This article analyses letters written by children to their fathers in the winter of 1942 as part of a competition instigated by the Comité des Amis des Travailleurs Français en Allemagne. These men were in Germany as participants in the Relève, the scheme whereby French workers could volunteer to go to Germany in exchange for the release of French prisoners of war. These letters shed light on father-child relations – an aspect of family life rarely examined by historians – but also clearly demonstrate the emotional impact of family separation on children, which they managed by drawing on emotional resources linked to love, loss and sacrifice. I suggest that family separation in wartime placed an emotional burden on children as they shaped their words and feelings to please parents who were also struggling under the weight of wartime pressures.

**Keywords**

Vichy, children, fatherhood, family, letter writing, Relève

Je ne sais vraiment pas pourquoi tu nous as quittés. La maîtresse d'école nous a parlé de solidarité, grand-père m'a dit que c'était à ton tour de partir, et mon petit camarade
Jacques m’a dit que son papa qui est parti depuis trois ans allait revenir puisque tu allais le remplacer. Moi je sais que c’est ta bonté qui t’a poussé à aller si loin de nous.¹

In this letter written in 1942, eight-year-old Guy tried to understand his father’s absence. Listening to the language of duty and sacrifice around him, he concluded with his own interpretation: it really boiled down to his father’s essentially good character. In so doing he evoked his love for his father, his awareness of certain external circumstances, and also the family’s sense of loss.²

French children experienced the Second World War in multiple ways. Joy and suffering, wealth and poverty, praise or persecution: all were present across those turbulent years. A frequent occurrence was family separation. Whether a father was absent as prisoner of war (POW), résistant or forced labourer, or whether a child was evacuated for health or security, family life was upset by war in a way which is rarely the focus of scholars’ attention. This article considers the hidden world of family separation occasioned by fathers who left to work in Germany as part of the Relève. I argue that separation placed an emotional burden on children’s shoulders which they sought to manage, both inside complex familial relations and against an ideological backdrop which sung hymns to their innocence yet confronted them with war and occupation. I also demonstrate the active and affectionate fathering evident inside these emotional interactions, but absent from historical scholarship on the family. My analysis revolves around three component elements of children’s emotional burden – love, loss and sacrifice – and is preceded by a brief discussion of the historiographical landscape and the nature of the sources. Families are social structures embedded in social networks. They are also political and politicized units, and never more so than under the Vichy regime which saw the family as the “cellule essentielle” in the regeneration of a France beaten and demoralized (Pétain, 1940). The family has been studied by historians interested in Vichy’s policies and ideologies (see e.g. Capuano, 2009). It appears far less often as a site of emotional exchange between individuals, active not only on a public stage but, more concretely, inside the home. What is striking about the study of the family in historical research is the near absence of children as anything other than the passive objects of parental attention. Indeed, at the time and since, children have been instrumentalized by politicians, writers, historians and filmmakers in order to carry ideological messages; and yet their lives and experiences as real historical actors are frequently ignored, deprived of agency. Narrative, qualitative sources, including drawings (see e.g. Cauacas & Cazals, 2012), diaries (see e.g. Bood, 1974 or Ruffin, 1979), and oral history (see e.g. Dodd, 2016) can increase knowledge of intimate familial relationships in wartime France; letters are another way in.

Fathers make some appearance in the scholarly literature on Vichy and the family, but not as active parents. Indeed, as for sociology, so for history: “we know far less about fathers than we do about mothers”, partly because of the way that mothers and motherhood have been policed and controlled, partly because of the focus of women’s historians, and partly because parenting has been seen as a voluntary, secondary role for fathers (Dowd, 2000, 8). Within the context of Vichy, literature on gender, family policy, pro-natalism and paternity also tends towards policy and ideology, not experience; in particular the traditional male roles of chef de famille and breadwinner are reinforced by scholarship which makes use of them to critique discourse about and policy towards women. These roles were emphasized in France’s hyper-natalist culture during the Third Republic and into Vichy because of fears that men’s desire to father large families was hampered by the financial disadvantages multiple children brought. As such, much discourse at the time and in later scholarship considers the family in relations to concerns about welfare, wages, the State and citizenship (see, among many others, e.g. Capuano, 2009; Childers, 2001; Pollard, 1998; Reggiani, 1996). Paternity provides a different historical perspective: fatherhood in a
biological and legal sense; yet, as Fuchs’s work shows, while debates over paternity frequently concerned what it meant to be a “good” father, this hinged almost exclusively on economic provision. It would be many years after the war that the “behavioural aspects of social fatherhood”, in particular the emotional dimension, entered paternity legislation in France (Fuchs, 2008, 241, 265-6).

Laura King has noted that in the British post-war world, active fatherhood and a “family-oriented male identity” became a dominant trope of masculinity (King, 2012, 29). Prior to that, fathers’ affectionate, active parenting roles were less likely to be promoted. Yet Vichy’s wartime representations of fatherhood, while steeped in the discourse of the chef de famille, were frequently depictions of physical affection and active fatherly engagement. Although pro-natalist moralising propaganda mostly targeted women, men were not absent, and fatherhood held its place as a vital role and path to fulfilment: “de beaux enfants – votre joie et votre fierté”, proclaimed one leaflet to men (Archives Nationales, 2AG, 497). Posters also showed affectionate, active fatherhood at the heart of Vichy’s promotion of large families: picture a rural father, pausing over his garden spade to swing his toddler aloft, smiling into its chubby face; his wife looks on from the doorway, holding two small children while another three scamper towards us (Jennings, 2002, 128). Posters such as this one promoted the regime’s ideological goals. However, the letters analysed in this study mirror the kind of active and engaged fatherhood propaganda promoted, showing something of the reality of men’s place in their children’s lives.

“La Plus Belle Lettre”

But are these letters wholly distinct from propaganda? I have used a corpus of 125 letters submitted around Christmas 1942 to the Comité des Amis des Travailleurs Français en Allemagne as part of a competition called “La Plus Belle Lettre”. In June of that year it was announced that for every three French workers who volunteered to work in Germany, one French POW would be released. This scheme, a compromise struck by Pierre Laval to head off a forced labour draft, was called the Relève, and was promoted as a means to reunite POW families, earn better wages and receive an extra family allowance (Capuano, 2009, 171-2). Jackson writes that by the end of 1942, the initial target of 250,000 French workers had been reached (Jackson, 2001, 220). The “Plus Belle Lettre” competition invited children aged between 6 and 15 to write a letter to a close relative who was working in Germany. The press release stated: “Petits enfants de France, laissez seulement parler votre cœur à ceux que vous aimez et qui sont allés travailler là-bas pour que reviennent nos prisonniers” (Le Matin, 16 December 1942). Echoing recruitment to the Relève itself, fewer letters than expected were received.3 Letter writers were divided into two age groups – the under 10s, and 11 to 15 years old – and all entrants received a prize. First prize in each category was 3,000 francs, second 2,000, and so on, down to entrants beneath twentieth place receiving 50 francs each. Sixty-four per cent of children addressed letters to their fathers, around thirteen per cent to an uncle and similar to an older brother; a few letters were written to grandfathers, mothers, sisters and aunts.

It is impossible to know the extent to which the competition affected the content. While children were urged to write from the heart, and the winner was praised for expressing himself in “termes simples et touchants”, we might also ask what children understood by “the most beautiful letter”. What is a beautiful letter to a six year old? Michel may well have thought he had created such a thing when he wrote to his uncle “tu sais que je suis depuis 8 jour J-2 et je suis bien cotan car cé pour ça que je t’écri tout seul [sic]”: a beautiful letter might be that written alone for the first time, particularly when one was “fort en ortografe [sic]”.5 Seven-year-old Guy did not perhaps consider the requirements of a beautiful letter when he wrote: “je fais le concours des lettres j’espère gagner quelque chose.” Among the touching and the sad – which the judges sought – and the elevated and more knowing language of adolescent writers, we also find factual accounts of school and leisure, lists of Christmas
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they do not represent the everyday as lived, but as filtered through a dialogic relationship.

Family separation placed an emotional weight on children by heightening the expectations placed upon them. Kristine Alexander has written about children’s “affective labour” – the “work” they do by suppressing or inducing certain feelings in order to have the “right” effect on those around them (Alexander, 2015, 123-125, drawing on Hochschild, 1983, Zelizer, 1985, and Ahmed, 2010). Children were (and are) expected to bring joy and satisfaction to their parents, typically by being cheerful, loving and well behaved. In the complex landscape of wartime family separations, this emotional work became more intense as even young children were sensitized to the need to please, comfort and support their parents. They were aware of parental hardships, and sought to mediate the distance of separation with words, thoughts and imagination.

Love

A striking feature of the letters is the lively and intense expression of the love children declared for their fathers: words they hoped would bring comfort and support. Usually this was done by evoking remembered or imagined kisses and hugs, or by recalling happy times together in the past. First-prize-winner Claude (7) wrote that he missed their affectionate Christmas ritual: “je ne peux avoir le grand bonheur d’entourer ton cou de mes deux petits bras pour te dire en t’embrassant bien fort: ‘Bon Noël et joyeuse année!’” Not just regretting the absence of physical affection, Gisèle (13) encouraged her father to recreate it in his mind: “imagine que je suis auprès de toi que je suis dans tes bras en ce jour de nouvelle année”, she wrote. Eight-year-old Jean-Claude reminded his father of the times they had shared on their allotment, asking “Te souviens-tu Papa cette été quand dans mon petit panier j’allais chercher tes petits pois et tes salades [?]” Jeannine recalled cosy evenings when “tu étais là près de nous, tu nous lisais des histoires à la fois intéressantes et heureuses” while Michèle described her father in his armchair,

presents, descriptions of people and places, and greetings from other family members.

Through their letters we gain insight into how children understood and managed their worlds. Letters are very much “documents of life” (Plummer, 2001): they are an act of everyday life writing providing a snapshot of a moment, “strongly marked [...] by their quotidian present” (Stanley, 2004, 208). It would be wrong to assume that the snapshot is a faithful and factual representation of an internal or external “reality”, though. First, children’s letter writing does not happen in isolation from the adult world (Salo, 2013, 137). Whether written collaboratively, or checked over afterwards, children’s correspondence is often supervised by adults, yet, as Clare Brant remarks, children’s “voice and [...] point of view [are] not necessarily scripted by adults in the letters they write” (Harris, 2009, 340, citing Brant, 2006, 83). Furthermore, what children express in their writing is affected by certain conventions which they may or may not adopt in terms of form and function (Hall, Robinson & Crawford, 2000, 132). Whether in the salutations and closures they choose, or in content, letters are shaped by their “selection of ideas and norms” from the world around them (Benninghaus, 2000, 47-8). Second, we must recall that letter writing is dialogical; it is shaped by the I/You relationship, and does not simply reflect that relationship, but also constructs it (Salo, 2013, 139, drawing on Altman, 1982, 88; Stanley, 2004, 211). In writing to absent fathers, children perform a version of themselves to the recipient; they hope their letters will “conjure up something of the being of the writer”, using the letter as a means to cross time and space (Stanley, 2004, 209-12). The self that they perform tries to show itself as competent, serious, responsible and loving (Salo, 2013, 137-8). But the letters are also revealing of children’s construction of the You. They show awareness of “the needs and perspective” of their father as a “distanced other”, and shape the content from an assumption of their father’s interest (Hall, Robinson & Crawford, 2000, 146, 149). So while these sources offer us narratives of the everyday,
making his “petites blagues qui nous amusent tant”. The reference made to shared experiences is part of a strategy to re-establish the bond between them. But in twelve-year-old Huguette’s letter, it serves a different purpose. She wrote of cycling with him on Sundays to gather lily-of-the-valley and wild strawberries, of going swimming together, of accompanying him to football matches “car c’était ton sport favori”, and of playing cards or draughts together. The use of the past tense here was because her father had been killed in an industrial accident in Bremen; in writing of times they shared, Huguette’s recollections are an act of mourning; hers was the only letter of this kind in the collection.

To their children, these fathers were crucial sources of physical and emotional affection – more substantial than the breadwinners and chefs de famille of ideology and policy. While the activities described here conform to the kind of secondary parenting generally undertaken by fathers (evening story-time, Sunday outings and games, homework and discipline), they also suggest mutual love and need, and provided earnest assurances to fathers that they were missed.

Loss
The absence of a father created a sense of loss, conveyed in two ways: through conjuring his presence by various means, and by remarking his notable absence. Fathers were firstly conjured by the evocation of geographical distance, which the child tried to understand and diminish. It seemed important to try to imagine Germany as a place, geographical and otherwise. Some of six-year-old Jaki’s worries had been allayed when “maman m’a dit que le Père Noël passe aussi en Allemagne”: his father would not be forgotten. Older children grasped more. Ten-year-old Jean-Claude wrote: “je souhaitait que tu t’habitues bien en Allemagne que tu peux visiter ce beau pays qui parait-il est si joli, je voudrais être à ta place mais j’espère y aller quand je serais grand et au moins nous deux pays pouvait être amis.” His writing showed solicitude, an attempt to create common

ground, and an expression of future hopes. Roger, four years older, also sought knowledge: “je voudrais bien être à ta place, où près de moi nous proéfionnes de ces journées [de congés] pour visiter la ville et les environs”; and as that was not possible, he hoped that his father would take photos and, when returned, “pendant les soirées tu pourras nous conter tes souvenirs”. Twelve-year-old Claude also wrote of the present conflict. His interest in Germany was fuelled by a hope of ending it – a task he placed in the hands of children: “si je réussiss au certificat, et si tu repars j’espère que tu m’emmèneras dans une école de là-bas pour apprendre l’Allemand [...]. Et si tous les enfants de France en faisait autant ce serait peut-être un moyen de ne plus faire la guerre entre ces deux pays.” Envisaging their fathers in Germany helped close down the distance, and helped build ground on which to share experience.

Other children used their imaginations to conjure the means to join their fathers. Jeanne, who was six, told her dad: “je dirai au bon Dieu de me faire toute petite, tu me mettras dans ta poche”: that way, she could always be close to him. At Christmas-time, there was someone else whose services were available. Marc, also six, had “demandé au père Noël un avion pour que je puisse venir te voir avec mon petit frère Pierrot”. Ten-year-old Edouard had high hopes of his luck coming in. He explained: “on m’a donné un billet de tombola avec ce billet je peux gagner une bicyclette. Oh! Papa si je la gagne: je ferais le tour de France. Oh! Quelle chance! J’irais te voir en bicyclette en Allemagne, et comme ça, on travaillera ensemble.”

Imagination played a crucial role in mediating distance, as did the outside agencies children called upon for intervention: God, Father Christmas and Luck.

There were more concrete ways in which families tried to close down the distance, and mothers were instrumental in helping children cope. It was common for children to tell their fathers how often they were in their thoughts. Ten-year-old Simone described a vivid scene: “nous ne cessons de penser à toi et le soir lors qu’il fait nuit noire dans la nuit serrées toutes les trois autour de maman nous
parlons de toi.” Suzelle attributed a direct consequence to actively thinking of her father: “maman nous parle souvent de toi [et] nous croyons que tu es vers nous”. While these children took comfort in thinking and speaking of their father, letters themselves were also powerful vectors of feeling. For ten-year-old Georgette, the arrival of a letter conjured him clearly to mind: “je suis toujours heureuse quand maman me dit “Papa a écrit” je te revois en image gai et souriant.” Michèle (15) told her father of the impact his letters had, saying that “on a le cœur joyeux pour toute la journée”; letters were more substantial that mere words written on paper: “avec tes lettres il nous semble que c’est un peu de toi qui nous arrive.” Letters, then, took the recipient closer than thoughts and fancies could, although one’s own imagination was perhaps more reliable than the post.

Another fifteen-year-old girl, Raymonde, expressed the power of correspondence to cross space and time. She constructed her letter as a direct link into her father’s mind:

Je suis tout près de toi, mon cher papa, par la pensée et par le cœur, par la pensée, vois-tu, car souvent lorsque tu étais à mes côtés, que je te racontais ou disais quelque chose, tu étais de m’écouter, et tu ne m’écoutais pas. Ta pensée était hors de moi, ou bien lorsque je te posais une question, tu répondais distraitement par un oui ou par un non. Aujourd’hui, je sais que lorsque ma lettre te parviendra, tu la liras avec une attention particulière, puis tu la reliras encore, parce que tu chercheras à l’approfondir. Aussi est-ce pour moi un encouragement à la pensée qu’en ce moment je suis tout près de toi. Je te vois, je te parle, et toi, à ton tour, assis dans un coin de l’usine, tu me liras, tu m’écouteras.

Raymonde gently berated her father for his inattention, and used her letter to try to build something which had been lacking before. The letters show how children actively tried to manage separation, whether by keeping their fathers present by speaking often of them, by conjuring their image, by crossing countries in imagination, or through the force of their words.

The second expression of loss came as children described the presence of absence in their lives. Such feelings must have saddened the fathers reading the letters, and perhaps show the limits of children’s empathy. But children wrote candidly of the impact of absence. Most tangibly, this was evident at home. Jeannine (11) told her father of “combien mon cœur est blessé de voir ta place vide à la maison”. Eleven-year-old Jacqueline described the first evening without her father:

quand nous nous sommes mises à table, je me suis prise à regarder ta place qui était vide et de grosse larmes coulèrent sur mes joues. La tristesse était peinte sur tous les visages on n’osait pas se regarder de peur de fondre en larmes, personne ne causait, car chacune était livrée à ses réflexions.

Loss echoed around the home, bouncing off objects redolent of the missing person. For Simone (14), “chaque chose évoque ton image, la table ou tu t’asseyais à chaque repas, le poste de T.S.F. où tu aimais te reposer après ta journée de travail: tout parle de toi”. The absence of these men left unavoidable holes in their children’s everyday lives.

Fathers’ departure increased the emotional burden placed on children because they were implicated in its impact upon their mothers. All who wrote of their mother’s sorrow attempted to reassure their fathers that they were trying to ease it, demonstrating their agency as participants in family life. Six-year-old Gérard’s mother was struggling to cope with the death of her baby, and Gérard felt his responsibility: “tu sais maintenant je suis un grand garçon et maintenant je suis sage car tu sais maman a beaucoup de chagrin depuis que notre petit Christian est mort.” He asked himself with being a good boy in order to ease her grief. Claude (7) told his father: “Pauvre maman depuis ton départ elle ne sait plus sourire, oh! je vais te dire papa chéri j’ai réussi à la faire rire maman.
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ces jours”, and explained how he had cheered her up. At ten years old, Serge took on certain tasks which lightened his mother’s load, but remained conscious of her sorrow:

Je deviens de plus en plus raisonnable mon papa, je peux te dire que lorsque finit la classe je me dépêche à rentrer à la maison pour aider maman pour la soulager de faire ses commissions si elle en a un besoin et quand je vois ses yeux remplis de larmes, je sais qu’elle a un gros chagrin d’être séparée de toi depuis 7 mois et je la console en lui donnant beaucoup de courage.

Fourteen-year-old Jean said that his mother’s sorrow had forced him to grow up. Seeing his mother weeping, he said, “je sors de mes soucis de gamin pour me noyer dans une espèce de crainte de la vie; le bonheur humain me parait si fragile. Cette larme […] exprime une profonde douleur”. Attempting to bear something of their mothers’ pain was common among the children; now, their work lay not just in pleasing their parents and making them proud, but also in supporting and mediating between them.

Sacrifice
Children’s understanding of their father’s absence was complicated by the notion of sacrifice. Sacrifice and duty were two of Vichy’s watchwords, and sacrifice was a key metaphor of the Catholic Church. Yet in the case of the Relève, what was this sacrifice for, and did children situate it at a personal, community or national level? It appears that some viewed their father’s departure as a sacrifice for the family finances, and an extension of his role as breadwinner. Their letters express how restrictions and penury affected children’s domestic lives. Seven-year-old Jean wrote to his father: “tu sais cette année je n’aurai pas de Noël maman a dit que nous étions trop malheureux qu’il n’y avait pas assez d’argent à la maison pour donner au père Noel je croyais qu’il suffisait d’être sage.” André (7) understood that “c’est pour gagner des sous pour acheter du pain et des bonnes choses que tu es parti”. This concrete advantage was clear to even the youngest children, like six-year-old Louis:

…

In some instances, then, the father’s departure was clearly seen as a sacrifice for the physical wellbeing of his family.

But more children saw a bigger picture. Six-year-old Bernard wrote that “maman a dit qu’il fallait faire un sacrifice pour que les petits enfants des prisonniers voyent leur papa qu’ils n’ont pas vu depuis longtemps. Alors ils seront bien contents”. Bernard took on the perspective of other children which he now could recognize. For many, the release of POWs far outweighed work and wages; some saw it as the sole reason for their father’s departure. Ten-year-old Gilberte told her father that she knew it was “pour le Bonheur d’un autre que tu es parti”. She assured her father that she was “raisonnable” and could understand why he had gone; Janine (13) asserted that “comme je ne suis pas égoïste je pense que ce sacrifice permettra à d’autres petits enfants d’embrasser leurs chers papas”. For these girls, their fathers’ actions sprang from the men’s recognition of other children’s suffering; they recognized a double sacrifice – one made by their father, and one made by themselves. Others saw their fathers as motivated not just by kindness. Yves wrote that if “tout le monde faisait leur devoir comme toi”, the prisoners would be home already, and Suzelle believed that her father had responded “à l’appel du Maréchal pour la relève”. Perhaps private sadness was easier to bear if understood as an altruistic sacrifice or as a point of duty. Overall there was a widespread sense of conviction that fathers were doing the right thing for the family,
for others and for the nation.

Indeed, the patriotic dimension of their fathers’ departure could be very prominent, reflecting the politicisation of children in Vichy France. More evident among older children, it was not absent in the younger age group; as nine-year-old Suzelle declared: “tu fais, mon cher petit papa, de grands sacrifices pour notre belle France.” It was a comfort to view fathers’ absence as a small part in the revival of France. Jean-Michel (15) saw his father’s decision as being “pour la France afin qu’elle se relève et redevienne forte et grande, elle que nous aimons tant”. For fifteen-year-old Michèle, too, the Relève had a wider significance:

Je le [Dieu] prierai également pour notre Maréchal et pour notre France. Car il faut qu’elle redevienne aussi belle, aussi grande, que ce qu’elle était autrefois. Je crois que le sacrifice que vous avez fait, Maman et toi, contribuera à lui rendre son ancienne prospérité.

Others linked the separation to a bigger purpose without an overtly nationalist sentiment. Ten-year-old Claude told his father that he would work hard so that “tu n’as pas à regretter d’être parti pour essayer de nous créer un avenir meilleur et sans la guerre”: the Relève formed part of his hopes for peace. Claudette (14) also understood her father’s departure in this way: “car grâce à ton travail […] les cloches de la paix sonneront dans le monde.” This feeling was most eloquently expressed by fourteen-year-old Jean: “cependant nous n’avons pas le droit de nous plaindre car notre séparation n’est que souffrance légère à côté des deuils affreux qu’entraine la guerre. Souhaitons donc la paix universelle, une Europe, une humanité fraternelle.” Such thoughts about motivation and impact created a positive counterweight to private sadness, diminished it and rendered this temporary loss meaningful within the context of the current conflict.

Emotional work inside the family

In many ways, it is not the specificity of the French experience which makes these children’s letters valuable, although it does account for some of the particularities of their content. What is of more interest, perhaps, is the way that such sources give some access to the emotional work done by children in this conflict due to family separation. That work is evident in their efforts to please fathers through letters, reminding them of love and loving moments; it is evident in their vigorous efforts to cross time and space with thoughts and fancies; and it is evident in their quest to comprehend their loss. Sometimes children assumed the burden actively, trying to fix the problems that their father’s absence caused. Six-year-olds Jaki and Bernard both recounted their efforts: the former wrote “je suis sage et je fais les commissions à maman pour que tu aies du content”, while the latter explained “j’ai bien su mettre le couvert et je vais chercher le lait pour que tu aies content”: in both cases, the work was done explicitly to earn approval.

Older children could do more, and Jean-Pierre (12) told his father:

j’ai consolé Maman en lui disant que je te remplacerais de mon mieux; mais j’ai appris depuis que dire et faire font deux. L’autre jour j’ai voulu réparer les souliers, croyant que c’était facile, je me tapai deux fois sur les doigts, je mettais presque toute les pointes de travers, et encore pour comble d’encouragement Maman ne fut pas satisfaite en me disant qu’il lui manquait papa. Hier encore j’ai voulu mettre des rivets à un de ses sacs à provision: elle arrive du marché le sac sous le bras, les rivets n’ayant pas tenu. C’est vraiment décourageant, mais je tacherai de mieux faire la prochaine fois.

Jean-Pierre’s comments may have amused his father, and may have been designed to do so, but they also testify to his earnest but
frustrated attempts to fill a bigger pair of shoes. He gives a sense of the emotional labour he was doing for both parents. In other cases, the burden was felt more passively, particularly when frazzled mothers used separation as emotional leverage. Eight-year-old Guy wrote:

La journée du Nouvel an a été bien triste sans toi, mais j’ai tant embrassé maman et je lui ai promis de garder ma première place à l’école qu’elle n’a plus été si triste, elle m’dit d’être toujours bien sage et que tu savais tout ce que je faisais et que tu étais triste aussi quand je lui désobéissais.

He took on the work of comforting his mother by affection and promises which he thought would please her; her response added to his worries by placing a further pressure on him. In some cases, the mother’s remonstrations led to feelings of reproach. Eight-year-old Albert wrote:

Maman me dit souvent “ton papa se sacrifie pour toi pour améliorer notre vie et nous la rendre plus douce” […] Maman me dit souvent que nous les gosses on ne pense à rien, pourtant moi je trouve que je pense tous les jours à toi.

No doubt harried by the concerns of everyday life, this mother exerted subtle pressure, using Albert’s father’s absence to control his behaviour. Perhaps without conscious intention, she increased his burden, forcing him to orientate his feelings, thoughts and actions towards remedying the faults he thought he bore.

Conclusion
These sources show us children’s active participation in their interpersonal relationships, in family life and in broader society. They show children as influenced by political events in ways which are specific to them as children, as well as active as individuals in the ways they sought to understand and act in the world. Children clearly saw themselves as having some influence in society, in the family and in their intimate relations. They knew they had the capacity to affect parents’ happiness through actions and words, and they sought to manage their relationships with their fathers, who must be seen as far more than chefs de famille.

The everyday activities of doing, thinking and writing provide evidence of children’s agency: they create their relationships with their fathers in writing, they build their father’s knowledge, affect his emotional state, they lay claim to the responsibility for their parents’ happiness, and they negotiate complex emotional territory as a result of family separation. Our understanding of children as historical agents in the past has been constrained by a limited view of agency as a concept: Maynes explains that the “ideal typical historical or social actor” is supposed to be “autonomous, driven by the imperatives of rational choice”, whose ‘moments of political rebellion or heroic action in the public sphere’ are what mark them out as enacting their agency (Maynes, 2008, 116). These children’s letters force us to rethink our understanding of agency to position it at the level of the everyday, enmeshed within emotional relationships, frequently invisible on the public stage, and often conformist rather than rebellious given the emotional work of pleasing adults that most children undertake. Children should therefore not be seen solely as the “quintessential victims of war” (Zahra, 2011, 24): victims they may often be, but they are also actors within their own worlds: constrained, yes, limited, perhaps, but influential people nonetheless.

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1. All the letters cited in this article are drawn from Archives Nationales de France (AN), AJ 16 7122. The children’s surnames have not been used.
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3. Provision was made for prizes to be given down to the 200th letter in both categories, envisaging at least 400 letters. The competition was repeated the following year, under quite different circumstances. First, in February 1943 Laval introduced the Service de Travail Obligatoire, the forced labour draft; second, the competition was much more widely promoted; third, the prize money increased and twenty-five letter-recipients received 15 days’ leave to return home for Christmas. The letters from this competition, however, were not present in the archives.

4. J2 was the ration category of 6-13 year olds.

5. In quotations other than this one, spelling has been altered for ease of reading, but punctuation has not been added.

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