
Raymond Thamin (1857-1933): Memoirs of the Rector of the Academy of Bordeaux in the Great War

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Examining the past in search of information on the Bordeaux Faculty of law during the Great War, historians can only be compelled by the discovery of an unknown figure who was nevertheless an important public figure in the history of the Third Republic. Indeed, Raymond Thamin, rector of the Academy of Bordeaux during the Great War, was a scholar with an exceptionally brilliant career. Alumnus of the École Normale Supérieure (1877), professor of philosophy (1880), doctor of letters with a thesis on Saint Ambrose and Christian morality in the 4th century (1896), lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities (1884) and professor at the Lycée Condorcet in Lyon (1894), author in particular of a

book on the philosophy of pedagogy titled “L’éducation et le positivisme”, encensed by the Academy of Moral and Political Science, and of a collection of Excerpts from French moralists, which became a classic known to all high school students, he was then substitute for Jean-Félix Nourrisson at the Chair of History of Modern Philosophy at the Collège de France (1895 to 1898) then professor at the Sorbonne after being elected at the French Academy to replace his former master Émile Boutroux. Alongside his life as a teacher and scientist, he was also a senior academic official, first as rector of the academy of Rennes (1900) and then of Bordeaux (1904), a position he held for eighteen years before being summoned by Minister of Public Education Léon Bérard, to occupy the post of director of secondary education in the government of the National Bloc (1922).

The office of rector that he held during the war was a Napoleonic creation closely following the fundamental law of May 10, 1806, which founded University. His role was then to represent the central power and to put himself at the service of the Emperor’s educational and political ambitions within the constituency of the Academy. His tasks were to attend faculty examinations, issue diplomas and hear reports from deans, principals and headmasters on the state of their establishment. He also directed the administration, ensuring discipline and expenditure, and supervised the institutions during his visits or had them supervised by the Academy inspectors. The rector’s prerogatives then evolved according to the many successive regimes experienced by France in the 19th century. Under the Second Empire, Napoleon III made higher education an important issue for rectors. The memorandum of September 15, 1854 insisted on this specific role and addressed them in these terms: “Vous marchez à la tête des facultés qui forment votre cortège, dont vous surveillez personnellement les travaux, dont vous dirigez les délibérations. Vous participez à la rédaction de leurs programmes ; vous assistez, toutes les fois que vous le jugez convenable, à leurs actes publics [...]. Cette position toute nouvelle que la loi vous a faite vous impose l’obligation de travailler sans relâche à entretenir le foyer de lumière remis à votre garde. [You walk at the head of the faculties that make up your procession, whose work you personally supervise, whose deliberations you direct. You participate in the writing of their programs; you attend, whenever you deem it appropriate, their public acts [...]. This entirely new position that the law has given you imposes upon you the obligation to work tirelessly to maintain the font of light placed in your custody]”.

After the republicans conquered the Third Republic in 1879, the academic board secularized itself by excluding bishops, priests, prefects and members of the judiciary world who had been sitting on it until then. The office of rector became republicanized and most of them were now former higher education professors, constantly recalling the values of freedom and equality that must animate the schools of the Republic. The law of July 10, 1896 thus enshrined the duties of the rector in higher education and placed him as president of the State-appointed university board. The rector, guardian of the central authority over the University and extracted from its ranks, appeared to be a defender of the faculties and, although he was still responsible for ensuring the smooth running of studies, compliance with official texts and the verification of the budget and accounts. He tried to carry out the teachers' projects through his contacts with regional and national elites. As a defender of his Academy in the Paris offices rather than an agent of the ministry sent to the provinces, he thus played a major role in the modernization and revitalization of faculties. Through his prerogatives, Raymond Thamin was the very example of a rector anxious to defend the projects of his Academy before the central administration. However, he was not particularly committed to the principle of secularism and defended conservative positions in favor of classical teaching imbued with Christian tradition and morality.

To try to pinpoint more precisely the ideology of this professor and scholarly administrator who, in the words of the epitaph that payed tribute to him, worked towards "l'élévation morale et intellectuelle de la jeunesse par l'enseignement [the moral and intellectual elevation of youth through teaching]", the investigator must then delve into Raymond Thamin's bibliography and the examination of the books, journals and numerous press clippings in which his involvement in social works and the numerous academic and cultural events with which he was associated were described. This research thus makes it possible to enter the intellectual and political circles of a cosmopolitan Bordeaux, to walk the classrooms and amphitheaters where the rector gave lectures and presented exhibitions, or to sit as a member of an examination panel. Continuing their book and archival exploration, the researcher looks at the testimonies and reflections of the Rector of Bordeaux contained in his two works: "L'Université et la Guerre [The University and the War]" (1916) and the "Pédagogie de la Guerre [War Pedagogy]" (1920). Reading these historical sources, Raymond Thamin appears as a dedicated civil servant who engaged his eloquence, knowledge and faith in the battles of the First World War, those of the rear, on the intellectual front of the "legal war".

Taking the analysis of historical events further into the prism of these memoirs of a rector at war, this article aims to give a vision of what the fights of the Academy of Bordeaux were during the conflict, to better illuminate the role of the law school within the framework of a policy that encompasses and surpasses it.

By the time war broke out, Raymond Thamin was already recognized by his contemporaries as an accomplished academic and zealous rector of national and international stature. In addition to his scholarly works, he is known to have been the first in France, thanks to the help of teachers and doctors from the “comité girondin de l’Alliance d’hygiène sociale”, to establish two schools for children with behavioral disorders. His name also appeared in the national press, as his position as rector led him to rub elbows with the highest political leaders, including President of the Republic Armand Fallières, during his visit in the south of the country in 1907. In the early months of the conflict, when the government was in exile in Bordeaux to flee a possible invasion of Paris by the German army, he stood next to Minister of Public Instruction Albert Sarraut during his speech for the solemn return to high schools in front of the deans and professors of the university, in the amphitheater of the Faculty of Medicine.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Raymond Thamin traveled extensively to give lectures and communications on morals and pedagogy: to Canada and the United States (1902), to Italy (1903 and 1911), to Belgium (1905 and 1910) and to England (1906). In the context of international relations, he was best known for having worked to bring France and Spain closer together by participating in the building of Casa Velázquez and the creation of the French Institute of Madrid in 1909. In the same year, he gave speeches in favor of a fraternal union between France and Scotland to foreign delegates who had come to attend the Franco-Scots festivals in Bordeaux. A pioneer of cultural diplomacy, he contributed in 1917 to the dissemination of propaganda among [neutrals](#) by accompanying Spanish academics who had come on mission to France. At the same time, shortly after the United States became involved in the conflict, he solemnly received Director of Education of the New York State Finley at the University of Bordeaux to promote [exchanges](#) of students and newly allied professors. An apostle of France’s influence abroad, he was also a member of the Institut de Coopération Intellectuelle and administrator of the Maison de France in London. However, these actions, which may seem worldly compared to the sacrifices of the soldiers on the front, were nevertheless decisive in a war where mass propaganda was a weapon of capital

persuasion. They were also essential for the construction of peace and the future relationship between the victors in the [new world order](#).

Raymond Thamin's fights continued on other fronts in the rear, notably for the maintenance of education and the moral support of populations at war. Commended for his constant involvement in the conflict, the press did not fail to recall how he was deeply affected by the loss of one of his six sons, Henri, sergeant pilot-aviator, mentioned on the agenda of the army, who died for France on October 11, 1915, as well as his brother, a commander returned to service during the mobilization, and of his two nephews, Marcel, artillery lieutenant killed in 1914, and Jacques, lieutenant-aviator, killed in an air combat in 1917. Despite these painful trials, war was an opportunity for the rector to show how attached he was to his Academy. In "L'Université et la Guerre", two articles first published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* before being published in a book, he gave an account of "comment, dans l'Université, on a su mourir, [et de] comment elle-même a su vivre [how, we of the University knew how to die, [and] how the University itself knew how to live]". Dedicated to the memory of his son, this booklet was a testimony to the efforts and sacrifices imposed on all members of primary, secondary and higher education. In the very first lines, Raymond Thamin reminded that "ce ne sont plus seulement des espérances, mais des talents dans toute leur floraison qui sont fauchés [it [was] no longer hopes alone, but talents in bloom that were cut down]". Indeed, "de plus de 42000 en janvier 1914, le nombre des étudiants des universités est tombé, en décembre de la même année, aux environs de 10000, et c'est à peine s'il se maintient autour de ce chiffre. Encore, les étudiantes et les étrangers représentent presque la moitié de ce total. Il y a donc 32000 étudiants en moins. Ceux-là se battent [from more than 42,000 in January 1914, the number of university students fell, in December of the same year, to around 10,000, and this figure struggled to maintain itself. Still, female and foreign students account for almost half of this total. As a whole, 32,000 students vanished. They are fighting]", he wrote.

He also paid tribute to the professors he knew and who died in battle, such as [Gustave Chénaux](#), professor of civil law of the Bordeaux Faculty of Law: "engagé volontaire à quarante-cinq ans, quand votre vie laborieuse vous apportait des fruits bien gagnés, vous dont les pacifiques travaux de juriste et la douce physionomie ne laissaient pas deviner l'ardeur patriotique et le futur héroïsme [volunteered at age forty-five, when a life of hard labor had borne you well earned fruits, you whose peaceful work as a lawyer

and gentle physiognomy did not lead many to perceive your patriotic ardor and your future heroism]”. Raymond Thamin then tried to show the dedication and the bravery of the academics on the front who continued their education and who read “leurs livres souvent souillés de terre par les obus, ou la nuit dans le voisinage des rats” [their books often dirtied with soil by shells, or at night in the vicinity of rats]”. The figure of the professor, he wrote, “comprend et fait comprendre autour de lui le sens et la grandeur des événements qu’il vit. Il éprouve d’y être mêlé une fierté et comme une jouissance d’ordre esthétique et moral tout à la fois [understands and makes others around him understand the meaning and the greatness of the events he experiences. In being involved in them, he is filled with pride and as a delight both aesthetic and moral at the same time]”.

After numerous testimonies and letters from teachers illustrating the events as they were experienced by the teaching staff on the front, the Rector of Bordeaux reported on the mobilizations of those left behind. He referred to the difficulties encountered in providing courses and examinations and recounted the misfortunes of student soldiers who tried to continue their studies despite the mobilization. He took the tragic example of an eighteen-year-old sergeant, Marcel Ferrette, who had taken his baccalaureate “entre deux coups de feu [between two gunshots]” and explained how, while he had passed both writing and oral examinations despite a terrible week in the trenches, he had returned to the front the same evening and died the day after. He thus described all the consequences of the conflict on education, how the war modified all school curriculum in all disciplines and how university life followed the rhythm of mobilizations, the return of the wounded, permissions: “l’auditoire de certains cours est impressionnant : des mutilés et de jeunes veuves, de vraies mutilées elles aussi, qui viennent chercher les moyens de refaire leur vie [the audience of some modules is impressive: cripples and young widows, no less crippled, who come to seek the means to rebuild their lives]”. He then devoted a chapter to works of war and details all the daily gestures on behalf of soldiers, prisoners, wounded and exiled. He himself would issue several memorandums, including one inviting all pupils and students to salute the war maimed each time they crossed paths to express their affection and gratitude. He also evokes the classes that took place in Alsace, in the invaded regions and in the prison camps in Germany to demonstrate the vigor of French ideas.

He then developed the idea that France, through the mobilization of these intellectuals in the “legal war”, was leading an actual “philosophical crusade”. He recalled all the trips made by students and professors outside national borders and all the universities’ “foreign policy” efforts to increase the prestige of French culture and convince the world of the merits of its struggle despite their lack of material and human resources. He pointed out to his reader that “la politique prévoyante des universités (françaises) a abaissé la barrière des formalités coûteuses qui jusqu’ici faisaient souvent reculer les étrangers [the far-sighted policy of (French) universities has lowered the barrier of costly formalities that until now often pushed back foreigners].” He continued: “Les universités allemandes ont choisi le même moment pour se fortifier par des mesures vexatoires contre l’invasion de la clientèle étrangère, afin de pouvoir dire sans doute qu’elles écartent ceux qui ne viennent plus à elles [German universities chose the same moment to fortify themselves with vexatious measures against the invasion of foreign customers, in order to be able to say without doubt that they exclude those who no longer come to them].” The spirit of revenge against German universities thus nourished all of his writings. Fervent patriot and unwavering defender of the Sacred union, he, who had nevertheless been criticizing the influence of socialist theses on the minds of young women when he was a member of the jury examining the aggregation of secondary school in 1906, recognized that it was now necessary to “regarder à deux fois avant de médire les uns des autres [look twice before slandering each other]”, evoking “les chefs de ceux qu’on appelait les syndicalistes [et qui] sont morts les premiers [the leaders of those who were called trade unionists, and who died first]”. He concluded his work with these words: “Université n’a jamais aussi fortement signifié union, union de tous ceux qui la composent à quelque titre, soldats et civils, hommes et femmes, maîtres et élèves, depuis les grands semeurs d’idées-forces jusqu’à la fillette de l’école de hameau qui a fait, en tricotant, sa campagne d’hiver. [...] Union sacrée dans l’Union sacrée, qui lui survivra comme elle l’a précédée, qui fait de l’Université une des institutions les plus robustes et les plus harmonieuses du pays, une force non seulement pour la paix, mais pour la guerre, qui lui a donné de se mesurer avec les devoirs les plus divers et d’apparaître, en face d’eux, comme une grande personne morale [University has never so strongly meant union, union of all those who compose it in any capacity, soldiers and civilians, men and women, teachers and students, from the great sowers of ideas to the little girl of the hamlet school who knitted her winter campaign. [...] Sacred union within the sacred union, which will survive it as it did before, which makes the University one of the most robust and harmonious institutions

of the country, a force not only for peace, but for war, which has given it to measure itself with the most diverse duties and to appear, in front of them, as a great legal person]”.

After the war, Raymond Thamin again delivered his memoirs of a rector at war in his book *Pédagogie de guerre*. He described the history of his Academy and presented all the letters he had received from the front in response to his address to the mobilized teachers of his academy. He summarized the contents of the memorandums he had issued concerning the funerals of soldiers, war [libraries](#), appeals for loans, works in favor of prisoners and the Allies’ response to President Wilson, a true “declaration of the rights of nations” that he wished to place at the center of a history lesson so that “que les élèves sachent [...] que quelque chose de grand [...] s’est passé qui engage l’avenir et promet une Europe meilleure” [students know [...] that something big has happened [...] that engages the future and promises a better Europe]”. He again presented his bitter response to the grievances formulated by the universities of Leipzig and Heidelberg on the expulsion of German scientists and librarians from the University of Strasbourg.

Convinced that the victory is that of science, French engineering and Latin civilization over German savagery and barbarism, Raymond Thamin preached for the strengthening of classical culture within the school curriculum. Fervent defender of tradition and worshipper of Antiquity, he re-established the compulsory teaching of Latin when he was appointed director of secondary education, and therefore attracted attacks from the socialist press. Tangled up in the debates between the right and the left on the question of school curricula, he was criticized for his rejection of the “école unique” (a project promoting free access to public primary school for all social classes), his conservatism and his defense of religious education. He was then denounced as a reactionary unconcerned with the application of the principle of secularism, a “recteur à la mode de Bretagne [rector in the British manner]” according to the daily newspaper *La Lanterne*, which criticized him in these terms: “Que l’Académie des pseudosciences morales accueille cet adversaire de l’école laïque, soit. Que le gouvernement du Bloc national et ultramontain le maintienne en place, soit encore. Mais que Thamin consente à demeurer – jusqu’à 75 ans – dans une grande Académie du sud-ouest, le chef de cet enseignement sans Dieu qu’il combat si âprement, voilà qui donne une singulière idée de sa logique et de sa sincérité. La santé de l’âme du sieur Thamin paraît décidément

fort compromise, en dépit de sa croyance à la Sainte-Trinité. Ayez, monsieur Thamin, la franchise de démissionner d'une Université que vous trahissez, et sollicitez le poste d'inspecteur général des Frères Ignorantins ! Votre fonction s'accordera du moins avec vos sentiments [That the Academy of Moral Pseudosciences should welcome this opponent of secular school, fine. That the government of the National and Ultramontane Bloc should let him keep his place, fine again. But that Thamin should agree to remain – until the age of 75 – in a great academy in the southwest, the head of this godless education that he fights so valiantly, gives a singular idea of his logic and sincerity. The health of Mr. Thamin's soul seems to be very much compromised, despite his belief in the Holy Trinity. M. Thamin, have the honesty to resign from a University you betray, and seek the post of Inspector General of the Ignorant Brothers! Your function will at least be in accord with your feelings]". The secondary education program he set up in 1922 was finally abandoned after the Left-leaning union victory in 1924. Raymond Thamin was then forced to leave his post, but returned to his first passions and taught ethics and education at the Paris Faculty of Humanities. He taught there until 1932 and died less than a year after his retirement.

Raymond Thamin's war writings thus testify to the commitment of intellectuals and academics who had joined the front or remained behind. His memoirs also show how at war, French thought was dominated by a patriotic propaganda flooding all sources of knowledge, particularly law and legal science. From the requisition of the premises of the law school by the government in exile in Bordeaux to the evocation of students and professors who died for France – including the figure of one who is worn as a hero for his sacrifice on the battlefields, Civilist Gustave Chéneaux – Raymond Thamin reported on the material and human upheavals of university education, including the teaching of law, which became the symbol of values to defend against the enemy. His stories and diplomatic actions also echoed the mobilizations of law professors who had gone abroad to convince neutrals to enter the conflict alongside the Allies, such as Parisian internationalist [Albert Geouffre de La Pradelle](#), who had left in the middle of the war to give a series of lectures in the United States promoting rapprochement between universities. The Rector of Bordeaux also did not fail to mention the decline in the number of students and professors and the lack of resources of the faculties at a time when the influence of science, particularly legal science, was becoming an issue of French cultural diplomacy. He therefore praised the arrival of more [foreign](#) and [female](#) students at University. Although fewer in the Faculty of Law than in the other faculties of

Bordeaux, these young women managed to take their place despite the reluctance of the academic and judicial circles and to establish themselves as important figures of legal science, such as lawyer Vogée-Davasse, who took the oath in 1915, and future lawyer Manon Cormier, one of the first female students of the Bordeaux Faculty of Law, who graduated with a bachelor of law at the age of twenty in 1916.

The accounts of events reported by Raymond Thamin also reveal the sufferings and sacrifices imposed on all in the context of a total war. *L'université et la Guerre*, a work that takes the side of supporting the morale of the populations while at the same time constituting a historical source, finally appears as the testimony of a bereaved man who recounted his own struggles to convince himself, perhaps, of the necessity of the sacrifices that events imposed on him. The repetition of this post-war process, through the publication of *Pédagogie de guerre*, which is a repetition of the demonstration of his commitments and the actions of the pupils, students, teachers and professors of his Academy in the conflict, reinforces the cathartic value of Raymond Thamin's writings. He revealed how his function became a plank of salvation on which he relied to transcend his misfortunes and continue his struggle against the enemy. Indeed, once his struggles were over, his role as rector ended, his program as director of secondary education criticized and then abandoned, his education completed, his reasons to live died out. However, despite these remarkable commitments in the conflict, it should not be ignored that the dissemination of his patriotism within the major national journals brought him a real notoriety that allowed him to enter the government of the National Bloc with Minister of Public Instruction Léon Bérard, future ambassador of the Vichy regime to the Holy See. Although this career progression to the post of director of secondary education was short, it seems to have provided him with a privileged path to occupy a chair at the Académie Française and at the Faculty of Humanities of the Sorbonne. Thus, it seems that the war may have been an opportunity to enhance the merits and careers of those who upheld the most conservative values in a republic that was moving from the rule of law to the state of war.

Antoine Sené, Doctor of Law, Institut de Recherches Montesquieu

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