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Review of "A Thirst for Wine and War: The Intoxication of French Soldiers on the Western Front" by Adam D. Zientek

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Adam D. Zientek. *A Thirst for Wine and War: The Intoxication of French Soldiers on the Western Front*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024. Pp. 272.

The officially sanctioned issue of alcohol to troops in the front lines may not be among the foremost topics in studies of the First World War, but it is certainly a subject that has gained momentum this millennium with dedicated adherents pursuing research in at least some of the national traditions. Of the countries that intentionally plied their soldiers with booze—Russia and the United States were noteworthy for being officially dry—France arguably possessed the largest system for the purchase and distribution of alcohol for the army. Probably for this reason, the historiography of alcohol in the French Army in the First World War is considerably richer than that for the other belligerents; in addition to articles, there are in French at least three monographs, and even a graphic novel, dedicated to wine at the front.¹ *A Thirst for Wine and War: The Intoxication of French Soldiers on the Western Front* by Adam Zientek, assistant professor of history at the University of California, Davis, is the first in English, which is almost certain to make it a very important work in its field.

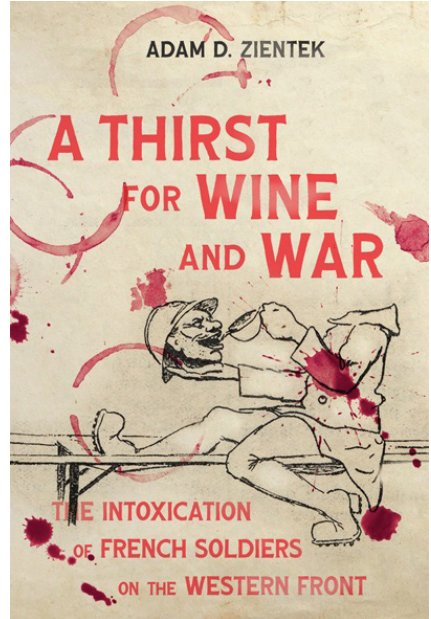
In addition to an introduction and an epilogue, which themselves are substantive and interesting, the work is divided into seven thematic chapters arranged chronologically. There is temporal overlap in the case of three of the central chapters, however, because the French not only issued wine—mostly red, mostly of indifferent quality, and referred to by the affectionate nickname *pinard*—but also brandy, *eau-de-vie*, known as *gnôle*, which was normally intended to be given to French infantry immediately before going over the top. The particulars of the *gnôle* ration receive a chapter of their own, and given the relative lack of attention paid to it elsewhere, if it is mentioned at all, this is a particularly welcome component of the book. Another aspect that receives its own chapter is the system of prohibition of *eau-de-vie* behind the lines, a zone in which wine

¹ Thierry Fillaut, *Le pinard des poilus : genre et leadership* (Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, 2014); Christophe Lucand, *Le pinard des poilus, une histoire du vin en France durant la Grande Guerre (1914-1918)* (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2015); Charles Ridet, *L'ivresse du soldat : l'alcool dans les tranchées : 1914-1918* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2016); the graphic novel is Philippe Pelaez and Francis Porcel, *Pinard de guerre* (Charnay-lès-Mâcon: Bamboo Édition, 2021).

consumption, on the other hand, was not only tolerated but encouraged, until the problems this caused prompted a wholesale crackdown in mid-1917. In thus examining not only the two parallel systems for providing rations of alcohol but also what was, in effect, their antithesis, the author provides a nuanced and balanced view of the entire program.

A considerable strength of this work is the author's effort to tie the purely military aspects of the alcohol ration into broader French society, one in which wine was very important. While he loses no opportunity to do this anywhere in the text it may be suitable, it forms a special study of its own in the first chapter. Examining sources going as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, Zientek explains that wine was viewed very positively in France, its consumption seen as imparting health and vigour, while, conversely, the drinking of distilled alcoholic beverages, produced using an industrial process, was claimed to lead inevitably to alcoholism, disease and degeneracy, the latter at the level of both the individual and society as a whole. Even the forms of inebriation caused by the two types of alcohol were considered different by the pseudo-science of the day, such that drunkenness caused by overindulging in wine was seen as good-natured and harmless, while that caused by distilled alcohol was thought to lead to criminality and violence of the worst sorts.

This dichotomous view was carried into the army after the opening of hostilities in 1914. While it took time for the system to get organised, the army's *pinard* was, wherever possible, issued every day. Army-issue canteen cups had a capacity of 250 mL, and that was the amount of the ration as of November 1914. This was doubled in 1915, and reached 750 mL, the equivalent of a full bottle sold retail today, per man per day, in 1917. With an estimated 2.75 million men receiving the ration in 1917, this necessitated what the author describes as a partial nationalisation of the country's wine industry. In order, though, to make the troops "pliant in the face of command,



aggressive towards the enemy, [and] silent in their wretchedness" (p. 64), the authorities obviously considered the enormous logistical apparatus needed to support the distribution of this amount of wine to be worth the cost.

Negative pre-war attitudes about distilled alcohol carried over to the army's ration of *gnôle*, with many men refusing to take it, and some veterans denying its very existence. Nevertheless, with the *Intendance militaire* taking delivery, on average, of almost 1.5 million litres per month of *eau-de-vie*, it was very much a serious component of the army's alcohol program. In line with the belief that drinking distilled alcohol created a nasty, vicious drunkard, the army instrumentalised the *gnôle* ration by issuing around half a canteen cup, or 125 mL, in the minutes leading up to an attack. Moreover, for reasons that are not clear, *eau-de-vie*, when it was available, comprised part of the daily alcohol ration as well, in the regulation amount of 62.5 mL, in addition to the *pinard*.

How much pure alcohol equivalent, then, could a French soldier in the front line have consumed on a typical day, one with no attack going in? From the decision in 1917 to issue 750 mL of wine daily, assuming a concentration of 12.5 per cent ABV (alcohol by volume), 93.75 mL of ethanol would have been provided from this source. *Eau-de-vie* was transported to the front lines at 95 per cent ABV and then diluted to around 50 per cent ABV; a 62.5 mL ration would therefore have provided 31.25 mL of ethanol. The daily total, then, from both sources comes to 125 mL. At 17.05 mL of pure alcohol per standard drink on the Canadian measure,² this works out to an impressive 7.33 standard drinks per day.³

The focus changes considerably in the following two chapters, which examine the mutinies at the front in 1917 and the near-simultaneous disturbances on the part of the *permissionnaires*, men on leave, affecting the rail transport network carrying them to it. Alcohol takes more of a back seat in these chapters, which provide an

² Government of Canada, "Low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines," last modified 5 July 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/alcohol/low-risk-alcohol-drinking-guidelines.html>.

³ The figure for British and Dominion troops receiving 2.5 imperial fluid ounces per day of rum at 54.5 per cent ABV is 38.7 mL of ethanol, or 2.27 standard drinks, on which, see Brian Bertosa, "Rum for the Army: Miscellaneous Notes on the Provision of Rum during the First World War," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 102, 409 (2024): 155.

excellent overview of these embarrassing episodes in the history of the French Army for those unfamiliar with them. When it does make its appearance, though, alcohol is shown conclusively to be not a cause, but a facilitator of almost all of the incidents of indiscipline. The author demonstrates this through detailed examination of reports of investigation that show, time and again, that once the unruly men had had the chance to sleep off their intoxication, typically overnight, it was a fairly easy thing to arrest the ringleaders and return the remainder to their responsibilities.

The author's writing style is engaging, brisk and effectively carries across his enthusiasm for the subject. He enlivens the text even further with frequent quotations from such sources as oral histories, memoirs, novels, poems, songs and cartoons, many of which show a sophisticated sense of wry humour—perhaps the only kind of humour appropriate to total war. (A wonderful example of this, too, is the pretend wine stains on the book's cover, which look and feel real. Kudos to the designer.) Typographical errors are few and far between in the English text, but unfortunately this does not hold nearly as well for quotations from French-language material, particularly in the notes, where the titles of documents are plagued with problems such as missing diacritical marks. A competent francophone editor ought to have been asked to go over this material. The only other complaint I can make concerns the author's belief that the writings of Michel Foucault can help in our understanding of the subject. The result is the occasional paragraph packed with scarcely penetrable critical theory jargon, with no support whatever in the primary source material, standing in stark contrast to the majority of the book. A writer has the right to write, though, and no doubt others may view the matter differently.

Aside from these minor issues, I think it is fair to say that Adam Zientek has done the English-speaking world an enormous favour in the writing of this book, and for those who would like to delve into this fascinating topic, I cannot recommend it too highly.

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