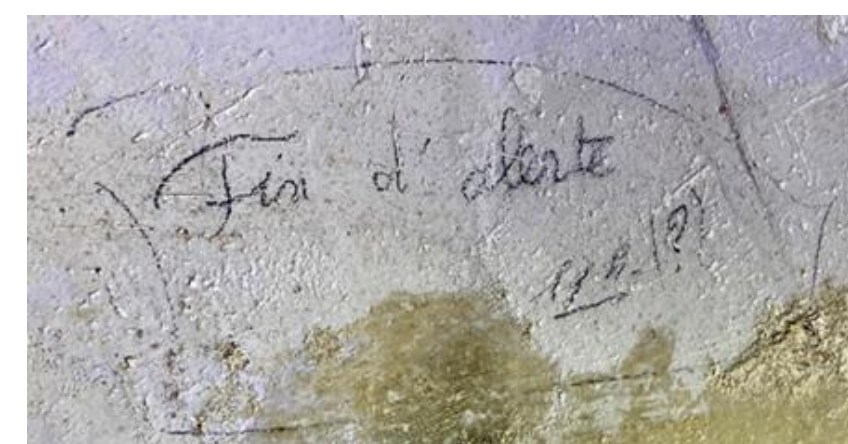




WWII: Air raid alert... at the high school

Hélène OFFRET & Gilles THOMAS
(16-17 March 2023) gilles.thomas@paris.fr



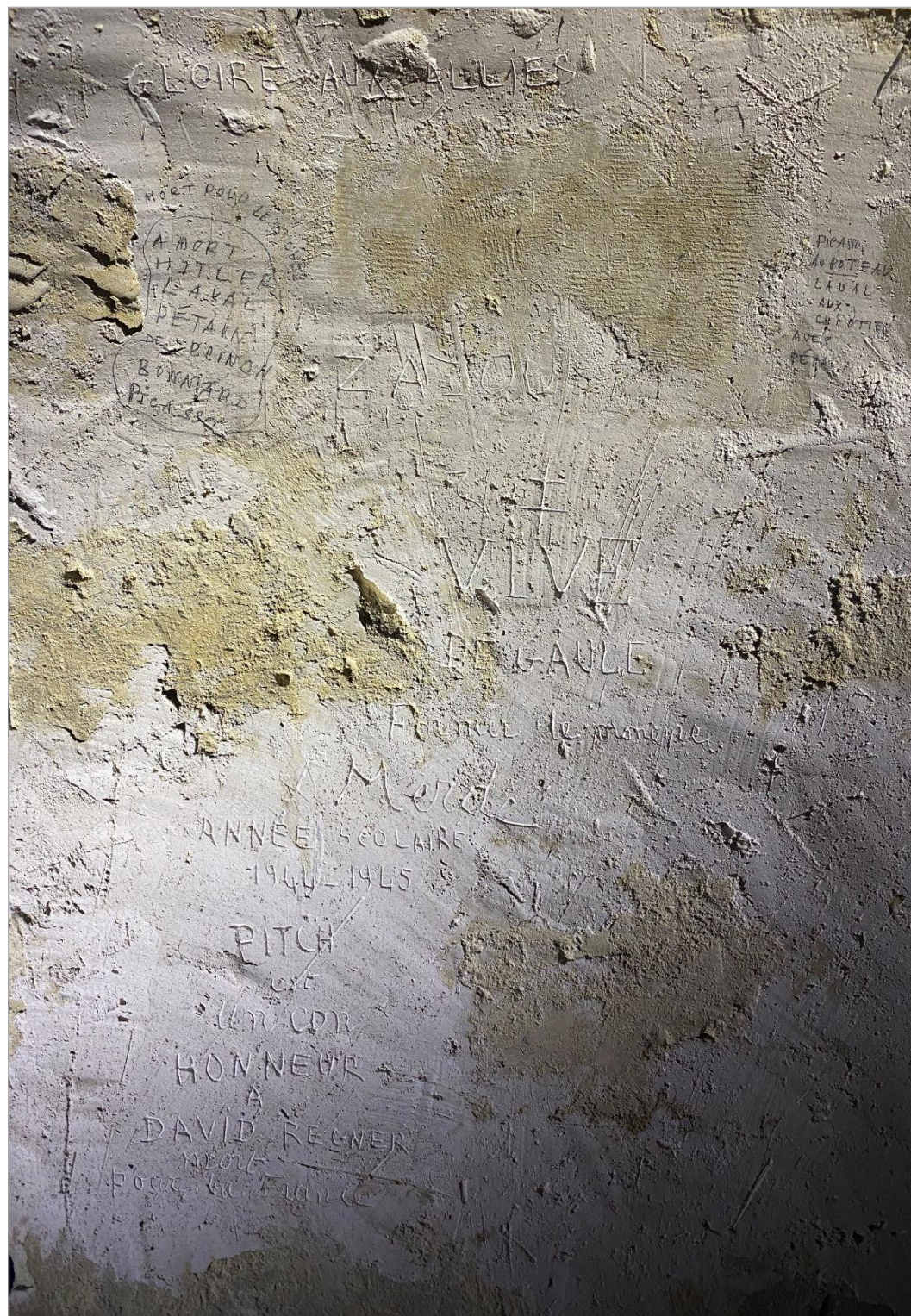
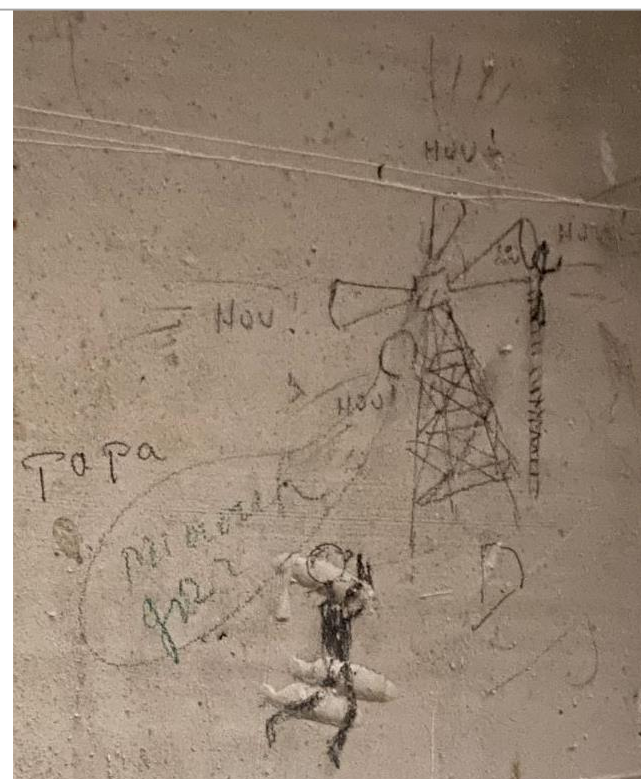
Civil defence

Initially thought in 1923, it was only in 1935 that the French government wrote a first law establishing Civil defence to protect the population in case of aerial attack.

When an alert rang, the population had to go to a shelter. According to the recommendations of the Civil defence, the basements converted into shelters had to have one or two emergency exits, to allow civilians to return to the surface after the alert even if the staircase used to enter the shelter had been rendered unusable. These recommendations were revived as the bombing intensified in anticipation of the Allied landing, which was expected in May or June 1944.

The Lycée Lakanal, often called simply Lakanal, is located in Sceaux, a southern suburb of Paris, France. When the school was built in 1882, its architect Anatole de Baudot wanted a functional high school, with modern solutions to ensure perfect hygiene. He had organized a sanitary basement, with natural ventilation and piping. The Civil defence reinforced these underground shelters, drilling multiple stairwells from the outside corridors to allow for rapid access.

The basement of Lakanal, which was used as an air raid shelter, is the site in Paris and its suburb with the largest number and widest diversity of handwritten inscriptions left by those who sheltered in the protective basement. This graffiti is located in a supposedly inaccessible location, with access being locked by the school's administration team, which has allowed them to pass through time without noticeable alteration.



Alert dates : By cross-checking the engraved dates with the register of alerts in the Archives of the French Prefecture of Police, we confirmed that people's presence in these shelters was linked to a risk of bombing between 1941 and 1945. This is the case for 17 of the 35 dates. There are only a few cases where the word "Alert" is written with the date, as presence in these locations was part of a sheltering operation triggered by the alarm siren, and therefore it was obviously for people taking refuge here there was an alert outside.

The way in which present time was formulated is of course not standardized, since it was far from being an official act. It was either written or engraved in full, with the month in lower or upper case. The month was occasionally indicated in full (18 MARCH 1944), sometimes in abbreviated form with different types of separators (3.1.44; 25/4/44) and the use of Roman numerals to indicate the month (I XII 1943; 20 XII 43); occasionally an hour was indicated. The most extreme case is the inscription "a.d. IX Kal. Jun. MCMXLIV 3eA'A" Lycée Lakanal"; "ante Diem IX Kalendas Junius", meaning the ninth day before the calends of June (that is to say the 24th of May!), a formulation ascribable either to the teacher of Latin, a language that was not entirely dead yet at the time, or to a particularly zealous pupil. Finally, the date is the only element that links all of the people present, who were facing the same situation and waiting for the end of the alert.

Evocation of a resistent : "HONOR TO DAVID RÉGNIER who died for France". David Régner (with a spelling mistake in his name), who was a Lakanal student born in 1925, died at the age of 18 on 20 June 1944. Tribute to a member of the Resistance, he was recognized for his numerous acts against the enemy. His combat group was denounced following an attack on a train that he had organized. He fought and made the ultimate sacrifice in order to allow his comrades to escape.

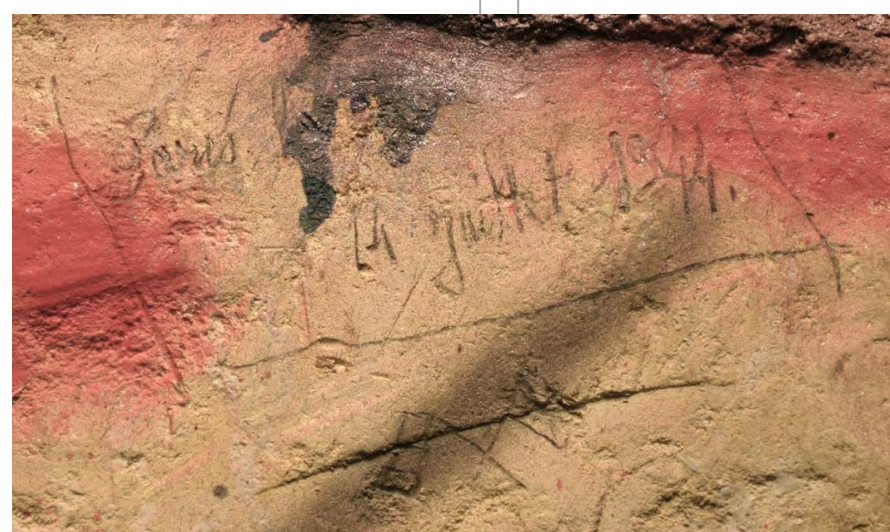
These anonymous writings was potentially the work of teachers and students, as it is important to remember that one of the very first acts of resistance was made by students on 11 November 1940. This graffiti is a way of expressing an opinion or a feeling about the events in progress. The authors of such audacious writings took the risk of being denounced for daring to criticize the policy in place, with consequences that could be dramatic, depending on the occupier's reaction to events it sought to repress. Yet by taking a minimum of precautions, such statements could be made much more easily than at the surface. A protracted alert or lack of supervision made such engraved inscriptions possible. In any case, the individuals wrote or drew with the greatest of discretion, as they could be denounced to the German occupiers, even by the supervisor.



"Victory graffiti"
The resistance did not exclusively take the form of armed action or an act of sabotage, as it could also be expressed by tearing up one's Parisian metro ticket to form the letter V for "victory", or drawing this symbol as graffiti on the walls, sometimes in association with the cross of Lorraine. In Lakanal's underground shelters, two crosses of Lorraine were drawn above the letter V.

War-time symbols
Some other graffiti illustrates the theme of the Second World War. For instance, the drawing of a rifle at scale does not include a written date, thus we cannot be sure it was engraved between 1939 and 1944. However, the representation of airplanes—symbols of the flyers conducted in the region during alerts—clearly reflected the gravity of the events being experienced by those taking refuge underground. In addition, the drawing of the propeller detail of an airplane shows a certain interest in aeronautical technique.

Some examples of the graffiti in the basement of Lakanal: "LONG LIVE FRANCE", "WE WILL HAVE THEM ALL/ LONG LIVE DE GAULLE/ LONG LIVE FRANCE/ DEATH TO LAVAL", "LONG LIVE FREE FRANCE", "LONG LIVE THE FRENCH", "DEATH TO HITLER", "DEATH TO THE KRAUTS", "TO EACH HIS TURN, TO EACH HIS POST", "TO THE ALLIES", "WE AWAIT THE PURGE, WHEN WILL THE NEW GENERATION COME", "DEATH TO HITLER LAVAL PETAIN DEBRINON BONNARD PICASSO": It was less risky to leave such traces on the walls of a basement than to express them verbally.



"TUESDAY 6 JUNE 1944 LANDING" : Someone could not resist engraving this long-awaited historic event, and had added the day of the week. At the same moment everywhere, even in the Santé jail in Paris, rumours spread that the liberators had just arrived on the Normandy coast.

"Paris, 14 JULY 1944" : below this French national date, found inside a shelter of another Parisian lycée, are drawings of French and British flags. But this historic graffiti was destroyed by vandalism!

Traces of the German occupation
During WWII, Lakanal was "occupied" in different ways. It was first partially converted by the French army into a military hospital, then beginning in 1940 partially requisitioned by the German army while also being used for French national teaching. As a result, some rare graffiti can be attributed to the German occupiers, such as this German brush-painted inscription: "Sanitäts Raum". This marking is next to an arrow of the same grey colour, indicating the direction of the infirmary.

CONCLUSION

Most of this graffiti denounces people who agreed with the collaboration. Their authors are anonymous, except in the case of a few indications such as initials. The heightened supervision of today's students prevents these traces of history from being covered by other forms of modern graffiti. This graffiti, a form of individual expression, ultimately reveals collective events. It provides a lesson regarding courage and existence. The walls of Lakanal high school must preserve the memory of these alerts, drawings, messages, and slogans.

PERSPECTIVES

Inaugurated in 1885, Lakanal has been on the historic heritage list since 2001 for several elements, but not for its basement. Our discovery and analysis of this graffiti dating from WWII could result in an addendum to this protection, as was that case for Val-de-Grâce Abbey in Paris: some parts were classified as historical monuments in 1964, while in 1990 other elements including subterranean quarries were added, along with "the graffiti and topographical inscriptions".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Ms. Raguideau, principal of Lakanal, the Intendant and the Maintenance team ; Jean-Paul Delacruz and Martin Manouvrier ; The archives of the Ile-de-France Museum ; The friends of Sceaux association ; and Mr Louis Mermaz, former President of the National Assembly of France.

