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"Girls were seen crying when soldiers departed." Belgian and French women and German soldiers: transgressive relationships under the gaze of the occupied population

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Abstract

Between 1914 and 1918, the German army occupied Belgium and large parts of France. One important feature of the occupation was the gender imbalance and, as such, these French and Belgian territories were often the theatre of encounters between the occupation soldiers and local women. Intimate relationships between members of these two groups were not uncommon: one can find comments about them in two thirds of the diaries kept by people living under the German occupation. This article is based on the analysis of a corpus of 110 such diaries, originating from the different occupation zones. These diaries reveal the way people perceived and judged these relations, but also show the variations in this perception, which could be geographical, chronological, social or gendered, or related to the forms of these relations. Some of these diaries – especially when written by young women – also provide clues about different aspects (like harassment or occupation languor) of the “psychological soil” in which these relations could emerge.

In occupied France and Belgium most people considered these relationships to be appalling from a patriotic and moral point of view, and their sheer number was viewed as a concern, but some diarists tried to understand the origins of the phenomenon. The different interpretations suggested explanations such as gender, class, age, education, the length of the conflict or misery, but rarely demonstrated empathy for those who were called “*femmes à Boches*” (“women for the Huns”).

Prostitution flourished from the start of the occupation and was completely at odds with the standards emanating from the “occupied war culture”. The rise in prostitution provoked an outcry and disgust among the population: its expansion and its association with the occupier inflamed its visibility in public space, making it partly inhospitable to the occupied people, but the situation became truly unbearable for locals when billeted occupiers welcomed women into the family home.

Weddings, in contrast, were extremely rare, and only reported in a few diaries. This quasi absence of formalized relations did not prevent the birth of numerous children born to a French or Belgian woman and a German soldier. These babies were generally officially recorded as having an “unknown father” and were not welcome in the community, despite the anxieties generated by a drop in the birth rate during the occupation period.

With the rise in sexual encounters between occupation soldiers and local women, venereal diseases became a common concern to both the occupiers and those occupied. During the first winter of the occupation, measures were taken by the German and local authorities to try to stop the spread of

sexual transmitted diseases. Centers specialized in the (forced) treatment of women infected by venereal disease were created by the occupying authorities. These centers were sometimes nicknamed "*parc à poules*" ("chicken parks") by the occupied population, ashamed of their very existence, but eager to see the "purification" of the public space through the arrest of prostitutes and infected women.

All in all, the various forms of intimate relationships were more often reported in the *Operations- und Etappengebiet*, close to the front, than on the territory of the general-government, where the density of the German presence was lower, especially in the rural areas. But everywhere, these relationships – generally regarded as venal sexuality – aroused animosity and led to these women being ostracised.

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In September 1915, Péronne, a French town in the Department of the Somme, was occupied for almost a year by the German army. From the beginning of the war, Judge Pierre Malicet kept a diary, in which he recorded his impressions on the course of the war and depicted daily life under military occupation. Among other things, he wrote that "the behaviour of the *Peronnaises* excited more and more the verve of the scandalmongers. This verve is often justified when it attacks for example mothers who engage in debauchery in the company of their girls, but she also attacks the most honourable people. We commonly hear Ms. X. has appointments with officers, Ms. Y. had an abortion, etc."¹

Even these few sentences taken from Malicet's diary point at a phenomenon difficult to comprehend: the intimate and consensual relationships between occupation soldiers and local women. That such transnational relationships have existed is in itself not surprising. Indeed, Belgium was almost entirely occupied by the German army for four years, as well as large parts of ten French departments.² These territories ran from the Belgian coast to Lorraine (and also included a small strip of territory in the Vosges), and incorporated large cities like Brussels, Lille and Antwerp, as well as large rural and sparsely populated areas like the Belgian and French Ardennes. The occupied population can be estimated between 9 and 10 million people and was quite heterogeneous, composed of urban and rural people, bourgeoisie, workers and peasants, French and Belgians, French and Flemish speakers. However, what those living under occupation had in common was to be cut off from the outside world by the occupying forces, and most of them were deprived of their beloved ones: over one million people was absent in these territories. Whole families had fled to escape the enemy and spent the remainder of the war in exile, but, above all, the mobilization led to the departure of most young men, especially in France where the conscription policy was more extensive than in Belgium. Indeed, the majority of the adults remaining in the occupied territories was women, and roughly 2 million male Germans took position on the front and on its rear in occupied France and Belgium.

What Malicet's comment shows is that these relationships were not invisible, and that they could take many forms, affect different categories of persons, and lead to different consequences. These relationships prompted commentary and gossip on the part of their fellow compatriots: Malicet was not alone in keeping a diary, and many, including Malicet, recorded rumours about these relationships, or commented on those people they knew personally.

Some diaries of German soldiers, such as Ernst Jünger,³ also referred to the intimate relationships they had with French or Belgian women. On the other hand, we have found to date no diary of a woman who had sexual contact with an occupation soldier. Thus, the perspective or mindset of the women who entered into intimate encounters with the occupation soldiers proves elusive for the historian. Yet the point of view of the local population observing such encounters is available to the historian, whether published or not. I have to date listed 230 diaries, including 65 written by women, and 165 by men; 107 written by residents of the occupied French departments, and 123 by persons residing in occupied Belgium. These authors were of all ages, but few came from the peasantry or the working classes. They were, though, not confined to intellectual circles, but the vast majority came from classes ranging from the petty bourgeoisie to the social elites.

Rather than considering the mention of these relationships between occupation soldiers and local women in diaries as purely anecdotal, the diaries instead provide insight into how the phenomenon was perceived, and to a certain extent on its different manifestations. However, relying on a single diary or on a small number of them is problematic: each single diary raises the question of its representative character. It therefore seems preferable to analyse a large number of them, in order

to not reach an illusory representativeness (namely because few of them emanate from the working classes), but at least for a broad coverage of the diarists in terms of geographical, social, linguistic, national, age or gender profiles. I base my analysis on a corpus of 110 diaries, which allows us to understand who were the authors were talking about when they wrote about intimate relationships between German troops and Belgian civilian women, what forms the phenomenon took, and the various opinions on it.

This article will focus on the distribution in space and time of the perception of the phenomenon, and then of some of its manifestations, namely prostitution, marriages, children born of such unions, and the treatment of women suffering from venereal diseases. Other close issues, particularly related to sexual violence, also appears throughout the diaries, such as rapes, mostly committed during the invasion, or popular violence against the "*femmes à Boches*" ("women for the Huns"), especially during liberation, but I will focus in this article mainly on consenting relationships. Before addressing these issues, it is important to briefly return to the nature of the occupation diaries and the characteristics of my corpus.

Occupation diaries

Written clandestinely, these diaries do not only reveal some aspects of the lives of their authors, but were also intended to contribute to the remembrance of extraordinary events, and, in the short term, to help overcome them by giving meaning through writing to these events, to the war, and to their personal role.⁴ However, they also had a value of challenge vis-à-vis the occupying power, their very existence a transgression of the order imposed by the enemy, writing appearing as wresting a shred of freedom from a dispossessed individual. In addition, these diaries bore witness to the cruelties and injustices affecting the civilian population, but also of testifying to the behavior of the latter in the face of adversity, and as such of participating in a practice of informal social control. They were nonetheless subject to forms of self-censorship, in case the diaries would be seized by the occupying forces. Self-censorship could also be motivated by respect for standards of morality, related to notions of decency; this was the case when it came to sexuality, more especially to the transgression of encounters with the occupiers. The silence on this subject could be quite deliberate: "Let's avoid deepening certain phenomena" wrote a printer of Braine-le-Comte (Belgium, Hainaut), "Let's even set a veil on human weaknesses. Let's leave to our readers the memory of what they have seen and heard, and let's see that if the hare has no affinity for the tortoise, the donkey and the horse have ever had a little more for each other."⁵ Does modesty explain the silences about these relationships? A silence can also result for other reasons such as voluntary concealment, a lack of interest, or even simply the absence of the phenomenon in the environment of the author. There is no definitive explanation for the silence on the topic in each diary. However, we can consider the silence from another angle: in an era characterized by taboos around sex, all diaries were initially silent on the topic, but only initially. Actually, the issue became so worrisome for the civilian population that it eventually pierced the silence in the majority of cases, i.e. in 72 of 110 diaries examined.

The 110 diarists were chosen to represent as best as possible the diversity of the occupied civilian population; however, the authors of the sample stem mainly from the middle classes. The scarcity of diaries kept by workers or peasants contributes to this imbalance. Out of the 110, 35 are women and 75 men; again, this imbalance is not a choice, but the result of the fewer number of diaries written by women during the occupation. One can find among the diarists 62 Belgians (22 Flemish speakers, 39 French speakers and an English speaker), 46 French, a British and a Swiss. These authors cover as

widely as possible the geographical diversity of the occupied territories⁶, as well as of the occupying regimes: 51 lived in 1915-1916 in the area of the general government and 59 in the army zone.

A diversity of evocations and explanations

Regardless of their form, the intimate relationships between German occupiers and local women formed a visible part of the occupation landscape, mentioned by two-thirds of the diarists (72 of 110). This visibility did not, however, have the same intensity everywhere. The diarists who mentioned it were indeed slightly fewer (32/51) in the area of the general government than in the army zone (40/59). This offset is probably the result of the difference in concentration of troops between the two areas: on the territory under the occupation regime of the general government, centered in Brussels and covering two-thirds of Belgium, the occupiers were mostly concentrated in the major cities; in the army zone, German troops were ubiquitous and much more numerous. The zone we can refer to as the “army zone” actually covered several zones of occupation: the *Etappen- und Operationsgebiet* (“the stages and operations zones”), a strip of territory deep of a few tens of kilometres, divided between each of the German armies fighting on the Western Front, and covering the ten occupied French departments and the Western (and Southern) margins of occupied Belgium, and the *Marinegebiet* (“Navy zone”), which incorporated Bruges and the Belgian coast.

The author’s gender is an important variable in mentioning the phenomenon or not: women (19/35, one out of two) were less likely to talk about it than men (53/75, two out of three). Of course, silence remains always difficult to interpret, but one could say that the more frequent silence on the part of women was a form of collective shame experienced by the gender most directly concerned. Crossed with the variable of gender, religious beliefs also had an influence, but a limited one: Catholic women were barely more reserved than others on the issue (13/26), but non-Catholic men mentioned it almost systematically (14/15).

Basically, regardless of the characteristics of the diarists, their comments are rarely caring. “Unfortunately, there is a lot of women and young girls who misbehave and have misbehaved with the Germans.”⁷ This sentence, written down in Saint-Mihiel (France, Meuse) by Marie-Joséphine André in July 1916, is typical of the attitude of the occupied civilian population against the “*femmes à Boches*”. Generally, their opinion was even more accusatory when the women dating Germans were married, especially if their husbands were mobilized. In his village of the Vosges, Henri Martin noticed in 1917: « Besides the young girls, a great number of married women fall in bad life ; I carefully record those who raise concern about themselves... »⁸ In his list he recorded at least 43 persons (some of them being collectively mentioned, like “the daughters of X”, etc.), 16 are identified as married, i.e. more than one in three.

These relationships were considered appalling from a patriotic and moral point of view, and their sheer number was viewed as a concern, but some diarists tried to understand the origins of the phenomenon. The Flemish writer Stijn Streuvels was among those who proposed an essentialist explanation: “the girls generally have a strange conception of patriotism; they do not think and give way to the spontaneous impulses of their mood.”⁹ Streuvels again and again pointed to the “eternal feminine”, that he used to refer to the German formula “*das ewige Weibliche*”, and to which he attributed this offending thoughtlessness. Many other diarists did not stick to such a simplistic reasoning, and stated the duration of the war as a major explanatory factor: it would have caused an erosion of the moral sense and modesty, that the exhaustion of the patriotism, caused by the length of the conflict, would have been less and less able to compensate. The shopkeeper David Hirsch

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3 subscribed to such an interpretation in December 1917: "the sluts who a year ago would have been
4 ashamed to show up with a German don't hide anymore [...] a sad result of the long occupation."¹⁰

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6 The manner in which the different social classes were affected by the phenomenon could also be
7 interpreted very differently by the diarists, some of them describing debauchery with the occupier as
8 typical of the lower classes. Whatever their own position in the social hierarchy, they ranked
9 themselves, as bourgeois, on the right side of the dividing line between virtue and vice. The latter
10 would have emanated from the classes inferior to theirs, while the women from "good families"
11 would have been unwilling to accede to the audacity of the enemy. The priest of Maroilles
12 (France, Nord) mocked in March 1916 the misfortune of a German captain who "drunk every night
13 [...]" claimed to make conquests among young girls or young ladies of Maroilles. But as he tried with
14 people from good families, he got nothing for his trouble."¹¹ The cleric observed some time later that
15 even among the bourgeoisie, some women also had affairs with Germans. The Flemish writer Virginia
16 Loveling had noticed long before him in Gent (Belgium, East Flanders) that there were also "ladies of
17 the bourgeoisie and upper classes who are not exempt from lack of self-esteem with officers
18 quartered in their homes."¹²

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21 At Marche-en-Famenne (Belgium, Luxembourg), the teacher Léon Galloy pointed more directly to
22 compromises of the lower classes that he depicted in his broader picture of society under
23 occupation: "I first divide the population into two distinct parts: the intelligent class and the ignorant
24 class, in other words the lower class. The first - upper - class [...] is not or less as possible with the
25 Germans. [...] Pervaded by the justice of our cause, it is perfectly convinced of the final defeat of the
26 Germans. But the intelligent and patriotic class suffers a lot of the subjugation of our fatherland. [...] The lower class threw itself wholeheartedly from the beginning in the arms of the Germans, especially the workers. [...]. Women and girls dishonor themselves in contact with the Germans: children born of adultery come to life everywhere. I must say that it is not the whole ignorant class which acts like that. But it should be noted that it is mainly the part who has lost any religion. Religion and patriotism are one!"¹³ On the one side, the "good society", especially Catholic, keeps its dignity and its patriotism. And on the other side, the lower classes which, especially among the workers and the irreligious one, combine all the vices, including the sex trade with the enemy.

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33 The opinion of Bernadette Colin, also of the Catholic middle class, was close to that of Galloy: the
34 cause of the decay was primarily to be found in education, and sometimes age. However, her daily
35 reality led her to a more nuanced and less accusatory analysis. Single and orphans, she and her
36 sisters (22, 26 and 32 years) lived in Lusse (France, Vosges), a village on the front line constantly
37 flooded with Germans, including in their own home. Bernadette and her sisters generally got along
38 with the soldiers, but she felt the need to explain: "in times like the ones we are living, pride is
39 necessarily set aside and an act of charity that would not have been accepted before the war, as
40 coming from enemy hands, is now received almost with recognition. Yet, while being kind, we keep
41 the distance and do not lose our dignity of French women. Unfortunately, some forgot themselves;
42 they are to be found in the poor class and they are these unfortunate ones who, by the very
43 meanness of their condition, have received no education and do not know what is keeping their
44 honor, or among those poor youth who still don't know anything of life and are susceptible to all
45 beautiful mirages. Such poor ones, one meet everywhere, in time of peace as in time of war. If they
46 do wrong, I believe we must pity them rather than blame them. If we would not have received more
47 education than them, maybe we would have done worse than they did. But no, it is not in the use of
48 the world to forgive."¹⁴ An adamant believer and patriot, Bernadette Colin turned out to be even
49 more indulgent than most of the civilian population towards both the enemy soldiers and female
50 sinners.
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Physical and psychological distress arising from the occupation were pointed out by other diarists to explain these “loose” behaviours, resulting less of a degradation of morality and patriotism than of the living conditions. “Immorality got much worse since the [beginning of the] war; poverty and unemployment are largely the cause. Many women run with the Germans” sighed the young architect Raphaël Waterschoot in August 1916, at Saint-Nicolas (Belgium, East Flanders).¹⁵ The annuitant Felix Chauvet noticed in his small village in the Oise: “Passel has had to register a birth today. This is regrettable from all points of view. In addition to the misery that they create for themselves, these unhappy ones! In a time lacking of everything. Yet, it seems to me that they have right to indulgence, because in these times we live in, most of these women have succumbed by the need. So it happens what happened. In exchange for the little well-being the soldiers gave them, they gave their favors. When one must live constantly for two years and more, with men who, for their part, are happy to meet sympathy, it is, or it must be difficult to shield oneself against these events, and, if many remained wise, it is because they had parents to protect them.”¹⁶ For Eugenie Deruelle, however, a widow of Sains-Richaumont (France, Aisne), food deprivation did not explain everything. She wrote in August 1915 : “I had never thought our country so rotten, and that without excuse, because there is not only those who are hungry who have affairs with the Prussians!...”¹⁷

The different interpretations mentioned gender, class, education, and the length of the conflict or misery, but rarely was empathy expressed for the “*femmes à Boches*”. The relative indulgence of Colin and Chauvet was quite exceptional: only 10 diarists of the 72 who evoked the phenomenon acknowledged mitigating circumstances or gave the benefit of the doubt to these women, or at least to some of them. The profiles of these “indulgent” diarists are various, the only trend being that they were to be found more often in the army zone (7/10), where poverty was bigger and relationships between occupiers and local women more frequent than on the territory of the general government.

Young women and girls were not necessarily more lenient than their compatriots, but their diaries can be useful to understand certain situations or moods, which have also characterised those who had affairs with Germans but left no notes. They depicted, among other things, some pick-up techniques, or even some harassment practices, which targeted them and added to the burden of the occupation. In Rocquigny (France, Ardennes), for example, Marie Chatelin, aged 20, frequently complained about having to endure this kind of male behaviour.¹⁸ She was annoyed by these calls as soon as she went out in her garden, to the point of feeling harassed: “Pstt... Pstt..” ‘Miss, Miss, nix talk?’ ‘Miss Marie... much work...’ ‘misfortune, war!’ ‘still nix talk Miss?... etc. ” These diaries also reveal that patriotic feelings and condemning the debauchery with the enemy did not prevent one to feel uneasy when an occupation soldier behaved nicely or with sensitivity. In Origny-Sainte-Benoîte (France, Aisne), Henriette Moisson, aged 21, admitted feeling troubled nonetheless when she received flowers from a German: “I love the flowers and I like to honor the French kindness. [...] I thanked Mr. Léo (that’s the name under which he presented himself, the surname escapes me). He gave me his hand. But I must confess it hurts me and the sight of the flowers brings me tears to the eyes! These flowers offered by enemy hands, I would like [...] to see them withered, I would like to see them falling one by one and with them, the last vestige of this army of invaders. Certainly, Mr. Léo is a right man, correct, and I believe, generous. Perhaps, he would regret his gracious gesture if he could assume the feelings it arouses in me!”¹⁹ It did not prevent these feelings from evolving in following weeks. Henriette admitting in her diary that the great qualities and the sensitivity of “Mr. Léo”: “ I only believed in hatred, but now I believe that friendship can sometimes exist despite national hatred.”²⁰

What is also revealed in the diaries written by young women is the endless boredom and the waste that the occupation represented. The same Henriette Moission wrote in the middle of the same spring at 21-years-old: “for two years, I have spent my best years in pain and sadness. [...] Years in

the field count double, and in this rapid race of my youth flew my beautiful illusions, vapours of happiness. I could be married. I'm not."²¹ With good reasons, as all legitimate candidates for marriage had left the village in August 1914.

This languor of the occupation could lead young girls in need of male gaze to release their apprehension towards those who were indeed present, i.e. the Germans. As such, attendance at traditional meeting places like balls, was particularly frowned on by their compatriots. The "occupied war culture", as defined by historian James Connolly, excluded from taking part in such festive events, deemed inappropriate in a time of suffering and deprivation, a fortiori if they allowed the meeting of German military and young local women. In early 1918, the success of a party organized in Oupeye (Belgium, Liège), triggered a controversy in the region: "former soldiers, moved to Foret, organized a ball before their departure, to which they invited the girls of the village, even by poster. A soldier wrote underneath 'The priest allowed'. These words caused the verve of the pastor at the Sunday preaching and despite necessary and useful advice, quite a lot of female dancers went to the party. Girls were seen crying when soldiers departed."²² In this regard as in other ones, the duration of the occupation put to the test the moral standards promoted by the elites from the early months of the enemy presence.

Prostitution

From the beginning of the occupation period, prostitution was completely at odds with the standards emanating from the "occupied war culture". Contacts between prostitutes and Germans immediately shocked the civilian population. A resident of the Brussels commune of Schaerbeek, the writer Georges Rens, noted on August 22 1914, two days after the Germans entered the Belgian capital city: "during the evening and into the night, the officers were busy, with scoundrel and debauchery in the welcoming places. Soldiers also found females [...] Tonight, the men continue to live it up. Half a dozen NCOs have fun noisily in the *rue de l'Eclipse*, one of the vilest brothels' streets in the capital city [...] At the Cecil Hotel, officers and sluts are organizing the orgy; it is said that there are even women in the barracks. In the one I see out of my window, people singing until midnight..."²³ This welcome was not unique to Brussels. It was to be found, for example, in the small town of Avelgem (Belgium, West Flanders), where the writer Stijn Streuvels, from the nearby village of Ingooigem, reported on August 23, that "women of easy virtue, led by the attraction of the foreign uniforms and the tender smile of the blond Huns, feel free to enter the camp – simply greedy for pleasure."²⁴

Benoît Majerus has showed in the case of Brussels that clandestine prostitution flourished in the occupied countries, and became a common concern for both occupying and local authorities (Majerus, 2003). The massive presence of troops and the dramatic circumstances of the war triggered the demand, while misery and food shortage – hitting first the lower classes – nurtured the rise of the supply on the sex market. After a few months of occupation, several diarists noted that the visibility of prostitution had increased since the beginning of the occupation. The Christmas holidays in 1914 were, in particular, described by some diarists as a moment of intense use of venal love by the German soldiers. Referring to the filming in Brussels of Christmas scenes by a German cinema team, Rens noticed: "there is yet a scene the operators neglected, of which the Fraulein, the chaste wife and whole Germany will be deprived. It was a scene to see, yesterday and today, in the streets hiding some houses with closed shutters and half-open doors. A Christmas procession took place there without interruption. The processionary ones were these noble warriors with helmets, chaspkas or round caps, who covered themselves with glory for five months. They queued up at the

entrance to these houses, I saw them, like hundreds of other Brussels residents, in the Saint-Laurent Street. And, whenever a uniform went out of there, another uniform went inside."²⁵

The "occupied war culture" was embodied daily by the maintenance of what historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver calls the "patriotic distance" towards the occupiers.²⁶ The French and the Belgians limited their contacts with the Germans to the ones imposed by politeness and necessity. This distance could often be understood in its most physical form: it was not only avoiding conversation with the Germans, but also standing as far away from them as possible, out of reach of the five senses, to somehow restrict or even deny their presence. The impossibility to maintain this distance could be a source of stress or even disgust, but the malaise could also be generated by the sight of civilians transgressing this patriotic standard. Prostitutes were no exception to this sense of disgust, inasmuch as their activity was already morally condemned in times of peace, as they were discursively and spatially placed outside 19^e century society by its regulationist norms. However, that prostitution flourished under the occupation and its visibility in public space, made it even more inhospitable to the civilian population. For example, in Sedan, at the end of summer 1915 was not the carefree time usually anticipated by the school director Rigobert Faÿ: "walk in the evening around six o'clock could be very nice now. The time is delicious. We meet few people, that is true. Still it should better not see any at all than to be the witness of the shamelessness of many girls of Sedan. Last night, close to the avenue, on the sidewalk of the cinema, I saw two of them holding Germans by the neck. [...] Two others were on a bench in an outfit that left no doubt about their intentions, between two German officers. A little further, in the avenue, German soldiers to a window were called unequivocally by such girls. It is so much that one doesn't want to go outside anymore."²⁷ Observing these forms of intimate contact upset locals, but being in the same space as the women concerned did not leave them indifferent either. Marie Masquelier, aged 23, passed by prostitutes when visiting a German doctor for an ear infection. The sight of these women struck her: "I never thought meeting this real slut [...] One could never know how much these people of debauchery are rotten and flawed!"²⁸ It was sometimes difficult for the locals to avoid witnessing the encounters between local women and German occupiers, but the situation became truly unbearable when these intimate contacts left the public space and penetrated the fortresses of their private sphere. The billeting of officers or troops was a burden for the occupied Belgians or French, but it turned into a much bigger ordeal when the billeted occupiers welcomed women, prostitutes or not, into the family home. Streuvels felt outraged in February 1918 when a girl from the village "dared impudently to come and spend the night here at home, and only left in broad daylight."²⁹

This diary entry was not exceptional. The malaise was serious enough so that one diarist out of three (39/110) mentioned prostitution in his writings. The frequency of these entries was stronger in the army zone (24/59) than in the territory of the general government (15/51). The difference came mostly from the countryside, where the phenomenon was twice as often mentioned in those of the army zone (11/32) than in those in the general government (2/11), where the occupiers' much more diluted presence made it less noticeable.

Weddings

Although prostitution flourished, it was not the only form of intimate relationships between occupiers and local women. Actually, the "exact" nature of a large number of relations was not always clearly identified by the diarist, and was probably also often ambiguous for the persons concerned. Interest and desire did not cover the entire field of explaining the motivations for these intimate relationships, which must also reckon with sentimental feelings. Their sincerity or intensity are nearly impossible to evaluate, especially as such sentiments were almost never explicitly

mentioned by the diarists, as if for them, such feelings between people of opposing camps were inconceivable.

Imagining marriage with a German was virtually unthinkable for locals, to the point that the mere mention of such a situation could trigger an incredulous response. Henriette Moisson laughed out loud with one of her friends who had told her about the "declaration of love" she indirectly received a few hours earlier. The young woman had gone to her aunt, where a German soldier was billeted. After her departure, the soldier reportedly said about the niece: "Miss sehr gut, he said. Me baker, if Miss wants, me immediately talk for marriage". The aunt was reported to have replied: "Rogue! [...] you are really straightforward, you, it's worse than love at first sight". Henriette Moisson concluded: "actually, it makes us laugh! From a Frenchman we would have been less surprised, but for a German, it seemed more surprising."³⁰

Surprising, but not impossible. The lack of local male marriage candidates was far from a strong incentive to push young women to enter into marriage with an occupation soldier. Yet, marriages did happen, despite the hostility of the local community and the strong reluctance of the highest military authorities, who considered that a committed relationship with enemy women was inconsistent with the idea of total commitment of the soldier to his fatherland. We have found information about less than a dozen such events, including a few occurring in Germany, meaning that there were probably no more than a few dozen for the whole duration of war. Marriages of this kind were thus very rare, so much so that such situations were only mentioned by 8 of our 110 diarists. These few authors were scattered throughout the occupied territory and, with the exception of rumors of the first months,³¹ only referred to this phenomenon during the second half of the occupation. For example, an resident of Brussels noticed in September 1917 that "one speaks a lot in Ixelles of a young Belgian woman, widow of a Belgian soldier who fell on the battlefield, who's marrying a German officer". In Mons (Belgium, Hainaut), the notary Hambye was more accurate when he admitted to being very surprised to learn in July of the same year that the daughter of his gardener had married "a German railway employee. The civil marriage took place yesterday at the Town Hall of Jurbise and the religious ceremony was celebrated in Mons by the Catholic Chaplain of the garrison. This small event has surprised many people."³² Hambye probably did not know, but the young bride, aged 18, was already pregnant at the time of her wedding.³³

Children of the enemy

The German presence in the occupied territories interfered little with the marriage rates in the occupied territories, which was heavily burdened by the departure of most young men. Was the interference so negligible for the birth rate? This issue of the "children of the enemy" was in any case far more often reported in the occupation diaries than marriages between Germans and local women: the topic of children born of German occupiers and local women was found in the writings of 24 diarists out of 110. And this topic was sometimes discussed very early, as in Enghien (Belgium, Hainaut), where in October 1914, "one says aloud that young *alboches* [Huns] will be born in the middle of next year from these poorly assorted unions."³⁴ Or in November 1914 in the Somme (France): "a midwife says that there will be many small Germans at Péronne next summer because the *Péronnaises*, probably with the patriotic purpose of tiring the soldiers, are quite happy to grant them favors."³⁵ The first war births of a German genitor happened actually during the spring 1915, but they were essentially the result of rapes during the invasion. The large majority of those births in the second half of 1915 were the result of consensual intercourse. Again, the mention of these births are more numerous (and a little earlier) in the army zone (14/59, be a diarist out of four) than on the territory of the general government (10/51, be one out of five). Especially, in the first case, births

were mainly reported in the countryside (9/14), while in the second one, they were a more urban phenomenon (4/10 were reported in rural areas).

In September 1915, Rigobert Faÿ, after having lamented on the existence of the relations between Germans and *Sedanaïses* reported: "declarations of birth of unknown father have begun at City Hall, sad to say, family men, currently at the front, will see their small offspring increased at their return."³⁶ Civil registers of a sample of 71 Belgian and French communes largely confirm that these births were not acknowledged by the German genitors. It sometimes happened that German soldiers committed themselves to the role of father, and officially declared themselves as such, but these cases were the exception. Furthermore, it should be noted that the gross number of births of unknown fathers generally did not increase, or insignificantly, during the occupation; it is rather the birth rate which declined substantially, resulting in an important increase of the proportion of births of unknown father. On average, the communes in our sample show a proportion of births to an unknown father was one third higher in 1917 (7.6%) than in 1913 (5.6%). And unsurprisingly, the municipalities where the part of births of unknown fathers increased the most were located in the army zone, where the German soldiers were the most numerous, with proportions of births of unknown fathers exceeding sometimes 20% or even 30% during the second half of the war.

Meanwhile, the proportion of children born of a German soldier and a married local woman is much more difficult to assess. Single mother status was certainly not enviable, but the wives whose husbands were at the front or a prisoner of war lived in the fear of his return home and his discovery of a child born as a result of an affair with a German. Several diarists were outraged by the abortion practices intended to prevent this kind of situation. In February 1917, Eugénie Deruelle suspected for example a fellow resident of Sains-Richaumont who resorted to seeking an abortion: "we had heard the rumor of the death of Paul S. [a mobilized soldier]: he's alive, and his wife has received information that he was in good health... Some time ago she was pregnant; then nothing... One says she is again [pregnant]!... That's classy!"³⁷ Nine months later, the wife of S. is pregnant again "and she couldn't get rid of the second Hun's offspring, as she did with the first [...]. She is very annoyed, and wonders what will happen to her when or if her husband comes back..."³⁸

I still have very little information on how these newborns were actually welcomed by the family and the local community, or if the mothers were single or married. The balance between compassion for the small and fragile newborns and the aversion to its origins probably varied greatly from case to case. This tension was experienced by Eugénie Deruelle, who knew that "the laundress of the judge" [the German military magistrate billeted at Deruelle's home], lived in "abject" conditions when she gave birth to twins born of this magistrate. Mrs Deruelle yet refused to provide her any help: "I would have gladly provided her clothes, but really, she has defiled my house... and however she is to be pitied, as well as to be blamed!..."³⁹ Only Eugénie Deruelle expressed explicitly such a refusal, but the fact that in four years, not one of the 110 diarists mentioned aiding or having expressed sympathy to a woman in such a situation says a lot about the social isolation of these mothers and their newborns. Even the local clergy was not very excited to welcome these children in the parishes, like the vicar of Fresnoy-le-Grand, who noted in August 1915: "I am going to baptise a Prussian: that's the word."⁴⁰ And this isolation sometimes proved fatal: the twins of Sains-Richaumont, perhaps premature and left in the winter to the care of a lone and impoverished woman, died within days after their birth.

Venereal disease

The health of these children born of war was not the only life threatened. With the increase in sexual intercourse between the German occupiers and local women venereal diseases spread and became a public health concern. During the first winter of occupation, measures were taken by the German and local authorities to try and stop the spread of sexual transmitted diseases. Local polices were asked to tighten their control of the prostitutes and of the "places of debauchery", and prevention campaigns targeting the soldiers were organized. Not surprisingly, the first mentions of these diseases appeared precisely in December 1914 in diary writings. One diarist out of five wrote about the issue (24/110), even as early as 1915 (16/24 in 1914-1915), but they were significantly more frequent in the army zone (16/59) than in the territory of the general government (8/51). Once again, the presence of this concern seemed to be directly linked to the numbers of the occupying forces.

The anti-venereal fight focused mainly on a health control of the prostitutes and the women equated to them by authorities. The occupation authorities created "clinics" specialized in the confinement and (forced) treatment of women with VD, whereas German soldiers were healed in military clinics. Thousands of these women were forcibly kept in these institutions while they were treated, and exposed to a harsh disciplinary regime, sanctioned by penalties such as solitary confinement and corporal punishment. Such custodial clinics were established in all major cities of the occupied territories, such as Brussels, Ghent, Lille and Antwerp, but also in places of more secondary importance, like Bruges, Maubeuge, Douai, etc. The comments made by the diarists reveal the negative image the local population had of these centers: for instance, in Sedan, Faÿ described the requisitioned hospice as having become the "dump of numerous sick women"⁴¹. These clinics were often given unflattering nicknames. For example, the "*Frauen-Krankenhaus Maubeuge*" was most commonly nicknamed the "*parc à poules*" ("chicken park", meaning the "sluts park") by locals.⁴² This appellation was not specific: it was to be found in a dialectal version in Mons, La Louvière, Charleroi and Nivelles, where its Belgian counterparts received the nickname of "*parc à pouilles*."⁴³ The expression was used especially in the region of Charleroi and in the Walloon Brabant, where it made its way into insults, local popular songs and even a play⁴⁴. Elsewhere, some nicknames could also extend to the surrounding areas of these centers, as in Ghent where the street where the center was located was called in Flemish the "*Microbenboulevard*."⁴⁵

The diary entries that mentioned these centers were not numerous (18/110), but when mentioned it was by a diarist in the army zone (11/59) rather than in the general government (7/51). And again, whether one lived in the countryside made a difference: absent from the diaries held in rural areas in the second zone, they sometimes appear there in the first one. The comments of the diarists reveal that reactions towards these centers varied between shame and anger towards the presumed debauchery and infection of the internees, and an acknowledgment of their supposed prophylactic and disciplinary usefulness. A few diaries even go as far to see the arrests of infected women by the Germans as a form of "purification": "these good Germans, these propagandists of hygiene, knowing how doctors are scarce at the moment, brought themselves to remove anything that could harm their health in order to purify the environment where their soldiers reside,"⁴⁶ wrote Henriette Moisson. Eugénie Deruelle was even more explicit when she learned in August 1915 that infected women were arrested: "it is well done for them. I don't pity them!"⁴⁷ Only a few locals, who witnessed directly the living conditions endured by the infected women, showed mercy towards them. This was the case of Jules Limbour, administrator of the Hôtel-Dieu of Douai. When he visited the anti-venereal clinic in his town, in the company of a German doctor, Limbour confessed that "this big room full of beds, swarming with two hundred and fifty women and forty children of all ages, children at the breast, and kids aged 10, and girls aged 14-15, and women aged 45, gave me the most heartbreaking spectacle of human misery."⁴⁸ This kind of comment was however very rare; more

common were those expressing repulsion toward the internees, like the young Mathilde Scaillierez, who, writing about the same clinic, estimated that "one shall re-santify this parochial room, when they will have been removed from there."⁴⁹

Conclusion

The Belgian and French women who engaged in intimate relations with the German occupation forces left few ego-documents for the historian studying this phenomenon. However, its transgressive nature sparked many comments of moral deprivation by the local populations, which have been partly preserved up in these occupation diaries. The number and the diversity of the diarists examined provide insight into how these encounters were perceived by the local population, and framed as a moral and patriotic concern, at least by the middle class diarists. However, it was in the army zone, where the German troops were the most numerous, that this phenomenon raised the most concern among the local population, while in contrast, there was little comment in the countryside of the general government, where the occupying presence was generally far less obvious.

Hostility towards these relationships was widespread, especially since a great number of these encounters occurred in the context of prostitution. Women who had affairs with Germans were frequently rejected, and those who had to undergo the difficult consequences of these relationships, like an unwanted pregnancy or a venereal infection, did not elicit more compassion from their fellow Belgians or French, who instead saw their misfortunes as an extra reason to ostracize them. However, the rejection was not systematic: without condoning it, a minority of the local population at least tried to explain the behavior and showed pity for the difficult situations these women sometimes faced.

Comments by the diarists, as well as their omissions, also allow us to identify what was unthinkable, or at least unspeakable about these relationships: the existence of potential mutual feelings. Clues that point to mutual romantic feelings were the few weddings mentioned or the expression of emotions such as grief at the moment of the separation, but they were never described as love by the civilian population. The "thoughtlessness" or personal interest were the only motivations conceivable by the occupied people for those relationships equated with "debauchery". Yet the diaries kept by young women who nonetheless had no intimate relationship with an occupier, suggests that other factors could have influenced them, as different as the deeply depressing character of the occupation, or the accidental encounters and the inclinations to which they could give rise.

It remains a challenge for the historian to penetrate the core of these relationships between enemies, due to their intimate but also shameful character, not to mention the short length of the relationships. Even the fate of these women and their children after the war remains most of the time very elusive. However, thanks to their transgressive dimension, the relations have left many traces in the different sources produced by, or relating to, formal or informal social control, as in the case of the diaries. The use of multiple sources of this kind, private or official, from the occupation forces or the civilian population, rarely allows insight into the very heart of these relationships. However, they help to better identify the contours and the constraints shaped by the context which engendered these relationships and ultimately destroyed them: that of an interminable war of occupation, generating unexpected encounters, unwanted ties and undesirable consequences.

- ¹ Deperchin, *Journal*, 128 (19 September 1915).
- ² The departments of Aisne, Ardennes (entirely), Marne, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Meuse, Nord, Pas-de-Calais, Oise, Somme and Vosges. The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg was also occupied, but unlike France and Belgium, it remained neutral and kept a limited autonomy.
- ³ Jünger, *Carnets*.
- ⁴ De Schaepdrijver and Proctor, *An English Governess*, 8.
- ⁵ Lepers, *Nix Pâris...*, 128 (10 June 1918).
- ⁶ I have used for the French departments of Aisne: 10 diaries ; Ardennes: 7; Meurthe-et-Moselle: 1; Meuse: 1; Nord: 17; Oise: 3; Pas-de-Calais: 2; Somme: 2; Vosges: 4; and for the Belgian provinces: Antwerp: 4 diaries; Brabant: 17; West Flanders: 10; East Flanders: 6; Hainaut: 11; Liege: 2; Limburg: 4; Luxembourg: 5; Namur: 4. This distribution is a compromise between the distribution of the population, the number of available diaries and the diversity of situations to be taken into account.
- ⁷ André's diary (23 July 1916).
- ⁸ Fauth and Martin, *Le journal*, 21 (26 February 1917). The list is available on p.57.
- ⁹ Streuvels, *In oorlogstijd*, 83-84 (23 August 1914).
- ¹⁰ Becker, *Journaux*, 223 (7 Decembre 1917).
- ¹¹ Peter's diary (25 mars 1916). I want to thank Jean Heuclin for having communicated me this document.
- ¹² Loveling, *Oorlogsdagboeken*, 218 (20 December 1915).
- ¹³ Galloy, *Pour les enfants*, 11-13 (31 May 1918).
- ¹⁴ Nivet, Fombaron and Prouillet, *Journal*, 262-263 (5 December 1915).
- ¹⁵ Waterschoot, *Oorlogdagboeken* (3 August 1916).
- ¹⁶ Chauvet, *Memento de guerre* (7 December 1916).
- ¹⁷ Giguët, *Carnets*, 105 (1 August 1915).
- ¹⁸ Chatelin, "Journal", 40 (9 April 1916).
- ¹⁹ Moisson, *Journal* (13 March 1916).
- ²⁰ Moisson, *Journal* (8 May 1916).
- ²¹ Moisson, *Journal* (8 May 1916).
- ²² O'Kelly, *1914-1918*, 431 (19 February 1918).
- ²³ Rens, diary (22 August 1914).
- ²⁴ Streuvels, *In oorlogstijd*, 83-84 (23 August 1914).
- ²⁵ Rens, diary (26 December 1914).
- ²⁶ De Schaepsrijver, *La Belgique*.
- ²⁷ Faÿ, *Sedan*, 209 (7-8 September 1915).
- ²⁸ Bellamy, "Marie Masquelier", 341 (28 April 1918).
- ²⁹ Streuvels, *In oorlogstijd*, 650 (15 February 1918).
- ³⁰ Moisson, *Journal* (15 June 1918).
- ³¹ For example in Tourcoing: Noyelle, *Mémoires* (31 January 1915).
- ³² Hambye, *La ville* (9 July 1917).
- ³³ Phone conversation between the author and Mrs. P.L., grand-daughter of the "young bride", 4 October 2017.
- ³⁴ Marchand, diary (28 October 1914).
- ³⁵ Deperchin, *Journal*, 58 (24 November 1914).
- ³⁶ Faÿ, *Sedan*, 209 (7-8 September 1915).
- ³⁷ Giguët, *Carnets*, 299 (1 January 1917).
- ³⁸ Giguët, *Carnets*, 454 (29 August 1917).
- ³⁹ Giguët, *Carnets*, 162 (19 February 1916).
- ⁴⁰ Postic, *Louis-Joseph Le Port*, 52 (4 August 1915).
- ⁴¹ Faÿ, *Sedan*, 351 (9-10 January 1917).
- ⁴² Dubut-Masion, *Journal*, 143 and 180 (5 March and 1 May 1917).
- ⁴³ See a.o. Delfante, "Elle marche".
- ⁴⁴ See for instance the song *Li parc à pouyes*, from the chansonnier Joseph Barras. Maret, *Wavre*, 93.
- ⁴⁵ Loveling, *Oorlogsdagboeken*, 230 (21 February 1916).
- ⁴⁶ Moisson, *Journal* (24 March 1915).
- ⁴⁷ Giguët, *Carnets*, 107 (10 August 1915).
- ⁴⁸ Allender, *Jules Limbour*, 154 (23 September 1915).
- ⁴⁹ Scaillierez, *Mon journal* (11 Decembre 2015).

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