

FRENCH The "Brassards Rouges": the forgotten men of history

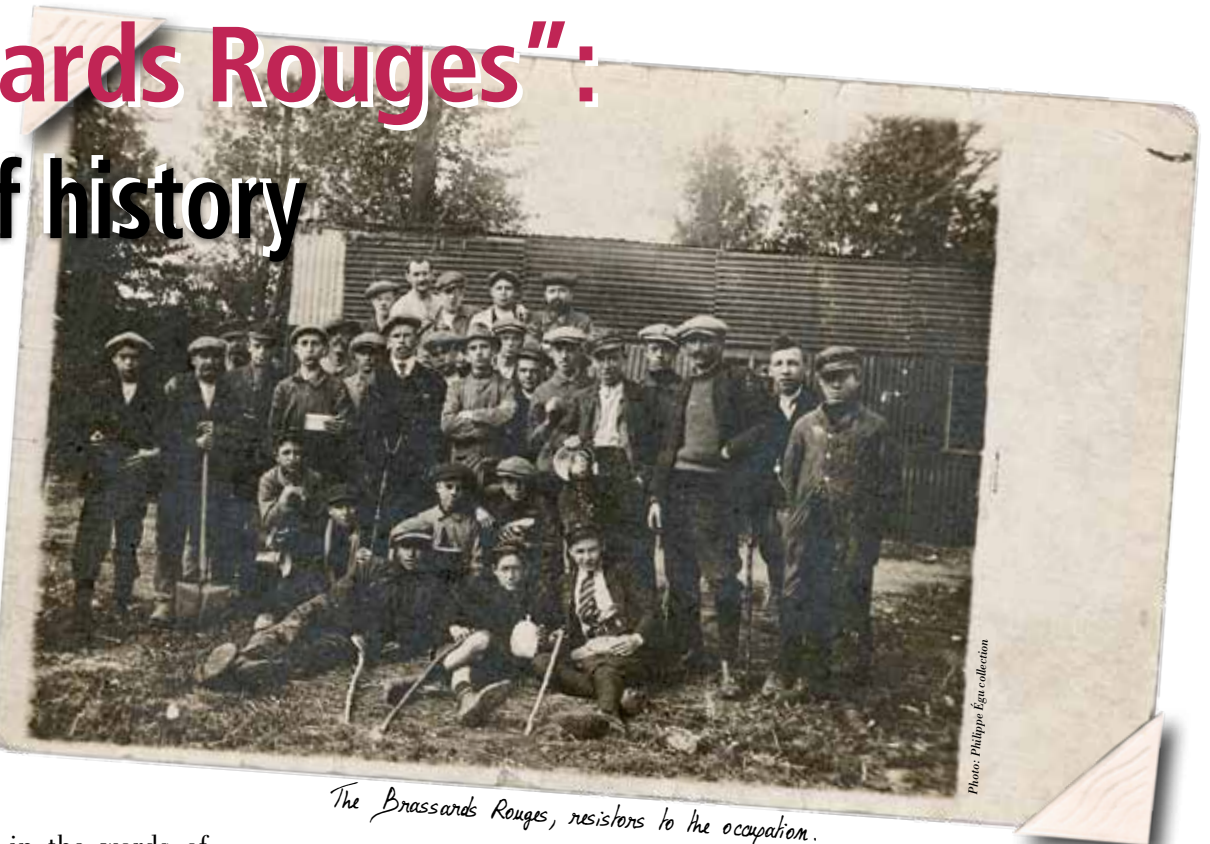
HAVE you heard of the "Brassards Rouges"? Philippe Égu from Grenay has shown a special interest in the forgotten ranks of civilian workers who, refusing to work for the enemy, were deported, mistreated and tortured. This was the case for his maternal grandfather, Georges Cambier, a joiner, who was taken away by force at the age of 19, and who survived deprivation and numerous beatings.

Few studies have been carried out on the lot of civilians in the occupied zone, although numerous eye-witness accounts tell of difficult living conditions. Requisitions, collective atrocities, reprisals and forced labour became increasingly common. From 1914 onwards,

civilians were a workforce which could be exploited for "the war effort", in particular for the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed as a result of the fighting. When they resisted, civilians (and occasionally even women and young girls) were deported to forced labour camps, where they formed ZABs ("Zivilarbeiter-Bataillone" or battalions of civil workers) and wore a distinctive emblem: a red armband (brassard rouge), which some wore until 1918. Living conditions for these "Brassards Rouges" was similar to those of prisoners in deportation camps.

A rebellious citizen

Georges Cambier refused to submit himself to the will of the Germans and was punished as a result. Along with five hundred or so other civilians, he was taken - "like a convict"



The Brassards Rouges, resisters to the occupation.

in the words of his granddaughter - to where labour was needed, mainly in the area around Vadancourt (in the Aisne département). At the railway station he witnessed civilians being hit with the butt of rifles, bitten by dogs and summarily executed. Upon arrival, hunger and ill-treatment were the norm. "We washed using the morning coffee, and once that was done we had to drink it as we were so short of water". Those who still refused to work were locked in flooded cellars and sheds full of foul-smelling manure. Every three days they received a litre of soup without

bread. After three weeks many broke down...

Others were enclosed in crates and some went mad. The hospital was, unsurprisingly, like an abattoir and the dead could be counted in their hundreds.

Censure

Personal correspondence was authorised but had to be written with a pencil to avoid censure. Miraculously, an injury to his shoulder enabled Georges to return home, "but he had to leave for fear of reprisals against his family." He was finally able to put this hellish

existence behind him in 1917. In the north, he saw his mother once again, who was mourning the death of his father. After the war he played his part in the reconstruction of local mines and put his talents as a woodworker to good use for the Compagnie des Mines de Béthune.

Nowadays, not a single monument pays homage to the "Brassards Rouges". "Their resistance has been largely ignored", regrets Philippe Égu. "However, they served their country well!"



Photos: Philippe Égu collection



Women and children first

Numerous accounts tell of acts of both remarkable and more modest female bravery. "Women made the Resistance what it was", explains 88-year-old Henri Claverie, a historian from Hénin-Beaumont. "They broke through enemy lines to pass on messages; they lived in caves, only venturing out to visit the supply depot in order to feed their families; and for hours on end they would grind flour in coffee mills." Simone Caffard, whose story was uncovered by Raymond Sulliger from the Cercle Historique de Fouquières-lès-Lens, was in her own way a young heroine. A gifted teacher who was passionate about education, she gave lessons to children in the most trying circumstances and worked tirelessly to ensure that they passed their "certificat d'études" exams in 1916. Sadly, she fell ill the following year and died. It's a lesser-known fact that women were victims of abuse and violence (which included rape, forced labour, deportation and savage repression) if they were found to be part of the Resistance movement. The atrocities to which they were subjected have not been recorded by history,

largely because the cruelties of the Second World War have taken their place in the collective memory. As for children, they, too, played their part as best they could. Raymond Sulliger has discovered anecdotes in the work by Alfred Crépe, in particular those relating to the children of Fouquières, who would sing under the noses of German soldiers returning from Lorette:

*"Té peux chîrer tes guêtes
Té n'mont'ras pas Lorette
Té peux chîrer tes bottes
Té n'mont'ras pas la côte!"*
(*"You can polish your leggings
You'll never take Lorette
You can polish your boots
You'll never take the hill!"*)

He also recounts how the most daring children would place bricks in German cooking pots when the cook's back was turned or do their best to stand up to the enemy in their own way. As the Kommandantur had given an order that all men and young people should greet officers by removing their cap, some walked around bare-headed,

which was far from common at the time!

Rens. <http://pabqt.free.fr/mairie1/vieclav.html>
<http://fouquiereschf.free.fr/>



Fouquières - lès - Lens. Occupying forces posing with local inhabitants - in this instance, the Musim family - as they would in a hunting scene.

Emancipation

It is often said that the First World War played a significant role in the emancipation of women. However, this is questioned by historians, who claim that the changes which took place at this time were fairly superficial. If changes did take place, they did not last long; once the war was over, women soon found themselves back in the home. Those who gained the most were probably educated or middle-class women. A "baccalauréat féminin" was introduced in 1919, followed by the introduction of equal pay for teachers. All women, however, benefited from the fact that clothes became simpler, as corsets, cumbersome long dresses and uncomfortable large hats were all abandoned. This marked the beginning of the liberalisation of women's bodies...



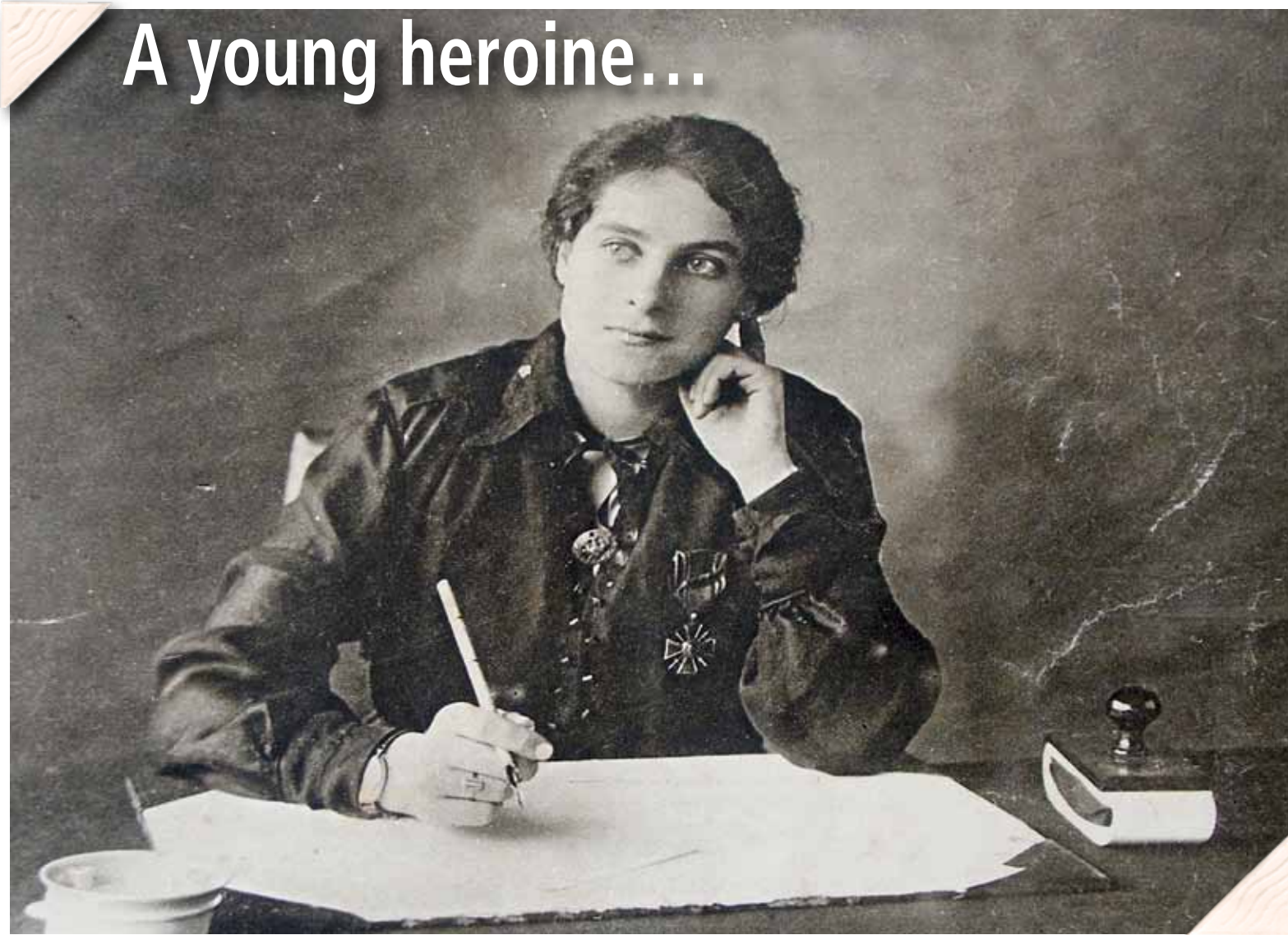
Simone Caffard died in January 1917

Photos: Cercle Historique de Fouquières-lès-Lens collection

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Émilienne Moreau from Loos-en-Gohelle

A young heroine...



The war was far from over yet the young Émilienne Moreau had already been decorated with the Croix de Guerre with palm, which she received on 27 November 1915 from the French President, Raymond Poincaré, at the Elysée Palace. She would also be the only woman to be awarded the Military Medal, a British distinction, and went on to receive the Royal Red Cross, the Medal of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem and the Légion d'Honneur.

To say that the inhabitants of Loos and the “Loos-en-Gohelle sur les traces de la Grande Guerre” association are proud of their heroine Émilienne Moreau is something of an understatement, as it is worth stating from the outset that in the Pas-de-Calais fearless 16-year-old girls with a grenade in one hand and a revolver in the other were few and far between! In turn a loving daughter, teacher, nurse and a combatant, she never once submitted to the enemy or lost her nerve.

Émilienne Moreau and her family left Wingles for Loos-en-Gohelle in June 1914. Her father, a retired mine foreman, was appointed the manager of a small shop on the main square of this large mining town. Émilienne, who had just turned sixteen, was destined for a career as a teacher. The alarming news of the final days of July worried her a little but “a young girl pays little attention to news relating to foreign politics; and to tell the truth I had little idea about the Serbia that was being talked about...”, she wrote in “Mes mémoires, 1914-1915”, which appeared in the magazine *Le Miroir*. When, at 4pm on 1 August, the siren brought miners up from the pit and the alarm sounded in local mining villages, the reality soon hit home. After mobilisation and the departure of her brother for the front, days of uncertainty were followed by days of anguish, and after the long processions of evacuated civilians came the arrival of the German occupying forces.

Time passed. Gradually, with each new horror and act of pillage by the Uhlans, the young girl's indignation and confidence grew.

Acts of fortitude

Émilienne created a special observation post in her attic, watching events through her binoculars. She started to observe the Germans digging shelters in the slag heap, installing themselves in the sorting buildings and, on 8 October 1914, setting up machine guns between the pylons of La Fosse. “A moment later, we spotted our soldiers on the hill. I suddenly started shouting: the poor souls are going to be mown down by the machine guns...” Without thinking, the young girl started to run “like a mad woman” between the bullets and pieces of shrapnel to warn the soldiers. French shells rained down on the Germans. “Thank you my child, you're a very brave girl!”, the sergeant said to her. “You did well!”, her father whispered as he hugged

her. The young girl's resolve hardened with every passing day. When the town hall was in flames, she ran to put out the fire and save the public archives; when the Germans threatened her, she held her head up high, brandishing a bottle at them. “(...) I asked myself whether it was really me who had behaved with such fortitude,” she wrote later.

« Give me two grenades »

When wounded British soldiers passed through Loos-en-Gohelle, Émilienne Moreau, who was devastated by the sight, became a first-aid worker. With her mother, she transformed the family home into an infirmary and provided useful assistance to a British doctor who established a clinic there. In the book “*Petits héros de la Grande Guerre*” (Unsung Heroes of the Great War), Jacquin and Fabre told how the wounded continued to arrive in great numbers and that many of them remained outside on the street despite their serious injuries. “*Ignoring the pleas of the major who feared for her life, she left the safety of her house and off she went amid the crackle of gunfire to give water to those in need, removing the wounded from among the dead...*” When she suddenly saw three Germans head towards an

injured Scottish soldier, she decided to attack them accompanied by three other wounded soldiers “*who could barely stand up*”. “*Follow me*”, Émilienne Moreau whispered, “*I'll go first*.” However, a noise had undoubtedly revealed their presence and a German bullet skimmed past the young girl's hair. She decided that all was not lost. “*Stay here*”, she said, showing the British soldiers the door to the cellar, “*and give me two grenades*.” On another occasion, a further act of bravery was to immortalise Émilienne Moreau in the hearts of the inhabitants of Loos-en-Gohelle. On her own, with a wounded soldier on a stretcher, she saw two Germans in front of her pointing their guns directly at her. Their shots missed but the young girl's did not. “*The young girl then spotted a revolver (...). Émilienne grabbed hold of it. Feverishly, she fired shot after*

shot at random (...), and the Germans, shot at almost point-blank range, fell one after the other.”

Frédo Duparcq, from the “Loos-en-Gohelle sur les traces de la Grande Guerre” association, knows Émilienne's story off by heart, or at least the one recounted to him by the village's older residents, as recollections vary somewhat between *Les Mémoires d'Émilienne*, the book by Jacquin and Fabre, and the memories of local inhabitants. Whatever the exact story, Émilienne Moreau's actions are to be applauded, and Frédo, who has carefully read through the rare edition of *Le Miroir*, is happy to share the details of this adventure. The story has a happy ending, with medals and decorations galore: “*On the day that Émilienne was accompanying her sister to Béthune for an operation, the latter injured by a shell, a car stopped alongside them. A few moments later, she was presented to the British general in command of the sector, who wanted to thank her and inform her that he had advised both the French and British governments of her actions. On 27 November 1915, following a mention in dispatches by General Foch, General De Saily presented the Military Cross with palm to the young heroine. On the recommendation of General Douglas Haig, the British ambassador in Paris also awarded her, in the name of His Majesty the King, the Military Medal, the Royal Red Cross First Class and the Medal of the Order of St John of Jerusalem.*” It goes

without saying that the Germans would have good reason to remember the name of Émilienne Moreau when they returned to the region twenty years later. Émilienne showed the same passionate commitment in the Second World War as she did in the first, and the woman known as Jeanne Poirier or “Émilienne la Blonde” in the heart of the Resistance would be talked about for many years to come.

