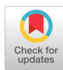

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ARTICLE

# Imagining a Channel Tunnel in France after the First World War

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## Abstract

The cultural shift that France experienced after the First World War has commonly been analysed through the prism of attitudes towards Germany, and the continuation of wartime prejudices in the immediate post-war period. Yet, an exploration of imaginings of future relations with a wartime ally reveals a broad spectrum of assumptions and expectations that span the transition from war to peace. Taking as its focus the prospect of a tunnel under the English Channel, this article situates thinking about France's future within cultures of nationalism and ideas about international connection. It uses a collection of answers to a 1919 exam question which asked what might be the likely consequences of a Channel tunnel, and analyses the themes that emerged as the candidates picked and chose from a variety of different national symbols and images. In so doing, they offered a vision of a tunnel that was rooted in the past and in wartime experiences, but that equally represented a means to strengthen and sustain the Franco-British partnership that would be key to France's future. Read alongside government and lobby group records, their essays afford a glimpse into grassroots imaginings of both the French nation and the new international order after 1919.

> I fear that this tunnel will become, in the hands of England, a powerful tool for our economic domination. I dread the Anglo-Saxon race, its shrewdness, its skill in business, its greed. I forsee [*sic*] in the near future (and a future brought closer by the war), our dear and beautiful country will be handed over to yours … I am not in favour of an economic rapprochement with England. You are too powerful, and we are too weak. … The Channel tunnel would bring you immense advantages. It would bring us only disadvantages. For you it would be a means of penetration into France. For us, it would be the gateway to invasion, (peaceful, no doubt) but all the more powerful for that reason.[1]

[1] Paris, Archives de Paris (AdP), D2T1 (14) Académie de Paris, Enseignement an XII–1943 (1803–1943), Aspirants Brevet Supérieur (Seine), Louis Malhis.

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In these words, the student and aspiring teacher Louis Malhis set out his view of the prospect of a Channel tunnel in the summer of 1919. Malhis was sitting the English element of the *brevet supérieur* examination, and the question posed was: 'One of your English correspondents has written to ask for your thoughts on a tunnel under the English Channel. He would like to know if you see any moral and economic advantages for France and England in the achievement of this project. You answer.' Malhis's response stands out among the essays written by the candidates in the department of the Seine with whom he sat the exam, as he was the only one to express his opposition to the proposal. His compatriots were overwhelmingly positive: Charles Charpentier expressed his surprise that the long-standing proposal had not yet been completed; Marcel Lanteaume outlined his certainty that works on the tunnel would begin imminently; Raymond Vuillemen described the tunnel as the best means to secure economic prosperity and peace; and Emmanuel Gaudriot predicted a slow but certain fusion of French and English customs, habits, and mores.[2] And, while Malhis may have disagreed with the others over the impact of a tunnel, he was united with them in treating the proposed scheme as *inevitable*.

A fixed link across the Channel was indeed a long-standing proposition, but it was one which captured public imaginations anew in the aftermath of the First World War. It would be a dazzling technological feat, and one that was both advocated by French military leaders, who argued that it would have shortened the length of the war, and proposed by the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, during discussions around the Versailles peace conference.[3] There were frequent and repeated discussions of a tunnel between the British and French governments, as well as within international organizations throughout the 1920s, in which a tunnel was imagined as part of a wider infrastructural transformation that would allow passengers to travel from London to Dakar or Baghdad without changing trains.[4] For its supporters, the tunnel would secure the economic recovery of the areas of northern

[2] AdP, D2T1 (14), Marcel Lanteaume; Raymond Gaston Vuillemen; Charles Albert Charpentier; Emmanuel Gaudriot.

[3] While scholarship has dismissed Lloyd George's proposal as a bribe to secure concessions in the Rhineland from the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, the positioning of the question within wider discussions about European borders is nonetheless suggestive of the ways in which the tunnel was bound up in wider geopolitical and strategic questions. See Antony Lentin, *Lloyd George and the lost peace: from Versailles to Hitler, 1919–1940* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 53; Margaret McMillan, *Paris 1919* (London, 2002) p. 174; Peter Jackson, *Beyond the balance of power: France and the politics of national security in the era of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2013).

[4] Paris, Archives nationales (AN), F/15/12599, Président du conseil de Ministère de la guerre à M. le Ministre des travaux publics et des transports, Conseil supérieur des travaux publics, 10 Mar. 1919; Geneva, UN Archives (UNA), R1097/14/11907/11907, B. Attolico to M. Millerand, Président de la République Française; UNA, R1097/14/11907/11907, 'De l'Europe à l'Afrique et à l'Amérique par l'Espagne', par M. N. Snss, ancien directeur, ingénieur; UNA, R1097/14/11907/11907, 'Rapport de M. Bressler sur le tunnel sous le Detroit de Gibraltar'; UNA, R1097/14/11907/11907, 'Paris–Dakar en 3 jours', Projet Henri Bressler, pamphlet (Paris, 1920); UNA, S484/3/2, Chambre de commerce internationale/Railway Transport Committee, 13 Nov. 1922.

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France and Belgium that had been devastated during the First World War, and would guarantee the fragile post-war peace.[5]

Yet, while a tunnel was discussed in international terms at the League of Nations, and in local terms at the French Ministry of Public Works, for the *brevet* candidates it was primarily a link between two nation-states divided by a maritime frontier. Such an association between borders and national territory was not unusual; fixed and delimited boundaries had long represented a symbol of the coherence of national communities, while it was at the border that 'otherness' or 'foreignness' was imagined.[6] Our understanding of such imaginings has been informed by a growing literature on the question of how people become nationalized.[7] Scholars have asked how ordinary people talked about, performed, ignored, resisted, and refused the nation.[8] This 'everyday nationalism' has underlined that people are active agents in the creation and development of their own particular visions of both the nation and national belonging.[9] It has also revealed some of the ways in which borders shaped cultures of nationalism, but grassroots imaginings of borders among 'ordinary people' living far from the boundary line are often absent from these histories. As a result, we know little about how the images, symbols, and rhetoric of high politics were adopted, appropriated, or rejected in everyday cultures of nationalism.

If we know little about the place of boundaries in the imaginations of ordinary people living far from the frontier, we know even less about border infrastructure. This is in spite of a growing acknowledgement of the importance of infrastructure in developing the networks and encounters that produced the increasingly globalized world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[10] In the case of borders, infrastructure offers new ways of thinking about the

[5] AN, F/14/1260 Minutes of the Conseil supérieur des travaux publics 1919–20; UNA, R1134/14/21691/21691, Chambre de commerce internationale, Comité de groupe des transports et des communications, 'Le Tunnel conseil sous la Manche. Note rédigée par M. Gustave Bortin, Secrétaire du Comité Français du Tunnel sous la Manche, d'association "Franco-Grande Bretagne"'; UNA, R1134/14/21691/21691, Chambre de commerce internationale, Comité des trains de marchandises internationaux, 6 Oct. 1922.

[6] Peter Sahlins, 'Natural frontiers revisited: France's boundaries since the seventeenth century', *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), pp. 1423–51. See also Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: the making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, CA, 1989); Linda Colley, 'Britishness and otherness: an argument', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), pp. 309–29.

[7] James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and national indifference in a central European borderland* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2008); Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Davide Rodogno, and Mona Bieling, eds., *Sovereignty, nationalism and the quest for homogeneity in interwar Europe* (London, 2023); Caroline Ford, *Creating the nation in provincial France: religion and political identity in Brittany* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1976); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped souls: national indifference and the battle for children in the Bohemian lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY, 2008).

[8] Jon Fox and Maarten van Ginderachter, eds., 'Introduction: everyday nationalism's evidence problem', *Nations and Nationalism*, 24 (2018), pp. 546–52.

[9] Maarten van Ginderachter, *The everyday nationalism of workers: a social history of modern Belgium* (Stanford, CA, 2019).

[10] Per Högselius, Arne Kaijser, and Erik van der Vleuten, *Europe's infrastructure transition: economy, war, nature* (Basingstoke, 2018). On internationalism, see Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the age of nationalism* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013); David Brydan and Jessica Reinisch, eds., *Internationalists in*

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symbolic importance bestowed upon national boundaries. While borders might be presented as eternal and constant, in reality they are neither. They have been imagined and reimagined in a variety of ways, and have operated in different manners across national contexts, time periods, and political regimes. Boundary-making has required constant negotiation, and is a process that engages both the state and civil society. Consequently, how people talk about their borders tells us much about their internal coherence and their domestic insecurities, as well as about their relationships with their neighbours and their ideas about international connection. In the case of a Channel tunnel, for the French parliamentarian Jean-Baptiste Sébastien Krantz a tunnel would do more for an alliance than endless diplomacy as 'it would be driven by shared interest'.[11] Yet the existing literature on the Channel Tunnel has focused upon the technological developments which led to its construction, or the internal government workings which underpinned discussions over a cross-Channel link.[12] These studies reveal some of the ways in which politicians, civil servants, and engineers thought about a tunnel, but tunnel histories have yet to unearth its place in the imagination of ordinary people.[13]

In their answers to the *brevet*, Malhis and his compatriots shared their thoughts on the implications of a tunnel for France and Britain, and imagined what closer connection would mean for both nation-states. These essays would have been shaped and informed by their schooling and by their understanding of what their examiners expected to read, but also by wider cultures of nationalism at the moment between war and peace in which they sat the exam. They thus provide access to voices that are often scarce in the historical record, and are revealing of assumptions about national borders and their role in the peace that was in the midst of being forged. This article analyses these candidates' answers, treating the future that they imagined as a lens onto their present cultural preoccupations and political perspectives. Adopting the perspective advocated by Roxanne Panchasi, it also explores the future as a category of analysis.[14] In so doing it sits at an intersection of histories of borders, nationalism, war, education, and technology, to cast light onto grassroots cultures of

*European history: rethinking the twentieth century* (London, 2021); Patricia Clavin and Glenda Sluga, eds., *Internationalisms: a twentieth-century history* (Cambridge, 2016).

[11] 'Une petite Angleterre', catalogue et contributions inedités, Departement de Pas-de-Calais, direction des archives (2004).

[12] Jean-Pierre Navailles, *Le tunnel sous la Manche. Deux siècles pour sauter le pas, 1802–1987* (Mâcon, 1987); P. E. Prestwich, 'French businessmen and the Channel tunnel project of 1913', *French Historical Studies*, 9 (1976), pp. 690–715; E. E. Vielle, *Le tunnel sous la Manche* (Paris, 1970); Keith Wilson, *Channel tunnel visions, 1850–1945: dreams and nightmares* (London, 1994); Eve Darian-Smith, *Bridging divides: the Channel tunnel and English legal identity in the new Europe* (Berkeley, CA, 1999); Bertrand Lemoine, *Le tunnel sous la Manche* (Paris, 1990); Jérôme Spick, *Le tunnel sous la Manche* (Vendôme, 1995); Duncan Redford, 'Opposition to the Channel tunnel, 1882–1975: identity, island status and security', *History*, 99 (2014), pp. 100–20.

[13] Terry Gourvish, *The official history of Britain and the Channel tunnel* (London, 2006); Richard S. Grayson, 'The British government and the Channel tunnel, 1919–1939', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31 (1996), pp. 125–44.

[14] Roxanne Panchasi, *Future tense: the culture of anticipation in France between the wars* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), p. 4.

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nationalism in France in the period that immediately followed the First World War.

The article's first section outlines the *brevet* examination and its place within the education system of the Third Republic, France's regime between 1871 and 1940. The second section analyses the way that ideas about war shaped the candidates' views of a tunnel, and the third section asks what they anticipated the effects of easier border crossing to be upon France's national community and international relationships. The answers are striking for the near consensus that a tunnel would be a good thing, and for treating its construction as both inevitable and imminent. Yet the candidates demonstrate more than grassroots support for a Channel tunnel in the aftermath of the First World War. This article argues that the *brevet* candidates' imaginings of the tunnel (and, in broader terms, of borders) afford a glimpse into how they articulated the French nation and the new international order that would emerge from the First World War. Crucially, their essays look optimistically to the future, with the Franco-British partnership of the war sustained into the peace by a tunnel that facilitated friendship and exchange, while securing the Entente's victory over Germany. This reimagined national and international order was not simply reflected through but rooted in assumptions about national boundaries, as the candidates drew upon various nationalist images from their schooling and wider cultures of nationalism, and picked and chose how they would express their ideas about the impact of a land border between France and Britain.

## I

The *brevet supérieur* represented the culmination of studies for Malhis and his compatriots in 1919. It is also the reason that their answers were preserved, as it was an exam taken to access the teaching profession as primary school teachers (*instituteurs*/*institutrices*). This career offered an important means of social mobility for young people from the working classes, as well as the opportunity to shape the worldviews of future generations.[15] All *instituteurs* in France's Third Republic were required to hold a *brevet élémentaire* (elementary diploma), but some students followed this qualification with the higher certificate of the *brevet supérieur*.[16] This usually took two years and involved

[15] This mobility was limited and there was a distinction between the children of the bourgeoisie, who attended the lycée, and those of the working classes, who studied in an *école primaire supérieure* or an *école normale* and worked towards the qualifications that afforded access to the primary teaching profession. See Marcel Grandière, *La formation des maîtres en France, 1792–1914* (Lyon, 2006).

[16] The *brevet* had a long history in French primary schools, and had survived multiple changes of regimes during the nineteenth century. The *brevet de capacité* was introduced as a compulsory qualification for *instituteurs* in February 1816, and the conditions underpinning it were progressively narrowed over the course of the nineteenth century. See Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l'enseignement en France, 1800–1967* (Paris, 1968), pp. 135–6; René Simon, 'Le brevet supérieur et les écoles primaires supérieures', *L'Information universitaire*, 550, 20 May 1933; 'La circulaire du 4 août 1926 relative à la préparation du brevet supérieur dans les écoles primaires supérieures et les écoles normales', *Bulletin administratif du Ministère de l'instruction publique*, no. 2573 (1926), p. 24. In the early twentieth century the brevet was one of a number of means to access a position as a primary

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classes on the core subjects, as well as twenty days gaining experience in a primary school.[17] Of those who sat the exam on 30 June 1919, the oldest candidate was Charles Charpentier, who was born in October 1901, while the youngest, Maurice Bouchard, was born in January 1905. Most were born in 1902 and were sixteen or seventeen years of age when they sat the exam.[18] If successful, the *brevet supérieur* would enhance their chances of promotion to headteacher, and in the department of the Seine it made it more likely that they would secure promotion in a school in Paris, where pay and conditions were better than those in the city's suburbs.[19]

The candidates thus occupied an unusual position. On the one hand they were students who had been the recipients of lessons on French history, geography, and moral education in the early twentieth century and during the First World War, all of which informed their worldviews.[20] On the other hand, they were on the cusp of taking up new positions within the republican education system as primary school teachers themselves, where they would take responsibility for delivering their own lessons to a new generation. Their essays are revealing of the national assumptions that they took from school, and of how they appropriated and adapted them to express them in their own words. And while there was no direct line from teacher to student, similarities in the form and content of the answers are suggestive of the fact that the boys were following a script of some sort, albeit one that had been filtered through wider cultures and social expectations.

The school system that they were part of was one of the nationalizing institutions that Eugen Weber famously highlighted for its central role in the transformation of 'peasants into Frenchmen' between 1871 and 1914.[21] For Weber, the free and compulsory primary schools created by the Third Republic were vital in the construction of a sense of national belonging among children living in vastly different and far-flung parts of France. Subsequent literature nuanced Weber's picture of a Parisian-driven project by demonstrating that teachers' presentation of the nation was frequently mediated through local symbols and languages, but it did not challenge the significance of education in creating nationalized citizens.[22] On the contrary, primary schools were credited with

school teacher. See Marcel Grandière, 'Les élèves instituteurs et institutrices au lycée: un projet de l'entre-deux-guerres', *Histoire de l'éducation*, 133 (2012), pp. 65–94, for efforts to reform this system during the interwar years.

[17] While two years was the norm, it could take up to four. It was also possible to take the *brevet supérieur* once in post, although it was rare to do so. See Jean-Michel Chapoulie, *L'école d'état conquiert la France* (Rennes, 2010). After 1923, students could take up to seven years to sit this exam.

[18] AdP, 1271W 205, Brevet d'enseignement primaire supérieure, 1919, Mabillon et écoles, procès-verbaux.

[19] Jérôme Krop, Claire Lemercier, and Pierre Schermutzki, 'Relations sociales et désignation des directeurs d'école dans le département de la Seine, 1870–1914', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 57 (2010), pp. 79–114, at p. 91.

[20] The *brevet supérieur* tested students on French composition, mathematics, science, modern languages, history, geography, moral education, and art. See AdP, 1271W 205, Brevet d'enseignement primaire supérieure, 1919, Mabillon et écoles, procès-verbaux.

[21] Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.

[22] Jean-François Chanet, *L'école républicaine et les petits patries* (Paris, 1996); Anne Marie Thiesse, *Ils apprenaient la France. L'exaltation des régions dans le discours patriotique* (Paris, 1997).

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building loyalty among linguistically and culturally diverse children, who found a common sense of belonging through a shared past and institutions. Teachers were identified as the driving force in this process, using works such as Georges Bruno's *Tour de France par deux enfants* to take their students through France's regions, and create an imagined link between nation, territory, borders, and belonging.[23] In particular, history classes played an important role in shaping a sense of a shared national past and future. In the work of Ernest Lavisse, one of the Third Republic's most prominent textbook authors, France was presented as having been forged through military struggles, from the victories of the Gauls over the Romans to that of Joan of Arc over the English and the colonial conquests of the Third Republic. Students learned that this process culminated with France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, and that Germany represented their hereditary enemy.[24]

During the First World War, schooling continued, with new importance bestowed upon lessons that emphasized the greatness of the French cause. This was coupled with a stress upon German barbarism, which formed the subject of dictation assignments, moral education lessons, and spelling tests, as well as of textbooks such as *Le tour de l'Europe pendant la guerre*, Bruno's wartime sequel to the *Tour de France*.[25] This book described a wounded soldier who returned home and shared with his family stories of the German atrocities that he had witnessed first-hand.[26] While Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau has argued that the circumstances of total war made the task of mobilizing the children of France impossible, we should not discount the influence that teachers were able to exert over the *brevet* candidates.[27] The department of the Seine, in which the young men had completed their studies and hoped to become teachers, was a largely urban department which included the twenty arrondissements of Paris, as well as the suburban communities that surrounded the capital. Children there experienced fewer disruptions than those close to the front line or in rural areas. Moreover, Mona Siegel has shown that teachers continued to hold considerable sway over the children in their charge, not least as the lengthy absences of their fathers and the additional responsibilities that fell upon their mothers meant that children relied more upon the moral authority of other adults in their lives, particularly their teachers.[28]

Over the life of the Third Republic, the reputation of teachers shifted. In the early years of the regime, *instituteurs* were seen as missionary-like figures, who introduced their pupils to France's national language, culture, and history with

[23] John Strachan, 'Romance, religion and the republic: Bruno's *Le tour de France par deux enfants*', *French History*, 18 (2004), pp. 96–118.

[24] See Pierre Nora, 'Lavisse, instituteur national: le "Petit Lavisse", évangile de la République', in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire* (3 vols., Paris, 1984–92), I pp. 247–89.

[25] According to Mona Siegel, *The moral disarmament of France: education, pacifism and patriotism, 1914–1940* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 20, 38, the majority of teachers across France adapted their lessons to inculcate students into a culture of war that was defined by devotion to France and hatred of the enemy.

[26] Georges Bruno, *Le tour de l'Europe pendant la guerre* (Paris, 1916).

[27] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *La guerre des enfants, 1914–1918. Essai d'histoire culturelle* (Paris, 1993).

[28] Siegel, *Moral disarmament of France*, p. 41.

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extraordinary zeal.[29] During the interwar years this reputation shifted, and when France fell spectacularly and unexpectedly after the German invasion of 1940, it was 'unpatriotic' primary school teachers whom Vichy's leader Marshall Philippe Pétain identified as being to blame for the defeat. For Pétain, the lack of fighting spirit demonstrated by the nation's reserve officers was unsurprising given that their teachers had failed to instil in them love for their *patrie*.[30] Pétain's claims have been shown to be groundless, yet they do nonetheless point to a shift in the schooling delivered after 1918, when pacifism occupied an increasingly important role in the classroom.[31]

In 1921, the department of the Seine was home to more than 4.4 million inhabitants, including a large number of immigrants.[32] It encompassed France's cosmopolitan capital city, as well as its suburbs. The department's public schools were densely populated; at the turn of the twentieth century each of its 400 primary schools had several hundred pupils, and in 1880 there was an average of fifty pupils per class.[33] The majority of these students came from the working classes, with the middle and lower middle classes profiting from the larger number of private schools (both secular and faith-based) in the capital.[34] All of this would have encouraged a particular perspective with regard to a Channel tunnel. The Seine was far removed from the borders of French territory, where borderlanders might have come into regular contact with their neighbours living on the other side of the boundary line and where border crossings and migration were common. Nonetheless, Paris was the political and cultural centre of France, and the boys wrote their essay two days after the signature of the Versailles peace treaty, and just kilometres from the palace where it had been signed. During the conflict, war cultures had crystallized around a stress upon the greatness of France, of heroic sacrifice, and of demonization of the enemy.[35] For the *brevet* candidates, such ideas were refracted through their stress upon the tunnel as a means to sustain French greatness, and to secure the victory over Germany and the central powers.

Thus, while the students' responses to their imagined 'English correspondent' would have reflected many of their own thoughts and assumptions, these ideas would have been shaped by both the republican school system and the cultures of nationalism that permeated France during and after the war. They would also, of course, have been filtered through the students' understanding of the requirements to pass the exam. Nonetheless, the responses afford a valuable glimpse into the worldview and national understandings that underpinned the candidates' answers, as they took their lessons and wider ideas and articulated them in a language and vocabulary of their own. What is more, these candidates represent a dual perspective. On the one

[29] Charles Péguy, *L'argent* (Paris, 1913).
[30] Siegel, *Moral disarmament of France*, p. 1.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p. 15.
[33] Krop, Lemercier, and Schermutzki, 'Relations sociales', p. 80.
[34] Ibid.
[35] John Horne, 'Introduction', in John Horne, ed., *State, society and mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 1–17.

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hand, they were working-class students sitting an exam. On the other, they were aspiring primary school teachers, hoping to take on responsibility for teaching the young people of the Seine or potentially directing a primary school in Paris or its banlieue. Given the reputation of *instituteurs* for republican and patriotic loyalty, we can assume that as a cohort the *brevet* hopefuls would seek to express their patriotism in their response to the tunnel, as Maurice Maillard did when he attributed the 'audacious project' to the 'honour of French genius'.[36]

The answers penned by the candidates were almost universally in favour of a tunnel, with Louis Malhis standing out for his opposition. Indeed, Malhis's exceptionalism in his answer serves to underline the unity across the other papers. The other students described closer connection bringing multiple and myriad advantages for France. Among the themes that came up repeatedly were the practicalities presented by a tunnel, such as the avoidance of seasickness or removal of the need to change between different modes of transport.[37] When the candidates highlighted disadvantages, they tended to argue that these could be overcome, such as the engineering difficulties in boring through the seabed, or the problem of persuading the English to abandon their 'splendid isolation'.[38] For René Hervé, a tunnel would mean that the crossing would 'lose much of its charm – never again the poetic spectacles of the sunrise …. Poets and nature lovers will need to find another route.'[39] Yet he treated this as an unfortunate but inevitable outcome, and most of the essays identified a wide range of benefits from closer connection. In the words of Gaston Lecendreux, 'I believe, therefore, my dear pen pal, that the achievement of this project would bring unimaginable services between the two allied nations, and that once the tunnel is completed it will increase the prosperity of the two countries and increase the links that unite them.'[40] In this way the tunnel was envisaged as a Franco-British enterprise, and one that was interpreted through the prism of recent events, most notably the First World War.

## II

The war loomed large in the candidates' answers. In many ways this is unsurprising: the conflict dominated their teenage years and the final years of their schooling. What is more, had they been born slightly earlier they might have been called up to join the French army. And, of course, there was also a broader sense among the French and European populations at large that the war had effected deep change in them. While the conflict ended in 1918, recent work has underlined the length of the *sortie de guerre*, and the transition from the norms and cultures of war to those of peace.[41]

[36] AdP, D2T1 (14), Maurice Maillard.

[37] AdP, D2T1 (14), André Georges Quesnel; René Hervé.

[38] AdP, D2T1 (14), René Louis Jevais.

[39] AdP, D2T1 (14), Hervé.

[40] AdP, D2T1 (14), Gaston Lecendreux.

[41] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Christophe Prochasson, *Sortir de la Grande guerre. Le monde après 1918* (Paris, 2008); Bruno Cabanes, *La victoire endeuillée. La sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918–1920*

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The idea of a tunnel under the English Channel was closely bound up with the history of war and peace. It had reportedly first been proposed during a lull in the conflict between France and Britain in 1802, when the French mining engineer Albert Mathieu-Favier presented Napoleon Bonaparte with his plans for horse-drawn carriages transporting people and goods under the Channel.[42] Subsequent proposals had been dismissed on multiple occasions across the nineteenth century because of the potential invasion risk that a tunnel posed for the British Isles, but the First World War brought about a change in thinking about a tunnel. At its close, military strategists argued that the use of poison gas, a water lock, or an electricity stoppage would ensure that a tunnel posed no invasion risk, while the expansion of airpower appeared to counter arguments for the value of the Channel as a defensive frontier for Britain.[43] The Ministère de la guerre in Paris even pointed to the potential military benefits that would arise from faster and more secure transport of troops and munitions.[44] Indeed, in the opinion of the French marshal and supreme allied commander, Ferdinand Foch, a tunnel would have ensured that the conflict was over by 1916.[45] The war reinforced the Franco-British alliance, and the tunnel appeared to offer a means to solidify it further. At the end of the 1920s, Yves le Trocquer, the former minister of public works and the president of the Comité du tunnel sous la Manche, would proclaim 'In France, the Channel tunnel would be welcomed as one of the surest signs of the trust and friendship of Great Britain … the Channel tunnel is the path to the Entente; the Channel tunnel is the gauge of peace in the world.'[46]

Almost all of the students' essays opened with reference to the war, and some echoed the arguments of tunnel promoters and military strategists. For Maurice Raingeval, engineers' proposals to flood the tunnel would render it obsolete as a means of invading the British Isles, while Gaston Lecendreux highlighted the morale boost for soldiers in knowing that a tunnel could bring trains full of men and munitions to their aid.[47] In the view of Gaston Bertrand and Max Ronny, if a Channel tunnel had existed during the war, the German navy would not have embarked upon their policy of submarine warfare, which would have avoided the loss of ships to submarines and mines and would have saved many lives.[48] Such suggestions reflected not only the way that the war had forced new thinking on a possible Channel

(Paris, 2004); John Horne, 'Demobilizing the mind: France and the legacy of the Great War, 1919–1939', *French History and Civilisation. Papers from the Georges Rude Seminar*, 2 (2009), pp. 101–19.

[42] Henry Petroski, 'Engineering: the Channel Tunnel', *American Scientist*, 82 (1994), pp. 408–11.

[43] AN, F/14/1260, Comité du tunnel sous la manche entre la France et l'Angleterre, Projet de rapport, 29 Mar. 1919.

[44] 'Le Manche et son tunnel', discours de M. le Trocquer, *Rotary Magazine*, 20 Jan. 1930; AN, F/15/12599, Président du conseil de Ministère de la guerre à M. le Ministre des travaux publics et des transports, Conseil supérieur des travaux publics, 10 Mar. 1919.

[45] 'Le Manche et son tunnel'.

[46] Ibid. See also UNA, R1097/14/11907/11907, B. Attolico to M. Millerand.

[47] AdP, D2T1 (14), Maurice Roger François Raingeval; Lecendreux.

[48] AdP, D2T1 (14), Gaston Bertrand; Max Ronny.

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tunnel, but also its reinvigoration of long-standing anxieties about the vulnerabilities of the nation's borders and how they might best be defended.

Ideas about defence encompassed both border infrastructure and the international system. For many candidates, the war reinforced the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France, and a tunnel represented an opportunity to further develop and sustain this relationship.[49] For André Quesnel, 'For five years the tommies and the *poilus* fought side by side. We should not let the pact signed in their blood be destroyed and we need to ensure that the contact that existed before the war continues into the peace.' Such links forged during the conflict meant that 'it is possible that many who were not supporters before … are supporters now, thanks to the war'.[50] Other candidates mused upon how the end of the conflict would affect wartime collaborations, whether in leading veterans to cross to see the soldiers whom they had fought alongside, or in transporting English tourists who wished to visit the battlefields, thus producing 'a current of visitors for many years'.[51]

The answers are therefore revealing of broader grassroots currents of thinking about the war, as well as about the peace and its implications for nation-states and the new international order. For some candidates, the tunnel represented a means to solidify the victory. André Vanacker wrote, 'the victory has just rescued us from a terrible danger, and this tunnel is, for me, a second victory that we will secure over the central nations'.[52] But many candidates framed the war not in terms of winners or losers, but rather through the prism of sacrifice, which was central to wider French rhetoric about the conflict. For Gaston Lecendreux, the French

> have an enormous task to accomplish; our fathers, our brothers, our friends have spilled their blood to defend France. It is to us that falls the task of rebuilding our motherland, which has suffered so terribly under the German atrocities; we should thus work with all of our force to ensure that the Channel tunnel brings immense service to our nation.[53]

In his description of bloodshed, loss, and suffering, Lecendreux picked up common themes in pacifist discourse after the conflict. Yet it is notable that his words were also imbued with the vocabulary of patriotism. As they wrote about a tunnel, many candidates entangled the two.[54] Thus they described a tunnel as crucial to the reconstruction of northern France which had been devastated during the conflict, and, in turn, this devastation was treated as

[49] AdP, D2T1 (14), Raingeval; Clément Joseph Legros; Jevais.

[50] AdP, D2T1 (14), Quesnel.

[51] AdP, D2T1 (14), Ronny; Quesnel.

[52] AdP, D2T1 (14), André Vanacker.

[53] AdP, D2T1 (14), Lecendreux.

[54] This association between patriotism (and also republicanism) and pacifism is one that Lecendreux would have been likely to carry with him as he became a teacher. Mona Siegel underlined the decisive role of the entangled concepts in shaping the values and beliefs that French primary school teachers attempted to instil in their students during the two decades between the two world wars. See Siegel, *Moral disarmament of France.*

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vital to the achievement of a lasting peace.[55] In making such claims, they echoed the comments of tunnel promoters who presented the tunnel as a means to solidify the Entente Cordiale, one that would leave both France and Britain better prepared for the future.[56] As Maurice Bouchard put it, 'our two countries, united following a struggle in which they fought shoulder to shoulder, would be even more closely tied [on] the day that they succeed in the accomplishment of this great *œuvre pacifique*'.[57] Closer connection was framed as positive, with the tunnel as a means to solidify the alliance and prevent future conflict by fixing cross-border links.

That the war would lead to a strengthening of the Franco-British alliance is reflective of wartime school lessons which treated the conflict as something that would bring out the best in the nation, making the French people 'prouder, stronger and more generous'.[58] Yet if the prominence of war in the students' work reflects their context and their schooling, it is also suggestive of a more general imagined connection between borders and conflict. As a point where others can enter the national territory, borders have long been associated with war and violence, which in turn helps to explain their significance in cultures of nationalism.[59] A clearly bonded national territory offered a sense of security and belonging, yet the transgression of borders could conversely create a sense of vulnerability. The candidates' answers thus reveal the multiple ways in which borders were associated with conflict beyond the threat of invasion, and, crucially, the ways in which borders were also bound up with ideas about peace. When writing about the war, these young men presented closer cross-border ties as a means of reconciliation, and border infrastructure as a work of peace in and of itself.

As the candidates imagined France's exit from the war, and the new order that would emerge, their writing was imbued with a strong sense of progress. For Louis Malhis, a tunnel would represent humanity overcoming nature:

> there are no more obstacles. The mountain bothered man, he hollowed out the mountain. He feared the sea and its dangerous waves, he dug to the bottom of the Atlantic ocean. Man will dominate nature and he will dominate the elements. The Channel tunnel will be a symbol and a lesson; a symbol of the 'march of progress', and a lesson of the power and genius of humanity. It will inspire faith in progress.[60]

[55] AdP, D2T1 (14), André Bougat.

[56] AdP, D2T1 (14), Maurice Kahn; Hervé; Bertrand; René Griette; Vuillemen; Charpentier.

[57] AdP, D2T1 (14), Maurice Bouchard; Vuillemen. On the tunnel as a work of peace, see UNA, S484/3/2, Chambre de commerce internationale/Railway Transport Committee, 13 Nov. 1922.

[58] Charles Bigot, *Le petit français* (Paris, 1884), p. 171, cited in Siegel, *Moral disarmament of France*, p. 24.

[59] S. C. Akbari, D. Jütte, C. Nightingale, W. Rankin, and K. Weitzberg, 'AHR conversation: walls, borders, and boundaries in world history', *American Historical Review*, 122 (2017), pp. 1501–53, at p. 1529; Charles S. Maier, *Once within borders: territories of power, wealth and belonging since 1500* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

[60] AdP, D2T1 (14), Malhis.

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Such ideas about human mastery of the natural world had long represented a source of the tunnel's appeal, attracting inventors, engineers, and railwaymen throughout the nineteenth century, while an association between the tunnel and progress, technology, and modernity reflected a long-standing theme in pro-tunnel propaganda.[61] After the war the Channel seabed was treated as one of the last remaining European frontiers, and in 1921, at the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Mont Cenis Alpine tunnel, speeches would describe a future Channel tunnel as the 'continuation of the programme of tunnels through which travel the great and fraternal ideas of peoples'.[62] This emphasis on technological advancement went hand in hand with assumptions about different types of progress; the *brevet* candidates imagined that the movement to smoother borders and easier passage represented a forward step for the new post-war world. André Quesnel even imagined that a tunnel might lead to the end of customs duties for goods imported from Britain.[63]

This emphasis on progress and moving towards a borderless world was imbued with an association with civilization arising from the destruction of the war.[64] For Pierre Danjou, the tunnel raised the prospect of the invasion of Britain by the German army. But, he wrote, the Germans would never invade as doing so would put them 'against the whole of humanity'.[65] Meanwhile, for Max Ronny, 'finally this tunnel will bring the English and the French into contact, and will, I hope, serve to unite, the best French and English qualities and will turn our two nations into a model of civilisation for the world'.[66] An emphasis upon 'civilizing the frontier' was evident in discussions at the peace conferences, and the nations that emerged from the Versailles moment applied notions of civilization to the integration of their eastern borderlands.[67] The candidates would have been aware of wider discourses about progress and civilization; in introducing them in their essays they offered, in their own way, a grassroots expression of ideas about the wider international order.

It is notable that the question asked about a future Channel tunnel, yet the young men's essays were closely tied to the culture of memory and mourning which was prevalent in France after the First World War, and are suggestive of the ways in which the flows between past, present, and future were multidirectional. Thinking about a future Channel tunnel involved thinking about the past, and the future that the students imagined reflected both their anxieties about the present and also their assumptions about the past. John Horne has argued that the period that immediately followed the end of the First World War was marked in France by the continuation of prejudices and passions kindled during the conflict, and that it was only in the second half of the 1920s that 'cultural demobilization' began to take place.[68] Mona Siegel

[61] A. Sartiaux, *Le tunnel sous-marin entre la France et l'Angleterre* (Paris, 1914), p. 38.
[62] 'Le Manche et son tunnel'.
[63] AdP, D2T1 (14), Quesnel.
[64] AdP, D2T1 (14), Legros.
[65] AdP, D2T1 (14), Pierre Prosper Danjou.
[66] AdP, D2T1 (14), Ronny.
[67] Kathryn Ciancia, *On civilization's edge: a Polish borderland in the interwar world* (Oxford, 2021).
[68] Horne, 'Demobilizing the mind'.

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offers a similar turning point in primary education, when she argues that lessons shifted from an emphasis upon heroic battles and hatred of the enemy to lessons imbued with an increasingly pacifist tone.[69] The *brevet* essays offer new insights into continuities and ruptures in such thinking, by shifting our attention to assumptions about the Franco-British alliance, which spanned both wartime and post-war thinking about French security and peace.[70] If the hard-earned victory of 1918 had turned France into an international beacon of peace, the French nation would create this world alongside Britain. For the candidates, a Channel tunnel would be crucial in this process; in the words of Clement Legros it was 'a common artery that beats in unity with the two hearts'.[71]

## III

The framework for the interactions that the candidates imagined between French and English border crossers through a Channel tunnel was the political relationship between their respective nation-states. Their ideas of the tunnel echoed some of the arguments of politicians that it represented a means to solidify the Entente Cordiale, yet their answers also offer an insight into how they understood the dynamics behind this accord. Crucially, for most candidates the Franco-British alliance would be strengthened by the two peoples getting to know one another better, a process described by Maurice Leclaire as a 'rapprochement of our hearts and our thoughts'.[72] As a result, the question of whether or not to build a tunnel went to the heart of a central question about borders and their relationship to the national community: would easier border crossing be a good thing? For most of the candidates the answers were a far cry from the novels of the late nineteenth century which had imagined soldiers disguised as tourists using a tunnel to launch an invasion.[73] Rather, in their eyes, easier border crossing offered the chance for new friendships and increased trade.

In 1919, the French Ministry of Public Works commissioned surveys which suggested that a tunnel would reduce journey times between London and Paris to four hours thirty minutes and remove the need to switch between train, boat, and train, leading tunnel supporters to argue that far greater numbers would travel between Britain and the European continent and that trade levels would increase as a result.[74] These predictions were picked up by the candidates, who echoed the arguments that a tunnel would bring a range of economic and cultural benefits by allowing faster and safer passage and

[69] Siegel, *Moral disarmament of France*.

[70] Peter Jackson, 'Great Britain in French policy conceptions at the Paris peace conference, 1919', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 30 (2019), pp. 358–97.

[71] AdP, D2T1 (14), Legros.

[72] AdP, D2T1 (14), Maurice Leclaire.

[73] C. Forth, *The surprise of the Channel tunnel: a sensational story of the future* (Liverpool, 1883), p. 22; 'Grip', *How John Bull lost London; or the capture of the Channel tunnel* (London, 1882), p. 38.

[74] AN, F/14/1260, Comité du tunnel sous la manche entre la France et l'Angleterre, Projet de rapport, 29 Mar. 1919 (signed by 'le président et rapporteur général').

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encouraging the transport of both passengers and goods.[75] Some argued that the tunnel would erode all differences entirely; Maurice Bouchard wrote 'and so our two countries, previously politically divided would come to form one'.[76]

For most candidates, the encounters that the tunnel would generate were framed by stereotypes about the English and the French.[77] Raymond Vuillemen contrasted the 'cheerful and carefree' nature of the French with that of the 'cold and methodical' English, arguing that each found much to admire in the other, as evidenced by the 'touching friendships formed between tommies and *poilus* on the front'.[78] For Emmanuel Gaudriot, the French people were too inclined to languish in a state of 'flawed and dangerous slumber, but English verve and vigour would push them back to life'.[79] As a result, they would benefit from the slow but certain fusing of English and French manners and customs that would result from the tunnel.

Raoul Bouchard saw the French as having much to learn from their neighbours:

> The Frenchman will travel more frequently to Great Britain, he will learn the language and above all study English habits. He will soon come to know your qualities and your foibles … and he will return to France equipped with your knowhow, not to embark upon crazy business schemes but instead to act methodically and precisely, he will be prone and punctual. After being amongst you the Frenchman will see what real family life is, and as a result, after leaving work in the evening he will not go to the cabaret. Instead he will return home, just as the Londoner does. He will live in the suburbs and cultivate his garden, and in the winter he will sit by the fire, his children on his knees. But most of all, what the Frenchman will learn is cleanliness, and after getting used to taking a daily 'tun' in Britain, he will retain this excellent habit when he gets home and all of these newly acquired habits will be to the benefit of France.[80]

The juxtaposition between the Englishman's domesticity and the Frenchman's habit of frequenting cabarets and skipping baths bore the imprint of moral education lessons which tied personal hygiene to national strength, as well common pre-war fears about French decadence in relation to its European neighbours.[81] But Bouchard did not frame France as falling behind Britain: instead, the tunnel would inform and enhance French culture.

For René Griette, the tunnel offered a means to dispel unhelpful stereotypes; 'although we are neighbours, the English and the French do not know

[75] AdP, D2T1 (14), Hervé; Bouchard.
[76] AdP, D2T1 (14), Bouchard.
[77] AdP, D2T1 (14), Charpentier.
[78] AdP, D2T1 (14), Vuillemen.
[79] AdP, D2T1 (14), Gaudriot.
[80] AdP, D2T1 (14), Bouchard.
[81] Koenraad W. Swaart, *The sense of decadence in nineteenth-century France* (The Hague, 1964).

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each other well. We imagine the English to be tall and thin, large eaters … and great businessmen.' He then went on to set out how he understood the reality behind the stereotypes as it would be revealed by the tunnel:

> We the French would be shocked to find the English frank, agreeable, even familiar, when we believed them to be hypocritical, cold, full of pride … You, the English would be surprised to see the French working with an ever increasing ardour to repair the damage of the war, while you believed them to be incapable of all serious action or sustained effort … Even more, we would bring to England our habits of punctuality, thinking before action and that familial spirit which lacks in your towns and cities. You would bring to us appreciation of beauty. And, in getting to know each other better we would get to like one another better.[82]

The stereotypes behind all the answers afford a glimpse of how the candidates saw their neighbours across the Channel, and in setting up the contrasts between the French and the English they offer an insight into their ideas of their own national community. After all, notions of who does *not* belong is a central component of a sense of belonging, or, as Daniel Pick has argued in reference to Benedict Anderson, '"Imagined Communities" are delimited by powerfully imagined other communities.'[83] If it was at the border that this imagining was taking place, the tunnel was therefore imagined as the vehicle for the dismantling of stereotypes.

While a tunnel would create a new land border for France, it is notable that in the candidates' discussion of border crossers there is no reference to the country's existing land borders. At France's boundaries in the north, south, and east, cross-border relationships were frequently peaceful and accommodating, and comparative work on interwar border regions has underlined the ways in which near neighbours who enjoyed close cross-border links were placed in a different category from other foreigners, in a hierarchy of imagined foreignness.[84] There is also little reference in the essays to the security of these borders, despite a constant preoccupation with the eastern frontier among military leaders. Efforts to prevent a future invasion from the east eventually concluded with the construction of the Maginot Line, a system of permanent fortifications stretching for hundreds of kilometres that was to become a significant cultural symbol of impregnability, a 'Great Wall of France'.[85]

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[82] AdP, D2T1 (14), Griette.

[83] Daniel Pick, 'Pro patria: blocking the tunnel', *Ecumene: A Geographical Journal of Environment, Culture and Meaning*, 1 (1994), pp. 77–93, at pp. 78–9; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London, 1983).

[84] Paul Lawrence, Timothy Baycroft, and Carolyn Grohmann, '"Degrees of foreignness" and the construction of identity in French border regions', *Contemporary European History*, 10 (2001), pp. 51–71.

[85] Kevin Passmore, 'Organising the terrain: the Maginot Line, 1919–1939', *Environmental History* (forthcoming 2024).

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Yet, while the security of the Franco-German border was not a theme in the essays, the Franco-British partnership was nonetheless imagined against the backdrop of ongoing rivalry with Germany. This was a relationship that was envisaged as complementary rather than competitive, allowing France to escape economic dependence upon Germany. For René Griette, Britain's industrialized economy would benefit from 'butters, eggs and cheese from Normandy, Roscoff and St Pol de Léon onions, clothing from Paris, wines from Champagne and Burgundy', while France could turn to Britain for coal, machinery, and chemical products that it would otherwise import from Germany.[86] A tunnel would thus forge a Franco-British commercial alliance which would put paid to Germany's dreams of economic victory in the post-war world.[87]

The exception to the unity in the stress upon the tunnel's advantages was Louis Malhis, whose answer opened this article. Many of Malhis's points mirror those made by the other candidates, such as his description of English business acumen: 'I dread the Anglo-Saxon race, its shrewdness, its skill in business, its greed.' For Malhis this was not a positive trait that the French stood to learn from but rather a threat to the future of the French people. While he was quick to stress his affection for England, for its political past, its history, and its wartime support of France, as well as his admiration for English business genius and commercial skill, he asserted his preference for 'beautiful, ardent, generous' France, for whom a Channel tunnel would represent a 'new cause of impoverishment'. Indeed, he highlighted Britain as France's main rival and argued that Britain would import goods and 'having defeated us in foreign markets you will come to compete with us in our national markets'.[88]

Malhis placed the Franco-British relationship within the wider international relationships that the two countries enjoyed, arguing that the English had already implanted themselves in Argentina, Brazil, and China, and he expressed his fear that the next goal was to plant their flag in France, where industrial and commercial weakness had led the English to view their neighbour as a 'marvellous field of colonisation'. It is notable, however, that he did not reject a tunnel entirely. Instead he argued that it should be delayed until the work of post-war reconstruction was complete and France would be able to resist English colonization, although he believed that, at that point, the English would no longer want the tunnel as it would be useless to them.[89]

Malhis stands out because he was the only candidate to stress the disadvantages of the tunnel, and to raise questions about the Franco-British relationship, defying the spirit of the question and also most likely disregarding lessons from his teachers. In his divergence, he highlights the uniformity among the other answers, which are unanimous in their emphasis both upon the advantages of a tunnel and upon the need to strengthen the

[86] AdP, D2T1 (14), Griette. The point was also made by Vuillemen, René Raymond Romac, Marc Koven, Hervé, Bougat, and Lecendreux.

[87] AdP, D2T1 (14), Kahn; Raingeval.

[88] AdP, D2T1 (14), Malhis.

[89] Ibid.

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Franco-British alliance. This affords a fresh glimpse of grassroots cultures of nationalism in France, where we know much about how the French viewed the enemy but much less about attitudes towards their allies.[90] The students' emphasis upon the Franco-British partnership and how much the two stood to learn from one another was an important continuity from wartime notions of patriotism that lasted into the peace. It was also an assumption that could be just as important an impediment to cultural demobilization as the dehumanization of Germany at this stage, yet it nonetheless underlines continuities with the policies adopted from the second half of the 1920s onwards, when French policy-makers and military leaders asserted the importance of the Franco-British partnership. As a result, the essays demonstrate the multiple ideas and assumptions that circulated and interacted in France in this moment between war and peace. They reveal the different ways in which the candidates picked and chose from different cultural motifs, and they suggest multiple timelines in the process of demobilizing minds and attitudes after the First World War, and in the grassroots cultures of nationalism that were so closely connected to this process.

## IV

A wide body of work has underlined the various ways in which the First World War shaped every aspect of French life after 1918.[91] As the French people attempted to move on from the physical destruction, loss of life, and psychological trauma of the conflict, the war influenced thinking about almost every aspect of social, political, economic, and cultural life. It also created the conditions necessary for new ideas about the international order and the national community to find expression, and the 1920s have been powerfully described by Norman Ingram as the decade of things that 'might have been'.[92] While the idea of a Channel tunnel was not new in 1919, the candidates' answers nonetheless show that it adopted new forms and force as it was reimagined as part of a way of making the peace and of securing France's role in the post-war world. It was discussed, debated, and imagined in the French foreign ministry in the Quai d'Orsay and in the Conseil supérieure de guerre in Vincennes, but also in spaces far from these centres of power. Stepping away from the lobbying publications of the Comité français du tunnel sous la Manche, the essays written by the candidates for the *brevet supérieur* in the department of the

[90] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18. Retrouver la guerre* (Paris, 2000).

[91] As a small sample, see Alison Fell, *Women as veterans in France and Britain after the First World War* (Cambridge, 2018); Robert Gerwath, ed., *Twisted paths: Europe, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 2007); Norman Ingram and Carl Bouchard, eds., *Beyond the Great War: making peace in a disordered world* (Toronto, 2022); Eric Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (Oxford, 2007); Chris Millington, *From victory to Vichy: veterans in interwar France* (Manchester, 2012); Daniel Sherman, *The construction of memory in interwar France* (Chicago, IL, 1999); Jay Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: the Great War in European cultural memory* (Cambridge, 1995).

[92] Norman Ingram, *The war guilt problem and the Ligue des droits de l'homme, 1914–1944* (Oxford, 2019), p. 264.

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Seine in 1919 offer an insight into the way that a tunnel was imagined among 'ordinary people' in France at the end of the First World War, and, by extension, of a grassroots reshaping of ideas about France, its borders, and the new international order that would emerge from the conflict.

Like the tunnel that they imagined, the candidates' essays form a connecting bond. First, as students educated in the early Third Republic who had come of age during the war and who would go on to teach in the late Third Republic, they offer an insight into the emerging values of the generation of teachers who would take responsibility for introducing French history, culture, and values to students in the two decades before the Second World War. Second, they connect France's wartime mindset of enemies and allies to the multilateral security policy of the late 1920s, which was based upon mutual assistance and the rule of international law, and which, as Peter Jackson has observed, still attributed decisive importance to British power.[93] If the candidates imagined a world free from tariffs and border checks, it was nonetheless one in which the Franco-British alliance was strengthened by new developments (most notably a tunnel), and in which the respective populations of both nations were united in friendship. Such freedom of movement and trade was not extended to France's eastern neighbour, however, and Germany remained a clear rival rather than the potential partner that it would become through the policies of Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann in the middle and late 1920s. The candidates' answers are thus suggestive of multiple assumptions that shaped everyday cultures of nationalism in the era of the First World War, but also of the multiple turning points and endpoints in the *sortie de guerre*.

Roxanne Panchasi has powerfully argued that the future imagined at a particular moment offers insights into the anxieties and preoccupations of the present that is doing the imagining.[94] In our case, the treatment of the tunnel as inevitable reflected broader Western hopes for the world which was to emerge from a war that was widely understood to have been fought for the noblest of motives. Such hopes were at a highpoint as the peace treaties were signed in the summer of 1919, and as the young men sat their exam. The students knew what answer was expected of them, and all bar Louis Malhis set out the positive implications of a tunnel under the English Channel. The uniformity in their answers offers an insight into the tremendous impact that the war had had upon them. But it also reveals the ways in which the importance of the Franco-British alliance had been a significant element of their schooling, and the wider cultural expectations that this alliance would continue to be a prominent part of France's efforts to reshape its role in the post-war world, and in the peace that the candidates would contribute to building when they became teachers themselves. Both their lessons and the grassroots cultures of nationalism were in evidence in their answers, which are steeped in their assumptions about the nation, about national security, and about the national community. Their thinking about borders thus

[93] Jackson, *Beyond the balance of power*, esp. pp. 427–522.
[94] Panchasi, *Future tense.*

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underlines the ways in which the expression of ideas of nationhood rarely, if ever, takes place in isolation. On the contrary, they cast a light upon the range of different considerations that made up ideas of the nation. A Channel tunnel was not just a tunnel; it was a vector for hopes, anxieties, fears, and expectations about France and its place in the world that would emerge from the devastation of the First World War.

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