

Things I can do for my country

The archives reveal patriotic concerns of the forerunners of BNP Paribas

Venture philanthropy for the Belgian Relief
Leap of fate for the war loan poster Alsace-Lorraine

This paper aims to shed light on two outstanding patriotic concerns revealed by the Archives of BNP Paribas forerunners Société Générale de Belgique and Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris.

Venture philanthropy for the Belgian Relief

When WWI fired Europe, the Belgian kingdom was overrun and occupied by the German army. At once Belgium was cut off from its allied countries which regularly provided cereals and any other food supplies needed by its inhabitants. As hard times and power vacancy were threatening the country, a group of businessmen decided on to weaken the starvation issues. The Director of Société Générale de Belgique, Emile Francqui, paid a key role in organizing the import of food from the neutral countries Spain and the United States of America. It was the ever biggest philanthropic venture launched at the time.

The Archives of BNP Paribas Fortis in Brussels keep the precious letters in which Emile Francqui and Edmond Carton de Wiart, a refugee director of Société Générale de Belgique in London, describe the full details of this enterprise as well as the induced diplomatic activities. They are also a testimonial of the gradual decay of the health condition of the Belgian and the evolving of their state of mind during these war years.

Leap of fate for the war loan poster Alsace-Lorraine

From the beginning WWI looked like being long and costly for France and the French. Loans from banks and the Allies rapidly ran out. Hence the new approach of the Government to obtain new resources by directly mobilizing the savings of every French citizen. Thus the war loan posters were issued to support and win the war by using striking visual means to catch people's attention and rouse patriotic fervor. The poster Alsace-Lorraine by Auguste Leroux was issued in the autumn 1918 by Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris to urge citizens to subscribe to the 4th French war loan.

The Archives of BNP Paribas in Paris keep an unusual record depicting how this poster met with a growing craze within a few weeks. Furthermore, the Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris followed the enthusiastic people surge and staged the poster at key points and times in November 1918 using unforeseen techniques acclaimed by the press.

Speakers

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Christiane de Fleurieu : graduated at Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris. After holding several positions in international banking departments at BNP and BNP Paribas, she joined the Heritage & Archives Department in Paris to manage projects in historical communications. She launched a collection of brochures about the history of the landmark buildings of BNP Paribas. Currently, she prepares an exhibition, running from September 15th – October 17th 2014, held 2 Place de l'Opera at the BNP Paribas branch called The Concept Store. It will provide a rare insight into the history of this building itself during WWI and showcase the Alsace-Lorraine poster.

Venture philanthropy for the Belgian Relief – Jean-Louis Moreau

The correspondence between Edmond Carton de Wiart and Émile Francqui, directors of Société Générale de Belgique (THE ARCHIVES OF BNP PARIBAS FORTIS AND THE GREAT WAR)

At the outbreak of the First World War in Europe, the German army very quickly occupied almost all of Belgium. At that time, Belgium had to import large quantities of cereals to ensure its food supply. However, the British Royal Navy's blockade of Europe cut off food supplies from countries that could have helped Belgium meet its requirements. It was not long before the country was on the brink of famine. As early as September 1914, a group of Belgian businessmen – including Ernest Solvay, Dannie Heineman (Chairman of Sofina) and Émile Francqui (director of Société Générale de Belgique) – realised the need to arrange food supplies. They therefore set up the Central Relief and Food Committee in September 1914¹. Émile Francqui, a banker, was appointed Chairman of the Executive Committee². Then aged 51, he had started out in the army and was involved in the colonisation of the Congo by King Léopold II. He then joined the diplomatic corps before going into business. In 1912, he was appointed director of Société Générale de Belgique thanks to the support of Jean Jadot, the Bank's governor.

In October, it became apparent that it would be necessary to extend the work undertaken by the Relief and Food Committee in Brussels to the entire country. The Committee therefore linked up with provincial and local committees to form the National Relief and Food Committee (CNSA). The Committee negotiated with the German and British authorities to obtain permission to import food supplies to Belgium with a guarantee from neutral countries. The Allies agreed to lift the blockade on food supplies to Belgium after the Germans gave an undertaking not to appropriate these supplies for their benefit.

The US, Spanish and Dutch ambassadors to Belgium agreed to supervise these food shipments. A separate body - the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) – was set up for this purpose³. It was chaired by Herbert Hoover, an American mining engineer, marking the beginning of the political career of the man who was to become President of the United States in 1929⁴. The aim of the CRB was to raise money, buy food in the US, Canada or Argentina, and send it by boat to Rotterdam. It then oversaw the distribution of the food by the CNSA in Belgium, ensuring that it was not requisitioned by the occupying forces. The main financial contribution to the CRB came from the Belgian government itself, which contributed 25 million francs a month, gradually increasing the contribution to 45 million francs.

The joint action of the CRB and CNSA became the greatest ever humanitarian aid campaign. By the end of the war, the CNSA had spent more than a billion dollars to feed eight million hungry people in Belgium and northern France cut off from their home country by the front line. Its activity brought about a major reduction in the number of Belgian workers opting to work in war industries in Germany: because they could rely on food supplies, workers were less obliged to accept working for the enemy in order to feed their families⁵. The Committee also played an important political role. Francqui ensured that the Board of Directors transcended all political and philosophical divides. The Committee included people from all walks of life:

¹ For the story of the National Relief and Food Committee: HENRY Albert, *L'œuvre du Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation pendant la guerre*, Brussel, 1920, 378 p. ; HENRY Albert, *Le ravitaillement de la Belgique pendant l'Occupation allemande*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1924, 210 p.

² About Francqui see: RANIERI Liane, *Émile Francqui ou l'intelligence créatrice, 1863-1935*, Gembloux, Éditions Duculot, 1985, 397 p.

³ For the story of the Commission for Relief in Belgium: GAY George I., *Public Relations for the Commission for Relief in Belgium. Documents*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1929, 2 vol.; GAY George I., *Statistical Review of Relief Operations*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1925; DEN HERTOOG Johan, *The Commission for Relief in Belgium and the Political Diplomatic History of the First World War*, Diplomacy & Statecraft, December 2010, vol. 21, n° 4, pp. 593–613; *Commission for Relief in Belgium*, in CIPRIANO Anne (dir.), *The United States in the First World War*: An Encyclopedia, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 154-159

⁴ BURNER David, *Herbert Hoover. A Public Life*, New York, Knopf, 1979, 433 p.; NASH George H., *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, t. 2, *The Humanitarian, 1914-1917*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1988, 310 p.; LEUCHTENBURG W. E., *The Presidents Series: Herbert Hoover*, Henry Holt & Co, New York, 2009, 208 p.

⁵ MAHAIM Ernest, *Le Secours de chômage en Belgique pendant l'occupation allemande*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France - New-Haven, Yale University Press, 1926, 322 p.

ultramontanists and freemasons, liberals and socialists, Flemish and Walloons, businessmen and politicians. The 125,000 people who worked for the CNSA were inspired by a feeling of unity towards all Belgians. There is a belief that the country was able to head off social and political conflict after the Armistice due to the feeling of social cohesion that the CNSA helped to create.

Société Générale de Belgique (SGB), the leading Belgian bank at the time, played a significant role in the work of the CNSA⁶. Besides the fact that this organisation was chaired by one of its directors, the plenary sessions of the CNSA and meetings of its Executive Committee were held at its head office. The bank made its premises and staff available to the Committee free of charge. It contributed 300,000 francs a year to the CNSA and granted it several interest-free loans. The premises of one of its subsidiaries, Banque Belge pour l'Étranger (BBE), were also used to house the CNSA's accountancy services. The local subsidiaries of Société Générale de Belgique in several regions of the country also provided the CNSA with financial services at local and provincial level.

The BNP Paribas Fortis archives include documents relating to the work of the CNSA, notably correspondence between Émile Francqui and chevalier Edmond Carton de Wiart. Carton was like Francqui a director of Société Générale de Belgique, although he lived in London throughout the war. Amongst other things, he was the Belgian government's financial representative to the British government and the Belgian government's representative to the CRB in London.

The Carton-Francqui correspondence in particular evokes the country's dramatic food situation. To accelerate food supplies as much as possible in Belgium, Francqui regularly described the deprivations suffered by the population, so that Carton could raise the awareness of the allies' authorities and facilitate the work of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. For example, here is an extract from a letter from Francqui to Carton on 8 May 1917: "*Last Sunday, in Antwerp, in a queue of unemployed people waiting for their soup ration [...], twelve people collapsed with hunger. This has become an everyday occurrence. [...] We're fighting the scourge of hunger. The local authorities, buying the livestock they can find in the country, have opened up butcher's shops for the destitute [...]. Many unfortunates, when night is about to fall, lose their sight and remain blind until the next day, when day has fully broken. Doctors claim that this phenomenon has been seen in India during the famines which devastated this country*"⁷.

Other subjects are tackled in the correspondence between Francqui and Carton, such as the periodic tensions between the Commission for Relief in Belgium and the CNSA concerning the respective responsibility of the two agencies in the distribution of food in Belgium. These tensions largely arose from the strong personalities of the directors of these two agencies, Francqui and Hoover. Francqui thus explains the attitude of the Americans involved in the relief: "*The war has provided the Americans with an opportunity to get richer at the expense of Europe, to an extent which they would never have dared imagine [...]. This situation grieves the intellectuals, who bitterly regret not having been able to prevent such a dark and bloody page from being written in their nation's history [...]. They are looking for any way to tone down the ugly role which shall be reproached to their compatriots. This is why the official American world supports, promotes and encourages getting the CRB notice, whenever it can. Hoover goes along with this even more willingly because he himself is an academic and therefore an idealist*"⁸.

Francqui also regularly sends Carton information about the political situation in occupied Belgium: the looting of Belgian factories by the German forces, the desire for collaboration with the Occupier of a minority of Belgians, the deportations of workers, shipped off *manu militari* for Germany to support the German war effort, and so on. The correspondence also regularly mentions Belgium's finances. We should remember that the Occupier had forbidden the National Bank of Belgium to continue to issue notes. With the agreement of the government in exile, Société Générale created its own issue department, issuing

⁶ BRION René and MOREAU J.-L., *La Société Générale de Belgique. 1822-1997*, Anvers, Fonds Mercator, 1998, 515 p.

⁷ BNP Paribas Fortis archives, Société Générale de Belgique papers, n° 94, Émile Francqui to Herbert Hoover, 8 May 1917.

⁸ BNP Paribas Fortis archives, Société Générale de Belgique papers, n° 94, Émile Francqui to Edmond Carton, 30 January 1917.

notes throughout the war. Arrangements were made with the directors of the National Bank of Belgium, who turned the Société Générale Issue Department into a simple front to conceal the national issue institute. But this activity was not well-received by the allies' authorities. On several occasions, Edmond Carton de Wiart, director of Société Générale, who had taken refuge in London, had to step in with the English and French authorities to explain the circumstances in which Société Générale had been involved in this matter – certain allied press articles did not think twice about accusing him of collaborating with the enemy.

Apart from the Société Générale notes, the population had to accept German marks – for all the army's requisitions and purchases. Almost all payments for bills of exchange and money coming in were made in marks: the Belgian public feared severe depreciation of the German currency after the war, tried to get rid of that currency and hoarded francs. On several occasions, the accumulation of marks in Belgium became such that the Occupier decided to send them back to Germany and put the amount in Belgian-German clearing system. Should this requisitioning have been opposed? Differences in opinion emerged between the Belgian leaders at home and the English and Belgian governments. The Bank's directors did not want to see too much resistance, which would jeopardize the existence of the National Bank, of the Issue Department, even of Société Générale itself, threatened with sequestration in the event of opposition to the removal of German marks. The Bank's governor, Jean Jadot, asked Carton to send all information relating to this crisis to the Belgian government, in Le Havre. The Belgian government ended up by accepting the compulsory transfer of marks to Germany.

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The letter we have chosen from this wealth of documents is one from Francqui to Carton de Wiart, dating from 2 June 1917. Names of persons and institutions are coded in this document to make it less compromising should it fall into the wrong hands.

The letter shows Francqui's anxiety because the shiploads of cereals promised by the Commission for Relief are late in arriving. Malnutrition in Belgium is becoming "*appalling*". It also refers to the funding of expenditure to feed French people evacuated to Belgium, which is separate from the expenditure undertaken to feed occupied territory in northern France. Société Générale de Belgique agreed to advance sizeable amounts for this purpose in exchange for guarantees. The bar on issuing guarantees poses practical problems... "*because a German administrator closely monitors all transactions in all banks [in occupied Belgium]. They would never allow a Belgian establishment to grant advances [to the CNSA] in francs knowing that the equivalent value would be paid in sterling in London. A transaction of this kind would benefit English reserves by making it possible [for the Belgian government in Le Havre] to avoid having to spend sterling to help the people of Belgium*".

This extraordinary letter confirms what King Albert once confided to one of his close associates, i.e. that "*the major factor keeping the Germans from acting on the annexationist views cherished by many of them was the spirit of resistance and deep hostility evident in the country; and that this spirit would not have remained so keen if the country's people had not received food and support from outside*"⁹.

Captions

C Recto of the 5 Franc bank note issued by the SGB during the Great War.
BNP Paribas Fortis Archives

D A meeting of the Belgian Relief in the Kings' room at 20 rue Royale, Brussels..
BNP Paribas Fortis Archives

⁹ BNP Paribas Fortis archives, Société Générale de Belgique papers, n° 72, Edmond Carton to the Belgian Minister of Finance Aloïs Van de Vyvere, 6 juillet 1915.

**Appendix: letter from Émile Francqui to Edmond Carton de Wiart, Brussels, 2 June 1917
(BNP Paribas Fortis archives, Société Générale de Belgique papers, no. 94).**

2 juin 1917

« Reçu le n° 50 du 12 mai [1917].

J'y trouve la phrase « *Nous espérons cependant que depuis ces trois dernières semaines, l'augmentation des arrivages a dû un peu améliorer la situation alimentaire chez vous* ».

On vous a là induit en erreur, cher ami. En effet, pendant tout le mois de mai, nous n'avons reçu que 3.000 tonnes de froment et on nous avait promis 80.000 tonnes de vivres. Cela vous dit assez. Ce que la population souffre, je l'ai écrit et répété depuis deux-trois mois dans toutes les communications que j'ai eu l'occasion d'adresser. Quelle est la cause de nos malheurs ? Je ne sais que supposer. Quant à nous, nous avons fait tout ce qui est humainement possible de faire et nous déclinons toute responsabilité. Le salut dépend de l'extérieur. La situation ici devient épouvantable et si cela doit durer encore un mois ou deux dans les conditions actuelles, la plus grande partie de la population sera irrémédiablement perdue. Ci-joint, copie d'un rapport médical d'un charbonnage qui vous en dira long.

Concernant les avances à faire aux Français, la proposition d'Henri [Hoover] est irréalisable, comme je lui ai déjà écrit.

Il y a d'abord une impossibilité matérielle. Les dépenses pour les Français évacués en Belgique s'élèvent pour le moment à 6 millions de francs par mois. Elles ne vont aller qu'en augmentant, attendu que le nombre de réfugiés s'accroît tous les jours. Jusqu'ici, nous nous sommes procurés ces sommes par les recettes faites sur la vente des marchandises importées pour les Belges, attendu que les produits importés pour les Français sont remis aux comités régionaux du Nord de la France sans autre contrepartie pour nous qu'un reçu. Comme nos dépenses sont de 50 millions pour les Belges et les réfugiés français en Belgique et que l'on importe à peine pour 20 à 25 millions de marchandises, il nous manque environ 25 millions par mois. Si la guerre doit durer encore 6 mois, comment voulez-vous que la Centrale [Société Générale de Belgique] avance des sommes aussi considérables que les 100 à 150 millions [de francs] qui seront nécessaires ? Tout ce que l'on pourrait obtenir ici, c'est que la Centrale [Société Générale] avance une cinquantaine de millions, étant entendu que la contrevaletur serait versée à son crédit à Londres. Le Comité [gouvernement] français doit déjà à la Centrale [Société Générale] 16 millions, et la Société [le Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation], une dizaine de millions. En garantie de cette avance, il faut que l'on verse immédiatement 1 millions de livres sterling à la Banque Belge pour l'Étranger [filiale de la Société Générale disposant d'une succursale à Londres], au Crédit de la Centrale [Société Générale]. Ces sommes couvriront la Centrale [Société Générale] des avances qu'elle fait ici pour la Société [le Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation] et les évacués. Il est bien entendu que ces sommes resteront bloquées jusqu'à la fin de la guerre et que le décompte du change ne se fera qu'à ce moment. Veuillez me faire connaître aussi le taux d'intérêt qui sera bonifié par la Banque Belge pour l'Étranger. Ce renseignement est indispensable car pour faire ici les avances nécessaires jusqu'à concurrence des 50 millions de francs dont il est question ci-dessus, la Centrale [Société Générale] devra emprunter au département d'émission ou à la Banque nationale à un taux probablement de 4%. Si la Banque Belge à Londres ne bonifie que 3 ou 3½ %, la Centrale [Société Générale] sera obligée, pour ne pas subir de préjudice, de compter 1 ou ½ % à la Société [au Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation].

A côté de la difficulté matérielle qu'il y a pour la Centrale [Société Générale de Belgique] à avancer des sommes considérables à la Société [au Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation], il y a une difficulté pratique. En effet, dans toutes les banques, un commissaire allemand contrôle les opérations de très près. Jamais, il ne permettrait à un établissement belge de faire ici des avances en francs à la Société [au Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation], étant entendu que la contrevaletur serait versée en livres à Londres. Cette opération avantagerait le change anglais en évitant au Comité [gouvernement belge] de devoir décaisser des livres sterling pour secourir la population belge. Du reste, pour faire comprendre ce

point de vue, il suffit de dire que jamais le gouvernement anglais ne permettrait à un établissement en Angleterre de verser des livres à des prisonniers ou des civils allemands, étant entendu que la contrevalet en marks serait versée en marks en Allemagne. Une semblable mesure favoriserait évidemment le change allemand, attendu qu'elle n'obligerait pas le gouvernement allemand à acheter des livres sterling au détriment de son change.

Si je vous engage néanmoins à verser les deux millions de livres sterling à la Banque Belge pour l'Étranger au crédit de la Centrale [Société Générale de Belgique], c'est pour permettre à celle-ci de pouvoir disposer au moment de la paix d'un change en livres sterling. Mais cette opération doit être faite très discrètement parce que, connue ici par les B. [les Allemands], elle susciterait des ennuis dont le moindre est l'amende.

Au point de vue de la Société [Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation], cette opération n'est qu'une mesure provisoire qui nous permet de parer au plus pressé car, je le répète, il n'y a qu'un moyen de sauver notre population, c'est d'augmenter les importations de vivres en Belgique jusqu'à concurrence d'une valeur que j'estime à deux millions de livres sterling. Non seulement alors la population pourra être nourrie, à peine suffisamment, il est vrai pour échapper à la famine, mais en même temps cela nous procurera les ressources pour la distribution de secours et nous ne serons plus alors obligés de nous servir de moyens semblables à ceux que nous devons employer aujourd'hui à nos risques et périls.

Pour la BCC [Banque Commerciale du Congo] nous sommes d'accord et j'espère que vous avez déjà pris vos fonctions.

Mes amitiés pour vous et à Lambert [Lambert Jadot]

Edouard [Emile Francqui]

Leap of fate for the war loan poster Alsace-Lorraine – Christiane de Fleurieu

From the beginning WWI looked like being long and costly for France and the French. When the war scaled up with time, its end became a rolling deadline. Loans from banks and the Allies rapidly ran out. Ever more resources were consumed stretching France finance closely to the breaking point while the Franc came under pressure. Hence, to keep pace with the growing expenditures and imports, the search for new sources of revenue was a major preoccupation for the French Government. Domestically, funds could be raised by taxation or by borrowing. However the Government chose to directly mobilizing the savings of every French citizen as the cornerstone to financing the war.

This new approach was initiated by 72-year-old Minister of Finance Alexandre Ribot. In a dramatic speech at the National Assembly on November 12th 1915, while launching the first long-term war loan he heartily concluded: “Let the Army of French Savings rise up! Alike the army on the front lines, it will help us fight to win. At this very time, selfishness is not only a sign of cowardice, a kind of treason but the worst of shortsightedness. What would happen to our moneyboxes if France were to be defeated? They would become the ransom of our defeat instead of the price of our victory.”

How to get ever more subscribers to the war loan? How to catch people’s attention? How to persuade those who were suffering hardships to sacrifice for the war effort? Before the age of television and radio, there were few ways to communicate with the masses. One was the use of posters, the most common publicity medium since the 1880s. Thus, the war loan posters were issued to support and win the war by using striking visual means rousing patriotic fervor to help embrace large numbers of small investors, which were the crux of the public subscriptions.

The fourth National Defense loan, first offered on 20 October 1918, did not close until 24 November 1918, and was dubbed the “Liberation Loan”. It appeared as the Central Powers collapsed and Fr. 27 billion were subscribed by 7 million individuals. The Archives of BNP Paribas in Paris keep an unusual record depicting how the poster, chosen by the French bank Comptoir National d’Escompte de Paris, a forerunner of BNP Paribas, met with a growing craze within a few weeks. Furthermore, the Comptoir followed the enthusiastic people surge and staged the poster at key points and times using unforeseen techniques acclaimed by the press.

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The Comptoir national d’escompte de Paris chose the poster Alsace-Lorraine by Auguste Leroux

Even though historical research has studied the array of topics and symbols used to design the posters, the archives of BNP Paribas reveal how the choice of Leroux’s drawing led to the successful poster in terms both of fame and subscription.

During the last weeks of August and the first of September 1918, the Comptoir was visited by at least four printers with a graphic proposal as the Fourth Loan was currently being prepared by the Government. Unfortunately, the drafts are still unknown to us. The printer Champenois, who published the Comptoir 1917 calendar with a Poilu blowing his horn, proposed a poster displaying this Poilu as the main character. The printer Devambez teamed up with the Franco American painter William Malherbe. Their proposal with a solicited quotation probably challenged printer Joseph Charles and his graphist Auguste Leroux. As two banks ordered William Malherbe’s drawing, one being Banque Française pour le Commerce et l’Industrie, a forerunner of BNP Paribas, we guess it was both a War and Republican proposal.

Auguste Leroux was a skilled illustrator and lithographer highly praised by bibliophiles. His works referred to Symbolism and Art Nouveau mixed with allegorical subjects before moving on more academism and a certain fascination for the female nude. He drew the plans for several public buildings and the mosaics of the Lady Chapel in the Sacred Heart Basilica of Montmartre.

Issued on 20 October 1918, the poster *Alsace-Lorraine* urged citizens to subscribe to the fourth war loan. It appeals to the senses of the people as it relies on symbolism to illustrate the disputes over governing Alsace-Lorraine that have dominated France and Germany for a very long time. And again this fixture was one of the key elements of French propaganda, a reminder of one of the highest tasks the French would fulfill once they had claimed for victory: the return of the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. The poster uses the image of Alsace and Lorraine traditionally embodied by two women garbed in regional dress. The lay-out reverses the lie of the provinces with Alsace taking center stage as a standing woman gazing into the distance and may be waving to unseen soldiers. A second woman, Lorraine, waits expectantly while crouched in the arms of the other one, Alsace. In the bottom left corner, a swallow represents freedom, hope, fertility and the renewal of life. It is common knowledge that daughters 16-year old Madeleine and 15-year old Lucienne modelled for father Auguste Leroux. The slogan reads "to hasten the victory and to see us again soon, subscribe! One can subscribe free of charge at the headquarters, the branches and the agencies".

The Comptoir seemed to have focused its advertising campaign on emotional depth: the return of Alsace-Lorraine and the return to one's home and own country. Neither military nor war messages but a touch both mothering and feminine called to action. Bringing back the lost provinces was also a cause for concern which the peaceful and welcoming mood would contribute to dismiss. Alongside this, as the Great War was coming to an end, it had already taken the life of a staggering percentage of the male population and the females were filling the gaps left by the men, altering forever their status. Thus the Women Speak to Women imagery might well underline their new economic position in the household as well as showing how they were asked to do their part, a teamwork between people on the home front and those on the battlefield that would lead to victory. The general message was that everyone's work was needed to support the war through any means possible as well as safeguard the social fabric.

As any of the war loan posters appealing for subscription, it was to be seen on every hoarding, in most windows, in omnibuses, commercial vans. To secure this widespread circulation, the Comptoir ordered 25.000 posters (120x80cm), 150.000 postcards (14x9cm) and 70.000 sticky labels (14x9cm).

The poster *Alsace-Lorraine* staged Place de l'Opéra

Once the Comptoir ordered the posters to be printed, it was made aware the Government was thought to relax the billsticking laws to help ending the ongoing downsizing of the previous war loans subscriptions. The archives keep a typewritten note dated 26 September 1918 describing the project to be implemented at the Paris main branch standing Place de l'Opéra, a very busy and crowded square: the poster *Alsace Lorraine* enlarged on a 6 x 4 meter framed canvas put up on the rotunda façade at first and second floor level and above the main entrance a 17 meter long banner begging for the people to subscribe. A tiny and teared handwritten paper shows off how short was the time left to the Comptoir and his supplier Defoly : a final quote on October 4th for a delivery on October 17th. During these thirteen days, an artist drew and oil painted both the enlarged poster under Auguste Leroux's directions and the banner reading in red shadowed blue letters "Subscribe". The in-house carpenter of the Comptoir was entitled the task of fixing the canvasses on the circular outside. The French weekly illustrated magazine "Le monde illustré", issued on November 2nd, acclaimed the stunning enlargement covering the rotunda façade : "Housed at the corner of Place de l'Opéra, the Comptoir has its posters yelling with patriotism the duty to be fulfilled by the citizens at this very time".

On November 11th and soon after the Armistice was signed, the French took over the streets in jubilation. Tens of thousands of Parisians filled the Place de l'Opéra. While it was getting dark, the Comptoir activated an inventive illumination of the enlarged poster as the city lights sparkled again after four years of darkness. Then the enlightened *Alsace Lorraine* poster faced the famed opera singer Marthe Chenal singing the French anthem *La Marseillaise* from the balcony of the Opera house. This outstanding patriotic moment, greeted by the press and reported by Maurice Donnay, a member of the French Academy, in the "Revue des Deux Mondes", a monthly literary and political magazine, enhanced immediately and continuously the public craze already surrounding the amazing display. The archives contain nearly a hundred letters asking for

one or several posters. These requests come from every field: individuals whose family members are in the army and are not able to see the gorgeous poster, Alsace and Lorraine refugees willing to keep the poster as a testimonial, French people impressed by the multiple feelings suggested by the poster, foreigners collecting all the war posters issued in the different countries, offices and stores eager to show their patriotism by sticking the poster in their premises, hospitals and asylums to adorn their walls to soften and entertain their injured men...

The poster Alsace-Lorraine staged Avenue des Champs Elysées

According to another hand-written memorandum dated 7 November 1918, the Comptoir studied the fitting out of two current posters and a banner above the ground floor of the agency standing at 49 avenue des Champs Elysées for Alsace Lorraine National Day ten days later. Attached is a pencil sketch of the façade showing the contemplated installation. As the Comptoir rented the ground floor only, it was necessary to involve the occupiers of the upper storeys, one being the owner herself who lived above the agency. She is asked to have two posters fitted in-between her three windows and retained on the exterior shutters hinges so that they are not obstructed.

The poster Alsace-Lorraine re-used

The first days of the Alsace-Lorraine posters met also with a press mishap when the daily newspaper "Le Gaulois" issued on 29 October 1918 a page long article about the Fourth War Loan posters and stated the Comptoir was re-using a former one. We learn by a letter from the editor to artist Auguste Leroux that the latter himself complained to the newspaper after reading the mistaken words. "Le Gaulois" made a correction on page 2 of the issue dated 6 November and sent a copy to Auguste Leroux who gave it to the Comptoir.

Yet the re-use of the vantage poster by third-parties was an issue for the Comptoir. The archives reveal that a staff of the western suburban agency Enghien had to visit a solicitor who put up his own details on the posters displayed in the city during the subscription period. After the subscription was over and a few days before Christmas 1918, the Goupil firm, one of the first publisher of art works, displayed in its shop on the ground of the Comptoir building Place de l'Opéra a reproduction of a preparatory sketch of the poster with Auguste Leroux's consent but without notifying the Comptoir. The next day the reproduction was removed. Simultaneously, the Comptoir authorization was requested by Auguste Leroux to let artist Guiraud-Rivière model the Alsace-Lorraine characters into a sculpture. The Comptoir insisted on having its own name engraved on the base of the work. But after a discussion with Auguste Leroux the bank agreed not to do so and simply have "After the poster by Auguste Leroux" written.

After the armistice was signed, the French government sponsored Alsace-Lorraine Day around France. The Comptoir was well aware of the success met by its poster thanks to the effectiveness of the image upon the viewer. Consequently, the Comptoir ordered another 10.000 extra posters with a new slogan reading: "Long life to the Poilus". The remarkably well-timed enclosure of the warlike glimpse fostered the iconic poster into a form of everlasting publicity mean for the after-war period.

Thus the Office of Propaganda Against The Enemy saw the poster as a good advert for its cause in Alsace and Lorraine and asked the Comptoir if it could use the poster. Within hours on 2 December 1918, the Comptoir had the slogan specially rewritten and made the decision to offer 5.000 posters along with Joseph Charles printing free of charge. The Office of Propaganda was moreover allowed to order more printing at its own expenses according to its needs. The archives keep the final proof of this poster. The slogan reads "Reproduction of the poster printed for the 1918 war loan" but keeps as a motto "To hasten the victory and to see us again soon, subscribe!" and finally boasts the network of the Comptoir with the headquarters and main branch addresses while reminding its 60 branches in the Paris area and 241 branches in the French regions and abroad.

As the Comptoir was getting ready for the National Exhibition held in Strasbourg from mid-July to the end of September 1919, it had the idea to display the original sketch of the poster icon which was included in the

agreement signed with the printing company Joseph Charles nearly one year ago. But one week before the opening, it emerged that the sketch was never given. After complaining, the Comptoir was delivered the dazzling original drawing the next day. At present, this piece is missing in the archives.

Lastly, the archives show off another anecdote. A noddle manufacturer wanted the appealing image to become its corporate logo and as such be printed on every box. The Comptoir refused straightaway arguing it could not publicize for another company.

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The history of the spectacular appearance of the poster lingers on thanks to the issuance file kept in the archivesⁱ. The numerous letters enable to trace the astonishing leap of fate of the teamwork undertaken by the Comptoir and its partners printer Joseph Charles and artist Auguste Leroux. As it seems the Comptoir had no specific posters for the previous war loans, this first happens to be a very good one. The Comptoir had patriotic concerns obviously but the various facts surrounding the rising fame of the exquisite image enhance its policy as innovative, client-orientated and close to the current affairs with a pioneering hue. Copyright matters were also serious grounds for the Comptoir which solved them distinguishing profitable and humanitarian demands, but always with the decisive aim to publicize for itself whenever possible.

Held 2 Place de l'Opera at the BNP Paribas branch called The Concept Store, an exhibition, running from September 15th – October 17th 2014, will showcase the Alsace-Lorraine poster and provide a rare insight into the history of this building itself during WWI.

Captions

A Poster Alsace-Lorraine.

BNP Paribas Archives FRAHBNPP_4AF1

B Poster Alsace-Lorraine displayed outside the Oloron agency.

BNP Paribas Archives FRAHBNPP_3Fi54

C Poster Alsace-Lorraine featured in the 2 November 1918 issue of Le Monde Illustré.

BNP Paribas Archives FRAHBNPP_PERIS1

ⁱ BNP Paribas Archives 73AH461 and 73AH462.