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**Title : « From Great War's Memorial to the House of Peace : pacifist initiatives in Saint-Ouen »**

Saint-Ouen is a commune in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, located in the northern suburbs of Paris. The city is nowadays famous for its flea market. Throughout the 20th century, it was also known as a left-wing stronghold. During the first municipal elections after the First World War, the socialist party won almost 55% of the votes and Emile Cordon was elected mayor. After the creation of the Communist party at the congress of Tours in 1920, and especially at the aftermath of the Second World War, the city passed under the influence of the Third Internationale. Fernard Lefort (1945-1979), Paulette Fost (1979-1999), Jacqueline Rouillon-Dambreville (1999-2014) succeeded each other as mayors under the flag of the communist party for more than a half century, from 1945 to 2014.

Besides its socialist legacy, the city of Saint-Ouen, was strongly committed to the promotion of peace. How local municipal officials involved in such actions ? How the urban landscape had been affected ? In what a sense the city of Saint-Ouen had been and continues to act, as an urban place for promoting the culture of peace, in its broad definition adopted by the UNESCO and the UN ? In order to answer to these questions, I studied the municipal archives, as well as the echoes of various events related to pacifist initiatives, within the local or national Press. My aim in this paper, was to examine which were and how had been developed the actions for peace in the city of Saint-Ouen, all along the 20th century and up to nowadays.

## **Memorials and other events related to the First World War**

At the aftermath of the Paris Treaty of Peace, the municipality of Saint-Ouen decided the erection of a War memorial. Contrary to other similar monuments all over France, bound to stir ‘patriotic’/nationalist sentiments among citizens, this one was conceived as a ‘stone manifesto’ against war and its underlying causes.

Actually, the FWW established the cultural template for modern commemoration<sup>1</sup>. I consider commemoration as an essential function of each society, a ritualized phenomenon, resulting from a social construction process, which reflects the dominant ideological sensibilities and ‘weltanschauung’ of the past within a society in a given historical context. Both religious and lay communities devoted themselves to the task of commemoration after 1918<sup>2</sup>. The resulting monumental art provided a focus for ceremonies of public mourning beginning in the decade following the Armistice, and continuing to this day. The languages, imagery and icons adopted, varied considerably according to artistic conventions, religious practices, and political convictions. They also reflected more practical considerations such as the ability or will of the community to pay for such monuments.

In the case of Saint-Ouen, an artistic competition was launched on december 1920. During the meeting where this decision was taken, the guidelines for artists and selection criteria were also formulated. For a suggestion to be adopted, it should enshrine the following characteristics : love for humankind and aversion towards the war and its horrors. Given this ideological orientation, we can read in the final text of this meeting that in « no way should the socialist city of Saint-Ouen be sullied by a monument gloryfying war. On the contrary, the internationalist spirit inspiring its communist citizens should lead them to build a monument, echoing a cry of revolt of human Reason against war »<sup>3</sup>. The members of the selection committee included : the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle, the designer Frantz Jourdain, Georges Pioch, secretary of Seine’s communist federation, the mayor of Saint-Ouen, Emile Cordon and his assistant, Alexandre Bachelet. Finally, it was the proposal of Louis Dejean<sup>4</sup>, that came up to the committee’s expectations, associating aesthetic quality with ideological engagement.

Taking his distances from other war memorials conceived in France at the same period, Dejean did not opt to portray a ‘Poilu’. On the contrary, he chose to represent a young woman discovering, contemplating the hideous aspect of the war and protecting a child from

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<sup>1</sup> *War memory and commemoration* edited by Brad West , ...,p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Winter, *The Cambridge history of the First World War ; Sites of memory, sites of mourning* ...,p.85.

<sup>3</sup> Saint-Ouen municipal archives, (registre 1D2 15)

<sup>4</sup> Louis Dejean had also carved the bronze medal for Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1909.

its terrible consequences. Under the advice of Bourdelle, this statue was not placed in a graveyard as usually practiced with this kind of memorials, but in front of the Town hall. Bourdelle highlighted in one of his statements in the final report, the very pedagogic value of exposing such an artistic work to the view of all Saint-Ouen's citizens. The allegoric message conveyed by this statue is enhanced by the three inscriptions that were added a posteriori, probably in the early 1930s. On the front side we can read one of Jean Jaurès famous phrases, « I dare declare along with millions of people that the Great Peace is possible », on the left side, it is Anatole France quotation, « the Union of people will bring World Peace », and on the right side, the saying of Voltaire, « War is a crime that Victory does not forgive ».

These distinguishing marks of the monument, decided Danielle and Pierre Roy,<sup>5</sup> to include it in the category of pacifist monuments in their geography of WW War memorials found in France. According to the typology they have elaborated, these monuments could be ranked in five main categories: the bulk of them belong to what they design as 'triumphalists' with engravings such as 'Glory to our dead soldiers...' and with representations of aggressive warriors... The second one, concerns vectors of traditional patriotism, with dedications such as « To the children of X...city fallen in the battlefields for the shake of France' ; next to them, there is also the 'dolorist' group ; a fourth group is made up by hybrid memorials, including the word peace within their phraseology, without however, necessarily implying or generating automatically their characterisation as pacifist. The case of Lille is a quite eloquent one ; even if the word peace appears in this Memorial, the whole scenery is a bellicist one. Finally, there are the memorials deserving the labelling of pacifist, such as the one of Saint-Ouen.

The inauguration of this Memorial, was also largely commented in the French newspapers. On the one hand, the socialist press praised the pacifist nature of this monument, contrasting with monuments depicting helmet-bearing Poilus or coqs beating their wings. *L'Humanité*, informed its readers that « our comrades in Saint-Ouen, had to counteract reactions from the partisans of the National Bloc, hostile to this initiative »<sup>6</sup>. This coalition of traditionalist-nationalist right-wing political parties, was in power from 1919 to 1924. Its ideological cornerstones were based on two principal issues: Patriotism and fear of Bolshevism. The National Bloc stressed the importance of the union sacrée and praised World War I veterans, while at the same time, it contributed to increase anti-communist sentiment in France.

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<sup>5</sup> See Danielle, Pierre Roy, *Autour de monuments aux morts pacifistes en France...pour une géographie des monuments aux morts pacifistes en France...*

<sup>6</sup> *L'Humanité*, 9 décembre 1922

One of the newspapers close to this political culture, *Le Figaro*, had another version of the story. Covering the same event, Figaro's editorial team, reported the « violent discourses addressed to several thousand people in front of the townhall gathered around some thirty red flags »<sup>7</sup>.

During the inauguration ceremony, prominent personalities of the local or national communist and pacifist movement, addressed the audience of this event. First of all the mayor of Saint-Ouen Emile Cordon, talked to the crowd. Next to him, Marcel Fourrier, international secretary of the Association of Republican veterans, adherent to the Clarté group, founded by Henri Barbusse in 1919, delivered a speech in his turn. Maurice Honel, president of the Communist Youth was also attending the inauguration, followed by Ludovic Oscar Frossard, general secretary of the PCF, who had supported the pacifist minority faction of the SFIO during the Great War.

Apart from the symbolic importance of this memorial's inauguration, another event related to the FWW and revealing the pacifist orientation of Saint Ouen's municipal authorities, was the inauguration of the buste of Jean Jaurès, on November 11th 1920. Once again, the place choosen was the Townhall, where Leon Blum and Georges Pioch adressed the assembly. The commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Armistice, offered another occasion for the communist mayor of that period, to demonstrate the commitment to the culture of peace for the city of Saint-Ouen<sup>8</sup>.

Back to the time, the campaign in favour of André Marty<sup>9</sup> was an additional manifestation of the city's engagement to peace. A leading figure in the French communist party during the Interwar period, disputed personality of the Spanish Civil War, whom uncomplimentary portrait was drawn by Ernest Hemingway in *For whom the bell tolls*, André Marty had joined the French navy, at the end of the War, as a mechanical engineering officer aboard the battleship *Jean Bart*. In April 1919, the crew of the battleship mutinied. Besides their sympathies laying with the Bolsheviks, French marins, were protesting against the slow rate of their demobilisation and the poor quality of their rations. The French government satisfied mutineers demands but pursued the ringleaders, among whom André Marty. After a mobilisation campaign in favour of his liberation, he was pardoned and released. The citizens of Saint-Ouen, played a crucial role in this outcome, as they mobilised themselves during

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<sup>7</sup> *Le Figaro*, 11 décembre 1922

<sup>8</sup> See the poster of the celebration of November 11th, on 1998 (1 Fi 3503)

<sup>9</sup> Saint-Ouen municipal archives : 1 Fi 44 (Ohé ! Les cannibales ! Nous exigeons l'amnistie !!!) ; 1 Fi 55 (Bourreaux !!! manifestation organisée le 30 juillet 1922 par le parti communiste pour la libération d'André Marty)

several protest marches in order to ask for his liberation, while at the same time they were seizing the opportunity to attack the nationalist/militarist coalition in power.

Helene's Brion personal history, is also linked to Saint-Ouen's pacifist image and action. Being one of the leaders of French Teachers Union and pioneer of feminist movement, she had been arrested for distributing pacifist propaganda and tried by a military tribunal in 1918. Despite her support to the « union sacrée » at the war's outbreak, she signed the pacifist resolution presented at the CGT's national congress at the initiative of Albert Bourderon and Alphonse Merrheim, in 1915. The resolution affirmed that "this war is not our war" and put the blame on the leaders of the belligerent states. Brion was arrested on November 1917 and sent to the women's prison of Saint Lazare. A smear campaign was started in newspapers such as *le Petit Parisien* and *le Matin*. Her trial became a « cause célèbre », reported on the front pages of French newspapers. On March 1918 *Le Petit Parisien* noted that Brion's certificate to teach had been revoked. She was not reinstated as a teacher until 1925 under the Cartel des Gauches. However, in the meantime, the mayor of Saint-Ouen, Emile Cordon, wrote on March 26th 1920, to Papillot, secretary of the syndicat of members of secular teaching, in order to inform him, that « the municipal council in its unanimity, assigned Helene Brion, as director of the creche, situated near the train station.... »<sup>10</sup>

### **From integral pacifism to anticolonial and inclusive pacifism**

During the Interwar period, the dominant trend within saint-Ouen's communist municipal team, was close to integral pacifism. As Norman Ingram highlights, although this movement emerged during the thirties, its origins go back much further than that<sup>11</sup>. Isolated individuals were precursors of the advent of a new pacifism which would respond to the growing aspirations of many people for a categorical rejection of war. The *Ligue internationale des combattants de la paix* was the most important and influential of the new-style pacifist groups in interwar France<sup>12</sup>. Founded by Georges Pioch and Victor Méric in 1930, its commitments to a complete rejection of the idea of national defence and to a, rapid and if necessary, unilateral disarmament, were conveyed by the socialist newspaper of Saint-Ouen, *Le Courrier socialiste*, led by Gustave Lesesne. At the same time, Lesesne was also close to Louis Sellier, the general secretary of the Proletarian Unity Party, formed in 1930 by leftists expelled from

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<sup>10</sup> AR370, personal file of Hélène Brion (le maire de Saint-Ouen, Emile Cordon au Citoyen Papillot, secrétaire du syndicat des membres de l'enseignement laïque, 26 mars 1920, n°5)

<sup>11</sup> Norman Ingram, *The Politics of dissent : pacifism in France :1919-1939*, ...,p.129.

<sup>12</sup> Romain Rolland was the honorary president and Victor Méric the general secretary. The honorary committee included Albert Einstein, Stefan Zweig, Upton Sinclair, Paul Langevin, Georges Duhamel, Jules Romains.

the French Communist Party (PCF), together with some who had previously belonged to the left-wing of the Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière (SFIO). Its members were known in France as *pupistes* and they shared integral pacifists' concerns. On January 1936, in a context of escalating tensions in the international relationships and with a Society of Nations, almost completely paralysed and weakened due to a series of aggressive acts committed both from authoritarian/totalitarian regimes and colonial liberal democracies, the Saint-Ouen socialist newspaper<sup>13</sup>, published articles critical of the secret diplomacy and the inefficiency of international institutions for law enforcement<sup>14</sup>. Haunted by the traumatical experience of the Great War, they were reluctant to join the antifascist front during Spain's civil war, and adhere to the idea of seeing this conflict through the lenses of a war for liberty on behalf of the Republicans. On the contrary, they considered that it was only a repetition of the caricature-like schematisation of the FWW as war of civilisation against barbarity. In such a sense, they were also accusing the Popular Front government about what they defined as 'their neomilitarist spirit'<sup>15</sup>.

During the Cold War period, the municipality subscribed to the anticolonial movement. When in May 1956, the news for the killing of one's worker son in Algeria, spread in the local press, antiwar initiatives had soon been brought about. In Somua (a company that manufactured machinery and vehicles. A subsidiary of Schneider-Creusot)<sup>16</sup>, three of the main syndicats (CGT, FO, CFTC) asked for an immediate cease-fire. A petition claiming peace in Algeria, circulated within workplaces such as the usine Lavalette or public schools of the city, gathering massive support from workers and teachers. On his part, Fernard Lefort, Saint-Ouen's mayor in the fifties, summarized in his editorial at the eve of general elections in 1953, the reasons for the city's commitment to Peace<sup>17</sup>. Advocating a peaceful settlement in the conflicts in Corea and Vietnam, he explained to his fellow citizens, that the pitfall of military spending, limits public investment, necessary for beautifying neighbourhoods and ameliorating everyday life.

Fifty years later, when the world entered a new era of conflicts at the end of the 20th century, The municipal council supported the initiative of a young citizen of Saint-Ouen, acting as a messenger of peace to the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 2005, at the 60th

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<sup>13</sup> Le Courrier Socialiste, 11 janvier 1936

<sup>14</sup> 19 septembre 1936 : « Même contre la guerre civile ! »

<sup>15</sup> 12 décembre 1936 : « L'offensive » par Louis Launay

<sup>16</sup> *Le Réveil*, 4 mai 1956 :

<sup>17</sup> *Le Réveil de Saint-Ouen*, 25 avril 1953 :

commemoration of the atomic bombings<sup>18</sup>. At this occasion, the municipal council appealed to the french government, urging it, to take an initiative for the implementation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. At the same time, the municipality, backed the activities of sociocultural associations, such as the local antenna of the Movement for Peace<sup>19</sup>. During the meeting of May 9th 2006, the council attributed 2500 euros to this association in order to enable it, to pursue its local initiatives on educational actions, centered on the culture of peace and non-violence. In the wake of this policy, the House of Peace (Maison de la Paix) was established and inaugurated at the same city in 2007. It hosts today the headquarters of the French Movement for Peace, member of the World Peace Council and of the International Peace Bureau. At the same time, this institution supports both the French section of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, and Mayors for Peace, whose network is joined by the city of Saint-Ouen.

Thus the peace-oriented thread that links up the story of Saint-Ouen, throughout the 20th century, is finally unwoven. In order to conclude, I would like to say that in my opinion, this paper contributes to the reflexion about the typology on Cities of Peace and for Peace, drawn by Peter van den Dungen, in his paper on “Idee und Geschichte der neuzeitlichen Friedensstadt”. Among the criteria, he defined and established for this classification, I think that Saint-Ouen is more or less directly concerned by the presence of important peace research institutions, such as the House of Peace, which serves also as a training center for people wishing to undertake actions in the field of peace culture. Moreover, the case of Saint-Ouen, show us that a series of other experiences may associate the urban places to peace actions. Artistic interventions shaping the public space, the employment of people working for the promotion of the culture of peace to public services, public manifestations such as anti-war, antimilitarist protest marches or public events celebrating the culture of peace and its values, together with peace narratives in the media space, contribute all to draw a cartography of one’s city pacifist heritage. At last, but not least, the instrumentalist nature of commemoration activities or monuments, can potentially act as a fundamental means for instilling and promoting a pacifist ethos within a given urban setting.

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<sup>18</sup> Report of the meeting of the municipal council on septembre 16th, 2005

<sup>19</sup> The movement was created in the aftermath of the Second World War by resistance movements, particularly those associated with communists and free-thinkers, and was linked directly to the *Mouvement mondial des partisans de la paix* whose aim was to struggle for peace.