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# Did the War Break Couples?: Marriage and Divorce in France During and After WWI

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## **Chapter 6. Did the war break couples?**

### **Marriage and divorce in France during and after WWI**

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#### **Introduction**

The First World War greatly disrupted couples and families in France because of the long-term separations associated with sending men to the front, and consequently the reorganization of homes in the absence of men that changed the position of women in within households. Couples who had gradually learned to live far from each other – while having many epistolary exchanges<sup>1</sup> – had, at the end of the war, relearn to live together. The women, who had tasted a certain form of independence and had asserted themselves in the management of the homes, had to ‘return to their place’ of wives and especially of mothers while the men regained their position of head of family even though they still have the horrors of war in mind<sup>2</sup>. Most separations were undoubtedly painful and made readjustment to family life generally difficult<sup>3</sup> even if they did not necessarily lead to a marital breakup. But some couples experienced more difficulties returning to their married life and eventually divorced. The conflict was for many couples a sentimental and sometimes a marital catastrophe<sup>4</sup>.

This paper aims to understand the impact of the First World war on marriages and divorces and eventually on the gender relations. It will first summarize the findings of Louis Henry<sup>5</sup> about the low effects of the war on the marriage rate thanks to compensation marriages. The latter result from the more frequent unions of women with widowed or divorced men, and with foreigners, as well as the modification of the crossing of the generations and the decrease in men's celibacy.

Then, the movement and characteristics of divorces will be studied to understand the consequences of the war on couples who had been separated during the conflict but also to know if the ‘compensatory marriages’ had a greater risk of divorce than the others. The grounds and the plaintiffs of divorce will be studied, as well as the socioeconomic characteristics of the divorcees (profession, family situation, nationalities etc.) to deepen the analysis and give more clues to answer our three hypotheses that are the following.

Our first assumption is that the First world war has led more couples to separate or divorce than in “normal times’ for two main reasons. First, the long separations of the couples and the

remoteness between fathers and children<sup>6</sup>. The enforced separation of husbands and wives – even those married for a long time - can have weakened marriages. Indeed, husbands and wives lived different wartime experiences during several months or years. These ‘divergent experiences must have affected them in different ways such that they developed more individually, and less in tandem, than they would had they not been separated’.<sup>7</sup> As to children, some grew up, and even were born, when their father was at the front and sometimes did not recognize or even know them<sup>8</sup>. Paternal distance from family life may also have led to the marriage breakdown. War experience may also have changed men’s personalities or preferences on the one hand, but they also might have returned to more independent wives who might also have changed substantially. Second, the traumas and the psychological effects of the war on soldiers, such as what we now called posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression, inability to feel emotion and closeness to others<sup>9</sup> may also have had a strong impact on couples and family relationships.

According to our second hypothesis, marriages entered during the war may concern only the oldest, at least the men too old to be at the front. There is no specific reason why these marriages would have higher risks of divorce and Pavalko and Elder<sup>10</sup> do not find such evidence for the United States. However, marriages of the war can also have been contracted quickly before the departure to war, during a permission or even by procuracy<sup>11</sup>. The rush of these marriages may have resulted in hurried weddings that had higher risks at divorce<sup>12</sup>.

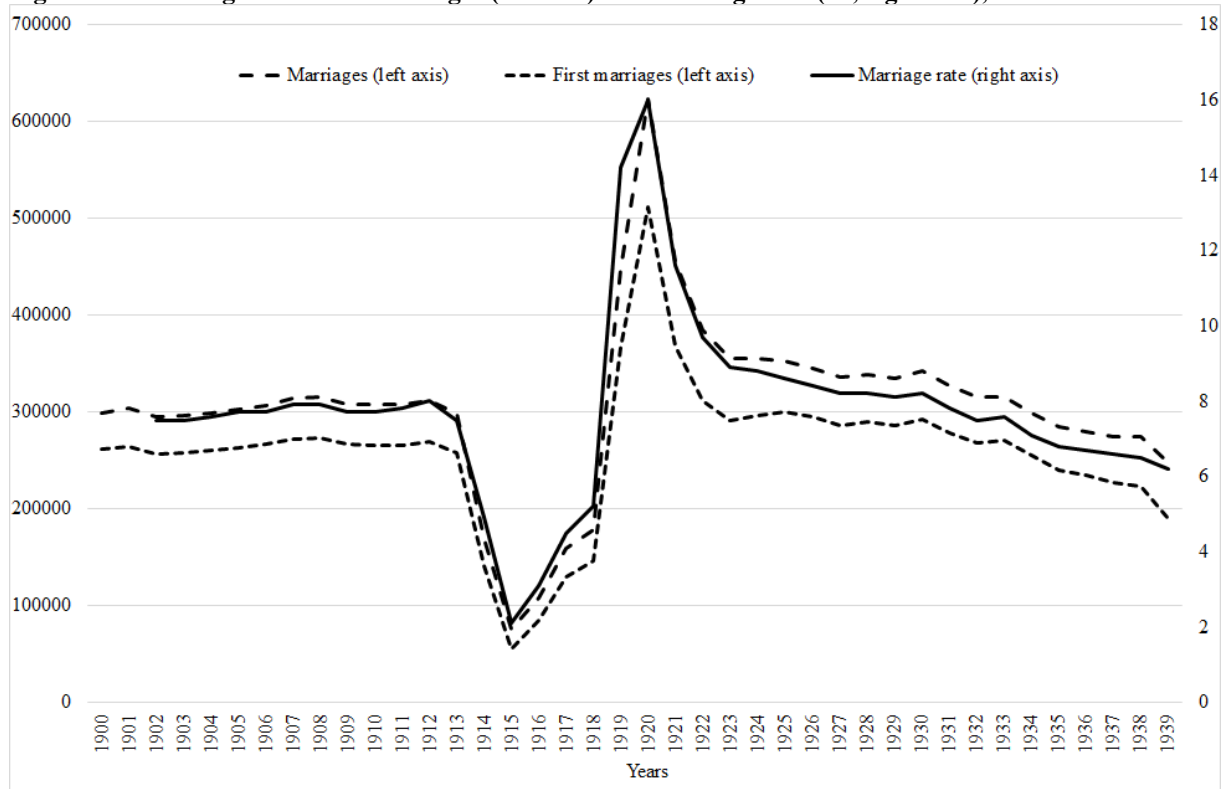
Our third hypothesis concerns the “compensatory marriages”. Women married men that they probably would not have married in peacetime<sup>13</sup>. In consequence, it is possible that these marriages have less chance to last than “more chosen” marriages.

The “couples of the war” were confronted with a very specific period made of separations, reunions and new good-byes, waiting for letters and news from the front, fear of adultery, abandonment and treason and obviously death<sup>14</sup>. Through the history of their marriages and sometimes divorces, this article will try to bring new knowledge about the impact of the First World war on conjugal and gender relations.

## The impact of the war on marriages

France suffered heavy losses during the First World War. The number of civilians and soldiers killed was extremely high<sup>15</sup>. Most of these were young men, a phenomenon which can have a strong effect on nuptiality and fertility<sup>16</sup>. According to the last estimates, 1 300 000 to 1 450 000 French soldiers were killed during the First World war<sup>17</sup>, representing 17% of men born in 1881-1885, 19 % of those born in 1886-1890 and 24.5 % of those born in 1891-1895, the cohort the most affected by the war<sup>18</sup>. This excess of male deaths naturally led to an imbalance of the sex ratio that should in turn have led to a strong increase of female permanent celibacy. However, the increase is low<sup>19</sup> and the share of women forced to celibacy is fewer than expected<sup>20</sup>.

**Figure 6.1. Marriages and first marriages (left axis) and marriage rate (%o, right axis), 1900-1939.**



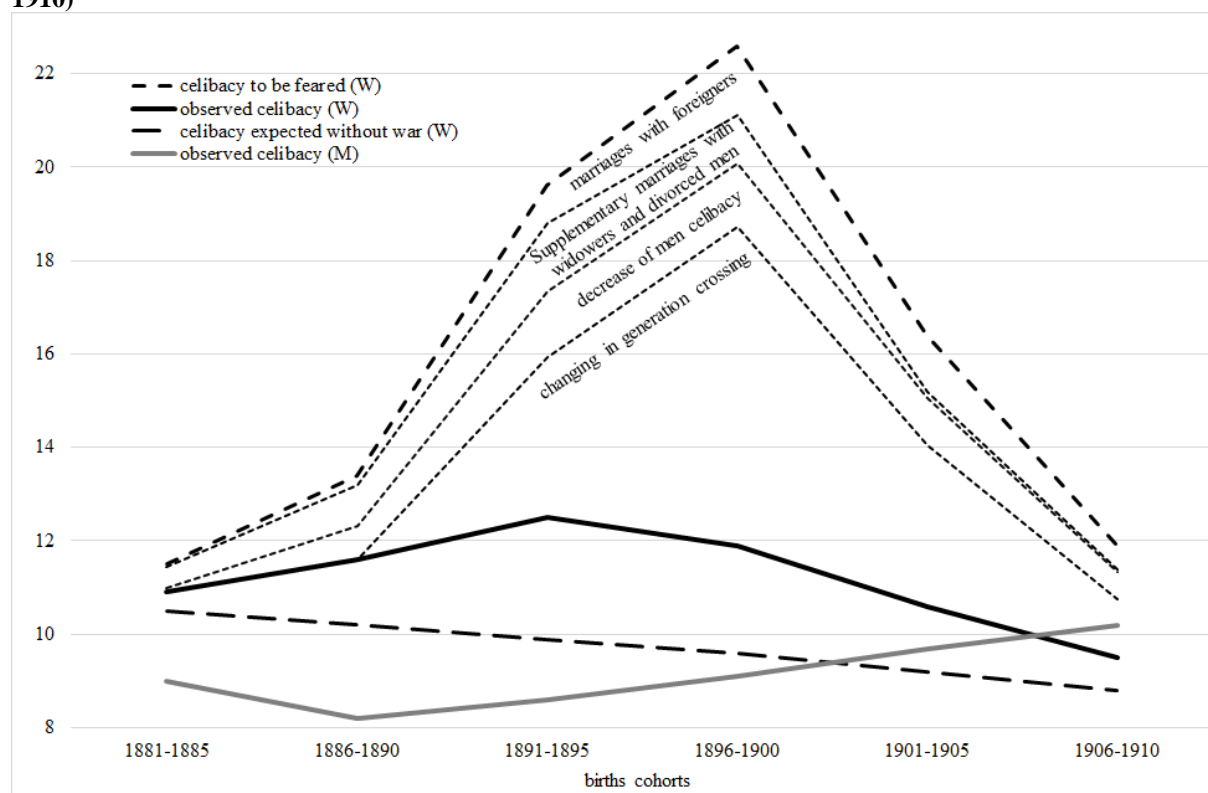
Sources: *Mouvement de la population, 1900-1939*; Population censuses (*Statistique générale de la France*).

Since the beginning of the First World war, the number of marriages decreased tremendously (Figure 6.1), especially during the four last months of 1914 and the four first months of 1915<sup>21</sup>. Despite the catch-up of marriages during the immediate post-war period (1920-1922), only 2 116 000 marriages were celebrated between 1914 and 1922. They represent 75% of the 2 760 000<sup>22</sup> that could be expected taking the 1910-1913 period as a

reference. The marriages that had been postponed because of the absence of men during the war were not all concluded after the war because a lot of young men were killed or wounded during the war<sup>23</sup>. The losses of men during the war could thus have led to a very strong increase of single women and the women of the most affected cohorts indeed remain single more often than in the other cohorts (Figure 6.2). However, in comparison to what could have been the consequences of the war, singleness among women at age 50 was not very high in France after World War I.

The lack of men only forced 12.5% of women of these cohorts to remain single whereas 15 to 20% of the men they could have married died during the war<sup>24</sup>. According to Henry<sup>25</sup>, four compensatory elements compensated the loss of men (Figure 6.2). His work is based on a longitudinal analysis that, by definition, does not provide cross-sectional data. To complete his analysis, some elements will be given by years to make the following cross-sectional analysis on divorces more revealing.

**Figure 6.2. Women celibacy to be feared, men and women observed celibacy (cohorts 1881-1885 – 1906-1910)**



Sources: Henry, 1966; Chasteland and Pressat, 1962 (for men celibacy).

Lecture: For women born in 1891-1895, the expected celibacy was 9,9% without the war and 19.6% with the war. The observed celibacy rate was 12.5%. The difference between celibacy to be feared and actual celibacy is due for 11.3% to marriages with strangers (decrease from 19.6% to 18.8%), for 20.6% to supplementary marriages with widowers and divorced men (from 18.8% to 17.3%), for 19.7% to a diminution of men celibacy (17.3% to 15.9%) and for 48.5% to changing in generation crossing (15.9% to 12.5%).

The four compensatory elements that compensated the loss of men according to Henry<sup>26</sup> are summarised in Table 6.1 for the cohorts of women born between 1881 and 1910 and explained below.

**Table 1.1. Distribution of 100 additional marriages according to the compensation mechanism.**

Cohorts	marriages with foreigners	Supplementary marriages with widowers and divorced men	decrease of men celibacy	changing in generation crossing	Total
1881-1885	8,3	78,3	13,3	0,0	100
1886-1890	11,1	49,4	39,4	0,0	100
1891-1895	11,3	20,6	19,7	48,5	100
1896-1900	14,0	9,5	12,7	63,7	100
1901-1905	20,7	2,4	17,6	59,3	100
1906-1910	20,8	2,9	24,2	52,1	100

1. The modification of generations crossing: more than half of the gap between celibacy to be feared and observed celibacy is filled by the modification of generation crossing for women born between 1891 and 1910 (Table 6.1). The modification of generation crossing means that women married with men older or younger than in 'normal' times. Thereby, women born between 1891 and 1910 married more often with men of their age or younger men and less often men significantly older than them than women born between 1881 and 1890. In consequence, the age difference between spouses decreased by almost one year between 1907-1913 and 1925-1935 (Appendix A1).

2. The marriage of women with immigrants of whom large numbers came to France during and after the war for reconstruction<sup>27</sup> compensated for around 15 % the loss of men. This element has an increasing importance: from 11% for the cohort born in 1886-1890 to 21% for the cohort born in 1906-1910 (Table 6.1). 'After the brutal decrease caused by the outbreak of the Great War, a frank rebound for unions of foreigners with French women appeared since 1915, due to the lack of men (held at the front, dead or prisoners), but only since 1919 for unions of foreign women with French men'<sup>28</sup>. Marriages including at least one foreigner were more than twice as frequent during the war than in the pre-war period (Appendix A2). The number of marriages between a French woman and a foreigner increased considerably between 1915 and 1919 because of the presence in France of the Allied soldiers<sup>29</sup>. American and British husbands are numerous in 1920 (Appendix A2) but their number rapidly decreases during the interwar period. In the immediate afterwar, marriages between two French are more frequent than in 1914 but their share is falling to lower levels than in 1914 (94%) since

1923 (93,4%) and even to lower levels than in 1915-1916 (91.1%) since 1927 (90.8%) (Appendix A2). Therefore, from 1920 to 1931, the share of marriages with a foreigner (3.7 to 5.3%) and especially between two foreigners (1% to 4.5%) is increasing<sup>30</sup>. It is also interesting to note that spouses come less often from the same town after the war than before (61.1% in 1907-1913; 60.4% in 1914-1919 with a peak at 73.7 in 1915 and a minimum of 53.9% in 1919; and 56.4% in 1919-1931). The war seems to have gathered people who may not have met without it.

3. Supplementary marriages with divorced and widowed men have also contributed to reduce the impact of the losses of the war on female celibacy. This compensatory mechanism is especially important among women who formed part of the oldest marriage cohort during the conflict, born between 1881 and 1890 (Table 6.1).

During the war and the years just after, women marry more with widowed and divorced men (Appendix A3). Marriages involving one or two persons who had already been married were numerous during the war because most of the single young men were soldiers<sup>31</sup>. The lack of single men can still be seen up to 1925 when the share of two-singles marriages returned to almost the same levels as before the war (about 85%). From 1925 to 1933, the share of single women marrying widowed or divorced men was at the same level as before the war (about 6% of marriages), as the share of single men marrying widowed or divorced women (about 4%).

4. The decrease of male celibacy. It is a well-known fact that ‘In a normal situation, whether they are aware of it or not, some people are prevented from marrying because they are in competition with others’<sup>32</sup>. During WWI, French women married men they would not necessarily have married in peacetime. Indeed, 10 to 11 % of men never married in the cohorts born between 1850 and 1870<sup>33</sup>. The decrease of male celibacy means that some of them who would not have married actually did.

These marriages compensate generally less than a quarter of the lack of men and, in consequences, the surviving men were one of the cohorts with the lowest rate of permanent celibacy (figure 6.2).

Single women managed to marry thanks to these ‘compensatory marriages’, but without preventing widows and divorcees from marrying<sup>34</sup>. Actually, widows’ remarriages were much

more numerous between 1919 and 1925 than before the war (Appendix 6.A3) and divorced women no longer encountered bigger obstacles to getting married than widows<sup>35</sup>.

In resume, thanks to these compensation mechanisms, observed celibacy is much lower than the extent of celibacy contemporary sources feared would occur among the generations of women who were most affected by the war (figure 6.2).

However, the rebalancing with marriages of women with younger or already married men, immigrants or widowed or divorced men may have had an impact on the relationships between men and women of these cohorts. Indeed, these ‘compensation marriages’ are possibly less preferred than the marriages of previous cohorts, even if love marriages that mainly spread since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>36</sup> are put forward during and after the war<sup>37</sup>. However, a less strong social and cultural homogamy could also have benefited these couples, especially those who needed more independence after the war. The decrease of the age difference between men and women may also have changed the gender relations. The analysis of the movement and characteristics of the divorces that occurred during and, especially, just after the war will enhance our understanding of these changes.

### **A short history of separations and divorces in France**

In the wake of successive political regimes, divorce legislation has undergone many changes. During the Middle Ages, marriage was an ephemeral institution that was made and discarded at the mercy of alliances between families. Since the end of the eleventh century, the catholic Church began to impose its norm of marriage and finally advocated for indissolubility and prohibition of divorce in 1563 (Council of Trent). At the end of the *Ancien Régime*, the voices of the Enlightenment philosophers (notably Montesquieu and Voltaire) rose up to condemn the indissolubility of marriage that only separation could break but without allowing for remarriage<sup>38</sup>. Marriage was desacralized and secularized by the revolutionaries on September 3, 1791 (introduction of civil marriage) and the law of September 20, 1792 then established divorce, including by mutual consent, because ‘the faculty of divorce results from individual freedom and including an indissoluble commitment would be its loss’. Legal separation was suppressed. However, the 1792 law was quickly criticized for its excessive liberalism and the Civil Code (1804) limited the possibilities of divorce: divorce was maintained but the procedure was strict, and the formalities were more rigorous, rendering divorce henceforth exceptional (only those divorces on the grounds of

‘fault’ continued to be allowed). On the other hand, legal separation was reintroduced. Finally, the Restoration reaffirmed the indissolubility of marriage by abolishing divorce by the law of May 8, 1816. The royalty, returning to power, wanted ‘to return to marriage all his dignity in the interest of religion, morals, monarchy and family.’

From 1816 to 1884, many petitions demanded changes in the legislation and the reestablishment of divorce. Hopes of reestablishment were frequent – especially in 1830, 1848 and 1871 –, but it was not until 1884 (law of 27 July 1884, known as the Naquet law), that the divorce is re-established and only for fault<sup>39</sup>. This law is part of the spirit of a sanction imposed on the spouse who has not respected his commitments<sup>40</sup>.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is therefore possible to divorce and to separate. This paper will mainly focus on divorces because they represent 85 to 92% of all the judicial disunions at that time<sup>41</sup>.

### **Data and method for the study of divorce**

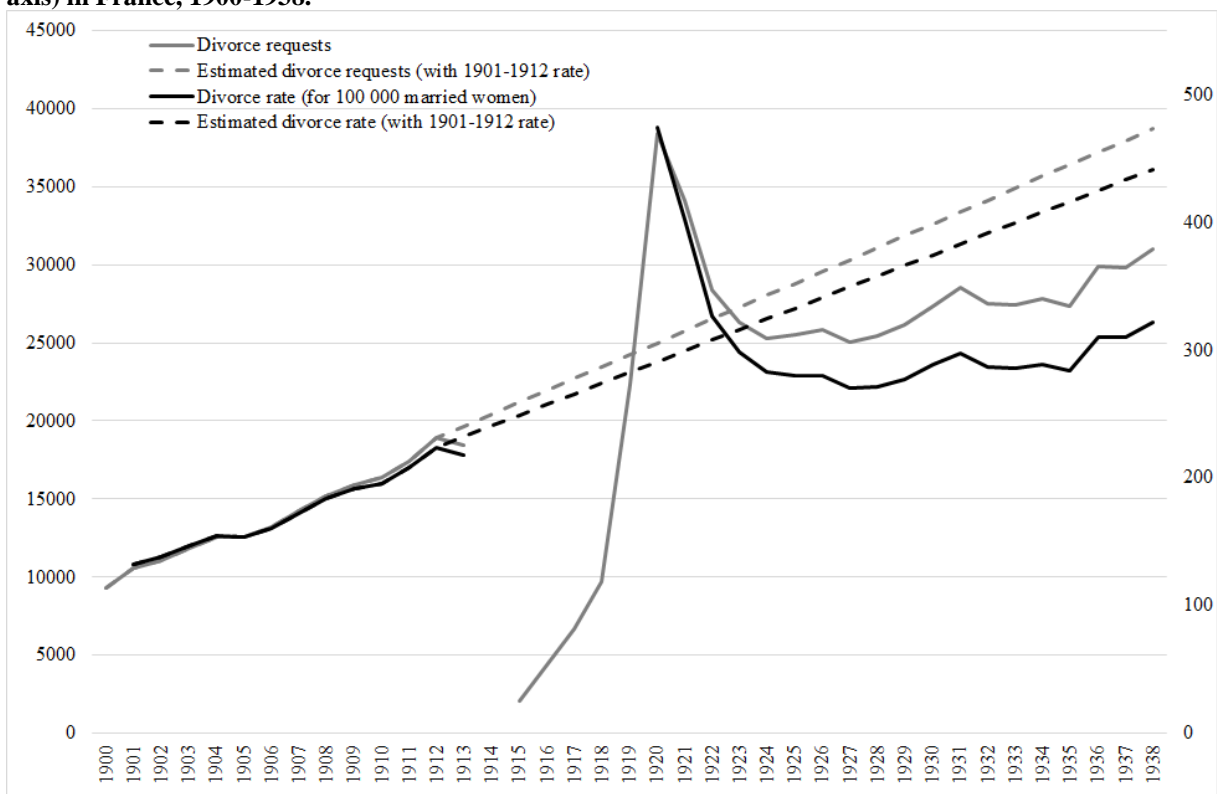
The main source for studying the evolution of divorces is the *Compte général de la justice civile et commerciale* (*General Account of Civil and Commercial Justice*) that publishes detailed data on separations and divorces. They provide the number of requests<sup>42</sup> by complainant (husband or wife), according to the family situation (with or without children) and the ground (main and counterclaims combined); as well as, for the period 1884-1933, the applicant's occupation and the duration of the marriage. This data concerns all applications for divorce and not only the accepted ones, which represent about 15 % of the applications.

We are interested also in requests for divorce that did not materialize. First, because they provide a better idea of the behavior of individuals at a given moment, while judgments can occur several months or even years after a request. Second, because the information about the complainant, the family situation or the ground are only given in the requests’ statistics and not in the judgments, at least not for every year. However, some details that do not appear in the *Justice accounts*, such as the nationality of the spouses or the marital status of the spouses before their marriage, are given in the *Statistics of the movement of the population* or in the *Statistical yearbooks*. These statistics will also be used to complete the analysis.

## The divorces of the war

Divorces are few during the war, but there is a sharp increase in divorces after the armistice (Figure 6.3). More than 109,000 divorces were pronounced between 1919 and 1922 but only 56,750 during the four years preceding the war (and 19,000 during). Are these divorces a consequence of the war or are they only a catch-up of those who did not take place during the conflict? If we stick to the numbers, the number of divorces between 1919 and 1921 is higher than the number of divorces of 1913 multiplied by 4, for the four years of the war<sup>43</sup>. So, there are more divorces during the immediate after war that they would have been without the conflict and this high number is not only the 'catching up' of war-divorces<sup>44</sup>. But, when looking at the long run, the divorce rate increase of the interwar is finally lower than during the 1900-1913 period (hatched lines, Figure 6.3).

**Figure 6.3. Number of divorce requests (left axis) and divorce rates for 100 000 married women (right axis) in France, 1900-1938.**



Sources: Civil Justice statistiques (*Compte général de l'administration de la Justice civile et commerciale en France et en Algérie (1837-1932)*), *Compte général de l'administration de la Justice civile et commerciale et de la Justice criminelle (1933-1938)*.

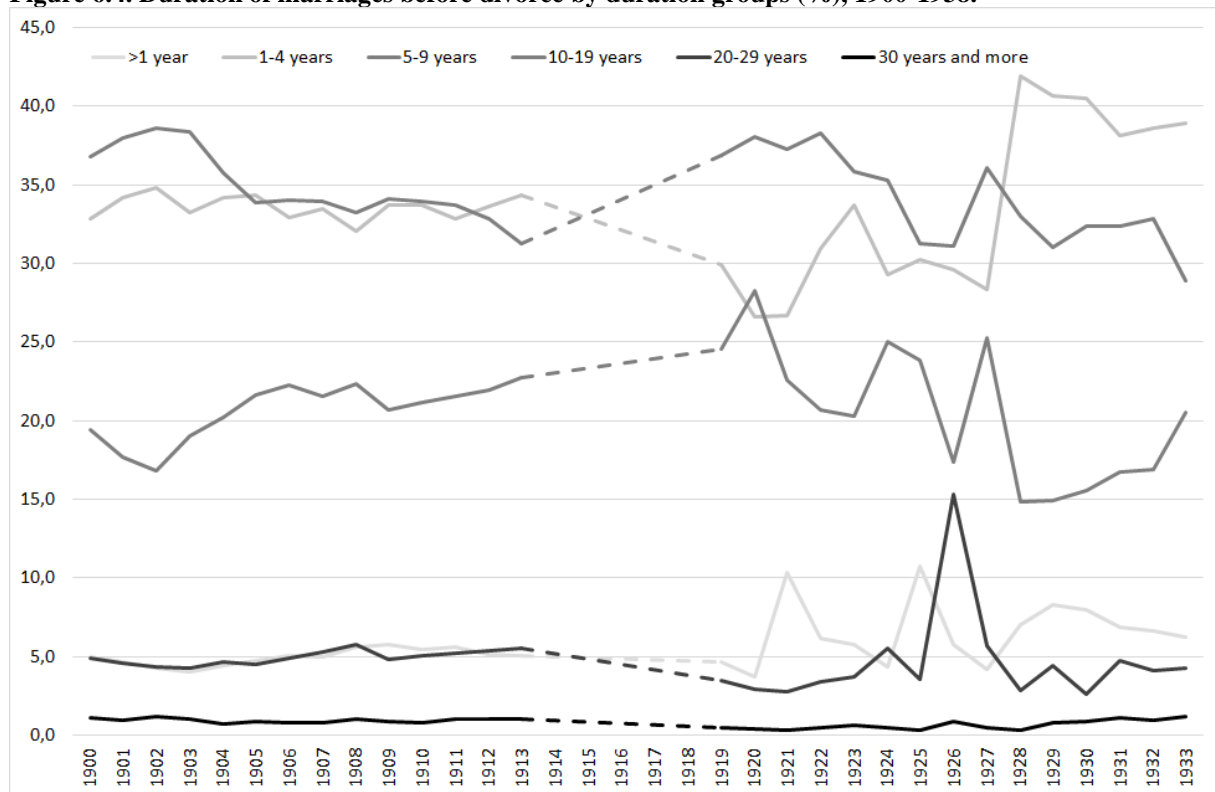
Note: The dashed lines represent the estimated number of divorces and divorce rate from 1913 to 1939 with the rate of increase calculated for the 1901-1912 period.

The war may have had a significant impact on the married life of couples causing a wave of divorces after the war, but it cannot be said that the First World War played a role in accelerating the trend of increasing divorce in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>45</sup>, unlike in other countries<sup>46</sup>. It is however possible that a number of divorces did not occur because of the death of the husband or because it was morally or socially difficult to divorce after such a deadly conflict. It is interesting to note that despite this finally moderate increase in divorces, there is a gap between the perception of contemporaries, who have the impression that the number of divorces is exploding, and reality<sup>47</sup>. According to Fouchard, this gap is due to the changes of women's place during the war that is presented as a threat for the traditional conjugal balance and the French family. She also hypothesises that this collective impression of the massive number of divorces can also be explained by the 'the painful surprises of the return'<sup>48</sup> and the actual difficulties faced by a lot of couples, even if they do not necessarily lead to a divorce.

The analysis shows an increase of marriages duration during and just after the war followed by a strong decrease between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s (Appendix A4). By going into more details, it appears that two categories of couples divorce more frequently than usual during the immediate post-war period (1920-1922): couples married for five to nine years, that correspond to marriages contracted between 1910 and 1917 and couples who married very quickly after the end of the war and whose marriage lasted only a short time – less than a year or one to five years on the other hand (figure 6.4).

To understand more precisely the evolution of divorces, it is necessary to know which generations are divorcing. To do this, we combine cross-sectional analysis (by years or periods) with longitudinal analysis (by cohorts). Divorces by duration of marriage are used to redistribute divorces according to the years couples were married. It is then possible to refine divorce rates by relating the number of divorces to the number of marriages of the year couples married rather than marriages in the year of divorce as is generally done (figure 6.5).

**Figure 6.4. Duration of marriages before divorce by duration groups (%), 1900-1938.**



Sources: Civil Justice statistics (*Compte général de l'administration de la Justice civile et commerciale en France et en Algérie*).

By relating divorces to the corresponding marriage periods, it appears that war brides (who constitute a particular group as we have seen) had higher risks of divorce. Couples married before the war also faced strong risks of divorce, even if much less strong than the war brides. One can notice a slight increase of the risk of divorce since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But, even considering this increase it appears that marriages that took place just before the war had higher risks of divorce than the only consequence of the ‘normal’ increase of divorce rates. Eventually, even if it is not possible to analyze the total divorce risk of the marriages occurring between 1920 and 1924 because our data coverage ends in 1933, it seems that, at least for the ten first years of marriages, couples married just after the war had the same risks of divorce as the ones which married just before.

**Figure 6.5. Frequency of marriage durations according to the period of marriage (1890-1924 marriage cohorts).**



Sources: Civil Justice statistics (*Compte général de la Justice*).

Note: This figure gives the frequency of marriages durations according to the period of marriage. The sum of the frequencies is therefore equal to the rate of divorce for 1000 marriages of the period. Only 0 to 19 years-old marriages are considered and even less for the youngest generations because data for 20 years-old marriages were available only for the oldest generations. Birth cohorts are estimated with a 29 years-old mean age at marriage.

For instance, 46 marriages for 1000 contracted between 1905 and 1909 have ended by a divorce (only considering divorces before 20 years of marriage). Of these 46 marriages, 18 have lasted less than five years, 13 less between five and nine years, 7 between 10 and 14 years and 9 between 15 to 19 years.

By associating the estimated birth cohorts to the marriages' periods<sup>49</sup>, different stories are revealed. The men of the youngest cohorts affected by the war (born between 1891 and 1895) were often single at the time of the conflict and the survivors marry actually more than the other cohorts thanks to the 'compensation' marriages (figure 6.5). In the cohort the most affected by the war in terms of mortality<sup>50</sup> (born between 1886 and 1890), many survivors also managed to get married, but they had significant divorce rates, especially after zero to four years of marriage. Eventually, the cohorts born between 1876 (and especially 1881) and 1885 were also strongly affected by mortality (although less than the youngest) but also by the separations from their families imposed by the war. Indeed, in these cohorts, the men sent to the front were 29 to 38 in 1914, so a high proportion of them were already married and fathers. These men and families have therefore probably suffered the most from the separation and the traumas of the war when reunited – even if these traumas may also have prevented

younger men to fall in love or to marry and start a family after the war. The First World war has had a double impact on the men, the couples and the who were of marrying and childbearing age during the conflict: first, in terms of mortality and mourning, but also for their family life.

### **Who asks for divorce and why?**

The weight of the marital institution is very different for men and women. The latter are under the authority of their father until their marriage from which they come under the authority of their husband<sup>51</sup>. The Civil Code (1804) inscribes and institutes the paternal and marital power and the legal incapacity of the married woman, placed under the tutelage of her husband<sup>52</sup>. During the period we are studying, women are therefore judicially dependent on their husbands. But, even more than this judicial dependence, it was the economic incapacity of women that compelled them to live with a father, a companion or a husband. Without a man's salary, women could not survive<sup>53</sup>. This economic and legal dependence of women should logically have motivated them to stay in a couple in order to benefit from the salary of their companion or their husband. By asking for judicial disunity, they ran the risk of putting themselves in a situation of economic distress, especially women who sought divorce rather than separation because the husband no longer had the obligation to support his wife. Yet, women formed the majority of those asking for separation and divorce<sup>54</sup>. Nevertheless, during our period of observation, the share of women asking for divorce for the first time fell below 50%: from 1919 to 1921, and once more in 1925, men were more often the demanding party for a divorce than women (Figure 6.6).

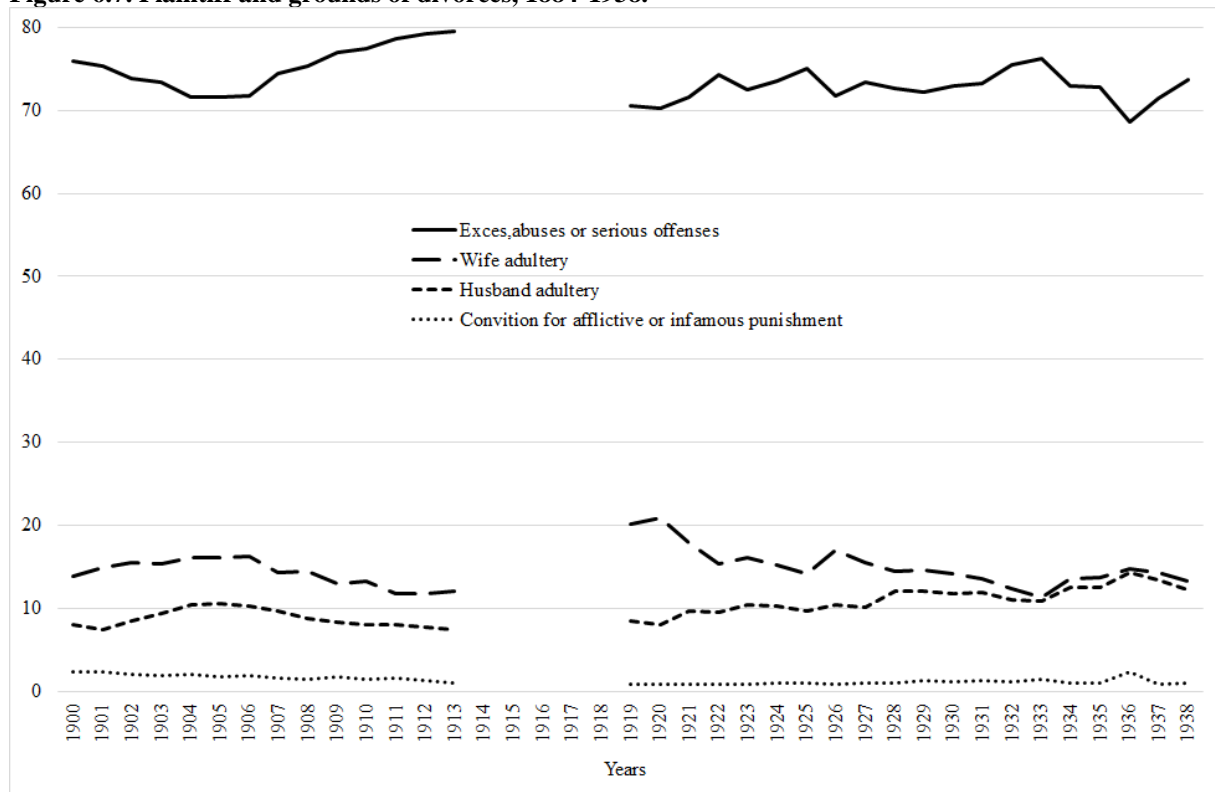
**Figure 6.6. Women asking for divorce, 1900-1938.**



Sources: Civil Justice statistics (*Compte général de la Justice*).

The same pattern occurred in England<sup>55</sup> after WWI and in the US and Australia after WWII<sup>56</sup>. Several explanations can be put forward to explain why. First, by producing more widows, the deadliest wars would free more women from seeking divorce, in comparison to the situation in which the husbands of these widows would not have died<sup>57</sup>. According to a second explanation, men being away during the war, the wives would be unfaithful to their husbands more frequently than usual (or their husbands would suspect them more), which would lead men to ask more often for divorce than at other times<sup>58</sup>. Indeed, in France during the First World War, applications for divorce on the grounds of adultery by the wife increases (Figure 6.7). Moreover, the number of illegitimate births increased from 8.5% in 1914 – and a mean level of 8.8% between 1901 and 1913 – to a mean level of 13.2% during the war<sup>59</sup>. The share of illegitimate births decreased quickly after the war as it was already at the same level as before the war in 1922. A third explanation may lie in the trauma of men - both physical and psychological – a trauma which they did not necessarily want to share with, or have their wives suffer from. As researches on WWII has shown, heavy combat left a substantial number of soldiers with symptoms of posttraumatic stress, including an inability to feel emotion and closeness to others; immobilizing anxiety; and depression<sup>60</sup>.

**Figure 6.7. Plaintiff and grounds of divorces, 1884-1938.**



Sources: Civil Justice statistics (*Compte général de la Justice*).

### Who divorces?

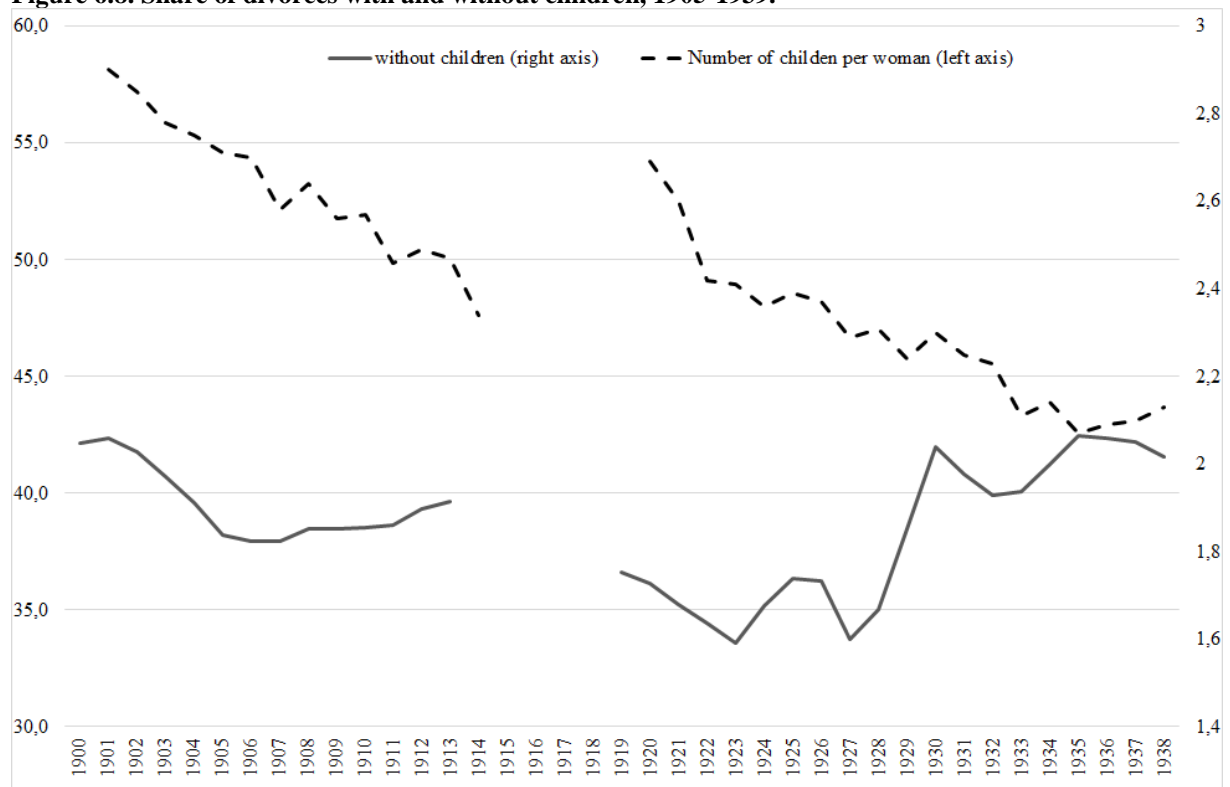
To understand if some couples were more likely to divorce than others during and after the war, the socioeconomic characteristics of the divorcees (profession, family situation, nationalities etc.) are now studied. The idea is not only to understand who has more chance to divorce but also if the couples who had higher risks of divorcing during and just after the war have the same characteristics than before or if we can identify some changed that could be seen as consequences of the conflict.

### Fertility

Data from the *Mouvement de la population* also give information about the presence or the absence of children (Figure 6.8). First, we notice that a lot of divorces (more than one third) concern couples who did not have children<sup>61</sup>. Second, couples who divorced during the immediate afterwar more often had children than those who divorced before the war. But one can also notice an increase of childless divorces in the 1930s. With an offset of twelve years, these divorces correspond of the marriages of the immediate afterwar years. Yet, fertility

declines during the interwar period (Figure 6.8), as childlessness increases<sup>62</sup>. The evolution of the share of divorces without children can thus be partly explained by the movement of fertility. But we may still wonder whether the marriages that ended in divorce were less fertile than the others, and whether childlessness can explain some of the divorces of the interwar. Researchers have shown that venereal diseases such as gonorrhoea and syphilis can cause miscarriages, stillbirth and temporal or definitive infertility<sup>63</sup>. And we know that a lot of soldiers had sexual relations with prostitutes during the First World war<sup>64</sup>. In consequence, the rise of childlessness could also be a consequence of the diseases soldiers brought back home. Eventually, the traumas caused by the war may also have caused psychological or physical infertility among soldiers. Moreover, it might be that some men or women no longer wanted a child after the traumas of the war. Deeper analysis would be necessary to understand the impact of the war on couples' sexuality after the war. But what we know so far is that for the era between 1884 and 1975, the interwar period is the only one during which the share of divorces without children increased.

**Figure 6.8. Share of divorces with and without children, 1905-1939.**



Sources: divorces : *Compte général de la Justice*, 1905-1913 ; 1919-1939; number of births per woman: Daguët, 2002.

## *Professions*

We also have information on the professions of divorced people (Table 6.2). One can notice a decrease of the share of workers and servants after the war, whereas the share of rich people and especially shopkeepers increases. Therefore, it seems that the interwar divorces concern more often than before the richest part of the population than the poor. Is it because divorces were expensive and because poor people, during the post-war period, did not have money to spend on divorce? Studies on post-WWII divorces have shown that men with more schooling were at lower risk of divorce than the others. If we associate the level of instruction with the socioeconomic levels, it seems that the opposite appears in the France after WWI<sup>65</sup>.

**Table 6.2. Profession of the person who asks for divorce (%)**

<b>Divorces</b>	<b>Owners, annuitants, liberal professions</b>	<b>Shopkeepers</b>	<b>Farmers</b>	<b>Workers</b>	<b>Servants</b>	<b>Eff.</b>	<b>No data</b>
1890-1899	10,7	17,2	9,7	55,3	7,1	86.673	7.954
1900-1909	11,2	14,6	10,4	55,4	8,5	126.451	12.682
1910-1913	12,1	14,2	9,5	56,2	7,9	71.177	7.672
1919-1924	12,8	18,4	10,6	52,9	5,3	174.854	22.579
1925-1929	11,8	18,6	10,4	52,7	6,4	127.937	28.357
1930-1933	12,4	18,7	10,3	52,9	5,7	83.481	17.906

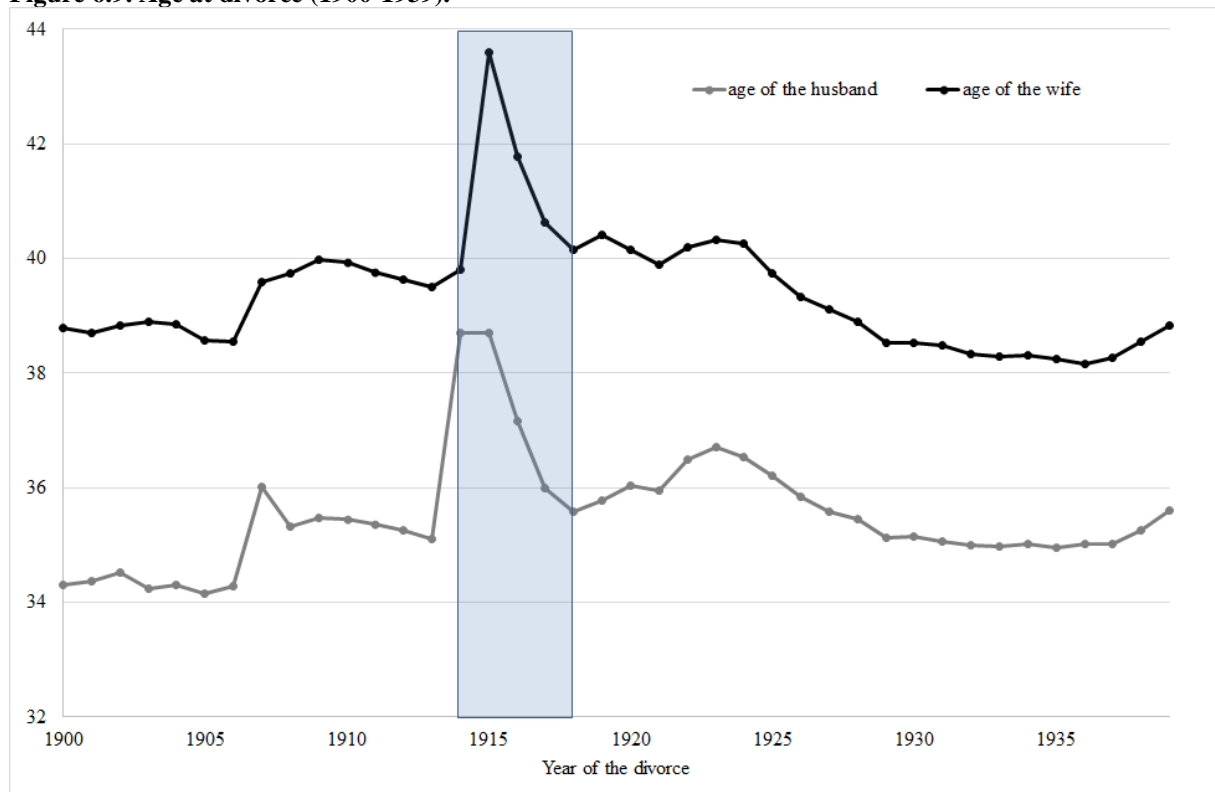
Source: *Compte général de la Justice*, 1890-1913; 1919-1933

## *Age*

The *Compte general de la Justice* does not provide more information about couples who requested a divorce, but we can find more data in the *Mouvement de la population* such as the age of the divorcees, the marital status, and the nationalities of the divorcees. As a reminder, this data concerns divorces that were accepted, not all requests.

As already mentioned, the divorces of the war concern some specific groups of the population. The analysis of the age of the spouses show that, logically, when the young men were at the front, the age at divorce increased (Figure 6.9). It is also interesting to notice that since 1925, the age at divorce decreased which is consistent with the decline of the duration of marriages (Appendix A4). The divorcees of the 1930s are the youngest of the first half of the twentieth century but it is probably more an effect of the beginning economic crisis than of the war, since the decrease of the age at divorce is mainly due to the increase of young people who divorce during the first five years of marriage, so at the earliest in 1923.

**Figure 6.9. Age at divorce (1900-1939).**



Source: *Mouvement de la population* (1913-1939). Accepted divorces only.

### ***Marital status***

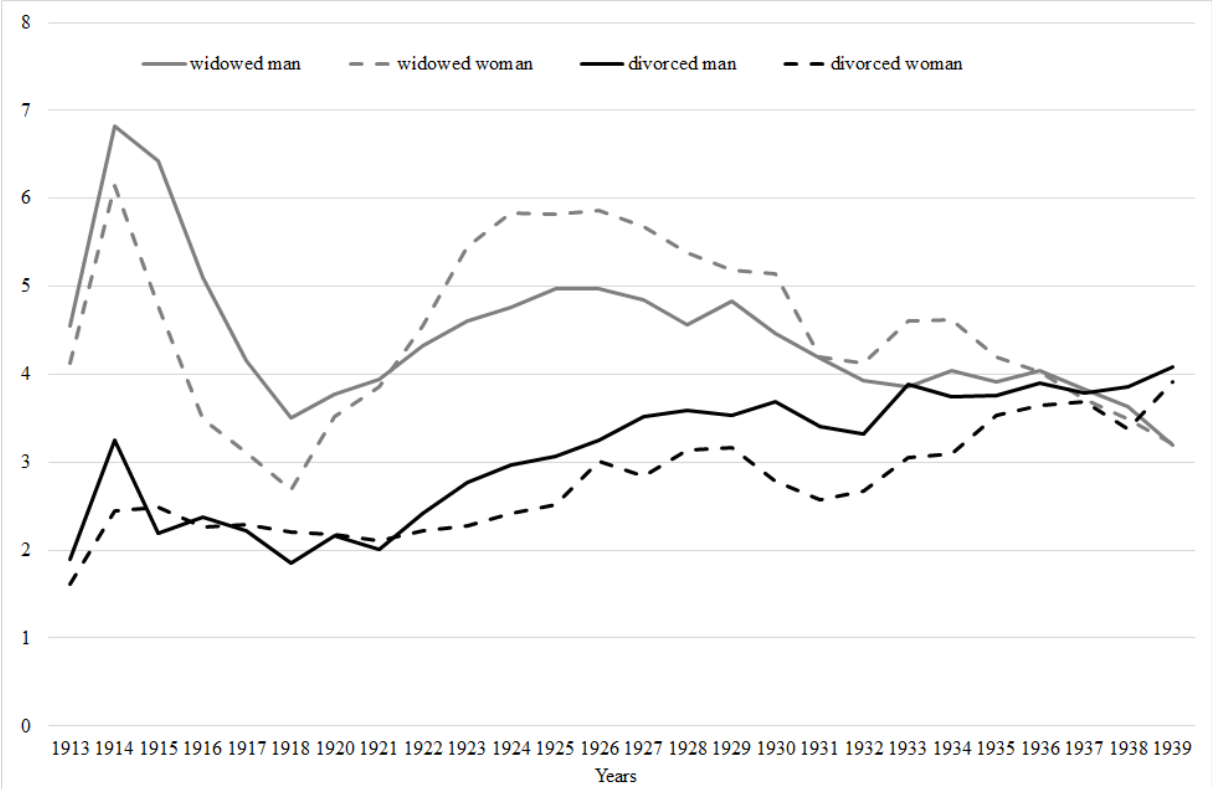
By analysing the marital status of the divorcees at the time of their marriage, one can first observe the peak of divorces during the war that included at least one widowed person or one already divorced person. It appears that those few divorces (Figure 6.3) that occurred during the war concerned more often than usual people whose marriages had already been broken once before (by death or divorce). These marriages appeared to have lasted longer than the others (Appendix A4).

What is probably more interesting to notice is the increase of couples who already lived separated when they filed for divorce. This increase occurred during the 1920s for widows in a second marriage, and during all of the interwar period for divorced people who were in a second marital union. (Figure 6.10). If we consider an average duration of marriage of twelve years plus one or two years<sup>66</sup>, the increase of divorces involving one or two widows corresponds to marriages that occurred between 1910 and 1917, thus during the war. Therefore, they can correspond to the increase of marriages involving a widow(er) observed in the beginning of the conflict (Appendix A3). The increase of divorces among people who

had already divorced once can also be a simple consequence of the increase of marriages with divorced people during all the interwar (Appendix A3).

With our quantitative data, it is very hard to know if the explanation of the rise is only numerical (more marriages of that type causing logically more divorces of that type) or if marriages with already separated people lasted less than marriages between single partners.

**Figure 6.10. Widowed and divorced husbands and wives (1913-1939).**



Source: *Mouvement de la population* (1913-1939). Accepted divorces only.

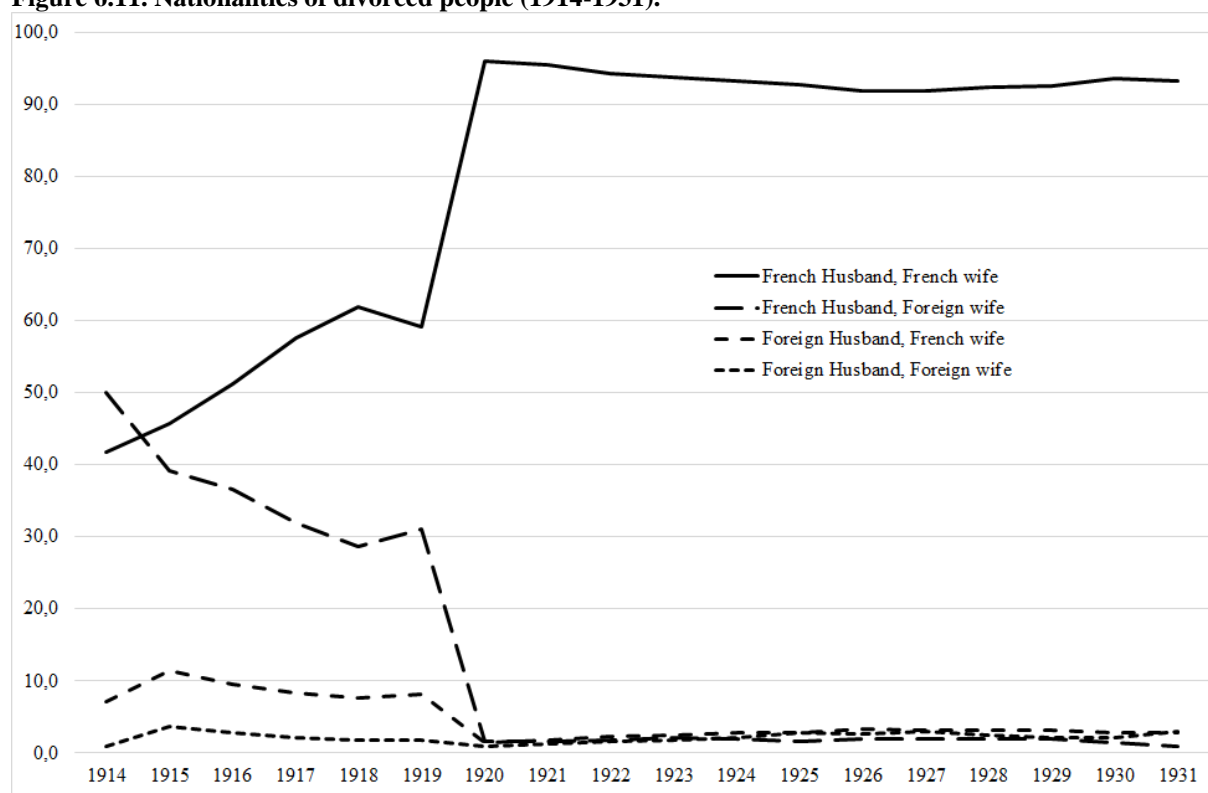
**Nationalities**

The *Mouvements de la population* also include the nationalities of divorced people from 1914 to 1931 (Figure 6.11). Unfortunately, such data is not available before the First World war, so we cannot compare what happens after the war to what was before.

During the war, a lot of the few couples who divorced included one or two foreigners: a quarter to almost half of the divorces. In comparison, after the war, they represented only 10 to 17 % of the divorces. Among these divorces including at least one foreigner, couples composed by a French husband and a foreign wife constituted the majority: 75 to 85%. These figures probably point to strong rejection of foreigners during the war, which made it

impossible to remain married with a wife or a husband who had the nationality of the enemy. As a reminder, 20% of foreign wives were German at the end of the nineteenth century (Appendix A2). The high share of marriages between two French in the immediate afterwar points in the same direction (figure A22, Appendix 2). This is probably why these divorces appear to be overrepresented: people did not divorce during the war except when there was a hurry, like in this case.

**Figure 6.11. Nationalities of divorced people (1914-1931).**



Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1914-1931. Accepted divorces only.

## Conclusion

Despite the extremely significant losses that decimated several cohorts of young men, the Great War had rather limited effects on the nuptiality levels of the French. Its main effect was that women married or remarried men they would not necessarily have married during peacetime. These ‘compensation’ marriages consisted of unions of women with widowed or divorced men, and with foreigners who often came to France for the reconstruction), as well as marriages of women with men younger or older than usual (i.e. the modification of the crossing of the generations). Finally, there was a decrease in men's celibacy<sup>67</sup>.

Many of these marriages lasted, limiting ultimate celibacy rates (at age 50) of the men and women the most affected by the war. During the interwar period – after a peak of divorces just after the conflict – the overall number of divorces was even than could be expected had there been no war<sup>68</sup>. But, by looking more closely at the data, it appears that different cohorts did not have the same risks of divorce. Indeed, the risk of divorce of the couples married just after the war, during it and just after is higher than for the other cohorts, which implies that couples which married longer before the war probably divorced less than expected. This held true especially for the cohorts of soldiers in their thirties during the conflict, who were often married, or even fathers.

This pattern validates our first hypothesis: couples that suffered from separation invoked by the war had a higher risk of divorce. In addition to the absence of the husband and father and the traumas due to the war, it appears that the distance also caused fears about, or actual infidelity. The divorces of the immediate afterwar years took place more often at the request of men and with adultery of the wife given as a motivation, than during any other period before the 1970s<sup>69</sup>.

As to our second hypothesis, the couples married during the war were the most likely to divorce. These couples form a specific group because they were generally older than couples who had married before the war, and more often widowed or divorced. French people, especially women, also more often married foreigners during the war, and more often people from the same town. But the marriages of the war also concerned young couples that married before the groom's departure to war, during a permission of leave, or even by proxy. The rush of these marriages could explain why so many of them ended in divorce. Unfortunately, our data does not allow to investigate the causes underlying these patterns further.

As to the 'compensatory' marriages, they seem to have provoked as many divorces as the pre-war marriages affected by the war, which validates our third hypothesis. First, these marriages concerned women who married men they would not necessarily have chosen in peacetime. Second, these marriages concerned mainly the cohort the most affected by the war in terms of mortality (born between 1891 and 1895). It appears, moreover, that even though many survivors managed to get married, they had significant divorce rates, especially during the first four years of marriage. These soldiers may not have suffered from separation from their spouses or children because most of them were not married or fathers at the time, but this does not mean that they did not have girlfriends or even fiancées from whom separation was probably as hard. Those who were in their late teenage years or their early twenties may not

have had romantic relationships, but the war took them in their ‘best years’. A high number of the young men of their age class died and a high share of the survivors were wounded, handicapped, or had ‘broken faces’. These young men were psychologically and physically traumatised and even if they managed to marry, the impact of the war seems to have had strong repercussions on their romantic, marital, and family lives. While the women of their age had not fought, they had also suffered from the separation. Moreover, after the war, whereas men were few and were in an advantageous position of strength to get married, women were in strong competition with each other. This is demonstrated, for example, by the way they were supposed to advertise their quality in the matrimonial classified ads<sup>70</sup>.

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## Appendices

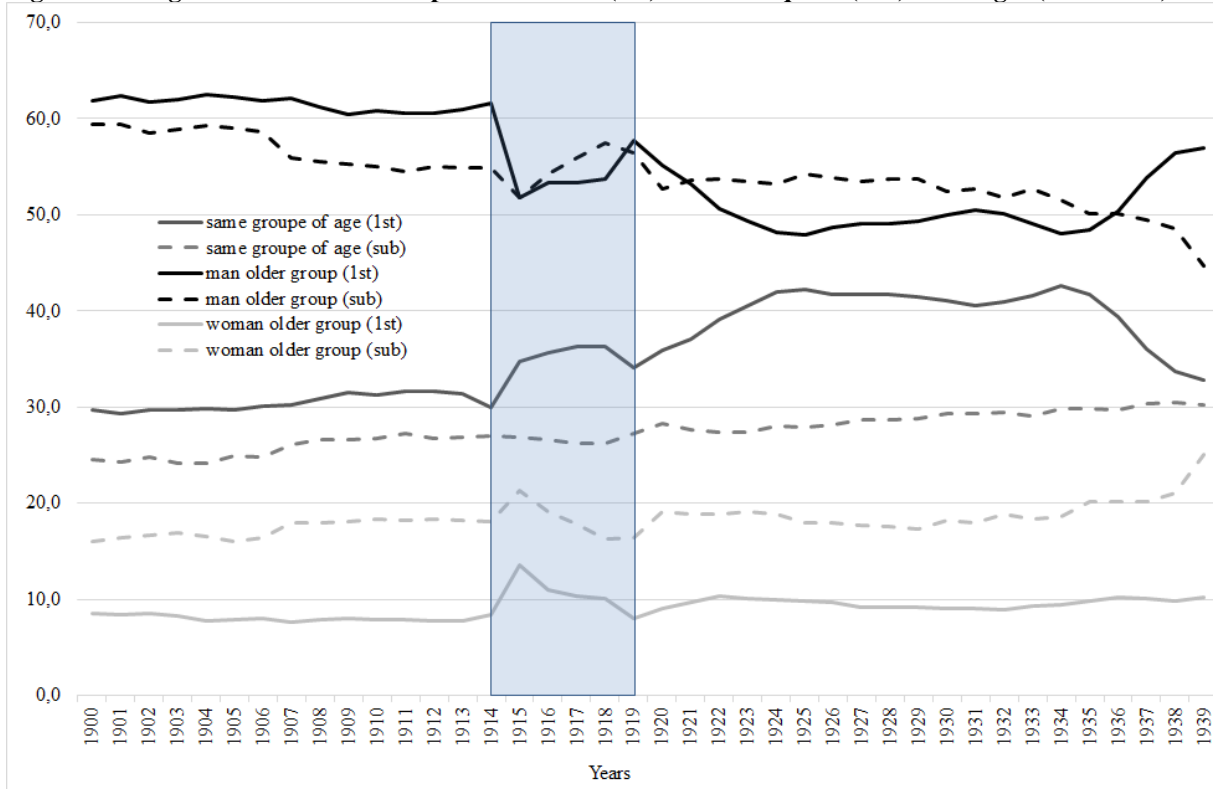
### Appendix 1. Age at marriage and age differences (1900-1938).

**Table 6.3. Age at (first) marriage, men and women, 1900-1938.**

Periods	Age at marriage (all)			Age at marriage (first)		
	women	men	age difference	women	men	age difference
1900-1906	25,1	29,4	4,2	23,7	27,8	4,1
1907-1913	25,7	29,6	3,8	23,9	27,8	3,9
1914-1918	27,6	31,3	3,7	25,1	28,5	3,3
1919-1924	26,4	29,8	3,4	24,4	27,6	3,2
1925-1935	25,6	28,5	2,9	23,6	26,3	2,7
1936-1939	26,4	29,6	3,2	24,0	27,1	3,2

Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1900-1938.

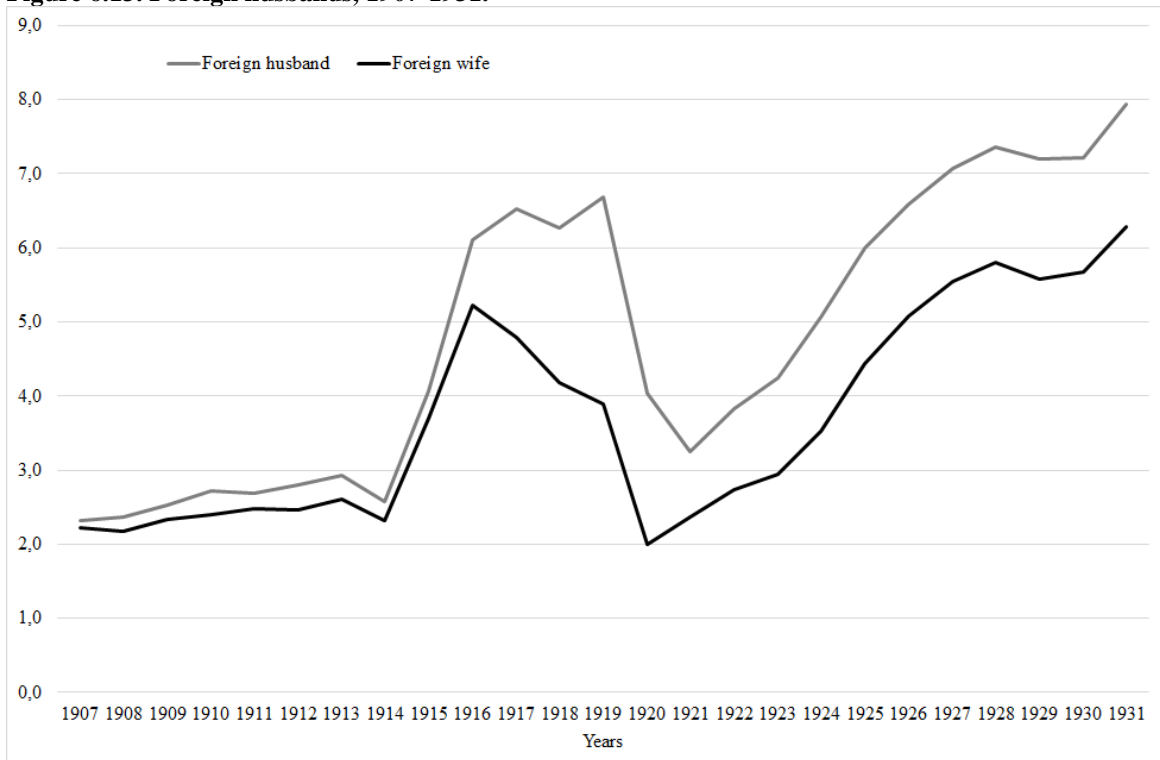
**Figure 6.12. Age difference between spouses for first (1st) and subsequent (sub) marriages (1900-1939).**



Source : *Mouvement de la population*, 1900-1939.

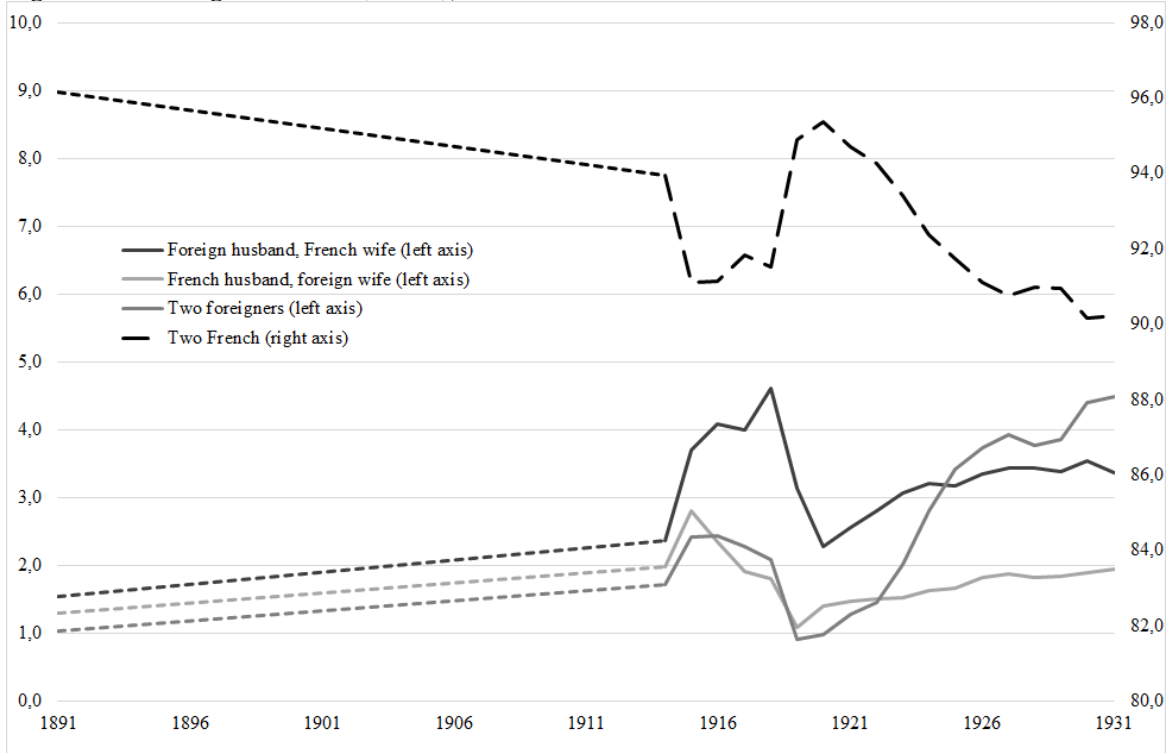
## Appendix 2. Marriages with foreigners

Figure 6.13. Foreign husbands, 1907-1931.



Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1907-1931

Figure 6.14. Foreign husbands (details), 1891-1931.



Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1891; 1914-1931 (between 1891 and 1914 and after 1931, there is no statistics about spouses' nationalities except between 1907 and 1913 where nationalities are given but not crossed for the two spouses, see below). For the period 1914-1919, French statistics don't consider the ten invaded départements of the north and the east of France. The estimations for the 90 départements we use were made by Munoz-Perez and Tribalat (1984) who have adjusted the figures of the 77 départements.

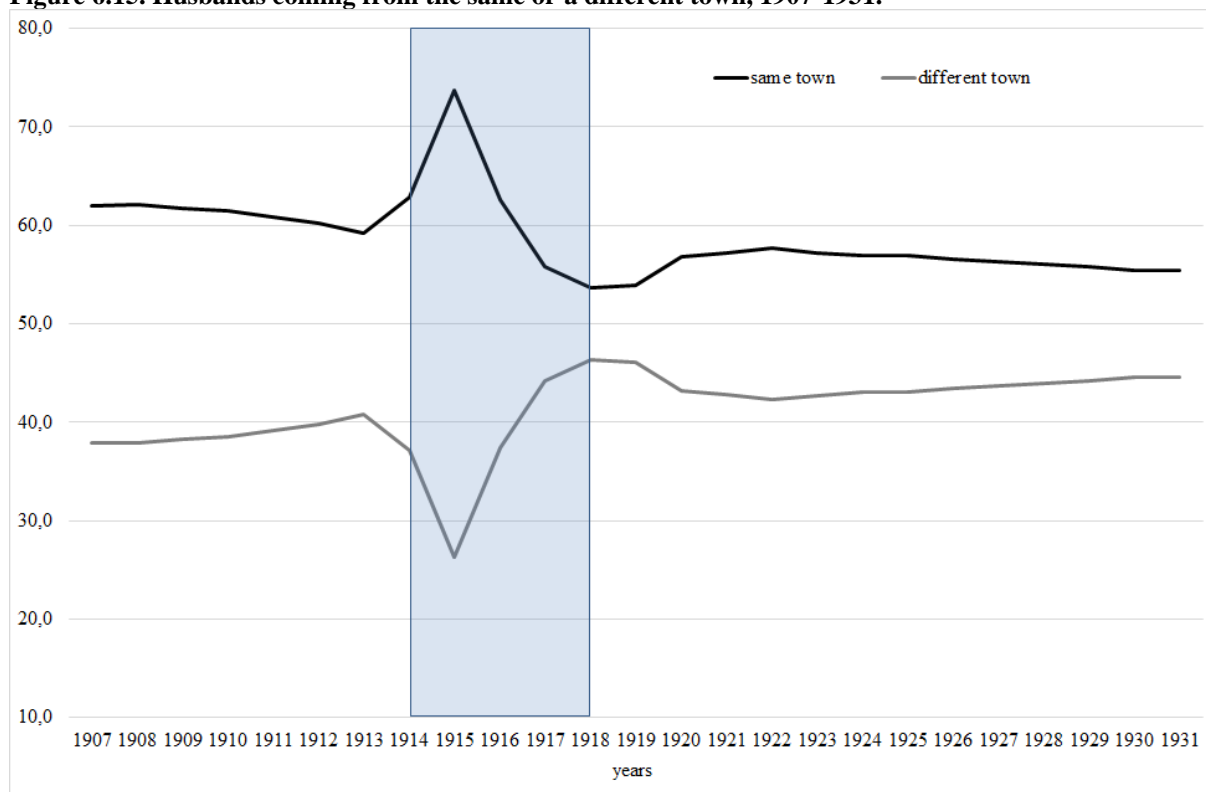
**Table 6.4. Nationalities of foreign wives and husbands, 1891-1930.**

Wives	1891	1920	1925	1930
German	20,5	19,4	12,2	9,3
Belgian and Luxembourgish	42,6	33,8	28,0	23,8
British	2,0	1,4	1,5	1,5
Spanish	4,7	6,4	10,8	13,4
Italians	14,6	26,2	27,8	29,9
Polish	0,0	0,7	2,4	7,6
Russian	0,0	0,9	0,8	1,1
Swiss	9,6	6,7	8,3	7,1
Other Europeans	0,0	3,6	6,5	4,8
American	0,0	0,8	1,2	1,0
Other	6,1	0,1	0,4	0,4
All	100	100	100	100

Husbands	1891	1920	1925	1930
German	12,8	6,8	4,7	3,5
Belgian and Luxembourgish	40,8	37,1	22,3	18,5
British	2,1	5,8	2,2	1,8
Spanish	5,6	9,5	11,9	13,1
Italians	21,0	15,9	30,2	31,8
Polish	0,0	1,5	2,8	4,4
Russian	0,0	2,5	3,4	4,9
Swiss	11,8	8,0	10,6	8,3
Other Europeans	0,0	6,5	8,1	10,1
American	0,0	5,3	1,4	1,5
Other	5,9	1,2	2,2	2,2
All	100	100	100	100

Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1891; 1920 ; 1925 ; 1930.

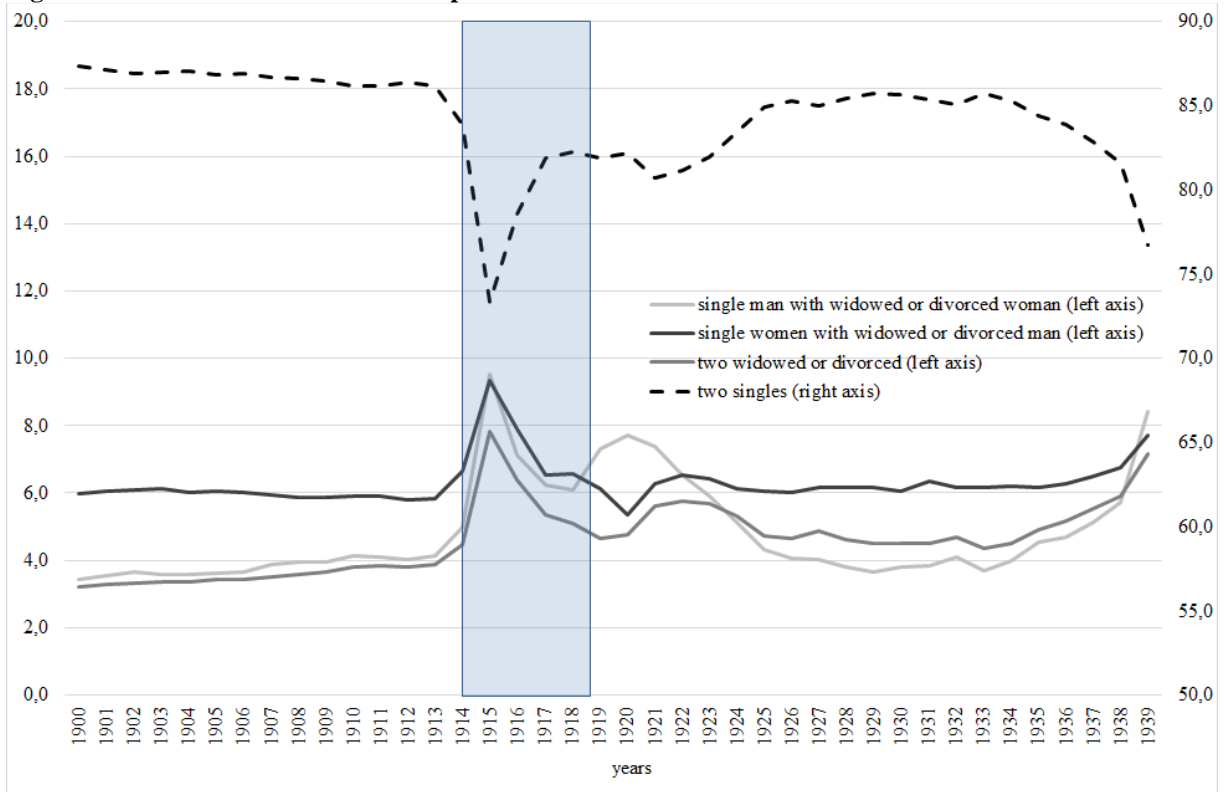
**Figure 6.15. Husbands coming from the same or a different town, 1907-1931.**



Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1907-1931.

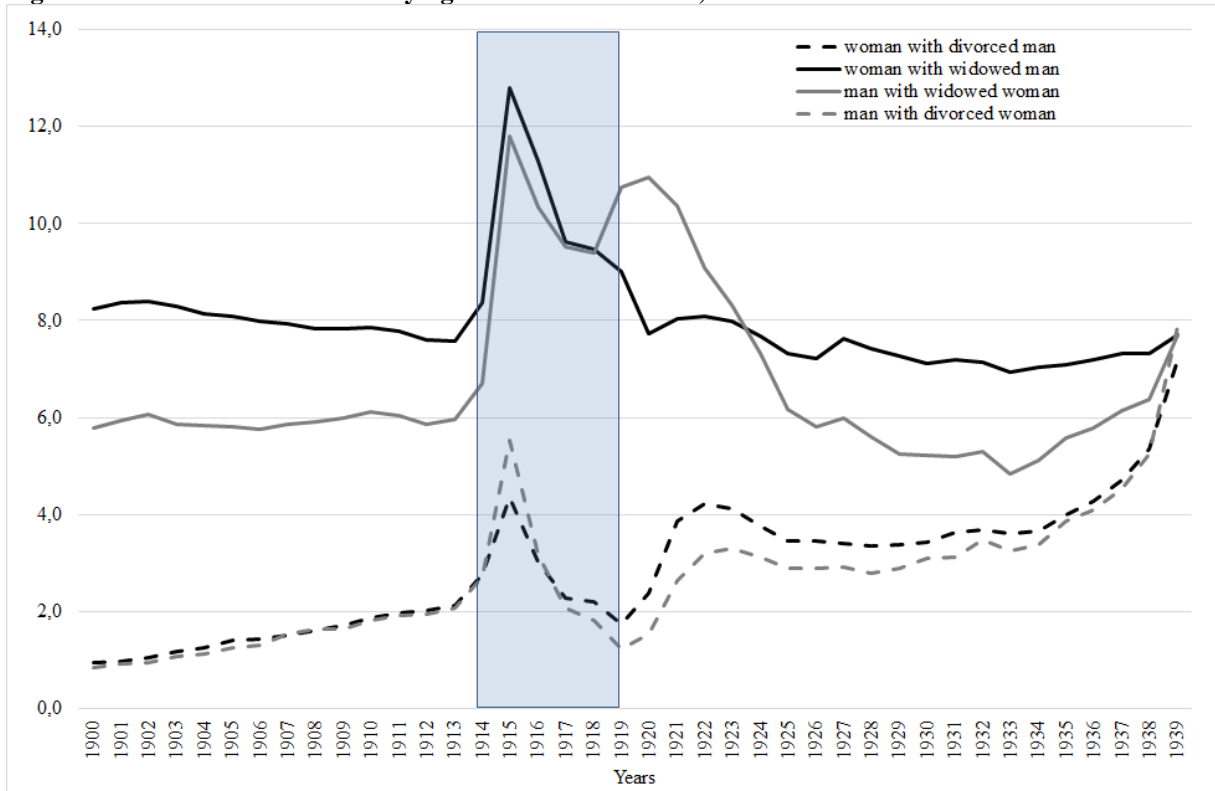
**Appendix 3. Marriages with divorced or widowed (1900-1938).**

**Figure 6.16. Marital status of the new spouses 1900-1939.**



Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1900-1938.

**Figure 6.17. Men and women marrying divorced or widowed, 1900-1939.**



Source: *Mouvement de la population*, 1900-1938.

## Appendix 4. Duration of marriages

Figure 6.18. Duration of marriages, 1900-1938.



Source : *Mouvement de la population*, 1900-1938 (accepted divorces only).

<sup>1</sup> Vidal-Naquet, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Perrot, 1984; Rebreyend, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Fouchard, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Vidal-Naquet, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, 1949; Stolz, 1954; Campbell, 1984; Phillips, 1988; Audoin-Rouzeau, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, 1991, 188.

<sup>8</sup> Studies on more recent conflicts have shown a higher risk of divorce for the veterans than for the non-veterans (Pavalko and Eder, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Brittain, 1933; Brill and Reebe, 1955.

<sup>10</sup> Pavalko and Elder, 1990, 1213–1234.

<sup>11</sup> French soldiers were authorized to marry by procuracy by a law of 1915 (Vidal-Naquet, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Phillips, 1988. Phillips specifies that if increased war marriages may have played a role in the post-war divorce rate in some countries, this hypothesis doesn't help to explain the post-war increase in countries like France or Germany where there was no rise in marriages during the war.

<sup>13</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>14</sup> Vidal-Naquet, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Rohrbasser, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Festy, 1984; Brée, Eggerickx and Sanderson, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Rohrbasser J-M., 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>19</sup> Chasteland and Pressat, 1962.

<sup>20</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>21</sup> Dupâquier, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> The average number of marriages per year is about 306 700 for the period 1910-1913.

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<sup>23</sup> The decline of nuptiality during the 1930s (Figure 6.1) can be explained by the arrival on the marriage market of the small cohorts born during the war (Bardet, 1999; Sardon, 2005); but also, by the economic crisis.

<sup>24</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>25</sup> Idem.

<sup>26</sup> Idem.

<sup>27</sup> The detail of the nationalities of the foreign spouses is only given in 1891 and between 1920 and 1931 but is interesting to analyse (appendix 2). Logically, German spouses are fewer in 1931 (9.3% of the foreign wives and 3.5 % for the foreign husbands) than in 1891 (respectively 20.5 and 12.8) but what is surprising is that the decrease only appears in 1925 for the wives (still 19.4% in 1920). The predominance of Belgian (more than 40% of the spouses in 1891 and more than a third in 1920) decreases during the interwar. The Belgian immigrants are then edged out by new immigrants who came for the reconstruction: Spanish (twice more husbands in 1930 than in 1920), Italian (wives especially) and, above all, Polish (who are five times more in 1930 than in 1920, even ten times when only considering the wives).

<sup>28</sup> Munoz Perez and Tribalat. 1984.

<sup>29</sup> Dupâquier, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> In the thirties, the departure of foreigners linked to the economic crisis, the more numerous naturalizations since the law of 1927 that facilitates them and the overall decline in the French nuptiality reduced all foreign marriages except for the two-foreigners unions (Munoz Perez and Tribalat, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> Marriages between two singles are especially low for the four last months of 1914 and the four first months of 1915. Then, from 1916, soldiers had more permissions and were therefore more likely to marry (Dupâquier, 1988) which increased a bit the number of two singles marriages.

<sup>32</sup> Henry, 1966, 312.

<sup>33</sup> Chasteland and Pressat. 1962.

<sup>34</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>35</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>36</sup> Sohn. 1996.

<sup>37</sup> Rebreyend, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Sardon, 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Mutual consent to divorce will only be re-established in 1975. To know more about separations and divorces and the couples who disunite since the French Revolution, see Brée, *forthcoming*.

<sup>40</sup> Ronsin, 1990.

<sup>41</sup> Brée, *forthcoming*.

<sup>42</sup> For this study, only the main applications will be used (not the counterclaims).

<sup>43</sup> Fouchard, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that there is no such peak for legal separations. The latest don't allow remarriage so it seems that couples who choose to divorce after the war wanted to be able to remarry.

<sup>45</sup> Fouchard, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, 1988.

<sup>47</sup> Fouchard, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Mollier, 1930.

<sup>49</sup> We consider an average age at marriage of 29 years old for men (source: *Mouvement de la population*).

<sup>50</sup> Héran, 2014; Vallin, 1973.

<sup>51</sup> Perrot. 1998.

<sup>52</sup> Schweitzer, 2002; Guillaumin, 1978.

<sup>53</sup> Fauve-Chamoux, 1981; Battagliola, 1995; Perrot, M. 1998.; Tilly and Scott. 1987.

<sup>54</sup> Brée, *forthcoming*.

<sup>55</sup> Thane, in this volume.

<sup>56</sup> Friedman and Percival, 1976.

<sup>57</sup> Mignot, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Boigeol and Commaille, 1974; Desforges, 1947; Rowntree Carrier, 1958; Sohn, 1996.

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<sup>59</sup> 11.2% in 1915; 13.8% in 191; 14.2% in 1917; 13.8% in 1918; 13.3% in 1919 (source: INSEE, Statistiques de l'état-civil). The period 1915-1919 corresponds to the out of wedlock relationships of the war since there is a 9-months period between the conception and the birth.

<sup>60</sup> Pavalko and Elder, 1990.

<sup>61</sup> For information, ever-married women that remain childless at 50 were 13-14% for the cohorts born in the 1860s and 16 to 18 % for the cohorts born in the 1880s and 1890s (Brée, 2017).

<sup>62</sup> Brée, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Szreter, 2014; Cahen and Minard. 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Le Naour, 2002; Benoit, 2013; Cronier, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Pavalko and Elder, 1990.

<sup>66</sup> In addition to a delay of 6 months between the pronouncement of the divorce and the transcription in the civil registers – and thus in the *Movement de la population*, the delay between the request and the pronouncement can also take several months (Ledermann, 1948).

<sup>67</sup> Henry, 1966.

<sup>68</sup> We must remember here that we can only see a little part of the impact of the First World War on couples and families as we only analyse divorce. Legal separations are about 3300 per year during the interwar period. But most of all, a part of actual separations may never have ended in an actual judicial separation or divorce.

<sup>69</sup> Brée, *forthcoming*.

<sup>70</sup> Gaillard, 2018.