



## The resilience of French society in 1914-1918: what lessons for the future? 1/2

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**Captain (R) Xavier Boniface details the reasons for the resilience of the French population during the Great War and explains how the attitudes of resilience of French society in 1914-1918 can, if not inspire, guide or influence current behaviour, at least enlighten it and help to understand it?**

One of the reasons for the French victory in 1918, beyond all the military, material or diplomatic reasons that can be invoked, was their moral capacity to hold out in spite of the ordeals, the appalling losses and the destruction. In other words, it was their resilience in war that enabled them not only to endure, but also to win.

This notion of resilience was not used at the time of the Great War, at least in this context. Originally, it defined the ability of materials subjected to shock or deformation to absorb energy, and thus their mechanical capacity for resistance and reconstruction. It was later applied to other fields of science, including psychology. For example, Boris Cyrulnik contributed to transposing it to this field by studying how Holocaust survivors were able to overcome their trauma and live with it. Social psychology is also interested: resilience is not only about individuals, but also about communities or social groups. However, the term tends to be popularized and often becomes a simple synonym for defence, adaptation or survival mechanisms. It is also referred to as resistance to stress and trauma, or even invulnerability - although the latter is distinct from resilience because it does not imply a reaction to an initial shock. According to scientists, resilience can be a capacity, a process or an outcome[1], which is why there are so many different definitions of resilience.

The question of the resilience of the French in 1914-1918 can thus, beyond its historical interest, be an element of reflection and comparison with the current situation of French society faced with terrorist Islamic jihadism. Of course, the contexts are profoundly different, the protagonists are not the same, and the intensity and scale of today's conflict are nothing like those of the Great War. But we can question the existence of invariants in the deep springs of society in the face of adversity, threat and violence. These invariants should be understood as conceptual frameworks that go beyond contingencies and are

arranged differently in different cultures (they do not imply invariability). We will study this resilience through its aspects and imitations in 1914-1918, then its causes, and finally the issues at stake today.

## **Aspects and limits of French resilience in 1914-1918**

- Some preliminary methodological remarks

In this panorama, the front and rear are considered in a complementary way. Indeed, even though civilians and combatants often feel a deep split between them, the links are more numerous than they seem. Their relations are therefore dominated by ambivalence and porosities. This observation for 1914-1918 is perhaps even more valid today, where there is a continuity between the French army's commitment in sometimes distant theatres of operations and the situation of the population exposed to the terrorist threat on metropolitan soil.

- The civilian world is criticised and despised: combatants feel cut off, misunderstood and ignored by civilians, even though they are risking their lives for them. They see themselves as a world of ambushes and war profiteers. In this world, skull stuffing distorts the reality of war to present it in the form of heroism and chivalry. On leave, French soldiers find that they are paid less than the workers in the armament factories who, moreover, stay with their families. The war gives rise to a feeling of arbitrariness and injustice.
- At the same time, soldiers need recognition from civilians, from whom they are not completely separated, whether psychologically, family-wise or materially. Permissions (organised from 1915 and improved in 1917), parcels from families, godmothers or associations, as well as letters (one per day and per combatant on average) - despite the postal control introduced in 1915 - maintained links that contributed to the soldiers' motivation to fight. The latter were aware that they were defending their loved ones by being on the front line. At the same time, the combatants remained civilians in uniform, preoccupied with their personal and family affairs. During the course of the war, changes in morale interact. The representations and determination of soldiers in the face of the hardships of the conflict depend in depth on the reality of national cohesion.

- Criteria of French resilience

How can we measure the resilience of the French population during the war - if this notion can be applied in a historical perspective? The question is linked to the question of why it held up.

Rallying to the war was massive and lasting: if it is not in itself a sign of resilience, it encourages it. In August 1914, while the high command expected 15% defections during mobilisation, only 1.5% of them were actually defected (and this figure includes those who, because they were far from the metropolis or their mobilisation centre for personal or professional reasons, were unable to rejoin their bodies in time). At the beginning of August, the interior minister decided not to arrest the 2,500 or so suspects (including 500 foreigners) listed in "Carnet B". Since 1886, this book has listed the suspects of espionage and, since 1909, the anti-militarist militants (socialists and especially revolutionary trade union anarchists) whose authorities fear their actions in case of mobilization (sabotage).

The acceptance of mobilization persists throughout the war, as with the appeals of the 1919 and 1920 classes from 1918 onwards. Of course, there were strategies of avoidance; the choice of engagement allows one to choose one's weapon, and therefore not to serve in the infantry; in the border regions, some sought refuge abroad. But these practices are still in the minority.

In the face of high losses, the French, despite mourning, showed resignation, tenacity and valour. A few reminders allow us to measure the extent of the losses. On average, 16.1% of those mobilised were killed, but 19% of officers and 15.8% of soldiers (29 and 22.9% in the infantry respectively). Such figures have social implications. Many of the infantrymen are peasants, who bear more deaths than other categories, especially workers benefiting from their recall from factories (special assignments). As for the officers, they came from the slightly better-off categories, the bourgeoisie, the nobility and the social elite: 6,000 teachers and 240 normal citizens were killed (with 50% of losses for the school promotions in 1914)... Everywhere, the younger classes were the most affected, as they participated throughout the war in active units, which were also the first to be engaged in combat. Those of 1912 and 1915 lost nearly 28% of their casualties each. The soldiers of the territorial army, who were older, were less exposed and suffered fewer casualties. Finally, in addition to the deaths at the front, we must also take into account an excess of civilian mortality, indirectly due to the war. In the face of mass death, especially that of the young, the old, who are psychologically weaker, die more. During and after the war, professional, associative, family and institutional "communities of mourners" were created and found, exalting the memory of the dead, publishing visitors' books, erecting monuments and carrying out ceremonies (the call of the dead on 11 November). They are one of the vectors of resilience.

The rear is mobilised to support the soldiers, the wounded (many improvised hospitals) and the refugees. In the occupied regions of the north-east, even if the population had to cope with the daily life of a sometimes very restrictive German presence (hostages, requisitions, deportations - i.e. forced displacements of civilians), some take the initiative to resist, like Louise de Bettignies, at the origin of the intelligence network "La Dame blanche".

In spite of the war that lasts and tests, opposition remains very limited. A few pacifist socialists, a very small minority, took part in the Zimmerwald (1915) and Kienthal (1916) conferences. Strikes in the rear and mutinies at the front - in fact, rather collective refusals to obey (mutinies imply revolt) - are rare and rather late.

Widely studied, especially for France, these movements raise several problems as to their meaning. They can appear as a refusal to hold out, or even as a crisis of national sentiment. The mutinies of 1917 were the most serious military crisis to hit European armies on the Western Front. However, the most surprising thing is that more mutinies did not occur, much earlier and on a much larger scale. The real question, the reasons why there was not more insubordination, goes back to the general acceptance of war. Refusal to obey increased during the war: 500 convictions in 1914, 2,500 in 1915, 9,000 in 1916, 21,000 in 1917 and 13,000 in 1918. The first decline in the morale of the troops, revealed by postal control, dates back to the summer of 1916 during the battles of Verdun and the Somme. On the other hand, the mutinies of May-June 1917, following the failure of the Nivelle offensive on the Chemin des Dames, reflected a deeper malaise: more than 20% of the units were affected. Repression amounted to 554 death sentences, 1,400 to forced

labour and 1,500 to lighter sentences. In reality, it will be more moderate (49 capital executions), as Pétain has just taken over as head of the army. The mutineers acted in exasperation, refusing to go back in line for attacks deemed as useless as they were murderous. But they did not abandon their post, especially in the front lines, and rarely made defeatist statements. Historians, after the military, have questioned the place of pacifist propaganda and the example of the Russian revolution in the references and motivations of the mutineers. In fact, these elements are mainly put forward by those responsible for the movements of refusal to obey. However, among them, there is a relative over-representation of workers, who are among those condemned to heavy sentences, even if the peasants are in the majority among the mutineers. This over-representation reflects the leadership role and collective traditions of these workers, who may also compare their situation to that of the workers required in the factories (hence their resentment).

- The limits of resilience

The resilience of the French population can be verified in the short and medium term. It is revealing that in 1918 the sacred union was strengthened, a few months after the mutinies and workers' strikes, while the Germans launched several major offensives and even threatened Paris in the spring. There is a kind of national awakening when the country is in danger. According to historian Antoine Prost, Verdun was the height of national sentiment in France. But the battle, which embodies in French memory the height of the sacrifices of war, also marks a threshold in the acceptance of sacrifice. One can then ask oneself about long-term resilience.

Is the pacifism of French society in the inter-war period, then after the Second World War and up to the present day not part of a continuing rejection of the hecatomb of the Great War and the losses it caused? It is also possible to re-read the 1940 disaster as a limitation, and even a failure of resilience, as if the country, like a material, had broken apart with a new conflict reminiscent of the previous one. Morally exhausted by the Great War, the French quickly gave in to the German advance. The defeat was not only military: many members of society collapsed, deserted or gave up. At the same time, the answer can only be nuanced in view of the tenacity in combat of certain units and the sacrifices made (more than 55,000 dead [2]).

From this point of view, the commemorations have an ambivalent character. They exalt victory less than they express collective mourning. This is a central issue in the analysis of resilience. What we need to grasp is the articulation between, on the one hand, the collective and social practices of war mourning through commemorations and the worship of the dead, and, on the other hand, the expression of personal pain[3]. 3] War death has indeed specific characteristics: mass death, death of young men (which is a reversal of the order of generations), violent death (suffering), distant death (on a distant battlefield), which can lead to feelings of guilt among relatives who cannot be present either at the time of death or at the funeral; there are also multiple deaths (families losing several members). Sometimes the bodies are unrecognizable, absent or missing - hence the unknown soldier.

The collective mourning is carried by the idealization of the hero who died in war and the veneration of his memory. Death in combat is not ordinary, even if dramatic; it is part of the nation's great collective narrative. The soldier killed in war is not presented as a



"victim" - at least from the perspective of consent to conflict. Death takes on an even greater meaning when war is victorious. However, this heroism can also block, prevent or complicate the epilogue of personal mourning (due to the special circumstances of the war). However, it can also block, prevent or complicate the epilogue of personal mourning (due to the specificities of the type of death in war) - hence the interest of families in the traces of the war dead even today. This does not prevent individual mourning and public commemoration from coming together (see the importance of ceremonies - at least in the inter-war period - and the large attendance).

## **Causes of Resilience**

- An object of debate

The causes of the resilience of French society during the Great War are the subject of historiographical debates, which are not simply scholarly and academic quarrels: they cover philosophical, social and political issues that may still have echoes today. This question of resilience refers to the question of the reasons that led the French to hold between constraint and consent.

- The thesis of constraint is defended by the Collectif de recherche international et de débat sur la guerre de 1914-1918 (CRID 14-18). Society held because its members were forced to do so, first by military authority, coercively (shot for example, court-martial, provost...) or by moral pressure. It was the leaders of society (politicians, economic leaders, the command, the clergy, the gendarmes...) who would have imposed their conception of war against the people, which would have been basically peaceful. Every soldier has internalized the culture of obedience and discipline, instilled since childhood. As a result, there is no escape from war. This theory favours a social approach to coercion, which also extends to the rear. However, for soldiers, it should be noted that the military coercive system, although developed, seems to be quite limited in terms of unleashing violence on the battlefield.
- The theory of consent is supported by the Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre (Péronne) [4]. The people accepted the war, adhered to it and consented to it. This does not exclude hesitations, tensions, or even occasional refusals, but which are in the end not very important, or even late. This consent is based on a solidly rooted patriotism, and it translates into a culture of war, that is to say, a way of (self-) representing it, of living it, of transcending it with specific fervours, symbols and practices. These representations help to integrate war into a familiar universe, through decorative objects, advertising, toys or school exercises, for example. Propaganda is effective because it is based on the state of mind that is culturally ready to receive it. This approach is above all anthropological. But some critics accuse it of privileging the vision of the Parisian elites over that of the people and the provincials.
- More isolated, a third trend[5], which is however focused on soldiers alone, but whose analyses can undoubtedly be extended to society as a whole, seeks a more comprehensive analysis of the situation in Paris, and is based on the cultural state of mind that is culturally ready to receive it. The third trend, however, which focuses only on soldiers, but whose analyses can probably be extended to society as a whole, seeks to strike a balance between the two theories of constraint and consent by highlighting the differences between individuals, beyond social groups, according to circumstances, in an evolutionary perspective.

- «Un multifactorial process resulting from the interaction between the individual and his environment".[6]

Psychologist Marie Anaut distinguishes several "levels" of social resilience: peers, social, local, religious or ideological/partisan communities, society and culture. She also identifies "forms" of resilience through solidarity, expectations, active involvement, values of mutual aid and tolerance, and the diversity of social resources. These elements can be broken down into the study of the causes of the tenacity of combatants, of their ability to overcome the violence of war, causes that can also be applied to the rear and to civilians.

- The importance of the "primary group", i.e. the basic unit (squad), as mentioned by Roland Dorgelès in "Wooden crosses"»). There is a strong solidarity, mutual aid, fidelity and cohesion between its members, between "peers", which are necessary to survive in war (in Verdun, there are no more trenches, only small groups of isolated men). To desert would have been to betray the trust of the comrades. The role of the contact cadres was also important. These solidarities also exist, in various forms, at the rear.
- The sense of duty, which is often mentioned in different social circles: a deep sense of pride is attached to its fulfilment. For the French, it is the result of the training provided by the republican school, particularly through civic education. But the conception of duty can vary: for Catholics, it is confused with duties towards God. It is a social and cultural level, as emphasized by Marie Anaut.
- Religious and moral support: this helps soldiers - but also civilians who share the religious convictions of the mobilized - to overcome fear, to find comfort before or during trials, to be reassured, protected and consoled, even if faith and certain superstitious practices are sometimes confused. The combatants draw courage, even moral assurance, to face violence; the civilians draw resources to overcome anxiety about the mobilized. War is accompanied by a religious awakening, especially in the first few months. All armies have military chaplains, often of different faiths, who sometimes appear as auxiliaries to the command, helping to maintain the morale of the troops. At the rear, the clergy also contributes to the moral support of the population.
- Hostility towards the adversary: the other remains an enemy, a threat, an invader, even a "barbarian" who must be rejected. This hostility is mobilizing. It is not, however, blind hatred for the soldiers in the trench opposite, with whom it is possible to come to an agreement from time to time in order to make life less difficult.
- The feeling of defence of the nation/defensive patriotism, to be associated with the sacredness of national soil. Trench warfare is characterised by the defence of the land, but also of one's own and of the rear. It is not an abstraction for the French infantrymen, peasants for more than two-thirds. Even when they fight in Salonika, far from France, they defend their country. For the soldiers of the North, it is even a war of liberation of the invaded regions. More generally, the soldiers are fighting for their children to live in a better world (hence the pressure of society and the nation on them).

1) See B. Michallet, "Résilience: historical perspective, theoretical challenges and clinical issues", *Frontières*, No. 22(1-2), Fall/Spring 2009-2010, pp. 10-18.

2] And not 100,000 as many books claim - a figure taken from Vichy propaganda.

3] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "What is war mourning?" *Revue historique des armées*, No. 259, 2010, pp. 3-12.

4] Annette Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "14 | Annette Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau. 14-18. Recovering the war" Paris, Gallimard, 2000, 272 p.

5] François Cochet, "Surviving at the Front. Les Poilus entre contrainte et consentement", Saint-Cloud, Soteca, 2005, 263 p.

6] Marie Anaut, "Le concept de résilience et ses applications cliniques," *Nursing Research*, 2005/3, no. 82, pp. 4-11.

URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-recherche-en-soins-infirmiers-2005-3-page-4.htm>

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