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# Franchet d'Espèrey, Louis Félix Marie François

By [Gwendal Piégais](#)

Franchet d'Espèrey, *Louis Félix Marie François* (General Franchet d'Espèrey, Marshal Franchet d'Espèrey)

French general

Born 25 May 1856 in Mostaganem, French Algeria

Died 08 July 1942 in Saint-Amancet, France

**Louis Franchet d'Espèrey was a French general who took command of the Fifth Army at the end of August 1914, then commanded the Eastern Army Group and the Northern Army Group at the end of 1916. He was the head of the Allied Army of the Orient based at Salonica from June 1918 until the collapse of the Bulgarian front which led to the Salonica Armistice.**

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## Early Career

Louis Félix Marie François Franchet d'Espèrey (1856-1942) was born in Mostaganem, French Algeria. He graduated from Saint-Cyr (1874-1876) where he was one of the best officers in his class.

He was first appointed to the 1<sup>st</sup> Tirailleurs Algériens and 1<sup>st</sup> Étranger in Algeria until 1885 (with a brief internship at the École Supérieure de Guerre). From April 1885 to May 1887, he served in the Tonkin region for two years, fighting against the Black Flag Army and taking part in the campaign

along the Black River and the Red River. He also took part in the occupation of the Tonkin and the Annam. After brief service in Fontenay le Comte and Paris (1887-1890) as well as Tunisia (1890-1893), he became the ordonnance officer of Freycinet (*Président du Conseil*, War Minister) and served in the garrisons of Toul, Stenay, and Nancy. He participated in another campaign in Asia in 1900-1901, this time against the Boxer Rebellion.

Back in [France](#), he was successively appointed colonel, commanding the 60<sup>th</sup> [Infantry](#) Regiment in 1903, commander *ad interim* of the 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and chief of corps of the 29<sup>th</sup>, 143<sup>rd</sup> and 163<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment. In March 1908, he finally became a general, commander of the 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Driven by his interest in the “Eastern Question”, he traveled to the Balkans many times during his annual holiday and even met [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#) in Trieste after a trip to Dalmatia. He was named commander of the [occupation forces in Morocco in 1912](#), taking part in the pacification of the newly created French protectorate.

## First World War

In August 1914, Franchet was at the head of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps (Fifth Army), which he had been commanding since 1913. His troops fought on the Meuse and the Aisne in an attempt to stem the German advance. He took the Fifth Army's command, replacing General [Charles Lanrezac \(1852-1925\)](#) during [Joseph Joffre's \(1852-1932\)](#) revisions at the end of August 1914. At the [Battle of the Marne](#) he counter-attacked and reached the Aisne. He then became an army group commander (Eastern Army Group in March 1916, replacing General [Augustin Dubail \(1851-1934\)](#); Northern Army Group, replacing Marshal [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) at the end of 1916 until 1918).

Early on, Franchet suggested opening a second [front in the Balkans](#), a region he knew very well, and proposed a strategy, co-written with his chief-of-staff, Colonel [Charles de Lardemelle \(1867-1935\)](#), to [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) when he visited the front in October 1914. Until 1918, he remained attentive to the situation in [Macedonia](#).

In June 1918, Franchet was appointed commander of the allied [Army of the Orient](#). He reaped the benefits of the reforms and preparatory phase of tactics, logistics, instruction, and equipment organized by General [Adolphe Guillaumat \(1863-1940\)](#) for an offensive in September. Moreover, Guillaumat left him an Allied army with inter-allied cooperation on much firmer footing than in December 1917, when General [Maurice Sarrail \(1856-1929\)](#) was removed. While Guillaumat bet on the British element of the coalition and enjoyed the confidence of General [George Milne \(1866-1948\)](#), Franchet established stronger ties with the Serbians. Unlike his predecessor, he decided to launch the main attack from the ridges held by the Bulgarians and not in the valleys or on the enemy's flanks.

After the Franco-Serbian attack at Dobro Pole broke the enemy lines (15-18 September) and the Greco-British operations near Dojran Lake (18-19 September), the Bulgarian front collapsed.

Franchet's troops exploited the breakthrough and took 90,000 [prisoners](#) and tons of war material. Within a few days, [Bulgaria](#) asked for an armistice, which was signed in Salonica on 29 September 1918, ending Bulgaria's participation in the First World War.

On 5 October, Franchet sent his plans to Prime Minister [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#). He suggested pursuing an offensive towards the Danube and then [Austria-Hungary](#) through [Serbia](#), covering the left flank from the Austrians and the right flank from the German troops who could come from [Ukraine](#). He even planned to constitute an army group to march on the Straits.

These plans were short-lived. [Logistical](#) constraints ([communication](#) and supply lines) made the operation difficult and both [British](#) and [French](#) governments wanted to withdraw troops from the Macedonian front to the benefits of the [Western Front](#) (in the French case) and [Mesopotamia](#) (in the British case). At the Superior War Council's session from 6-9 October, Franchet's attitude was highly reviled by Prime Minister [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) and the Italians, who criticized French control of the operations. Clemenceau had to accept giving a free hand to his allies (the Italians in [Albania](#), the British against the [Ottoman Empire](#)), while the French would operate in the Danube, foreshadowing future spheres of influence. This decision also initiated the decrease of importance of the allied Army Command of the Orient and thus Franchet's decline in power.

Following this decision, on 13 October, General [Henri Berthelot \(1861-1931\)](#), former head of the French military mission in [Romania](#), transmitted to Franchet new instructions, ordering him firmly to focus on the liberation of Serbia, the occupation of Bulgaria, and the constitution of a defensive line on the Danube. Meanwhile Berthelot entered Romania to reorganize the Romanian army and reestablish communications with General [Mikhail Alekseyev's \(1857-1918\)](#) army in southern [Russia](#), a step that made French forces co-belligerents in the [Russian Civil War](#).

The Serbian and French forces under Franchet's orders pursued a quick advance, Belgrade was freed on 1 November and on 3 November, Serbian troops occupied the Banat in Hungarian territory. At this point, Franchet again suggested launching an offensive toward Bohemia in cooperation with Italian troops to Clemenceau. In the meantime, the Hungarians, who did not recognize the armistice of Villa Giusti between [Italy](#) and Austria-Hungary, asked Franchet for their own armistice on 7 November. [Mihaly Karolyi \(1875-1955\)](#), leader of the Hungarian delegation, wanted to secure ambitious political clauses (coal delivering from [Germany](#), Hungarian borders preserved and secured from Czechoslovak, German, Romanian, and Serbian offensives), which were all refused by Franchet, who imposed a path to round up [August von Mackensen's \(1849-1945\)](#) army in Romania. Due to the slowness of Romanian remobilization and troop movements, this maneuver could not be achieved.

## Post-war

In line with the instructions of 13 October, Franchet was put in charge of southern Russia by Clemenceau and was ordered to intervene against the Bolsheviks in Crimea, an operation he

disapproved of and judged too risky. On 17 December, Berthelot landed in Odessa, but the intervention failed and Franchet had to recall Berthelot on 1 April 1919. In the meantime, Paris named Franchet Allied High Commissioner for the occupation of Constantinople, but the British had no intention of giving up the upper hand on the imperial city. Franchet finally left the command of the allied Army of the Orient in March 1920.

Franchet was made marshal of France and voivode of the [Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes](#) in 1921. He became inspector general of the troops in [northern Africa](#) in 1923 but had to retire after a car accident in 1933. He dedicated his time to social activities for the Army of Africa through the *Comité des Amitiés Africaines*, which he founded in 1935. He was elected at the Académie Française to the seat of the Marshal [Hubert Lyautey \(1854-1934\)](#) in 1934. Franchet died in Saint-Amancet on 8 July 1942 and was buried in the Invalides.

Gwendal Piégais, Université de Bretagne Occidentale

Section Editor: [Emmanuelle Cronier](#)

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