

Roubaix – The German occupation during the First World War

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Roubaix, a large industrial city in the Nord department located near the Franco-Belgian border, is occupied by the Germans from 14 October 1914 to 18 October 1918. The VIth Bavarian Army sets up there and Major Gessler Hofmann becomes the Kommandant of Roubaix. The occupying troops are for the most part made up of reservists who were too old to fight on the front lines. Many of the occupiers are hosted in private homes, and given that the civil population is mainly comprised of women, romantic and intimate relationships are formed – which is criticised by a large majority of Roubaisians.

The hardships of the occupation

The German authorities impose control on all aspects of life through a multitude of regulations. In the event of an infraction, there are punishments. A pass is required for leaving the municipality; French press and correspondence are forbidden; there are curfews and seizures of goods... The occupation is characterized by hunger, scarcity and economic problems. Many primary and secondary schools can no longer operate. With the rise of unemployment, there is an explosion of what certain Roubaisians call "idleness" and "vagrancy" among young people, especially teenagers responsible for theft, vandalism and even acts of violence. Contemporaries fear the corruption of the Northern youth by the occupation, which would pose a problem for France in the future.

Deportation and forced labour

On Easter 1916, the Germans deport approximately 20 000 men, women and young people from Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing to the Ardennes in order to subject them to forced labour in the fields and forests. The presence of young women is considered by the residents to be a violation of moral standards. This reaches the media and inspires so much international protest that in early 1917, the Germans abandon this policy and send the deported back home.

From forced labour to resistance

A minority of Roubaisians works voluntarily in factories for the Germans, making bags of dirt that will serve to reinforce the trenches. In spring and summer of 1915, during the "*Affaire des sacs*" ("Scandal of the bags"), some Roubaix residents attack these volunteers verbally and physically, many of whom then stop working. The industry owners refuse to force their employees to go back to work. The scandal ends near the end of the summer, when the German authorities punish the residents with a curfew, imprison the factory owners, and impose collective fines on the city. The socialist mayor Jean Lebas is arrested in March and deported to Germany in June 1915 for having refused to provide the occupier with a list of young people designated for forced labour.

Resistance also manifests itself in other ways. For instance, a clandestine newspaper founded in January 1915 by the industrialist Firmin Dubar, the pharmacist Joseph Willot, and the abbot Jules Pinte provides the citizens of Roubaix with information from unoccupied France. In 1917, Dubar and Willot are sentenced to 10 years of forced labour by the Germans. They will only be freed at the signing of the Armistice. There is also the Roubaisian Léonie Vanhoutte, who conducted espionage for the Allied forces and helped the allied military – especially fallen aviators – return to unoccupied France. Vanhoutte is arrested in September 1915, sentenced to 15 years of forced labour, and freed after the Armistice. When the Germans leave Roubaix in October 1918, they destroy the main bridges, railways, and a gas factory. They also drain part of the canal. British troops free the city on 18 October 1918.

A difficult memory

During the war, the occupied population was viewed by some French people as "Northern Boche" due to their proximity with the enemy; the refugees from the North, evacuated by the tens of thousands by the Germans between March 1915 and 1918, are met with distrust by the French populations further to the South. Unsurprisingly, the particular situation created by the occupation makes it difficult to commemorate, as well as to anchor in the French national collective memory. Even at the local level, the memory of these events is complex. In Roubaix, the main monument located on the Grande Place is inaugurated in October 1925: a pedestal upon which there is a statue of Peace vanquishing the Hydra of war, with four bas-reliefs evoking both the *poilus* and the hardships of the occupation. Some monuments to the dead don't even mention the occupation. But the resistance is commemorated by the medals awarded to such resisters as Vanhoutte, Dubar, Pinte and Willot (the latter posthumously). In the field of literature, the novel *Invasion 14* by Roubaisian Maxence van der Meersch, who was a child during the occupation, offers a fictitious and complex but factual version of it. Published in 1935, the author was shortlisted for the *Prix Goncourt*.

From the Second World War to today

In 1940/44, Roubaix experiences a new trauma: the city is part of the German military administrative zone known as the "*zone interdite*" ("forbidden zone"). Restrictions and retaliations await, including the execution of hostages. There is also collaboration and support of collaborationist parties such as the Francists and the French Popular Party. Nevertheless, Roubaix is foremost a city of resistance: attacks against German soldiers (often made by communists); acts reminiscent of the First World War, such as evasion or espionage networks, clandestine publications... Sometimes resisters from the First World War are involved, such as Jean Lebas, who founded *L'Homme libre* ("*The Free Man*") in 1940; arrested by the Gestapo in 1941 and deported to the Sonnenburg concentration camp (now located in Poland), he died at the camp in March 1944. The main monument observing this second occupation is located specifically on the *Place des martyrs de la Résistance* ("Martyrs of the Resistance Square").

In spite of the First World War occupation having mostly fallen into oblivion, there are more publications and monuments relative to this period than is the case for 1940-1944. This phenomenon was again reinforced through the Centenary of the First World War.

Further reading

Chemins de mémoire/Memory paths, *Laissez-vous conter la Résistance à Roubaix durant la Grande Guerre* available online : <https://www.calameo.com/read/00005313760b8e50cd934>

Landry, Gérard, *Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing sous l'Occupation*, Rennes, 1982.

Van der Meersch, Maxence, *Invasion 14*, Paris, 1935 (*Invasion 14: a Novel*, Montréal, 2016).

Waret, Philippe, *L'occupation allemande à Roubaix, 1914-1918*, Atramenta, 2013.