Suppliers to the armed forces. Logistics and private interest, from the Directory to the Empire

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SUPPLIERS TO THE ARMED FORCES. LOGISTICS AND PRIVATE INTEREST, FROM THE DIRECTORY TO THE EMPIRE

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Abstract

The aim of the Revolution was to make a *tabula rasa* with respect to the Ancien Régime. As far as army supplies were concerned, this meant calling into question the principle of the 'enterprise', a process by which a commission agent delivered materiel, victuals, etc. to the armies in return for a fee. However, faced with ever-increasing needs, and in the absence of an established system for managing these logistical requirements, other expedients had to be sought out. During the Directory period a small group of businessmen and bankers emerged, connected notably with the figure of Gabriel Julien Ouvrard, who made substantial profits. How was private interest promoted, controlled, limited or fought against during the Directory, Consulate and Empire?

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As head of the Brest squadron in March 1800, Admiral Bruix wrote to the Minister: "On my arrival, I found them naked from head to toe, completely discouraged and despairing of the neglect in which they have been left [...]. I am writing to the First Consul by the same letter and I will keep nothing from him."[1] At the same time, letters received by the munitions supplier general for naval supplies in Brest, such as this one, confirmed the situation: "We are living from day to day and on Saturday evening we don't know if we will have bread for Monday".[2] That being said, though Admiral Bruix was complaining about these malfunctions at the beginning of the Consulate, it was he who in 1798, as Minister of the Navy, had awarded the supplies contract to the supplier and banker Gabriel-Julien Ouvrard.

Via Admiral Bruix's contradictions in two different roles, we can see the tension between the (organisational and financial) constraints imposed by the State and the operational needs of a theatre or squadron commander. The monarchy of the Ancien Régime had initiated forms of control in a system that was fundamentally based on the private sector (the commissaires de guerre), but the system was thrown into disarray by the Revolution. The threat of bankruptcy, which remained throughout the whole of the Revolutionary period, explains the extreme nature of the expedients used during the period. It was against this backdrop that a whole class of businessmen took on the role of suppliers to the armies. In the space of a few years, this group grew to become very wealthy

1 Quoted by Pierre Lévêque, *Revue du Souvenir Napoléonien*, hors-série n° 3, 2010.

2 *Idem*.

during the Directory, and was able to exert significant influence at the heart of the State, particularly through military matters.

The aim in the paper here is to understand the successive approaches taken by the State during the Napoleonic period to this group of army suppliers that was well established in the circles of power, and to understand the logic and efficiency of the choices made. To do this, we will first paint a picture of the situation during the Directory before looking at the entrepreneurial behaviour displayed during the Consulate and then a more pragmatic approach induced by the permanent state of war during the Empire.

Supplying the army of a state with no money and no logistics

From September 1795 to February 1796, French army and navy supply was gradually handed over to private enterprise; in December of the same year, the Directory inaugurated the system of general contracts. Economic circumstances, as well as interpersonal relationships, meant that suppliers were often involved in large-scale speculation on goods. The bankers with whom they associated acted as guarantors; furthermore, they could replace the State by making up for the State's shortfalls in terms of advances or repayments. Temptation for huge profits offered by the supply business led these financiers often to accept significant risks. One example of the failure of a high-risk operation is the bankruptcy of Joseph François Choulx de Tillemont at the beginning of the Consulate.[3] His company had assets of almost ten million. But these assets were in reality largely made up of outstanding debts or financial objects that were difficult to mobilise, while its liabilities due to insufficient working capital amounted to almost one million. Tillemont was the financial partner of the Compagnie Ravet (for general supplies to

3 Archives de Paris, D 11 U^3, 14/1021, 9 December 1801.

the army of the interior), of the Compagnie Fourcy (for supplies to the armies of the Alps, Italy and the Midi), and of other tenderers (for civilian requirements).

Ignace-Joseph Vanlerberghe was one of the leading figures in this world of bankers associated with civil, but above all military, supplies. In 1796, he took a number of stakes in companies such as Wouters & Godard and Rochefort et Cie, which supplied troops in the field with victuals, as well as providing for staging posts and military convoys. He also invested in Compagnie Maurin, which supplied the armée d'Italie with large quantities of goods.[4] But the most famous supplier (and banker) of the period was undoubtedly Gabriel Julien Ouvrard, who was also associated with Vanlerberghe for wheat and the Michel brothers for military supplies. In 1794, Ouvrard became the munitions supplier to the Spanish fleet anchored at Brest. Thanks to his relations with Barras, he convinced the Directory to centralise the entire administration of naval supplies (5 Prairial year VI - 30 June 1798) and to return to the company system.[5] He then obtained the contract from Admiral Bruix (12 Messidor An VI-30 June 1798) for six years from 1 Vendémiaire An VII. The contract was in the name of his brother-in-law, Claude Blanchard aîné, merchant in Bordeaux; but in reality, it was Ouvrard who was the guarantor, and who ensured the execution of it. He even obtained an extension of the supply to the Spanish squadron stationed in Brest, with even more advantageous conditions. This was the origin of the Ouvrard debt of four million piasters on the Treasury of Mexico.[6] He had also added a contract for the supply of 48 million livres to the armée d'Italie commanded by Bonaparte.

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4 Louis Bergeron, *Banquiers, négociants et manufacturiers parisiens du Directoire à l'Empire*, Paris, Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1996.

5 Archives nationales (AN), AF^{IV*}, 191, « Procès-verbaux du Conseil d'administration de la Marine », An VIII to 1811.

6 Jean Bouvier, « À propos de la crise dite de 1805 : les crises économiques sous l'Empire », *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, n° 17-3, 1970, p 506-513. This annuity on the Brest squadrons no doubt explains the

As for Navy supplies, Ouvrard was, in fact, led to create several companies. Some within his bank, like that with which his brother Augustin was associated; others were trade companies, whose role consisted in facilitating the purchase of the requested supplies - such the company Jacques François Gamba, Jean Sigismond Gay and Co, "establishment of trade, bank and commission in Antwerp, place de Merr". Created for six years, the Gamba/Gay company's capital reached 350,000 F, 300,000 of which was brought by Ouvrard alone in limited partnership, whilst at the same time he only took a half part in the interest. Ouvrard also sponsored, for a total of several million, the Parisian trading houses Girardot et Cie, Charles Rougemont et Cie, Charlemagne et Cie, as well as three companies in Brest, Bordeaux and Orleans. All this was crowned by central offices on rue d'Amboise in Paris (the former headquarters of the Rougemont et Hottinguer bank). In short, to use an anachronistic word, his was a veritable holding company. Ouvrard was thus in a position to lend 10 million livres to the Directory.[7]

Over the Revolutionary period, that of the Directory represents a high point of public/private conflicts of interest and influence peddling, as embodied by Ouvrard. There are many examples. One such is the Ouin company, responsible in Year VI for the "supply, transport and handling of victuals, bread, meat and fodder" for the troops of ten military divisions and the Armée d'Angleterre, for one year. Jean Baptiste Ouin was himself a former head of division in

observation made by the Countess de Boigne (*Récits d'une tante : mémoires de la comtesse de Boigne, née d'Osmond. Tome 1 : du règne de Louis XVI à 1820*, Paris, Émile-Paul Frères, 1921, p. 204) shortly before the death of Admiral Bruix in 1805: "... he died in a state of distress which, despite all the luxury surrounding him, went as far as not having enough money to buy wood. [...] a large part of Ouvrard's fortune had come via Bruix; learning of the admiral's position, he sent five hundred gold louis to Madame de Bruix on the eve of his death. This was certainly not the hundredth part of what the admiral had allowed him to earn, but he was dying and disgraced and this action does credit to Ouvrard".

7 Louis Bergeron, *Banquiers, négociants et manufacturiers parisiens du Directoire à l'Empire, op. cit.*, p. 235.

the War Department, and he associated other very "useful" former heads of department with him, including a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and, above all, Fouché and Tallien as political intermediaries.[8] Given the permanent state of war and ballooning army requirements, savings were an absolute priority. Armand-Jean-François Seguin (1767 - 1835), a manufacturer in Sèvres, proposed a revolutionary process for tanning leather that reduced production time from six months to a few weeks and won contracts for "all tanned, cured and "hongroyés"[9] leathers required for footwear and equipment for all troops on foot and on horseback" for a period of 9 years from Year VI (1796).[10]

Regaining control of army supplies during the Consulate: new political determination and administrative reorganisation

On coming to power, Bonaparte performed a re-set of State prerogatives. In particular, he desired a more viable financial system, essentially by consolidating the currency – without going into too much detail here, but notably via the creation of the Banque de France - and by reorganising the awarding of State contracts to private companies. The main aim was to re-establish tools for State control and management. In 1802, the Ministry of the Administration of War was created under Dejean's leadership, while Daru the Commissaire Général (later Director of the Administration of War at the end of the Empire) reorganised the Commissariat des Guerres

8 Mathieu de Oliveira, *Les routes de l'argent. Réseaux et flux financiers de Paris à Hambourg (1789-1815)*, Paris, Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique, 2011.

9 Tanned with salt and alum, in the Hungarian manner.

10 This exclusive supply was granted in return for a 10% discount on the current trade price. Seguin received an advance of 100,000 francs in cash per "*décade*" (i.e., the Revolutionary ten-day week).

on 9 Pluviôse An VIII (29 January 1800), hot on the heels of the instauration of the Consulate.

During the Empire, each army was given a single intendant general with distinct powers, that were extended over all administrative departments. In fact, they had already been defined by a law dated 28 Nivôse An III: "supervision of supplies of all kinds, both in the armies and in the strongholds; the levying of contributions in enemy countries; the policing of military stages and convoys; victuals, artillery and ambulance crews; hospitals, prisons, guardhouses and other military establishments; the distribution of victuals, fodder, heating, clothing and equipment; the verification of expenditure resulting from these distributions, and of all other expenditure except that of pay".[11] However, the events of the Revolution had prevented any real implementation.

Political changes often require symbolic acts; the will to change direction must be embodied in emblematic examples. When Napoleon Bonaparte came to power, Ouvrard was the richest and most prominent of the Directory traders. This is why, while most of his former associates were appointed to the regency of the new Banque de France, he was to be arrested in January 1800 (though eventually released). To explain this, it is worth noting the identity of the legal adviser to Ouvrard's trading houses: Cambacérès. But the message was clear: the State would no longer call upon him except in dire need. Since this was precursor of a larger and firmer system, the business leaders and bankers who had supported the coup d'état openly expressed their solidarity with Ouvrard. Beyond the corporatist reflex, had Ouvrard gone bankrupt there would have been repercussions for all the suppliers of the western ports. Ultimately, his financial solidity (in stark contrast to what happened to the Choulx de Tillemont mentioned above) was a guarantee of

11 Service historique de la Défense (SHD), 7 W 93.

"reliable service" for the armies and the State. All these arguments led Ouvrard's exoneration.[12]

That being said, Napoleon Bonaparte could not escape the practices of his time. Jean Pierre Collot inherited the position of general munitions officer for the Navy. Collot had been introduced to Bonaparte in 1793, and Collot and Caillard supplied meat for the armées d'Italie, des Alpes and du Midi. Collot's brother, a banker in Genoa, had also extended credit to Bonaparte. It also seems that Collot did some business in partnership with the general, in particular the sale of stock for the Idria mercury mines.[13] Finally, the weakening of Ouvrard was also perhaps only the result of the passage from one preferred customer (Barras) to another (Bonaparte). This relative disgrace should also be seen against the backdrop of the immense needs of the armies: Ouvrard was to take part in the provisioning of the army of Marengo; then, jointly with Vanlerberghe, he participated in the exceptional corn supplies in 1802; finally, he was part of the provisioning of the camp of Boulogne the following year. In June 1804, the Compagnie des Négociants Réunis (Ouvrard, Vanlerberghe), responsible for managing the Treasury, replacing the Agence des receveurs généraux, would prove insufficient for wartime.

Practices then changed as Napoleon**'**s power grew stronger and the war became a long-term affair. The Ministry for the Administration of War set up in 1802 continued to pay badly, but there were no direct bankruptcies under the Empire. Of their own accord, suppliers decided not to renew their contracts. They knew they were at the mercy of the Emperor. In 1806, Ouvrard experienced difficulties that endangered the Banque de France. And in January 1809, though his private creditors had authorised him to continue his business, he was imprisoned in June 1809 in the Sainte-Pélagie

12 Françoise Kermina, « Gabriel-Julien Ouvrard. 1770-1846 », *Heurs et malheurs des grands argentiers,* Perrin, 2018, p. 205-235.

13 Pierre-François Pinaud, *Histoire des finances publiques au XIX^e siècle : le ministère des Finances, 1789-1870. Techniques financières et prosopographie des gestionnaires,* thèse sous la direction de Louis Bergeron, Paris, EHESS, 1995.

prison for debts to the Treasury. That being said, the credit that was offered to suppliers - which was an indirect way of sharing in their profits - was only one aspect of a highly diversified financial or economic activity for banks. For example, Nicolas Seillière, the Parisian banker, was a lender to François Delpont, a milliner and government supplier. In 1804, Florentin and Nicolas Seillière guaranteed a contract for 200,000 metres of white yarn awarded to François Alexandre Delpont, but the yarn was produced by the Seillière family**'**s factory in Pierrepont, near Longwy.[14]

Intensified and permanent warfare prevented transformation

Despite this persistent reliance on financiers who were also suppliers, other supply methods gained in importance under the Empire. As early as the 1805 campaign, Minister Dejean was asked on 23 August to provide 500,000 rations of biscuits ready for when the Grande Armée passed through Strasbourg and 200,000 in Mainz, with the troops were already ahead of schedule.[15] This required coordination between Berthier and the Intendance Générale under Petiet. In fact, an effort was made by the government to achieve maximum control, a sort of "internalization", to use the modern term.

However, the fluctuations in numbers of staff present and the unrealistic planning expectations, combined with the acceleration required by Napoleon for military reasons, made it very difficult to ensure that supplies arrived at the right time and in the right quantities. What's more, suppliers were largely uninvolved in supplying

14 Louis Bergeron, *Banquiers, négociants et manufacturiers parisiens du Directoire à l'Empire*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 1975.

15 Fondation Napoléon, napoleonica.org [en ligne], Correspondance de Napoléon, CG5-10686, 28/08/1805. URL : https://www.napoleonica.org/fr/collections/correspondance/CG5-10686.md.

everyday items. Indeed, “canteen” and “ordinary” necessities – such as tobacco, wine and spirits, haberdashery, etc. - were mainly purchased by soldiers from the sutlers and canteen cooks who followed the armies, travelling merchants or local traders. Another way of obtaining everyday consumer goods was to steal from the local population or from the enemy dead, wounded and prisoners.

The problem of supplies was somewhat different in territories where armies were stationed for long periods. This was particularly the case during the counter-insurgency in Spain. Historiography has emphasised the importance of logistical factors, such as armament, transport and victuals, in the establishment or rejection of occupation.[16] In fact, here Napoleon’s armies did not perform forward planning in the way that they would for a "classic" campaign. Hospital supplies in Spain provides a useful illustration of this. The Intendant General Deniée wrote to Murat in 1808: "My Lord, that most important of services, namely, the hospital, in all the establishments where the soldiers of the army are received and treated, is experiencing great difficulties because to a lack of funds. I have written about this to Monsieur Despentes, financial adviser, and he has replied by sending me a copy of a letter dated 15 June which he received from Monsieur le Marquis de la Ordemazas, general administrator of the great hospital in Madrid, who wrote as follows:

> “Since I am short of absolutely everything needed not only by the new hospital that we want to create in the barracks of Santa Isabel, but even for the daily consumption of the great hospital, I am forced to tell you that, in such a situation, hospitals will no longer be able to exist without prompt and powerful help.”[17]

16 See especially Richard Hocquellet, *Résistance et Révolution durant l’occupation napoléonienne en Espagne, 1808-1812*, Paris, La Boutique de l’Histoire, 2001, 368 p. and Jean-Marc Lafon, *L’Andalousie et Napoléon : contre-insurrection, collaboration et résistances dans le midi de l’Espagne (1808-1812),* Paris, Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2007.

17 SHD, GR8C 7, Report by the intendant général of the Armée d’Espagne, Deniée, to Murat on the situation of the army’s services, 20 June 1808, quoted in Thomas Ramonda, *Soigner en temps de guérilla : la prise en charge médicale des soldats français blessés dans la péninsule ibérique (1808-1814)*, doctoral

The fact that the Iberian Peninsula could not be pacified meant that the local authorities had to be relied upon to provide care for the military. When a province was conquered, the hospitals were the responsibility of the municipalities in which they were located. From 1810, Pamplona City Council signed a contract with Juan Brauhauban, under which he took over the management of the capital's hospitals, providing food and medical supplies and paying the salaries of the health staff. Shortly afterwards, the Society of Merchants of Pamplona took over responsibility for maintenance until December 1812. In 1813, the Pamplona City Council set up a six-person board to manage the hospital, with funds raised through new taxes.[18] The management of the province's military hospitals thus evolved from a system of coercion to one of competition in a market before becoming a branch of local government. This system of contracts was common to the whole of northern Spain.

A report on the administration of northern Spain by the chief quartermaster of this army to Cafarelli sums up the situation as follows:

> "Hospital services are provided by commercial companies. A hospital day in a Stationary Hospital[19] is invoiced to the company at a fixed price. Independently of anything to do with a patient's health, contractors are responsible for renovating the furnishings and doing all repairs to the buildings. Sometimes, it has been possible to entrust the care of patients to guilds. This method has been adopted because it offers the best guarantees. For example, the Burgos cathedral chapter provides hospital services, and these are satisfactory in the four Burgos hospitals. In Vitoria, there is only one hospital which, depending on the arrangements to be made, will be able to accommodate 13,000 to 14,000 patients, with repairs to be carried out by a contractor. In Pamplona, the hospital service in this stronghold has been entrusted to a company

thesis supervised by Walter Bruyère-Ostells, defended at Sciences Po Aix 4 June 2024.

18 Archivo Municipal Pamplona (AMP), Actas del Ayuntamiento, núm. 71, fol. 26.

19 As opposed to a (relatively) mobile Field Hospital.

> of merchants who bring to the execution of their business all the good faith of commerce. Since the payments have been brought up to date, the hospital service has changed, and the furnishings of the second-rate hospitals have been added to and renovated. The strongholds of Santander, Santoña, San Sebastian and Tolosa are in the most desirable condition. The one in Santoña has been cited for its good facilities and good service. The one at Tolosa left much to be desired in terms of furnishings. The delays in payment that the contractor had experienced were a pretext for him not to renovate the furnishings there or complete them".[20]

Towards the end of the Empire, large contracts were still available. The shoe market, in which Ouvrard was still involved, led to the delivery of shoes with fake leather soles, which contributed to mortality in Russia. In 1810, Déaclard, Néret et Cie were awarded a three-year contract "for the manufacture and general supply of shakos to the armies of the Empire". In 1811, Brémond, a merchant hatter and helmet maker in the rue Saint-Honoré, and Lécuillier, a merchant currier in the rue Saint-Antoine, joined forces for the manufacture and general supply of helmets for the dragoons and cuirassiers of the Empire. In fact, in 1810, due to the scattered nature of the battalions and squadrons of the same regiment, the Emperor decided to group supplies in state spread throughout the vast territory under his authority. But this came up against a series of material obstacles.

In October 1811, Napoleon once again authorised the regimental administrative councils to award contracts, limiting them to the manufacture of 200 uniforms, with the rest being supplied by the State warehouses, though with the continental blockade, the quality of the fabrics and dyes used tended to become increasingly mediocre, a situation increasingly leading to disputes. Once the raw materials had been accepted by the regiments, the uniforms were made by the regimental craftsmen. The uniforms were made according to patterns and models supplied by the central administration, in three

20 Archivo General Navarra (AGN), Documents of count Caffarelli.

sizes: small, medium and large. They could then be readjusted at the colonel's request. In reality, however, delivery of raw materials was inconsistent and Empire soldiers were often poorly dressed. The problem was particularly acute in the field. Even though the regiments were provided with master tailors and master bootmakers, soldiers very often had to replace damaged posessions or missing items themselves, often with supplies sourced locally or taken from the enemy. In his memoirs, Captain Godet reports that after the Battle of Ulm, the French soldiers, who had no coats, stripped the Austrian prisoners of their cloaks. For the 1807 campaign, because of the climate and the distance, Daru had clothes and shoes made on the spot, setting up five workshops in Germany and Poland.

The Imperial Guard also enjoyed a number of "privileges". Particular attention was paid to the remounting of its cavalry. This was one of the major logistical problems. Up until 1807, a regimental remount was the responsibility of an officer, who generally had his own merchants. At the end of the Empire, urgent needs meant that these merchants bought up a surplus of horses, particularly in Germany, in order to reconstitute the army's park of horses, with the problems of quality that such a procedure entails, but also giving the merchants opportunities for cashing in. Subsequently, a commission bought horses for the army at fairs and depots, which were then distributed to the regiments. In enemy countries, recourse to expropriation as war booty and requisitions were also very common.[21]

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In conclusion, the Napoleonic period can be seen as a break with the system inherited from the Ancien Régime and the Revolution, in particular with the harmful influence of the associated world of banking and suppliers to the armies during the Directory. During the Consulate, Napoleon Bonaparte implemented a very proactive

21 Jean-François Brun, « Le cheval dans la Grande Armée », *Revue historique des Armées*, n° 249, 2007, p. 38-74.

policy to put pressure on these business networks, combined with structural reforms (in particular the Ministry of the Administration of War). However, the Ministry for the Adminstration of War could not completely do without these businessmen during the Empire, as the logistical effort required increasingly grew both in terms of the volume of materiel and the geographical space involved.[22] The use of the private sector, which was generally more localised, made it possible to adapt to different theatres and specific needs (for example, Stationary Hospitals in Spain, where there was a counter-insurgency, whereas for the short campaigns of the Grande Armée, hospitals had to be brought close to the battlefields). Despite the increase in administrative control, suppliers became a flexible tool (to whom certain services could be delegated, with whom financial weight could be distributed), without any bribery comparable to that of the Directory. However, they were still able to use the quality of the materials they supplied to their advantage, and it would be many decades before the balance of power between the military administration in charge of supplies and equipment could fully impose its expectations on private service providers.

22 See for example Jean-François Brun, « Le rôle du Grand Empire dans le recrutement et la logistique des armées napoléoniennes », *Revue historique des Armées*, n° 291, 2018-2, p. 31-40.