

Gendarmes and Work Transfers Since the 19th Century –Balancing Professional Duty and Personal Freedom^(*)

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The Gendarmerie –a branch of the French Armed Forces– had a high rate of geographic mobility during the 19th and 20th centuries. Mobility was one of the means available to officers for managing their men and this meant that professional transfers were a frequent occurrence in the course of a gendarme’s career. These compulsory transfers were a source of considerable discontent on the part of the gendarmes concerned. Yet gendarmes also claimed the right to transfers for both personal and professional reasons. The conflict between institutional constraints and personal interests meant that the issue of mobility in the Gendarmerie was a “power game” and therefore subject to constant negotiation. This situation produced a solid set of shared values, the predominating one being the granting of priority based on length of service. Above all, it provided a new forum for discussion and one that was particularly original for such a highly structured military institution.

“When you were a gendarme, it was like being a bird on a wire. The order came in and that was it –you had to take off for a new place!”⁽¹⁾ This comment, taken from a popular novel by Clovis Hugues, was commonplace at the end of the 19th century. This phenomenon is no less surprising as Jean LE BIHAN (2009) recently remarked. Indeed, we know that the higher the status of civil servants, the more often they were transferred. Whether this involved the “elite” (CHARLE, 1987) or, to a lesser extent, middle-level civil servants (LE BIHAN, 2008), mobility was the price they paid for prestige. Conversely, subordinate employees such as policemen (DELUERMOZ, 2009), customs officers (CLINQUART, 1986) or rural policemen (GAVEAU, 2005) enjoyed stable careers from a geographical point of view. Although schoolteachers were frequently transferred, they rarely left their native region (OUZOUF, 1992). This was far from being the case for gendarmes, who could be posted anywhere in the country.⁽²⁾ Indeed, this put them into a rather exceptional itinerant category.

Was it worth it? Let us try and understand the reasons for this mobility. The term “mobility” should really be

in the plural (“mobilities”) because this type of mobility could take on many different forms as well as very specific meanings. This subject has sparked relatively little interest among civil service historians who tend to focus much more on the logic dictating career advancement than on the issue of mobility itself. Indeed, this topic has failed to generate much more enthusiasm on the part of sociologists specialized in the forces of law and order (DIEU, 2008), who record these phenomena without really trying to explain them.

We need to take into account that all sources of research available for issues such as this are not equally prolific and, with the exception of some corporatist publications, have never been open to public debate. Official texts provide highly detailed accounts of transfer procedures but do not clarify what was at stake. In this respect, legislation was mainly communicated *via* memoranda and internal notes circulated on a strictly local basis. Gendarmes’ pension and retirement files, which often included requests for transfer, provided additional insight into the subject. Unfortunately, the arguments used sound a little hackneyed, such as “personal” or “health” reasons. The reasons put forward are too vague to be used for research purposes. The information given by the officers can provide occasional valuable pointers. Unfortunately, this was only filed and kept from the end of the 19th century onwards⁽³⁾.

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(1) Clovis Hugues, *Monsieur le gendarme. Roman villageois*, Paris, Charpentier, 1891, p. 268.

(2) We should note that the gendarmes generally came from the North-East of France, a traditional zone for military recruitment and, to a lesser extent, from certain “regions of civil servants” (Corsica, the Pyrenees). These familiar areas are thus particularly sought after by gendarmes, who cannot all be posted to their own regions.

(3) We find the main part of these notices in the “registry of routine correspondence” (R/2 in gendarmerie archivist jargon), which recorded, in summarized form, reports submitted to the hierarchy. By convention and to avoid overcomplicating the critique here, we will only indicate the date of the daily report in which the notice is found.

Box 1

Prosopography of the Gendarmes in the 19th Century

The prosopography approach, well known to historians and widely revived in the past few decades (CHARLE, 2001), is a traditional tool used by social historians. By drawing up a group profile of the members of an institution, this tool enables typical patterns as well as distinctive features to be observed. This approach does not express the diversity of a group by an artificial average –on the contrary, it pinpoints what brings a group together but also what divides it.

Of course, implementing this approach depends on available data sources. Whereas it is often easy to carry out a prosopography of the upper echelons (political, economic, etc.) of a group, it is trickier to enquire into subordinate staff members, because fewer records remain. It is worth noting in this respect that most recent discussions and complementary research data focus on the use of private archives and findings from network analyses (LEMERCIER, PICARD, 2011), which are more difficult to use for the lower staff levels. The military are nevertheless an exception to this rule. Entered in a register (“*contrôle des troupes*”) since the 18th century (CORVISIER, 1968), they also received retirement pensions, requiring individual files to be opened and kept.

Other research (STRIETER, 1994) was based on these retirement files containing a significant amount of personal information. However, our chosen starting point was the registration of ID numbers (“*contrôle des troupes*”). Even if they are less detailed, they do contain the essential biographical data. Above all, they are invaluable in that they list all the gendarmes, including those –20 to 30% of staff– who did not pursue their career up to retirement age and therefore do not feature in the retirement files. This mass of documentary evidence provides us with quite complete insight into the life of each individual: geographical background, marital status, military then civilian career, etc. However, some civil information is missing (family connections, property). We cannot underestimate the importance of these data (CARTAYRADE, 2003), but compiling them is a significantly more complex process.

The research was done for a history thesis, and it targeted a cross-section of 3353 men. These were all gendarmes posted in 1857 then in 1889, in seven typical companies (Hautes-Alpes, Gironde, Hérault, Ille-et-Vilaine, Loir-et-Cher, Marne, Nord). Depending on available data, several secondary cross sections were added to this base if they provided complementary information.

If we want to understand gendarmes and mobility, firstly we need to understand the big picture. Indeed, a transfer affected an individual as a

whole –his professional as well as his personal life, his past as well as his future plans. How can we understand the impact of moving homes on an individual if we know nothing about his family situation or ambitions? Not to mention the place he is leaving and his new place of residence –we would need to weigh up the pros and cons of each... Mission impossible? Not necessarily –if we bear in mind the limits of this endeavour and certain “dead-ends” in its subsequent analysis, we can nonetheless draw up a factual summary based on a social history of the Gendarmerie in the 19th century and on a prosopography research paper (HOUTE, 2010; see Box 1).

So, with the help of these two tools, the goal here is to understand how mobility –whether due to institutional constraints or personal choice– affected a gendarme’s life. Indeed, we would like to believe that a transfer was not only the result of a “top-down” decision but that –above all– it provided scope for a negotiation opportunity and one where the individual could attempt to enter into a dialogue with the institution and assert his rights. In this respect, analysing the different types of mobility and the strategies behind them provides an effective means of gaining insight into the nature and development of professional relations.

First we shall gauge and explain the fluctuations in the number of employees and the frequency of transfers and then we shall give a detailed presentation of the two main reasons for mobility: interest of the organisation and personal grounds. We will then endeavour to understand the dynamics of these apparently contradictory approaches before examining the trends that would take shape in the course of the 20th century.

Endeavouring to Gauge the Mobility of Gendarmes

The first step is to measure global mobility at its most relevant scale, namely, the brigade. This roughly corresponds to the cantonal structure and provides a fair representation of the working and living community. The most effective method entails making a year-by-year comparison of the composition of the units. This research can be carried out using census records (JOURDAN, 1994) or more targeted surveys.

A Remarkably High Turnover in the Number of Employees

Everything points nonetheless to a very high turnover of employees, as can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Stability in Postings at Brigade Level, 1898-1910

	4 years' stability	8 years' stability	12 years' stability
Type of brigade			
External brigades	33.4%	13.0%	8.2%
District headquarters	45.6%	22.6%	0.0%
Company headquarters	50.0%	16.7%	5.4%
Department			
Aisne	32.4%	8.1%	5.4%
Ille-et-Vilaine	35.0%	15.6%	Inc.
Jura	28.2%	11.5%	11.5%
Loir-et-Cher	47.4%	20.5%	Inc.
Hérault	44.9%	Inc.	Inc.
Hautes-Alpes	Inc.	7.7%	4.0%
All the brigades	37.2%	15.2%	5.0%
<i>Number of staff</i>	<i>1 078</i>	<i>356</i>	<i>261</i>

Note: Between 1898 and 1910, 37.2% of gendarmes stayed in the same brigade for four-year periods; 33.4% of gendarmes posted in external brigades stayed in the same brigade for four-year periods, etc.

Scope and source: Statistics were drawn up using exhaustive listings, at regular intervals, of members of six companies for which correspondence registers were kept (SHD, series E).

This means that, in the space of four years, two thirds of the gendarmes were no longer in the brigade. The remaining third did not stay for much longer: 15.2% stayed at least eight years in the same brigade and barely 5% managed to stay twelve years. A significant difference in the turnover rate can be observed from one location to another. For example, it is particularly high in the Hautes-Alpes region, especially in the outposts located in isolated mountainous areas. The officers were well aware of this and claimed special privileges (higher wages, food delivery, etc.) to compensate for the inhospitable nature of these regions –these claims were rarely met with a positive response.

“Because of the extreme severity of the climate, and almost without exception, gendarmes posted to the Briançon region request immediate transfer once they have served their two years. They are inevitably replaced by new recruits coming from different regions, who in turn, ask to be transferred as soon as possible. This is the way it’s always been and it will never change.”⁽⁴⁾

But this type of exodus also affected other regions with milder weather such as the Hérault or the Loir-et-Cher. Even in this latter department (known for its easy working conditions, for its relative proximity to Paris and above all for the high number of job opportunities available for retired gendarmes), half of the brigade staff was replaced in four years. The size of the living quarters was also an important factor: employees’ departures were a little slower and not as sudden in the urban brigades, located

in territorial administrative centres and districts (*chef-lieu de compagnie et d’arrondissement*) that were less isolated and better supported by the other administrations.

That said, staff turnover remained nonetheless high in the Gendarmerie as a whole. A variety of factors can easily explain this general phenomenon: retirement, death, resignation, as well as regular compulsory transfers. But it is these compulsory transfers that came in for the most criticism and were the main source of worry for officers. “Changes of residence should be drastically limited as they are always harmful to the service”, explained Squadron Chief Lebouvier in 1860,⁽⁵⁾ echoing the statements of the Pontoise *sous-préfet* (regional government official): “Supervision would be more effective without recurring transfers that increase the turnover and disorganize the Gendarmerie Brigades.”⁽⁶⁾

It is easier to view mobility as a whole rather than on a case-by-case basis. Either available data is scattered and individual records tracing the career path of each gendarme do not give full details of their movements or –if and when they do– these are not sufficiently detailed. Transfers were only automatically recorded when these involved changing companies –and this was not the most frequent case (see Table 2).

Table 2: Transfers and Movements of Retired Gendarmes, 1898-1910

	Total	Gendarmes	Brigadiers	Barrack masters
Worked in one posting	10.4%	12.3%	0.0%	0,0%
Worked in two postings	27.4%	29.8%	14.3%	0.0%
Worked in three postings	20.7%	14.9%	28.6%	35.7%
Worked in four postings or more	41.5%	43.0%	57.1%	64.3%
<i>Number of staff</i>	<i>135</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>14</i>

Note: 10.4% of gendarmes worked in only one posting; 12.3% of gendarmes (excluding non-commissioned officers) worked in only one posting, etc.

Scope and source: The data used are based on a sample of gendarmes and one non-commissioned officer. Full details of their careers are to be found in the summaries kept in their pension files (SHD, série Yf).

We can only therefore provide a rough estimation based on approximately one hundred individuals for whom complete data of their movements is available. When we cross-reference this scanty sample with the quality assessments of officers, we can conclude

(4) Service historique de la défense (henceforth SHD) Department of Defence History, 5th 12, Hautes-Alpes, 12 August 1903. See also *L’Écho de la Gendarmerie* of September 29th 1901.

(5) SHD, 1M 2003, notes from Squadron Leader Lebouvier sent to Napoléon III, May 25th 1860.

(6) Quoted by L. Saurel, *La Gendarmerie dans la société de la Seconde République et du Second Empire*, PhD, Paris, 1957 t. 2. p. 119.

that a vast majority of gendarmes had been transferred between two and four times in the course of a career spanning fifteen to twenty years. Here it is easier to identify a trend: already a rare occurrence in the middle of the 19th century,⁽⁷⁾ gendarmes who stayed in their first posting belonged to a category that had become extinct at the turn of the century. Conversely, those who had served in at least four brigades gained a slight majority.

Conflicting Explanations

This figure increases for senior ranking officers. Let us put aside the officers at middle to senior civil servant level and for whom mobility was more frequent and routine (SERMAN, 1994). In their capacity of brigadiers or barrack masters, brigade commanders could be considered to have more in common with regular gendarmes in terms of social background and standard of living. Interestingly enough, a significant number of gendarmes with the best appraisals refused promotion, as the advantages of such promotions did not significantly outweigh the responsibilities that went with them. The unwillingness of these gendarmes was mainly linked to the nomadic existence that often went hand in hand with the position of brigade chief. Figures provide a clearer picture –in the second half of the 19th century, deputy officers were transferred four times in the course of their short career.

The fact is that a promotion invariably entailed geographical transfer. It is understandable that both gendarmes appointed to lead a brigade and deputy officers considered for promotion needed to leave their former place of residence if they wanted to fully assert their newly gained authority. It is more surprising, however, that this same rule applied just as frequently to brigadiers promoted to barrack masters –in reality, the brigade chiefs' tasks and responsibilities remained the same. But the prestigious postings were specifically destined for the highest performing officers. If they accepted promotion in reward for their services, brigade chiefs had to be willing to take on extra responsibilities in a new posting. In this particular case, geographical mobility was simply a consequence of professional mobility.

Conversely, transfers for disciplinary reasons, which were based on the same logic, should be brushed aside. The Gendarmerie *Règlements sur le service intérieur* (internal regulations) are relatively vague on this subject, stating that the War Ministry could, at the request of an officer, transfer or move any soldier suspected of misconduct. In reality,

(7) This was however the case for the majority in the 18th century. In the Auvergne police force, 55% of mounted gendarmes spent their whole career in the same position; cf. D. Martin, "La maréchaussée au XVIII^e siècle. Les hommes et l'institution en Auvergne", *Annales historiques de la révolution française*, 1980, p. 103.

a variety of sanctions were applied, ranging from simple "admonishments" to dismissal. "Transfer of office for disciplinary measures" (expressly stated in official documents) is one of the final stages in the hierarchical sequence of disciplinary measures applied.

This kind of sentence (disciplinary transfer) occurred particularly during times of political changeover—often unofficially. In 1885, the Minister for War observed "the significant number of changes of residence that were ordered by the legion chiefs" to sanction the enemies of the Republic. In this respect, he reminds us that this kind of punishment should only be applied "after the usual means of repression have been used up."⁽⁸⁾

This sanction remained a rare occurrence—outside periods of crisis—as the institution preferred to resort to transfers in the interest of the organization.⁽⁹⁾ These did not carry the stigma of punishment but in reality it amounted to the same thing. As all the regulations in the 19th century remind us, transfers could only be justified if they were in the interest of the organization or "for the personal benefit of the gendarmes."⁽¹⁰⁾ With the exception of promotions and sanctions, these two notions encompassed all the reasons for transfer. As they were loosely defined and open to all kinds of interpretation, they became the focal point of negotiations between the institution and its members. Let us now take a closer look at each one of these two notions—"the interest of the organization" or "personal benefits of the gendarmes".

"The Interest of the Organization" Or the Institutional Angle

This first notion "the interest of the organization" was usually applied in three cases. In the first place, it was used to manage any changes to the brigade staff allocation scheme ("Brigade scheme") as well as administrative amendments that led to staff reshuffles. Between the law of 1843, which saw an increase in the forming of brigades and the 1880s, which saw a marked reverse in this trend, the Gendarmerie significantly expanded its ranks. It was therefore necessary to transfer experienced military personnel to fill these new vacant positions. This issue had to be addressed differently at the end of the 19th century. The allocation of brigade staff remained stable, but the imminent phasing out of

(8) Circular letter from the War Secretary to Legion commanders, May 19th 1885.

(9) In certain cases, the gendarmes were recommended to ask for a transfer on personal grounds to pre-empt a formal punishment, and to avoid the latter being noted in their files; SHD, 35E, Rennes legion, October 26th 1903.

(10) *Loi de germinal an VI* (Law of April 17th, 1798), article 177.

the use of horses and the gradual introduction of the bicycle gave rise to frequent switches within the organization of infantrymen and mounted gendarmes from one brigade to the other.

More often than not, officers used the concept of the interest of the organization as a means of avoiding conflicts of interest. These could be triggered off quite easily: suspicion fuelled by a “whistle-blower” or an anonymous letter, a misunderstanding with the city council that needed to be ironed out before things went sour...

These transfers were preventative measures as opposed to sanctions, even if the two motives often overlapped. There again, in the 19th century there was a move towards increased awareness of the “risk of compromise”. A circular dated 13th June 1868 strongly recommended keeping an eye on men who got married in the canton where they were working: any gendarme who announced his engagement had to be warned of the risk of automatic transfer the day after the wedding. The policy of maximum geographic mobility was clear: appointing a gendarme in his own region was out of the question.⁽¹¹⁾

Finally, there is a less well defined and more varied category of transfers for supervisory purposes. For example, company commanders received verbal instructions to appoint their best gendarmes to “sensitive positions” or to relocate their “fine soldiers” to urban postings where they would make a better impression than “decrepit and ageing gendarmes.”⁽¹²⁾ Company commanders also received more formal instructions to organize their staff in such a way that bilingual gendarmes were given border postings. These are just some of many examples, but it goes without saying that this opportunity to transfer gendarmes was a powerful lever and one that was not tightly controlled.

Providing these transfers took place within a company or even within a legion (which covered three to six departments), the chief colonel of the legion had sole responsibility for these. In practice, he carried out the orders of his company commanders. One barrack master who was pressured to resign by his superiors spoke out against the abusive and arbitrary nature of transfers in the so-called interest of the organization. He had been transferred five times in three years!⁽¹³⁾

This type of protest was by no means rare –on the contrary. However, gendarmes’ voices were seldom heard. Only the constant rotation of gendarmes who were transferred due to their anti-republican

tendencies attracted significant attention from the media. In 1880, a journalist from the *Figaro* daily newspaper strongly protested against the disproportionate amount of power given to officers who could harm what was most precious to their subordinates: “For a gendarme, there is no worse punishment than changing residence: all of a sudden, he has to take his children out of school, cover the expenses of an unplanned move, change his working routine, even his whole life.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Even if the cost of the move was covered, the statutory financial monetary compensations were nonetheless insufficient. Reliable sources confirm that these transfers were in fact “true financial sanctions,”⁽¹⁵⁾ all the more so because the institution did not take family constraints into account. It must be noted that a great majority of gendarmes were married.⁽¹⁶⁾ Contrary to firmly held common belief, their spouses were not excluded from the world of work. Even if many professions were closed to them, a lot of military wives worked as seamstresses and therefore ran the risk of losing their clientele if they moved. There were also shop assistants, midwives and a large number of schoolteachers. The predicament of the schoolteachers did however draw the attention of the commander of the Hautes-Alpes Company. After discussion with the school inspector, he helped speed up the process for teachers seeking work in areas close to their husbands’ new postings.⁽¹⁷⁾

However, let us put the financial drawbacks of a transfer into perspective. Most chiefs requested and obtained exceptional financial aid for those subordinates being transferred in the interest of the organization. As most military wives did not in fact have a salaried position, the financial loss was limited. Finally, the free housing provided to the gendarme and his family meant that moving costs were easier to bear. We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the gendarmes’ protests –why should we? All the same, we should bear in mind that there was a certain degree of exaggeration. Contrary to what they sometimes claimed, gendarmes did not necessarily dream of a sedentary position. They did, however, want to have a say in where they were sent.

(11) The fact is that none of the 3,353 gendarmes in the prosopographic sample was assigned to their native canton.

(12) SHD, 5E 6, Hautes-Alpes, February 2nd, 1902.

(13) *Plainte d’un maréchal des logis de la gendarmerie adressée au Sénat pour demander réparation des injustices dont il a été victime*, Paris, Vve St-Aubin éditions, 1865.

(14) Janus (of *Le Figaro*), *La Fin de la gendarmerie*, Paris, Victor Palmé, 1880, pp. 39-40.

(15) H. Delattre, *La gendarmerie de demain, ou la gendarmerie après la nouvelle loi militaire*, Paris-Limoges, Charles-Lavauzelle, 1887, p. 17. The details vary according to each department, but generally the gendarmes only received a small allowance (barely 10 francs in Brittany!) and a free move (with a limit of 250 kg of baggage).

(16) More than 95% of the gendarmes in our sample got married during their career. In general, weddings took place after 2-4 years of service.

(17) SHD, 5E 3, Hautes-Alpes, August 13th, 1899.

“For Personal reasons” Or Individual Grounds

Personal reasons were the second motive for requesting a transfer. This allowed gendarmes to get out of an inhospitable posting,⁽¹⁸⁾ to choose a town suitable for their children’s schooling, *etc.* The most frequent motive, however, remained the serving of their own interests. We must not forget that the criteria for the first postings were in the interest of the organization and could be very far removed from what the applicant actually wanted. This meant that the Gendarmerie was able to fill vacancies as quickly as possible while the same time preventing new recruits from putting down roots, thereby ensuring their increased loyalty (HOUTÉ, 2008). The inevitable backlash was: “Gendarmes who were not fortunate enough to be posted near their home regions want to go back there.”⁽¹⁹⁾

To limit the influx of requests, the first measure applied by the Gendarmerie restricted changing legions. Indeed, anyone wishing to change legions had to have prior authorization to leave his present legion and subsequent authorization to join another legion. The authorizations had to be signed by the two colonels concerned and approved by the general inspector. It was also possible, subject to officers’ approval, to swap postings with a gendarme with the same grade. Despite its complexity, this procedure developed to such an extent during the Second Empire that the *Journal de la Gendarmerie* “opened, in its offices, a register book where this type of request is compiled”, while an employee “directly answers questions on this matter.”⁽²⁰⁾

Most requests for transfer were made within the closer ranks of the legion. At this level, all that was needed was a positive response from the legion chief. This was not without a certain number of conditions. First of all, applicants had to testify that they had no personal connection with the requested area. This condition became compulsory in the 1860s and was very strictly applied in certain areas. For example in the Cher department, an applicant applying for transfer had to formally state the following: “I hereby state that there are no family connections on my wife’s side or my own, in either the district of the brigade I wish to join or the brigades in the surrounding districts.”⁽²¹⁾

The second measure aimed at limiting mobility applied more specifically, but not exclusively, to young gendarmes who were repeatedly told that they had to be fully drilled before even considering applying for a move. A circular dated 1875 formalized a time-honoured practice when it stipulated, “authorization for transfer for personal reasons can only be given after a certain period spent in one location.”⁽²²⁾ This period was set at two years and despite strong objections raised in parts of the organization,⁽²³⁾ it was strictly respected and, in some regions, extended to three years.

The third measure obliged the applicant to prove the existence of an individual fund (see Box 2) if he wished to be transferred to another department. This measure restricted mobility for the younger gendarmes, as most of them were indebted to the institution during the first three to four years of their career. If they wished to request transfer for personal reasons, they had to fully refund the cost of equipment. This meant paying out several hundred francs.

Gendarmes transferred for personal reasons received no financial assistance and as a result had to add moving costs to this already considerable sum. One commandant from the Saint-Claude arrondissement was so affected by the “delicate situation” of one of his subordinates –financially depleted by his move– that he requested exceptional financial assistance amounting to 30 francs. In vain –the answer was: “This transfer is for personal reasons so the gendarme knew the score.” A certain Gendarme Gros was subjected to the same fate and found himself well out of pocket after paying 121 francs for moving his furniture: “Our financial assistance should be reserved for gendarmes transferred in the interest of the organization.”⁽²⁴⁾

It should not come as a surprise, then, that an institutional approach based on the interest of the organization prevailed over an individual approach based on personal reasons. Although the interest of the organization took precedence, transfer for personal reasons was still an option. Thorough examination of how these requests were dealt with by the officers will give us more insight into the approach and the power dynamics within the institution.

(18) It was however very seldom recommended to “flee” a brigadier general deemed too strict, as a transfer request might well become a disciplinary action!; SHD, 34E 8, Hérault, June 7th, 1907.

(19) *Journal de la Gendarmerie*, January 5th, 1900.

(20) *Journal de la Gendarmerie*, January 11th, 1865.

(21) SHD, 878 (provisional quotation), Cher, November 10th, 1908.

(22) Memorandum from the War Secretary to Legion commanders, April 18th, 1875. This system existed from the end of the July Monarchy in the North and Eastern legions; SHD, Xf 257, report from the Inspector General to the War Secretary.

(23) *Moniteur de la Gendarmerie*, November 13th, 1881.

(24) SHD, 39E 44, Jura (Saint-Claude), January 23rd, 1907; SHD, 3783, Indre-et-Loire, November 8th, 1913.

Box 2

The Individual Fund, a Type of Management Tool

This measure was highly technical and therefore relatively unknown. Yet, in the 19th century it was one of the essential tools used in the Gendarmerie for maintaining the balance of power. To fully understand how it worked, one should remember that the liberal approach to the profession (which lasted right up to the 20th century) meant that a gendarme had to pay for his own equipment. Financing one's own equipment –especially a horse– was the price to pay for the right to wear a uniform. The sums paid out could be the equivalent of over a year's wages!

So it was to make access to the profession easier and to provide for accidents (death of a horse, etc.), that the organization set up an individual fund in 1821. This was administrated at company level and its purpose was to finance the equipment required for the job. In practice, it meant that a gendarme started his career with a *debet* sometimes exceeding a thousand francs. This sum was gradually reimbursed by making heavy deductions from his wages. This was not all: once the debt was paid, further sums were withdrawn at a slower rate until the fund reached its full capacity and could be used for further equipment requirements.

Even if he managed to stagger his expenses along the lines of an insurance-based model, this measure could be used as a means of exerting pressure: a gendarme whose fund was “in the red” –as was the case with between a quarter and a third of staff– could not get either permission to marry or to transfer for personal reasons.

Power and Negotiation

Until 1905 at least, officers had the power to postpone or reject requests for transfer for personal reasons. How did they wield this power? It is difficult to make a precise analysis, but the case of the Rennes Legion at the beginning of the 20th century would suggest that most requests were recorded and filed. This was no guarantee of a quick and successful outcome (see Table 3).

Table 3: Requests for Transfer for Personal Reasons in the Rennes Legion in 1903

Request for transfer from one legion to another	34	Transmitted	22
		Rejected	8
		Postponed	4
Request for transfer within the legion	45	Filed	37
		Rejected	3
		Postponed	5

Note: Among the 34 requests for transfer from one legion to another, 22 were transmitted, 8 were refused, etc.

Source and scope: These figures have been calculated using the routine correspondence log of the Legion Chief (SHD, 35E 2).

There were few rejections, and these were always justified. They stated mostly the risk of compromise: “As the requested brigade was only 14 km from Savignac-les-Églises, the home region of his wife [...]” or “[...] the location of the posting borders on his home region –it is too close.” They also mention the idea of personal abilities: “A poor performer all round and needs to make progress”; “This gendarme is already too young to serve in his own department –he would be accepted for the other companies of the legion [in neighbouring departments].” In the same vein, they identify a certain number of sensitive postings, especially in brigades with the heaviest workload: young Mazéry was therefore “absolutely incompetent to carry out service in Rennes.”

Assessments were therefore based on thorough knowledge of the men and the locations involved. As Commandant Kervella reiterated in 1900 when asked –as were all the officers– to explain the reorganization of the Gendarmerie, his position was that all the squadron chiefs should be consulted concerning any request for transfer. “This would prevent transferring men to areas where they have parents or family, or men who may not be physically able for service in that particular region –factors that do not occur to the legion chief. One such example is the Gap brigades. This was a place where, at certain time, all the old, weary, exhausted gendarmes ended up.”⁽²⁵⁾ Another argument supporting Commandant Kervella's position: consulting the squadron chiefs would make it possible for the personal merits of the transfer applicants to be taken into account.

Although they were not included in the official regulations, the notions of merit and justice were very frequently mentioned in officers' statements. These statements demonstrate that transfer for personal reasons, offering a more pleasant place of residence, was seen as a reward for the dedicated service of a hard-working gendarme. This reward system also made it possible to take other criteria into consideration, such as the family situation.

This is where we should consider the personal dimension of the power dynamics. Even if an officer was distant (geographically and socially speaking) from his men, there was inevitably a certain degree of emotional involvement in his leadership. As numerous military regulations pointed out, especially during the Third Republic, the chief was expected to act as the *paterfamilias*. This meant that his role was not limited to judging his subordinate based on professional criteria –he was also responsible for assessing his moral qualities. Let us consider the case of one Gendarme Berthier, who persisted in requesting a transfer to Paris. His officer was reluctant to grant this for professional reasons (lack of

(25) SHD, 5E 3, Hautes-Alpes, May 26th, 1900.

experience). However, his reservations were also based on more personal observations: “He must have known that his wife [a seamstress from Paris] would not be able to keep her clients; [...] I had already mentioned this to him.” However, this negative feedback was not taken into account and the gendarme got his transfer within a few months.⁽²⁶⁾

In reality, the officers’ power did not seem to be as substantial as the regulations would have us believe. On one hand, paternalism prevailed over the unyielding and harsh nature of the official rulings. Commandant Kervella who supposedly supported the principle that “transfers are not allowed until after five years spent in the same place” in fact refused to go by this rule that was too broad-based: “There are priority cases that we cannot ignore”⁽²⁷⁾ ... “It is a question of life or death,” he wrote, concerning a gendarme whose “health is completely destroyed by the mountain climate” but had only spent one year in this posting.⁽²⁸⁾ There are several examples of “rule bending” which allowed gendarmes who got married in their home region to wait a few years before a vacancy came up in the surrounding region.⁽²⁹⁾

On the other hand, officers were under pressure themselves from outside the organization. It is common knowledge that at the end of the 19th century, prominent local figures, Members of Parliament in particular, were constantly called upon to “put in a good word” concerning a request or favour here and there ... (MONIER, 2007). Year after year, the general inspectors of the Gendarmerie repeatedly warned that these procedures were unworthy of military men and that sanctions would follow... However, these sanctions were all too rare and forms of immunity all too many! All that had to be done to ensure the chiefs’ leniency –and even in some cases, the fulfilment of the request– was to swear that the politician’s help had not been directly requested but that a third party had deemed it necessary to do so.⁽³⁰⁾

Officers’ power was therefore meted out and negotiated. This was particularly the case when gendarmes had to fill vacant posts. What prevailed was the interest of the organization, but the chiefs avoided upsetting their men. “Please draw lots in the presence of all the parties concerned to pick out the name of the mounted gendarme from your region who will be have to be relocated”, they asked a young officer who was about to carry out a compulsory transfer.⁽³¹⁾ In the town of Saint Chinian, “[for] a somewhat busy and difficult posting” requiring an experienced and qualified man (which automatically eliminated new recruits and gendarmes who

had been sanctioned), they ended up appointing a promising new recruit to the position because there were no volunteers.⁽³²⁾

Careful research into the reasons for transfers proved that (see Box 3) there was general, albeit tacit, agreement on one simple principle: mobility was the prerogative of youth and transfers should slow down over time. Indeed, all the statistics confirm this: after the first part of their careers, which were characterised by a rapid succession of transfers, gendarmes settled down in one or two final postings. This “bonus” for the number of years served is obviously linked to the pace and lifestyle of the older gendarmes, but compared to other parts of the Armed Forces it was also one of the few privileges granted to veterans in the Gendarmerie, where career advancement was rare and increments for years of service amounted to very little.

Box 3

The Unacceptable Tyranny of Commander Brissaud

Squadron Chief of the Seine-et-Oise company, Désiré Brissaud was one of the most promising officers of his generation. This must have generated a lot of jealousy, because he was subjected to an exceptionally thorough disciplinary enquiry in 1905. The General Inspector compiled around sixty testimonials⁽¹⁾ denouncing his authoritarian and inhuman behavior. This provides us with a rare opportunity to find out what gendarmes thought about their officers’ behaviour.

One of the most recurring grievances expressed by his subordinates concerned transfers, as revealed by the following complaints from gendarmes who resigned under pressure: “I had three children and I wanted to change legions, but the commander refused without explaining why”; “He wanted me to move without giving me the reason and I didn’t want to leave because my wife was working at the Poudrerie de Sevran”; “He forced me to change postings three times in two years”; “He told me he would post me to the other side of the department if I insisted with my request for transfer”; “He moved me to another brigade on my fiftieth birthday”, etc.

These grievances were clearly used to serve a certain purpose and do not accurately reflect the facts. They do at least reveal the limits of what was acceptable for gendarmes and they show us that the drawbacks of mobility, together with retirement and children’s schooling issues, were among the most sensitive subjects –much more so than issues of career advancement or bonuses. An officer who was too authoritarian on these sensitive issues risked being resented by his subordinates or even receiving sanctions.

(1) Brissaud file, SHD, 10 Yd 1512.

(26) SHD, 977, Loir-et-Cher (Romorantin), February 28th and June 30th 1903.

(27) SHD, 5E 12, Hautes-Alpes, December 16th, 1903.

(28) SHD, 5E 6, Hautes-Alpes, January 26th, 1902.

(29) SHD, 35E 2, Rennes Legion, July 18th, 1903.

(30) SHD, 2E 43, Aisne (Soissons), November 8th, 1903.

(31) SHD, 34E 13, Hérault, August 30th, 1911.

(32) SHD, 34E 7-8, Hérault, March 16th and May 16th, 1907.

In the light of this, we can understand how the rules relating to transfer were part of a policy of human resources management. This policy served to consolidate the power of the institution itself, but also –and above all– to ensure the continuing personal investment of gendarmes in their profession. Obviously, conflict was unavoidable,⁽³³⁾ but this was kept under control, as the Gendarmerie knew how to act in the interest of their veterans. By combining the two issues of mobility and discipline in their broader sense, one could say that the Gendarmerie of the 19th century served as a laboratory for a management approach which would become commonplace in the public sector in the 20th century (DARBEL, SCHAPPER, 1961), as well as for middle management levels (JOIN-LAMBERT, 2001).

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* *

The question is: has this model that was established in the second half of the 19th century withstood the upheavals of the 20th century? It is difficult to answer this question as the social history of the Gendarmerie is really “unchartered territory” especially when it comes to the interwar period and the post-war boom, known as the “*Trente Glorieuses*” (LUC, 2010). What we do know is that the basic principles have changed very little. The belief in compulsory mobility for gendarmes remains steadfast. Accounts of “the time when gendarmes spent their entire career in the same posting”⁽³⁴⁾ should not always be taken at face value. They are more like a repetition of clichés than a true reflection of reality.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the rules governing mobility have remained constant. Interest of the organization, disciplinary measures, and personal reasons –the same criteria can be found today. Only compulsory transfers still receive financial compensation and, in the same way, transfers for personal reasons are still subject to a minimum period of residence –three years.

No doubt, slight changes can be observed. Let us take for example the order dated 27 June 1929 ruling that transfer requests for personal reasons were governed by the conduct of the applicant: one

punishment was all it took to cancel a request.⁽³⁵⁾ Another rather controversial change is priority given to transfer applicants on health grounds (with the justification of a medical certificate).⁽³⁶⁾ Since the beginning of the decade other adjustments have been introduced. For example, it is now possible to be promoted without having to relocate geographically. “A substantial response to a recurring request”, wrote the Legion Chief for the Franche-Comté in 2008.⁽³⁷⁾

How many other planned reforms have been debated, rejected, implemented? As no specific studies exist on this subject, we cannot give a definite answer to this question but we can at least observe that adjustments have amended procedures without shaking the foundations of the model. This overall stability is all the more remarkable in view of the far-reaching changes to the Gendarmerie in the 20th century. One such change is the ceaseless fragmentation of the units. Whereas a great majority of gendarmes in the 19th century belonged to the “*départementale*” unit, their successors are divided into “*départementale*”, “*mobile*” units and so on ... and also into different sections and subsections that are increasingly specialised. This fragmentation hinders the transfer process, as the Chief of the 2nd Legion remarked in the 1930s.⁽³⁸⁾

These changes do, however, offer new opportunities for career advancement. Gendarmes today, compared to their predecessors who for the most part had little or no hope of being promoted, can earn their extra stripes. This is why they need to adopt a different approach to mobility. Back in 1928, a certain up-and-coming Gendarme Cazals did not take long to realize this when he was posted to “a quiet area intended for employees who were waiting for a peaceful retirement.” This drove him to make a request, backed up by a letter of recommendation, for a quick transfer to a neighbouring area, which offered him the opportunity to make his mark and move his career forward.⁽³⁹⁾

Are twentieth century gendarmes more receptive to promises of career advancement? Are they willing to sacrifice their geographical stability? A few examples would not provide ample proof of this.

(33) This was the case of Gendarme Hervé, transferred to an isolated rural position after 20 years of service! This transfer in the interest of the service probably conceals a punishment or a settling of scores. Whatever the case, Hervé decided to take early retirement. SHD, 35E 4, Ille-et-Vilaine, July 1st and 12th, 1904.

(34) Account given by Claude Durang, gendarme from 1969 until 1994, on his blog, consulted in April 2011: http://www.durang.net/spip2/article.php3?id_article=1.

(35) It is thus that Gendarme Lallard, punished for indiscipline, had to cancel his move, as his recently-granted transfer was cancelled a few days before taking effect; SHD, 1D1/6, Lille Legion, March 7th, 1939.

(36) Especially in the case of Corsican gendarmes, who were hospitalized on the mainland and thus obtained a quicker repatriation, paid for by the state; Simon Fieschi, *L'action des gendarmes contre les "bandits d'honneur" corses dans les années 1930*, Master in History, under the direction of J.-N. Luc, Paris IV, 2008, p. 51.

(37) It would be beneficial to read the “moral report” written by the heads of unit in 2008 and published, creating quite a scandal, on the website *Gendarmes et citoyens*.

(38) SHD-G, 303, Amiens Legion, May 16th, 1935.

(39) Marcellin Cazals, *Journal de marche d'un gendarme, Rodez, Remy, Canitrot*, 1995, pp. 13, 19-20.

On the one hand, mobility in general has become more the norm in the civil service due to the transport revolution⁽⁴⁰⁾ and this has altered the situation. On the other hand, it is equally true that the growing number of women on the labour market (BERGÈRE, 2004) has created other constraints (BERTAUX-WIAME, 2006).

In any case, the issue of mobility is still up for discussion. It is mentioned in anonymous letters sent by Gendarmes to the national press in the summer of 1989 and the subject was also brought up in the token strikes in 2001. It is featured in the agendas of the CFMG (*Conseils de la fonction militaire gendarmerie*),⁽⁴¹⁾ which acts as the staff advisory body for the Gendarmerie. Frequently referred to since the 19th century in professional publications, it continues to provide copy for the press aimed at retired people (D’HAUTEFEUILLE, 2007). Mobility is a recurring subject for discussion on the much-visited forums on the “Gendarmes et citoyens” website. There is no doubt finally that the subject will come up in the negotiations concerning cooperation between the Gendarmerie and the Police Force.⁽⁴²⁾

Today, just as in the 19th century, managing mobility is a means of exercising power, and this is all the more significant that it is masked by highly technical considerations. Despite diverging interests and

principles, both the Gendarmerie and its gendarmes have the same objective –achieving what we could call “an acceptable level of mobility” (CERUTTI, 2010) allowing the interests of the organisation to be served without encroaching on employees’ freedom. If the institution enjoys an inordinate degree of power because it can choose to transfer its members, this power should be used wisely –otherwise there is the risk that this tacit contract based on good governance will break down.

Thus we can see the emergence of a set of common values that legitimise the order of priorities relating to transfers: not only seniority and health but also professional competence and family reasons are commonly acknowledged, from the bottom of the institution upwards. The remarkably stable nature of these key principles, fully adhered to in today’s civil service, do not prevent divergence and conflict. This is particularly true in a military organisation such as the Gendarmerie, with its emphasis on disciplinary regulations and hierarchy. Within these “silent ranks” or “the great mute one” (the nickname given to the French Land Army or Gendarmerie),⁽⁴³⁾ the issue of transfer policy provides a rare forum for negotiation. This shows the extent to which this technical issue deserves to attract the attention of the social sciences and also encourage further research.

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(40) Of which we must still qualify the impact, taking into account the hemming in of numerous gendarmerie brigades: mostly situated in rural areas, they sometimes felt more isolated than in the 19th century! Resistance to the Carraz-Hyest report, published in 1998, and which redefined the map of police and gendarme installations, can be partly explained through the gendarmes’ fear of being permanently relegated to the countryside.

(41) This representative body, placed under the control of the French Ministry of Defence was set up in 1990. Composed of gendarmes selected at random, its aim is to address issues relating to working conditions in the Gendarmerie.

(42) One might say that the gendarmes did not really enjoy the experience of being ousted from the urban world, as certain of their generals had feared.

(43) Let us recall the recent Matelly affair. The officer of the same name was sanctioned for expressing his personal opinions (we would like to point out that this was when he was off-duty): the duty of confidentiality is not to be taken lightly in the gendarmerie institution; cf. Jean-Hugues Matelly, *L’affaire Matelly*, Paris, JC Gawsewitch, 2010.

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