

# The History of Homing Pigeons from 1885– 1918 in France: Military and Leisure practices



## Abstract



**Figure 1:**  
A portrait of a racing pigeon, ordered by his owner.  
On the bottom of the painting stands the major prizes he won during races.  
  
E.Evrard, *Portrait de La Bigame, pigeon de concours de colombophilie*, 1888.

Around 5000 BC, pigeons were used by Sumerian populations to carry messages, taking advantage of their natural ability to find their way home. Later, homing pigeons were bred in Greece and in the Roman Empire, introducing this practice in Europe.

Since the Middle ages and until the French Revolution, pigeon breeding was exclusively reserved in France to the members of the aristocracy. That is why, in the 19th century, with the end of this prohibition, pigeons began to be used by amateurs for racing sport. Associations, dedicated to pigeon racing were created. Their activities included organizing races and sales, giving prizes and promoting pigeon breeding.

At the same time, European armies began to use pigeons to maintain communications during war time. In 1870, during Franco-Prussian War, around 400 pigeons were employed in France to transport approximately 3 millions letters, written by both soldiers and civilians.

This work seeks to highlight the fact, that in the end of 19th century, the military and leisure uses of homing pigeons are closely linked. According to French law in place during the 3rd Republic, each amateurs breeding racing pigeon could be called to war by military authorities if needed. This can be explained by the fact that, after the Franco-Prussian War, tensions between these two countries were still very high and another war was seen as imminent. Pigeons could be extremely useful in war times because they could enable officers to communicate with each others even if the telecommunications were interrupted or destroyed by the enemy.

However, homing pigeons were also seen by the French Government as a threat because they could be used by foreign countries for spying missions.

**Keywords:** pigeons, military, war, leisure, breeding, races, associations, communications

## Introduction

During this study, I had several objectives in order to highlight various aspects of my research:

- **Understand** how the use of homing pigeons was regulated by French authorities
- **Observe** in which directions pigeons were trained and for what purpose.
- **Define** the profile of pigeons breeders: age, gender, profession, social class...
- **Describe** how pigeons racing associations worked : their organization, their objectives, their ways to promote themselves...

## Materials & Methods

In order to understand how homing pigeons were used both by army and civilians at the end of the 19th century in France, I choose to study the concrete case of the department of Isère. I mainly used **two types of fonds**:

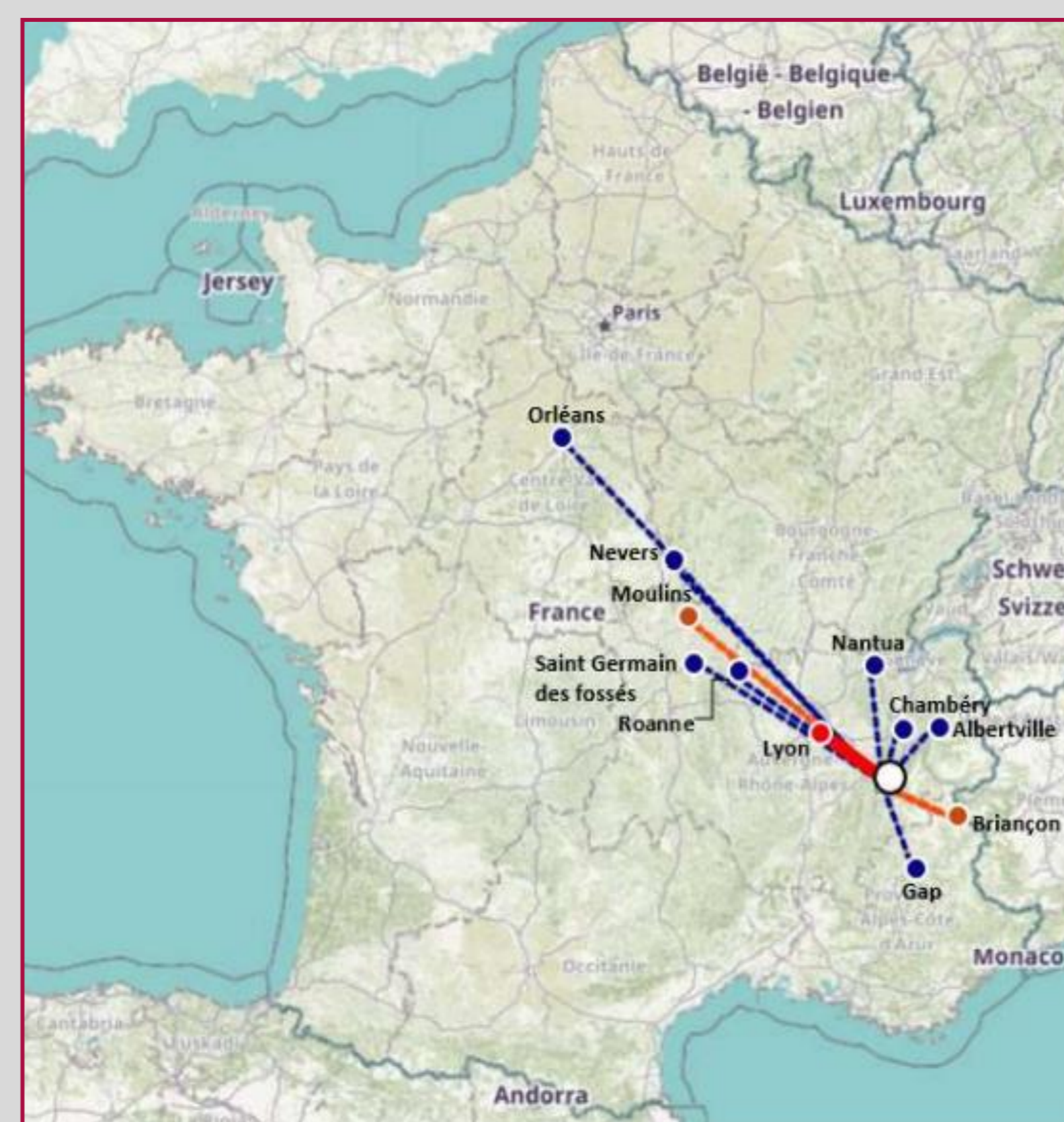
### → Departmental archives of Isère

This fonds contains various documents about homing pigeons from 1885 to 1950: military orders, authorizations needed to open a dovecote, communications between mayors and higher administrations but also census forms recording where were the dovecotes, who owned them, how many pigeons were inside and towards which directions they were trained. This fonds also consist of documents from pigeon racing associations like their accounting records, their newsletters and communications between their members.

### → Grenoble city archives

This fonds represents a smaller amount of documents but one of its particularities is the presence of local press articles from 1880 to 1900, reporting the different activities related to homing pigeons in Isère: races, charity events organized by the associations, major sales...These articles were very important for my researches, as a way of having a better understanding of the impact of pigeons racing associations on local life. Grenoble city archives also contains numerous letters written by pigeons breeders to the municipality, another interesting material for my study.

I used various methods to work efficiently with my archives. Censuses were my biggest materials in terms of volume, that's why I used them with the intent of creating various statistics and putting them into graphs and diagrams for better readability. I also created maps from data gathered in my archives to highlight routes taken by homing pigeons and the communications networks they helped to build by carrying messages.



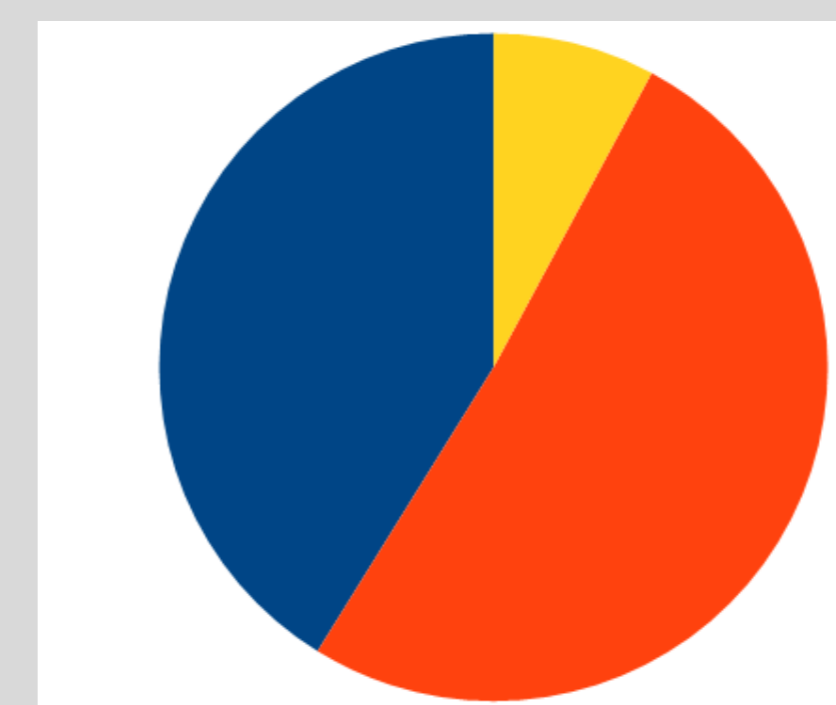
**Figure 2: Training routes used by pigeons belonging to "Le Ramier des Alpes", a pigeon racing association located in Grenoble (1896-1917)**

- Very frequently used route (more than 10 times from 1896 to 1917).
- Frequently used routes (between 5-10 times).
- Rarely used routes (less than 5 times)

## Results

Breeding homing pigeons from 1885-1918 was an activity **under strict surveillance** by the French administration, due to the geopolitical context in Europe during these times. Each year, since 1885, every people owning homing people should declare to local authorities how many pigeons they owned, how many of them where trained and in which directions. These declarations (also called "yearly censuses") were extremely important for French army officers because, thanks to these documents, they could be able to know how many trained pigeons were available in case of a military conflict.

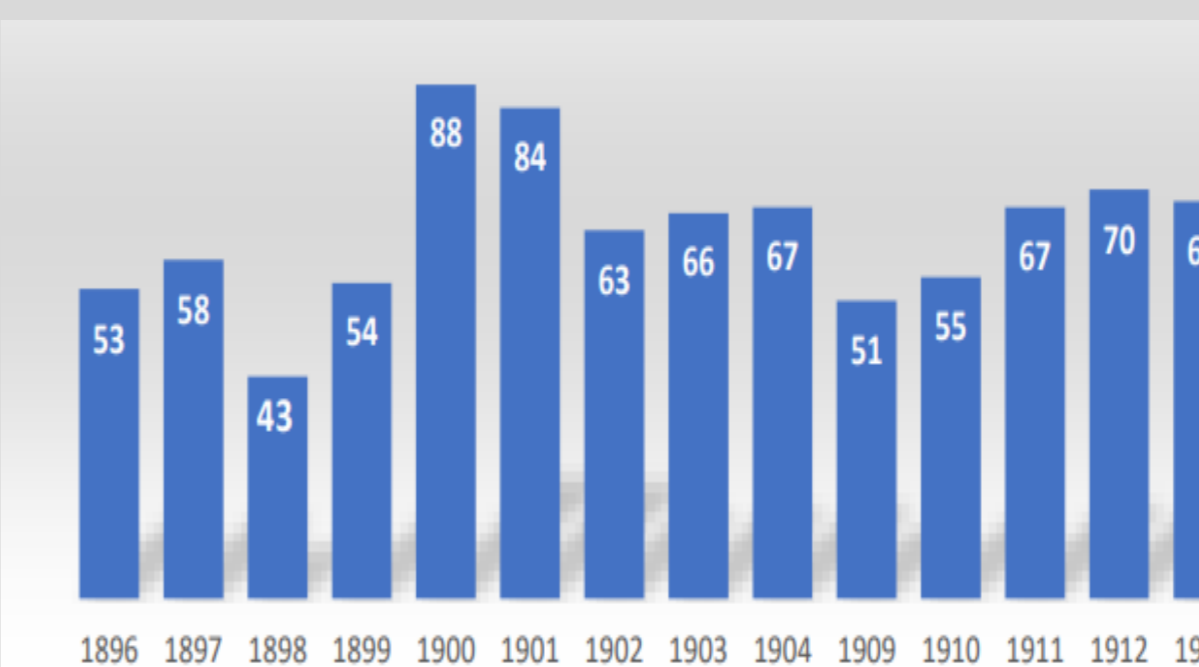
Besides, every pigeons releases should be simultaneously declared to the prefecture and be under surveillance of several policemen, to avoid illegal releases. Foreign pigeons breeders were also strictly controlled and they should have the personal permission of the Minister of the Interior in order to open a dovecote.



**Figure 3: Wealthiness of homing pigeons owners in Isère, as mentioned in the 1896 pigeons census**

- Only owns his work force
- Wealthy
- Very wealthy

The number of dovecotes inside the department of Isère is **globally stable** for the entire period of my study. Brutal increases and decreases of opened dovecotes (cf figure 4) are due to the creations and dissolutions of pigeon racing associations.



**Figure 4: Number of dovecote owners between 1896-1913**  
Note: The censuses from 1905 to 1908 were lost, probably during the war.

Breeding homing pigeons is also an expensive hobby and that aspect could be a problem in a long term perspective. That is why, as showing on figure 3, **59%** of pigeons owners are considered wealthy or very wealthy in the 1896 census.

## Discussion

This work enabled us to discover that, since the 19th century, homing pigeons **were principally bred by urban men**. Another fact highlighted by this study is the odd nature of pigeons breeding, **which is a hobby but also a military practice**. For example, pigeons racing associations did not choose the directions used to train their pigeons, it was the local military authorities who chose them instead. Finally, working on these animals brought me to study various topics like the military and political context of the end of 19th century, as well as environmental and social history.

## References

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