



"Authority and obedience" in the historiography of the Great War...

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

In the abundance of historiographical information on the Great War over the last twenty years, a very large number of works have addressed the question of "obedience and authority". The author proposes to follow the evolution of this theme in order to better apprehend the recent, but complex, history of a first world conflict that is still being written.

In their book "Thinking the Great War"¹, Antoine Prost and Jay Winter assert that the writing of the history - or historiography - of the First World War has undergone throughout the twentieth century an "evolution at the crossroads of multiple influences". Among these influences is, of course, the course of history itself, which, in the course of the events of the twentieth century, has suggested new ^{readings of} the conflict from an increasingly broad time perspective. The practice of the memory of the conflict, which sometimes led to heroisation and sometimes to the victimisation of the "poilu de 14", also influenced the writing of the history of the Great War. Since the 1980s, a new historiography of the Great War has developed, this time in the form of what is known as "cultural history". Cultural history, which can be defined as a form of "social history of representations" ^[2], focuses on the analysis of the past through the analysis of people, societies, their state of mind or their mental conceptions. In this context, the cultural history of the Great War aims to approach the history of the First World War by focusing first on the men in the war. In this sense, it is intended to be a true "history from below" ^[3]. ^{3]} The interest is then to apprehend the events from an unprecedented angle and to make possible at the same time transverse approaches to all men of the time and not only to the combatants alone.

It is in this context that a large number of books and articles have been published over the last twenty years, which have made it possible to revive a history of the Great War considered by some as a veritable "field of ruins" ^[4]. While the themes addressed in this historiography are numerous, the theme of "authority and obedience during the Great

War" is found in most of the works published during this period. As such, following the evolution of this theme in French university research can help us to better understand this recent historiography as a whole, to understand its variations and the issues at stake, which still give rise to many controversies today.

The questions of authority and obedience have indeed constituted an innovative field of research that covers fundamental questions about the war. These questions of authority and obedience gradually emerged in the late 1980s in the light of what historians of the Great War have called "the cultural history of war". This cultural history, the historian Jean-Louis Robert tells us, "functions (...) at the level of the anthropological meaning of the word culture (...), and studies the daily practices of women and men during the conflict, with the questions of death and violence at its heart. (...) They also study cultural and intellectual productions (...) and the systems of representations that are constructed within them". This new approach to war thus aims at "rediscovering man in war and man in war" [5]. 5] It is not unique to historians if we consider the craze generated by the online publication of more than a million individual records of soldiers who died in 14-18. The attraction for a more family history that would be part of the more global history of the war reflects the public's expectations for a "history of ordinary people" [6]. 6] Pacifism, which marks a French society increasingly removed from the military fact by the end of national service, probably also explains this evolution. The retreat of war in Europe, the ideal of peace promoted after 1945, the hedonistic and consumerist values of modern societies have indeed produced feelings of misunderstanding in civil society as to the motivations and capacity of the poilus to fight and to hold out under the conditions of one of the deadliest confrontations in history. How did the soldiers hold out? How could the people endure such violence for so long? These are all essential questions that underlie this renewed public interest in the Great War, as well as the particular interest of historians in these questions of authority and obedience.

To question these notions - their representation and practices during the Great War - is therefore to ask how, in essence, soldiers, but also societies at war, held out during the four terrible years of the conflict. Beyond this first question, there is therefore the question of the involvement of men in the considerable war effort that 14-18 constituted and, beyond that, the responsibility of the combatants themselves in the continuation of the conflict. This is undoubtedly the main interest of the themes mentioned. Indeed, considering the war as the only unleashing of anonymous and impersonal violence does not allow us to account for the involvement of soldiers in this violence. On the contrary, the development and persistence of violence throughout the conflict reflects its acceptance by the combatants and society itself. Therefore, the reasons for this acceptance become central. And the fact that this acceptance is common to the whole society gives the issue a cultural dimension.

In an attempt to provide an answer to these fundamental questions around 14-18, the notions of authority and obedience are called upon here. The concepts of authority and obedience are here called upon, as they offer a very wide range of themes and call upon a variety of sources, sometimes unpublished and little exploited. Indeed, the notion of authority does not refer only to the military hierarchical relationship. It also covers the notion of "institution" (civil and military authorities), that of "competence" and that of "charisma", or even a mixture of the two. It also covers the notion of "institution" (civil and military authorities), that of "competence" and that of "charisma", or even the image of the leader, whether he is a father, a teacher, a parish priest, a company manager or a military leader in France at the beginning of the 20th century. In addition to the simple application

of orders, obedience evokes respect for laws and institutions, conformity to practices and customs and, beyond that, the mental representations that are made of these notions in society. The scientific framework for these questions of authority and obedience is therefore very broad. Recent historiography on the subject tends to demonstrate this, as for example in the book "....Obey/Disobey"[7] which brings together various works by several historians. In turn, the question is dealt with in specific national frameworks (French, Italian or Belgian), or even through particular practices: that of violence to "force the obedience" [8] of subordinates or the "avoidance strategies" [9] of authority. Among others, a chapter puts "submission to authority" [10] into perspective with the work of the social psychologist Stanley Milgram. Then, many authors address the question of authority through a wide range of notions that broaden the field of investigation beyond the single military dimension. In this context, Romain Ducoulombier[11] approaches authority from an original angle: that of the "hairy socialist at the front", while Emmanuelle Cronier[12] puts into perspective the "role of the Parisian permissionaries in the mutinies of 1917". The angles of attack are thus quite multiple. And, as the historian of the Great War Antoine Prost points out, it is not a question of studying "everything that refers to institutions (...) to the nation-state (...) or to social groups". On the contrary, this historiography diversifies the fields of research and gives a large part to the sensitivity of men in war, to the "affective dimension" [13]. 13] This cultural approach therefore gives full place to singular cases. The sources of this historiography thus appear to be equally rich and varied. Soldiers' letters, military regulations, written testimonies of all kinds, French or foreign, literary and artistic productions, military justice decisions, military medicine reports are among the archives on which this research is based. As Frédéric Rousseau, the historian of the international research and debate group on the First World War (CRID 14-18), writes, it is most often a question of studying the "morale and psychology" [14] of the combatants based on the testimony of European soldiers. This recourse to testimonies is, moreover, characteristic of part of this historiography, but it is also an important point of divergence between historians. Indeed, if the testimony of contemporaries of the war covers an authenticity worthy of interest for the historian, this testimony remains the subjective appreciation of the war by a person. Moreover, its selection is a matter of choice - that of the historian - who then becomes suspect of having favoured one source over another.

In any case, this historiography tends to substitute a history "from below" for the one "from above" (more political-diplomatic or economic) through the analysis of the experience of the combatants. It is through this method that some historians[15] have formulated the idea that a "culture of war" would be at the origin of the process of mobilization of men and the acceptance of war by French society. For these historians, "the process of totalization of the war is profoundly linked to a crossing of thresholds, of degrees in violence, (...) which finds its source in the system of representations of societies engaged in the immense ordeal" [16]. 16] The culture of war is therefore defined as "a corpus of representations of the conflict crystallized into a true system that gives war its profound meaning" [17]. 17] Above all, as Jean Yves Le Naour analyzes it in his diary, this culture of war emphasizes an "eschatological dimension of the conflict, which "would have been experienced as a crusade of civilization against barbarism, of law against force and, more simply, of good against evil" [18]. 18] Moreover, this culture of war would be less the product of institutions such as the press or the government, but rather a kind of "great thrust from below" that would explain man's "consent" to war. Finally, according to the criticism of Antoine Prost, this culture of war "would have unified the entire nation, front and rear, in solidarity, throughout the duration of the conflict, and thus assured victory, which gives it a central and eminent place in the interpretation of the war" [19].

19] The thesis of the "culture of war" as the basis of patriotic consent is thus formulated, not without giving rise to much controversy. Indeed, the inclusive character of the term culture, the homogeneity it suggests among the contemporaries of the Great War, constitutes both the strength of the concept of "war culture" but also its limits. For the word culture refers to a long period of time. The question of the construction of this "culture of war" in 19th and ^{early 20th century} France ^{therefore} raises a number of questions. The question of its future after the war is also not clear-cut.

Taking up these latter objections in part, other historians have demonstrated, as a counterpoint to the culture of war, that the soldiers, immersed in a universe of brutalizing violence, oppressed on all sides by the military hierarchy, finally continued to fight in spite of themselves. For Frédéric Rousseau, the obedience of the soldier would then be based on a set of oppressions of all kinds. Defended also by Nicolas Offenstadt, this thesis intends to show "the network of constraints between which the combatants were held" [20]. Obedience then finds its source in a "training of the soldier" [21] which then appears to be a "blind submission, (...) to a mechanical obedience". For André Bach, analyzing this way of explaining war, "the obedience observed [becomes] the fruit of the implementation of a State apparatus so effectively repressive that it obtained, if not the obedience of hearts, at least that of bodies. 22] In this new perspective, patriotic consent, the corollary of the culture of war, became for Frédéric Rousseau a "very improbable national sentiment" [23] which "owes much, if not everything, to the revolvers brandished by the sergeants who were gunslingers. It would be more a "formidable military totalitarianism" [24], an imposed violence, he asserts, which would have held the soldiers together rather than a true patriotic "consent".

The force of the controversies surrounding these questions has also tended to erect these two theses - that of the "culture of war" and of consent on the one hand, and that of "constraint" on the other - as true explanatory paradigms of the Great War. Other works, including some fairly recent ones, have, however, attempted to take the question of authority and obedience out of this dichotomy. Some historians have thus helped to qualify the theses formulated. The title of François Cochet's work is explicit of this will: "... the question of authority and obedience is a question of authority and obedience. The hairy line between coercion and consent». Still other works, such as that of Emmanuel Sant Fuscien ".At your service: the relationship of authority in the French Army of the Great War"...have brought a fresh look at the military world. Finally, others, taking the theme "obey-disobey", try to go beyond the previous theses by evoking in particular the idea of "social conformism" as the driving force behind the acceptance of war and the obedience of soldiers.

In the end, therefore, questions of authority and obedience suggest many cross-cutting approaches to the different "worlds" of war: civilians, soldiers, combatants, non-combatants, societies, armies, French or foreigners. The study of authority and obedience is not limited to an appreciation of the military practices of the time. It also means examining, from a cultural perspective, the mental conceptions that underpinned these practices in society. The link between social practice and cultural representation is therefore at the heart of the question.

This immersion in the French historiography of the First World War, almost a century after its beginning, recalls the complexity of the history of the Great War, and of history itself. However, in view of the plans to commemorate the centenary of the First World War - to

which it was envisaged to add the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the Allied landings in 1944 - this search for historical "truth" seems very little. Without doubt, history and memory do not go hand in hand. For the former, it is certainly a necessity to free ourselves from the emotions that memory can arouse in order to understand the past. For the second, however, how can we imagine paying tribute to what we do not know or know imperfectly, whether we do not know it willingly or not at all? Unless memory serves the interests of the present better, but that's probably another story.

1] Prost, Antoine and Winter, Jay. «Thinking about the Great War». 2004. Seuil.

Ory, Pascal. «Cultural history». Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 2004, (Que sais-je?; 3713), p 13.

3] Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane and Becker, Annette. «14-18, go back to war». Paris, Gallimard, Folio, 2000. p24.

[4] Le Naour, Jean-Yves. The battlefield of historians. La vie des Idées [online]. November 10, 2008.

5] Rousseau, Frédéric. «The censored war, a history of the European fighters of 14-18». Paris: Seuil, 1999 ed 2003, p8.

6] Cochet, François. «Surviving the 1914-1918 front, the hairy between constraint and consent». Paris: 14 18 Éditions, 2005, p 7.

7] Loez, André and Mariot, Nicolas. «Obeying/Disobeying the mutinies of 1917 in perspective». Paris: La découverte, 2008.

8] Saint Fuscien Emmanuel. "Forcing obedience: intentions, forms and effects of a military practice in the combatant activity of the Great War", in André Loez and Nicolas Mariot, op. cit. pp. 32-46.

9] Lafon Alexandre, "Obéir, contourner, refuser: les stratégies dévoilées par le témoignage du combattant Henri Despeyrières," in André Loez and Nicolas Mariot, op. cit., p. 160 .

10] Richardot Sophie. L'apport de la psychologie sociale à la question de l'obéissance: les travaux de Stanley Milgram sur la soumission à l'autorité, in André Loez et Nicolas Mariot, op. cit. p. 47.

11] Ducoulombier Romain. La "Sociale sous l'uniforme: obéissance et résistance à l'obéissance dans les rangs du socialisme et du syndicalisme français, 1914-1916" in André Loez and Nicolas Mariot, op. cit., p. 266.

12] Cronier Emmanuelle. "Le rôle des permissionnaires parisiens dans la révolte de 1917: un front contaminé par Paris" in André Loez et Nicolas Mariot, op. cit. p. 125.

13] Bach, André. Of a dispute, its origins and its nature. Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps, 2008/3 n°91, p6.

14] Rousseau, Frédéric. Op. cit . p 28.

15] Especially Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker in their book: "14-18, finding the war again».

16] Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane and Becker, Annette. Violence and Consent, the Culture of War of the First World War, In Sirinelli Jean François, Pour une histoire culturelle. Paris: Seuil, 1997.

17] Ibid, p. 8.

18] Le Naour Jean-Yves, op. cit.

19] Bach André, op. cit. p. 8.

20] Ibid, p10.

21 | Rousseau, Frédéric. Op. cit . p. 340.

22 | Bach André, op. cit. p. 9.

23 | Rousseau, Frédéric. Op. cit . p 126.

24 | Ibid, p. 339.

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