



Tribute to General André Bach (1943-2017)

military-Earth thinking notebook

Lieutenant-colonel Christophe GUÉ

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Already attracted by history as a high school student, General André Bach saw his inclination for this subject assert itself in Saint-Cyr in contact with Henry Contamine and reading Guy Pedroncini. The master's degree in history that he completed as part of his training as a commissioned officer and the three years he spent as professor of history and strategy at the École supérieure de guerre confirmed his inclination.

His passion for the First World War came later, however, when he discovered the archives of the Service historique de l'armée de Terre (SHAT) on this conflict, when he had only recently been at its head. The question of the mutinies of 1917, during which the number of people shot had been limited compared to the executions of the previous years, was not a major issue. dentes, had just been put back on the agenda by Lionel Jospin on the occasion of the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the armistice of ¹⁹¹⁸.

Since then, General Bach has never ceased to work on the Great War, thus making decisive progress in historical knowledge on the shootings and military justice, as well as on high command and operations. His skills as a historian, combined with his experience in command and communication, were an unborn asset to him. The historical skills he already possessed, combined with his command and communications experience, were an invaluable asset to him in the work he undertook as head of SHAT and, more importantly, after his tenure in the Second Platoon.

Not satisfied with the artificial debates (consent vs. coercion) among historians of the First World War, he undertook extensive research on the functioning of the military institution before and during the conflict, cross-referencing the official archives with the official records of the First World War. private memorials, which were widely used, and by making successful use of quantitative history through the creation of a database of military personnel tried by military tribunals. Involving many researchers - members of SHAT, then volunteers - in his project, he built a dynamic team and a network through which

important results were obtained. They have been published in reference works, as well as on the remarkable Prisme14-18 website[1].

In his work, General Bach highlighted the extent of the repression carried out by the military justice system to enable the command to keep in hand the troops shaken by the terrible failures suffered in 1914 and 1915. Rejecting the point of view of those who considered these shootings "for the sake of example" as a "detail", in comparison with the considerable losses suffered daily by the French armies, he said: "It is a great tragedy that the French army has not been able to keep up with the French people. However, he was not in favour of an overall rehabilitation of the condemned, believing that this would have been an injustice to all those who had died for France.

Although he was also surprised by the blindness shown by the High Command and more particularly by the H.Q.G., he was not in favour of a general rehabilitation of the condemned, believing that this would have been an injustice to all those who had died for France. during the first years of the war, he nevertheless refused to attribute to all the generals the failure of Plan XVII and the offensives of 1915, as well as the excesses of military justice. Such simplifications would indeed have been contrary to the results of research highlighting the diversity of points of view regarding the operation of the army. These simplifications would have been contrary to the results of research that highlighted the diversity of views on rations operations and command, which also highlighted the responsibility of the political authorities for the unpreparedness of the French armies and the severity of the repression encouraged by the failures.

This did not prevent General Bach from judging the reactions of the defenders of the Grand Quartier Général (G.Q.G.) to be excessive., for which the latter would have allowed the French army to adapt in a continuous and exemplary manner to the realities of modern warfare, thus making it "the best in the world". Contrary to received ideas, he confirmed the importance of the shock of events, already underlined by Guy Pedroncini, in the turn that was taken in mid-1917, with the setting up of General Pétain's 3rd G.H.Q..

Unwilling to please, General Bach conducted his work with the conviction that it would not be possible to overcome the oppositions and move forward without a significant advance in historical knowledge. For this man, who had established contacts in all walks of life, and who had been seduced by the British idea of granting the forgiveness of the nation to those who had been shot if they were not rehabilitated, the recognition of historical truth in all its complexity was indispensable. It was necessary in order to appease the families of those shot, who were suffering the consequences of events of which they were often unaware until they were killed, as well as to disarm the anti-militarism of several leagues and federations. It was also done so that the military institution, leaving behind a sometimes defensive attitude, would admit that the high command was not omniscient. Finally, it was so that the political authorities could learn real lessons from the past.

In his view, this ability to question itself was also essential to ensure that the teaching of military history for the benefit of the younger generations of officers was well assured.

Hoping that the centenary of the Great War would make it possible to move in the direction he wished, General Bach regretted that the question of the shootings was once again placed at the centre of the debates with the idea of a general rehabilitation. General Bach regretted that the question of the shootings was once again brought back to the centre of the debates with the idea of a general rehabilitation of the latter, and that history was subordinated to a memory subject to immediate concerns, without any work to

overcome the opposition being carried out within the Ministry of Defence. Not hesitating to express himself on this subject in several reviews, including the Nouvelle Revue d'Histoire, he did not hesitate to offer his assistance to various institutional projects and, in particular, to put online the files of military personnel tried by military courts.

As his assistance was not retained, the work undertaken suffered from errors that could rekindle the controversy. Thus, the 1,008 files published on the Internet concerned spies and civilians who had committed common law crimes, alongside 639 military personnel executed for "disobedience", without it being possible to obtain the lists of those shot belonging to the various categories[2].

General Bach, who disappeared prematurely, unfortunately did not have the opportunity to complete all the work he had begun wherever he intended to undertake.

The example of selflessness and enthusiasm given by this easily accessible and very simple, modest and generous historian officer who, despite his terrible illness, fought until the end of the war, was a great example of disinterestedness and enthusiasm. The example of selflessness and enthusiasm given by this easily accessible, simple, modest and generous historian officer, who, despite his terrible illness, fought to the end to advance the projects he believed in, has aroused admiration and respect in many, often very different circles, and is still bearing fruit, as evidenced by the countless messages of gratitude and sympathy generated by the news of his death.

1) Unless we study one by one the files of those concerned, which have been put online on the Mémoire des Hommes website.

[2] <http://prisme1418.blogspot.fr/>

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