

Pre-war Military Planning (France)

By [Olivier Cosson](#)

This article focuses on the military anticipation and preparation for war in France (1870-1914). First discussed are the intellectual tools mobilised during the period, and second, the actual preparation and training of the French army, turned toward its main counterpart in Europe, Germany. Third, the article questions the impact in France of “peripheral wars”: the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and the Balkan Wars (1912, 1913). Technological developments (armaments, logistics) and battlefield restructuring may have, in a specific socio-political context ultimately marked by the threat of war, deeply influenced French military plans on the eve of World War I.

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Introduction

The French military played a leading role in the fall of the Second Empire (1852-1870) and the birth of the Third Republic (1870-1940). The former collapsed on the battlefields with a major defeat against the federated German armies. The latter was established by the severe military crushing of the Parisian “Commune” insurrection and of extended uprisings in French colonial Algeria.

From this abyssal “*débâcle*” to the French Army’s deadly rush to the eastern border in 1914, understanding the military planning of war requires long-term analysis. As far as possible with hindsight, our goal here is to outline the main features of the challenge war presented in [France](#), as the world acknowledged in 1871 the shift from a French to a German era of prestige and leadership in military affairs.

First, we will consider the main stakes of the French military thought in the pre-war period, second how they were determined by the actual preparation of the army for war and third, through the technological changes in armaments as well as the military reading of peripheral wars, we will question the officers’ corps’ fighting spirit on the threshold of war.

The Mainstream of a Military Interwar Period (1871-1914)

For the military, peace is only a respite. This view was largely held in France before the securing, in the 1880s, of the eastern border by a new (and therefore modernised) defence system. But globally, this assertion can be argued as characterising the whole military mentality and profession. This first section aims to highlight a forty-three-years long military anticipation of “the great day” of a return to war in Europe.

Foundation of the New Republican Army (1871-1879)

As early as 1871, the professional and prestigious French army was placed at the centre of political reconstruction. As such, it was absolved of its critical defeat in front of an army of conscripts that outnumbered and outclassed it. The failure highlighted the Second Empire’s inability to confer on the French the ability to fight as a whole, as well as its immediate will to prevent invasion. In these terms, it shaped in the long-term the republican army.

Crushed by the dreadful experience of invasion by a single European neighbour, French self-esteem was deeply hurt and resulted in an acute feeling of vulnerability in the country.^[1] The feeling of the

duty of patriotic defence widened and emerged as a road to redemption for the nation. The army, as the crucible of national reconstruction, first appeared as a “Holy Ark”, as the famous French military historian Raoul Girardet (1917-2013) put it.^[2] This obviously exacerbated the prospect of a new Franco-German war, well beyond the theme of “*Revanche*” that the officers’ corps embodied, but that masked the underground and decisive cultural move in the construction of a French conception of National Defence. Through an intense military debate^[3] and structural reforms during most of the 1870s, the choice was made to copy the conscription army model of the enemy, as well as its military staff system (the only one to allow handling of such a large number of active and reserve troops). This widely discussed orientation is of the highest importance. It is the first stage of European preparation for the most random war: the people’s war. On the other side of the Rhine, the military bore a painful memory of the experience of the occupation of countryside and cities. It appeared clearly to senior officers that during a large-scale invasion, military-civilian confrontations would escalate in national uprising and potentially unleash a **total war** (so far, escaped).^[4] Other solutions were available around this French Revolution model of mass armies: but the Germans embodied modernity and strength then, and the fear of being overwhelmed again prevailed.

Furthermore, the progressive militarization of the population appeared as effective, democratic, and a revival of French traditions. Beyond the immediate military defeat, the French soldiery can be considered the heirs of a particularly long history of popular war.^[5] The French Revolution, without imposing lasting conscription, anchored in France the idea of personal service, which is a quite different thing. The link between citizenship and the country’s defence against invasion (“*La Patrie en danger*”) was not reversed by the Napoleonic wars and conquests, as they affected a large part of the nation and deeply reshaped society. Overshadowed by this exceptional period, political instability, from 1815 to 1870, stimulated a continual debate about the real nature of the French (“imperial” or “republican”) Army. Under the tricolour flag anyway, should it be a professional force, socially isolated and politically suspect, a permanent tool for adventurism? Or, on the other hand, should it be the “Nation in Arms”, the crowd of ploughmen called by the tocsin in case of peril, that once laid the foundations of the modern (post-revolution) France? These representations and political controversies remained vivid until the Great War and well beyond, maybe to the present.^[6] They forged citizenship and even masculinity, dividing the population as well as elites. After the 1870-71 disaster and ahead of the German national rising, they led inexorably to the conscription of an increasing part of the population. Seminarians, for example, like a growing portion of the golden youth of the country, had to serve in the army following the 1889 (first republican) military law, in spite of numerous exemptions: these were cancelled in 1905 (universal service).

The French Military Though Renovation (1880-1905)

After a short time of “*état de grâce*”, the founding in 1880 of the French Staff College heralded a time of intellectual renovation in the army, questioning history, strategy, tactics, logistics, technology or leadership in modern perspectives. The St. Cyr academy (infantry, cavalry) was renovated and the

“*École Polytechnique*” upgraded to give future [artillery](#) officers and engineers a high-level scientific foundation. Young officers slowly presented a new profile in the 1880s, better integrated in society and more focused on their professional duty.^[7] It does not mean that the old spirit of recklessness and formalism had suddenly disappeared. Nevertheless, the army’s brains and leaders found the sources of a renovated doctrine in the history of the Napoleonic and Prussian wars.

The French military, in spite of heavy domestic political pressures, left the old century convinced that its school of thought was the best in the world and that the experience of 1870-71 was the result of an accidental break with a centuries-old tradition. Fighting around the globe but challenging in Europe a well-studied enemy, officers felt confident in their [weapons](#), staffs, and the fighting spirit of their soldiers, which was the object of intense debates about command and “moral” stimulation in the 1900s.^[8] More than ever, the Franco-German confrontation was the horizon of the national army, placed under close control of a Minister who was given, in 1900, the direction of the newly gathered “Colonial Army” units. Previously dispersed around the globe under the authority of the Navy, these shock troops were now based for the most in France, intending to take their full part in the losses and glory if a European War occurred.^[9]

Toward the “Offensive à Outrance” (1905-1914)

The year 1905 has been questioned, for a long time, as a crucial political and social turning point in France (see section 3.3). In the high command, the years 1906-1911 saw the rise of the famous “*offensive à outrance*” (offensive to excess) theories. An excessive tactical enthusiasm and sudden disparagement of the German army resulted in elevating faith and sacrifice as keys to victory. This radical evolution led finally to great lack of realism on the eve of the war, or more precisely to a very strict and enduring vision of what war had to be.^[10] It is at first glance astonishing but remains a reality in military literature and internal debates.^[11] It denotes the change in military thought: from historical, the trend turned to psychological or even mystical approaches, insisting on fear in battle (Ardant du Picq) and the necessity to instil in the conscript basic automatism (Grandmaison): the bayonet rush forward, possibly the fire “toward” the enemy.

In 1911, another discussed pre-war turning point, the rise of military “offensivism” in the ranks met, at the head of the army, diplomatic and political requirements. First, the non-negotiable respect of Belgian [neutrality](#), guaranteed by the (uncertain) [British partner](#), implied leaving the initiative to the Germans or attacking on the difficult ground of [Lorraine](#), maybe against all rationality. Second, the imposition on the Russian ally of a maximalist interpretation of the mutual support [alliance](#) of 1892 was at stake: a massive and simultaneous Franco-Russian offensive toward the [German Empire](#) appeared more than ever vital in order to counter the [Schlieffen Plan](#), more impressive than ever after a military bill was voted in 1912. This discrete radicalization of the Franco-Russian alliance toward a more automatic and aggressive (and random) operational perspective was not a new idea. But it appears to be a major piece of rare and noticeable consensus linking the government and the

General Staff from 1911 to 1913^[12] (see section 2.3).

Broadly, the success of these theories and concepts was neither undisputed nor definitive in 1914. But the outbreak of the war gave way to their immediate (and deadly) application. It cannot be limited to military intellectual circles: as we will see (see section 3.3) it had a real echo in barracks, where it found its strongest roots.

Actual Preparation and Training of the French Army (1880-1914)

It had been a major weakness of the army in 1870: the new Republic undertook from the beginning the task of elevating technical ability, skills and leadership of officers and of banning the past “improvisation culture” of the officers’ corps. The multiplicity of schools, training centres and journals dedicated to officers’ technical or scientific education, gave rise in the 1880s and 1890s to innumerable articles, studies, courses, books and conferences. This permitted the republican professional officers to cope with the growing complexity of their function. After 1900, most of them were not expecting war passively but were trying to contribute to war preparation. The profession of arms remained throughout the period one of the most stable situations and a very attractive career for graduate students.^[13] Besides, one must not forget that the French officers’ corps was a remarkably socially mixed group: 50 percent of French officers came from the ranks around 1900, earning their officers’ “*épaulettes*” after years in barrack routine, with little interest in “modern warfare” and a poor prospect of achieving a career beyond the grade of captain, i.e. of being among the army decision-makers.

In daily life, most of the French officers of the period had one main task: the training of soldiers for war. To do so, they constantly looked for accordance with the successive – and numerous – regulations (on training, combat, command etc.) issued by army staff but also by the directions of arms ([infantry](#), artillery, etc.), and various accredited schools or textbooks. Ultimately, their own conviction had to find common ground with the views of their direct superior commanding officers. This must not be forgotten in matters of military doctrine: unity of views is always the best aim.

Facing the German Army: The Masses and the 75 mm Light Gun

The French army recovered from defeat walking. First, the enrolment of the masses, as mentioned above, reduced the risk of being overwhelmed. It required the training of thousands of soldiers each year in renovated or new barracks and fields of manoeuvre. The officer’s task, first, was to impose by force a handful of values (obedience, *esprit de corps*, and sacrifice). Second, he led the painful “body learning” imposed on recruits during the ordinary peace service (stand guards, parade) and war training ([weapon](#) handling, marches, field fortification exercises).^[14] A large part of this mission was actually assumed by Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), who suffered a recurrent problem of understaffing in France. The necessary revalorisation of their position was part of the 1889 military law and had resulted ten years before in the foundation of dedicated schools to provide NCOs with

an official way to become officers: as had substantially happened before.

As to command and staff duties, a crucial point in mass armies, the disbandment of the Imperial Staff Officer Corps gave place, as mentioned above, to a new Staff College, opened to all officers. Promoting a scholarly model of staff officer, on a meritocratic basis in accordance with the Republican motto, it delivered “*brevet*” to subaltern officers aspiring to leading staff positions or generalship. Nevertheless, the system was constrained by a major peacetime promotion crisis: up until the eve of war, nominations to leading positions were governed by political interferences and personal relationships.^[15] Most of the officers had few illusions as to this “diploma” promotion system. Slowly, the institution deviated from its formal mission of staff and leadership training. It supported the occasionally dissonant voices of distinguished theorists – from the “moral forces” theories of General Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929) to the more pragmatic views of Colonel Philippe Pétain (1856-1951) for example – offering ultimately a misleading showcase of authentic military thought.

The second major difference from the Prussian army concerned artillery. Before 1870, gunners and artillery in France had suffered widespread contempt that gave a definite advantage to the enemy in the field. This issue was resolved by the development of a new kick-firing light cannon. The 75-mm field gun (1897) was not only a technical achievement without equivalent in its time, but it had strong influence in that it became the backbone of French tactics. Rates of fire of fifteen rounds per minute (every four seconds!) on the battlefield became commonplace in France, notwithstanding the huge shell stocks required and the real and rapid destruction of the gun that would result. In spite of the theoretical maximum rate of fire of twenty shells per minute, in real conditions a single four-cannon battery was able to deliver on a targeted area a sudden “rafale” of fire of six to (exceptionally) eight shells per gun: already unprecedented for a barrage or for counter-battery fire for example (twenty-four to thirty-two bursting shells).

This excellent armament granted the French their first mark of superiority over the enemy. In addition, it afforded the gunners (generally more intellectual officers) an increasing role in front of infantrymen, who were required to adapt to a more sophisticated view of combat. It finally upset the tactical field in the 1900s in providing infantry with a sort of permit to insane boldness while the French colonial wars were also contributing to turn artillery into a decisive infantry support arm.^[16]

The French Army Tactics

In European [warfare](#), infantry remained “Queen of Battles”. Tactics of the time shared the same goal: a short, violent and decisive battle for which the first necessity was to attack. The offensive appeared universally to be the key to victory. Schematically, compared with the German (and British) ones, French tactical theory presented a major difference *after* this initial engagement (called “safety combat” in France). Then, from the company to regiment level, the commanding officer had to concentrate a force called “manoeuvre mass” (infantry, artillery, cavalry) to crush (by fire and movement) the point of the enemy that appeared to him to be the best to achieve a decisive victory.

Cavalry units (possibly endowed with artillery and [machine guns](#)) were designed first to preserve the troops from surprise and then to ensure the “pursuit” and destruction of the enemy forces.^[17]

The point here is the unpredictability of this method as opposed to the German flanking movement alleged to be more mechanical. We can see here more than a renovated form of the “improvisation culture” evoked above. First, this French conception resulted from a historical view of Napoleon’s genius and art of war. Second, it appeared to be the most adapted to the French soldier’s “fighting spirit”. Associating bold fury and capacity of initiative *after* an initial versatility, the French soldier’s representation was antithetic to the supposedly more disciplined and passive German, British or Russian trooper. Other things being equal, it was this French military strength and military genius that had to be maximized on the battlefield. It was the heart of French officers’ confidence and of their reinstatement of a victorious perspective.

The French annual manoeuvres throughout the period simulated this unpredictable forward movement of infantry supported by mobile and quick artillery fire (in the best of cases), showing the global lack of realism of field and commanding officers as to the question of defensive enemy fire. In fact, the French reborn art of war poorly fitted these often slow, full-scale simulations in which the foremost role of infantry before 1900 gave way to the new guns of artillery in the 1900s. But this evolution was to be reversed at the end of the decade, when “*furia francese*” inspired renewed enthusiastic invocations.

The French Army Strategy

The French strategic planning between the 1870s and 1914 followed a course related to geostrategic matters and the development of [transportation](#) networks. But it also echoed these tactical conceptions through a succession of collective staff planning works (Plans I to XVII).

In the early period (Plans I to XII, 1870s-1880s) the French army projection in war was defensive and essentially on the German border. In the following two decades (1890-1909), the new army size (since the 1889 recruitment law) and the relief provided by the new Russian Alliance were taken into account. A defensive-offensive conduct of war was designed by concentrating, amidst an extended initial location of troops from north to south, a central “*masse de manoeuvre*” allowing the high command to counterattack whatever the enemy undertook (Plan XVI, 1909). The prospect of the enemy crossing to Belgium was formally addressed only in 1911^[18] (though strongly suspected since 1904^[19]), during the short time of General Victor Michel’s (1850-1937) appointment at the head of the Superior Council of War: but his views were to be quickly considered as too defensive.

The last plan was designed by and for General Joseph Joffre (1852-1931). In the aftermath of the Agadir Crisis, in 1911, this distinguished, cold-blooded (and politically moderate) engineer was suddenly entrusted with extended power over the army command *and* the military planning, two sides of military power previously strictly separated (an institutional compromise of the Third Republic that remained unchallenged until then). This break in civil-military relations history assured

Joffre and his close staff consent in the ranks, notably in matters of doctrine. In addition, in terms of strategic planning, Plan XVII (1913-1914) brought sensible changes. Foremost a concentration plan (Joffre excelled in logistics), it gave the commander-in-chief considerable latitude and freedom in case of war, and, not the least, the ability to hit the enemy before the beginning of the battle (during the German invasion of Belgium for instance). Sensitive to the public warning and invasion fear, according to a military mood of confidence and exaltation, the idea of adopting an immediate offensive posture gained impetus in the army, largely at the tactical level of combat, as we have seen, but also at the strategic level, as high-ranking officers knew that it might be the commander-in-chief's intention. The critical decision remained, anyway, in his hands and under his responsibility.

After the war Joffre claimed that his confidence (or boldness) was widespread (this is not totally wrong). The first strike he actually launched (sending numerous French elite troops to their destruction) would have been designed to engage the battle, not to win immediately. The assertion may be questioned, not only in the war context but also in the light of military mentalities before the outbreak of war.

Technological Developments and People's War Horizon

Unlike the civilian view, military anticipation for war appeared to be, for the overwhelming mass of officers, rooted in a concrete and technical preparation, focused on weapons' handling, administrative tasks and conscripts' training. In spite of social or political times of trouble that we will consider later, let us address the very military perception of an evolving "[modern warfare](#)".

The Silent Armament Revolution

In the last two decades of the 19th century, new models of repeating [rifle](#) were developed, using a revolutionary smokeless and powerful powder. They allowed soldiers to fire very significantly quicker, longer and further without being spotted. Each European army quickly upgraded to the new standard and developed its own rifle following the early Lebel in France (1886).

Machine guns also require a mention here, achieving a level of reliability and unprecedented power in the 1880-90s. Whatever the various models adopted, these weapons were massively integrated, in batteries, in order to support infantry assault or cavalry raids, and to defend fortifications. It should be noted in passing that in infantry officers' and theorists' minds, this formidable weapon remained (as do modern rifles) attached to the risk of pointless ammunition overconsumption.

The technological progress of the artillery, as evoked above in France, was last but not least. The German 77-mm field gun or the Russian model 1902 cannon for example were quite inferior but comparable to the famous French 75, especially in the high lethality of their explosive shells. In the meantime, the heavy artillery of the Reich followed the path of increasing power^[20] to face Belgian and French modernised fortifications and crush any resisting strongpoint.

Surveying the Present Wars: the Anglo-Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War and the Balkan Wars

The new armaments would probably contribute to shape the battlefield of the new century. That is what the 1900-1913 campaigns were to show. In the first instance, the outbreaks of distant wars indicate by the numerous military observers they attracted, that the confident façade of European military planning hid a real eagerness to learn about new conditions of warfare.

In [South Africa](#), it was not before the severe initial setbacks of the British troops that the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902)^[21] drew world attention. Further to this, the impressive Mauser rifle fire of the Boer farmers (that fixed and even disbanded their enemy) opened the field of controversy in France: “small war” of colonial interest or omen for a future war banishing infantry, and artillery largely exposed to fire?

The [Russo-Japanese War](#) in Manchuria (1904-1905)^[22] made of that breach a real shake-up in a weakened French army (see section 3.3). Numerous military observers and press reporters sketched the picture of an unseen battle, first because they were rarely permitted to see combat, second because they nevertheless penetrated an “empty battlefield” that was like nothing they knew. Notwithstanding the slaughter of Japanese assault waves in the [barbed wires](#) of the fortress of Port Arthur, the spectre of industrial warfare appeared in Manchuria. It took the form of over-extended battlefields, invisible (concealed) combatants, innumerable holes, shelters and trenches, omnipresent wastes, rubbles and wrecks of guns. The documents issued by belligerents reflected week-long, night-and-day fighting, heavy losses (including psychological) in the front line and, maybe worst of all, indecisive outcomes for every engagement. Machine-gun action was analysed in detail, as well as the role, losses and impact (including medical) of artillery. The poor part played by cavalry or the question of [camouflage](#) lay alongside concerns about ammunition shortages. No one then could dismiss this modern experience of war. Without doubt, it weakened certainties about command and firepower, questioning the possibility of a mobile, short, decisive and sustainable future war in Europe.

Finally, this shock had already contributed to the doctrinal drift in the French ranks when [war broke out in the Balkans \(1912-1913\)](#).^[23] Observers documented the high mobility and lethality of invasion fighting in [Macedonia](#) and Thrace. Acknowledging the reliability of French-made guns, artillery, at last, had a decisive role when correctly “fed” on the front. It caused, on both sides, sanitation disasters and thousands of wounded.^[24] [Atrocities](#) against civilians finally raised international indignation (as had the British concentration camps in South Africa ten years before). But actually, these civilian massacres coincided with the return of the war in Europe. Balkan peasants, transformed into fierce warriors on the front pages of newspapers, heralded something of the future of people’s war. For Balkan States and Ottomans, peace had become a pressing cease-fire.

The Limits of Troops Training for a People’s War

Would the French peasants bear such frightening combat conditions, bombing and massive losses? Historians have to confront the paradox of the military overconfidence and exaltation in 1914 that emerged from the ten-year-long period of uneasiness, with the question of the ability and training of soldiers.

The time of service of Frenchmen evolved from five years (1872) to three years (1889) to two years (1905) and back to three years (1913). The reflection of political perception of the threat of war (strongest in the aftermath of 1871, before the 1892 Russian Alliance, and in 1911-1913), long-term service was always valorized by the military in spite of restricted training capacity and numerous silenced progressive officers. In that matter, the 1905 Two Years Law struck the army as an affront.

The year 1905 can be considered as the acme of an unprecedented political crisis for the army.^[25] Questioning the officers' loyalty to the supposed liberal values of the Republic (as to religion or politics), the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906), the Fiches Affairs (1901-1904), the Church buildings inventory (1906) and finally the engagement in the social field (1904-1906) severely put the army to the test.^[26] Only the appointment of Joffre (1911) allowed the army to take advantage of the war threat.

The Military Law of 1905 has to be highlighted as it established a short but universal service. In the barracks, on the officer's desk, it meant more diversified recruits with less time to acculturate them with patriotic or sacrificial values, not to speak of tactical skills. Most officers considered this egalitarian view of national defence as a general dumbing down in the ranks, requiring, especially for artillery and cavalry, new training methods. Actually, modern training theories were available; their core was the initiative and individual abilities of soldiers. However, they soon appeared as complex and inapplicable, even threatening to the officers' authority. In contrast, the new "*offensive à outrance*" theories, which were primarily training methods, praised French fighting spirit in modern war and scorned the prestige of the German army. Overall, they provided simplified training methods for simplified tactics, designed to escape the deadly trap of trench warfare in the future as well as, before the 1911 relief, the depressed military mood and besieged mentality.

Conclusion: Red Trousers and Bayonets

As the historian Michael Howard stated, commanding officers of European armies in 1914 kept in mind, more than any other, the Russo-Japanese War.^[27] In the French army, this underground earthquake of battlefield representation occurred at the very moment of a political but overall practical professional crisis, concerning the daily training of civilians for modern war. We advocated here the idea that it opened the way to a more existential challenge.^[28] The heroic culture of officers, linked to decisive personal action and sacrifice for victory, survived every routine or so-called "social role"; it raised their aversion for the chaotic, anonymous and absurdly deadly battlefield of the future that Manchuria and later Balkan Wars may have unveiled.

Indeed, this kind of projection in a dead end may be helpful to understand the doctrinal and psychological drift evoked above. A clear horizon of legitimacy was recovered in an intellectual and physical headlong rush, turning war into a violent, simplistic but significant shock of faith and national will. It enshrined in combatants' hearts, flesh, and bones the ultimate keys of modern war. In fact, nothing else but bayonets and troopers' legs would bring victory, whatever the colour of their trousers, that emphasized the 1905-1914 reject, as pusillanimous, of any gadgetry or any easing approach of combat and death. Ultimately, everything would be, as Joffre said in August 1914, a question of perseverance and stamina.

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