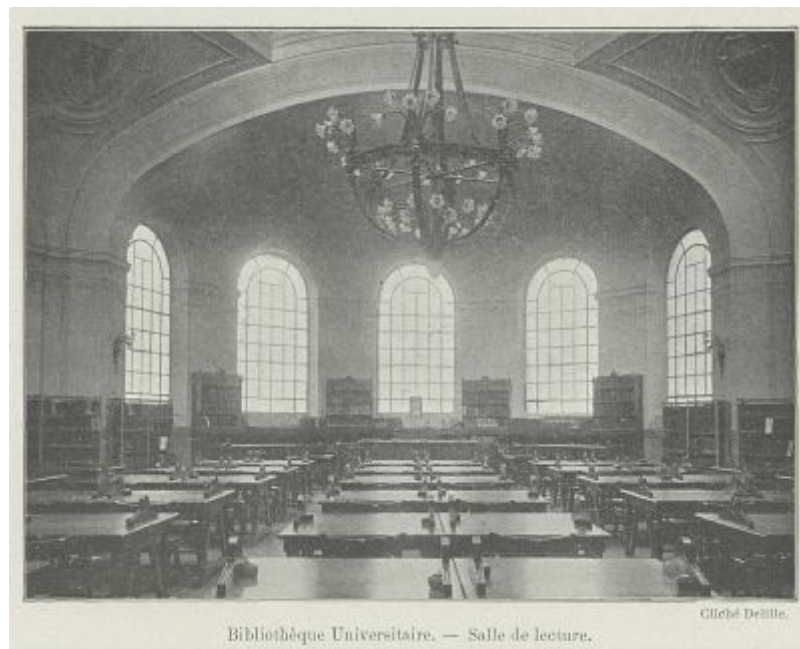

The University Library of Lille in the Great War

Téléchargé depuis **Faculties on the front line for right** le 09/12/2025

<https://expo-grande-guerre-biu-cujas.univ-paris1.fr/en/the-university-library-of-lille-in-the-great-war/>



History and functioning

Until 1887, the Faculties of Law and Humanities and their library were located in Douai. On that date, the two faculties joined the faculties of science and medicine in Lille, with an organizational chart already merging all libraries. The four faculties were then reunited at the University of Lille in 1896. In 1914, the [university library](#) was housed in a recent building, inaugurated in 1907.

This building was specially designed to serve as a library: it met the professional standards of the time. In 1903-1904, director of the library Paul Vanrycke took a study trip to Germany (then including Strasbourg), Belgium and the Netherlands to prepare his project. The building covered 1,570 m², or 16,900 sqft. The reading room was lit by a glass canopy and boasted 125 seats. Added to this was a teachers' room where the

recent issues of periodicals were made available, as well as a room for the cards catalog. The ten stores were meant to accommodate 500,000 volumes. The building had a heating system and electrical lighting. It was also equipped with fire-fighting appliances and fire extinguishers. The library was open from 10 AM to 12 PM and from 2 PM to 6 PM from Monday to Saturday. It was closed during the university holidays.

In 1909, the collections were comprised of 240,000 volumes. The new building left much room for growth. The library received 1,800 journals and periodicals, many of them through international exchanges. The period leading up to the Great War saw the university library's collections grow considerably, with donations and legacies playing an important role in its history. In 1910, the State entrusted the university with nearly 14,000 works from seminary funds. In 1911, the Laurence-Angellier donation enriched the collections of 20,000 volumes from the personal library of Auguste Angellier, dean of the Faculty of Humanities and English Literature professor. Vanrycke indicates in his reports that the books arrived at the library in "full carts".

To give an idea of daily activities, during the first trimester of 1912, librarians loaned 69,266 books to users, including about 12% to professors and the rest to students. 5,028 were borrowed, of which approximately 23% were by professors; 114 professors and 789 students came to the library at least once during this trimester and the vast majority borrowed at least one book. The library received an average of 119 readers every morning and 170 every afternoon; 625 books were purchased, 2,120 received as donations, and 5,917 files were added to the catalog (each cataloged book leading to the writing of several cards: author card, field card, etc.). At the beginning of the 20th century, the staff of the University Library of Lille consisted of seven people: the librarian, two under-librarians and four library aides. The Chief Librarian regularly complained in his reports about the lack of staff, pointing to the increase in attendance, the work involved in moving into the new building and the need to catalog books from significant donations that arrived around this time.

The librarian, who took the title of chief librarian in 1910, directed the library and organized acquisitions. The under-librarians, who took the title of librarians in 1910, assisted the chief, dealt with the communication of books to readers and participated in cataloging. Under-librarians/librarians had similar qualifications to librarians/chief librarians and represented two ranks of the same body. They were at least high school graduates, and often had a bachelor's degree. The library aides were responsible for

the maintenance of the premises and had not continued their education beyond primary school.

The situation in 1914

In 1914, the library's budget was 39,510 francs. The documentary expenses represented 25,496 francs, or nearly two thirds of the budget, divided between about one third of books and two thirds of periodicals. The remainder was allocated to operating expenses: bookbinding (?5,500), heating (?2,900), lighting (?900), furniture and insurance (?1,150), office supplies (?900), unforeseen expenses (?350) and financial reserve (?2,313.95 – a compulsory item equivalent to a certain percentage of the acquisition budget). Just over one third of this operating budget was covered by library fees paid by students, and two thirds by a departmental grant. Staff was paid directly from the department's budget. In 1914, total wages amounted to 15,500 francs.

The library team still consisted of seven people: the chief librarian, Paul Vanrycke; two librarians, Eugène Macaigne and Jean Riquier (the latter was replaced by René Lobstein in December 1914); and four aides, Charles, Paul, Augustin Serré and André Amédéo.

The librarians at the University of Lille all held a certificate of aptitude for the position of university librarian and had a university degree (usually a bachelor's degree, sometimes a doctorate). Proficiency in ancient or modern languages was an important element. The four librarians who worked at the University of Lille during the year 1914 all spoke German, and three of them had spent at least a year in Germany during their studies. This reflects Germany's fascination with academia, despite a significant rivalry. Eugène Macaigne, librarian at the University of Lille from 1907 to 1922 and chief librarian of the same library from 1926 to 1937, had a bachelor's degree in German and had studied in Leipzig in 1894-1895. Jean Riquier, librarian in Lille from 1911 to September 1914 and from 1925 to 1934, also held a bachelor's in German, and had stayed in Germany from 1900 to 1904 where he worked as a bookseller in Marburg, Hesse. René Lobstein, appointed librarian in Lille in September 1914, was a doctor of law who specialized in German law. Although Vanrycke was an exception, having spent his entire career in Lille from his internship to his death, the career paths of these librarians show that the profession was, already at that time, organized at a national level: Lobstein also worked in Lyon and Paris during his career, Macaigne in Paris and Poitiers, Riquier in Paris and

Lyon. The University of Paris seems to have played a central role in the training of librarians, welcoming many trainees.

The library aides whose career we know, on the other hand, spent the entirety of their careers at the University Library of Lille.

The director of the library was Paul Vanrycke, who served from 1901 until his death in 1923. He was born in Dunkirk and studied medicine in Lille, without pursuing a doctorate. He held a bachelor's degree and the CAFBU, the certificate of aptitude to the function of university librarian. He knew Latin, Greek, German, English and Italian. After entering the University Library of Lille as a trainee in 1896, he became an under-librarian in 1900, and became a librarian in 1901. From 1916 to 1922, he was director of the university library and the municipal library. In 1920, he was awarded the Legion of Honor, and in 1922 became president of the University Librarians' Association. He took his functions very seriously. The rector's reports on him indicated "that he [lived] for his library". His only transfer request came at the end of the war: he wanted to become director of the university library of Strasbourg (called the BNU today), which had just been annexed, in order "de transformer à la française cet outil merveilleux mais trop germanisé [to transform this marvelous but too germanized tool in the French way]", a remark which reflected the ambiguity of his feelings towards German universities. He admired this library which he visited during his study trip to prepare the new building. However, his candidacy was not accepted, a refusal about which he expressed a strong bitterness, reinforced by the difficulties of daily life in a city that had just emerged from occupation. In January 1919, he wrote to the ministry: "je ne vous ferai pas à nouveau le tableau de nos misères. Cependant il n'y a plus à la bibliothèque que de coke pour trois jours et chez moi je n'ai pas plus de charbon que la plupart de nos concitoyens. En outre il neige et il fait extrêmement froid. [I will not paint you another picture of our miseries. That being said, the library only has three days' worth of coke left, and at home I have no more coal than most of our fellow citizens. In addition, it is snowing and an extreme cold has settled]." The harsh climate was a recurring reason for transfer requests.

During the war

[The library closed as soon a mobilization started](#): there remained only chief librarian Paul Vanrycke and library aide Charles Serré. It did not reopen, "en vue d'éviter toute

occupation allemande, même d'ordre intellectuel [so as to avoid any German occupation, even of an intellectual nature].” This expression refers to the concern inspired by patriotism, also present in the desire to keep the university in operation, to preserve a French intellectual life in the occupied territory. In addition to the absence of most of the staff and threats of requisition, the breakdown of communications with the rest of the country seriously disrupted the functioning of the library. The ties with Paris and the central administration were broken. Wages were taken from the university's working capital, and without a budget provided by the State, documentary acquisitions stopped throughout the war. The journals could no longer be sent to the library either. Donations and exchanges stopped. Part of the internal work, however, continued with the preparation of the general catalog, with more than 100,000 cards drawn up during the war, and the catalog of French theses since the year 1800 was also completed.

University professors also continued to have access to the library, while students could still borrow books, with the secretariats of the law and humanities faculties acting as counters; 1,307 loans were made in 1914-1915 and 3,692 in 1915-1916. The basements of the library were fortified in anticipation of bombardments. The stores served as refuges for valuable private collections or funds of institutes such as the Institute of Papyrology, hidden there in the beginning of the war. These funds were increasingly deposited: books of professors expelled from their homes, books and journals of faculties or institutes expelled from their premises... During the occupation, the university library reached a maximum of 900,000 stored volumes, including those resulting from the rescue of the municipal library.

Indeed, the main event concerning the library that took place during the occupation was the fire of the city hall from April 24 to 25, 1916. This building also housed the municipal library, whose librarian had left France at the beginning of the war. Vanrycke, who had been named responsible for the archives and the municipal library one month before the fire, organized the rescue of the collections. During the disaster, 4,000 to 5,000 volumes were evacuated. The card catalog and periodicals burnt. The incunabula and manuscripts were fortunately kept in a part of the premises that was spared from the flames. The surviving collections were transferred to the university library: 50,000 dry books and 30,000 wet books that had to be kept opened during the drying in the reading room, ventilated by fans found for the occasion, to avoid the development of mold. Each book had to then be brushed before being stored on the shelves. A total of

110,000 to 125,000 books from the municipal library were saved out of 185,000, including all of the incunabula and manuscripts. The staff of the municipal library was set to work in the university library. Vanrycke remained in charge of the municipal library in addition to the university library until 1922. The collections did not leave until 1965 when the Jean Lévy media library was built.

A refuge for books, the library is also a refuge for teachers who met there in the evening to read the press, the librarian collecting the daily newspapers received in Lille and making the translation for those who do not understand German: “aussi de nombreux professeurs s’y donnaient-ils rendez-vous soit pour lire les journaux soit pour en entendre lire la traduction “à la française” par le bibliothécaire : occasion pour les uns et les autres de se reconforter mutuellement, en échangeant leurs idées, leurs pronostics et, principalement, leurs espoirs. [so many teachers gathered there to read the newspapers or to hear them read the French translation by the librarian: an opportunity for them to comfort each other, by exchanging their ideas, their prognoses and, above all, their hopes].” (Annals of the University of Lille, 1914-1919, report for the year 1917-1918)

Reconstruction

At the end of the conflict, the university library was physically spared, being affected neither by bombs nor by requisitions. When the Germans left Lille on 17 October, the building was ready to reopen. However, it would take time to return to normal operation.

The personnel who were mobilized and who were absent from Lille at the beginning of the occupation had to be brought back. Paul Vanrycke was still there, but until the end of 1918, Charles Serré being ill, the operation of the library relied almost entirely on the hosted municipal library staff. In December 1918, Louis Macaigne received an injunction to return to his post. Augustin and Paul Serré were not discharged until the spring of 1919. André Amédéo died in February 1919 without having returned to the library; he was replaced in 1920 by Paul Paris. Appointed in December 1914, René Lobstein was never able to occupy his post and refused to settle in Lille. He wanted to stay in Paris and prepare for the law agrégation (teaching diploma in France). He was placed on leave of absence in May 1919 and was to be replaced in Lille. After several attempts, he obtained a post as librarian at the University of Paris in 1923. His post in Lille remained vacant until 1920 with the appointment of Raymond Beaupin, but he in

turn left Lille in 1921 for Bordeaux, citing the harshness of the climate and its consequences for his health as the reason for his request.

Another obstacle to the return to normalcy was the slow rate of reconnection with the central administration, which provided the budget. In 1918, a draft documentary budget was proposed, of about 19,000 francs, compared to more than 25,000 before the war. The same amount as before the war was entered for subscriptions to magazines, but the budget requested for the purchase of books was only 500 francs, compared to just under 7,000 in 1914. This proposal was not validated until August 1919, and even then only a quarter of the sum was paid to the library. It was not until 1920 that the level returned to 1914 standards, with a documentary budget of around 22,000 francs actually paid. The recovery, while it happened, was very slow, especially since the decline in the number of students in the post-war years proportionately reduced the library fees collected. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that this was a period of high inflation, weighing on operating and acquisition costs.

As regards to the creation and reconstitution of collections, the return to normalcy was also hampered. No books had been purchased in four years, and budget issues obviously had implications for the recovery. Most importantly, although Lille was liberated on 17 October 1918, communications with the unoccupied area were extremely limited until early 1919. The circuits for acquiring and receiving journals took a long time to reopen, particularly from abroad. Foreign journals began to be received again only from March 1919. At about the same time, the library received the first series of periodicals intended for it by ministerial subscription, but which had remained in stock in Paris throughout the war. Moreover, a very large part of the journals was received until 1914 via exchanges or donations. Work was underway to reactivate these tracks, but Vanrycke estimated that over 2,000 letters were to be sent, despite how understaffed the library was. Beaupin, resuming the service of periodicals in 1920, noted in a letter that it had been abandoned since the beginning of the war and that there was a large backlog of reports. The Agache Desmedt bequest, however, marked a gradual return to normalcy, echoing the important gifts of the pre-war years, and in 1921 enriched the old collections with 1,800 volumes. This bibliophilic collection is notably at the origin of the university's collection of medieval manuscripts.

The occupation thus left lasting traces in the functioning of the university library of Lille. Returning to Lille from 1923 to 1926, following Vanrycke's death, Beaupin informed the

ministry that there were still salary arrears due to the cumulative effects of the war and the shortage of staff. The university library still housed the collections of the municipal library. Because of these problems and disorders in the management of the library stemming from the last years of Vanrycke's management, it was decided to call on Louis Macaigne, previously the director of the University Library of Poitiers, to draw on his past as collaborator of the former director to take over the institution.

**Geoffrey Haraux, Project Manager, Digital Libraries and CollEx Referent, Joint
Documentation Service of the University of Lille**

Bibliography

[Westeel Isabelle, « La bibliothèque universitaire de Lille en 1909 »](#), Insula, 2013, (en ligne le 03/11/2021).

—, [« Les bibliothécaires de l'université de Lille entre 1883 et 1923 »](#), Insula, 2013, (en ligne le 03/11/2021).

—, [« Il est difficile de compter les livres dans une bibliothèque »](#), Insula, 2013, (en ligne le 03/11/2021).

—, [« Le catalogage à la Bibliothèque universitaire de Lille »](#), Insula, 2013, (en ligne le 03/11/2021).

—, [« La bibliothèque universitaire de Lille pendant la Grande Guerre »](#), Insula, 2013, (en ligne le 03/11/2021).

—, [« Réflexions sur le métier de bibliothécaire au début du 20e siècle »](#), Insula, 2013, (en ligne le 03/11/2021).

—, « La bibliothèque universitaire de Lille pendant la Grande Guerre », dans Jean-François Condette (dir.), *La guerre des cartables (1914-1918)? : Élèves, étudiants et enseignants dans la Grande Guerre en Nord-Pas-de-Calais*, « Histoire et civilisations », Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2018, p. 103?116.