Up to the present day, the multinational nature of the First World War has mainly been conceptualised as the interstate confrontation of major allied powers. The other is first and foremost the enemy, and encounters are framed by military and cultural opposition. However, the Great War was also a time of unprecedented intermingling and circulation within the coalitions. Metropolitan and colonial soldiers, civilian workers, refugees and displaced persons left their familiar frame of reference by the millions. The conflict thus also constituted a change of scene, a confrontation with social and cultural otherness at all scales for the belligerent societies (empires, nation states, local communities). This project aims to contrast the emergence of an Allied identity with the resilience of communal identities, in a broad comparative research encompassing the French, the British and the American cases, and including the colonial armies.

These issues were addressed through food identities and cultures, currently an under-researched topic for the First World War. Drawing on European and North American sources, this transnational study of food identities and cultures explores a critical dimension of the Allied experience of the First World War. The project resulted in a study of the impact of the First World War on the food ways of the Allied troops sent to Europe, including troops from the French and the British Empires.

Local food ways were essential to the endurance of combatants, and families managed to send local products and homemade food in millions of parcels during the war. They intended to supplement military rations, highly criticized for their lack of taste. But the Allied leadership was also aware of the importance of food for the morale and took special care of uprooted soldiers and of Imperial troops, where religious issues resulted in special supplies, preparation and distribution. Food ways and religious issues legitimized regulation and segregation, as food was recognized as a crucial issue to maintain discipline and morale among Imperial troops and foreign workforce, such as the 140 000 Chinese workers brought to Europe. The study focused on the British and French imperial troops to show how food was used to maintain discipline and to build narratives of how the Empires cared about their imperial troops.

The First World War was also a time to discover local food ways for the uprooted soldiers and workforce sent to Europe. During and after the war, these encounters led to some mixing of food ways. Food heritage was thus challenged during the war, which was also an opportunity for the Allied nations to develop new commercial networks and practices, not only through national conventions but also on a local scale. These two last issues still need to be scrutinized for the long run.

The second result of the project focuses on how food structured the Allied identity during the First World War. Narratives presented the sharing of food as a typical Allied value, while wartime profiteers and the enemy appeared as starvers. The issue of food gives a new light to the “economy of sacrifice” according to which general sacrifices paved the way to victory (Winter And Robert, 1997, 2007). In this regard, emergency food aid was supported by local, national and transnational structures. The Croix Rouge and several charities targeted specific groups endangered in their daily nutrition, such as children, refugees or uprooted soldiers. The intercultural identity of the Entente also passed through stomach : products and recipes were exchanged, not only through the actions of the American Relief Administration of H. Hoover, but also through daily contacts at the front and at the rear and through popular culture. Food thus appears as a crucial identity builder of the Entente during the First World War.

The work conducted by Dr. Emmanuelle Cronier paves the way for a comparative study with the Second World War and encourages further transnational analysis of coalition warfare and of food identities and cultures during the First World War