

## “War Diary” by Paul Demeur

<http://expo-grande-guerre-biu-cujas.univ-paris1.fr/en/war-diary-by-paul-demeur/>

Paul Demeur's “War Diary” is not a war diary. In 1964, Paul Demeur, a lawyer at the Court of Cassation, was asked to join the editorial board of the *Journal des Tribunaux*, Belgium's leading legal periodical. At the time, Paul Demeur was a leading figure in Belgian legal circles in the second half of the 20th century, both as a lawyer at the Court of Cassation and as a professor at the Catholic University of Louvain. Fifty years after the outbreak of war, the editorial board felt it “appropriate to evoke [...] the memory of those jurists, magistrates and lawyers, both practicing and aspiring, who did not, at the time, remain insensitive to the call of the country, and who’s simple and pure examples still nourish our pride”. Demeur published a contribution entitled “*Journal de campagne 1914-1918 à l'intention de mes confrères*” (“Campaign diary 1914-1918 for my colleagues”). It was published in two parts of almost three pages each (each page consisting of three columns) in two successive issues of the *Journal des Tribunaux*, on October 11 and October 18, 1964 (JT, 1964, pp. 565-567 and pp. 586-588).

Paul Demeur's career as a lawyer and teacher can be reconstructed without difficulty, based on documents held by the Brussels Bar, the Cassation Bar and the archives of the Catholic University of Louvain. Other biographical elements were gathered from the tributes paid to him in the legal press and by the Court of Cassation following his death. The gathering of certain elements required more patience. They have been assembled based on genealogical research. Nevertheless, some parts of his career remain in the shadows. This is unfortunately the case for most of his student life, which must have taken place before the outbreak of war. As for his experience of the war itself, apart from his “diary”, we only know about him through his service record, which succinctly summarizes the stages of his military career. The military file itself, on which the card is based, has unfortunately disappeared.

Paul Demeur was born in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode on July 12, 1892. He grew up in a merchant bourgeoisie family in a Catholic environment. His family is renowned for his great grandfather, Albin Demeur, a well-known Brussels watchmaker, honored by Leopold I with the title of “King's Watchmaker”. His father, Georges Demeur, developed a soap business in Marseille. His mother, Marie Poncelet, is also from a merchant family. We know that he was in the “Humanities” section of the Jesuit Collège Saint Michel. He graduated in 1909. We lose his trace afterward since he does not give any details in his diary about his situation and occupations at the beginning of the war. We find him ten years later. His lawyer record mentions that he has a degree from the University of Liège from 30th August 1919. His studies were therefore obviously interrupted by the beginning of the war, in August 1914. Interrupted, no doubt, we must also consider the time between his graduation from the Collège Saint-Michel and his entry into the war. What did he do between September 1909 and August 1914?

Why Liège? That is surprising, given that there is a much closer range of university courses available in Brussels (université Libre de Bruxelles) and Leuven (université Catholique de Louvain). Judging by the available sources, he did not start his university career there. The *Livre d'Or des Universitaires liégeois*, which lists the names of students who died in battle and those who survived, does not mention his name. Therefore, he began his studies elsewhere. Coming from a catholic background, Demeur could naturally have followed the course of study that such students tend to follow: the Catholic University of Louvain.

He could also have entered, at least at the beginning of his studies, the Institut Saint-Louis, which organizes undergraduate studies for Catholics, including two years of candidacy in philosophy and literature in preparation for what was called a “doctorate” in law. Yet, there is no trace of him in the archives of these two institutions. Could it be that, at the start of his university career, he chose to enroll at the Free University of Brussels? Catholic student enrolments are rare, but perhaps not completely exceptional. While there are no statistics available to date to assess this phenomenon, we can at least mention the names of several leading catholic political figures: Charles Woeste, Henry Carton de Wiart, and Jules Lejeune. However, the available sources also lead us to answer in the negative. There is no record of Paul Demeur's enrolment at the Free University of Brussels.

Nevertheless, the archives of the University of Liège give important information. The enrolment register shows that he enrolled on May 6th, 1919, in the third year of his doctorate, and mentions “Jury central au Havre” as his institution of origin. Paul Demeur would therefore have been one of the students who sat an examination session in Le Havre. It is difficult to corroborate this information with other sources and to find out more about this student-soldier career, as the archives of the central jury in Le Havre have been lost. Some information can be gathered from *L'Universitaire*, the student-soldier organ created in March 1918. There is no trace of Demeur in the June 1918 issue, which presents the soldiers who passed the first session that had been organized. A second session was scheduled for September. However, *L'Universitaire* did not publish the results. It simply ceased publication. It is, possible that Demeur was one of the students who took their exams in September 1918, whose identity remains unknown for lack of available sources. The enrolment register shows something else. Under the “domicile” column, it says: “Hôpital militaire Saint-Laurent”. This may explain why Demeur, from Brussels, is registered in Liège. The Saint-Laurent military hospital occupies a former well-known abbey in Liège, which was converted into a military hospital and artillery barracks. If we consider the date of his enrolment at the University of Liège, May 1919, and the date of his demobilization, September 1919, his student career becomes a little clearer. Paul Demeur enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Liège because, during this period, he still had a military status and was assigned as an artilleryman to the Saint-Laurent barracks. His military service record supports this hypothesis. It states that he applied for unpaid leave in October 1919. Very clearly, he obtained his doctorate in law while still enrolled in the active army. According to his military record, he was admitted to the reserves on December 3.

After graduating from the University of Liège in August 1919, Demeur joined the Ministry of Economic Affairs. He remained there for almost two years. He then joined the bar. He did his legal internship for Lionel Anspach-Puissant. Lionel Anspach-Puissant is from a family that occupies a prominent position in the liberal sphere. Son of Eugène Anspach, Governor of the National Bank of Belgium, he is also the son-in-law of Jules Guillery, a leading liberal politician. Anspach-Puissant distinguished himself, among other things, by welcoming into his firm one of the first two women to take the lawyer's oath, following the law of April 5, 1922, opening up the legal profession in Belgium to women. A Catholic, Demeur thus evolved in a progressive professional environment. This career path of a young lawyer from a Catholic background is not “natural”, even if the development of social Catholicism, encouraged by the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII), has led some Catholics to progressive positions since the end of the 19th century. His involvement with Anspach-Puissant may be explained by his father's business relationship with the lawyer. Anspach-Puissant developed expertise in trademark and patent law. In the 1890s, the Brussels press reported that Georges Demeur was called on to advise him in a lawsuit against the family of one of his former partners.

While at Anspach-Puissant, Demeur met Léon Cornil, son-in-law of Lionel Anspach-Puissant and future Attorney General at the Court of Cassation. At the same time, he embarked on an academic career at the Catholic University of Louvain. He was entrusted with the maritime law course within the School of Political and Social Sciences, an “extra-faculty” structure that enabled the development of new courses not provided for in university curricula, the organization of which was still left to the legislator. With the maritime law course included as an elective in the doctorate in law program, he was appointed lecturer in the Faculty of Law in the early thirties. During the same period, he also taught a commercial law course for students of economics.

A reservist, he returned to military service in 1939. Until 1947, he was also a military auditor in Namur, then deputy auditor general in Brussels. Appointed *avocat à la Cour de cassation* by decree of the Regent on April 27, 1948, he was President of the bar in 1962-1963. He asked for his resignation on January 24, 1973. He died the same year.

Following the practitioner-professor model – which is widespread in Belgium – Paul Demeur published several doctrinal studies in his field. These were mainly focused on the inter-war period. His first publications date from the early 1920s. His relationship with Paul Veldekens (1888 - † 1958), his future colleague at the Cassation bar and future colleague at the Catholic University of Louvain, is recounted in his diary (*Journal des Tribunaux*, 1964, p. 587), on the occasion of the battle of Mont Kemmel in the spring of 1918, continued after the war. A relationship of collaboration and friendship developed. He worked alongside Veldekens, who trained him in the technique of cassation. They published together in the field of civil law. As early as 1923, they jointly wrote a commentary on a draft law on co-ownership (“Projet de loi révisant et complétant les dispositions du Code civil relatives à la copropriété”, *Journal des Tribunaux*, 1923, col. 759). These collaborations were to be numerous. In 1935, they published *Copropriété et propriété divisée* with Larcier. They also published an article on civil liability (P. Veldekens, P. Demeur, “Obligation intégrale de réparation incombant aux coauteurs d'un dommage”, *Annales de droit et de sciences politiques*, t. V, 1937, p. 340).

A lecturer in maritime law, Demeur published a work in this field in 1937, published by Bruylant in Brussels: *L'affrètement fluvial sous le régime de la loi du 5 mai 1936*. He is also the author of several articles, mainly: “De l'obligation intégrale de réparation incombant à chacun des navires responsables d'un abordage vis-à-vis du navire non fautif” (*Pandectes périodiques*, 1936, p. 420); “Vers l'unité de compétence criminelle en matière d'abordage” (*Revue de droit international et de législation comparée*, 1937, p. 737); “Les projets de convention adoptés par la Conférence de Paris (mai 1937) du Comité maritime international” (*Revue de droit international et de législation comparée*, 1938). His expertise in maritime law led him to represent the Holy See at several diplomatic conferences on the law of the sea (notably the 2nd Conference on the Rights of the Sea, Geneva, and March 17-April 26, 1960).

His commitment to commercial law, and more specifically to company law, led him to join the editorial board of the *Revue pratique des sociétés*, which he headed from 1950 to 1971. He also published numerous contributions and published regularly the *Revue Critique de Jurisprudence belge* (RCJB).

The “Journal de campagne” is thus an atypical publication in the lawyer's bibliography. Unfamiliar with this exercise, he was helped by Nadine Beer-Stoop, then Secretary of the Cassation bar (interview with Nadine Beer-Stoop, April 21, 2023). Demeur takes care to mention those with whom he would later come into contact in the course of his career. What makes this exercise so special is that it points *a posteriori* to

the personalities – jurists or future jurists – he met during his wartime experience. It is therefore an exercise in reconstruction, biased by the context of publication. Nevertheless, these selected and formatted recollections are not without interest.

In addition to Paul Veldekens, Paul Demeur highlights various personalities from the bar and, to a lesser extent, the judiciary. He evokes the figures he met in chronological order of wartime. Let's take the first part of his diary, which covers the years 1914 to 1916. From his first steps at the Antwerp fort, where he was posted following his enlistment as a “fortress artilleryman”, he recalls his meeting with his “first lawyer”, Fernand Dardenne (1893 - † 1915), a young lawyer at the Brussels bar and socialist activist, with whom he “did a few days of ‘soldier's school’”. The figure of Albert Devèze (1881 - † 1959) appears next. He is mentioned several times in the story. His personality seems to have left an indelible mark on Demeur as a young enlistee. A lawyer at the Brussels bar, he has also been a member of the Chamber of Representatives since 1912. In the future, he would distinguish himself as Minister of Defense, a portfolio he would hold on several occasions in different governments. Maurice Jacquet's name appears next, associated with Yvan Thoumsin (1892 - † 1962), two “fellow students at the Faculty of Law in Brussels”, i.e. the Free University of Brussels. The former gained an important position in Egypt. He was an advisor to the Egyptian government in the 1930s. The second was a lawyer at the Brussels bar. He was a member of the Council of the Order during the 1930s. Two alumni of the Collège Saint-Michel also appear, Joseph de Decker (Joseph de Decker de Brandeken, 1889 - † 1952) and Paul Renkin (1886 - † 1915). The former was a lawyer at the Brussels bar. The latter was one of the sons of Jules Renkin, Minister of Colonies during the war and future Prime Minister in the 1930s. In the summer of 1916, he met Frantz Van Keerberghen (1893 - † 1957), or more likely Vankeerberghen, a member of the Brussels bar and future member of the Council of the Order, at the CISLA (Centre d'instruction pour sous-lieutenants auxiliaires), where he was training to become an officer. Back at the front, he met Devèze again, and Maurice Crick (1879 - † 1946), who later became a notary public, but was to make a name for himself in politics, also as a member of the Chamber of Representatives. He then evokes Henri Rolin, the “third wound” of a man who belonged to a family marked by commitment, three of whose sons died in combat. A lawyer at the Brussels bar, Rolin distinguished himself both nationally, as Minister of Defense and Minister of Justice, and internationally, as one of the authors, alongside René Cassin, of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Did he rub shoulders with him, or meet him on the front line? He mentions Rolin's wound, following the artillery exchanges that took place around Oudecapelle, right up against Dixmude. Does this mean he met him during this period? Or does he provide a piece of information that he may have learned after the event? This is uncertain. The same is true of the very brief – and cryptic – mention of Henri Simont (1898 - † 1979), who was one of his colleagues at the Cassation bar, and apparently one of the gunners in the nearest battery, who came to Henri Rolin's aid.

Demeur mentions other names. However, this should not be misunderstood. He mentions certain soldiers whose works, published after the war, are well known and undoubtedly had an impact on him, such as Albéric de Fraipont, author of *Ce n'était qu'un petit bout de sol* (1931), or Martial Lekeux, the “Commandant Lekeux”, author of *Mes cloîtres dans la tempête* (1922).

The second part of his diary opens with the year 1917. He mentions meeting Jacques Levy Morelle (1888 - † 1942), “with whom I had less contact than I would have liked”, who was also a member of the Council of the Order in the 1930s. Then there is Pierre Nothomb (1887 - † 1966), whom he says he met in the Renynghe sector, where he was sent with his battery for an offensive that never took place. A lawyer

at the Brussels bar, he was already known as a writer. As Demeur points out, he “spends his rest time in a cubbyhole that I believe serves as his study: what book has he been working on there?” After the war, he became involved in politics, becoming a figure of the nationalist right. Demeur also meets Frans Brusselmans (1893 - † 1967), “whom everyone will know”, a lawyer at the Brussels bar, a professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, and a member of the House of Representatives, yet another. In 1917, he joined Paul Labouverie (1890 - † unknown), one of those student-soldiers who, like Demeur, obtained his doctorate in law from the central jury in Le Havre, and went on to become a lawyer at the Brussels bar. In 1918, he came across, he wrote, Pierre des Cressonnières (1890 - † 1945), then artillery adjutant, and future president of the Brussels bar, who died in 1945 in the explosion of a V2. Other names come up: Olivier Malter (1892 - † 1964), a lawyer at the Brussels bar, specialized in liability and insurance law, and was later a member of the Council of the Order during the 1940s. Jules Bayot is also mentioned, who will go on to be the First President of the Court of Cassation and that Demeur will have the occasion to meet again regularly, especially when he joins the Cassation bar.

After the Armistice, as he set off with his battery for Germany, he crossed paths again with Raoul Hayoit de Termicourt (1893 - † 1970), the only magistrate who, along with Jules Bayot, was honored by his diary, who was also a former student at the Collège Saint-Michel, “where he was a dizzying student”. Hayoit went on to become a public prosecutor at the Court of Cassation. Demeur was to meet him again as a lawyer. Jules Bayot and Hayoit de Termicourt bring his evocation of the war years to a close, along with the names of his fellow members of the Court of Cassation bar, who were also *bâtonniers*, and who distinguished themselves by their commitment as soldiers: Henri Simont, already mentioned, but also Henry Van Leynseele (1893 - † 1979), Max della Faille d'Huyse (1898 - † 1973) and Paul Struye (1896 - † 1974).

The story leaves little room for the author's daily life. The fifty years that have passed have no doubt somewhat eroded the relief of life at the front, his daily life but also his traumatic experience. As far as his “intellectual life” is concerned, we will recall his passage through Amersfoort, in the Netherlands, following the capture of the Antwerp citadel in October 1914. Interned in a barracks, he recalls the material discomfort, in contrast to the nourishment of the mind at their disposal: “A library has been opened; in my life, I will never read so much in such a short time”. These intellectual resources heralded the opening of the “Belgian University of Amersfoort” for Belgian refugees a few months later, in January 1915. Later, when stationed near Ramscapelle, he recalls those moments of waiting devoted to reading; then, recalling the year 1917, that commandant, Paul Van der Eycken's brother, professor of commercial law at the Free University of Brussels, who let him read “a few pages of books from Doctor Mistiaen's kits”. He remembers reading Claude Bernard's *La science expérimentale* and Léon Daudet's *Le Stupide XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. He also recalls the works on “religious psychology” he found in the “portable library” of the military chaplain, Father Florent Fierens (1885 - † 1947). However, Commandant Van der Eycken met these intellectual stimuli with defiance: “he did not consent to [Demeur] showing his natural inclination for the company of academics versed in the team of telephone operators”. What about reading the law textbooks and books he had to study in the summer of 1918, in preparation for the central jury examinations held in Le Havre? There is no question of it. The jurists are there, yes. Literature too, and the widest possible range. However, the law? No question of it. Perhaps, that is not the literature a soldier needs.

To highlight the setting, particular circumstances, an anecdote, and a few elements of daily life, this “war diary” is therefore rather a series of memories, which depict the relationships, formed during the war with

representatives of legal circles, in particular lawyers from the Brussels bar. It is indeed a commissioned text that Paul Demeur intended for his colleagues, and in which he endeavors to present a “picture” of the commitment of jurists in the war. The exercise is that of a directed reconstruction, by a lawyer for lawyers... featuring lawyers. In this, Demeur is perfectly in agreement with the project of the editorial committee of the *Journal des Tribunaux*: It is a question of highlighting the patriotic commitment of jurists – magistrates, and lawyers. The promotion of patriotic commitment is particularly important among lawyers. This is the case after 1918; it will be the case after 1944. The part that lawyers take in each of the two conflicts is an element of the identity construction of the profession, whether in military action, in action resistance or, in occupied territory, in the affirmation of democratic values through the reaffirmation of “right against force” and the exercise of the right of defense.

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## **Indications bibliographiques**

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