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ARTICLE
SPECIAL SECTION

Towards Norms and Sanctions: Interwar Franco–Belgian Border Conflict over the Insalubrity of French Factories

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Downstream from the industrial French cities of Roubaix and Tourcoing, it took more than a century of exceptional insalubrity in the cross-border Espierre valley for France and Belgium to move towards the idea of adopting sanitary norms and sanctions to be imposed on French manufacturers. We propose to focus on the interwar period to try to understand the path that was followed for the different actors to agree on this idea. By tracing the history of an environmental controversy that was among the first to end up before an international jurisdiction, we highlight the important place this question had in the construction of Franco–Belgian border relations during a period of great tensions in Europe.

Introduction

In 1974, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a *Draft European Convention for the Protection of International Watercourses Against Pollution*, which aims to provide a framework for the use of transnational river waters. In 1979, a convention was signed at the United Nations on long-range transboundary air pollution. The practices and norms resulting from these texts were guided by the level of cooperation that already existed within the European Economic Community. However, the issue of massive transboundary pollution in Western Europe has existed since the early days of the first industrial revolution. To fully understand the construction of border relations in this region would be impossible without considering their environmental dimensions. Whether in the management of resources or pollution, cross-border regions have often been the site of strong tensions whose resolution, or lack of resolution, has put diplomatic relations to the test.

This historical work deals with Franco–Belgian relations during the interwar period around the question of the insalubrity of the Espierre valley. A typical case of exacerbated tensions and asymmetrical positioning, it features a multitude of actors who all played a role in the perpetuation of large-scale nuisances. This article proposes to bring some elements forth to understand the dynamics at work in the status quo imposed by the industrialists concerning the treatment of their wastewater at the origin of the pollution. During the interwar period, anxious to spare an important ally, the French central administration seemed to want to act

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in the face of the inaction of the industrialists and the municipalities. However, we will see that despite the rise of the hygienist current and sanitary considerations, the public authorities did not enact any measures to make the pollution of French industries disappear.

This study is based on original archival documents, in particular French and Belgian press articles, the archives of the Espierre purification syndicate, *Fond du syndicat de l'Espierre* 1892–1937 (AMR 5M 115–116), the deliberations of the Roubaix city council, *Bulletins communaux*, 1919–1939 (AMR 1 D 171–191) and the minutes of the meetings of the wool combers' cartel, the corporation's employers' union, *Fonds du peignage Amédée Prouvost, Syndicat des Peigneurs de Laine* (ANMT 1997 014 221). This work is part of the field of environmental history; this historiographic approach has, since its inception, taken into account the question of borders in its studies (Worster 1982). More recently, it has renewed the study of the history of industrial pollution, highlighting the place of its management in the development of contemporary industrial societies (Massard-Guilbaud 2010; Jarrige & Roux 2020). River pollution has been specifically studied, as it represents moving and visible pollution that can alter the way of life of population far from the places the pollution occurred (Steinberg 1994; Castonguay & Evenden 2012).

The Beginnings of the Espierre Valley Insalubrity

Throughout the 19th century, the cities of Roubaix and Tourcoing experienced a spectacular expansion of their textile industry. At the beginning of the 20th century, the place of these two agglomerations in the industrial complex of the country was central. These agglomerations were then the capital of French textile production, and the city of Roubaix was given the nickname of "French Manchester". For wool in particular, the Roubaix-Tourcoing complex was unrivaled, accounting for 59.3 percent of French wool fabric sales, four times more than Reims, the second largest production center (Daumas 2020, 217–330). In 1902, the agglomeration had 21 combing workshops and more than 1,300 combing machines, which treated 65,000 tons of wool annually and also ensured 60 percent of French exports (Goblet 1903, 82). In these workshops, around 12,000 men and women worked for a handful of large companies. The wools, once cleaned and combed, were woven in 90 weaving workshops, which employed around 17,000 workers (Daumas 2020, 293).

The conditions that allowed the development of this important industrial complex have been studied in several academic works. The matrimonial strategies of the bourgeoisie of Roubaix and Tourcoing allowed them to constitute a powerful fabric whose cohesion allowed them to defend their economic interests with efficiency (Mastin 2007). This bourgeoisie was able to keep control of municipal power in Roubaix until 1892, and to some extent until 1930 in Tourcoing. Its interests were also well represented in the Chamber of Deputies and the General Council of the Nord department. A few geographical elements must also be taken into account to understand the success of the complex. The proximity of the mining basins of the Borinage in Belgium, and later of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais in France, made inexpensive coal available to the towns, thanks to an efficient navigable network. Thus, the first mechanized workshops were able to use steam engines from the beginning of the 19th century, whereas the transition would be later in New England (Steinberg 1994) and in England (Malm 2013). This facility allowed all the wool factories—along with the dyeing factories, weaving mills, and cotton spinning mills—to ensure a high level of mechanization by taking advantage of a certain number of technical innovations imported from the Netherlands or from England. However, this technological level seems to have waned at the beginning of the 20th century, as evidenced by the German report on industry in occupied France written in 1916 (Industrie 1916).

The proximity of the border also provided the agglomeration with an important asset. Among the almost exclusively working-class population of the city, a significant part was made up of Belgian workers who either settled in France or crossed the border daily to get to the factory. The availability of this abundant labor force had historically played an important part in the success of the region's industries. Employers benefited from advantageous hiring conditions, but could also use this foreign population as a reservoir when the economic situation required it. Belgians were often paid less, relegated to menial tasks, and could be used as strikebreakers in times of social tension in France. The "salutary" fear of deportation allowed employers to play on wages, which remained almost stagnant between 1882 and 1913 (Hennebicque 1968, 85). Although the proportion of Belgian workers varied regularly, at certain times they constituted more than half of the active population of the city of Roubaix (Daumas 2020, 266; Petillon 2006, 83–164; Lentacker 1987).

Other geographical considerations could have been a barrier to the development of industry in the region: in particular, the water shortages that hit the factories from the beginning of the 19th century onward. The wool industry was especially water-intensive, with wool imported from France, Argentina, Australia, and South Africa arriving at the port of Dunkirk and being transported to Roubaix, where it arrived dirty and needing to be washed. Washing and combing is the first stage of processing in the wool industry. It consists of removing all sorts of impurities that constitute the wool's suint while untangling the fibers. These processes require a lot of water, but the cities of

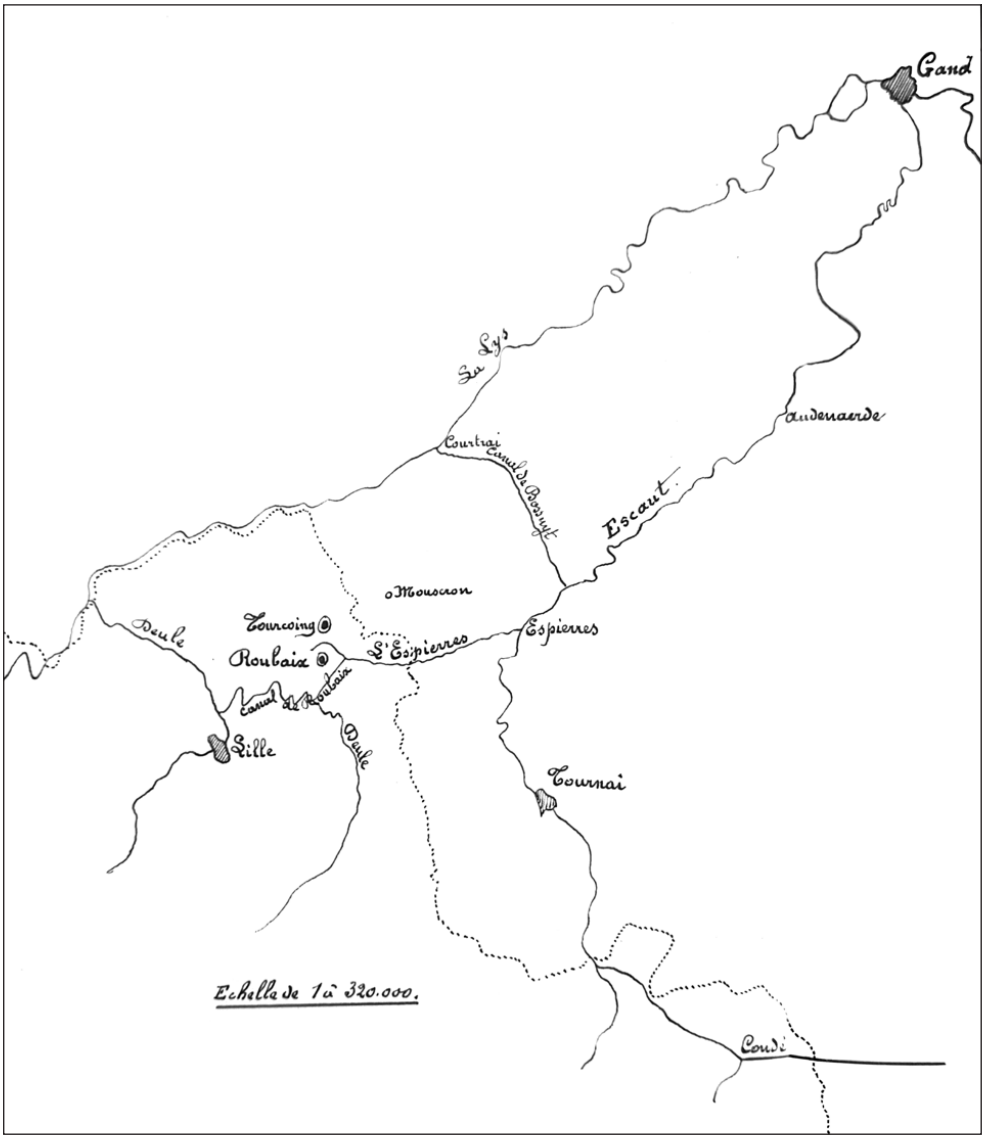

Figure 1. Hydraulic Network around Roubaix-Tourcoing, mid-19th century.
Image source: the author, based on data from AGR T039 05 296.

Roubaix and Tourcoing are only crossed by two small streams that flow into the Espierre, a river that runs a few kilometers in France before passing into Belgium and joining the Scheldt. Drilling into the groundwater table proved insufficient to meet the need for water during the explosion of the wool industry in the early 19th century. However, despite the lack of water, the industrialists reiterated time and time again their choice to maintain the production centers in the agglomeration. Throughout the 150 years of the city's textile history, investments outside the agglomeration by the large families were rather rare, and this, perhaps, raised questions. It turns out that the availability of manpower has always been a key factor in the decision to locate factories. This dynamic can be compared to the production centers in England. In his study on the origin of fossil capital in the British wool industry, Andreas Malm explains the choice made by British manufacturers at the beginning of the 19th century to abandon the remoted production colonies located near large rivers and out in the countryside in order to settle in cities. This priority given to the availability of labour thus accelerated the shift from water power to coal and steam, despite the economic inferiority of the latter at the time (Malm 2013).

The industrialists therefore lined up in order of battle to provide the cities with several infrastructures in order to bring water to the agglomeration. First, a canal was built between 1835 and 1877 along the Espierre River. This development not only provided the town with a navigable waterway, but also allowed for numerous pumping operations in the canal, which the industrialists used as a water source. Later, two other pumping plants

were built under the impulse of the municipalities. One in Bousbecques, completed in 1863, pumped the waters of the Lys river for the benefit of industry. The second one in Anchin, at the end of the century, about 40 kilometers south, drew drinking water from another groundwater table, for both domestic and industrial uses. These very important water supplies created a hydrographic imbalance, and the flow of the Espierre River increased tenfold over the course of the century, swollen by all the wastewater, both domestic and industrial, from the agglomeration (Gagnepain 2021a).

It was in the 1850s, with the installation and multiplication of the first mechanical combing factories in Roubaix, that the problems of insalubrity in the Espierre valley appeared. These problems were of two types: first, the hydrographic imbalance caused regular floods downstream of the cities, and second, the bed of the Espierre proved unable to accommodate the sewers of Roubaix and Tourcoing, especially when significant rainfall affected the region. Floods regularly devastated the whole valley, from Wattrelos in France, to Espierres, a small village at the confluence of the Espierre and the Escaut. But these floods were not the only problem: the quality of water released in the Espierre soon drew tensions with the Belgians. Indeed, the river was considered by the industrialists as the natural collecting sewer of the two cities. The industrial waters were thus released there without any treatment. The wool combing industry, the most water-intensive, was quickly singled out by the French and the Belgians. The washing and combing waters were sludge loaded with grease and organic matter. The riparian inhabitants of the Scheldt and the Espierre complained that the rivers carried water that was unfit for the most basic uses. Fishing was impossible and the odors emanating from the river and the canal were accused of being the cause of fever and typhoid epidemics. Several studies show that the water of the river was more polluted than the water of the sewers of big industrial cities like London or Paris. The industrialists of Gandt were also worried about not being able to use the river water for their machines when the water of the Espierre became so dirty and so abundant that it can could no longer dissolve in the Scheldt.

Belgium imposed several international commissions on France in order to propose solutions to the situation. The most important one took place between 1882 and 1884, and ended with a promise from the French side to build a purification station at the border to treat the waters of the Espierre. Indeed, the industrialists refused to treat their discharges themselves, arguing that the State could not impose that on them. Above all, they opposed Belgian demands with thinly veiled threats regarding the employment of their nationals in the French factories.[1] At the border, the experimental Grimonpont water treatment plant was built during the last decade of 19th century. It quickly proved to be undersized for the treatment of all the water in the river, and the technical solution chosen—which was to purify the water by spreading it over the ground—quickly accumulated quantities of sludge that the plant was unable to get rid of. After several failed technical experiments, the plant closed in 1908. The promises and commissions, as well as the improvement of the Espierre riverbed, only marginally reduced the problem of insalubrity in the valley. Diplomatic tensions continued to rise, to the point that Belgium threatened on several occasions to build a dam at the border to flood Roubaix and Tourcoing with their industrial waste (Gagnepain 2021b). A budget was voted in the Chamber and land was purchased for this purpose. This fanciful project never came to fruition, but it demonstrated both how much Belgium was affected by this situation and how powerless it was to impose serious measures on the industrialists of Roubaix and Tourcoing. It is therefore reasonable to consider that this ease given to pollute, thanks to the nearby presence of the border, was a major asset in the development of the textile industrial complex of the agglomeration, and such sanitary conditions could certainly not have been maintained in another river in the middle of the national territory. It was not until the period between the two world wars that political pressure was sufficient to impose standards and sanctions on industry. We will focus on this period in the continuation of the paper below.

1919 to 1930: The Industrialists Temporize

During the First World War, the cities of Roubaix and Tourcoing, like Belgium, were occupied by the German army. Industrial activity was largely suspended and the infrastructure suffered significant damage. The Roubaix canal, for example, was put out of service by the occupying army when it retreated in 1918. The city council did everything in its power to rehabilitate the facilities, and major work was financed in part by the war damages paid by Germany under the Treaty of Versailles. From 1918, industrial activity resumed, as did the water distribution network. The volume of water distributed by the Roubaix and Tourcoing water department doubled between 1917 and 1919, from an average of 8,000 cubic meters per day to more than 16,000 cubic meters per day, almost back to pre-war levels (AMR 1 D 171, 66, 352). The wool industry also resumed its activity; for Roubaix-Tourcoing, this period between the two world wars certainly marked a halt to the uninterrupted growth of the 19th century, but production quickly returned to pre-war levels before slightly exceeding them at the end of the 1920s (Daumas 1997), then falling back when the economic crisis of the 1930s hit the region. The municipalities did everything they could to encourage industrialists to use the water service and to abandon the drillings that some still used. To do this, they adopted sliding scale tariffs: the more water a private individual used, the less he paid. These tariffs, adopted in 1920 and 1921, were designed for the large industrialists and in particular for the wool

combers, who were the biggest consumers (see Table 1). The sums recovered by the water department were very large, making nearly a quarter of the municipal budgets throughout the period. However, far from representing a financial windfall for the cities, the water department's budget was just balanced overall, with sales covering only the operating costs of the water collection plants and investments each year.

Table 1. Price of Water from 1921 to 1926 in Roubaix-Tourcoing (price per cubic meter). Table source: the author, based on data from AMR 1 D 173, 268.

Drinkable water	River water	
0.80 Fr	0 to 4,000 m^3 / trimester	0.70 Fr
	4,000 to 30,000 m^3 / trimester	0.40 Fr
	More than 30,000 m^3 / trimester	0.10 Fr

With the resumption of the industrial activity, the state of the Espierre and its valley deteriorated again. The complaints from the river's residents resumed. On the French side, the floods in Wattrelos poisoned the banks, and on the Belgian side, the cities complained about the quality of the water. The city of Ghent, located fifty kilometers downstream of the confluence of the Espierre and the Scheldt, denounced the pollution of the French industry: the mayor wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom to encourage its intervention in the French government's operations (*La Dernière Heure* 1922, 4). The newspapers, as well as the Belgian parliamentarians, systematically recalled the age of the question and the inaction of French public authorities and industrialists. Although the French law was supposed to prohibit discharges without prior authorization, few industrialists had taken the necessary step, but no sanctions had ever been imposed. Following the Belgian complaints, the Prefecture of the North of France issued a new decree on November 27, 1922 to reiterate the ban on the discharge of industrial effluents into the Espierre. However, the press as well as the industrialists did not really believe that this decree would change anything in the discharge practices.

Thus, *Le Journal de Roubaix* reported without conviction on February 6, 1923 the wish of the mayor of Wattrelos to see the new decree applied:

> Recently, Mr. Briffaut, mayor of Wattrelos, expressed the hope that the Prefect's decree concerning water purification would be entirely applied. It is necessary to consider that in Wattrelos, the Espierre flows in the open air and the inhabitants are strongly inconvenienced by the pestilential emanations. Naturally, the Prefect knows that he cannot require the application of his decree, and, however, the black waters of this stream continue to flow.

To understand the position of the industrialists, one can look at the minutes of the meetings of the cartel of the wool combers. This group, which had been organizing the owners of the combing mills since the mid-1880s, was central to the corporation and did everything it could to defend their interests (Mastin 2011). In 1923, the combers discussed the issue of wastewater from their factories several times at their meetings (ANMT 1997 014 221). They were first of all summoned by the Prefect to come and be accountable during the intermunicipal commission of water purification. They decided on February 22 to send Mr. Duhamel there from Tourcoing. Faced with the commission—which, under Belgian pressure, was looking for solutions for the treatment of wastewater—he recalled the great difficulty of getting rid of the sludge from the wool washing. He stated that in Bradford, a stronghold of the British wool industry, a factory built by the municipality had left a large operating deficit. On May 29, the combers once again discussed how to proceed following a second meeting of the purification commission in which they participated:

> Two policies can be followed towards the prefectural administration: either to oppose that the problem of wastewater is absolutely insoluble or to continue to study the question in sub-commission and to make the discussion last. This last method seems preferable.

They therefore chose to promise that tests of a new decanting process would be carried out at the Droulers combing factory. A few months later, on December 27, they announced at a meeting that the tests had been completed and seemed to have satisfactory results, yet they mandated that one of their members "prolong the discussion by alleging that experiments were currently being carried out in the combing plants". At the beginning of the following year in 1924, a decree from the Prefect of the North once again prohibited the discharge of water from wool washing into rivers, this time specifically targeting the combers. The cartel reaffirmed its position at its meeting of January 22: "it does not appear to the members present that the question is urgent, and the policy followed until now in this matter must be to temporize". This choice of temporization—one that they would follow for decades—seems once again to be the good one, because despite the prefectorial decree, the frequency of the floods, and the multiple articles of press that address the situation, one does not find traces of new attempts carried out by either the municipalities nor by the prefecture to force the combers to raise their standards of purification. For several years the situation remained unchanged.

It is necessary to wait until the beginning of 1927 for a new decree to be published by the prefecture. The content was similar to that of the previous ones, but this time it specifically targeted the combers and the

washing of wool. During their meeting of January 27, the combers quickly swept the question aside. "After an exchange of views, the combers decided to abstain and wait", not deviating from their previously observed strategy. But, over the course of the year, the requests of the prefectorial authority were to become more pressing. On July 27, the combers held a meeting specifically pertaining to the question of wastewater, because the prefecture asked them all to comply with a specific wool washing process, that of Mr. Duhamel, which seemed to produce less contaminated water. The combers argued that this was a wool washing process and not a purification process, and that they could not be obliged to use it because it would go against their industrial freedom. They therefore informed the prefect "that they were forming a commission to study this possibility", once again seeking to gain time. When they were once again questioned by the prefecture in November, it appears that they still had not gathered their commission. It was finally in January 1928 that they submitted a report to the prefectorial authority. Their argumentative strategy consisted of refusing to take the full responsibility for the pollution. They put forward that they were not the only ones to pollute, that other corporations such as the dyeing and tanning factories discharged their water into the Espierre, and that the domestic water of the agglomerations also brought quantities of sludge in the river. However, the very fact that the combers felt compelled to answer and justify themselves shows a change of situation compared to the previous period.

It must be said that the Belgian recriminations were more pressing, and the cartel was summoned to meet for an international commission about the Espierre River. A delegation of three combers met with the Belgian delegates, who directly accused them of not doing anything to treat their wastewater. We can see in the report made by the delegation of combers to the cartel that it was the Belgians who were at the origin of the requirement to comply with the Duhamel process. In order to gain time once again, the combers invited the Belgian delegates to visit some plants so that they could see the diversity of the efforts made by the combers to purify their water. Five officials, considered as good students of this subject by the union, were selected in Roubaix, Croix, and Tourcoing; the visits took place in fall of 1928. In 1929, the Belgian delegates submitted a complete report to the French government in which they again denounced the wool combers; they reiterated the old Belgian threat to block the Espierre River with a dam in order to flood the cities of Roubaix and Tourcoing. The Belgian report recommended prescribing the purification of water directly in the factories because the experiment of a centralizing factory had not been successful. The prefecture once again asked the combers to purify their waters if they had not been doing so, and to make efforts to improve their devices if they had been doing so already.

Municipalities that Buy Peace

In 1912, a socialist and workers' list won the elections for the Roubaix city council. Influenced by the hygienist movement, it pursued a proactive policy on the issue of sanitation. During the interwar period, the municipal team led by Jean Lebas was systematically re-elected, and at each election it committed itself to this issue and highlighted its achievements: the construction of tuberculosis clinics, a large municipal swimming pool, school camps to keep sick children away from the factories, and the generalization of access to drinking water by increasing the density of the distribution network. These advances are far from negligible and represent important investments by the city council. However, as we will see, the city council never really confronted the industrialists on the issue of their wastewater and their discharge into the Espierre.

If the prefecture seems to give the impression that it wanted to act on the discharges of the industrialists, the municipalities of this period acted as a buffer between the industrialists and the complaints of the riparian residents along the river. As we have seen, since the middle of the 19th century, municipalities have been the providers of water resources by setting up distribution infrastructures for the industries. It is therefore logical that they were singled out when the floods multiplied. The phenomenon of flooding in the Espierre valley was not new to the interwar period. At the beginning of the century, some farmers of Wattrelos took up the habit of systematically asking for damages from the cities during these episodes. At first, the cities were recalcitrant to compensating the victims, but they were eventually judged as responsible for the outbursts by the prefecture council. Experts were originally dispatched to the scene of the disaster by the municipalities to observe the damage and defend the cities in court. But during the interwar period, the compensation was systematized because the cities considered that the legal experts were too expensive, while the amount of compensation was low. Indeed, the Espierre river only flows a few kilometers in France, crossing Leers and Wattrelos, so there were few French victims.

Residents adapted to the systematization and generalization of compensation. While at the beginning of the century only a few farmers asked for financial compensation, the number of complainants increased during the 1920s. An association was created in 1930 by tenants and owners whose cellars were regularly flooded by the Espierre. They founded the *Association Wattrelosienne des victimes de l'Espierre* [Wattrelosian Association of Espierre victims], with the aim of "defending the interests of the people who were victims of the inconveniences caused by the course [...] of the Espierre" (AMR 5M 116-2-20). In the first year, they succeeded in getting the municipalities to accept the

compensation of 54 co-complainants, each of whom received between 30 and 1,600 francs, depending on the damage suffered (AMR 1D-184, 404). Thereafter, these reimbursements were frequent, with the municipalities even giving a lump sum to the association, leaving the association with the task of distributing the sum among the complainants.

The frequency of the floods, up to seven episodes compensated in 1935, gives an idea of the nuisance that the river must have represented for the residents who, with each significant rainfall, were likely to find their cellars, their houses, or their fields drowned under nauseating water. Figure 2 depicts the number of floods compensated by the water department of Roubaix and Tourcoing each year between 1930 and 1939. However, in spite of the frequency of the disasters and the number of victims, the sums advanced by the cities were never truly substantial and did not exceed a few tens of thousands of Francs each year, which can be compared to the five-to-seven million that the water distribution service brought in.

The cities were also made quite regularly to plan and pay for improvements of the riverbed, so that it would be less likely to overflow and would run more easily. Works were also to cover some part of the nauseating river in the most urbanized areas. This solution of the development of the riverbed is one that was put forward in the speeches of the combers, who saw it as a technical solution likely to alleviate the problems without having to engage in purification efforts.

Far from putting pressure on the industrialists, the municipalities, although they were in favor of the hygienist theses, finally managed to deal with the damages caused by the industries by financing installations and by compensating the victims. In 1929, the municipality of Roubaix was forced by the prefecture to complete the city's sanitary regulations. It ordered the installation in each factory of "watertight sumps intended to collect wastewater before it is evacuated into the sewer system [...] equipped with devices that allow samples of the water they contain to be taken" (AMR 5M 116-2-18). The new regulation gave the industrialists three months to comply with the installation requirements, but it did not provide for any pollution standards above which a fine could be imposed.

1933 to 1939: Exacerbated Tensions

At the beginning of the 1930s, the textile industry of the North was affected by the economic crisis, and the production levels decreased. As a result, the level of sanitation in the river stabilized slightly, and the Belgians let the industrialists have some rest. The employers were more concerned about the powerful strikes that interrupted the production in the factories.

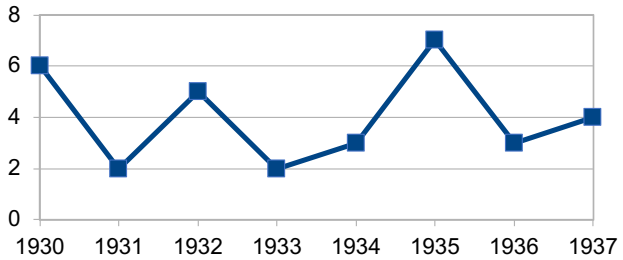

Figure 2. Number of Floods Compensated by the Water Department of Roubaix and Tourcoing Each Year. Chart source: the author, based on deliberations of Roubaix City Council, 1930–1937 (AMR 1D182-189).

The workers were worried about the wage cuts imposed by the bosses under the pretext of the economic crisis. This situation temporarily interrupted the negotiation with Belgium on the question of the Espierre, and once again allowed the combers to not comply with the requirements of purification prescribed to them.

When production resumed in a more significant way in 1933, the levels of pollution and nuisances went up inexorably. The prefecture initiated the umpteenth international commission to which it summoned the combers. The report that the delegation of the combers made to the trade union makes it possible to realize that the central administration took the question more and more seriously under the henceforth double pressure of the Belgian and Dutch diplomats:

> The question of wastewater treatment has entered an acute phase. Following complaints from the Belgians and the Dutch, who threatened to take the matter to the court in The Hague. An interministerial meeting concluded that the combers were the main culprits for the pollution of the Espierre waters. [...]
>
> The Ministry of the Interior gave very strict orders to the Prefect to find a solution without delay to the treatment of the combing water. [...]
>
> Mr. Lhoste [the delegate of the combers] explains that in a conversation he had with the chief engineer of the Ponts et Chaussées [French national civil service corps of building engineers], the question was clearly put to him to know if the combers intended to collaborate with the Administration to find a process likely to produce tangible results, or on the contrary if the combers intended to remain in a passive attitude. He reminds that the Administration has taken decrees that it can execute immediately, and that on the other hand it can ask for the classification of the combings as unhealthy establishments and if these establishments do not conform to the degree of purification that one fixes to them, their directors or administrators incur correctional penalties.[2]

The combers began to feel that it was no longer possible for them not to answer to the administration's

injunctions. They were now afraid that if they did not guarantee their compliance, the administration would build an expensive water recovery network with a treatment plant, the financing of which would be billed to the combers. They preferred to commit to treating their waters in each factory, which had been demanded of them many times in the last several decades. They asked that a reasonable standard be given to them, so that they would be able to comply with it; they also asked that the state put in place a protectionist policy on the suint market, so that they could make profit with the product of their purification by producing fertilizer. They pushed for the signature of an agreement in 1934 between the wool combers' union and the purification union of Espierre, which represented the different cities. The agreement proposed to set the concentration of grease allowed in the washing water discharged into the sewer at 600 milligrams per liter (AMR 5M 116-9-26). This concentration was still ten times higher than the rates mentioned a few years earlier by the Belgian delegates to the international commission. Nevertheless, the French government did not validate this convention and continued to work on the project of an epuration plant in France that would collect the water from the factories, whose industrialists they no longer trusted (AMR 5M 116-2-49).

However, all the approaches of the French public authorities and the promises of the industrialists were no longer able to calm public opinion in Belgium. Internal tensions, fed by the rise of the Rexist party and Flemish nationalism, forced the government to take the lead, as the state of river water in Flanders was a recurring point of tension. The country therefore undertook the building of its own experimental water treatment plant to try to treat the water of the Espierre before its confluence with the Scheldt. This brand new plant was built quite quickly, and purification tests took place as early as 1935.

In 1936, meetings at the highest diplomatic level took place between France and Belgium. On several occasions the Belgian Prime Minister, Paul van Zeeland, visited France. During his talks with the French ministers, mainly one subject was discussed: the military question, following the remilitarization of the left bank of the Rhine by Nazi Germany. However, at each of these meetings, in February as well as in May, the insalubrity of the Espierre valley was discussed.[3] Some Belgian newspapers did not hesitate to mix up the issues, arguing that if France wanted to continue to hold Belgium as an ally, it should treat its inhabitants a little better. A few months later, Belgium withdrew from the Franco–Belgian military alliance of 1920, preferring, in the face of German rearmament, to declare itself neutral in the event of a conflict in Europe.

Following this double reversal of circumstance, the construction of a purification station in Belgium, and the diplomatic distancing of the two countries, the question of the Espierre seemed less pressing in France. The prefecture, in a letter to the city council of Roubaix, related a visit which was carried out at the station of Espierres: it said there was not any more reason to consider the construction of a new station in France because it would be redundant. The prefecture finally sided with the convention that had been proposed by the cities and the combing companies for individual treatment in the factories (AMR 5M 116-2-52). It took several more months for the agreement to be rediscussed, stabilized and accepted by all parties. The agreement set out which materials could be discharged, at what rate, and the required treatment processes. It also provided accounts for penalties for industrial offenders. Factories were given 18 months to comply. This deadline, as well as the improvement of the Espierre treatment plant, allowed the *Courrier de l'Escaut*, a Belgian newspaper, to headline "Espierre : A promise of water purification is acquired for 1940".

If the year 1940 did see an interruption of the industrial activity of Roubaix, the reason was quite different, and the problems of the insalubrity of the Espierre would continue in various forms after the Second World War and until the deindustrialization of the region. The advanced state of insalubrity in the Espierre valley during this period between the two world wars was therefore an important element in the relationship between France and Belgium. This study has made it possible to highlight the multiplicity of positions of the French actors, who, far from forming a homogeneous block, were each more or less permeable to the pressures exerted by Belgium. The municipalities, although close to the hygienist theses, only acted under the constraint of the prefectural authority. The prefectural authority, which represented the State, only really pushed the municipalities and the industrialists when the Belgian requests, to which those of the Dutch were added, were sufficiently pressing. These elements allow us to put forward a perfect case of non-cooperation, where industrial interests prevailed over the common good. It was only because of the presence of the border that the manufacturers could afford to impose such a high level of insalubrity for so long. If the border, and in particular the one between France and Belgium, is only an artificial construction, it is in no way an obstacle to the spread of industrial pollution, and even more so it seems to have been a vector, allowing French actors to turn a deaf ear on Belgian protests. The asymmetry of the relationship between the two countries is twofold: their economic and diplomatic power is not comparable, and one is located upstream and the other downstream. This discrepancy is well summarized by a Belgian parliamentarian: "if the situation had been the opposite, our industrialists would have been forced to clean up a long time ago". Nevertheless, this period has allowed us to progress gradually towards the idea of standards imposed on industry and penalties for offenders. This type of long history of insalubrity is undoubtedly to be taken into account if one wants to understand the

logics that presided over the establishment of a more important cooperation on the issues of transboundary pollution, particularly in Western Europe where the absence of standards and common practices have persisted and poisoned entire populations for more than a century.

Notes

1 For the detailed reports of this commission, see: ADN M420-23.

2 Meeting of the cartel of combers of October 26, 1933 (ANMT 1997 014 221).

3 These interviews are summarized by the Belgian and French press, see for example the May 15, 1936 issue of *l'Égalité Roubaix-Tourcoing.*

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ANMT: Archives nationales du monde du travail, Roubaix, France
ADN: Archives départementale du Nord, Lille, France
AGR: Archives Générales du Royaume, Bruxelles, Belgium

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