War and student death at the Lille Faculty of Law (1914-1918)

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LA REGION

Aux familles d'Étudiants en droit

Afin de connaître la situation militaire de ses étudiants et aussi pour conserver pieusement le souvenir de ceux qui sont morts pour la France et honorer leur mémoire, le doyen de la Faculté de droit de l'Université de Lille, prie les familles qui n'auraient pas reçu la circulaire adressée en mai dernier de bien vouloir envoyer tous renseignements utiles au secrétariat de la Faculté de Droit, 9, rue Auguste-Angellier, Lille.

The commemorative plaque, now set in front of the entrance, in the largest hall of the Lille Faculty of Law, does not attract attention. And yet it is up for everyone to see, both from the ground and from the hallways, in particular the one leading to the hall of acts, where the audience gathers during the defense of theses. Although the commemoration of the centenary of the First World War sparked a renewed interest in this monument, it has absolutely nothing to do with the emotion that gripped all those who, in the aftermath of the conflict, lifted their eyes to the impressive list of names engraved in marble.

Mass death

At the start of the 1913-1914 school year, there were 351 students. At the first day of class following the Armistice, on January 5, 1919, there were only 105: some had not yet reached a heavily damaged region, the mobilized were not yet back and there were those who would not return. In terms of staffing, the situation was confusing. To take stock, in March 1919, Dean Eustache Pilon started a survey of families. It revealed the certain death of 54 students (44 at the front, 9 from their injuries, 1 from illness), and 11 were missing. Were they dead? Had they been taken prisoner? As long as the last captives had not returned, hope remained even if it was reasonable, at that time, to estimate the total mortality at 65 students. In addition, the war prematurely shortened lives, and out of the 30 wounded that the survey lists, how many would survive their injuries? Historians have shown that the exact number of deaths in the Great War is impossible to determine. The counting of those who are called the “morts pour la France [dead for France]”, which, to be clear, corresponds to those who lost their lives between two deadlines set by law, is distinct from that of the “dead of the Great War”. It is significantly lower, because one can die of the war long after its end, even if the relatives had more and more difficulty establishing it, because the budget of France struggled to handle the consequences of the conflict. The number of names engraved in marble at the Lille law school amounts to 82, 17 students higher than the dean’s count. We do not know the rules governing the preparation of the final list. It is clear, however, that a number of former students, in this case lawyers, have been added to the students in the course of study. One wonders about the tendency of the various institutions to add to an already impressive macabre tally. Thus, some students also appear on the plaque of their high school, their parish. Each institution, after the war, strove to show, through the mourning recorded, how involved it had been in the conflict. In this case, they proved that law students, who at that time came from privileged backgrounds, were not in cushy positions, and largely gave their share to the national sacrifice. They also showed themselves particularly courageous, as evidenced by the medals and citations obtained, which were mentioned in the commemorative speeches, by never failing to state, in a veritable record, their cumulative number: the harvest of glory reflected on the institution.

Apart from the magnitude of the sacrifice made by the faculty, the plaque tells us little. It is silent. And yet, beyond the cold of the marble, the cold of death, the hieratic and imposing aspect of the aligned names that leave spectators speechless, life resides in the noise and the furnace of war. Finding it involves changing scale, moving from mass

death to individual destinies – both the spirit that animated these students and the concrete experience they lived.

The psychological horizon of students in August 1914

We cannot understand how these students entered the war if we do not consider the importance of the war culture that raised them and nourished their imagination. It came into being after the humiliating defeat of 1870 and proved particularly effective in making them patriotic and militaristic, ready to lose their lives for France. Education played a major role in the construction of citizen-soldiers through the teaching of history, that of an essentially perfect France, barred a few “details”. The students who went to fight lived in an “armed nation” that declared itself pacifist while preparing to respond to aggression. Specifically, school battalions began to train children, before military service turned them into real soldiers. In 1905, conscription was generalized and by 1914, every Frenchman was indebted for military service for 28 years. After active service (the Barthou law has just increased it from 2 to 3 years), the citizen-soldier was sent to the reserve of the active army, then to the territorial army, and finally to the reserve of the territorial army. In order for the system to function properly in the event of war, Frenchmen had to regularly complete exercise periods. The army then occupied a large place in social life. Its reorganization has drawn a grid, dividing the territory into 18 military regions, which made it close to the population: 221 cities were home to a garrison. Lille was the seat of the 1st region and, for the Nord department, the 43rd infantry regiment held its quarters in Lille in the Vandamme barracks, the 127th in Valenciennes and Condé-sur-Escaut, the 1st in Cambrai, the 84th in Avesnes, finally the 110th in Dunkirk. A regiment had about 3,000 men. Soldiers were therefore part of the landscape, as well as the parades and their music. Each year, the press reported extensively on the great manoeuvrings through articles, photos and special issues. Military leaders, respected for their colonial conquests, were revered and contributed to the prestige of the army. The colors and elegance of the infantry uniform, red trousers and deep blue coat, added to the prestige of the military state. Finally, the imagination of war made it exhilarating. If there is war, according to the official discourse, it would be offensive and the officers would play a major role in leading their men into battle. It was not surprising that many law students were preparing to become officers. Thus, on the eve of the conflict, regardless of political cleavages, the concept of an armed nation was accepted and announced consent, even adhesion, to war. Each man owned a military

booklet containing a road map that dictated the procedure to follow in case of mobilization. France gave the impression of being ready to defeat any enemy. If necessary, the French 75 mm field gun, equipped with the latest improvements that made it fast and mobile, would support the fighters' victory. As an object of national pride, it enjoyed a true cult. The prospect of a war that promised to be a very quick victory, the military assured, reinforced national confidence.

The conditions in which the war unfolded in the first few weeks strengthened the determination of law students to join the fight. In absolute terms, Germany could consider, just as much as France, that it was waging a just war. Factually, it immediately violated the law by invading Belgium and its armies used serious violence against civilians in their path. In reality, the German General Staff had never adhered to the arguments of jurists, written in conventions, including their compatriots. It was no mystery to anyone: they believed that war puts the law in brackets to make way for "military necessities" that make it possible to win it. Law students, like jurists in general, felt particularly concerned by this disregard of the law. In the fantasy of a crusade against barbarians for civilization of which Law was the emblem, they left outraged by the violation of treaties and strongly motivated by the urgency of the defense of the territory. Individually, they wanted to believe that they would escape death, because it remained theoretical until it was effective.

Encountering lived death

The plaque gives death a name, but does not talk about it. It is necessary to make serious research efforts to approach, if not find, concrete elements of each person's experience. The work done, the analysis of individual destinies makes it possible to note that nothing makes the death of law students any more specific than those of other fighters. It comes to verify that in this democratic war – in the sense that few special assignments have sheltered their beneficiaries – death hit in priority the youngest (active army and reserve of the active army), the infantry, non-commissioned officers and junior officers. Law students, like their counterparts in other disciplines, met all three criteria.

The study of individual paths reveals that the students on the plaque belonged almost entirely to the infantry (94%). At 70%, they were officers or non-commissioned officers (lieutenants, under-lieutenants, sergeants) and therefore placed at the head of combat

units which, depending on rank, varied from 15 (corporal's squad) to 60 men (lieutenant's section). Finally, due to their youth, 84% of them belonged to the active army and its reserve. They therefore left as soon as the decree of mobilization was issued and experienced the death toll of the first months of war. This included Corporal Raymond Delpierre, who had disappeared in the fierce fighting at Hastière, Belgium on August 23, 1914, when his unit had come to reinforce the Belgian army to prevent the Germans from crossing the Meuse. Three had fallen during the Battle of Guise: Raymond Lixon, Albert Merchier and Albert Lembrez, the latter two on the same day (August 30) in Sains-Richaumont. The Battle of the Marne (September 6-13) having halted the German advance, an involuntary race to the sea began, producing attempts to circumvent the opposing army. The Ypres region in Belgium is a highlight. Frédéric Bouclet fell in Zillebeke on November 6, 1914. Many of those who had survived were killed in the offensives of 1915, almost all on the Champagne-Argonne-Woëvre front. While the names of Minaucourt, Mesnil and Perthe-les-Hurlus, the farms of Beauséjour and Navarin no longer evoke anything for us, they then resonated dramatically for the families, as a quarter of the students were buried there. In total, at the end of 1915, 66% of the students on the plaque died, 10% of them during the first month of the war, a perfect illustration of the mortality of the elites in general, as due to their rank, these students were at the head of the deadly assaults.

Those who the conflict would engulf later went through all these trials before knowing Verdun or the Somme. Verdun and the Somme; these two battles lasted throughout the second half of 1916. The "hell" of Verdun came down to emblematic places such as Douaumont, Fleury, Le Mort-Homme, Côté-du-Poivre and many others. Officer cadet Georges Blavier did not have the glory attached to Colonel Driant's fighter pilots. However, he was part of the company of the 165th infantry regiment made available to the latter when they suffered, on 21 February 1916, north of Verdun, in Bois des Caures wood, the first assaults of the gigantic offensive of the German army. It is not known when he fell between February 21 and 24, during this attack survived by few. A judgment would fix the death to the 23. A few days later, Gustave Poullet was killed in Fleury, a village from which nothing would remain. Albert Cambier and Marius Dournel fell on the same day, May 20, 1916, in Le Mort-Homme; Désiré Nison on June 21 in Douaumont. Second Lieutenant Jacques de Riols de Fonclare, who had chosen the right of preference over the army, son of the general who commanded the 1st division in Verdun, to which his regiment (127th infantry regiment) belonged, did not survive the

wounds he received during the April fighting in Côté-du-Poivre, attesting that the mourning of war did not spare military hierarchy. Of his six fighting sons, had not General de Castelnau already lost three? The Battle of the Somme, triggered on July 1, 1916, reaped, among others, on the 20 Georges Saintoyant, on September 6 Edgard Godard and André Goubet, on the 16 Marcel Cappon, the 25 Paul Faille, the 26 Jean Poussart. In total, the two great battles of the year 1916 killed more than a quarter of the students on the plaque. The years 1917 and 1918 were comparatively less deadly (18% of the deaths for the two years), marked by the fighting on the Chemin des Dames, the offensive of the summer of 1918 whose favorable outcome provoked the gradual reflux of the German armies, and by the Spanish flu, which caused far more deaths than the war worldwide, and which killed, among the 400,000 French people, Eugène Torrez and Antoine Bianconi.

Reversed Mourning

Although France was victorious, in the words of Dean Pilon, “La joie n’apparut pas cependant radieuse au fond des cœurs [joy did not appear radiant in the depths of hearts]”. The emotional burden of the first day of class in 1919 was heavy. The unmistakable deaths were being mourned, and there was still hope for the return of the disappeared, almost as many, among the last prisoners released, such as Albert Cambier, presumed captured in May 1916 in Verdun. A vain wait, as he would never return.

The dead whose bodies had been found had sometimes been recovered by their families, the vast majority of them lying in the large national necropolises that relatives could visit to pay their respects. But this was not the case for all families. One third of the dead in the faculty were missing. As far as they were concerned, no body had been found and no death certificate could be established. In 1920 and 1921, judgments would take the place and be transcribed on the civil registers. They would then be considered as truly, that is to say legally, dead. For relatives, this social recognition of death conditioned pension rights and facilitated mourning. Missing persons could be classified into two categories. Some were killed during the movement war in the first weeks of the conflict. The concern of armies was to progress, not to tally the dead. The bodies were therefore left on the ground and buried later when the fighting moved away, more or less long after and usually near the place where they were found. Thus

the body of Albert Marchier, missing in 1914, was found in 1917 after the German strategic withdrawal of the spring. After the armistice, were found the bodies of Raymond Manier, disappeared in October 1915, and that of Maurice Vallas, son of Professor Louis Vallas, disappeared in September 1918. Their bodies were then buried in a necropolis, giving families the opportunity visit the graves. Since the war, new bodies have been exhumed every year and it is estimated that tens of thousands remain buried on the front line. Some bodies will never be found. Those that were burned, a practice attested by testimonies, and which, although not generalized, nevertheless existed. Especially those that were shredded by heavy artillery shells and of which remains, at best, only debris collected and grouped in the multiple ossuaries of large military cemeteries. In addition to cleaning up combat zones, a post-war imperative to be able to return the soil to agriculture, there was a matter of giving families the opportunity to imagine that in the collective tomb, the ossuary, were the remains of their deceased. One may be surprised at the precise number of bodies inscribed on the ossuaries. Thus in the sixth ossuary of the Minaucourt necropolis, we can believe or hope that, on the basis that “two shins count for one man” and among the 4,446 “French” bodies grouped together, there lie the remains of students who fell in this sector, such as Maurice Gouvion or Paul Salandre. The high number of missing people explains why commemorative plaques and monuments were multiplying everywhere. In the absence of a body, they brought matter and gathered in a collective mourning that could be shared.

With war, the unbearable happened: sons had died before fathers, and normal mourning, inverted, was all the more difficult to accomplish. Prolonging this inversion, the words of Dean Pilon pronounced on the occasion of the beginning of the 1919 school year were explicit: students, by the effect of the war and especially of their death, were promoted to professors: “Honneur à ces héros ! Ils étaient venus chez nous en élèves pour apprendre le Droit. Et tout d’un coup, ils sont devenus des maîtres, ils ont donné au monde la grande leçon de droit en offrant leur vie pour la cause du Droit [Honored be these heroes! They came to us as students to learn the law. And all of a sudden they became masters; they gave the world the great lesson of law by offering their lives for its cause]”.»

The words have been forgotten. Out of oblivion, without being put into context, they even seem strange. Emotion no longer seizes the very few people who stop to look at

the plaque. Nevertheless, the faculty keeps it preciously, and this austere marble monument was part of all its peregrinations. From rue Angellier to rue Paul Duez, from the latter to the Villeneuve d'Ascq campus, it has now returned to Lille in the current premises of Place Déliot.

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