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Tracking the 'Enemy Within': Alcoholisation of the Troops, Excesses in Military Order and the French Gendarmerie during the First World War

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In his testimony published in the late 1970s, Louis Barthas mentions soldiers on the Somme front during the summer of 1916 being desperate to avoid the presence of the 'c*ognes'*[1] who prevented them from foraging in the neighbouring villages. However, as he further explains, 'this zeal to implement such stringent and absurd regulations irritated the soldiers so much that they formed gangs and went on to administer quite a few beatings using clubs on the backs of gendarmes.'[2] Worse still, Barthas mentions a later incident when – as a result of similar military police inflexibility – two gendarmes were apparently assaulted, then hanged by the side of the road leading to a nearby village.

Albeit reported as hearsay by the author, this sinister anecdote nonetheless mirrors the reality of numerous clashes between gendarmes and more or less inebriated soldiers. Military archives and personal accounts are filled with tensions and quarrels[3] between those entrusted by military regulations with law enforcement across military operations areas – the so-called

[1] A highly pejorative nickname ('thrashers') given to gendarmes since the beginning of the 19th century.
[2] Louis Barthas, *Les carnets de guerre de L. Barthas, tonnelier*, Paris, F. Maspero, 1978, pp.350-351.
[3] See for instance narratives by Maurice Genevoix (*Ceux de 14*) or Roland Dorgelès (*Les Croix de bois).*

'Zone des armées' - and soldiers whose drunken proclivities are now widely known and fully documented[4]. By extension, comparable incidents also occurred away from the front, during leave periods[5] or when quartered in barracks.

For the most part, such forms of hostile behaviour can plainly be attributed to the *poilus'* massive consumption of wine and other alcoholic beverages. To some extent, this took place with the assent of military authorities who actually included wine as part of daily rations; consumption was also encouraged via supply channels with official approval (supplementary rations, profiteering merchants, cooperatives, postal packages)—not to mention illicit sources (looting, fraud and general foraging in ruins).

As a result, gendarmerie forces were confronted with several types of situations calling for their intervention. Under increasingly firm instructions to achieve greater control, investigations, monitoring of outlets and *in flagrante* arrests were carried out to combat such practices whose consequences were sometimes tragic[6]. Gendarmes became a tool in the fight against the 'alcoholization' of both French and allied military forces—as well as against all forms of related disorderly behaviour resulting from consumption (brawls or riots) or procuring it (e.g. thefts).

As illustrated in the anecdote reported by Barthas, action from Gendarmerie forces – widely documented during the war – intended to achieve limitation, confinement or even full eradication of drunken behaviour – collective or individual – contributed to further degradation of their image among soldiers. As law enforcers, gendarmes thus suffered a wide number of negative and more or less lasting consequences, from general contempt and derogatory nicknames to physical assaults[7].

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[4] On this particular subject, see Thierry Fillaut's "La lutte contre l'alcoolisme dans l'armée pendant la Grande Guerre : principes, méthodes et résultats" in Laurence Guignard, Hervé Guillemain and Stéphane Tison (eds.), *Expériences de la folie. Criminels, soldats, patients en psychiatrie (XIX-XXème siècles)*, Rennes, PUR, 2013, pp. 141-152 or François Cochet's "1914-1918 : L'alcool aux armées. Représentations et essai de typologie", *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 2006/2 No. 222, pp. 19-32). See also Charles Ridel's recent *L'Ivresse du soldat. L'alcool dans les tranchées,* Paris, Vendémiaire, 2016.

[5] See for example Emmanuelle Cronier, *Permissionnaires dans la Grande Guerre*, Paris, Belin, 2013.

6 For a very detailed case study, see Marie-Laure Féry, *Prévôté et lutte contre l'alcoolisme dans le Groupe d'armées du Nord pendant la Grande Guerre,* Master's dissertation under the supervision of Prof. Jean-Noël Luc, Paris-Sorbonne University, 2000.

7 On this subject, see the chapter entitled "La légende noire, ou l'offensive des lieux communs" in Louis-Napoléon Panel's *La Grande Guerre des gendarmes*, Paris, Nouveau monde, 2013, p.531 et sq.

In reality, gendarmes acting as provosts on the front line were only responding to a standard requirement of wartime operations: keeping fighting forces mobilised and united[8] by quashing all transgressions of military order. With cohorts mainly drawn from conscription and only recently drafted, this regulatory dynamic was therefore bound to clash with its natural opposite—a dynamic of disruption fuelled by alcohol in multiple forms.

Exploring this permanent fight against what soon became an 'enemy within' must lead us to consider a number of specific issues; first, the practices, origins, consequences and perceptions of drunken behaviour among soldiers; secondly, measures taken against this problem – a real curse in times of war – and the part played in this effort by the French Gendarmerie. Doing so will enable us to consider more generally the place taken by the First World War in the wider history of alcohol consumption by the masses, its collective representations and its regulation by public authorities.

Alcoholization in the army: fostering disorder and discontent

The First World War marked a radical turning point in the socio-cultural history of practices related to alcohol consumption. Often wrongly presented as the moment when the entire French nation fell in love with wine, it was rather a decisive moment in the conceptualization and promotion of temperance.

Wines and spirits at the heart of the poilu*'s daily routine*

The mass consumption of alcohol on the front line – be it as wine, spirits, cider, beer, etc. - is widely documented as early as 1914. This resulted from several factors. The first is institutional: even before the conflict, France's Supply Corps was instructed (April 1914) to supply each 'bivouacked soldier' – i.e. posted in frontline areas - with a daily ration of 0.25L of wine and 0.0625L of brandy[9] (respectively equivalent to 1/3 of a standard bottle and a very small flask). In the autumn, these rations were quickly extended to all soldiers present in the

8 Louis-Napoléon Panel, "'L'énorme machine' : la gendarmerie et la mobilisation en 1914", in Jean-Noël Luc, *Soldats de la loi. La Gendarmerie au XXe siècle*, Paris, PUPS, pp. 65-75.
9 Official Bulletin of the Ministry of War, *Alimentation en Campagne*, Paris, Charles-Lavauzelle (ed.), 2 April 1914, p.64.

'Zone des armées', i.e. nearly 3 million men to be daily supplied[10]. Allotted quantities of wine never ceased to increase during the whole conflict, either via the standard ration going up to 0.5L in 1916, or via the allocation of supplementary cheap rations bought on the count of the corps[11]. By 1918, the daily ration of a soldier thus reached nearly a full litre, to which must be added 'exceptional' rations gifted by military authorities to celebrate an event and quantities bought from local supply channels (military canteens, front-line merchants, local population). Though it remains difficult – given the available data - to provide a precise evaluation of the average daily intake, the figure was indisputably high—probably around 1.5 to 2 litres of mostly poor-quality wine and – more importantly – wine with very limited strength (ca. 8-9% alcohol content or even less if diluted—which was then common practice).

Other spirits were also widely consumed, including beer, cider and *aperitifs*. However, corresponding quantities never reached the levels recorded for wine; more difficult to obtain, less easy to preserve and more dependent on regional cultural practices, they were never likely to rival the prominence of wine, which soon became part of French soldiers' identity and earned itself – as early as the end of 1914 – the universal slang nickname of '*pinard'* (plonk)[12].

It is therefore not surprising to notice regular mentions of alcohol consumption in the mass of testimonies from soldiers. These testimonies allow us to grasp other factors at play and underpinning such practices. First and foremost, as underlined by Alexandre Lafon, consumption practices were imported from civilian life[13]. Alcohol consumption, especially collective consumption among members of the same units, eased a soldier's integration into their virile sociability—as confirmed by Roland Dorgelès who explained in *Les Croix de bois* that a sure sign of successful integration was achieved when 'the newbie […] started to drink our pinard with pleasure[14]'. One also drank wine purely to quench one's thirst, all the more so since wine was easier to preserve than water, which needed to be sterilized and whose supply channels - including natural springs – could be contaminated by decaying corpses[15]. Other

10 French Senate Archives, 69 S 119, *Rapport fait à la commission de l'armée sur le ravitaillement des armées en vin* by M. André Lebert, November 1916, p.3.
11 This compares with the average yearly consumption of wine in France estimated to be around 130L per inhabitant in the early 1910s. For its own part, France's Academy of Medicine stated in an extensive study published in 1915 that a "modest" drinker should be defined as one drinking only a litre or less of wine per day.
12 Albert Dauzat, *L'argot de la guerre, d'après une enquête auprès des officiers et soldats,* Paris, Armand Collin, 1918, pp.59-31.
13 Alexandre Lafon, *La camaraderie au front, 1914-1918*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014, p.260.
14 Roland Dorgelès, *Les croix de bois*, Paris, A. Michel, 1919 (new edition, Paris, Le livre de poche, 2007) p. 42.
15 *Archives départementales de l'Hérault* (hereinafter ADH), 172 J 2, Jean Pouzolet, *Journal résumé de la guerre 1914-1918*, 22-23 August 1915.

drinks were also used to celebrate a promotion, the birth of a child or an exceptional event; champagne was of course served to all soldiers on New Year's Day meals but a number of aperitif brands – household names at the time such as *Byrrh* or *Dubonnet* – were also used for celebratory purposes and spread their fame along the frontline. A post-prandial outburst by Paul Duval-Arnould narrating a meal with his captain in 1915 typifies this: 'Oh Dubonnet! Dubonnet! I do not have the honour of your acquaintance, nor am I expecting any advantage from glorifying your divine beverage! But our meal was a chorus of praise addressed to you[16].'

Yet drink was also a means to combat inner trouble or distress, including the famous '*cafard'*, a broad term using the image of a cockroach – its literal meaning – to refer to homesickness, the pain of losing one's comrades or even the permanent stress of war. In his *Crapouillots*, the same Paul Duval-Arnould introduces one of the soldiers of his unit as follows: 'a decent chap—but with a major flaw. He once got a bullet in the head. Now when it acts up, this bullet gives him the *cafard*; so to drown it, he drinks—and then let's say he's not an easy customer to handle[17].'

Given this context, 'just a little drink' would often lead to numerous forms of excesses.

All kinds of excesses

Excesses were of all kinds and, though mostly recorded in relation to festive circumstances, they largely emerge from the archives as a means of 'letting off steam' to relieve permanent pressure from the conflict, especially on returning from a particularly trying ordeal. Frédéric Rousseau defines it as an 'artificial shield[18]' but it created numerous disruptions of military order, jeopardizing not only the necessary unity among soldiers required for victory but also their public image in the eyes of civilian populations.

From the early days of mobilization, soldiers received massive quantities of wine gifted by the local populations and corresponding episodes of drunken soldiery on board transfer trains are plenty. In Lyon, in May 1915, Sergeant Maurice Berruyer mentions one of his comrades who 'gave in to his natural proclivity in honour of our departure. He then caused some disturbance and threatened our warrant officer right in the middle of the crowd at

16 Paul Duval-Arnould, *Crapouillots. Feuillets d'un carnet de guerre,* Paris, Plon, 1916, p.237.
17 *Ibid.*, p.59.
18 Frédéric Rousseau, *La guerre censurée. Une histoire des combattants européens de 14-18*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, p. 174.

Perrache station; so we had to hand him over to military authority.[19]' In Cahors, men of the 7th Infantry Regiment were blamed for having - as mentioned in a report -, 'caused a lot of racket in town [because] many men had drunk—as usual', which could have been avoided if 'the men were consigned to their barracks on the day of departure and prevented from drinking with excess in the canteen[20].'

At the front, cases of drunken behaviour were also particularly frequent, especially on return from the trenches—as the *Revue d'économie politique* deplored in 1917: 'When the soldier comes down from the trenches, there's a little money in his pocket from higher pay and his combat allowance; he can therefore easily get drunk, especially since, most of the time, he doesn't need much to do so' and since – at his cantonment – 'he has many occasions to become inebriated"[21]. Such statements are confirmed by the soldiers' direct testimonies, for instance that of Alphonse Gallienne describing his arrival in a Lorraine village at the end of August 1914, where 'it's a real party, we can get anything we want here' and later mentioning consequences: plenty of men 'sick from drinking[22]'. If several tales reported by Louis Barthas, Paul Duval-Arnould or Jules Jeanbernat are to be believed, such excesses sometimes created a challenge to collective security; beyond frequent cases of drunken soldiers threatening their own comrades or risking to reveal their position to nearby enemies, numerous cases related to spying are noticeable: local civilians working for the Germans gave massive quantities of wine to soldiers in exchange for information or simply to cause them to lower their guard and neglect security precautions[23].

Finally, one must recall cases in which soldiers having consumed alcohol or trying to procure it became involved in delinquent behaviour, be it at the front, at their cantonments or in garrison towns. Corporal Henri Bury thus indicates in his diaries that 'the town of Villeron was seriously afflicted by the French army who plundered everything […] it is shameful to see such things—and we hear the same story in every village that we go through[24].' To a large

19 ADH, 18 PRI 2, Maurice Berruyer, *Journal de Guerre*, 28 May 2015.
20 *Service historique de la défense* (hereinafter SHD), 6 N 94, *Fonds Clémenceau* collection, *Incident report dated October 30, 1915 on disturbances in Cahors (29 October 1915).*
21 Pierre Cauboue, "Les cooperatives militaires pendant la guerre'', *Revue d'Economie Politique*, July-August 1917, pp.297-298
22 *Carnets de guerre d'Alphonse Gallienne*, *Fonds familial Lebucher* collection, 23 August 1914.
23 A typical episode from the summer of 1914 is reported by Captain Jules Jeanbernat in his memoirs. See *Lettres de guerre (1914-1918)*, Paris, Plon, 1920, p.61.
24 Henri Bury, *Journal de guerre*, private collection, p.13.

extent, such practices were related to what Jules Isaac calls 'the *Chasse au pinard*[25]' (hunting for plonk), a significant vector of tensions with the local populations—as witness formal complaints lodged by civilians throughout the conflict[26]. Similarly, brawls were also numerous between soldiers, or even with civilians[27] who often had to suffer the combined effects of drunkenness and peer pressure.[28]

Such incidents were not without consequences, especially since they gave a negative image of the army at a time when national unity was a permanent core theme of official discourses. Hence stigmatisations—from both sides.

A protean anti-alcoholic discourse

From the outset, temperance organisations were keen to alert the authorities on the phenomenon of drink-related disorderly excesses, especially in the rear. A compendium of evidence entitled 'Fighting alcoholism at the front ('Zone des armées') and rear ('Zone de l'intérieur') – September 1914- July 1915' condemned the behaviour of drunken soldiers via numerous testimonies, unreferenced but supported by letters from the *Ligue nationale contre l'alcoolisme (National Temperance League)* or the workers' monthly periodical for 'social hygiene' *La Pensée ouvrière (Organe mensuel illustré d'hygiène sociale et ouvrière)*. One of them provided a striking amount of details:

> Reservists had drunk so heavily at the time of departure that in certain regiments the men arrived in a dreadful state. In the reception camp at one of our great naval bases [Rouen], it became permanently necessary to call on guards to intervene and tie up such men taken with fits of *delirium tremens* or mad rage caused by alcohol. […] There were even many who had to be tied down to their beds in order to be restrained. A young soldier assured me that in one single night, he had counted 100 men restrained in this way.[29]

25 Jules Isaac, *Un historien dans la Grande Guerre. Lettres et carnets, 1914-1917*, Paris, Armand-Colin, 2004. Letter dated 5 September 1915.
26 SHD, 19 N 38, Miscellaneous reports, *Complaint from Madame Gibert*, April 1918.
27 See for example SHD, 18 N 190, "Report on the incident involving *chasseurs* from the 44th battalion, 17 June 1917. Chasseurs complaining about the absence of any wine merchant and causing a racket."
28 Emanuelle Cronier, *Permissionnaires, op. cit.*, p.182.
29 SHD, 6 N 21, Fight against alcoholism, blank note, Calvados, 6 December 1914.

If this presentation may seem excessive, it is nonetheless a valid reflection – among many other testimonies – of the degree of alcoholization affecting part of the troops and this situation even moved France's Academy of Medicine to signal 'the likely advantage – at the present hour – to inspect all towns and areas of military residence […] to ensure ill-advised tolerance does not expose soldiers to the serious consequences of alcoholization and drunkenness[30].' A year later and in the same perspective, the *Société française d'action contre l'alcoolisme* (French society for action against alcoholism) began publishing *Le Bulletin de l'alarme*, its 'call to arms bulletin' defining the fight against alcoholism as similar to the fight against the Germans, themselves portrayed as incarnations of drunkenness—with quotes and iconography to prove it[31]. Debates on alcoholism in the army became a burning issue, notably among members of the Academy of Medicine, as witnessed in its proceedings for 1915[32]. If the peril was properly understood, measures to be taken and products to be controlled were still the subject of multiple controversies.

Within the army, condemnations were also numerous and in line with manuals intended to build the character of soldiers. In its 1914 edition, Félix Chapuis' *L'Instruction théorique du soldat par lui-même (Self-Taught Theoretical Instruction for Soldiers)* recommended the following: 'Whenever soldiers have the occasion to drink wine, beer, cider or other beverages, they must always be moderate and prove their understanding of moderation as a matter of hygiene and an invaluable quality[33]'. Among soldiers themselves, a number of testimonies take up similar arguments praising the necessity and honour of remaining sober, as for instance in Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* where these words from a common soldier are recorded while fighting goes in a barn right next to where Barbusse and his squad are sleeping: '*But we're not like them—we know how to behave!* Marthereau comments with a certain amount of pride. *Thanks to Bertrand and his obsessive hate of alcoholism, that poisoned Nemesis playing havoc with the*

30 Session dated March 2, 1915, reported in a letter from the *Ligue nationale contre l'alccolisme* to the Ministry of War, 12 March 1915, SHD, 6 N 21, *op. cit.*
31 "A nos lecteurs", *L'Alarme*, No.1, April 1916, p.2.
32 *Bulletin de l'Académie de Médecine,* Compendium of sessions and reports for the year 1915.
33 Major General Félix Chapuis, *Instruction théorique du soldat par lui-même*, Berger-Levrault, 1914, 24th ed., p.67.

masses, our squad is one of the least infected by wine and the hooch.[34].' On the contrary, condemnations are no exception, especially when they disturb sleep[35] or seem excessive, as indicated by Jean-Pierre Poutous, a soldier from the Landes region who – in his letters home – describes one of his comrades as follows: "Since last September, he must have drunk enough wine to drown [the lake of] Saint-Pée […] the way he laps it—it's fearful[36].' Logically enough, most condemnations came for superiors, whether in direct contact with the troops like Lieutenant Marcel Étévé ("My Breton Le Botte behaves very badly: he cannot be in the cantonment without getting terribly drunk[37]") or posted at staff headquarters like General Humbert who reported in August 1916 that 'the increasing number of outlets offering wine for immediate consumption undeniably endangers the discipline and health of our troops[38]'.

In total, while alcoholization practices were recurrent among the troops, they were also duly blamed for their negative impact on discipline and unity, two fundamental requirements for any hope of victory. This explains why military authorities, acknowledging the concerns of temperance organisations, doctors and soldiers themselves, took measures to bring such excesses under control.

Regulating, monitoring, arresting: gendarmes at the heart of the tracking Process

Faced with this not altogether unknown but remarkably new situation, forces of law and order were the necessary guarantors of a control and repression process with multiple consequences.

34 Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu. Journal d'une escouade*, Paris, Flammarion, 1916, p.165.
35 Testimony of Raoul Dumas, cited by A. Lafon, *op. cit.*, p.260.
36 Letters of Jean-Pierre Poutous (34th Infantery Regiment), private collection, Letter dated 3 May 1915.
37 Marcel Etévé, *Lettres d'un combattant*, Paris, Hachette, 1917, p.164.
38 SHD, 18 N 190, Note from the 3rd Army Military Staff dated 2 August 1916.

Military authorities at work

In his already mentioned *Instruction théorique du soldat par lui-même*, Major General Chapuis defined proper military behaviour as follows:

> In town, one should be well dressed, sport a proper attitude and walk casually. One must never smoke a pipe, walk with one's hands in one's pockets, loiter or engage conversation with low-life women; one must always be found polite, obliging and protective. A soldier must never enter brothels or establishments of ill repute; his proper place is in broad daylight. Military regulations forbid contracting of debts and prescribe severe punishments for those infringing this rule.[39]

All archives at our disposal demonstrate that soldiers would regularly disregard such standards of military decency whenever inclined to have a drink or go on a spree. Considering the likely dangers entailed by tipsiness - even in its milder forms - in a frontline context, it was hardly surprising to see military authorities react swiftly.

The first measures were isolated; taken on the initiative of local commanders and sometimes radical, their aim was to prevent any disruptions at the front as well as in the rear. As early as the autumn of 1914, orders were given in the *Seine-et-Oise* region – near Paris and by then very close to the front line – 'to curb the scourge[40]', i.e. drunkenness affecting soldiers' fighting capacity. In the 5th Army, General Franchet d'Espérey prohibited any purchase of alcoholic beverages by the military at the beginning of March 1915 and restricted the public sale of so-called 'hygienic' beverages (wine, bier, cider, etc.) to only two two-hour periods daily (10am to 12pm and 5pm to 7pm)[41]. As Commander-in-chief, Joffre confirmed this a week later: 'In all armies, measures have been taken by commanding generals to the effect of restricting the sale and circulation of alcohol and alcoholic beverages'. Aiming to streamline practices which 'differ in their modalities in accordance with each army', the original prohibition was extended to the whole 'Zone des armées'.

39 Major General F. Chapuis, *op. cit.*, pp.26-27.
40 SHD, 6 N 21, *op. cit.*, Anonymous note [in all likelihood coming from the National Temperance League], 23 September 1914.
41 *Ibid.*, Decree governing the sale of alcohol to troops in the army Zone, 5th Army, 3 March 1915.

Away from the front, the situation was identical. In the 10th Military Region (Brittany), General Vautier equally banned the selling of alcohol to stationed troops on account of 'extremely frequent cases of drunkenness resulting in breaches of discipline'. In collaboration with the local *Procureur de la République* (public prosecutor) and the Prefect of *Ille-et-Vilaine*, he signed a decree in June 2015 which - advertised by the local press at the end of the same month - banned the sale of any alcoholic beverage - other than the so-called 'hygienic' ones – to all soldiers on the territory of the 10th Military Region and imposed specific opening hours to all public outlets [42]. In July, the military governor of Paris, General Gallieni, applied the same measure to the capital—then considered 'a fortress under siege'[43]. In October, a ministerial circular eventually endorsed all of these decisions, thus banning the sale of alcohol to all soldiers mobilized at the front and in the rear or even posted in factories working for the war effort[44].

Rationalisation of control was then pursued at a steady pace between 1915 and the end of the conflict, via some forty successive regulatory instruments (orders, instructions and directives) governing the sale and circulation of alcohol in the 'Zone des armées'[45]. Now emanating from General Headquarters working in cooperation with public authorities[46], these regulations turned out to be more stringent by extending the ban to soldiers on leave in February 1916[47] and by including wine itself at end of the same year. Somehow tolerated until then, wine and the excesses it created were thus brought under control. By April 1916, any incident in the Zone could lead to forced closure of outlets—whatever beverage being sold[48]. In the following year, General Pétain ordered commandeering of surplus wine quantities entering the Zone[49]. In August of the same year, the Ministry of War prohibited the sale of any alcoholic beverages – including wine – between 9.30pm and 8am in all railway stations[50].

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[42] SHD, 6 N 21, o*p. cit.*, Letter from General Vautier to the Minister of War dated 1 July 1915. Cafés, brasseries and bars of any kind had to be closed by 10pm every night in towns of more than 5,000 inhabitants (9pm in all other localities).

43 *Ibid.*, Letter to the Minister of War, 15 July 1915.

44 Ministerial circular dated 27 October 1915. Cf. SHD, 5 N 269, Note to the Minister of War, 7 November 1915.

45 SHD, 16 N 1575, Chronological transcript of the orders, instructions and directives relating to the sale and circulation of alcohol in the armies.

46 The first step in this area had been the prohibition of absinth, implemented in the army as early as the end of 1914 and extended to the whole population in 1915.

[47] SHD, 16 N 1575, o*p. cit.*, GQG (General Headquarters), Decision dated 15 February 1916.

48 *Ibid.* GQG (General Headquarters), Instruction dated 13 April 1916

49 *Ibid.* Instructions dated 1 and 30 July 1917.

50 SHD, 7 N 175, Letter from the Minister of War, 12 August 1917. However, this measure was softened regarding shunting yards, i.e. allowing soldiers on leave to fill their regulation flasks.

In order to uphold such regulations, both military and civilian authorities logically required the intervention of law-enforcement forces—mainly Gendarmerie forces.

A function with distinct levels of action

In peacetime, fighting the excesses related to alcoholism formed part of regular Gendarmerie assignments; such excesses were defined by the law dated 23 January 1873 governing repression of public drunkenness[51]—until replaced by that of 1 October 1917, which – enacted right in the middle of the conflict – made corresponding constraints, fines and penalties more stringent[52].

Whether integrating military police units in the 'Zone des armées' or remaining posted in the rear with their initial status, gendarmes were indeed confronted with numerous cases of drunkenness or disorderly behaviour related to the soldiers' consumption practices. Their role was clearly defined: enforcing the dispositions set out by the many official texts regulating the circulation, sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages. In traditional and very formal fashion, the April 1916 decree 'purporting to the prohibition of opening new public houses for the consumption of beverages on the premises or sale and conveyance thereof' provided the following precisions in its last article[53]: 'Art. III. Police commissaries [superintendents], mayors, Gendarmerie officers and all other law-enforcement agents shall be put in charge of enforcing the present decree.' In some cases, the word 'provost' is specifically mentioned, for instance in Art. 4 of General Franchet d'Espèrey's 1915 decree[54]: 'the selling of hygienic beverages (wine, cider, beer, perry, mead, coffee, tea and other herbal beverages) to soldiers of all ranks shall be authorized in public houses only from 10am to 12pm and from 5pm to 7pm—subject to the strict monitoring of provosts.' Tasks assigned to gendarmes were therefore multiple: they had to record infringements and sanction them but also had to keep a close watch on public houses. This extended their standard mission and plainly amounted to an overload of work difficult to cope with given – especially at the front – their understaffed

51 Thierry Fillaut, "La lutte contre l'alcoolisme dans l'armée pendant la Grande Guerre. Principes, méthodes et résultats" in Laurence Guignard, Hervé Guillemain and Stéphane Tison (eds.), *Experiences de la folie. Criminels, soldats, patients en psychiatrie (XIXe-XXe siècles)*, Rennes, PUR, 2013, pp.141-152.
52 Imprimerie-librairie de la gendarmerie, *Loi du 1er octobre 1917 sur la répression de l'ivresse publique et sur la police des débits de boissons*, A. Le Normand (ed.), 1917.
53 SHD, 18 N 190, Model decree, April 1916.
54 SHD, 6 N 21, *op. cit.*, 3 March 1915.

units with too few commanding officers. In this regard, a revealing entry in the diary of Captain Jules Allard – Chief Provost of the 18th Infantry Division – informs us that at the time of the outbreak of war, only 22 units (7 gendarmes on foot and 15 on horse) [55] were available to him to ensure policing of a whole division numbering – at least theoretically – more than 15,000 men. This situation consequently made the fulfilment of their duties a formidable challenge, all the more so since the surveillance of bars and repression of drunkenness was only one special segment—to which must be added the gathering of intelligence, criminal investigations, the hunt for spies and deserters, the escorting of prisoners (German or indeed French), the controlling of traveling goods and individuals, etc.[56] However the crucial importance of their intervention remained—based on a twofold logic: ensuring the strict maintenance of law and order (a practical dimension) and keeping the French nation united (an ideological dimension).

As a result, their intervention became indispensable to achieve any meaningful repression of drunkenness and related excesses among soldiers, both in terms of recording infringements and of establishing their exact circumstances. Here's for instance a typical case from 1918, taking place in the Vosges region: two gendarmes on foot spotted the presence of two soldiers seated in a bar outside of authorized hours; though there was no visible evidence of alcohol being consumed (the soldiers were only in conversation with the owner and later claimed to have forgotten about the hour limit), a report was nonetheless filed for infringement of the 19 July 1917 decree[57]. More seriously, a few weeks later in a nearby village, two gendarmes discovered eighteen military men drinking wine in a bar supposed to be out of bounds for troops since December 1917[58]. There again, a report was duly filed. French gendarmes sometimes operated in collaboration with or on the indications of other forces; such was the case in Gérardmer in September 1918 when three American military police officers – having previously concealed their badges – obtained cognac from a local café. They reported this information to their captain who himself informed Provost Lambert, attached to the American 6th Infantry Division. Swooping on the premises, Lambert secured a confession from the owner after only a short investigation (though this was late retracted). Using his

55 Captain Jules Allard, *Journal d'un gendarme, 1814-1918*, Paris, Bayard, 2010.
56 Louis-Napoléon Panel, *La Grande Guerre des gendarmes*, Paris, Nouveau Monde Editions, 2013.
57 SHD, 19 N 1195, Gendarmerie report dated 8 August 1918.
58 *Ibid.*, Gendarmerie report dated 18 September 1918.

military authority powers in this field[59], the Provost then called for a 'severe sanction' (especially since the establishment had already been closed three times[60]). This action was intended to demonstrate to our American allies that prohibition regulations extended to US soldiers posted in France were truly enforced as mandated by general staff instructions[61].

Investigations in such cases were brief and successful. Yet some cases proved to be more complicated. In May of 1918, a house owner of Crevecoeur in the Oise *département* went to the local Gendarmerie station to lodge a complaint against two soldiers having broken into his cellar with – he claimed - intent to steal beverages. A few weeks earlier in Breteuil, the cellar of a woman had been ransacked for wine and spirits—but also food and rabbits. Despite formal investigations by gendarmes, no charges were brought—for lack of certainty as to intent in the first case and in the absence of a clear identification of perpetrators in the second[62]. When charges were brought – however –, punishment was exemplary. In 1916, a party of soldiers was accused of having stolen wine from a crumbled house in Verdun. The inquiry was swiftly conducted by gendarmerie officer Royer and one of the soldiers – Hanen – was charged with plunder *in flagrante delicto* and brought before the 2nd Army's court martial who condemned him to two months of imprisonment[63]. Finally, in certain situations, civil and military justice proved complementary. Again in the Oise *département*, a soldier was arrested in 1917 for drunk and disorderly behaviour on the streets of Creil. After a thorough inquiry by the local gendarmerie (interrogation of all witnesses to restrict the definition of charges to public drunkenness and verbal assault), the man was transferred – under the supervision of provosts – to the remand prison of Senlis where he was detained at the disposal of the public prosecutor—the latter receiving 'orientations' from the major general in command of the soldier's division as to appropriate final charges and punishment[64].

Same procedures were followed in the rear and Gendarmerie activities were also properly supported, as witness the files of soldiers court-martialled for desertion, disobedience,

59 Recently reasserted by the Ministry of War via a circular dated 18 September 1918. Cf. ADH, 4 M 709, Thefts and Frauds. Circular from the Legal Affairs Division of the Minister's secretariat sent to all military governors, generals in command of military regions and chief commanding officers of French troops in Northern Africa.
60 *Ibid.*, Report dated 27 September 1918.
61 "L'alcoolisme francais et les soldats américains », *L'Alarme*, No. 10, October 1918, pp.3-4. See Also SHD, 18 N 32, Supplies (food, fodder, tobacco), note from the special Franco-American office, Ministry of War, 22 July 1918.
62 SHD, 19 N 38, Fournier and Gallopin cases, reports dated 16 May 1918 and 27 April 1918.
63 SHD, 11 J 6, Hanen case, Conviction file ref. 19/105, 1916.
64 SHD, 11 J 6, Lombard case, June-July 1917.

or breaches of the peace[65]. Logically, this problematic positioning of gendarmes in an intermediary capacity directly led to a degradation of their relations with soldiers, itself contributing to the deterioration of their image[66].

Impaired relations and assaults

If the example taken from Louis Barthas quoted in the introduction to this study might be construed as fiction fed by daily rumours haunting the trenches, tunnels or cantonments[67], the situation it mirrors remains highly representative of real tensions affecting the social bond between soldiers and gendarmes during the conflict, a phenomenon in which the fight for temperance played a fundamental role. At the front as well as in the rear, Gendarmes thus often found themselves involved in clashes when trying to arrest or simply calm down soldiers. In February 1916, the 24th Colonial Infantry Regiment left its barracks in Perpignan to march to the railway station where a train would transfer it to the front[68]. Yet some of these men were unhappy about this return to combat duties and, as one report states it, 'many were drunk and nearly all of them hollering'; a gunshot was then fired, forcing gendarmes to intervene to arrest the culprit—who rebelled against them. This unit being famous for its lack of discipline, the four gendarmes involved had been appointed by the colonel in command 'to ensure proper policing and respect towards civilians in and around the station'. Once this soldier restrained, gendarmes had to supervise the boarding of train carriages 'partly by force, partly using persuasion' and make sure his 'overexcited' and inebriated comrades were duly shipped off. During a later stop at Béziers, new incidents broke out: a soldier picked a quarrel with a gendarme, insulted him, grabbed him by the collar and tried to take his gun; as the train left the station again, general insults were also thrown at the stationmaster, at commissioned officers and at other gendarmes. This story is particularly revealing and demonstrates how much gendarmerie officers – beyond their mere involvement in punch-ups – were also lumped together with superiors as natural targets for invectives. Together with an entrenched distrust of law-enforcement forces already at work in peacetime, their relational ambivalence toward

65 ADH, 2 R 913-914, Court-martial files, August-December 1914.
66 See the testimony (*op. cit,*) of Captain Allard on this matter.
67 See Emmanuel Taïeb's survey article on this issue: "Des rumeurs de guerre", *Quaderni*, vol 49, 2002, pp.5-16. See also the interpretation of the "Pendus de Verdun" affair by Louis-Napoléon Panel in *La Grande guerre des…, op. cit,* p. 533 et sq.
68 SHD, 6 N 94, *Fonds Clémenceau* collection, Perpignan incidents file, 10 February 1916.

soldiers – horizontal and vertical at the same time – explains to some extent the sharp animosity sometimes surfacing in the interactions between the two groups.

Military archives therefore provide frequent instances of clashes, threats and insults towards gendarmes perceived as shirkers and traitors. For example, a gunner by the name of Courcol - from the 6th Army – was court-martialled for 'provocation' in 1916[69]. The indictment against him informs us that in the early afternoon of 23 January 1916, the sergeant of his unit found him drinking in a café instead of fulfilling his duties (grooming the horses); the sergeant scolded him and reported the incident to the lieutenant in command. A few hours later, keen on revenge, Courcol – described as an 'inveterate drunkard' and now 'in state of intoxication' – encouraged a colonial infantry soldier to punch a gendarme who had summoned them. Hit in the face, the man lost a tooth while a fellow gendarme having rushed to his rescue was also hit with a foot kick. Courcol was sentenced to immediate imprisonment.

Far removed from the front, in Algiers, *chasseur* Royer was involved in a similar case. While instructed to stand guard at the entrance of his cantonment, he became inebriated and aggressive towards an employee of the local postal services who shared the same buildings. When a sergeant – a gendarmerie officer - ordered him to allow this employee to enter, Royer answered with taunts, then pointed his rifle at him before three other gendarmes intervened and managed to restrain him. Once tied up, Royer went on insulting the sergeant having reproved his behaviour. He was sentenced to a year in prison[70].

Finally, tensions were also frequent in relation to the monitoring of outlets, mainly on account of the stringent approach taken by gendarmes in charge of this surveillance. Assigned to military police, this task was carried out by gendarmerie privates under the supervision of NCOs with previous civilian experience of similar investigations. As revealed in 1917 by a service circular from the headquarters of the 1st Army, four NCOs were affected to this monitoring because of their profession—all of them former tax inspectors[71] well-versed in conducting inquiries and drafting reports. Though duly trained at the headquarters of the *division d'étape* (staging posts and logistical services) and reminded that their function required 'a measure of tactful understanding'[72], such men soon gained a reputation for inflexibility[73]

69 SHD, 11 J 6, War Justice, Court-martial files, Coursol case, Decision ref. 2/88, 1916.
70 ADH, 2 R 909, Court-martial files, Royer case, Decision ref. 143/1088, 1914.
71 SHD, 19 N 37, Note dated 4 March 1917.
72 SHD, 19 N 1195, Note from the *Sûreté* [criminal investigations] bureau of the 7th Army, 7 September 1918.
73 *Ibid.*, petition from families of soldiers on leave from the village of Hérimoncourt (Doubs *département*), 25 August 1918.

and excessive pride in their status. Under such circumstances, nicknames thrown at gendarmes logically reflected a depreciation of their identity and the angry or even violent nature of relationships between gendarmes and soldiers. Such nicknames were sometimes old ones (e.g. 'cognes' [thrashers] from Provencal 'cagne' (bitch) and/or the verb 'cogner' (to hit violently—also reflected in 'bourres' from 'bourrer' [to pummel]) or inventive new ones: 'les enfants de chœur de Deibler' (Deibler's choirboys—from the name of a famous family of public executioners) or – in the same vein - 'les hirondelles de potence' (swallows of the gallows) [74].

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Ultimately, gendarmes clearly appear to have played – under the guidance of military authorities aware of the dangers of alcohol as early as 1915 and including wine as a target from 1916 onwards - a fundamental part in the fight against alcohol-related excesses challenging wartime order. Their intervention was rendered necessary by the permanent need for able-bodied men to fight in what was then a total war for which controlling the public image of soldiers – both at the front and in the rear – was undoubtedly a relevant factor. In this context, it became primordial to quell the excesses and disorderly behaviour of soldiers infringing common decency and military discipline as a result of drink.

Given multiple assignments, gendarmes ensured control and repression in various fields, a chief one being the tracking of the 'enemy within' quickly identified by temperance societies; this did not go without consequences affecting their relationships with the troops; which, as early as 1914, became very tense. A reputation for rigidity, treacherous tactics, subservience to superiors and the undue enjoyment of privileges soon stuck to them, aptly summarized by private Tulacque in *Le Feu* : 'You should see them […] how they build their little nests in our cantonments—going straight to where there's plenty of food and comfort; and when their own plonk supplies are neatly secured[75], they go hunting for our clandestine bars. You'll see them lurking around, always with their sneaky eyes on the doors of *kasbahs*

74 On this subject, see Albert Dauzat, *L'Argot de la guerre. D'après une enquête auprès des officiers et soldats*, A. Colin, 1918.

75 Concerning the consumption of alcoholic beverages by gendarmes themselves, see Terry W. Strieter, "Drinking on the Job. Ivresse among the French Gendarmerie in the nineteenth century", *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 13, 1986, pp. 173-181.

[slang for houses] to check if there's a *poilu* discreetly coming out, licking his lips and looking left and right[76]'.

While Tulacque's trenchant views then lead to an open debate among in his squad comrades, this tirade is significant inasmuch as its arguments against gendarmes focus on the consumption of alcohol and the monitoring of outlets. Coming to the end of the present study and though it remains in need of further exploration (notably through the examination of the profiles of gendarmes involved in this type of policing, of the real extent of their powers and of the very few testimonies written by themselves) the problematic of this subject remains complex, with multiple issues fundamentally based on the often antagonistic concerns of the troops and the authorities above them.

76 Henri Barbusse, *op. cit.* p. 125.