

THE FRENCH ARMY 1870-1914  
DEFEAT, RECOVERY, PREPARATION

by

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B.A., Kansas State College, Pittsburg, Kansas, 1969

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A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1979

Approved by:

  
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Not only is it easy to be wise  
after the event; it is, for military  
historians, almost irresistible.

from William Manchester's  
American Caesar

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The sentiments and attitudes of military officers are important factors in determining the causes for past military events and in predicting the outcome of future military endeavors. This belief led me to explore the professional officer corps in the French Army from 1870 to 1914. My efforts in undertaking this large task have been aided and encouraged by several kind and generous people. I owe each a debt of gratitude that cannot be adequately expressed.

It is unusual for a graduate student to extend his appreciation to his graduate committee. However, I feel fully justified and compelled to do so. My sincere gratitude is extended to Professors Robin Higham and Donald Mrozek for their patience, wisdom, and encouragement. They manifest the highest qualities in practicing scholars.

It is a sincere pleasure to acknowledge Madame Edmonde Péchilliot and her daughter Madame France-Eliane Kinser for their invaluable contribution in my project. Madame Péchilliot graciously consented to the unlimited use of her father's unpublished war diary. Madame France-Eliane Kinser deserves a very special acknowledgment for her assistance in translating the various sections of her grandfather's diary. Without their assistance, the project would have lacked the benefit of a new and interesting primary source document.

My appreciation is extended to Colonel Royer--French Army Liaison Officer to the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth,

Kansas--for his assistance in defining several technical military terms. My deepest thanks go to the late General Valentin himself, who so faithfully and meticulously noted in his diary his personal reflections and opinions.

## PREFACE

The career of every professional military officer is profoundly influenced by the interaction of four major factors--formal military training and education, personal experience, the political atmosphere of his service, and the social milieu in which his career evolves. The formal instruction and training of cadets and officer-candidates form the foundation and direction of an officer's career. During this crucial period, the potential officer receives an education that will enable him to communicate effectively, absorb theory and doctrine, and stimulate participation in scholastic endeavor. Personal experience shapes and molds the officer's attitude, gives impetus to individual qualities, and solidifies his commitment to the profession of arms. For the majority of officers, the initial posting to a Regular Army unit and, in particular, his first combat assignment compose reference points or what is currently termed "mind sets." Senior commanders and general-staff policy planners often fabricate policy and command decisions on personal experience recalled from many years past. The latter two factors directly involve politics. Throughout an officer's career he cannot avoid the direct and indirect effect of domestic political processes on the international posture of the government which he serves. This is manifested primarily in the arena of international relations and foreign policy. The degree of influence depends in part on the character of the military establishment and its perceived role in society.

These thoughts first came to me as a result of my service in the Republic of Vietnam with the United States Army. Initially, I dismissed these suppositions and any further analysis as simply the standard skepticism of youth and idealistic search for answers that accompanied my generation into the 1970's. Like many of my contemporaries, I tended to view the wide range of controversial subjects, such as the student activism in politics, the military draft, the Indo-China War and civil rights as strictly moral dilemmas. However, as my perception matured, I became more cognizant of the interplay and intricacies of politics and social behavior. This cognizance was reinforced as a result of my academic interest in political and military history. My chief area of interest focused on the military and political history of the French Army in the Third Republic. In my studies, I detected a striking number of similarities between the French officer corps following the Franco-Prussian War and the American officer corps after the Indo-China war. The circumstances and magnitude of the two conflicts were obviously dissimilar. However, within the development of each officer corps and institutional framework, I found parallels. This furnished momentum in my endeavor to satisfy my personal and professional curiosity.

I was further encouraged as a result of incredible good fortune. I had the opportunity to examine and use the unpublished war diary of General Joseph Bernard Valentin, whose military career coincided with the period dating from the Franco-Prussian War through World War I. I will introduce General Valentin more adequately in another section and will discuss his role in the present work. However, he fits the characteristic French officer of his day just as many senior officers and aspiring

field grade officers can be stereotyped into roles in the American Army in our own time. I do not intend to offer a translation of General Valentin's memoirs, but only to use them to illustrate and, hopefully, personalize the attitudes, trepidations, and prejudices of the French officer corps in the period under study. In the paper I have used General Valentin's comments to emphasize and support the thesis, particularly the section treating the technical aspects of the French Army's preparation for war. Though I have not extensively used his comments, I believe my selections will sufficiently convey the emotional intensity and thoughts of a generation of officers confronted with inflexible military dogma and the vicissitudes of political involvement. Also, this study is not intended to be a comparative analysis between the American Army in the post Vietnam era and the French Army from 1871 to 1914. I only hope to take an historical perspective which, I sincerely believe, is lacking in current doctrine and training psychology within the commissioned ranks of our armed services.

The influential factors I mentioned in the opening paragraphs are as relevant today as they were for the French officers in 1914. It is important that they be comprehended or at least recognized. History is replete with disastrous consequences when they are not.

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## INTRODUCTION

Victory is a thing of the will

Ferdinand Foch, 1914

This epigram, so piquant in its absoluteness, embodied the French war policy that sent thousands upon thousands to their deaths in World War I. French generals were obsessed with the strategic and tactical offensive. They attempted offensive after offensive in the vain hope of obtaining a decisive victory over the abominable *les Boches*. The senior officers who participated in this war were products of their training, personal experiences, and the tumultuous political events in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their frame of reference extended back over forty years to the Franco-Prussian War. They were deeply affected by this cataclysm and the subsequent political and social controversies that followed.

The period in French history from 1870 to 1914 provides the reader with an historical profile of an army as it recovers from defeat, experiences political and social distractions, and prepares for the next war. This paper intends to examine the professional soldiers who officered this army and concentrate on the major political, military, and social events that influenced their role in French society. The thesis will describe the sentiments and attitudes that pervaded the professional officer corps and caused their estrangement from the main stream of politico-social life and their inflexible devotion to principles that

almost led to another military disaster, if not, in fact, moral negligence. This work seeks to provide some comprehension of a generation of combat officers who labored over forty years for the restoration of French national pride and the exoneration of France's military force.

Famous military officers such as Ferdinand Foch, Philippe Pétain, and Joseph Joffre are traditional sources on matters pertaining to the generation of military leadership in World War I. These officers occupied top decision making positions in the French Army and obviously should be consulted. However, it is equally important to consider the views and perspectives of the multitude of senior officers who commanded frontline regiments and divisions. What did they think about Allied strategy, tactics, politics, and the enemy? How much did their military experiences and past assignments influence World War I battlefields? One recently found source that may furnish some insights into these interesting questions is the unpublished war diary of General Joseph Bernard Valentin, whose military career coincides with the period under study. The diary has been made available to the author through the kindness of his daughter and grand-daughter, who are currently residing in the United States. It is important to consider and examine General Valentin's diary because he is the epitome of his generation. He was a professional soldier who possessed the qualities and characteristics of his generation, at least on the surface of his military record.

Joseph B. Valentin was born in January 1863 in the provincial town of Saint Chinian in the Department of Isère. His father was a successful wool merchant who later entered politics and became an Assemblyman from his department. His parents were well-to-do members of the local

bourgeoisie who could afford to send their children to private Catholic schools for their early education.

According to General Valentin's daughter, he wanted to become a soldier since he had been seven years old. It is interesting to note that this coincided with the defeat of France in 1870 by the emerging German Empire. Of course, it is pure speculation on how much his childhood desire can be attributed to the stigma of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. But, it is reasonable that the memory of the defeat or even the possibility of Valentin witnessing the arrival of German troops for occupation duty had some impact on the formation of his attitude and personality. General Valentin, like others in his social-economic class, claimed a strong family tradition of military service. His grandfather had been an officer in Napoleon's *Grande Armée* and several family members had subsequently followed in the martial tradition.

He entered Saint-Cyr in 1883 and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the 1st Colonial Infantry Regiment in 1885. His first assignment took him to Annam (now Vietnam) for three years where he worked on engineering projects around the city of Hue. He returned to France for a brief stay, then departed for the Sudan in 1889 where he served until 1895, except for a brief tour in Senegal. During his tour in French Africa he participated in several campaigns and was wounded in action against hostile tribesmen. When not actively engaged in combat operations, Valentin directed his efforts towards topography and mapping. He was cited several times for his work and in 1890 was promoted to captain. In 1895 he returned to France after ten years in continuous colonial service.

In 1902, promotion to Major came for Valentin, and in 1910 to Lieutenant Colonel, while he served in various units throughout France. On the eve of World War I, he commanded the 27th Regiment garrisoned at Dijon and like his fellow officers greeted with favor the opportunity for *la Revanche*, revenge for the defeat of 1870-1871. One of General Valentin's journal entries at the outset of World War I reflects the ebullience and confidence that his generation felt for the moment that had been the focus of so much of their personal and professional life.

At 2:30 pm on 15 August 1914, I went to the head of the regiment, the 1st Battalion, as it crossed the German boundry--Alsace and Lorraine. Thirty minutes later I occupied the village of Foulerey in annexed Lorraine. We did not shoot once, the Germans vanished as if by magic.

We were the first to have the honor of crossing the border among the units in the First Army. This day will be a date remembered in history. It is the beginning of *la Revanche*.

15 August 1914

Early in the war, he was promoted to Colonel and commanded the 32d *Brigade d' Infanterie* in the campaigns of 1914-1915. In 1917 he was promoted to *General de Brigade* and appointed commander of the 133d *Division (la Gauloise)*. His unit participated in most major campaigns on the Western Front. After the war he was promoted to *General de' Division* and occupied militario-political positions in Algeria and France. He retired from active service in 1925 and died in 1938.

In his personal life, he followed the standard pattern for a colonial soldier. He was a bachelor until mid-career and after his service in the colonies. He married in 1896 and had one daughter, who was reared and educated in a private school for officers' daughters. He apparently was a very artistic man, who was interested in drawing and

writing. His diary is filled with samples of his engineering and fortification projects. He was an engineer by training who worked on several landscaping projects while in the colonies. In his diary he drew sketches of fortifications and other military subjects with explanatory annotations which indicated more than a casual interest in military topics in many areas.

During the years 1914 to 1918 he kept a set of diaries to record his thoughts and to comment privately on a variety of subjects. His candid thoughts and observations as recorded in the 1914 diary provide important source material for this thesis.

This project is intended to be the foundation for future research and commentary on the study of French officers in World War I. Consequently, much of the paper is devoted to background information of the French officer corps and its role in the Third Republic. In order to accomplish this task, the paper is divided into topics that discuss significant periods and events in the development of the French officer corps and the French Army. Of prime importance is the treatment of major historical developments in the French Army from 1789 to 1870. This is necessary to comprehend fully the magnitude of the disaster of Metz and Sedan in 1870. Like all national military organizations, the French Army regarded its traditions and heritage as a necessity for effective continuity. In this vein, a discussion of the Franco-Prussian War provides the setting for the catastrophe in 1870-1871 which produced the Third Republic. Significant features of this conflict will be addressed without presenting a campaign history of the war.

The chapter addressing the Army in the Third Republic contains the substance of my effort to define the relationship between the Army and the State, the soldier and the politician. Throughout this period one problem without precedent in France emerged to dominate the relationship between the Army and the State: the coexistence of a republican regime with increasing democratic ideals and a large standing army, officered by a caste of professional soldiers. This situation greatly strained the tenuous nature and aggravated the frequent instability of the Third Republic. The weaknesses supposedly inherent in democratic governments were particularly amplified by the circumstances surrounding the Third Republic's establishment. The Third Republic was not founded on any momentous popular movement by the French people, but rather it was engendered by the inability of conservative, monarchist politicians to determine which royal house should rule France. The government survived and eventually most Frenchmen came to favor the parliamentary system of a republican government.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the French Army became increasingly hierarchical and anti-democratic in political and social perspective. This divergence was in many ways the strength of the Third Republic, but it was also the dominating factor in the numerous controversies that gripped French society from 1870 to 1914. These controversies were so intense and profound that their effect on the Army and, in particular, the officer corps were incalculable.

French society, its government and military establishment, though often at odds with each other, united in one commanding way--an intense fear and loathing of the newly created German Empire. Bismarck created the Second Reich at great expense to all Frenchmen. In addition to

losing territories and the imposition of a large war indemnity, France suffered the loss of her self-esteem and dignity. Cries for *la Revanche* echoed through the halls of the National Assembly and villages of France for more than forty years. It was the one factor that could and did unite France.

Perhaps army officers were more keenly aware of and sensitive to the full implications of *la Revanche* than their civilian counterparts in the Third Republic. French officers were very conscious of the military blunders that led to national disgrace in 1870-1871. Their professional lives were oriented toward the day of reckoning with the German Army and their institutions reflected this intense force. The national desire for *la Revanche* provided the impetus for many of the institutional changes in the military structure in the years prior to World War I. However, for the professional officer, *la Revanche* was not only a goal, but a personal reminder of the shame of defeat in 1870.

Many members of General Valentin's generation vividly recalled defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the myriad of difficulties following it. Many were directly or indirectly involved in the political-military debates of the Third Republic and the various scandals that will be discussed in following chapters. In the forty-four years between the Franco-Prussian War and World War I, these damaging events factored into the mentality of this generation of frontline commanders. However, at the foundation of this generation's philosophy of training, military education, and strategy was the goal of *la Revanche*. General Valentin emotionally recorded in his 1918 war diary the moment when the realization of this goal was at hand.

We move forward to the shores of the Rhine, so our horses can drink in that river--which the Germans wanted to completely monopolize for themselves--and now it's our turn to '*Monter la Garde*' on the shore. We have your German Rhine! It is in our glass now!!\*

22 November 1918

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\*NOTE: The phrase "It is in our glass now" is curious. Apparently this was Gen. Valentin's parody of a popular German beer drinking tune around the turn of the century.--gms



## CHAPTER I

### Heritage of the French Army

#### 1789-1870

The military corps is the most  
complete expression of the spirit  
of society

Charles de Gaulle, 1934

The Army of the Third Republic inherited three traditions from its imperial predecessors: philosophical subordination of the military to constituted authority, advocacy of conscription, and social and political achievement through military service. These traditions were at the core of many of the passionate and emotional controversies between the Army and the State, between the soldier and the politician. At times these distinctive traits appeared to contradict and oppose the republican ideology of the Third Republic. This resulted primarily from the manner in which preceding governments interpreted the relationship between the Army as an institution of France and the government as an agent of the State. In the post Franco-Prussian War period, the construction of this relationship continued to undergo revision as one government replaced another and changes in the popular appeal of the Army occurred.

The tradition of active and passive obedience to supreme authority originated and developed as a result of the metamorphosis of governments in the years before 1870. These governments encompassed a variety of

political perspectives, which included the revolutionary dictatorship of the Directory, the imperial rule of Napoleon I, the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe, the short lived Second Republic, and finally the imperial reign of Napoleon III.

Prior to 1870, every soldier bound himself to military service by swearing an oath of personal allegiance to the sovereign. This oath was the remnant of the feudal compact between lord and vassal. The majority of officers and men committed not only their faithful service, but personal, sacred honor as well. Problems arose for the professional officer as to how far he was bound by his oath when his sovereign was deposed and replaced by another. This had taken place with great frequency during the years between 1789 and 1870. Under these circumstances where the nation periodically repudiated the sovereign, whom the soldiers had sworn to serve, a new concept of military loyalty and ethical structure had to be created.<sup>2</sup>

After the fall of Napoleon, the Bourbon dynasty was restored to the throne of France in the person of Louis XVIII. The royal government could never be absolutely certain of the sentiments of the officer corps, particularly when it considered their behavior during the Napoleonic "Hundred Days." The army included many Napoleonic veterans, but also members of the old privileged classes, many of them emigrés. The royal government reserved the most important positions for former emigrés hoping to ensure the loyalty and devotion of the Army. During the declining years of the reign of Charles X, the officer corps and republican activists grew impatient because they suffered demoralization from the arbitrary, politically motivated policies favoring the royal government. In 1830, the revolutionary movement that installed the

constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe provided the evolutionary impetus to redefine the relationship between the soldier and his political superior. Two important legislative instruments were devised to protect the individual officer from capricious and peremptory governmental acts that were strictly politically motivated and to secure the cohesive, undivided fealty of the officer corps.<sup>3</sup>

The Promotion Law of 1832 protected the professional status of officers by guaranteeing the officers' rights to promotion by strict seniority up to the grade of commandant (major). The law contained provisions for the rapid advancement of a small percentage of gifted, young officers through the echelons of command and general staff hierarchy. More importantly, the Law of 1834 stipulated that an officer's rank was his property. It could not be revoked or suspended unless exceptional circumstances warranted such action. However, an officer's position and assignment were another matter. The government retained the prerogative to move and change an officer's billet and assignment arbitrarily at its convenience. These legal measures and the point of view they reflected toward the military meant the abstract, philosophical concept of the state was replacing the more personal idea of the sovereign as the focal point for military loyalties. The state emerged as the guarantor of the officer's position in society. As years passed and governments came and then departed, this concept entrenched itself in the officer corps and legal institutions of France.<sup>4</sup> The net result of this evolutionary process was the institution of the ideal of passive obedience to orders from superiors. Military honor and loyalty was no longer based on personal allegiance but to absolute obedience to whomever held the mandate of legitimate authority.

One of the most emotional and politically sensitive issues that strained the relationship between the Army and the State was the concept of universal military conscription. This was not a new issue for the politicians and soldiers of the late nineteenth century. For the Third Republic, however, the debate took on a more passionate tone because of the clash between republican sentiments and military authoritarianism. This explosive subject emerged from the Great Revolution in 1789 and the subsequent wars to protect the infant republic.

The radicals who came to power as the Committee of Public Safety indoctrinated the French people with their Jacobin concept of a "Nation in Arms."<sup>5</sup> In August, 1793 the Committee, through its War Minister, Lazare Carnot, decreed a *levée en Masse* for all male citizens of France. This summons to the manhood of France was a relatively novel idea because military forces had previously composed of long term professionals and mercenaries. The "Nation in Arms" concept later justified and set the precedent for universal military conscription, which would significantly influence the relationship between the Army and the State over the next 120 years.

Initially, compulsive military service was not entirely successful. In 1789 the Army enrolled only 25 per cent of the total eligible manpower due to determined resistance of the peasantry. Napoleon improved the induction "percentage" during his administration. He increased the rate of enrollment from 67 per cent to 90 per cent. By 1830, French society accepted universal military service as a vital element in the national life of France.<sup>6</sup> The French people neither enthusiastically embraced conscription nor, likewise, wholeheartedly abhorred it. The controversies and political debates in the Third Republic centered on

the technical aspects of conscription such as length of service, unit assignments, and post-separation status. Military service, itself, was regarded as necessary to the security of France.

Conscription was revolutionary in its own right. It changed the military establishment by completely reorienting the Army in French society. The Army of the Revolutionary era was no longer considered by the people as the praetorian guard of kings, but rather as the armed organ of democratic government and protector of the citizenry of France. Thousands of citizen-soldiers entered the Army and swelled the ranks to unprecedented proportions. Imbued with revolutionary zeal, French soldiers waged successful campaigns against counter-revolutionary forces and altered the map of Europe. The military order was also changed because of the idea of a "Nation in Arms." Serving in the Army was now an expression of patriotism since, it was believed, the Army represented the Republic instead of an aristocracy.<sup>7</sup> Patriotism, a serious matter for most Frenchmen, ran particularly deep among common citizens because of the new republican belief that linked military service to democratic virtues. Patriotism permeated its military complement "esprit de corps" and rose to become an ideal. The patriotic fervor not only made the Army popular, but also made its officer corps parochical. Army officers regarded themselves as the embodiment of the patriotic ideal, standing above politics and partisan intrigue. This self-image paralleled the evolving definition of the relationship among the professional officer corps, the Army as a whole, and the State. The professional officer corps considered itself a separate entity dedicated to the preservation of the French nation, society, and culture. French officers believed they were the ultimate protectors of France. This

conviction led professional officers to avoid politics early in their relationship with the state.

Between Waterloo (1815) and the July Monarchy (1830), the Army experienced a decline in popular appeal and image.<sup>8</sup> The Restoration of the Bourbon dynasty in 1815 alienated the Army from the French people because it was tied to Louis XVIII (1815-1824) who did not appeal to the nationalism of the common Frenchman. He had been installed on his throne by the military enemies of Napoleon I. Consisting of a large number of aristocrats and emigrés, the Army was considered by common citizens to be associated with the foreign powers responsible for the Restoration.

There were other reasons for this slump in military appeal. The people of France were still weary from the unceasing martial clamor of the Napoleonic era. In addition, there were several unpleasant but real drawbacks associated with military life. The pay of an officer was very low and prospects for promotion were not encouraging. The routine of regimental life restricted an officer's opportunity to marry and limited his social affiliations. Regiments rotated garrisons on the average of every eighteen months, adding to the difficulties in an officer's social life. Private soldiers were recruited from those too poor to escape induction. Conscription was regulated by lottery. Candidates who drew "safe" numbers were exempt from obligation. Others who drew designated numbers for induction could still avoid service by locating a substitute. They were found among the poor through the use of a financial incentive. Extraordinary measures were used to evade military service by the unwilling sons of wealthy families. Companies were established to ensure young, well-to-do Frenchmen against an unfortunate drawing and to

furnish substitutes for those who did.<sup>9</sup> For those who were inducted, a term of service lasting seven or eight years awaited them. Under these circumstances the Army offered unattractive prospects to most young Frenchmen.

During the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848), the Army regained some of its former glory and prestige because of its successful military occupation and administration of Algeria. Politically, however, it was considered a hotbed of liberalism with a potential for revolutionary activity. The violence and political insecurity associated with the Revolution of 1830 and the July Monarchy were vivid memories to suspicious politicians. Many welcomed colonial excursions as an outlet for Army activities. With the Regular Army so employed, the National Guard inherited the responsibility to maintain public order. The National Guard consisted of citizens from the bourgeois class, who had been responsible for the revitalization of republican government in the 1830's. The Regular Army reserved the mission of defending France on her frontiers and administering colonies.<sup>10</sup>

In 1848 France endured another revolution. Louis Napoleon Bonaparte assumed the reins of power in the midst of political turbulence and instability. This year marks a turning point in the French Army, which experienced a transformation of its political and social orientation. Widespread revolutionary violence had erupted in response to a general feeling of disaffection with the government of Louis-Philippe. The National Guard, now an unreliable force, was called out, but was unable to cope with the crisis. In its place, the Regular Army was summoned to restore order. Bourgeois citizens, who had neglected their obligations in the National Guard, had little choice but to allow

professional soldiers to cope with the chaotic situation. The government called upon General Louis Cavaignac to save the Republic.

A professional soldier with strong Republican inclinations, General Cavaignac had spent most of the years preceding the 1848 Revolution in Algeria. He returned to France in 1848 to become the Minister of War and to prepare military defenses in Paris. During the 1848 rebellion he was given dictatorial powers. General Cavaignac crushed the insurrection and a grateful government named him the "savior of society."<sup>11</sup>

The use of the Army in civil disturbances in 1848 and again in 1851 had two important effects on the Army as an institution. First, the Army became identified with reactionary politics and governmental establishment. The Army aided Louis Napoleon in destroying parliamentary government in 1851 by a coup d'etat. Under Napoleon III, military forces were increasingly employed to break workers' strikes and for political repression. During his reign Napoleon III (1851-1871) enhanced the prestige of the Army for their role in saving France from civil war; and, eventually, it became the pillar of his autocratic regime. In order to reinforce the clout of the Army in domestic matters, Napoleon III unified the command of the regular Army and National Guard. In the Second Empire, all soldiers whether regular army or National Guard, were placed under one military system where officers were no longer elected as they previously had been in the National Guard. This was a significant step in the evolving separatism of professional officers within the state.

Second, the Army continued to be a refuge for members of the aristocracy who had been denied political office over the last forty years. They were attracted to the Army in hopes of reclaiming their traditional eminence in the only profession left open to them for



achieving influence and recognition. The other government institutions, such as the Civil Service, were becoming increasingly more Republican in political tone and dominated by men appointed by liberal factions. These two incipient factors--the association with reactionary policy and the officer corps' parochialism--would mature into institutional characteristics in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Public concern compelled the Army to re-direct its attention from maintenance of domestic order to international involvement with the outbreak of a series of nationalistic wars in the 1850's. In 1854, French military forces were dispatched to the Crimean Peninsula to join their allies in combating the Russian enemy and in 1859 aided Piedmont's attempt at independence from the Austrian Emperor Franz-Josef. In 1866, alert Frenchmen, both military and civilian, observed the devastating power of Bismarck's Prussian Army in his war against Austria. The dramatic defeat of the Austrian forces by the "New Model" Prussian Army at Sadowa (1866) alarmed many French citizens. Military officials began to prepare for the clash between France and her emerging continental rival.

France in the nineteenth century was an artistic, intellectual, and agricultural country, but it was also on occasion a militaristic one. In 1848 it elected a poet as president in time of revolutionary crisis and in 1870 it chose an historian to rescue it from the Prussians, but it turned to military leaders more often in times of political turmoil. The army as an institution generally avoided direct political involvement with the exception of the coup d'etat in 1851. However, this did not preclude certain gifted officers from using their military position to advance their political ambitions by exploiting unusual opportunities.

The tradition of Napoleon as the soldier who could save France was continued by General Cavaignac in 1848, Marshal MacMahon in 1873, and General Boulanger in 1888.<sup>12\*</sup> In each instance, military governments were not established; rather, civilian authority was maintained. This is important in that professional officers, either willingly or not, accepted the neutral role of the military in politics.

On the eve of the Franco-Prussian war, the French Army occupied a prominent position in the State, within society, and enjoyed the respect of the international military community. The Army symbolized loyalty, service, and patriotism even though it had discarded its Republican origins to become the mainstay of dictatorial power under Napoleon III. Its political orientation was decidedly conservative, if not monarchist, but it could claim the military heritage of the First Empire as the descendants of Revolutionary and Napoleonic soldiers who had conquered Europe and had enjoyed the glory of imperial France. The French Army entered 1870 an arrogantly confident military organization supposedly ready to protect the interests of the government and safeguard the French nation.

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\*NOTE: Though it exceeds the scope of the present work, it is interesting to note that Marshal Pétain, General de Gaulle, and General Salan adopted the "man on horseback" role in more recent examples.--gms

## NOTES

## Introduction and Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>David B. Ralston, The Army of the Republic (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup>David Thomson, France: Empire and Republic 1850-1940 (New York: Walker and Company, 1968), p. 201.

<sup>6</sup>Theodore Zeldin, France 1848-1945, 2 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 877.

<sup>7</sup>Thomson, France: Empire and Republic 1850-1945, p. 201.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ralston, The Army of the Republic, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>Zeldin, France 1848-1945, Vol. 1, p. 598.

<sup>11</sup>Anthony Denholm, France in Revolution 1848 (Sydney: John Wiley and Sons, 1972), p. 176.

<sup>12</sup>Zeldin, France 1848-1945, Vol. 2, p. 876.

## CHAPTER II

### The Franco-Prussian War:

#### The Seeds of *la Revanche*

To arms! To arms! Ye brave!  
The avenging sword unsheathe,  
March on! March on! all hearts  
resolved  
On victory or death!

The Marseillaise, Rouget de Lisle 1792

In 1870, Spanish military leaders offered the crown of their country to a Prussian aristocrat--Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen--to fill the vacancy left by the deposition of Queen Isabella. The French were furious at this bold attempt by Prince von Bismarck to install a Prussian officer as the King of Spain. Their concerns were not without foundation. The Chancellor of the North German Confederation intended to surround France with his political allies. This was an excellent opportunity to ensure a friendly power on the southern border of France. When the French government protested vigorously the candidacy of the Prussian prince, the Prussians at first appeared to back down. However, Bismarck pressed the issue, having as his real ambition the unification of North and South Germany. By the use of clever propaganda and diplomatic intrigue, Bismarck maneuvered France into war as the aggressor, a role the French readily accepted.

There are few events in the history of modern France that had such disastrous consequences on the French people, their political institutions, and military establishment as did the Franco-Prussian War. With the cataclysmic events of 1870-1871, a new era began in France. The next four decades were filled with governmental instability, clashes between secularism and clericalism in education, social discontent, and economic pressures. French officers of the World War I generation were profoundly affected by the climate of uncertainty created by the interplay of these forces. At the core, indeed the cause, of many of the controversies facing the Army was the bitter memory of its capitulation in 1870. For this reason, it is necessary to review significant features of the Franco-Prussian War's effect on the French military.

Prior to the war, the French Army was reputed to be the best in Europe, despite the Prussian victory at Sadowa in 1866. French officers showed courage and took their profession seriously. Unfortunately, courage and dedication were not enough. There lacked the proper amount of attention to the comfort and conditions of the rank and file of the private soldier. Instead, most officers concerned themselves with computing future promotions and their accompanying proprietary titles. It appeared that, for the majority of officers, reviewing the Army List was their only intellectual pursuit.<sup>1</sup>

There were exceptions of course. The artillery and engineer officers who were educated at the École Polytechnique showed the highest intellectual merit. But those officers were technicians and designers who, for the most part, did not possess an understanding of the general problems of war. The General Staff was comprised mostly of officers from the Staff Corps and as such had never served in a regiment. These

officers were unprepared to organize and plan large scale mobilization, transportation, service support operations.<sup>2</sup>

French senior commanders had, on the whole, more practical military experience than their Prussian counterparts who participated in theoretical training. However, French officers who distinguished themselves in Africa and Mexico had only commanded small mobile columns. They were promoted without having commanded large troop formations and, consequently without having experienced the problems associated with mobilization. Thus their officer's commission and command potential could be validated only by personal valor and direct combat performance.

The Crimean and Italian campaigns did not alter this practice nor lead to innovations in officer education and training. Officers still believed that élan and battlefield gallantry would be the most important ingredients in a quick victory over the Prussians. The French army took to the field ready "down to their gaiter buttons," so they thought, confident of victory and enjoying tremendous public support.

From the onset of the Franco-Prussian War, French military forces encountered severe problems. Due to insufficient planning, transportation had to be improvised, ammunition was scarce, and units were not brought up to authorized strengths during mobilization. Because no unit larger than a regiment existed in peace time, divisions and army corps had to be formed from regimental sized units from all over France. This caused enormous problems in concentrating the main French field armies. This was due to the inefficiency and inexperience of the French general staff. As J. F. C. Fuller noted, the General Staff "was a collection of young-bloods out of touch with the army and elderly clerks overwhelmed with the minutiae of routine."<sup>3</sup> Such was the condition of the General

Staff that Marshal Bazaine at Sedan, like other senior commanders, forbade its officers on the battlefield. Rather, they relied on their personal and subordinate staffs for assistance and information. Added to these problems in the mobilization process was the lack of a well coordinated plan of campaign to initiate operations. The only "plan" French commanders in the field possessed was a desire to invade southern Germany and then march "On to Berlin."

The French Army was hampered still further by Napoleon III's decision to take personal command in the field. The situation was made even more difficult by the absence of a unified or centralized planning staff and a single commander-in-chief.

The French campaign began in August 1870 with a general advance in Alsace-Lorraine. After minor, indecisive defeats at Weissenburg, Froeschweiler, and Spichern, the French army never ceased retreating. The military situation rapidly deteriorated. Finally, one-half of the army under General Bazaine was gathered into Metz and the other half commanded by Marshal MacMahon and accompanied by Napoleon was herded into Sedan.<sup>4</sup>

At Sedan, General Ducrot, who had replaced the wounded Marshal MacMahon, found his army surrounded by Moltke. He desperately attempted to break out, but all efforts failed. He was replaced by General Wimpffen, who urged the Emperor to place himself at the front of the army and make one last attempt. Rejecting the proposal, Napoleon decided to surrender himself to the King of Prussia and avoid the sacrifice of more French soldiers. General Wimpffen surrendered his besieged army on 1 September 1870--only forty-six days after the declaration of war.

The war appeared to be over. Half of the French forces in the field had surrendered at Sedan, the other half were encircled at Metz. While German armies continued to besiege Metz, the Second Empire fell. On 4 September a provisional government was formed by Leon Gambetta after escaping to Tours by balloon, and resistance resumed. The French nation responded to his call for a "Nation in Arms." Renewed opposition appeared to the Prussian invasion. Particularly effective were small units that harassed and interdicted the Prussians' lines of communication. In spite of these valiant efforts, the besieged garrison at Metz capitulated in October 1870. Amidst rumors of treason and collaboration, General Bazaine surrendered his army of 173,000 effectives.<sup>5</sup> Serious French resistance continued over the next three months, but did not affect the outcome of the war. In January 1871, the Convention of Versailles ended hostilities between France and the newly created German Empire. The capitulation of French forces became a national disgrace.

The causes of the ignominious defeat of the French Army are varied and numerous. Two main reasons were organizational deficiencies at the national level and disunity of command. The French Army had no established war plans on which to initiate tactical operations or to base logistical requirements. Prussian strategy was conceived and practiced in advance by the use of numerous war games using units actually designated for deployment. In contrast no unit in the French Army above the regiment existed in peacetime. Therefore, brigades, divisions, army corps, and armies had to be created and gathered from all over France at the time of mobilization. Without pre-determined assembly areas, staging areas, pre-stocked logistical stores, or transportation priorities, the French Army suffered a severe disadvantage.<sup>6</sup>



In the French Army, nothing existed comparable to the Prussian General Staff. It did not possess a single, centralized organ with a peacetime mission of preparing France for war. The Ministry of War was responsible for the administration of the army. It was divided into functional departments or "bureaus" which supervised the specific functions of pay, commissary, and procurement for each branch of service--infantry, cavalry, and artillery. These departments were staffed by civilians, often including the director; and they operated in a bureaucratic vacuum from each other and from units in the field.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these formidable impediments, the French Army in the field had no commander-in-chief who possessed absolute authority over subordinates. The main French Army changed commanders three times in six weeks.<sup>8</sup> Subordinates displayed little initiative and engaged in personal feuds and bickered incessantly among each other. Not even Napoleon III could instill a sense of cooperation among his generals. This lack of direction in the conduct of the war extended to the government in Paris as well. While Napoleon III took to the field, the Empress and a Regency Council directed the war effort incompetently, contributing to the completeness of the disaster.

The war was formally ended by the Treaty of Frankfurt in May 1871. France reluctantly agreed to cede the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and to pay an indemnity of 5 billion francs; a German army of occupation was to be stationed in France until the settlement of the debt. The material losses were harsh, but the national humiliation and indignity were even more unbearable for the defeated but proud French. The people of France could not forget that just six months earlier, France had been the leading power of Europe and the cultural center of the Western world.

Suddenly, all that was gone. France, dismembered, in debt, and occupied, drifted toward inevitable political and governmental crisis.

The terrible and humiliating calamity was most fervently remembered by its soldiers. Down through the years, soldiers, such as J. B. Valentin, considered themselves the warrior race of Europe, and they could not forget this degradation.<sup>9</sup> In the forty years between the Franco-Prussian War and World War I, the desire to exonerate the French Army became the first article of faith for professional officers. This compulsion for revenge, or *Revanche*, was manifest in almost every military endeavor--training, education, and strategic planning. These will be discussed in more detail in following chapters. *Revanche* affected more than mere impersonal institutions. It was something personal, profound, and ever present for the officers of General Valentin's generation. Forty-five years after the event, the defeat of 1870 was alive in the thoughts and hearts of this generation. J. B. Valentin was probably like other senior commanders when he reminded the troops of the 27th Infantry Regiment of their duty when war came in 1914.

My friends, while going to the front, keep in mind all the cruelties committed by our enemies on our women, children, and *Inoffensifs*. Remember the harsh peace terms imposed on France by Germany forty-four years ago. The theft of our dear provinces Alsace-Lorraine and the innumerable humiliations inflicted on our country since then. Remember it! Remember it!!

13 August 1914

Part of the concept of *La Revanche* was the idea that past French victories would be an inspiration to success. For an Army recovering from defeat, this would contribute to morale and to the preparation of

troops for battle. General Valentin relied on this theme when he continued his order to the 27th Infantry Regiment.

. . . remember also that a little more than a century ago our forefathers felled the German pride in circumstances similar to that of today. First in Valmy (1792) where our just formed militia forced the Prussians back while shouting "Viva la Nation," then in Jena and Auerstadt (1806) where in only one day the Prussian Army was crushed, destroyed, and scattered. One month later all of Germany belonged to us and begged for mercy. . . .

13 August 1914

These extracts are from General Valentin's Order Number 2. They illustrate his preoccupation with the German Army. The glorious military past of France made even more keen the desire to avenge the defeat of 1870-1871. Valentin reminded his men that France had defeated Germany in the past and implied that she would do so again. The disgrace that France had suffered at the hands of Germany in the preceding forty-four years loomed large in his words, echoes of the military defeat of France in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian War.

## NOTES

## Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>D. W. Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939) (London: Hanish Hamilton, 1940), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>J. F. C. Fuller, The Conduct of War 1789-1961 (Minerva Press, 1968), p. 119.

<sup>4</sup>Alistair Horne, The Price of Glory (New York: St. Martins Press, 1963), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, The Encyclopedia of Military History (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 236-238.

<sup>6</sup>Ralston, The Army of the Republic, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup>Horne, The Price of Glory, p. 3.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Army in the Third Republic:

1871-1914

A monarchy is a merchantman which sails well, but will sometimes strike on a rock, and go to the bottom; a republic is a raft which will never sink, but then your feet are always in water.

Fisher Ames, 1795

The distinguished New England Federalist aptly described the difficulty in sustaining a republican government. The political administrations of the Third Republic testified almost continuously to Ames' subtle observation. The Third Republic experienced rotation of governments, attempted coups, scandals, and national demoralization. The French Army, as a major institution in the Third Republic, could not avoid being significantly influenced by major socio-political events during this period. Professional officers, as the leaders of the Army, were sensitive to the issues and controversies facing the army and the nation. Officers were themselves the most serious and constant critics of the Army in its reorganization and its reformation. Their observations provided the basis for the unending political debates about the Army in the Third Republic.<sup>1</sup>

The Army was the one institution above all others that could claim the energy, courage, and wealth of the defeated and humiliated nation.<sup>2</sup>

This may seem incongruous in light of the army's performance during the recent war. Nonetheless, in the twenty-five years following the Franco-Prussian War, as David Ralston has written "The army occupied an honored place in the affection of practically every Frenchman." The reason for this phenomenon was that, in a France conquered, humiliated, and divided, the army became the great "common denominator" for all Frenchmen. The war had given the opportunity to thousands upon thousands of young men to serve France and to acquaint themselves with military life. Millions of citizens had come into direct or indirect contact with the Army, who otherwise would not have. The swell of patriotic fervor showed more than just an increase of familiarity with the military service. The dispossession of the two French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine "touched a vital nerve," and the Army was perceived as the instrument to regain them.<sup>3</sup>

The infant Third Republic encountered its first post-war crisis six months after its establishment. The Provisional Government fled Paris during the war to avoid capture by the Prussians. The capital was left under the control of mayoral committees, who exercised authority over the city's National Guard units. The vacuum left behind by the Provisional Government's departure was readily filled by leftist politicians in the mayoral committees. There was a long history of deep resentment and suspicion between Parisians and the rest of the country. Since the revolution in 1789, Paris had been identified with advanced republican ideals, while the provinces were politically more conservative. The pressures of the German siege and the decision of the National Assembly to cancel the moratorium on wartime commercial debts made Paris a center of revolutionary fervor. In March 1871, Parisians elected an autonomous

municipal council which was determined to pursue the war and preserve the Republic. This autonomous municipality, called the Paris Commune, was a direct challenge to the authority of the Provisional Government, and an immediate and serious crisis ensued.

The Provisional Government of the venerable historian Adolphe Thiers reacted by authorizing Marshal Marie-Maurice MacMahon to occupy Paris and reinstate the government. The Army had few remaining reliable troops; the exceptions were the French Foreign Legion and Algerian native soldiers. The Army, enervated by the disastrous war, was not in a "combative mood."<sup>4</sup> They particularly disliked the prospects of fighting their Parisian countrymen. To marshal a suitable force, Thiers asked Bismarck to accelerate the repatriation of the prisoners of war of the old Imperial Army captured at Sedan and Metz. These professional soldiers were reliable and loyal to orders from government officials and when repatriated were organized as the Army of Versailles.

In early April, the Army of Versailles began its offensive by attacking and seizing suburbs around the capital. Paris was ablaze with the emotional fervor of civil war. The French Army marched on Paris to force its way into the city. This was a particularly agonizing venture for the professional army officer and his troops. To entertain the German Army of Occupation by treating them to a brutal civil war added insult to the intense disgrace of the recently defeated French Army. Nevertheless, the French infantry entered Paris with the aid of an artillery bombardment, and the savagery of street fighting began.

The Paris Commune, as a military force, collapsed. The fighting during the "Bloody Week" was conducted by stalwart individuals behind barricades. Reprisals were severe. The army disposed of the rebels and

sympathizers with bitter resolution. Prisoners and collaborators were summarily judged and executed by firing squad. By the end of May, the fighting had stopped, and Paris was returned to the Provisional Government. The army, under Marshal MacMahon, had restored peace and order to France. The Paris Commune was important to the Army because it was the prime reason for its rapid reconstitution, which under other circumstances may have taken longer. The success of the Army in smashing the Commune emphasized the absolute value in possessing a strong, obedient military force to politicians of the early Third Republic. Nevertheless the professional officers, who had predominated the officer corps in the recent war, could take little pride in the victory. For them, fighting a civil war under the disdainful eyes of the German Army of Occupation must have been a bitter reminder of their degradation.<sup>5</sup>

It would be difficult to gauge which of the two great catastrophes horrified the French more--the defeat of France by the Prussians or the shock of civil war and potential for more "Communes." The deputies to the National Assembly were convinced that France must undergo a moral and social revitalization in order to rise above this depressing state and to regain its position in the international community. The disagreement on how this was to be accomplished showed up in the military. For example, one of the first steps in this process was the reorganization of the army. All deputies agreed that reorganization was necessary, but finding a method proved extremely difficult for the politically diverse deputies. This situation caused much consternation and apprehension for the army during the period from 1871 to 1914.

The conservative deputies did not immediately address the need to reform the Army's hierarchy or to investigate the reasons for its



defeat. Rather they moved to re-establish hierarchical order in the professional officer corps and to reapply rules that traditionally governed its existence. During the last days of Gambetta's government, officers were desperately needed to replace those who had been captured at Metz and Sedan. To supply them, guidelines enacted by the Promotion Laws of 1832 and 1834 were suspended for the duration of hostilities. Officers were commissioned from groups of citizens with known republican sentiments, and seasoned officers were catapulted several grades higher. After the war, the officers of the regular army returned to France and believed their vital interests had been endangered by the rapid expansion of the officer corps. There was an excess of 50 per cent in the officer ranks.<sup>6</sup> A government committee was established to evaluate each officer's source of commission and determine the merits of any promotion. The results were predictable. Regular army officers were favored over the officers receiving their commissions from Gambetta's government. As a result, regular Army officers were reinstated in their former positions at the expense of the "temporarily" promoted officers. Thus the officer corps in the Third Republic had much the same composition as it had in the Second Empire under Napoleon III. The result of the government's committee was that officers in command of the Army for the next three decades would have begun their careers in the Second Empire or before.<sup>7</sup> This secured for the Army a body of officers who would perpetuate traditional military values and firmly establish the goal of *Revanche*.

Marshal MacMahon became President of the Third Republic in 1873. Marie-Maurice MacMahon was considered the only person in France able to head the government because of his untainted role in the Franco-Prussian War and his service to the Republic in the Paris Commune uprising. The

founders of the Third Republic intended for it to be only temporary, while they debated which royal house would furnish a new king for the Third Restoration. This issue was passionately debated among competing monarchist deputies--Legitimists, Orleanists, and Bonapartists. There were two favored candidates--the Comte de Chambord representing the Bourbon line and the Comte de Paris, heir to the House of Orleans. The Army did not become directly involved in the controversy, but it was affected by its outcome. The two rival factions were so inflexible and uncompromising that they threw away any hopes of a Restoration. Marshal MacMahon continued in the presidency until 1879 under a republican constitution promulgated in 1875.

The failure of monarchist politicians to re-establish a monarchy had significant ramifications in the relationship between the Army and the State. Professional officers now served in a republic governed by politicians of many different factions and parties, who represented a wide variety of ideas on the subject of civil-military relations. They also must work within a democratic framework that often was unresponsive to the concerns of the military chiefs and in which, on occasion, the politicians chose to follow their own advice in the formulation of military policy.

Army officers encountered a confusing and paradoxical political environment in the Third Republic. In the relationship between the Army and the State, the officer worked for and with politicians who as republicans, socialists, conservatives, anti-militarists, rightists, and leftists represented diverse and sometimes overlapping factions. Because of the confusing nature of French politics, it is necessary to offer some general definitions of political terms. Republicans basically believed

that the republic should defend the individual against the state, while recognizing that citizens had to work within the limits of the social order. Radical politicians labored for the complete separation of church and state and for the political treatment of social problems. They felt also that governments in general possessed an inherent inclination towards tyranny. The individual had the right and responsibility to keep this tendency in check. The political Right included politicians who desired to maintain the status quo or even bring back the "good old days," government hierarchy, and the infallibility of the Catholic Church. Members of the Left believed that all men were created equal, progression of man through reason, and men have the right to individual pursuits without undue interference from government. In the Third Republic the main advocates of pacifism and anti-militarism were the Socialists. They maintained that the army was only a tool which capitalists used to keep the proletariat under their control. No war was worth fighting since it would only increase the suffering of the masses.<sup>8</sup> Encompassing these factions was the main branch of the Republican Party. The Moderates or Opportunists maintained that though one should be bold in one's ideas, he should be prudent in executing them.

The confusing nature of French politics created a climate of mistrust and enlarged the distance between the politician and the separate professionalism of the officer corps. As later writings of General Valentin suggest, officers gained a contempt for the socialists as irresponsible enemies of the military. This sentiment lingered for years and showed itself even on the eve of demobilization in 1918:

It's not time to demobilize yet. *Les Boches* have not demobilized. And already our extreme Left, our "good" Socialists are asking that the

whole French Army and its soldiers be returned to their homes. And once more the Socialists make it an election issue. Those people are only rascals pursuing their own interests. They always flatter the electorate by giving them what they want. They care nothing for France or its welfare. I hope the Socialists are rejected and discredited by the electorate.

23 November 1918

These selections from General Valentin's diary show his distaste for socialists and their anti-militarism, but they may also indicate a feeling of disgust with politicians in general during this period. He suggested such a view upon receiving news that a regiment had hesitated to advance to the battlefield in World War I.

. . . It is not the fault of the poilu. It is the way of governing France; politics permeated everywhere; more in the south of France than in the north and with the same undiscipline, corruption, cowardice, etc. . . .

20 August 1914

Three important reform laws were enacted during the early days of the Third Republic which provided the essential evolutionary framework in the development of the relationship between army and state over the next forty years.<sup>9</sup> In 1872 the first of these, the Conscription Law, was passed after much debate. Legislative argument centered around the issue of the term of service for inductees. The conservative factions wanted a term of service for seven years; the more liberal deputies wanted it shorter. From a military viewpoint it was an issue of quality opposed to quantity. The French Army, made up of long-term professionals, emphasized quality while the Prussians with their large reservoir of conscripts and reserves had only quantity. The professional officers wanted to retain the "quality" because they believed it took years to make a soldier proficient and reliable. A compromise was reached that stipulated

that the term of service would be five years. Basically a conservative measure, the law did contain one reform--the abolition of substitution. The sons of rich or influential men could no longer escape conscription, except through educational exemptions. This law also contained specifications disenfranchising soldiers from voting until they retired.

The second pertinent law was passed in 1873, and, unlike the Conscription Law, it was actually a reform. The Reorganization of the Army Law provided the peacetime army with a wartime organization and command structure. The Army was given the means to transfer effectively the responsibility for administration and command from peacetime to general mobilization for war. Brigades, divisions, and corps were organized and furnished the appropriate command structure with auxiliary services.<sup>10</sup>

The third piece of legislation concerned the number of cadres and effectives. Passed in 1875, this stipulated the size of battalions and companies as well as the appropriate officer's billets. The military objected to this bill because it addressed a purely technical internal matter. Prior to 1870, the French infantry regiment consisted of four battalions, each with six companies. The deputies wanted to change the regiment so that it would have three battalions, with four companies each. The purpose of the proposed changes was not to reduce the number of effectives but to increase tactical potency of a company by making it larger. Units would still have the same number of men, but would have fewer officers, particularly captains. In order for republican politicians to placate politically powerful generals sitting in the Senate, a compromise was reached. Metropolitan regiments would have twelve companies as the bill stipulated, but Algerian regiments would have four

battalions and twenty-four companies. Not only were the number of captains' billets retained, but more billets for majors were created.

The initial legislation dealt with what has often been an endemic problem area for legislators and soldiers alike. The great question for military reformers was how far the French Army should go in remodeling itself after the Prussian military establishment? Members of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, increasingly republican in political perspective, were very sensitive and suspicious about the ultimate form of the reorganized military establishment. They knew that the Prussian military aristocracy dominated the German Empire, that it was anti-democratic, and that the German General Staff was semi-independent from the German parliament. This arrangement was anathema to French politicians. Yet, they were also fully aware that war had entered the industrial age and that a successful military force required centralized direction and a sweeping claim on national resources. The terrible memory of Prussia's victory over French arms was a constant reminder. Even the most liberal French politicians realized that ultimately their security rested on the French Army.

The Army, on the other hand, recognized that there could be problems associated with political involvement and genuinely desired to stay neutral in political fights except in the legislation affecting its own internal affairs. It favored the legislation of 1875 barring general officers from sitting in the Chamber of Deputies. In 1884, general officers on active duty were barred from holding positions in the Senate except in the special case of a few distinguished old soldiers. The military greeted these measures as guarantees against harmful effects on the Army's tradition of political neutrality. For the most part,

professional officers believed that to introduce into the army the factional quarrels of the parliament would destroy its cohesion and consequently its effectiveness.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1880's the professional officer corps began to awaken from its many years of intellectual turpor. In the words of David Ralston, "Within the officer corps, there could now be sensed a real intellectual ferment." A few newspapers appeared as well as professional journals, discussing current military issues. The penetrating posthumous work of Colonel Ardant du Picq, *Études sur le combat*, received international acclaim, even from the Germans. Colonel Lewal published *La réforme de l'armée* and acquired an immediate reputation in French military circles. He was appointed the first commandant of the *École de Guerre* and later served as Minister of War. The next four decades saw the publication of numerous periodicals and books on military subjects.<sup>12</sup>

The military renaissance was further advanced by the introduction of new weaponry and equipment. The Gras and later the Lebel magazine loading rifle provided infantry units with increased fire-power and flexibility. French artillerymen made significant innovations in breech-loading field artillery pieces. By 1900, French cannoneers had regained their premier position among field artillerymen with the introduction of the 75mm field gun.

One of the most significant events in the French Army's reforms was the reorganization of its staff system in 1880. The previous staff system was instituted in 1818 by Saint-Cyr. Staff officers were assigned only to the Staff Corps and were separated from the rest of the officer corps who were eligible for field commands. They did not serve with troops and were assigned only to higher commands. The Staff Corps was

intended to suppress any favoritism that might accompany positions that were inherently close to senior commanders. Unfortunately, the French Army had been completely without the benefit of staff planning and organization in the war with Prussia. Separation from troop duty insulated staff officers from a sense of the realities of the modern battlefield. The new staff system sought to correct this. Officers could only be admitted to staff service after graduating from the *École de Guerre*. Candidates could enter the *École de Guerre* after serving a number of years with troop units. Assignments to positions on division and corps staff would alternate with duty at the troop level.

Officers who demonstrated exceptional talent were selected for the developing General Staff. In 1887, the General Staff of the Minister of War reached its final form and was chartered along the same lines as the Prussian model. It comprised a ministerial portfolio and four bureaus-- personnel, intelligence, operations, and logistics. But, it had one significant disadvantage. The Minister of War was a general on active duty, but he was also a member of the cabinet. If the government lost a vote of confidence, as it often did in the Third Republic, it was forced to resign--in its entirety in accordance with the principle of ministerial solidarity. The Minister of War, though selected for his military experience and expertise, was nonetheless obliged to resign along with his ministerial colleagues.

As a result of this practice, there were twenty-six Ministers of War from 1875 to 1900. The frequent change in ministers affected the Army in two very important ways. First, it made it difficult, if not impossible, for policy at the cabinet level to have continuity and stability. The exception was Charles Freycinet, a civilian who served as minister from



1888 to 1893. His tenure was the longest and generally considered the most successful, especially in reform of the General Staff. Second, less competent generals usually held the portfolio. The more capable officers desired to remain in corps and division command billets to avoid merely temporary service in the ministry. The most prominent generals did not consider appointment to the War Ministry as the climax to a successful career.

The most capable generals wanted to stay in the purely military sphere preferring to command a corps or an army in time of war. The reluctance of qualified officers to serve as Minister of War added to the weakness in the Army's high command. The ministerial appointment usually went by default to officers junior to the most prominent generals. In theory the general who was Minister of War exercised command authority over the entire army by virtue of his position. He did not possess the added authority of an increase in rank over his subordinate field commanders because the highest rank in the army was that of divisionary general. Authority for corps and army command derived from the positions themselves. It was traditional that among officers of equal rank, precedence went to the one promoted first. Because of this situation, the Minister of War, as the nominal commander of the French Army, was often junior to his corps commanders. In practice, the Minister of War might very well hesitate to exert the full authority of his office over generals commanding in the field.<sup>13</sup>

In the late 1880's, a series of events began that interfered with and interrupted the army's attempts to continue its reformation and reorganization. Just when the Army was in a position to advance its popularity and healthy working relationship with the Assembly, the

relationship gave way to apathy, estrangement, and at times, hostility between politicians and soldiers. The problem began in 1886 with the appointment of the flamboyant General Georges Boulanger as the Minister of War. The political successes of the conservative and Rightist factions alarmed the liberal republicans, especially the Radicals of the political Left. Leftists conspired to have General Boulanger appointed to the ministry. They were very much concerned about the increasing trend of political reaction in the military. They wanted to reverse this general trend of conservatism and, in particular, inject republican virtues into the military forces. Eventually, political forces allied with Boulanger coalesced into an undefined, emotional movement usually referred to as Boulangism.

General Boulanger as the War Minister was energetic and determined to force Republican reform on the Army. The food, lodging, and clothing of the troops were improved, and he worked to gain the loyalty of the noncommissioned officers.<sup>14</sup> The morale of the Army and regimental esprit were encouraged and fostered. Unfortunately for the Army, these were shallow rehabilitative measures designed to promote the political career of Boulanger. He continued in his efforts to republicanize the Army by removing officers with aristocratic connections and dismissing general officers senior to himself. General Boulanger, as a Radical minister, was the darling of Parisian society and was popular with the masses. His political image grew in a wave of emotional appeal. He claimed to represent the Republican tradition that had made France great in her past.

Boulanger denounced the conservative deputies for failing to pursue a more active policy in war preparation. His appeal for increased military preparation fired the emotional fervor of the public who still

clamored for *la Revanche*. The government became justifiably concerned and transferred him to a field command outside Paris. The Radical and Republican politicians were enraged and the Chamber pressed the President for his return. To placate Boulanger's numerous supporters, the President gave in. Boulanger returned and was elected to the Chamber and his political ambitions increased. Boulanger had ceased to be a political general or an army reformer. He had now become a symbol representing a great republican national movement and a public idol. Boulanger's patriotic rhetoric combined with the exposure of scandals involving family members of high public officials threw the government into turmoil. France was rapidly approaching a crisis. The immediate cause was the resignation of Jules Grévy, President of France since 1879, and the election of a successor. Suitable candidates were difficult to identify because of the political differences of the factions involved. It was Georges Clemenceau who found an acceptable man by advising his colleagues to "Vote for the stupidist." They elected Sidi Carnot. Though not "stupid," he lacked any real political or administrative talent. The real victor of the crisis was Boulanger because of the frailty of the newly elected government.

Republican politicians sensed an opportunity to control the government using Boulanger as their standard-bearer. It was planned that Boulanger would lead his supporters in demanding the dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies.

At the moment when everything appeared to be in his favor, Boulanger lost his nerve. The government was aware of the plan to dissolve the parliament and used the legality of their position to prevent its execution. They prepared to call the High Court into session to try

Boulangier for seditious acts. The possibility of his arrest and trial before the High Court undoubtedly smothered his zeal. He deserted his baffled supporters and went into a self-imposed exile. His supporters sent deputations to induce him to return and face a skeptical public. He refused, not wanting to be separated from his dying mistress. A few supporters of Boulangism remained but evaporated in 1891 when Boulangier shot himself in despair over the death of his mistress. Dramatic to the end, he killed himself on her grave, and Boulangism was buried in a Brussels cemetery.<sup>15</sup>

The Army's reaction to Boulangier is both interesting and pertinent to the relationship between the professional military and the government. Career officers may not have shown affection for politicians in general, but they cared far less for one of their own that used his uniform to advance his political ambitions. Even though Boulangier spoke for the principles of patriotism and military preparedness, he failed to win supporters in the professional officer corps. Boulangier never seriously considered using the Army against the regime because he realized that the Army would never support such a plan.<sup>16</sup>

The Army satisfied those politicians who had been skeptical over the loyalty of the army. And equally important, the Boulangier episode demonstrated the unreliability of political soldiers, raising questions about the ambivalent status of a Minister of War. This was one of the prime considerations in the appointment of the first civilian minister, Charles Freycinet, in 1888.

Over the next fifteen years, the Army experienced more serious distractions that influenced profoundly its role in the Third Republic. A series of events, including the Dreyfus Affair in the mid-1890's and

the Combes and André episodes involved the Ministry of War in a scandal that altered the Army's position in society. Officers of General Valentin's generation were in mid-career during this period and were exposed to the far reaching implications of corruption, dishonesty, and disloyalty of these events.

The Republic had not yet fully recovered from Boulangism when in late 1894 a Jewish Army captain, Alfred Dreyfus, was arrested for espionage and treason. It was an event that would eventually involve and embroil all segments of French society, although the affair was from beginning to end an Army matter. The legal aspects and circumstances surrounding the famous courts-martial are well known and need not be reiterated. Based on circumstantial evidence, an Army tribunal convicted and sentenced Dreyfus to life imprisonment for complicity in a German spy ring. The Army would suffer greatly from this blatant mockery of military justice. It was widely believed that, in this period of government corruption and weakness one institution did not falter in its duty. As D. W. Brogan has written, "There might be no government that the man on the street could trust, but there was the Army."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately for the Army, Dreyfus was innocent, and his conviction set in motion a series of events that eventually culminated in one of the most extensive scandals of the century.

The Dreyfus Affair, as it is known to history, reached incredible proportions and eventually polarized society. The Affair far surpassed the legal aspects of the Dreyfus court-martial. It called into question the honor of the Army and the integrity of the officer corps. Initially a few family members and friends labored on Dreyfus' behalf. They slowly won the support of important personages like Gambetta and Clemenceau

while steadily increasing public interest in the case. In 1897 evidence was produced that indicated Alfred Dreyfus was innocent and another officer, the aristocrat Major Esterhazy, was the guilty party. So much publicity now surrounded the case that Esterhazy was brought before a tribunal. Since the Army had already convicted Dreyfus of the crime, Major Esterhazy was acquitted. The tribunal chose to believe falsified documents that supported Dreyfus' guilt. Enraged by this affront to justice, the famous author Emile Zola published an open letter entitled *J'accuse*, in which he indicated that several senior military officers including General Mercier, the Minister of War at the time of the conviction, General de Boisdeffre, Chief of the General Staff, and others were guilty of corruption and obstruction of justice. He achieved his purpose of creating the biggest possible public scandal and forced the government officially to acknowledge inconsistencies in the Dreyfus court-martial. In 1899, Dreyfus returned from Devil's Island to stand trial again.

The implications now exceeded the discrepancies in the original court-martial. Society was divided into two sides as represented by the Dreyfusards on one hand and the Army on the other. The Dreyfusards not only wanted the acquittal of Dreyfus, but also represented those who were against authoritarianism and clericalism. The Army became the standard-bearer for political conservatives, monarchists, anti-semites, and Catholics dedicated to order, hierarchy, and authoritarianism.<sup>18</sup> For the Army, its reputation and position in French society depended on the "guilt" of Dreyfus.

The Army hierarchy undoubtedly knew that Dreyfus had been convicted on very scanty evidence. Furthermore, internal investigations uncovered

incompetent investigative work, perjury, and security violations within the General Staff itself. Senior officials felt they had little choice but to continue the condemnation of Dreyfus in order to protect society from what they believed would be the unsettling effect of the truth. Shamefully, they used vile tricks and every pretense available to uphold the Army's "honor." The net result of the retrial was the sustaining of the conviction. However, in a desperate attempt to deflate the explosive issue, the court pardoned Dreyfus. The attempt failed. The Dreyfusards continued to make headway in their cause and in 1906 argued the case again. The verdict of this trial cleared Dreyfus and annulled the conviction. The Army restored Dreyfus to the service amidst much pomp and ceremony in which he was made a Knight in the Legion of Honor.<sup>19</sup> After twelve years of fratricidal bickering over the issues, the case was closed, but its impact was felt for many years. Although it created no threat of a revolution or military coup, the Dreyfus Affair was a painful and distracting event that drained energy from and tested the resolve of the Third Republic.

Within the Army, the implications of the Dreyfus Affair created incredible strains on the command hierarchy. Because of the evidence, it was inevitable that the government would eventually have to oppose the Army in the Dreyfus Affair. Suddenly, professional officers found themselves on the defensive and alienated from the government. The Dreyfus Affair also renewed and aggravated issues surrounding the separation of church and state. For a Catholic possessing conservative beliefs, the Army was about the only career open in state employment. Access to the French civil service, diplomatic service, and magistracy had been made more difficult for them in past years. It appeared to republican

politicians that the Army had become a bastion of Catholic and monarchist professional officers.<sup>20</sup>

Many officers were appalled at the blatant miscarriage of justice covered up by the military hierarchy. They clamored for increased and broadened reform in the senior echelons. Disenchanted officers unwarily found allies among the republican-dominated deputies. These adroit politicians sensed an opportunity to "republicanize" the Army by altering its conservative trends. Republican politicians used their influence in the appointment of General Louis André to the post of Minister of War in 1900. The initial intent of the Republican politicians was to reconcile the Army Officer Corps to republican ideals and lessen its autonomy within the state. The appointment produced another major scandal instead of the desired results.

General André was a fervent anti-cleric who intended to carry out the republicanizing of the Army in the tradition of General Boulanger. His main preoccupation was the protection and advancement of young republican officers. His main duty, as he envisioned it, was to create a favorable climate for the promotion of republican officers. To accomplish this, General André abolished promotion boards and centralized the process in his ministry. To make this system work, information obtained outside regular channels was required. He decided to seek assistance from that solid foundation of French Republicanism--the Freemasons.

The Masons were contacted and they agreed to establish a network to gather information on Army officers. This system eventually became very sophisticated and efficient. Agents and informants were everywhere--the barracks, officers' messes, military facilities, and Catholic churches.



They surreptitiously collected information on an officer's personal political opinions, social habits, and religious views. The information was catalogued and transferred to individual index cards or "fiches" and stored in the War Ministry and some were even kept in the lodge of the Grand Orient. As an example, the information collected on one professionally competent commandant stated that he ". . . takes no part in politics, lets his wife have her own way and sends her six children to religious schools and goes to Mass with his family."<sup>21</sup>

Profiles were collected with such information on unsuspecting officers and gathered together into dossiers for review by the Minister of War. A covert system so large could not be kept secret for long. Rumors circulated, and shortly proof surfaced to discredit André and his cohorts. The public and the government alike were appalled at this latest scandal. This interference with the promotion system had demoralizing and disconcerting effects on the professional officer. André and his political supporters, through their manipulation of the promotion system, attempted to realign the composition of the officer corps. The exposure of this latest scandal was an intense disappointment to many professional officers, who sincerely believed that the army was above political factionalism and that its code of ethics was beyond reproach.

Throughout this period, there was an escalation in the vehement rivalry between secular and ecclesiastical groups for control over state education.<sup>22</sup> Republican minded politicians labored to ensure secular control and divest all religions of their educational institutions, particularly the Catholic church. They wanted complete separation of State and Church.

Pressure for reform in the school system began immediately after the French defeat in 1871. The Republicans attributed partially the nation's failure and lack of resource to the education provided by clerics and religious orders. The Republicans, who held legislative majorities in the 1880's, were able to institute a program of free education taught by lay teachers. The program emphasized the sciences along with civic morality and republican patriotism. Even with official sanction and support, the new educational system was slow to replace the Jesuits and other ecclesiastical orders.

In 1902, the new President of the Council of Ministers, Émile Combes, came to power determined to complete the separation of Church and State. A law was passed that expelled religious orders from the educational system. Parochial schools were closed and church-owned property confiscated. The Army was summoned to enforce expropriation. This threw many officers into a moral dilemma, which aggravated the existing ill-feelings between the politicians and soldiers. Since the majority of senior officers were Catholic, they viewed this as a measure designed to embarrass them and their religious convictions. Many senior officers who held field commands balked at forcibly entering church property and arresting dissident clergymen. For the Catholic officer, the moral quandary deepened when the Pope declared the expropriation illegal and in violation of canon law.

General Valentin was a Catholic, although according to his daughter, he did not devoutly practice his faith. Apparently, he was not concerned with the government's anti-clerical policy because of any deep religious conviction. Rather, he abhorred the effects of such policies on the officer corps and the resulting discriminations in promotion and

assignments. General Valentin's daughter recalled that her father talked bitterly about this period. Many of his friends resigned their commissions due to the inequities of the system or because they did not want to make a decision that would so deeply involve their conscience.

How serious and penetrating issues involved in the separation of Church and State had become is shown in some famous examples. The distinguished military educator and future World War I supreme commander, Ferdinand Foch, was passed over for promotion in the early 1900's because his brother was a Jesuit priest. General Curières de Castelnau, who was a devout Catholic and accompanied everywhere by his private chaplain, was known as the "Monk in boots." He had been one of several senior officers dismissed by General André for having an overabundance of "pronounced religious views." As late as 1917, the Commander-in-Chief, General Nivelle, who was a stern Protestant, flew into a rage when he discovered his headquarters was once a Catholic seminary. This law and the anti-clerical view of the government exacerbated existing schisms in the Army and in the words of Alistair Horne ". . . To a large extent widened the same chasm dug by the Affair."<sup>23</sup>

The Dreyfus Affair and the Combes and André episodes were followed by a wave of anti-militarism as a result of the exposure of corruption and dishonesty in the military hierarchy. All politicians, especially the Socialists, distrusted the General Staff. The Socialists, who now possessed considerable political clout, delighted in the newest conscription law which reduced the term of service to two years. Also, in 1906, a regiment in southern France mutinied when ordered to suppress an uprising staged by economically depressed vineyard workers. From 1907 to 1910, the Army was called upon to quell other acts of social

disobedience engendered by economic dissatisfaction. The reputation of the Army sank to its lowest point since 1871. The period from about 1900 to 1910 was a very depressing and disturbing time for professional officers. General Valentin was in metropolitan France serving in regimental garrisons and therefore, undoubtedly felt the impact of these discrediting and demoralizing events upon the army in general and the officer corps in particular. Officers tended generally to accuse politicians, especially Socialists, of paying more attention to political connivance than to the discipline of the Army. General Valentin alluded to these sentiments as late as 1914:

I know very well that in peacetime it is difficult to have a firm hand in discipline. If you do the Socialists and anti-militarist clique will be on your back. . . . But, nevertheless, duty before everything. . . .

20 August 1914

The years 1910 through 1914 witnessed a *Réveil national* in France. It was one of those nebulous but nevertheless real phenomena in history that defies complete comprehension. In essence public opinion towards the military reversed and the army began to recover from its experiences of the past decade. The main reason for this shift in popularity was the increase in tension between France and Germany in international affairs. This sparked memories of *la Revanche* and a revival of martial virtues. The two most important legislative acts passed during this period concerned familiar issues--conscription and reorganization of the high command. In 1913, the Assembly obligated young men to serve three years instead of two. This law was greeted with enthusiasm from most segments of society. In 1911, the function of the Chief of the General Staff was combined with that of the Commanding General. This new arrangement eradicated the duality of the old command structure and gave extensive

powers to the new position. The Chief of the General Staff would now personally direct the preparation of war plans during mobilization, as well as the concentration of field armies before the initial campaign. Although these laws were formulated for strictly military reasons, they nonetheless represented the renewed feeling of confidence in the military and its popular appeal.

In summary, it is important to mention that the position of the Army in the Third Republic had great significance. During the years from 1871 to 1914, the Army developed a separate, corporate military structure. The professional officer corps itself became increasingly separated from government and society. It evolved into an exclusionist entity with social and political sentiments. The evolution of the relationship between the Army and the State fell into three distinct but interrelated phases which had an impact on the professional officers in General Valentin's generation. From 1871 until approximately 1894, French society was generally supportive of the military. The humiliation of the defeat of 1870 was a strong bond between politician, private citizen, and soldier. Beginning with the Dreyfus Affair in 1894 and lasting until 1910-1911, the Army experienced scandalous and disreputable distractions. French society lapsed into a period of disinterest in military affairs, except for the scandals; and the Assembly was strongly influenced by Socialists, pacifists, and anti-militarists. The Army reached the nadir of its public support. In 1910, there was a national revival, caused primarily by the concern for the military posture of France as compared to Germany. The Army made gains in its effort to modernize the military force structure and counter the demoralization in the officer corps resulting from the preceding years of discreditable publicity.

It can be imagined that the professional Army officer, believing in the institution of the Army as a symbol of the vitality and strength of France was indeed perplexed and sometimes demoralized with the role of the military. Not only were there recent scandals, but also the memory of the horror of the Paris Commune, monarchist rivalries, the threatened coup d'etat of Boulanger, and the impassioned religious-education controversy. Against this background of unsettling influences, professional Army officers prepared for the long awaited *la revanche*.

## NOTES

## Chapter III

- <sup>1</sup>Zeldin, France 1848-1945, Vol. 2, p. 886.
- <sup>2</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 117.
- <sup>3</sup>Ralston, The Army of the Republic, p. 83.
- <sup>4</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 61.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 72.
- <sup>6</sup>Ralston, The Army of the Republic, p. 31.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 33.
- <sup>8</sup>Zeldin, France 1848-1945, Vol. 1, pp. 605-683.
- <sup>9</sup>Ralston, The Army of the Republic, p. 62.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 49.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 61-64.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 87.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 153-154.
- <sup>14</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 185.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 198-199.
- <sup>16</sup>Ralston, The Army of the Republic, p. 172.
- <sup>17</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 310.
- <sup>18</sup>Zeldin, France 1848-1945, Vol. 1, p. 679.

<sup>19</sup>Nicholas Halasz, Captain Dreyfus: A Story of Mass Hysteria (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 263.

<sup>20</sup>Ralston, The Army of the Republic, p. 229.

<sup>21</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 383.

<sup>22</sup>Thomson, Empire and Republic 1850-1940, p. 228.

<sup>23</sup>Horne, The Price of Glory, p. 9.



## CHAPTER IV

### Preparation for War

The military mind always imagines that the next war will be on the same lines as the last. That has never been the case and never will be.

Ferdinand Foch

France astonished the world with her rapid recuperation and recovery in the years following the Franco-Prussian War. The physical results of the lost war were rapidly eliminated. The trial and conviction of Marshal Bazaine for alleged treasonous collaboration in the capitulation of Metz partially absolved the collective disgrace of the Army. The war indemnity imposed by the Treaty of Frankfurt was paid, and the German Army of Occupation departed France in 1873. The French economy recovered and prospered. By 1878, the Paris Exposition demonstrated to the world that France had recovered her claim as the international capital of the affluent *haut monde*. Even the Prussians looked upon France with envy. One popular German proverb proclaimed a person should be "As happy as God in France." Nowhere was this renaissance more pronounced than in the Army and the technical military aspects concerned with reform and the preparation for *la Revanche*.

In their reorganization, reformers modeled the Army after the Prussians. A new spirit was infused into the officer corps. Professional officers discarded the old Imperial Army tradition of the café and the

vacuous routine of garrison life.<sup>1</sup> Instead they adopted a more energetic and intellectually stimulating life style. They studied the basic intellectual elements of war and the scientific aspects of industrialized warfare. Officers analyzed the campaigns of 1870 in order to find the reasons for their defeat. This intellectual surge manifested itself in the emergence of books and periodicals, as discussed previously, which propelled the revitalization of the Army and, in particular, the officer corps.

The National Assembly passed laws dealing with conscription, cadres and effectives, general officers, promotions, and internal structure and administration. The *École de Guerre*, a staff college, was established to further military education and prepared officers for positions of increased responsibility. The *Centre de hautes Études militaires* prepared senior officers for division, corps, and larger unit command and staff positions. Military agencies such as the General Staff and *Conseil supérieur de la Guerre* underwent revision by soldiers and politicians alike in an effort to project and plan for general mobilization. These steps were important advancements in the rebuilding of the Army and in training the professional officer corps. Despite the positive impact of these progressive steps, the military policy of France displayed a marked sense of inferiority from 1871 until the 1890's.<sup>2</sup> It was as D. W. Brogan stated "Defensive in spirit," if not timid.

The loss of the frontier provinces of Alsace and Lorraine deprived France of her natural defensive barriers. Consequently, the hereditary enemy was brought to within 200 miles of Paris. This necessitated the creation of new defensive barriers. The task was entrusted to an engineer general, Séré de Rivi re. He constructed a system of two continuous

lines of sunken forts. One line ran from the Swiss Border to Epinal; then from Toul to Verdun. It was designed to canalize the German attacker and pin him, so the French maneuver forces could envelop his flanks and eventually surround him. The plan had a major flaw--the Belgian frontier was left unfortified except for a few scattered fortresses because of Belgian neutrality.<sup>3</sup> The underlying strategy was to allow the Germans to initiate offensive action and engage themselves in desperate assaults on fortified positions. The German Army decimated from these futile frontal assaults, could then be defeated by an overwhelming counter-offensive. Such was the doctrine of the General Staff.

By 1900, the Army had recovered its military prowess and self-confidence and in fact, had made significant contributions to military science. French officers could indeed be proud of their achievements. The French Army had developed and adopted the Lebel, the first magazine rifle. This weapon was superior to any infantry assault weapon and remained so until 1914. They had produced the 75-millimeter rapid-firing field gun which was superior to the German 77-millimeter and British 18-pounder even in 1914.<sup>4</sup> Also, French officers in regiments of the line took enthusiastic interest in training and preparation for war. They displayed an increased concern for the well-being of the *poilu* and his morale.

Around 1900, there was a concern on the part of some officers to change the strategic posture of France as represented by the de Rivière defense system. This new breed of officers found this defensive attitude very distasteful. They wanted radical changes in France's military policy to suit it to their revived obsession with *la Revanche*. As a result of their studies of the campaigns of 1870, French officers concluded that the primary reason for the success of Prussian arms was their superior

offensive strategy. This analysis resulted in French officers accepting two interrelated concepts that would have a significant impact on the preparation for and conduct of World War I campaigns. First, the offensive replaced the defense as the primary element in military strategy. Secondly, French officers generally tended to discard or misinterpret the role of massed and rapid firepower on the modern battlefield.

Among the new generation of officers, one in particular would influence significantly his fellow and subordinate officers--Ferdinand Foch. In 1894, Foch was appointed professor at the *École de Guerre*; later he became the Director of the *École Supérieure de la Guerre*. Influenced by Karl von Clausewitz and an analyst of the campaigns of 1870, he lectured students on the overwhelming advantages of the strategic offense over the defense. He later published two books expounding his doctrine, which J. F. C. Fuller has called "The new testament of the French Army." Foch's doctrine of the offense contained both abstract and empirical qualities. On one side, he preached *élan vital*, the all-conquering will to defeat the foe. Its success depended on the *furor gallicae*, the violent fury of a French assault, to overcome any difficulty imposed by a fortified defense. Two examples of this doctrine follow:

A lost battle is a battle one thinks one has lost.

Any improvement of firearms is ultimately bound to add strength to the offensive.

The supposition that any improvement in firepower would benefit the attacker lacked a sense of awareness in battlefield realities. Apparently this line of thought did not consider that a defender could fire faster, reload quicker, and more accurately acquire a target than an exposed, advancing infantryman.

On the other side of Foch's offensive doctrine was the element of *sûreté*. This more practical aspect of the offense addressed the necessity of protection from defensive fires, the establishment of advance guards, and the maintenance of discipline.

Foch's advocacy of the offense captured the minds of his students and paved the way for a complete reversal of military policy. The new doctrine would have the French take the initiative by launching a massive offensive across the German border. The majority of French officers accepted only the abstract side of Foch's doctrine, *élan vital*, and discarded the elements of *sûreté* as unimportant.<sup>5</sup> The essence of what Foch preached was a reiteration of von Clausewitz in that the victor would ultimately have to attack. However, some officers carried this to the extreme and forged it into a *mystique*.

One officer in particular, Lieutenant Colonel Loyzeaux de Grandmaison, evangelized zealously the principle of the offensive and contributed significantly to the *mystique*. As Chief of Military Operations, he preached enthusiastically that the offense was the only operation worthy of the French soldier. He expressed a military philosophy that "electrified" his audience, showing his fellow officers that France would win a war with Germany with the *offensive à outrance*, offensive to the limit. In essence, this belief held that the doctrine of the offense should govern all phases and be the principal consideration in the planning of tactical operations. Lieutenant Colonel de Grandmaison's extravagant offensive thesis was, in Alistair Horne's words, "semi-mystical."

In the offensive, imprudence is the best of assurances. . . . For the attack only two things are necessary: to know where the enemy is and to decide what to do. What the enemy decides to do is of no consequence.

This element of the offense replaced the defense as the official doctrine in military education to the exclusion of any other teaching, especially the defense. The student-officers, who would be unit commanders in the coming conflict, became hostile to any policy that distracted from the offensive initiative. Advocates of the offensive minimized the effects of barriers and improvements in such weapons as the magazine-loaded rifle, machinegun, and field artillery and regarded them as only temporary obstacles to the *offensive à outrance*.

The offense was to be conducted almost entirely by infantry operations. The French infantry in their red pantaloons--"so the Germans could see their furious numbers and be terrified"--would be the deciding factor in the battle. The cavalry and artillery occupied only secondary and supplementary roles. The artillery would only support the attack, not prepare it. The field guns would remain silent until the assault was launched by the infantry. The cavalry would screen the flanks and provide security to the infantry force.

To the French officer, *élan* and *esprit* were everything. These are important virtues in the conduct of the offense, and they fit comfortably into the character of General Valentin's generation. Like other members of his generation, General Valentin believed battlefield courage was an integral part of the separatist attitude predominant in the professional officer corps and was irrevocably linked to personal honor. The unwavering stipulation of this system held that courageous example was the highest or most important ingredient to effective officership. The

devotion to this idea can best be conveyed in General Valentin's own words from his Order Number 2:

Men from Burgundy and other Frenchmen who form the 27th Regiment, I am counting on you as you can always count on me. I will give you the example in every circumstance, you only have to follow me and I am certain none of you will falter.

Dying for your *Patrie* is a beautiful destiny.  
*Toujours en Avant. Vive la 27th! Vive la France.*  
5 September 1914

The passage indicated also that sacrifices might be necessary to ensure the success of the offensive. Advocates of the offensive believed that troops should be trained to withstand any losses in their advance to the enemy line. Once the enemy line was reached, the bayonet would redress the balance; and the enemy, driven from his position, would suffer more losses in his retreat than the victors in their advance.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to determine accurately why this remarkable reverse in military policy occurred. Possibly, French officers became too overconfident of the capabilities of the revitalized army. This overconfidence could have impaired their sense of balance and judgment in battle-field scenarios and realities. They desired greatly to reassert the martial qualities of the French Army and to reaffirm their professional standing with the public. Another explanation from General Valentin stated:

In France, as I have said before, we have the unfortunate habit carrying everything to the extreme. In military things, as in others, a new idea started by a *marquant* personality is not only adopted immediately but is accepted as the panacea. And soon everybody preaches it and accepts it. The idea of the offensive is one of those ideas.

5 September 1914

In this passage, General Valentin used the word *marquant* to describe a personality that was remarkable. This may indicate that the officer corps was very susceptible to men or ideas that appealed to the martial glory of France. This inclination would be particularly acute in a professional officer corps that had experienced unpleasant and disconcerting events such as those from 1894 to 1910. Regardless of the reason, the spirit of the new offense permeated the professional officer corps, who abandoned the defense as a productive means of prosecuting war. This makes an interesting irony of the mentality of World War I officers. Much of the new weaponry had been developed by French officers, who should have been keenly aware of the tremendous advances in military technology. French officers also observed military operations in Manchuria and South Africa, which indicated that improvements in weaponry and barrier systems strengthened the defense. Advocates of the offense misinterpreted the lessons of these battlefields. Rather than reinforcing the defense, they believed that innovations, such as the machine gun and magazine-loaded rifle, would strengthen the offense; therefore the attacker, not the defender, would benefit from increased firepower. The issue over the field uniform of the infantryman provides an example of how extreme the advocacy of the offense had become. In the decade before World War I, the British and Germans had outfitted their infantrymen in a uniform of an unobtrusive color. The French infantry still wore the red kepi and red pantaloons of the Second Empire. Efforts to change the uniform met with a response that was pure Grandmaison in that to change to a drab color would lower the morale of the troops and detract from the *furor gallicae*. This would result in the offense losing its momentum and neutralizing the *Élan vital*. This obsession is best



described by a former French War Minister defending the traditional uniform. "Eliminate the red trousers?" War Minister Étienne cried, "Never! *Le pantalon rouge, c'est la France!*"<sup>7</sup>

There were some senior officers who did not accept the offense entirely as professed by Foch and Grandmaison. The most famous examples include the future marshal, Henri-Philippe Pétain and the Vice-President of the *Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre*, Augustin-Edouard Michel. Pétain, for a time professor of infantry tactics, was considered a doctrinal heretic and slated for normal retirement until the failure of the 1916 offensives vindicated his ideas on the defense. Michel was removed from office in 1911 because his proposed strategy would place the French Army in defensive positions along the Belgian border. However, the war diary of General Valentin indicated that at least some regimental officers were concerned with the extremism of the offense and realized the importance of firepower on the battlefield. According to General Valentin, who wrote in 1914:

Before a certain group (of officers) achieved publicity by re-establishing the school of the offensive in France, we were trying, at least in the provinces, to conduct combat training maneuvers more wisely than the Army of the East\* by taking into consideration the non-existent fires. At least we simulated the effects of fires that could have and would have existed!  
5 September 1914

This passage demonstrated the sentiments of regimental officers who were genuinely concerned with realistic combat training and the effect of firepower. General Valentin's reference to the Army of the East suggests a lack of professional respect for officers in those units. Officers in

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\* NOTE: The Army of the East refers to the main grouping of French Armies on the Eastern border.--gms

regiments that were components of the Army of the East were supposedly the most promising and gifted in the professional officer corps. Colonial officers, such as General Valentin, felt apart from and resented officers in metropolitan regiments, who practiced parade-ground maneuvers and attended staff schools; while they participated in colonial campaigns. Colonial officers looked contemptuously upon the set-piece scenarios and the synchronization of battlefield tactics as practiced by metropolitan regiments.

General Valentin did not object to the offense in principle. On the contrary, he wholeheartedly accepted it, but not with a blind application. He demonstrated his feeling when he wrote:

I could not be more in favor of the principle of the offensive. It is part of my character and attitude but not this extraordinary exaggeration. For me, to be offensive minded means to have in your heart the firm intention to go to your adversary in order to crush him and take him at the throat. But there is a manner to get at the enemy. Yes, there is a correct manner: The important thing is how and when!!

5 September 1914

General Valentin suggested ways to increase the sense of realism in order to enhance combat training. Apparently he and his associates advocated a method of umpiring, as indicated when he continued with his comments on the offensive:

We preached with energy the idea of using *arbitre* (umpires). We were ridiculed and called foolish. We thought that if we could not represent the effects of fires and the subsequent demoralization (among the troops) our maneuvers did not resemble the realities of war. We must consider the effects of fires and have not developed a better way than the *arbitrage* (umpire system).

5 September 1914

General Valentin and similar thinking officers desired to inject realism into the spirit of the offense. This can be attributed in part

to his service in the colonies where he experienced hostile natives. Though fighting in the colonies was far from a "modern" battlefield, it nevertheless exposed colonial officers to the effects of battle and tactical operations. It was a source of first-hand combat experience for many officers.

Professional officers in General Valentin's generation followed basically two career patterns: colonial service or regimental duty in metropolitan France. Some officers decided that serving in metropolitan France was too stale with its emphasis on military education and theory. Action-minded officers opted for service in the colonies where first-hand experience in operations and administration could be obtained. The desire for glory and military action drove men like Gallieni and Lyautey to Tonkin, Algeria, and Equatorial Africa. Through their efforts, the French overseas empire was established and maintained. The successful administration of the colonies proved economically beneficial to France. It also provided the French Army with professional officers who had experienced the exigencies of a battlefield.

By 1914, the doctrine of the offense, as theorized by Foch and Grandmaison, found expression in general war plans. Plan XVII, under whose direction the campaign in 1914 was begun, provided for the defeat of the German Army by outmaneuvering it with offensive action. As history records, the French leaders in 1914, as in 1870, disbelieved that the Germans could make effective soldiers from their reservists. Thus, the French intelligence bureau was self-deceived into the actual number of Germans opposing the main French armies. The French General Staff rationalized that the Germans could not possibly field enough divisions to weight the right flank sufficiently while maintaining adequate forces

in the center. The French intended to attack in the center and swing up through central Germany. The French General Staff believed that the more German divisions used on the right flank, the better for the French to execute their grand offensive through the center. When war came, the French attack was delivered against an enemy strong enough to absorb it and then repulse it and simultaneously, with sufficient forces, execute the devastating offensive, known as the Schlieffen Plan. This ultimately led to disaster for both belligerents.

The strength and weakness of the French Army in 1914 had curious resemblances to its strength and weakness in 1870. There was the same reliance on a few weapons, without a sufficient study of their tactical application, capabilities, and limitations; there was the same underestimation of the potential enemy, and the same overestimation of the martial prowess of the French military.<sup>8</sup> The French Army practiced self-deception and in so doing, caused many officers and men to lose their lives for an abstract ideal; reinforced with a lack of proper training, officers went into battle in the spirit of Grandmaison.

The object of war is to impose one's will on the enemy until he surrenders or is rendered incapable of effective resistance; the means of imposing this surrender is battle, and no defensive battle could give the results of an offensive battle.<sup>9</sup> This synthesis of von Clausewitz and Foch manifested itself not only in strategic war plans, but in tactical application on the horrible battlefields of World War I. The results were predictable; by the end of 1915, France had lost 50 per cent of its Regular Army officers.<sup>10</sup> Officers declined to make themselves less inconspicuous by carrying a weapon. Instead they led the way brandishing their canes and were picked off by the hundreds.

When Plan XVII and the Schlieffen Plan failed in achieving strategic results, battles during the period of trench warfare became dismal stereotypes. First the long wait in the squalid trenches, then the attack across a quagmire of mud to the enemy lines. Close-in fighting with the bayonet took place, then a brief pause before the enemy counter-attacked; unable to hold the position with too few men, the French were forced to retreat back across the quagmire to their own lines. General Valentin testified to this sordid battle scenario. He preserved for posterity the reason for the incredibly high casualties, when shortly after the war began he wrote:

. . . In front of the German Army these assaults, as if a furious torrent, might occasionally succeed, but more often failed and usually cost us huge losses. The Germans apparently knew what to expect. They always waited for us behind fortified and concealed positions. They let us advance, then when our furious torrential attack was broken by heavy fires, they in turn would attack and push us back (to our own lines).

5 September 1914

The French Army prepared for its great task in 1914 by dutifully training and preparing contingency plans and battle scenarios. These efforts in preparation were based on a strategic offensive concept designed for a quick victory over the German Army. The all-out offensive would be the principal ingredient in ensuring the victory. The separatism of the professional officer corps provided the seeds and fertile climate for the growth and development of this doctrine.

## NOTES

## Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup>Horne, The Price of Glory, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 463.

<sup>3</sup>Horne, The Price of Glory, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 464.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara W. Tuchman, August 1914 (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1962), pp. 39-45.

<sup>6</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 468.

<sup>7</sup>Tuchman, August 1914, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup>Brogan, The Development of Modern France (1870-1939), p. 463.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 464.

<sup>10</sup>Horne, The Price of Glory, p. 26.

## CONCLUSION

France will have but one thought: to reconstitute her forces, gather her energy, nourish her sacred anger, raise her young generation to form an army of the whole people, to work without cease, to study the methods and skills of our enemies, to become again a great France, the France of 1792, the France of an idea with a sword. Then one day she will be irresistible. Then she will take back Alsace-Lorraine.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

The victory over Germany in 1918 was the realization of a goal toward which a full generation of French officers had dedicated their personal and professional lives. The French officer corps labored over four decades to raise the Army from the shambles of a catastrophic defeat to the pedestal of military victory. If military success is determined only by the end result, then French officers succeeded in their great mission. Their endeavors to reform and revitalize the French Army achieved the treasured *la Revanche*.

General Valentin saw the victory as more than just the superiority of French arms over the German Army. His comments from the 1918 diary reflect a deep sense of historical significance attached to the military victory.

On all fronts, French and Allied troops advance. . . . The Germans are concerned that we will not stop and just occupy our ex-frontier of 1870, but will occupy the frontier of 1815. I hope we do, because all of this territory is ours and should come back to us. I don't see

why the Prussians should reign the left bank  
of the Rhine. . . . We should take it all back.

We have to know how to take advantage of  
our victory. We need to take the opportunity.  
The occasion will not arise again.

27 November 1918

General Valentin, like other members of his generation, believed sincerely that France should take the opportunity to reclaim her former territories. He undoubtedly felt that the Army should be allowed to exercise military force so that France could regain her self-respect and security. The tone of his words indicated that he believed the Army had vindicated itself and unshouldered the burden of the defeat of 1870.

The road to victory was long and agonizing, not only in terms of lives and resources, but in the development of the French Army, and in particular the professional officer corps. The task of rebuilding the Army after 1871 fell primarily to the professional military. Generally, politicians agreed that professional officers could best carry through the necessary reforms and preparations for war, but this did not prevent serious conflicts from arising. Each government possessed a different philosophy on how to initiate reforms and what the Army's reform programs should be. This meant that politicians entered frequently into an area that the military believed was its sole sphere of influence. The feeling of separation and alienation grew as different governments came and then departed the Third Republic. As a result, the relationship between the soldier and the politician fluctuated from compromise to hostility to toleration.

The relationship between the Army and the State was basically between a conservative, anti-democratic, hierarchical institution and an increasingly democratic, skeptical parliament. During the period from



1871 to 1914, controversial political issues and embarrassing or damaging events placed incredible strain on this relationship. In the political and social arena, Boulangism, the scandals of the early 1900's, the debate over the conscription laws, and the issue concerning the permanent establishment of the General Staff propelled officers into the limelight. With the exception of a few, most officers had a genuine desire to avoid the controversies and in fact, considered themselves above the political in-fighting. Nevertheless, they were dragged into the fracas thus distracting their attention and resources from the continuous improvement of the military posture of France. Most officers, especially after the debarring acts in 1884, according to David Ralston, held "Almost a superstitious fear" of politics and regarded politicians with haughty disdain.

Throughout the period from 1871 to 1914, to be a professional army officer was to occupy an uncertain social position and be subject to ideological and political tensions. Some officers reacted to this sense of insecurity by either grasping at traditional values or by entrenching themselves in the bureaucracy of military hierarchy. The defeat of 1870 and the political and ideological attacks from Leftist politicians caused professional officers to withdraw into their own world; thus deepening the feeling of separation where their special virtues could be cultivated. Instead of professional officers seeing themselves as leaders of a progressive and technologically advanced institution, they preferred to confine themselves, as Theodore Zeldin has written, "To the cult of individual prowess."

This "cult" produced the mentality that caused the doctrinal shift from the defense to offense in the years prior to World War I. The

professional officer corps entered the war with their tactical and strategic ideas based on the all-out offensive. The doctrine remained unchanged through 1916, as evidenced by the Marne, Somme and Verdun battlefields.

The Army eventually overcame the stigma of its defeat in 1870 and the deficiencies resulting from a separate, distinct officer corps. It served the Third Republic faithfully by completing the cycle of defeat, recovery, and preparation for war. The French Army's success in 1918 will remain a testament to the strength and resolve of the French officer corps, if, in fact, the affirmation of man's ultimate folly.

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THE FRENCH ARMY 1870-1914  
DEFEAT, RECOVERY, PREPARATION

by

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B.A., Kansas State College, Pittsburg, Kansas, 1969

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1979

French history from 1870 to 1914 provides the reader with a historical profile of an army as it recovers from defeat, experiences political and social distractions, and prepares for the next war. The thesis intends to examine the professional soldiers who officered this army and concentrate on the major political, military and social events that influenced their role in French society. The paper will describe the sentiments and attitudes that prevailed the officer corps and caused their estrangement from the main stream of politico-social life and their inflexible devotion to principles that almost led to military disaster, if not, in fact to moral negligence.

The majority of the thesis is devoted to the relationship between the Army and the State, the soldier and the politician in the Third Republic. Throughout this period, one unprecedented and novel problem emerged to dominate that relationship: the co-existence of a republican regime with increasing democratic ideals and a large standing army, officered by a caste of professional soldiers. This situation greatly strained the tenuous nature and aggravated the frequent instability of the Third Republic. The weaknesses supposedly inherent in democratic governments were particularly amplified by the circumstances surrounding the Third Republic's establishment. Events such as the Dreyfus, André, and Combes Affairs placed incredible and agonizing strain on the relationship between the professional officer corps and the republican elements of the government. The thesis deals with each of these events for its impact and effect on the Army and its perceived role in French society.

French society, its government and military establishment, though often at odds with each other, united in one commanding way--an intense

fear and loathing of the newly created German Empire. Bismarck created the Second Reich at great expense to all Frenchmen. Cries for *la Revanche* echoed throughout France for more than forty years. It was the one factor that could and did unite the country.

French officers during this period were overly conscious of the military blunders that caused national disgrace in 1870-1871. Their professional lives were oriented toward the "day of reckoning" and their institutions reflected this intense force. General Joseph Valentin (1863-1938) was one such officer. Though he is an unknown professional soldier, he is the epitome of his generation. His career spanned this period and his experiences and personal reflections are recorded in his unpublished 1914-1918 war diary. His candid thoughts and comments as recorded there, partially form the basis for the thesis. In addition, numerous secondary sources were used to provide valuable background and complementary information. Though the diary was not used extensively, the selections convey sufficiently the emotional intensity and thoughts of a generation of officers confronted with inflexible military dogma and the vicissitudes of political involvement.

The victory over the Germans in 1918 was the realization of a goal toward which a generation of French officers had labored. Four decades of constant and unceasing effort had guided the French Army from the shambles of catastrophic defeat in 1870 to the position of military victors in 1918. The great task of rebuilding and reforming the Army after 1871 was primarily the responsibility of the military. The thesis shows that this was not accomplished without distracting and discomforting events in and to the Army, and in particular, the officer corps.