‘There are Boches everywhere…’ – Popular participation in tracking down and controlling ‘the enemy from within’ in France during the First World War

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> *The inhabitants of Plouézec do not like to be praised for their police feats, their very special self-esteem is not consoled for having done a bad job. However, that adventure at least resulted in calming down the exaggerated fear of spies. The fleeting gleams in the night went out, the mysterious cars and ghost submarines disappeared, there was only the tolling of the knell, alas repeated too often, which came to remind us of the nightmares of the war.*[1]

This chronicle written by a teacher from Côtes-du-Nord narrates the arrest of a spy, imaginary as always, by a group of local people. It is a perfect summary of the popular excesses seen in every town and village on the French home front due to the ambient spy mania during the First World War. In a context marked by mourning but also by irrational fears fed by the wildest rumors, the general mobilization of the nation leaves no room for disinterest or idleness. The war effort and the sacrifices made by the combatants on the front are mirrored by a symmetrical duty of implication from civilians on the home front. As early as August 1914, in a context of ‘jingoistic outburst’,[2] members of the public spontaneously participated in a real hunt for ‘the enemy from within’ that is to say, searching for any individual representing a threat to national defense ‘through subversion, terror, sabotage, spying or betrayal’.[3] Within this varied sample group, individuals put on file in Carnet B for antimilitarist activities are quickly removed, and then with the help of Union sacrée the figure of the spy will at once mobilize all the attentions and all the energies of patriotic watchers. The tenacious fantasy of a clandestine enemy penetrating into the home front calls for the entire population to get involved in the national defense by actively supporting the efforts of the specialized counter-intelligence services to flush out the ‘Boche in our home’ and render him harmless. Driven by different motives, not always in line with the ideal of national defence, this patriotic exercise takes a twofold form. At first, it is a question of hunting down spies by engaging in daily surveillance of any suspect elements. A stranger, a weird rig-out, odd behaviour, a German-sounding name, a villa with closed shutters; everything becomes shady. But the populati-

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1 Plouézec municipal notice, Côtes d’Armor Departmental Archives, 1 T 402.

2 Becker, 1914, p. 513.

3 Bavendam, ‘L’ennemi chez soi’, pp. 707-714.

on does not just watch for suspicious behaviour, it also acts to eradicate any threat from a national point of view. If denouncing and spreading rumours are more common, it is also not rare to see physical intervention by a crowd and there is also sometimes recourse to summary justice. This contribution, which brings into question the cultural mobilization and the relations between the popular masses and the constitutional bodies during the First World War, will be based primarily on our research on Western France, interspersed with other national examples.

I. The varied motives of the hunt for 'the enemy from within'

From the beginning of the war, there is a natural and conscious division of tasks between the combatants and the civilians. The former had to fight the war and win it, the latter had to contribute to victory by annihilating any threat to the nation at war. From the first days of mobilization, the violent nationalist excesses testify to a spontaneous will of popular participation, conveying a true drive to cleanse. Chauvinism, anguish, early mass mourning and an ambient Germanophobia inherited from the Pre-war era combine to explode into popular violence against everything that 'sounds German'. This spontaneous anarchy fuelled by false news primarily affects the rural world, where the fear of spies spreads. The deputy of the Morbihan department, Regis de l'Estourbeillon, thus gets carried away in his efforts against 'the home front poisoners' finding in the ignorant and credulous country masses a breeding ground admirably willing to welcome and spread the false reports responsible for people's suspicion. On the fly, he jokes about those peasant women accusing a fellow citizen of sending a gold bar to Germany every week, hidden in a lump of butter, or about a priest entrusting a sailor with all the local bank's gold every evening: it is his responsibility to send it to the Pope, who will hand it over to Emperor William.[4]

This fantastical fear of the enemy is also present in urban areas. In Paris, the psychosis of light signals intended for enemy aircraft triggers dozens of denunciations.[5] In Saint-Brieuc, commercial travellers and German industrialists are accused of covering France with a suspicious coat of advertising inscriptions for Kub stocks which constitute as 'markings for saboteurs' like the one adorning the viaduct of the Paris-Brest line.[6] The spy mania is even more acute on the coast, in holiday resorts which had been fashionable for many German families since before the war. A teacher in the Paimpol area reports that the fear of spies, maintained by gossip at washing places, made the most familiar figures look suspicious, the vibrations of supply vehicles for submarines were heard each and every night, light signals running around like big will-o'-the-wisps were glimpsed

[4] Le Nouvelliste, 1 September 1915.

[5] Loez, 'Lumières suspectes sur ciel obscur', pp. 166-188.

[6] Le Lannou, Un bleu de Bretagne, p. 74.

at night, and where people would have sighted the mythical Korrigans, they now report sightings of Boche spies disguised as nuns.[7]

After the first feverish weeks, the fear of spies keeps smouldering, just waiting for a signal to wake up. It is fuelled by some newspapers promoting preventive posters inspired by the Ministry of War – 'beware, keep quiet, enemy ears are listening to you'. Others publish photographs showing the executions of spies or open their columns to stressful serials, such as 'Demon Boche' published from June 1915 onwards by Ouest Eclair, which fuels the myth of old German spying activities firmly fixed on the Breton coasts. Books and press drawings complete the paranoia by listing an elaborate vanguard of the German army formed by those spies hiding in the country, while creating the illusion of large numbers. People who claim they contribute to the national defence are driven by several motives. The great majority are led by the genuine concern to serve France. Driven by a kind of uselessness complex, those zealous patriots seek to rid themselves of the guilt of not being on the front and transcend the status of mere passive spectators of the conflict. Tracking down and interning the enemy from within is somehow waging war too, in another way. 'Between two prefectural glasses of red wine', Maurice Le Lannou reports, the rural policeman of Plouha, in Côtes-du-Nord, had understood 'both the danger and his duty', that is to say keeping a daily watch on the famous Kub advertisement painted on a small and modest local bridge.[8]

In addition to the desire to take part in the war effort, hunting the enemy from within is also a form of patriotic leisure. The pleasure taken in watching and locating spies serves the nation as well as relieving the boredom of its citizens. A third motive, more shameful and therefore always anonymous, is the matter of individual malevolence, whereby the war serves as an alibi for people to settle small personal scores cheaply. 'It is already enough to skilfully throw a name to the crowd to get rid of a rival' priest Lelièvre, a witness to the agitation of the early days of the war, reports.[9] In one place, employees rouse the crowd to take revenge on an unpopular boss by revealing his alleged German origins.[10] In another place, a lay teacher is denounced as a spy by the village priest, building on very old political quarrels in the background.[11] With those multiple intentions in mind, the 'snifflers' take a sharp and paranoid look at some potential spies archetypal figures.

7 Plouézec municipal notice, Côtes d'Armor Departmental Archives, 1 T 402.

8 Le Lannou, Un bleu de Bretagne, p. 75.

9 Pierre Lelièvre, Le fléau de Dieu (Paris: Ollendorf, 1920), p. 5.

10 Breton, A l'arrière, p. 22.

11 Folder of the teacher Théodore Chalmel (1885-1935), Departmental Archives Ille-et-Vilaine, 1 F 1768.

II. Who are the "enemies from within"?

1. The real German

Naturally, the enemy from within is first associated with the Germans. That suspicion particularly sharpens people's eyes in the towns and on the coasts, where the 'bland German tribes' installed in hotels and villas are seen as vanguards of the German army. What does it matter if those dangerous Huns are actually Alsatians, like Louise Weiss who takes refuge in a family villa in Saint-Quay-Portrieux, where many Protestant families from Upper and Lower Rhine have formed small settlements that local people quickly call 'nasty Boches'.[12] The archetypal spy figure here, inherited from before the war, is that of the banker Kahn. Anxious to give substance to Leon Daudet's predictions of a potential German landing on the island of Bréhat, the Breton regional press picked up the story as early as August 1914. To prepare and lead such a military campaign – the potential landing of 200,000 men on the island is evoked without batting an eyelid – a potential subject for suspicion is needed, and Maximilian Kahn, the son of an influential Jewish banker in Frankfurt and owner of a wealthy villa on the island, is the one. Although groundless, those 'Bréhat rumours' sharpen the paranoia of spy hunters.[13] Actually, nothing proves that Kahn was really chased out of Bréhat by a popular riot, as some 'witnesses'[14] argue, and the figure of the spy Kahn is above all a media construction exposed to public condemnation, which sees a good opportunity with the presence of this idle, German, Jewish bourgeois, with old anti-semitism competing with ambient background Germanophobia.

2. The fantasy German

However, the popular suspicion of people 'being a Boche' also takes aim at the fantasy German. In this context of irrational fear, confusion prevails and any figure that doesn't fit the local setting is immediately considered a potential danger. Foreigners, Swiss, Russians or others are concerned, especially when they are tall and blond. The internment of civilians from so-called 'oppressed nations' – Poles, Czechs, etc. – but also many Alsatians and people from Lorraine reveals the importance of this precautionary principle, reinforced by the ignorance of the low-level civil servants who were in charge of separating the wheat from the chaff, and who cautiously prefer to intern many more suspects than necessary rather than to let loose potential spies. The population gives into that suspicion even more. People are suddenly inflamed by certain names that were familiar to them before the war. 'For a few days, it was not good not to be called Dupont, Martin or Bernard, because a Teutonic-sounding name cast suspicion over its owner, who got abused [and] was threatened', [15] Victor Lecas reports, evoking the traders who have to demand protection from the authorities and to stick the words 'French house' or some official docu-

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12 Weiss, Mémoire d'une Européenne, p. 172.

13 Le Journal de Paimpol, 13 February 1916.

14 Le Moniteur des Côtes-du-Nord, 29 August 1914.

15 Leca, A bas les Boches!, p. 98-100.

ment on their windows to ease people's suspicion. In addition to the 'dirty name' crime, the population also succumbs to prejudice against any singular-looking intruder. Otherness puzzles and worries people, and not only in isolated rural areas. 'Tall, with a blond moustache, blue eyes and very educated, this is obviously a Prussian officer'[16] the regulars of a café in Fougères conclude, on seeing an unknown customer. Those archetypes related to appearance and novelty lead to a few rather ubiquitous popular blunders about alleged 'Boche spies' disguised as women, at a time when persistent rumours everywhere also warn people against a woman with a large feathered hat moving around in a car and distributing poisonous sweets to children on the home front.[17] In May 1915, an 'agent from Germany' suspected of supplying the 'starving Boches' was thus apprehended by the crowd at the cattle market in Lannion. Unmasked by his tall height, his wig and his dense pilosity clumsily concealed by a fresh shave, the person incriminated is in fact a female merchant from a neighbouring village. She thus justifies the physical stigmata behind the mistake: 'What can you do? Being afflicted by nature, I have only found one way to hide this ugly down: I do like you, I shave![18] In Plouézec, near Paimpol, the population rejoices similarly in the summer of 1917 on apprehending a Boche spy disguised as a woman found lurking around the semaphore, not far from the island of Bréhat which had been rustling with rumours of a German landing. The premonitory echoes peddled about her are imbued with the same fantasies: a horrible figure, gigantic feet, hairy hands. Before the gendarmes, the Boche spy disguised as a woman dispels every doubt with dignity: it is actually the widow of Jean-Marie Toussaint Pendézec, a former Army Corps general and Army General Chief of Staff, deceased in 1913, who is on holiday in Plouha.[19] We could multiply the examples of misadventures happening to brave French people whose only crime is not to have been familiar figures for natives who have been made a little finicky and paranoid by the circumstances.

3. The assimilated German

By extension, the hunt also affects all those who are associated with Germans through marriage or acquaintance, presumed or real. The same goes for French women married to Germans and their children. 800 of them are thus gathered during the first days of the war in the jail of the police headquarters in Paris with the motive of potential spying. They are massively denounced everywhere and then transferred to internment camps where they represent between 5 and 10 percent of the workforce in the autumn of 1914. Internees' letters note that they are sometimes not treated as well as women who are German by birth.[20] The preventive confinement also extends to women suspected of going around with Germans in the occupied departments of the East and North. 150 of those 'dubious women' are thus confined in the hotel of Kergroës, in Finistère, on the grounds of social and/or moral anti-conformism supposed to hinder the nation at war. If prosti-

[16] Le Réveil fougerais, 14 August 1914.

[17] Becker, 1914, p. 509.

[18] Le Moniteur des Côtes-du-Nord, 20 May 1915.

[19] Richard and Richard, 'Rumeurs et espionnite en Bretagne', pp. 419-432.

[20] Jouguet internment camp, Internees letters, Côtes d'Armor Departmental Archives, 9 R 7.

tution alone constitutes a form of 'social leprosy',[21] the suspicion that a woman is having a relationship with Germans, as it is, is an act of collaboration and clearly renders these women enemies. It should be noted that this camp, outside the scope of ordinary laws and poorly secured, constitutes a relative threat for the public order, as the surroundings of this depot attract curious onlookers, most often men, and the authorities states a net revival of prostitution in the local taverns.

This lack of trust extends to refugees, not just those who have lived in the occupied territories and who would have been 'infected' by their contact with the enemy. On the home front, especially in remote rural areas, many refugees suffer from suspicion which is too often targeted at migrants. If the local populations fear that, because of the great exodus of August and September 1914, spies could join this 'massive trek of migrants' converging on the home front, they have become alarmed more generally about the intruder, the stranger to their 'little homelands', with the timely name 'Boche du Nord' used to stigmatize him further and to attract suspicion to him. The aim is to push him to leave, even though he has never come into contact with Germans. It is more the fear of the migrant that creates this timely assimilation with the enemy, with the sole unadmitted and inadmissible objective of sowing the seeds of doubt and confusion.

4. Surveillance of 'spy nests'

Once interned, the doubt piled on the enemy from within doesn't dissipate. The neighbouring residents are watching over the situation and while they insist that internment camps do not become 'golden cages', they also fear that these will become real nests of spies. Popular suspicion falls on these establishments which are subject to frequent wild accusations. In the abbey of Langonnet in the Morbihan, for example, where Austro-German ecclesiastics are interned, is denounced at the end of 1915 by a French combatant on leave as an intelligence centre and as a landmark for enemy planes, flying over the area on dark nights. 'A discreet investigation could be fruitful in the result'[22] concludes the informer. Coastal camps are obviously privileged targets for such rumours. In Noirmoutier, Guérande, Sarzeau or Carnac, there are countless cases of luminous signals supposedly being sent to German submarines. These accusations are clearly guided by malice. Some merchants and local craftsmen criticize the unfair competition from production workshops in some camps while elsewhere, the mere presence of these undesirables and the inconvenience caused by their security perimeters feeds the rumours aimed at getting these civil prisoners transferred elsewhere.

III. Popular modes of intervention

The hunt for the enemy from within takes two main forms during the war, one individual, the other collective. The sharing of roles is pretty clear. The individual 'sniffs' and de-

21 Le Naour, Misères et tourments de la chair, p. 156.

22 Langonnet internment camp, Departmental Archives Morbihan, 4 M 526.

nounces suspects at the first suspicion, the crowd gathers and admonishes and then the authorities apprehend the suspect and investigate, and if necessary punish him.

Whether it actually provokes a rumour or is the result of rumours, denunciation is one of the preferred popular modes of intervention. Anonymous letters flourish 'with remarkable intensity'[23] according to a report to the prefect of Vendée in August 1915, the snitch denouncing any suspicious signal or presence. 'Monsieur the prefect, do you know that the mayor of Maroue has a Boche domestic servant at home?' ask thus 'a father who has his children on the front'.[24] The prefectural archives are full of letters of the same type while other informers also act verbally to stir up the crowd. 'Shout down the spy! It's the German we need!'[25] says a passerby in Rennes station, intrigued by the suspicious appearance of a man. Once started, the rumour is collectively assumed and the individual immediately blends anonymously into the crowd. The recourse to collective physical intervention against the enemy from within goes back to the first days of mobilization, all the emotions of the moment exploding impulsively on a basis of a simple rumour. 'The French were as crazy' writes a German civilian internee in a letter.[26] Referring to the destruction and looting of stores and the obsessive tracking of the spy, Hugo Ringer, interned near Saint-Brieuc, describes a wild populace sniffing out everything that has a foreign character and also describes scenes of lynching during which suspects had their clothes torn off and were knocked to the blood. According to this internee, 'more than one [...] would have left his life under the fists of the fanatical mass during these days of horror'.[27] Throughout France, there are traces of these violent arrests and lynching scenes perpetrated by the raging and repulsive 'populace' that André Lorulot accuses of wresting simple suspects from the hands of the police in Marseilles in order to trample them.[28] This testimony questions the role of public authorities during these days of popular outbursts. Sources disagree on this point. If some witnesses claimed that the police were guilty of brutal threats, insults and violence against foreigners,[29] it seems that more frequently, the intervention of the authorities' representatives made it possible to restore public order and decrease tensions, which explains why, once confined to the depots, many internees confide that they feel safe and secure, protected from the popular violence.

If this popular fever of the first days soon dissipates, it awakens again at the slightest opportunity. Some poison pen letters addressed to the prefect make their full intention clear, as in one village of Côtes-du-Nord where a vigilant patriot has located 'his Mata Hari', actually a simple German servant employed by a local notary: 'If you don't sort it

23 Departmental Archives de la Vendée, 4 M 265.

24 Jouguet internment camp, dossiers des internés, 9 R 2, Côtes d'Armor Departmental Archives.

25 Ouest Eclair, 15 August 1914.

26 Jouguet internment camp, Côtes d'Armor Departmental Archives, 9 R 7.

27 Ringer, Boulevard des étrangers, p. 23.

28 Lorulot, Barbarie allemande et barbarie universelle, p. 13.

29 Ringer, Boulevard des étrangers, pp. 23-24.

out, we'll clear it up, we'll set fire to his home and we'll put her in the water'.[30] Physical intervention is not always just a threat. It is part of a sort of ritual involving, in turn, denunciation, crowds of pedestrians and the arrest of the suspect by the mob who turn him over to the authorities in charge of the examination. During this active phase, the crowd exhibits a virile form of defiance in order to put pressure on the authorities. Insults and threats fuse, but never transgress the established order, thanks to the presence of a handful of individuals representing authority. At Fougères, the Prussian pseudo-officer, escorted by firemen, old soldiers, and the local rural policeman, is surrounded by an aggregate of exasperated patriots proposing nothing less than to shoot him without delay.[31] In Rennes, a suspect is led in procession to the police station by 200 to 300 over-excited people shouting death threats and at the passage of the Saint-Georges Bridge to proposing throw the suspect into the water. The intervention of armed soldiers escorting the suspect, reinforced by military nurses, helps calm the spirits and lead him to the police station.[32] In Plouézec, the 'German spy disguised as a woman' is also escorted 'by a screaming crowd of shameless kids and shrews armed of pitchforks and sticks', surrounded by two customs officers in uniforms ensuring her protection.[33]

In the end, these popular stirrings are more about ritual bidding than a real desire to do justice in place of the public authorities. This collective violence allows the populace to evacuate the accumulated tensions while giving its contributors the feeling they can act against the enemy almost as much as the combatants at the front. Yet this is in vain because these enemies from the interior are always imaginary and the verdict of the authorities everywhere stifles this thrill felt at the prospect of having seen the shadow of the enemy 'in a mouse hole'. In all these cases after the first weeks, the authorities clearly assume their role. Unwilling to apportion on these cohorts of zealous patriots, partly inspired by the state policy of national defence, the authorities work conscientiously to investigate every denunciation and to as much as possible prevent any temptation of popular justice. The memory of the events of the first days of August 1914 precludes the authorities from underestimating this risk, although it is all the more embarrassing as spies almost always don't exist. The ambiguity of the role of the public authorities can be read clearly in these words of the Police Commissioner of Rennes:

> *In these days, we cannot be too careful. But all the same, we should not impose excessively on caution. Supervising suspicious people; examining their facts and actions is alright. But arresting without any reason, treating these people like bandits is exaggerated. Once again, do not worry, let us keep our composure: circumstances require it!*[34]

30 Jouguet internment camp, Côtes d'Armor Departmental Archives, 9 R 2.

31 Le Réveil fougerais, 14 August 1914.

32 Ouest Eclair, 15 August 1914.

33 Plouézec municipal notice, Côtes d'Armor Departmental Archives, 1 T 402.

34 Ouest Eclair, 15 August 1914.

IV. Conclusion

Can we, ultimately, understand these forms of popular policing as a translation of this culture of war, defined as a set of shared representations and practices, a complete rupture with pre-war ideas, fuelled by exacerbated patriotism, hatred of the enemy and new forms of radical violence? Admittedly, the perceptions of the foreigner, and especially the German, changes radically from the mobilization. Hugo Ringer notes it well in his diary when he expresses how he deplores those friendships that had lasted for years and had suddenly changed into 'ferocious hostilities'.[35] However, this monolithic cultural analysis must be qualified with some remarks. On the one hand, as we have seen, the motivations of the spy hunters are not all related to the war but sometimes to personal or family grudges. On the other hand, the most violent behaviour doesn't help in strengthening public order. By its destruction, its beatings, its gatherings and its blackmail with an expeditious justice, the crowd acts outside the law which ought to guarantee public order. It creates more disorder, behind the easy alibi of a national defence which is itself misguided. These practices, furthermore, are not unanimous. Many observers admit their shame at the popular and disturbing abuses of what André Lorulot calls 'popular peat'.[36] The arrests of some 'thugs' are also allowed thanks to many denunciations. As Jean-Jacques Becker notes, if public opinion seems for a while to have been an accomplice, it quickly recovered.[37] In the same way, the practice of the snitch has its detractors, including among the local press. And then, as always, there are in the population people who are undoubtedly indifferent, passive, those who are always hidden from the eyes of historians. As for this hatred of the enemy, a supposedly essential component of the culture of war, which would be the matrix of a radical violence against the German and a ruthless pursuit of the enemy from within, it is not consubstantial with the French population. The real enemy is, in fact, all but hidden: he is in the countryside, in the forests, on the roads, in the factories, in the ports, where more than 300,000 prisoners of war are at work in November 1918. And the mistrust towards them has quickly faded, even in remote rural areas. Formerly abhorred, this 'retrograde barbarian' has meanwhile become a providential worker whose contribution is so appreciated that one quickly forgets all safety precautions. At the end of the war, these prisoners working out of camps which were described at the beginning of the war as 'spy nests' are used in campaigns separately and are almost unattended. Because of its disorganized, unconventional and unpredictable nature, essentially irrational and impulsive, popular participation in the eradication of the enemy from within is ultimately more embarrassing than helpful for the authorities. In the absence of a real enemy, this gives an outlet for part of the population. The suspects thus previously hunted serve as scapegoats in order for the population to feel less guilty about not being in the front and to exorcise tensions, mourning and anxiety caused by the conflict. This exercise, felt as patriotic, also often reflects, in the most iso-

[35] Ringer, Boulevard des étrangers, pp. 22-23.

[36] Lorulot, Barbarie allemande et barbarie universelle, p. 13.

[37] Becker, 1914, p. 505.

lated areas, a natural temptation to withdrawal. The stranger to the closed world of the village community, this 'little homeland' constituting the most reassuring level of identification, naturally arouses fear and suspicion. Mysterious, he inspires distrust and in a context of fear fed by the wildest rumours, there is a step, quickly crossed, between the intruder, the suspect and the enemy.

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