
Glory and Memory of Louis Boulard (1877-1914)

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In the summer of 1914, everything came together to make Louis Boulard a happy man on all levels. The university curriculum was flawless. After a doctorate defended at the Paris Faculty of Law in 1902, rewarded with a thesis prize, he joined a Bar, while giving lectures in said faculty. In 1907, he was appointed in Lille to replace Professor André Giffard, who had been sent on a mission, and he taught legal history. From the outset, Boulard established himself as an excellent pedagogue. This is evidenced by the particularly laudatory appreciation expressed by Dean Pilon, who was not known for his indulgence, at the end of this first year in Lille. Stressing his erudition and dedication, he predicted a bright future for him: "M. Boulard sera un professeur d'enseignement supérieur dans toute l'acception du terme. [M. Boulard will be a professor of higher education in every sense of the word]." He was hoping that a success in aggregation would allow him to keep him in Lille. The following year, in 1908, Louis Boulard passed the examination in the legal history section and remained in Lille. The dean remained as

laudatory in his annual assessments, especially in 1912, as Boulard had the happy initiative to propose a conference of legal Latin to the bachelor students who had not studied it. That year on December 30, a decree appointed him professor in Lille. At the end of the 1913-1914 academic year, Boulard was more than ever a "professeur érudit et laborieux [learned and hardworking teacher]", dedicated and zealous, who "fait un très bon enseignement [made a very good teaching]", and Boulard did indeed impress with the gifts he displayed. A curious mind, he enjoyed exploring new horizons: he took courses in Egyptology at the École du Louvre, learned to decipher hieroglyphics to invest Egyptian law, before learning Chinese, which he mastered quickly. In 1913, he enrolled in canon law at the Catholic Faculty of Lille, where the examinations were to be held in November 1914. On the eve of the war, professionally and intellectually, Boulard became passionate about research, pursuing a profession he loved. In addition, he enjoyed general consideration and a comfortable material situation ensured by his teacher's salary and complementary courses.

His private life seems just as fulfilled. At the end of 1909, Boulard had married a Breton woman in Vannes. From this union were born two children, a boy in 1911 and a girl in 1913. Born in Cherbourg, Normandy, Boulard seems to have adopted Brittany to the point of asking for a transfer to the University of Rennes in 1912, with all due respect to Dean Pilon, and of reiterating it the following years.

Finally, as far as convictions went, Boulard was intensely patriotic and showed a marked taste for the military world, which was very common in the pre-war elite classes. When deciding on careers, he considered joining the navy, like his father, and then the army. It is unclear why he ultimately opted for the law. In 1897, he interrupted his university studies to perform his military service from November 1898 to September 1899, in the 102nd Infantry Regiment. He completed it with the rank of corporal. A sergeant by 1900, he wanted to become an officer, took the exam and regularly completed the required training periods in the following years. By 1902, he was under-lieutenant in reserve, and lieutenant by 1908 in the 116th, a regiment based in Vannes and Morlaix, to which he was assigned. Concerned about the threat of war against Germany, he became active in the French Initiative Institute for Military Preparation and Improvement, one of the four thousand companies whose purpose was to improve the military value of future recruits. In 1914, he was vice-president.

[When the war broke out](#), Louis Boulard was a reserve lieutenant in the territorial army, to which he was assigned in 1911. He was 37 years old. Within a few days, the general mobilization summoned hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and the army urgently needed reserve officers to supervise them. Louis Boulard joined his regiment as early as August 3. The great majority of the mobilized left in the acceptance of a duty to be accomplished. Some, like Louis Boulard, beyond duty, welcomed the war with enthusiasm and were impatient to fight with the enemy. Disappointment! He thought he was going to fight, but he was ordered to remain in Vannes to ensure the logistics of the regiment: reception and departure of the mobilized, delivery of equipment and supplies. He saw the 116th Infantry Regiment leave for the Belgian Ardennes to participate in the Battle of the Borders. But as soon as contact was made with the enemy, losses were enormous for the French army: 27,000 dead on August 22 alone, including 618 killed, wounded and gone missing in action in the 116th, out of the approximately 3,300 who left. By the end of the month, 84,500 French combatants had lost their lives. In the context of the retreat and the massacre, Louis Boulard was called in as reinforcement at the head of a group of 800 men. Before leaving, he wrote to his wife: " Sois calme, je partirai le jour de ma fête, sous la protection de Saint-Louis... Je te supplie de ne pas te laisser déprimer. Tu connais mes idées. Mettons-nous dans la main de Dieu, qui ne décidera rien que pour le salut de la France et notre bonheur en ce monde ou dans l'autre. [Be calm, I will leave on Saint Louis Day, under the protection of my patron saint... I am begging you not to fall into depression. You know my ideas. Let us put ourselves in the hands of God, who will decide nothing but for the salvation of France and our happiness in this world or the next]." This would be his last letter.

He left Vannes on August 25. After wandering for several days on congested roads and under bombardment, he joined the 2nd battalion of his regiment near Vouziers in the Ardennes, and the colonel entrusted him with the command of the 6th company, whose commander had just been wounded. Louis Boulard took part in the retreat to the Marne, around Reims. The regiment set camp in Louvercy. The testimony of the innkeeper of this village was collected by her grandson: she had been sufficiently impressed by the young officer with blue eyes and a tapered mustache, not very tall but quite dashing, to remember, many years later, that she had served him dinner the day before the battle in which he would fall.

Indeed, for Louis Boulard, the experience of war ended in Louvercy. It had only lasted a few days. In the morning of September 3, the French soldiers, withdrawn behind the Châlons-Reims railway, must contain the German advance as much as possible. When the enemy arrived, Louis Boulard rushed, his sword in the clear, into the streets of Louvercy, at the head of a bayonet assault, to the cry of "En avant, mes enfants [Onward, boys!]". The battle began, and the surprised enemy was thrown out of the village. Under-lieutenant Henri Jacquelin, who had resigned from the Quimper town hall to join the 118th IR on August 14, positioned alongside the 116th at Louvercy, reported the following in his notebooks: "Vers 15 heures, la fusillade cesse presque. Je m'aperçus avec stupeur que sur ma droite, la ligne de tir s'était complètement dégarnie de soldats. Seuls des cadavres jonchaient le talus, rouges sur l'herbe, au milieu des enveloppes de cartouches déchirées et froissées et de douilles abandonnées. [At about 3 PM, the shooting almost ceased. I was baffled to see that, on my right, the line of fire had completely cleared of soldiers. Only corpses littered the hill, red on the grass, in the middle of the torn and crumpled cartridge envelopes and abandoned casings]." Short lull: at nightfall, the enemy counterattacked and the fighting continued in the dark. Louis Boulard was wounded in the fray. A survivor testified to seeing him dying on the side of a road, sword in hand. The fierce fighting of Louvercy Wood did not stop the German advance, and the 116th continued to retreat until September 5, the day before the Battle of the Marne. The war of movement did not allow anyone to count the absentees. After September 13, when the battle ended, it was discovered that Lieutenant Louis Boulard was missing. Was he dead? Wounded, had he been patched up and taken prisoner? No one knew, either in the 116th or in his family. He became a "disappeared", missing in action. At the beginning of the 1919 school year, the hope that he was alive was very tenuous, as Dean Pilon put it perfectly: "Nulle précision n'ayant pu être obtenue sur les circonstances de cette disparition, nous espérons toujours le revoir. Ayant développé la certitude du sacrifice noblement consenti, saluons pieusement sa mémoire. [Since no details could be obtained on the circumstances of this disappearance, we remain hopeful that we might see him again. Certain of his consent to this noble sacrifice, let us piously salute his memory]." Only upon the return of the last prisoners did the certainty of Louis Boulard's death set in. In the absence of a body, a judgment was substituted for the death certificate, rendered by the court of Lille on August 27, 1920, fixing the date of death at September 3.

“Dead for France”, Louis Boulard now belonged to the immense cohort of heroes whose [sacrifice would be glorified](#) to alleviate the suffering of the (under-)estimated 1,300,000 deaths. This glorification began during the conflict with the creation of a new military distinction, the Croix de guerre, in April 1915. It was meant to reward wartime behavior deemed exceptional by the command. Louis Boulard, “Officier d’une belle bravoure. Glorieusement tombé pour la France le 3 septembre 1914 au cours d’une contre-attaque de nuit à Louvercy (Marne). Croix de guerre, étoile de vermeil [Officer of great bravery. Gloriously fell for France on September 3, 1914 during a nighttime counterattack in Louvercy, Marne. Croix de guerre, silver gist star].” He obtained it posthumously, as well as the Legion of Honor. In July 1915, the mention “Dead for France” was created to distinguish ordinary, useless death, so to speak, from combat death. Carried on the margins of civil status documents, its award entitles the wife to a war widow’s pension and gives her children the status of wards of the nation by means of a decree of adoption by the fatherland.

The trauma was such that no one knew what to do to honor the memory of the heroes: [Golden Books](#), plaques, [monuments](#) were created to testify to their sacrifice for eternity. Each dead man was celebrated in the social circles in which he had gravitated before his death or in the past. Cities, institutions, associations, parishes counted their dead and reaped glory through the medals and rewards they had been able to obtain. Louis Boulard first appeared on the commemorative plaque of the Lille Faculty of Law, which gave his name to one of its lecture halls, as well as on the plaque of the University of Lille, but also on that of the Paris Faculty of Law as he had given lectures there at the beginning of his career. His name, as an inhabitant of the city, can be found in the Golden Book of the city of Lille which, if the project of nominative collection of the dead of the cities of France, had succeeded, would have been kept in the Pantheon. His name was pronounced during the ceremony of the fiftieth anniversary of the *École pratique des hautes études*, celebrated in 1922, in the presence of President of the Republic Alexandre Millerand, in tribute to the masters and students who fell during the war. Undoubtedly, the most visible form of commemoration remains the monuments to the dead erected by the cities in memory of their “children” who died for the motherland. Inscriptions on these monuments have depended locally on the municipal councils; and the lists they have drawn up reveal, depending on the influences exerted, a more or less extensive conception of the notion of “children”, between natives and relatives by marriage, or even close by heart. This explains why Louis Boulard does not appear on

the monument of his hometown Cherbourg, but on that of Vannes.

Admittedly, the abundant commemorative work contributed to consolation by giving meaning to the absurd. Still, families had to grieve in practice. The location of a body in a necropolis made it easier, but Louis Boulard was missing, an unburied dead man. After the war, his widow, not unlike the heroine of Bertrand Tavernier's film *Life and Nothing* did for her son, set out, after the war, in search of her husband's body, hopefully going to the place of his disappearance. It is likely that he was buried several days after his death, by the Germans, as per military custom. But like many other widows, fathers or mothers, she was unable to find the place. A fervent Catholic, Charlotte Boulard strived, as she did for the monument to the dead of her city, for the name of her husband to be inscribed on the monument of Saint Pierre Cathedral in Vannes, a way of bringing back her late husband to his family. She also had to fight for her war widow's pension. Speeches of glory did not concretely feed families and, after the war, Mrs. Boulard, left without any income, returned to her parents in Vannes. At the end of the conflict, she asserted her pension rights without knowing what she could obtain as, in her situation, she was entitled to two types of pension: civil and military. The administrative work took time. An application for a military pension must first be made to the steward military deputy of Vannes, who referred it to the War Department, which prepared a military pension project and notified the Ministry of Public Instruction so that it could draw up the civil pension statement. The two pensions were not cumulative, and the widow would have to choose. But as the months went by, Mrs. Boulard succeeded in obtaining an advance on the military pension and multiplied her efforts, first with the dean of the faculty in 1919, who could only give her advice. Years went by. In 1921, she wrote to the Minister of Public Instruction to push her case forward. Far from speeches of heroism, the widow quickly experienced the accounting management of the war and the restrictive administrative procedures. She had to wait until the Ministry of Pensions had revised the military pension project submitted by the Ministry of War to make her choice in favor of the much higher civilian pension. Although she was still young, Mrs. Boulard, faithful to her husband's memory, never remarried and devoted herself to the education of her children, who had lost their father at the ages of three and one respectively.

Since the Great War, the Lille Faculty of Law has moved three times, and the commemorative plaque followed, but no room bears the name of Louis Boulard

anymore. In September 2014, thanks to the commemoration of the 14-18 centenary, the fighting in Louvercy was evoked at the initiative of the local historical association, La Peuplée, through an exhibition and a commemoration of the “battle”, accompanied by the unveiling of a plaque paying tribute to the 64 soldiers who fell during the fighting of September 3, 1914, Louis Boulard among them. Then, on May 5, 2019, his figure and his act of bravery emerged from oblivion: in the presence of his grandson, the kingpin of his grandfather’s memory, a plaque was inaugurated on the facade of the church:

“In memory of Lieutenant Louis Boulard of the 116th Infantry Regiment, who disappeared on September 3, 1914 in the Battle of Louvercy.”

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