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Gérald Arboit

► **To cite this version:**

Gérald Arboit. The Gendarmerie of Luxembourg. Jonas Campion; Laurent López; Guillaume Payen. European Police Forces and Law Enforcement in the First World War, Springer International Publishing, pp.141 - 155, 2019, 9783030261016. 10.1007/978-3-030-26102-3\_10 . hal-04090652

**HAL Id: hal-04090652**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04090652>**

Submitted on 16 May 2023

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WORLD HISTORIES OF CRIME,  
CULTURE AND VIOLENCE



# European Police Forces and Law Enforcement in the First World War

*Edited by*

Jonas Campion · Laurent López  
Guillaume Payen

palgrave  
macmillan



## The *Gendarmerie* of Luxembourg

*Gérald Arboit*

To examine the *Gendarmerie* of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg during the First World War, one must confront two distinct realities. The first concerns the lack of archives in Luxembourg, as is the case for any number of subjects other than the country's railways and steel industry. The second stems from the first: a lack of interest on the part of the small number of Luxembourgish historians, and a large number of popular misconceptions. This lack of interest might actually be considered a good thing, however, for it demonstrates the depoliticisation of law enforcement in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, while the prevalence of misconceptions is the result of an essentially bureaucratic history of the force.<sup>1</sup>

Independent of the biases of national scholarship, the history of the Grand Ducal *Gendarmerie* runs into the same historiographic lacunae as its European counterparts. Like them, it rests uneasily between an exclusive concern with the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup> and an overabundance of attention paid to the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> To this may be added a typically Luxembourgish tendency to view the “first European civil war” in light of the shadows cast by the second, elevated to the status of

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G. Arboit (✉)

Sorbonne University, UMR 8138 SIRICE, Paris, France

e-mail: [arboit@gmx.fr](mailto:arboit@gmx.fr)

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J. Campion et al. (eds.), *European Police Forces and Law Enforcement in the First World War*, World Histories of Crime, Culture and Violence, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26102-3\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26102-3_10)

“memory matrix”<sup>4</sup> (*matrice mémorielle*). The goal of this chapter is thus to lift the veil from the nationwide administration of a neutral country coming to terms with completely unprecedented circumstances, in the form of military invasion and economic blockade. The *Gendarmerie*, a rural police corps, became the primary force defending the neutrality of Luxembourg, as well as protecting the economic and social order of the country.

### THE *GENDARMERIE* OF LUXEMBOURG IN THE SUMMER OF 1914

The Luxembourg *Gendarmerie* is unique above all in that it is the lone national police force in the monarchy, which was established by the French Revolution from Brussels in 1796; international law (in the 1867 Treaty of London) required the state to maintain strict political neutrality in a country enveloped geographically by an economic alliance with its German cousin (the Prussian *Zollverein*, in 1842). The handful of large towns in the centre and south (Luxembourg, Mersch, Ettelbruck, Diekirch, Esch-sur-Alzette, Differdange) remained formally outside the gendarmes’ jurisdiction, in that they possessed municipal police forces of their own, under the command of local authorities. But the Superintendents of Police were recruited from the non-commissioned officer class of the *Gendarmerie*, or sometimes even from among its brigadiers. This tendency reinforces the notion that the *Gendarmerie* should be understood as the safety net for the Grand Duchy. Parliamentary debates after 1867 emphasised this point as well, and the law of 16 February 1881 consecrated the superiority of the gendarmes over the company of volunteers who with them composed the “armed force” of Luxembourg.<sup>5</sup> This hierarchy was justified by their practical utility, the volunteers being viewed as little more than a pool from which to recruit postmen, customs agents, roadmen, forestry rangers, rural policeman (*gardes-champêtres*) and municipal police. When the 1881 law was reformed in the spring of 1911, the government proposed a “reserve system” which would draw upon military veterans who had accepted employment with the state. The proposal was never adopted by parliament,<sup>6</sup> but the question of how to reinforce the ranks of the *Gendarmerie* remained an open one up until the outbreak of the First World War. A commission was created to study the question in the autumn of 1916, but the project remained a purely formal exercise for an additional 4 years.<sup>7</sup>

The problem of manpower available to the *Gendarmerie*, and to a lesser extent that of the volunteer company, was made abundantly clear during the First World War. The reform passed in the law of 16 February 1911 was designed to respond to the “increase in the population” of young men in the south of the country; this itself was the result of 3 decades of regional industrial growth and the unobstructed circulation of the “dangerous class” that furnished the labour force between Luxembourg, Meurthe-et-Moselle and the *Lothringen*, a class drawn from throughout Europe, but especially from Italy. The border was no longer a barrier for individuals seeking to avoid French, Belgian or German authorities; Luxembourg was a haven where it was easy to disappear in the crowd. The 160 gendarmes, established in the 1881 law, were no longer enough to deal with the evolving security conditions the corps now had to face. The 20 men and supplementary brigade authorised by parliament in light of the strikes in France (1905–1906) and Lorraine (1907) were insufficient to handle the strike of January 1912. In the 1913 budget, deputies authorised the addition of 10 men to the *Gendarmerie*, along with 3 machine guns (Fig. 10.1).<sup>8</sup>

This perception of a growing domestic threat on the part of parliament was based primarily upon a rise in criminality within the Grand Duchy. But these statistics disproportionately emphasised the Luxembourg arrondissement, where 20 of the *Gendarmerie*'s 33 brigades and 65% of its effective



**Fig. 10.1** Number of crimes recorded by the Luxembourg *Gendarmerie* (1900–1919). *Source* La Gendarmerie au Luxembourg, 1798–1935, Luxembourg, Worré-Mertens, 1935, p. 255

force, including 25 gendarmes in the capital city alone, were stationed. The response offered by the *Gendarmerie* largely addressed the demands of industrialists clustered in that part of the country to “stifle any [contingent] disorders”.<sup>9</sup> Some 57% of the population, however, lived in the arrondissement of Diekirch, which included the northern part of the country. With 186 men, or 1 gendarme for every 1420 inhabitants, the company of gendarmes there was little more than a “rural” police (66.2% of its statements) rather than a true “judicial” police (17%). It would take until the reign of the Grand Duchess Marie-Adélaïde (1912) for the *Gendarmerie* to come under the department of Public Force for its administration and the department of Justice for its operations.

These imbalances can be explained by the deployment of the brigades, which took place in 1895. They were largely stationed along the routes of the major railways (Prince-Henri and Guillaume-Luxembourg) and border crossings with Belgium, France and Germany, most notably across the bridges along the Moselle; later, the rural villages that grew to support the steel industry were added as they progressively expanded. As Luxembourg was not yet the land of milk and honey that it would become after the Second World War, but rather a liberal state still establishing itself after its recent independence (1867) and in response to the issues confronting it, the expansion of the *Gendarmerie* was not a major priority. The force had to make do with the resources available to it in order to accomplish its missions and make itself modern. With respect to the training of its ranks, in 1891 the Grand Duke Adolf von Nassau ordered future officers of the companies of *Gendarmerie* or volunteers to attend the *Theresianische Militärakademie* in Vienna, where officers of the *k.u.k. Infanterie-Regimentes Adolf Grossherzog von Luxembourg, Herzog zu Nassau Nr. 15* were already being trained; the first contingent arrived in 1896, composed of four non-commissioned officers—two of whom (Eugène Ferron and Michel Franck) were later assigned to the *Gendarmerie* after a stint in command of the volunteers.

This pattern of back-and-forth between the two companies was not yet a means to advance one’s career, but rather an expedient to make up for a lack of personnel. Thus, on 14 June 1912, First Lieutenant Ferron was named commandant of the *Gendarmerie* for the arrondissement of Diekirch, replacing Joseph Beck, who was promoted to captain and head of the volunteer company. Three years later, Major Emile Van Dyck, commandant of the armed force of the Grand Duchy since 11 January 1900, asserted his prerogative to step down. On 30 January 1915, a game of musical chairs ensued whose the Grand Ducal Army had the

secret: Captain Pierre Heckmann, head of the *Gendarmerie* company for 15 years, was named major-commandant, while Captain Beck replaced him in the *Gendarmerie* company, and Beck himself was replaced by First Lieutenant Frank, who was also promoted to captain. Among the non-commissioned officers, Ferron remained in Diekirch, while Lieutenant Maurice Stein left the company of volunteers and assumed the role of “military service as commandant of the arrondissement of Luxembourg”. Upon the death of Major Heckmann on 14 December 1921, these officers all advanced one step up the ladder.

The real innovation in terms of *Gendarmerie* operational adaptation to the times came with the decision to create “a special section” (1903–1914). The advocate general (*avocat général*) had in mind a judicial police force, like in Belgium, while the attorney general (*procureur général*) was looking for a criminal police force, like in Germany. For his part, Heckmann wanted more of a “mobile brigade” that was capable of responding to strikes, along the lines of the French “Tiger Brigades” (*brigades du Tigre* in reference to Clemenceau, Minister of the Interior who created them and who was so nicknamed). The result was a compromise between all these forms of law enforcement, trained professionally in France, in which only the detective branch adopted innovations of forensic policing under the title “criminal brigade”.<sup>10</sup>

### THE GENDARMERIE AND THE NEUTRALITY OF LUXEMBOURG

In late July 1914, this evolving *Gendarmerie* was on the front lines of the German invasion. The government asked it to report on the movements of the German armies along the country’s borders. The frontier brigades returned a wide range of information. On 31 July, civilian patrols were led by gendarmes Joseph Kugener of Rodange and Nicolas Peters of Rumelange in the border zones of Meurthe-et-Moselle and Lothringen. On the bridges spanning the Moselle, meanwhile, gendarmes passed the time in conversation with their German colleagues. The first dispatches regarded the closure of the German border to both human traffic as well as exports of food and provisions “from Prussia to Luxembourg”. Mobilisation also emptied the spa town of its French and Belgian vacationers, with the Lothringener stampeding to purchase coffee, food and salt—still relatively cheap, although prices were known to jump by as much as 50% in a single day. The dispatches from the *Gendarmerie* along the border relayed the panic gripping the people of Luxembourg in the



face of emptying shops and their inability to report to work. By 1 August, industry in the three fraternal nations had ground to a halt. In Rodange, Kugener relayed the widespread concerns among the population with respect to the probable arrival of unemployed foreigners (Fig. 10.2).<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, the criminal brigade turned its attention to espionage, the government having been misinformed by a note from the German legation, tracking down sources of French and German influence. But the restriction on activities related to the defence of Luxembourg's neutrality was relaxed, after the spring of 1914, in favour of the deportation of known "spies". After pursuing an English agent from January through March, attention turned to the Germans, beginning in Namur and Liège. And like the preceding spring, so-called

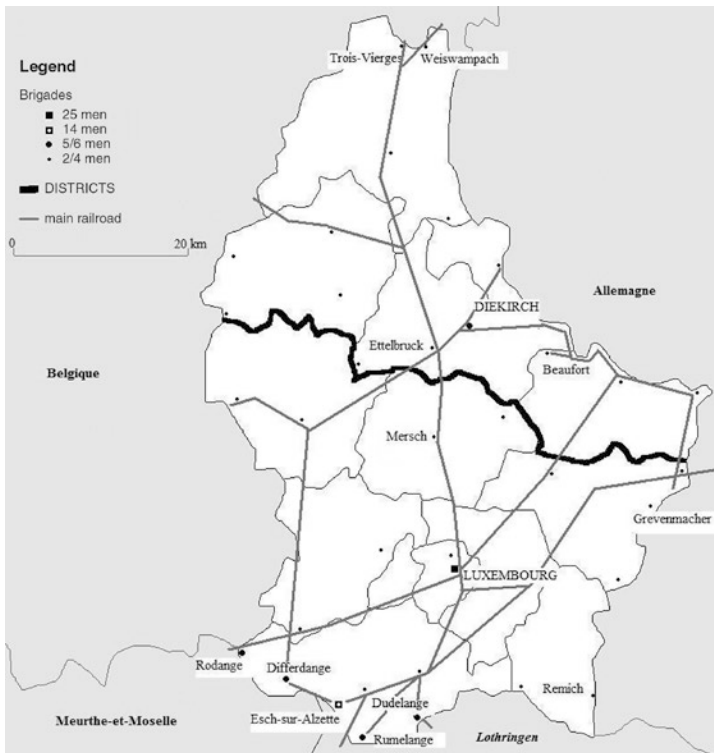


Fig. 10.2 Brigades of the Luxembourg *Gendarmerie* in 1914 (Credit G. Arboit)



“tension travellers” (*Spannungsreisenden*) were compelled to return to their country of origin.<sup>12</sup> Other cases of espionage were uncovered here and there, most notably by the brigade in Differdange, on the French border. Then, at 4.00 p.m. on 1 August, while the gendarmes stationed on the bridges of the Moselle learned of the state of war between Germany and France from their German colleagues, a squadron of the *Infanterie Regiment N. 69* occupied the railway station at Trois-Vierges. The objective of this special operation by the *Abteilung IIIb*, the German intelligence service, was to prevent France from using the railway to invade Germany.<sup>13</sup> In fact, as reports from the first Luxembourg gendarmes to encounter the “Prussian” troops indicate, the invaders had no knowledge of French positions. They all expected a violent French response, explaining away their harsh treatment of the gendarmes and railway and telegraph staff in Bettembourg and Grevenmacher, the primary railway connections and bridge to German territory.

In the face of invasion,<sup>14</sup> the *Gendarmerie* began as of 2 August to focus on defending neutrality. Wherever German military commanders appeared, they were presented with a formal complaint regarding their violation of the 1867 Treaty of London; on some occasions, gendarmes oversaw the evacuation of troops towards the Belgian or French border.<sup>15</sup> Above all, they saw to it that the local population obeyed the law, that is, that they refrained from committing any hostile act, from random acts of resistance to more serious offenses like espionage or theft of war *matériel*. When, in the autumn of 1914, the *Geheime Feldpolizei* of the Fourth Army began to dismantle French networks in the Grand Duchy, on the basis of intelligence seized from French archives, the *Gendarmerie* sought to become more proactive. Leaving to their fate those already “burned” by the German revelations, the *Gendarmerie* sought to protect any undercover Luxembourg nationals from being brought before the military tribunal of the 30th *Infanteriebrigade* of Trier; in Luxembourg, they would either be found innocent or brought before local tribunals, which did not prosecute either espionage or treason. The criminal brigade likewise attempted to uncover the agents that the *Geheime Feldpolizei* sought to infiltrate into France and effectively remove them from the playing field by revealing their identities.<sup>16</sup> In the same spirit, the *Gendarmerie* moved to arrest soldiers from Allied nations on national soil, rather than let them fall into the hands of the Germans. Thus, when French and English planes were forced to make emergency landings at Beaufort and Clémency on 13 August 1917 and 17 September

1918, respectively, gendarmes raced to extract the aviators from the custody of the *Geheime Feldpolizei* by appealing to the terms of the Hague Convention (1907).

But oversight of the occupation was not limited to playing defence against Germany. The *Gendarmerie* also sought to intervene judicially in the war effort. Of course, it could not effectively resist any atrocities committed by German soldiers or officers, whether due to drunkenness or intoxication with their own power; gendarmes recorded such actions, and even on some occasions managed to prevent them.<sup>17</sup> They had greater success, however, intervening to protect the extraterritoriality of Allied legations, entrusted to the protection of the volunteer company. Thus, on 9 March 1917, the criminal brigade was invited to investigate a theft that occurred at the French mission two days earlier; they discovered that two similar crimes had previously been hushed up by Major-Commandant Emile Van Dyck, both there (in October 1914) and at the Belgian mission.<sup>18</sup> More tragically, the *Gendarmerie* was in position to record the human impact of Allied bombardment. From 3 October 1915 until 11 November 1918, gendarmes were called on 137 occasions to 28 different towns and villages, to declare the death of 53 people.<sup>19</sup> The *Gendarmerie* was also called upon to oversee what became an all too common occurrence, intervening on 26 September 1914 to remove shells from German artillery found in the capital. Six days earlier, in Rodange, they had been asked to record the damage sustained during an exchange of fire between French and German soldiers ... in the room of the gendarme Nicolas Reuter.

#### THE *GENDARMERIE* AS DEFENDER OF LUXEMBOURG'S ECONOMY

The defence of neutrality was an obvious objective, in the sense that the *Gendarmerie* was a key component of institutions that were determined to keep functioning, be it the justice system, the government as a whole, or the Grand Duchy itself. The same was true of the economy, thrown into disarray by the blockade of Germany, a symbol of the government's inability to provide for its own people.<sup>20</sup> This issue began to assume worrying proportions for the government in March 1915, as evidenced by the findings of the *Gendarmerie* based on new legislative measures to protect the economic interests of the country in wartime. Scant notes exist on the smuggling operations organised by the German Army, despite the diplomatic concerns such incidents occasioned.<sup>21</sup>

To examine the defence of the country's economic interests, one must look instead at price monitoring,<sup>22</sup> enforcement of restrictions on consumption<sup>23</sup> and oversight of grain stores<sup>24</sup> and livestock.<sup>25</sup> In the spring of 1916, Major-Commandant Heckmann established “an organisation plan for the occupation of the frontier [by] the volunteer company” at the behest of the government. The *Gendarmerie* was similarly involved in filling spaces left unguarded by the army, particularly those between two smaller brigades, as in Trois-Vierges and Weiswampach in the north, and Remich and Rumelange in the south.<sup>26</sup>

These measures fell outside the scope of the *Gendarmerie*'s police duties in the countryside, although they were initially (in 1914–1915) understood as part of their mission with respect to public health. They were dictated by a context characterised by widespread shortages and imbalances of supply and demand. The situation reached such a point that on 18 November 1916 the government established mobile inspection brigades to monitor harvests and livestock. Importantly, they reported to the administration of contributions and excises, rather than the *Gendarmerie* (Fig. 10.3).

The latter felt they were already taking on a lot of work. Heckmann did not hesitate to call this creation a “grave, unmerited, and surely unwanted humiliation” by the government. He engaged in a veritable guerrilla war with the executive, refusing to see his gendarmes reduced to the role of “mere observer [...] of operations undertaken by other authorities”.<sup>27</sup> He reacted to the replacement of the gendarmes with

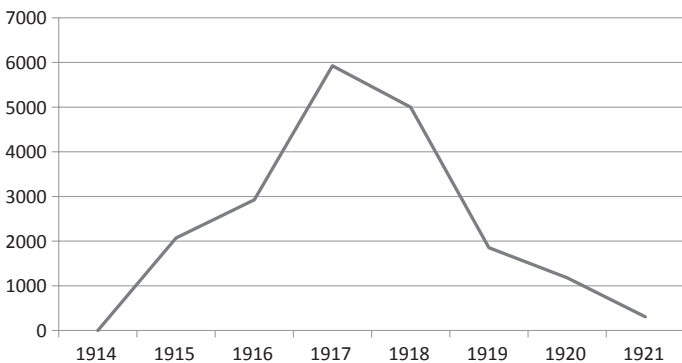


Fig. 10.3 Economic reports by the *Gendarmerie*. Source La Gendarmerie au Luxembourg, 1798–1935, Luxembourg, Worré-Mertens, 1935, p. 255

customs officers on 9 December 1916 by creating the “mobile brigade” discussed before the war; this was entrusted to Brigadier Jean Nickels, and included two gendarmes, Nicholas Galles and Pierre de Boursy. Heckmann thus defied the order of Prime Minister Victor Thorn, the former justice minister, who argued the submission of the *Gendarmerie* to the control of civilian authorities was an entirely legal manoeuvre.<sup>28</sup> Heckmann, in contrast, believed that the decision “[would] damage the prestige of the *Gendarmerie* and deprive the Corps of the public’s trust, which is the source of its strength, esteem, and authority”.

This bureaucratic guerrilla war was not properly the business of the *Gendarmerie*, but that was not how Heckmann saw it. His boss, Captain Beck, grumbled about the lack of coordination between the two inspecting brigades. This was all the more evident for the fact that his relationship with the head of the mobile brigade, Michel Wilwers, placed in charge of contributions from Luxembourg, was not the greatest. But Heckmann held out until the spring of 1918, when he understood that the economic situation was so critical that the mobile brigade could no longer act without the support of the *Gendarmerie*.<sup>29</sup>

This situation put a strain on the relationship between gendarmes and customs officials, particularly in Weiswampach, leading to the recall of deputy Jean-Pierre Jérôme Thinnès.<sup>30</sup> It also led to discontent within the ranks of the *Gendarmerie*. In 1916 and 1917, six gendarmes left the service, as well as any claim they had to a pension, further exacerbating the numbers problem. The centre-left newspaper *Escher Tageblatt* could hardly fail to pick up on the situation. On 1 September 1917, an editorial titled *Unserer Gendarmen* [“Our Gendarmes”] described the harsh terms of service in the brigades: the 15-hour workdays, the heavily worn uniforms needing to be mended as well as the requirement to learn Italian while off-duty in order to hold on to one’s position in the south and avoid transfer to the north, in the Ardennes, at one’s own expense. Heckmann brought the matter before a judge, who upheld the “offensive character of the article”, and had the daily paper formally censured.<sup>31</sup>

In an irony of history, once it was subjected to a domestic social crisis, the *Gendarmerie* also monitored the rise of discontent among the people of Luxembourg itself; discontent nourished by the political crisis that ensued following the death of Prime Minister Paul Eyschen, who had governed the country from 1888 until 1915, in addition to economic decline. New Prime Minister Victor Thorn was no fool. On the evening of 1 June 1917, after 2 days of growing calls for a general

strike, he summoned Heckmann to inform him that “the gendarmes and police [should] not feel themselves bound by the measures adopted by the German military authorities regarding questions related to the strike”. Presented as an appeal to uphold the law, the politician sought to prevent the disorder from distracting the army from the defence of Luxembourg’s neutrality and its economy. He even took the time to remind the officer by letter the next day.<sup>32</sup> The Major-Commandant got the message, but had to wait for the naming of the new government, on 18 June 1917, to present his evaluation of the *Gendarmerie*. The situation was worse than that revealed by the *Tageblatt* in its interview with the gendarme Nicolas Waldbillig.<sup>33</sup>

According to Heckmann, understaffing had reduced the gendarmes to 1911 levels, that is, 160 men. The company was overburdened, suffering from the rising cost of living and increasingly restless. The health of its members had declined under the weight of deprivation; six gendarmes were dead. Many servicemen were forced to hold down a second job in the private sector (in commerce, security or business) to supplement their salaries. The situation was no better in the army. In both cases, manpower was scarcely sufficient to handle the situation. Accordingly, he requested “the means to fully staff the corps of gendarmes and volunteers”. On 9 November 1918, he made the same demand of Kauffman’s successor, Emile Reuter. This time, he framed the request in terms of “reinforcement of the *Gendarmerie* during the retreat of German soldiers”, in order to ensure the “security of the country against this scum [*racaille*]”. He also proposed to simply staff a “reserve”, discussed in 1911, capable of supporting the mobile brigade. This project had been under examination by the chief of defence (Heckmann, Beck and Franck) since September 1916.<sup>34</sup>

But the coffers were empty, and the people would not have tolerated addressing the fate of the armed forces without taking their own suffering into account. Reports from the *Gendarmerie* foreshadowed the political crisis of the winter of 1918 since the preceding summer. In Rumelange, the echoes of the Russian Revolution of February gave new life to criticisms of the Grand Duchess Marie-Adélaïde.<sup>35</sup> That’s not counting the echoes of the German Revolution of November 1918, from the soldier’s council of Diedenhofen (Thionville) and the disorders resulting from the long retreat of imperial soldiers towards a Reich in ruins. Factories witnessed strikes. The *Gendarmerie* monitored the demonstrations that took place throughout the south (Rodange,

Differdange, Esch-sur-Alzette, Dudelange and Rumelange) as well as the north (Ettelbruck) and in the capital.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, a petition was circulated within the corps, which attracted the signatures of some 90% of the gendarmes. The petition was presented by “some of the oldest gendarmes” at the general assembly of the armed forces, not just the volunteers, on 20 December 1918 in the barracks at Saint-Esprit, in the ancient fortress of Luxembourg. They asked for what Waldbillig had displayed to the journalist who interviewed him, and what Heckmann had employed towards Kauffman. They, too, demanded the right to speak!<sup>37</sup>

On 9 January 1919, while the volunteer company threw itself into the republican revolution already underway, the gendarmes were left isolated in their brigades. They had returned to work in the name of the economy and security of the Grand Duchy. Though the movement was subdued by the French Army and military police (*prévôté*), the *Gendarmerie* of Luxembourg reaffirmed itself during the crisis, as it had throughout the war, as the armed force of the legal government. While the law of 13 August 1921 concerning the discipline of the company of gendarmes seemed to turn back the clock, it could not undo the impact on personnel of salary increases and readjustment of office and traveling expenses of February 1918, and April, May and June 1919. In addition, 13 new colleagues also rejoined the brigades. Their fate was more enviable than that of the volunteer company, which was disbanded.

## CONCLUSIONS

During the First World War, the *Gendarmerie* of Luxembourg underwent an evolution that turned it into an indispensable auxiliary of the government. Its social malaise was but a parenthesis. The task of modernising the armed forces in the pre-war years was accelerated during the war, no longer thanks to a “circulation of police”, that is, by the emulation of foreign police forces, but rather by the invention of economic control. The *Gendarmerie* thus established itself as the guarantor of the country’s independence, but also, in light of its leniency with agents from Allied countries—whether aviators or spies—as an instrument for the preservation of Luxembourg’s neutrality against German occupation, a demonstration of its engagement with the Allied powers.

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29. ANLux, AE-00525, Heckmann to Kauffman, 20 September 1918; Beck to Heckmann, 6 February 1917; Heckmann to Kauffman, 9 March 1918.

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33. *Escher Tageblatt*, 11 October 1917.
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35. ANLux, AE-00681, 26 August 1917.
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