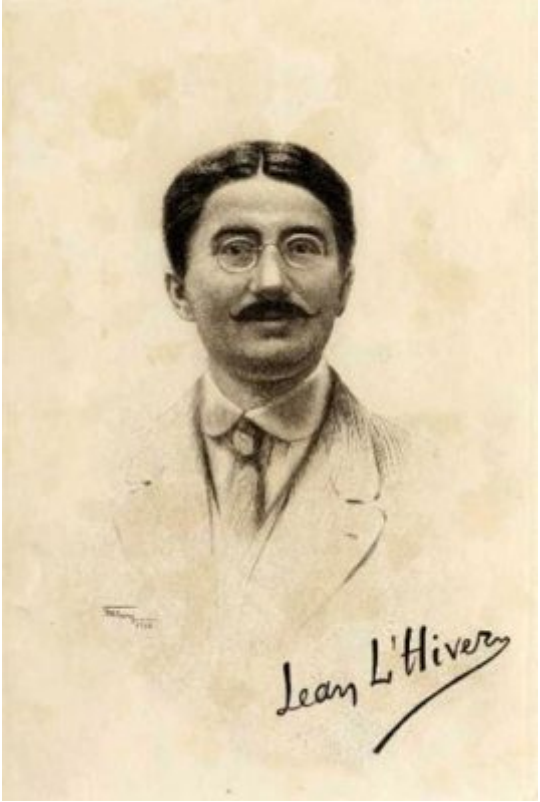
Stories of Bordeaux students who “died for France”



The outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 led all European states to solicit the greatest sacrifice from their able-bodied male population. Thus France solicited most of its twenty years old citizens, nineteen even, till the past forty, to join the ranks of the active army. Even if the students appeared as a minority, their departure to the front left a mark. By themselves, they embodied youth, as students were the only social group composed almost exclusively of young people. From then on, the faculties concentrated what could be called “the youth of France”, scrutinized in particular by journalists. In the provinces, student populations were much less important than in Paris. Nevertheless, they continued to grow, as in Bordeaux, where the number of students enrolled in the Faculty of Law on the eve of the conflict was about a thousand. This figure was halved

until the end of the war and was not reached again until the early 1930s. There were even no registrations in the second year of bachelor's for the year 1914-1915! In addition, in the number of registrants, artificially inflated by the institution, there were many who never appeared for exams, due to mobilization. The audiences that took place in the great amphitheater were therefore more than sparse and much more feminine. While the number of female students did not increase significantly during the conflict, their proportion among the student body was considerably increased due to the departure of male students. Law school attendance, which pre-war was among the most frequented with that of medicine but also the least feminine of academic institutions, was thus doubly affected by the war. In addition, the willingness of the authorities to continue academic activities during the conflict also posed a number of organizational challenges. Thus, some retired professors were back at the chair to replace their younger colleagues mobilized in the delivery of teaching as well as the holding of exams.

The need for a specific functioning of the university in the context of the war effort was, however, only a secondary upheaval in relation to the human drama that accompanied it. University buildings still retain traces of it today, through war memorials and commemorative plaques. In Bordeaux, this was the case of the former premises of the faculties of law and medicine. The plaques of the Faculty of Humanities and Sciences have been removed from the hall of the building that now houses the Museum of Aquitaine, but are still preserved in the reserve. In the grand staircase of the Faculty of Law, in addition to the memorial dedicated to Professor Gustave Chéneaux who also died in battle, there is the list of seventy-eight students sacrificed. Today, let us follow in the footsteps of three of them, whom the intersection of the archives allows us to revive in a few paragraphs.

Raymond Cottineau "in the land of giants"

Raymond Clément Gaston Eugène Cottineau was one of those students who followed the family will, but never gave up the passions that had seized them. Born in Luzon in Vendée in 1893, Raymond's unconvinced choice of law studies was undoubtedly no stranger to the influence of his father, who exercised the profession of notary. The childhood of Raymond and his older sister Yvonne was divided between Luçon, from which their parents originated, and the château of Chillac, a severe 15th century estate

located near Barbezieux in Charente, acquired by Maître Cottineau in 1902. Children of notables, their maternal origins were nevertheless more modest, as their grandfather was a former saddler turned coachbuilder. However, in accordance with his immediate social environment, young Raymond Cottineau continued his studies in a *“lycée”*, a high school. These fee-paying schools were then mainly intended to accommodate the children of the bourgeoisie, while the *“collèges”*, middle schools, received those from more modest backgrounds who had brilliantly obtained their certificate of studies. The notary’s son first attended the collège of Luçon, then that of La Roche-sur-Yon, probably after his parents’ divorce in 1911. The same year, he obtained his baccalaureate of philosophy, or “bac A”. With Latin and Greek as flagship subjects, it was the bourgeoisie’s most sought-after baccalaureate, for whom Greco-Latin culture was a factor of social distinction. Despite passable grades, which were also widespread among the graduates of the time, Raymond won the sesame that opened the doors of law schools.

The young Vendéen, with a written paternal authorization, being a minor, first registered at the law school of Bordeaux on November 14, 1911, at the beginning of the academic year. Students were then required to first pay a tuition fee to take the courses and then pay again to take each exam. Raymond took up residence at 3 Place Pey Berland, where the Bordeaux faculty had been located since the construction of its new buildings in 1873. Yet, despite these ideal material conditions, student Cottineau was not fully dedicated to his law studies. After his first exam, however, he managed to validate the first year of bachelor’s, also known as the “legal baccalaureate”. But the young man’s concerns were actually far removed from the Codes studied in amphitheaters. He had taken from his readings a deep love for poetry, and this passion proved to be all-consuming. Raymond turned to writing and published his first poems under the pseudonym Morn Day in the *Revue des poètes*. And much more than an inclination, poetry appeared to him as a true philosophy. Under the new pseudonym Jean L’Hiver, he joined the “artistic action journal” *Les Loups* founded by Anatole Belval-Delahaye who gathered around him a group of writers who declared together: “Pour vivre notre vie en beauté, nous saurons lutter. Les réfractaires que nous sommes ne veulent pas se résigner. La révolte, pour nous, est de l’action d’art ; et chacun de nous la manifestera selon son tempérament [To live our life in beauty, we will know how to fight. We are the refractory, and we shall not resign ourselves. Revolt, for us, is an artistic action; and each of us will manifest it according to his temperament]”. Wanting to

proclaim the “93 of the arts”, these individualistic anarchists with a slightly conventional manner of speech intended to replace politics at the center of social life with art.

The young idealist, however, continued his studies. He obtains the second legal baccalaureate with passable grades on his first attempt. His application, however, decreases with the year 1914. At the end of July, he took his first exam, on which he scored only 8/20, and did not bother to take the second exam, scheduled for the following day. The examinations being then exclusively oral, his disappointment of the day before may in part explain his absence, but it is probable that the beginnings of the war were what was absorbing the student. In addition to the shadow of the conflict that fell on the whole of Europe and the prospect of his imminent incorporation into the fighting forces, the anarchist militant loathed warfare. However, when the suspension of military service he had obtained in 1913 in order to continue his studies was lifted, he immediately responded to the call of arms and joined the ranks of the 114th Infantry Regiment in Parthenay. Having not yet completed his military service, he did his basic training there in order to join the front as soon as possible. In August, he learned of the death of his brother-in-law, husband of his sister Yvonne, while he joined the front on the outskirts of the city of Ypres on Flemish soil. Wounded for the first time, he was sent to recover at the Parthenay hospital. There he devoted himself to writing new poems. Along the lines, he appealed to God in the face of the horror of war:

> « Ah ! Brisez-moi plutôt !… Que je sois impotent ! [Ah! Break me instead! … Let me be impotent!]
>
> Broyez mes bras !… Broyez ces jambes précieuses, [Crush my arms! … Grind these precious legs,]
>
> Qui promenaient ma joie aux minutes heureuses [Who walked my joy in the happy minutes]
>
> où j’allais sans compter ma jeunesse et mon temps. [When I went without counting my youth and my time.]
>
> Rendez-moi monstrueux et crevez mes oreilles !… [Make me monstrous and pierce my ears!]

> Mais ne me plongez pas dans l'éternelle nuit… [But do not plunge me into the eternal night…] »

As soon as he had recovered, he was sent back to the front. Appointed corporal on the night of Eve of the new year 1915, he moved the next day to the 32nd Infantry Regiment stationed in the same area. Indeed, as was customary, the new officer must be moved to contact with men with whom he had not maintained a bond of camaraderie. In front of Ypres, the front was an important point of friction between the Allies, French and British, and the Germans. This is where the Battle of Flanders ended in December, which marked the end of the race to the sea, the last stage of the war of movement. While Belgium, France and Britain had already lost more than a million men in six months of conflict, the first snows forced the belligerent armies to sink into the trenches that still today stretch from the North Sea to the Swiss border. As early as January, Corporal Cottineau was tossed between the first and second line trenches. On the night of February 4-5, Hooge Castle, where the regiment's command had been established, was set on fire by German bombing raids. On the 10, the men withdrawn in the second row moved up to the front row. This was the last day of Raymond Cottineau's life. He was the eighteenth student of the Bordeaux Faculty of Law to fall since the beginning of hostilities. The poems he had composed during his convalescence in Parthenay were published in 1915 under the title *Le Beau Sacrifice* [The Fair Sacrifice], which he had chosen. We only know the title of the book he had planned on the wars of Vendée, and which echoes strangely his own story: *Au Pays des Géants* [In the Land of the Giants].

Jean Quoique: the glory of republican education under fire

Jean Quoique is an example of the success of Republican education. He was born in 1893 in the town of Castillon, where France's decisive victory over England had ended the Hundred Years War 440 years earlier. His father, a carpenter from Port-Sainte-Marie in the Lot-et-Garonne department, has married a "maîtresse d'hôtel", responsible for welcoming customers in an establishment located in this river port of more than 3,000 inhabitants. Jean's youth was divided between his hometown and that of Coutras, less than 30 km to the north, where his family finally took up residence. The student, although from a modest background, distinguished himself by brilliant results and was probably awarded a scholarship to pursue secondary education at the Blaye public lycée. Thus he obtained a scientific baccalaureate, called "bac C", which allowed him to

register at the Bordeaux law school in October 1911. This degree equipped him with an indispensable tool to face the legal curriculum that was Latin, whose place was maintained in the teachings of law faculties in order to remove the holders of the “bac D”, former modern baccalaureate, considered rather mediocre by the teachers and who had not studied a dead language. However, the student differed from his classmates, most of whom held the famous baccalaureate of philosophy. In addition, he was also one of the most modest students, and the dean granted him exemption from his tuition fees in view of the low income of his family, but also the exemplary nature of his school reports.

Just 18 years old, Jean Quoique found accommodation at 20 rue de Lamourous in Bordeaux, from where fifteen minutes is enough for him to walk back to the faculty and its library. He made good use of this proximity as he validated his first legal baccalaureate with six white balls, the best possible result, in addition crowned with the praise of the first examiner, as well as the prize of the first year lectures. The implementation of the grading on 20, as early as 1913, does not deny these first successes: Jean Quoique obtained an average of 20/20 on the second year exams and 19.5/20 on those of the bachelor’s. He also won the second-year lecture award and the optional conference award the following year. In addition, there were the first civil law prizes of the second and third years, as well as the second prize in criminal law and civil procedure. Young Jean never ceased to surprise his teachers, who saw in him the embodiment of social success through school work, so dear to the Third Republic. The descendant of carpenters equaled, if not surpassed at least by his merit, the sons of the most gifted families when he obtained his license on July 25, 1914. The faculty honored him with the title of “most deserving student” for the year 1914, and was preparing to receive him among its doctoral students, as evidenced by a pencil note in his student file. It had been almost a month, however, since the assassination of Archduke Franz Joseph in Sarajevo, that the excitement was great among students, raised in the thirst for revenge and great readers of the press. Peace was swept away in a few weeks and France entered the war on August 1. Jean Quoique, who had benefited since 1913 from a reprieve of incorporation reiterated in 1914, was summoned to join the ranks; it was done on August 12.

Incorporated into the 57th Infantry Regiment where he received rudimentary military training, the second class soldier was subsequently sent to the front where he took part

in the Battle of the Marne. There he experienced the transition from the war of movement to the war of position and their innumerable losses. The day after the capture of a new German trench, he was promoted to the rank of officer cadet while Christmas carols echoed from the German trenches, before moving to the 144th Infantry Regiment early the following month. He worked there for two weeks to build new trenches under enemy fire before an equally brief passage through the 34t h Infantry Regiment, which offered him some respite before joining the 91st Infantry Regiment on March 23, 1915. On the morning of April 6, the regiment was awaiting an attack to capture the village of Maizeray in Meuse. The officer who wrote the regiment's marching journal pointed out the lack of artillery to support the operation, which therefore appeared to be "une démonstration destinée à attirer […] l'attention et les coups de l'ennemi [a demonstration intended to attract […] the attention and blows of the enemy]". The attack order was received at 2:30 PM for 3:33 PM. Jean Quoique never returned to his station. He was the twenty-ninth Bordeaux law student to fall since the beginning of the conflict. His student file contains a sheet listing the items that were given to his family, including two silver medals and his bachelor's degree.

André Verdenal: from law capacity to the Legion d'Honneur

The story of André Paul Adolphe Verdenal is a reminder of the extent to which academic performance is often at odds with human qualities. André was the youngest son of Dr. Verdenal, a doctor at the hospital of Pau, and Jehanne Massinot. From a first marriage, his father had had a daughter, Marie-Louise, six years his senior. His brothers Jean and Pierre were born in 1890 and 1893, a year before him. André Verdenal was born on August 1, 1894 in Laruns, because the doctor specializing in thermal medicine spent every summer with his family at the Eaux-Chaudes resort, located on the banks of the Gave d'Ossau, for his professional needs. Their father's profession was therefore omnipresent in the education of the siblings, as was his love for Lorraine culture, in which he had been raised. André's older brother followed the paternal path and went to Paris to study medicine. Passionate about literature and poetry, he met American poet Thomas Stearn Eliot, with whom his correspondence even helped him make a name for himself across the Atlantic. Pierre, meanwhile, started studying law. He would become a lawyer. André's studies turned out to be a little more chaotic, which was probably not unrelated to his fragile health. Like his two elder brothers, he went high school in Pau but he did not obtain his baccalaureate. However, he began a legal course by enrolling

in legal capacity studies in January 1913. He first requested an exemption from the Minister of Public Instruction in order to register during the academic year. His health did not allow him to consider university studies for at least a year. The capacity certificate, created during the Napoleonic era and forming mainly tribunal attorneys, was still widely discredited by teachers despite a thorough reform in 1905. Nevertheless, from 1908, professors Gustave Chéneaux and Louis Barde began to offer two courses specifically dedicated to capacity students, whose training spanned over two years since the reform. Nevertheless, student André Verdenal had an atypical profile compared to other law students, as those without a baccalaureate were relatively rare, but also compared to other abilities, generally from more modest layers. But he probably felt little difference as he seems to have studied in Pau with his family, where he could also make use of his brother's extensive library.

Unlike the two legal baccalaureates and the bachelor's degree, which required the taking of two exams per year, the capacity only had one. André Verdenal failed his first capacity exam. On the second, he obtained a "passable" mention, but again failed the third. He therefore had not obtained his certificate when the hour of general mobilization struck, by which he was incorporated a little later than his classmates of the 1913 class or of previous. However, he was waiting for this moment probably not without some level of impatience. His two brothers had both enlisted before the war, the first as a military doctor and the second as infantryman. This conflict also took on a specific color for the Verdenal brothers, Lorrains of origin, for whom Revenge was also a call from the roots. André Verdenal was finally incorporated on September 1, 1914, when he joined the 18th Infantry Regiment, to which both his brothers also belonged. However, the three would not be reunited, as Pierre disappeared on September 16, during the Battle of the Marne. He remained a prisoner in Switzerland until 1918. When he was sent to the front, second class soldier André Verdenal nevertheless reunited with his brother Jean, who was an auxiliary doctor there. He would become a corporal at the beginning of November. The two brothers were separated again when Jean joined the 175th Infantry Regiment at the end of February 1915. Within this corps, the young doctor took part in the Dardannelles campaign, during which his selflessness was noted by his superiors. It was while assisting a wounded man that he was killed in early May 1915. Just as Corporal Verdenal heard the terrible news, he was cruelly sent in the footsteps of his brother in the East, within the 176th Infantry Regiment. And just like his elder brother, he stood out for his courage. He was first called to the order of the regiment in

June for his bravery while serving as a liaison officer, which earned him to be promoted to sergeant the same day and decorated with the *Croix de Guerre*. Kept on the Eastern Front, where the Allied armies were particularly battered between retreats and bombardments, Sergeant Verdenal returned to the 18th Infantry Regiment in 1916 where he participated in the battles of Verdun, Argonne and the Somme before returning to the 120th Infantry Regiment in 1917. Promoted to deputy lieutenant on a temporary basis, he continued to fight there until 1918. On August 15, while on a reconnaissance mission on recently conquered lines, André Verdenal was fatally wounded by a bullet to the chest. Transported to the nearest hospital, Saint-Vincent-de-Paul in Montmirail, he died of his injuries. He was the seventy-fifth Bordeaux law student to meet his death in the fighting of the First War. In recognition of his courage, Deputy Lieutenant Verdenal was posthumously made a Knight of the Légion d'Honneur, as were many other soldiers. However, his academic record tells us that the University could also "reward" those of its students who had defended the homeland with the greatest bravery. In addition to the documents relating to André Verdenal's brief passage in the Bordeaux capacity course, the file contains a copy of a letter sent in 1919 to the town hall of the city of Pau, where the family home was located, by which deputy dean Léon Duguit transmitted the bachelor's degree awarded to the former student.

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