run the family interests directly. Here is the example of Louis Koester²⁰. Koester is a famous and prosperous merchant, born in Sète in a german family. Even if his brother is fighting in the French Army, suspicions concerns and mistrust arise when Louis's father, Henrich, himself naturalized, flees to Spain in 1915. Louis Koester is then forced to officially hand his commerce over and is now only referenced as a land owner (even if he stays involved in the

¹⁷ Jeanjean M., *Vigne et vin en Languedoc-Roussillon : l'histoire de la famille Jeanjean, 1850-2006*, Toulouse, Privat, 2006, p. 63 et sq.

¹⁸ ADH 8 M 309, Fonds de la Chambre de commerce de Béziers, Lettre d'A. Dessup, 03 mai 1920.

¹⁹ Idib., Lettre de « Chabbert-Poussines », 28/04/1920.

²⁰ See his biography in Le Bras S., *Négoce et négociants en vin dans l'Hérault : pratiques, influences, trajectoires (1900-1970)*, thèse soutenue à Montpellier, novembre 2013.

sector after the war, mainly thanks to his father in law, Louis Thau). We know through several indications that this examples is not unique and that all german-originated firms are under suspicion or forced to shut down.

Aside these individual actions, we can observe patronal ones as well, through the involvement of regional and local syndicates.

2. Syndicates in action

As soon as august 1914, the Regional syndicate, even weakened by the absence of several of its members support an effort to restore regularity in the sector. Meanwhile, it participates to the Union Sacrée, the collective effort requested by the president Poincaré.

- Union Sacrée

In this context, the wholesalers, through their syndicates, decide to contribute to the generous donation made by the entire sector. Thus, in the autumn of 1914, 200.000 hectolitres are delivered to the front and the wounded in hospital (doc 9a). Until early 1915, we have proofs of deliveries of wine from the southern merchants to hospital and refugees lodging in the northern part of France²¹. Even if this action is limited in time (in December 1914, the regional syndicate expresses fears that this donation could become regular²²), this is the sign of a significant effort in a profession known for its individualism.

- Restoring pace

But main concerns in the syndicates are to the restoration of a close-to-normal activity. Indeed, war has caused three kinds of troubles to the expeditions of wine from Languedoc²³. The first one is the destruction of trains and infrastructures in the north.

The second one is the requisitions of material for military purposes.

The third one, consequence of the two first ones, is the disorganisation of the railroad system.

Based on a law from 1875, military transportations (ammunitions, food supplies, soldiers) are having priority and up until 1917, wine is not considered as a "staple product". Thus thousands

²¹ ADH, 10 R 50, dons de vin, 1914-1915.

²² BMS, déc-janv. 1915, p. 142.

²³ BMS, août-sept. 1914.

of carts are abandoned or lost in august 1914 on the French railroad system, with no possible hope of a rapid return and, because of the state of war, the approval by the government of the non-responsibility for the rail companies. Moreover, in case of a return, this could be a breach in commercial contract and the loss may be supported by the merchants. This is a tremendous concern because in Languedoc a large amount of the expeditions are made by train (around 90%). In the meantime, a moratoria for commercial transactions is ordained by the government. Many southern merchants, who were expecting payments from their clients in august 1914, are then facing huge delays that burden their firm's accounting. Furthermore, the circulation fees are increasing during war time, from 1,5 F in 1914 to 3 F en 1916 and 10 F in 1918²⁴.

In this context, the regional syndicate is active in three directions:

- Giving advice to his members, especially advice of prudence and to trade only with solid and long-time running firms, less inclined to be weakened by the war. The syndicate offer as well services such as a collective service of commercial credit and try to facilitate the communication between commercial partners
- Starting an intense propaganda and activity of lobbying, especially towards the Ministry of Public works, the one responsible for the railroad, with some results : in late 1914, government forces the rail companies to provide a regular service to commercial activities + in 1917, wine is decreed as a "staple product"
- Being the unavoidable partner of the army in the supply of wine to the front. This is brought into being with the increase of demand from the front. In this tensed situation, the State and the Army must find reliable intermediaries in the productive regions : thus they rely on the Regional syndicate to get information, relay orders and control the sector (doc 9b).

III. The Home front : a significant opportunity

1. Wine consumption in WWI (doc 10)

- Pinard : sociability and a national catalyst

Wine on the front has three main purposes, as suggested by the testimonies²⁵.

²⁴ Figures from Gervais P., *La viticulture en France de 1913 à 1924*, Paris, Chimie et Industrie, 1924.

²⁵ See Cochet François, « 1914-1918 : l'alcool aux armées. Représentations et essai de typologie », *Guerres*

The first one is classical : wine is part of the daily ration of the poilu and is used in the "rata", to accompany the meal.

The second one has a social dimension : wine is drunk with friends, to fight boredom, to celebrate or to fraternise with allies.

Third point (doc 11): This last picture induces the question of propaganda, which is not absent in this matter, since wine is also a national catalyst.

- A booming demand

In this context, the demand is important, especially after a decree of October 1914, when the general staff headquarter decide that every soldier will be granted 25 centilitres of wine everyday (doc 12), which means almost 1 M litres per day, mainly coming from Languedoc (or at least transiting through it, from Spain and Algeria)²⁶.

To assure the distribution, large facilities are created both in Languedoc and in the near-front : Store-stations as well as "wine trains" (doc 13).

This leads in the region to

2. *Rapid and suspicious fortunes*

- An ongoing activity with large benefits

Despite the difficulties, the activity is ongoing, especially for the strongest firms.

In Sète, so called "port of wine", the activity of the port doubled during the war (doc 14), and german prisoners are required to sustain the activity and fill in to replace the mobilized workers (doc 15). Many reports and testimonies describe the frenzy activity of the port²⁷, where wine from Algeria and Spain are imported, then dispatched to the front.

After the war, official reports indicates that many houses from the region realized tremendous benefits²⁸, especially in 1916-1917 when the wine prices reach 100 F/hl (12 F in 1914 - doc 16)).

This shed jealousy, suspicion and hatred to a profession which was already suffering from distrust

mondiales et conflits contemporains, 2/ 2006 (n° 222), p. 19-32. One can find other examples in Cazals R. (dir), *500 témoins de la Grande Guerre*, Ed. midi-pyrénéennes, 2014 or in war testimonies such as *Les carnets de guerre de Louis Barthas*, recently edited in a new version in 2013.

²⁶ Archives du Sénat, Rapport fait devant la commission de l'armée sur le ravitaillement en vin, 1916.

²⁷ Hélys M., *Les provinces françaises pendant la guerre*, Paris, Perrin, 1918, p. 212 et sq.

²⁸ Archives de la Banque de France, inspection des succursales de Sète, Béziers, Montpellier, Narbonne et Nîmes, 1919-1925.

since the turning of the XXth century and that is suffering from the bad image of wine-merchants on the front (called "mercantis") as well as those far way (doc 17).

This led as well to the intervention of the state.

- The intervention of the State

To avoid the speculative (and sometimes overspeculative) attitude of the merchants, the state and/or the army intervened on the market in two different ways.

First by the requisition. Because of the non-cooperative attitude of the wholesalers, offering poor-quality and insufficient quantity of wine, the army decided to apply requisition to the wines as well in the summer of 1915 = up to 20 % of the harvest in 1915 ; 1/3 in 1917 (this leads to lots of complaints, because of the low price and the conditions of payment)²⁹.

The second way is taxation. A first step is the luxury tax that strikes some wines, especially the aperitifs. But the main taxation is a law passed in 1916 and taxing all the benefits from august 1914 up until 18 months after the end of the war³⁰. In some case, the taxation could rise up to 80 % of "extraordinary" benefits, which were numerous since wine prices were rising.

Conclusion :

- 'Cleansing' of the sector
- Increase in wealth of the ongoing companies that were able to sustain their activities during the war
- Emerging of the Regional syndicate, now a reliable and manifest partner of the State
- Worsen the image of the wine merchants

²⁹ BMS, juill. 1915-janv. 1916, p. 189 et sq.

³⁰ Loi du 1^{er} juillet 1916 concernant l'établissement d'une contribution extraordinaire sur les bénéfices exceptionnels réalisés pendant la guerre (Journal officiel de la République française des 2 et 6 juillet 1916).