

# **The Cenacle during the First World War (1914-1918)**

## 1) The events:

The First World War is brought about after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by a Serbian nationalist on June 28, 1914. But this event is only the detonator of the explosive situation in Europe since the end of the Nineteenth century, made of tensions due to the spreading of the nationalisms and to the rise of imperialism. In retaliation to its heir's assassination, Austria-Hungary declares war to Serbia on July 28, and Germany does the same with France on August 3. The latter is bound in a treaty with United-Kingdom and Russia whereas Germany is part of the Triple Alliance along with Austria-Hungary and Italy until her change of camp in 1915. Almost the whole of Europe is immersed in war.

Very quickly, the French, Belgian and British armies draw back from the German troops. Following the Belgian government's refusal of the ultimatum to let the German army enter freely in Belgium, the Germans enter Brussels on August 25, 1914 and occupy most of the country until its country's liberation by the Allies in 1918. In October starts the "run to the sea" and the Germans attempt several offensives, in particular during the bloody battle of the Flanders (October 29-November 24, 1914). This event represents the end of the movement war, because the front is stabilized on around 800 kilometres from Switzerland to the North Sea, and the beginning of the trenches war. The battle of Verdun, brought about by the German High Command who wants to "bleed the French Army dry" in the main event in 1916, starting on February and finishing in December. At the end of the battle, the losses are enormous since 62 000 men are killed, 101 000 reported missing and more than 200 000 wounded, and 22 million shells are shot. On the other hand, neither army yields any field. On April 2, 1917, the United States renounce their neutrality by joining France, the United Kingdom and Russia. But in spite of their taking an active part in the war, 1917 is a difficult year during which every domain is struck by crises and mutinies arise in French troops after the bloody Chemin des Dames offensive (April-October 1917). In 1918, the German army is in a slow down and attempts last offensives in July in the Champagne region. After this failure, she is not able to continue fighting anymore and asks to sign an armistice. It is signed in the forest of Compiègne near Rethondes on November 11, 1918. The Versailles treaty signed in June 1919 puts a final end to the conflict by stipulating Germany's responsibility and by cutting out 1/7<sup>th</sup> of her territory, in particular the Alsace and the Lorraine regions which are restored to France. In all, this conflict has cost the lives of 10 million people, out of which 1,7 million Germans and 1,3 million French, and has wounded 6 million soldiers.

## 2) The Belgian Cenacle in turmoil:

At the time of the declaration of war, the Cenacle survives illegally in France since the suppression of religious congregations in 1901, thanks to a few Sisters dressed in civilian clothes who do their best to continue the apostolic work. As it will be explained later, they are rather spared by the war. On the other hand, the houses of Brussels, where the general government has found shelter in 1901, and above all the ones in Menin and Yvoir, founded in 1901, are affected by the German invasion of Belgium in 1914 and by the military occupation that follows.

- *Brussels:*

Although the Germans occupy the city as soon as they enter it on August 25, 1914, the Brussels Cenacle does not seem to have suffered too much during this difficult time that only ends after the signing of the armistice. The letters and cards sent during this period show that the Sisters are more concerned with each other's health than with the enemy's stay. No trouble is mentioned in their relations with the German authorities, and the individual as well as the group retreats seem to prosper.

However, most of the Sisters are repatriated in France by the Red Cross in 1917 like many other inhabitants affected by the compulsory evacuation of the country. Two groups leave Brussels during the second half of September. They stop at Enghien where they are accommodated by Sisters of Nazareth for a week, because due to some trouble the departure of the train for France is uncertain. They do leave after all and travel with some nurses working for the Red Cross and under the watch first of Germans then of Swiss. Despite a luggage control before the departure which forces them to leave some belongings behind, all goes well. They are all very moved upon their entering France, especially in Lyon, because many of them have not come back since their hasty departure in 1901.

- *Menin:*

The Menin community is the one most affected by the German occupation and this period has left a strong mark on the Sisters. Indeed some of them have left a very detailed account of the occupation in several diaries: the Mothers Madeleine Scrive, Marguerite Constant and Fernande Le Mintier left very detailed souvenirs, in particular the latter whose description has been done with meticulous care.

The festive atmosphere of August 1914 does not suggest at all the arrival of the Germans. France, the United-Kingdom and their soldiers are acclaimed everywhere and flags are hoisted on every house including the Cenacle. From the very first days of the war, the general superior puts the three Belgium houses at the disposal of the government to install ambulances, and preparatory courses are given by a doctor and attended by all the ladies of Menin. An ambulance is installed in a house close to the Cenacle, at the Mill St Jean and the superior sends a Sister to help around the growing number of the wounded. Two choir religious and a few coadjutresses are in charge of the supervision of the ambulance and the material care and operations are carried out by home nurse Sisters, ambulance drivers and soldiers from the civic guard. The wounded needing special care are entitled to rooms of their own while the others must content themselves with sleeping in dormitories. At the beginning of the conflict, the ambulance caters for voluntary Belgian soldiers who have been wounded by their fellow-countrymen who mistook them for Germans...

Everyone is quickly lacking news about the military operations, and the spreading anxiety soon gives way to panic. The accommodating of six Belgian conscripts coming back from the front calling it a "slaughter" is far from reassuring. On August 23, canons are fired during the whole day, and the Belgian and French flags are hastily taken off the houses. A few days later, the rumour of the Germans' moving towards Paris causes a new rise of anxiety. But despite the fear, the care of the wounded goes well, and when the soldiers go back to the front they want to thank to community by making themselves useful. Thus one sows a sheet, another gardens and a third and a fourth paint some old furniture.

In September there are new panic movements and spreading of false rumours. On October 2, the mayor of Brussels announces that the city waters have been poisoned by

German spies, but it quickly happens to be false. However the presence of spies in Belgium is true, since several of them are arrested and executed in September, including King Albert's personal driver. The diaries of the Cenacle Sisters contain many details on these spies and on the executions of civilians by Germans, which shows that fear is in everybody's mind. Here is Mother Le Mintier describing the atmosphere at the beginning of October: "People are moving about, some out of curiosity are running everywhere to see what a German soldier looks like. Others, seized with an exaggerated fear, magnify the merest event so much so if we were to believe them we would be going back to the worse events of the barbaric Antiquity".

The Germans enter Menin on October 6 in the middle of the annual procession of the Rosary which is suddenly stopped while all its participants immediately go home, and the next day Mother Constant talks of a "Prussian deluge" when 30 000 soldiers parade in the streets. The next day, the Sisters witness the whistle passage of British soldiers shooting on a German patrol with a machine gun. The ambulance becomes German and the wounded are brought to the civilian hospital. The Sisters regret however not to have treated French soldiers. From this moment on, the house slowly turns into military barracks, because the Germans don't stop requisitioning beds, and the Sisters' life becomes hectic. Besides, the word "invasion" often comes back in their diaries and letters from this period. On October 18, more dead than alive, they witness a night visit of German soldiers threatening them and searching the house from top to bottom, believing them to hide French soldiers. There are incessant comings and goings of German soldiers who settle in the house's courtyard with cars and often also with horses since there is no stable for them. These movements create an "indescribable" atmosphere for religious who usually live cloistered and rarely go outside. They have described the incessant activity taking place in the courtyard, from the loading and unloading of the cars that are washed, scrubbed and polished, to the noisy repasts of the batmen, the hanging of meat on the yard's columns by the cooks who more than once have to run after ducks that have escaped from the bugs they were kept in... Mother Le Mintier kept a thorough account of the soldiers lodged at the Cenacle between October 1914 and July 1917 which allows us to image the house bustling with activity. In all, she believes that 9200 militaries lived in it with a maximum in January and March 1915 with 1360 and 1280 of them... As time goes along, at each arrival of soldiers, the Sisters are forced to give up their rooms and to sleep in the corridor. They also have to give them sheets, blankets, wine and eggs. While struggling with food, they also face floods twice in January and December 1915 when the rise of the nearby river obliges them to pump...



Drawing by Mother Le Mintier of Major Esser's helmet in quarters in the Cenacle in the city of Menin



View of the courtyard

Nevertheless, the officers behave correctly towards the religious even if some of them are sometimes a little impolite by complaining about the slowness of the dinner service and finding the coffee too cold to their taste. They are not allowed to go in the kitchen, so the Sisters cook their meals according to the chef's instructions. The meals are then served to the officers, in particular of the imperial guard, by the orderlies. The soldiers are watched by their superiors and by an examining magistrate who both come several times to the house to question the Sisters on their behaviour. Discipline is obligatory for militaries even during relaxation times! However, despite this watch a few incidents occur during the Kaiser's birthday celebration on January 25, 1915. The soldiers wine and dine, and two of them fire gunshots to each other. The next day, two non-commissioned officers fight a duel right under the windows of the Sisters.



That same month, in spite of the superior's protests, a casino is installed with a canteen, a rumpus room and a reading room. The next few days are so noisy that the superior complains of it to the headquarters. The episode ends up in favour of the Cenacle since the General comes to make an inspection on January 30 and decides to close the canteen and to forbid all alcoholic drinks. So the military authorities are understanding towards the occupied population and try to respect their homes. This understanding sometimes goes up to friendship, because the Sisters make friends with an Alsatian soldier who happens to do them some services and spends his evenings at the Cenacle under the pretext of teaching them German. When the soldiers go back to the front, the Sisters can't help being moved while, as Mother Le Mintier writes in her diary, "and yet they are [our] enemies".

Menu served to the officers staying at the Cenacle in Menin January 15, 1915, by Mother Le Mintier

Thanks to the lodging of soldiers, the Sisters pick up details on their living conditions at the front, especially in the trenches, and on the German troops' gradual demoralization. In August 1915, the soldiers don't want to go back to the living death of the front lines. The regular visits from the ones who have lodged at the Cenacle allow the Sisters to realize their living conditions. They also realize it when they see soldiers coming back from the horrors of the battle field: "Infantrymen, cyclists, ambulance drivers, we see all of them, passing wet with yellowish mud up to their waist, trudging rather than walking, with haggard faces... it is an awful sight" writes Mother Le Mintier in December 1914. The battle of the Flanders rages at this time and the human losses are heavy. The gun-fires are incessant during the whole occupation, both during the day and at night, and the inhabitants live in the fear of being bombed in their bed. As writes Mother Le Mintier in February 1915, "everything goes on with the company of the cannon". Mother Marie Choquet, the house superior, writes in a letter from November 22, 1914 that they have heard the cannon 26 days and 26 nights in a row, which gives an idea of their very difficult living conditions. But the soldiers continue to come and go regularly at the Cenacle until their departure that seems definitive in September 1915. The enclosure door is put back in its place but only for a short time because the barracks is reinstalled in January 1916 at the Sisters' great distress who also witness with consternation the display of a board indicating "Soldatenheim" above the front door.

From this period on, the activity of the house increases, since on top of the soldiers they also accommodate around fifty girls to teach them catechism, more than a hundred adolescents and as many schoolboys and girls for retreats, which results in an "endless movement that makes one go dizzy". So the German occupation clearly doesn't prevent the congregation's apostolic work which continues to be dynamic, and the Sisters manage to keep living a community life in particular thanks to the preaching of priests. The chapel is also used by the near-by secondary school for Sunday masses and first communions. However, the religious are constantly disturbed by the Germans who become more severe from 1916. They want to search the house for supplies, or ask for a list of all its inhabitants with their names and ages.



A military exercise in the courtyard

The restlessness of the German authorities soon increases with rumours of an evacuation because of the pulling back of their military forces in Belgium. The first civilians are evacuated on June 9, 1917. The Cenacle receives a first official warning to prepare the departure on June 17, and during the next days the Sisters hasten to pack up and hide what they can like their bronze and copper belongings that are hidden in the sacristy. They also

give what they can get out of the house without drawing attention to the poor. But they have to face another ordeal the next day, because secret police agents, “professional burglars” according to the outraged Mother Le Mintier, search the house and discover hidden wine, wheat and oil, all forbidden goods that lead to the affixing of seals and the imposition of a 1000 Mark fine. The next few days go by in the noisy atmosphere described by the ever-observant Mother Le Mintier: “the noise of the cannon that thunders day in and day out, the purr of the many planes flying over continuously, the vertiginous and endless movement of the cars, artillery trains, troops, patrols, out of breath liaison officers who come together all over the place.” In such conditions, one understands how relieved the Sisters feel when they leave for France on a Red Cross train on July 2, 1917 because they leave a country in alarm. After their departure, the house is permanently closed.

Arrived in Brussels where they meet again their fellow Sisters and the general government with great delight, they stay there until September in the retreatants house. They are then separated in several groups and go to join their Sisters or friends in Enghien, Evian, Yvoir or in France.

- Yvoir:

This community’s situation is in many ways similar to the one in Menin before the arrival of the Germans. An ambulance is installed on August 5, 1914, and fear is in everyone’s mind. The civilians are exposed to shootings that cause some damage in the Cenacle house. But the entrance of the German troops in the city doesn’t affect it too much, because the bishop obtains from the authorities an exemption from occupying the cloistered convents. They do however accommodate a few refugee families.

Some of the Sisters are evacuated in December 1917, but the ones who stayed left some very precious details regarding the Germans’ departure after the armistice of November 11, 1918. From October, the inhabitants witness the stream of many processions of soldiers accompanied by French prisoners carrying their equipment. On November 11, the announcement of the signature of the armistice makes everyone sceptical because they can hardly believe the war to be over. But the following day the Germans rush their moving, and everywhere soldiers leave on foot because the trains are crowded. During the next days, French prisoners abandoned by their jailers on the roads enter the city and are welcomed with enthusiasm. They often are in a pitiful state being exhausted and starving, but they are very obliging and insist on helping the Sisters to clean the house. During a few days, French and Germans come together without causing any trouble. Finally, the allies’ entrance in the city arouses great displays of joy. The Sisters witness with a lot a curiosity the march of Australian, Scottish and Indian soldiers, and this living together of different nationalities increases the delight to be free and able to go back to a normal life.

### 3) The French communities:

The Cenacle not existing anymore on the French soil since 1901, the Sisters who live the war years are rather isolated and the situation varies depending on the cities they are in.

- Lyon:

In 1914, the house in Fourvière is a boarding-house but its residents leave right after the declaration of war. The events the Sisters have witnessed have been written by Mother de

Valence to Mother Buisson in a letter from January 1919. On August 12, 1914, a regional regiment's headquarters with a colonel, 25 officers, some batmen and an orderly settles in the house until November 11 of the same year. The batmen take care of the rooms and serve the meals and a subsistence officer helps to provide the food supplies. On September 5, delegates from the city council come to ask if the house occupiers would consent to installing an ambulance. After having thought about it, the person in charge agrees to organize one at the house situated at n°3 at the montée de Fourvère on the condition that no exterior staff will be allowed. The building is quickly organized to accommodate wounded men, with dormitories, a wound-dressing room and a linen-room. A Sister of Good Help takes on the role of the nurse in chief and one from the St Philomena congregation is in charge of the linen-room while a Jesuit is the chaplain. A new administrator, Monsieur Gauthier, arrives in autumn 1916 to complement the staff.



Three wounded men in 1914

The first wounded arrive on September 27 from Charleroi and Toul. But taking care of them doesn't prevent the Sisters from making their retreats nor from sometimes welcoming a few retreatants groups. Besides, the wounded soldiers gladly join the religious ceremonies, and several of them are baptized or make their first communion during their stay in Fourvière. In February 1915, the number of available beds goes up to 40, and the house also receives families coming to visit their wounded parents in the city hospitals. Then, in February 1916, many refugees from Arras also join the ambulance. The atmosphere is calm, and some relaxation times come to break off the dreariness of medical care. For instance, the soldiers perform a show in January 1915. Moreover, a nice military ceremony followed by a meal takes place ten months later for the decoration of two soldiers. Despite a German attempt to close it done on the pretext that it is too clerical, the ambulance holds on until the end of the war and has to deplore only a few deaths. However, the supply problems, in particular in coal, that arise at the beginning of 1917 harden the living conditions. In November, oil becomes unobtainable and measles and small pox epidemics set in, before the arrival of the Spanish influenza in 1918 that fortunately doesn't leave any casualty in the house.



Ambulance of Fourvière (Lyon)

- The other communities :

In Nancy, Bordeaux, Versailles and Paray-le-Monial, ambulances are also installed but don't interfere with religious life. In Paray-le-Monial, retreats continue in spite of the care of the wounded and the welcoming of numerous refugees from Paris and Nancy. In Versailles, the community is able to make its retreat in 1917 and 1918 in a huge property belonging to the Jesuits that also shelters an ambulance and a school. The planes' machine-guns during the day and the fire guns at night makes the stay a little difficult but the retreats take place quite well.

At the castle of Courcelles, near Paris, where Sisters had hidden during the dispersal, an ambulance is also installed with fifty beds. After the battle of the Marne in September 1914, a few apostolic works resume in spite of the nocturnal bombings.

In Lille, the situation is more difficult because the city is under German occupation from October 1914 to October 1918 and partly destroyed by the bombings and the particularly fatal explosion of a munitions depot. The archives hardly mention the Sisters' life during this time, but an inhabitant writing to her sister during the occupation describes the atmosphere: "The music of the enemy, the ringing of the bells for his victories, the plundering, the fires, the bombings, the great explosion [the munitions depot one], the night and day gun fires since October 4, 1914. The capture of the women, the hostages, the civilians; the fines, the jail, the tortures, the forced labour, the punishments of every sort, this is the treatment of our invaded regions, adding to it the greatest material privations". In such conditions, the life of the Sisters who remained in Lille must have been painful.

The conflict is therefore trying for the entire congregation, even for the Italian, English and American communities who, even if they live sheltered from the German invasion are cut from the generalate for four years and are constantly worrying for their Sisters whose countries are occupied.

However, the evacuation of Belgium in 1917 allows at least the return of some of the dispersed Sisters and of the religious costume in France. They can go back to their regular life from 1919 thanks to the relocation in the houses of La Louvesc, Lyon, Paray-le-Monial, Amiens and Bordeaux. Moreover, the election of Achilles Ratti, former chaplain of the house of Milan and close to this community to the throne of St Peter in 1922 under the name of Pius XI allows a genuine march in Mother Thérèse Couderc's cause.