

France and the Great War, 1914–1918

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1 The national community goes to war

In *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), Alexis de Tocqueville described the French as a people “talented enough at anything, but who excel only at war. They adore chance, force, success, flash and noise, more than true glory. More capable of heroism than virtue, of genius more than good sense, they are suited more to conceiving immense plans than to completing great enterprises.” Up to a point, Tocqueville knew his compatriots well. Over the course of the nineteenth century, France had gone to war many times and, in general, had fared poorly at it. The French had mainly themselves to blame. The century began in a blaze of Napoleonic glory, followed by complete national defeat in 1815. Not that this prevented the French from erecting to Napoleon their greatest military monument, the Arc du Triomphe, an unusual tribute to a defeated commander. Some victories came at mid-century, against the Russians in the Crimean War of 1853–6, and against the Habsburg Monarchy in Italy in 1859. Yet these were classic nineteenth-century “limited” wars, in which France ventured and gained relatively little. But the “immense plan” of Emperor Napoleon III (allegedly the illegitimate nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte) to install his protégé, Archduke Maximilian (the brother of Habsburg Emperor Francis Joseph), as emperor of Mexico in 1861 ended in utter failure. France had nothing to show for it but the famous 1867 painting by Édouard Manet of Maximilian’s execution by Mexican patriots.

Worst of all, France provoked a war with Prussia in 1870, over what seemed the relatively minor matter of the succession to the Spanish throne. In fact, Napoleon III wanted to forestall the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership. He had reason for concern, but blundered without allies into a war that invoked the very thing he sought to prevent. The overconfident French army met defeat within two months, and on January 18, 1871, the victors proclaimed the creation of the German Empire. To maximize the humiliation of their foe, the Prussians chose to do so in France, in one of the most splendid spaces created by the old monarchy – the Hall of Mirrors at the palace at Versailles. According

to the armistice with the new republican government of France signed a few days later, France had to pay a large indemnity and surrender Alsace-Moselle and most of Lorraine, two wealthy provinces now absorbed into the Reich. France could fume and swear one day to get its revenge, but not much else. Worse, a new Great Power had been created at its doorstep, far more dangerous to France than Prussia had ever been. The Third French Republic had to prepare for a new war with Germany virtually from the day of its inception. France would never again feel safe from Germany until the Allies divided Hitler's Third Reich after World War II.

Yet Tocqueville, who died in 1856, did not live long enough to see the whole picture. Perhaps he was too taken with his idealized version of the young republic in the United States to see his own country clearly anyway. The French economy boomed through most of the nineteenth century, and French literary and artistic life remained the envy of the West. By the end of a century of war, revolution, and social turmoil, the French, in part through a massive investment in institutions such as the education system and the army, had forged one of the most cohesive national communities in the world. France had also become the only republic among the Great Powers of Europe. The Third Republic proved more cautious about going to war than the regime of Napoleon III. The guardians of the republic made alliances, in order to contain a Germany much larger, wealthier, and militarily stronger than itself. Those among the French who sought Napoleon's sort of military glory did so mainly through the vast French global empire. The French military, as we will see, had many problems, in doctrine, funding, and leadership. But the army and navy of France continued to be feared throughout Europe and even the world. Moreover, despite decades of civil-military turmoil, democracy took hold in the French military. Unique among Europeans mobilized in 1914, the French soldier served neither kaiser nor tsar nor king, only himself and his compatriots. Even before the outbreak of the war, he was a citizen-soldier.

But success in the great enterprise of national rehabilitation came at a price. The alliances made by the Republic, in the end, provoked rather than deterred Germany and its ally Austria-Hungary, and thus helped render the diplomatic situation in Europe more perilous. In the crisis of August 1914, France had little room for maneuver, because of diplomatic and military choices made decades earlier. But this did not obscure the fact that Germany and not France chose war in 1914, because of the inflexibility of prewar German military planning. France had war forced upon it more than any other European country except Belgium and perhaps Serbia. German aggression in August 1914 responded to a

long-term threat posed by the alliances made by France. But it was aggression all the same.

The French greeted the outbreak of what they saw as the most just of wars with grim resolution rather than patriotic fury. Yet from the beginning, the French were very determined to win the war, and to regain Alsace and Lorraine in the process. The return of the “lost provinces” proved the most consistent French war aim, from the first days of the Great War to the last – the symbol, in fact, of making France safe from the enemy across the Rhine. Yet their initial military effort seemed scripted by Tocqueville’s assessment of the national character. The French offensive in Alsace and Lorraine failed miserably, while the Germans poured into northeastern France. The Battle of the Marne in September 1914 drove the Germans back, and partly reversed this initial disaster. But the first month of fighting proved the bloodiest in the entire war. Although the “miracle of the Marne” became understood as the greatest victory of French arms since Napoleon, it led to the descent into trench warfare, and to four years of fighting that was as bloody as it was indecisive.

Diplomacy: France as a Great Power, 1871–1914

The main preoccupation of French foreign and military policy between 1871 and 1914 was the threat of a new war with Germany. Heading off this threat required the reestablishment of France as a Great Power. The French sought to deter Germany, not through creating strategic parity, but through superiority. The leaders of the Third Republic concluded early on that France should never again fight Germany alone. But breaking out of diplomatic isolation proved difficult for about twenty years after the defeat. Otto von Bismarck, Prussian chancellor in 1870–1 and Imperial chancellor until 1890, effectively pursued his own policy of deterrence through superiority, by cultivating alliances with Russia and Austria-Hungary. Keeping France isolated removed the threat of a two-front war, and thus forcibly muted nationalist cries in France for *la revanche* (revenge). But Bismarck’s policy began to break down, even before his forced retirement in 1890. Tensions grew between Russia and Austria-Hungary over the Balkans, particularly over who would pick up the pieces of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. Germany sided with Austria-Hungary in this evolving struggle, as its only reliable ally.

After Bismarck’s departure, the French began to court Russia in earnest. Some peculiar political theatre resulted, as well as, over time, a dramatic reversal of French fortunes. In July 1891, the French navy paid an official visit to the Russian port of Kronstadt, where Tsar Alexander III, autocrat of the most reactionary regime among the Great

Powers, stood at respectful attention while a military band played “La Marseillaise,” which sang the death of tyrants. The French side, for their part, transformed the tsarist regime, which had invoked the ruin of Napoleon in 1812, into a somewhat exotic but treasured counterweight to the enemy across the Rhine. A variety of cultural exchanges followed, the most famous of which proved Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russe*, which electrified the Paris dance scene beginning in 1909. Of more diplomatic import was a massive flow of French capital into Russia, mostly to finance Russian industrialization. In 1888, Russia borrowed 500 million francs on the French market; by 1913, the French had invested 12 billion francs in Russia, more than in any other country. France stood to lose a great deal of money should its ally fall.

What came to be known as the Dual Alliance between France and Russia began in the winter of 1893–4, as a straightforward defensive response to the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. It committed Russia to war against Germany in the event that Germany attacked France, or if Italy attacked France supported by Germany. Likewise, France would be obligated to go to war with Germany should Germany (or Austria-Hungary supported by Germany) attack Russia. The alliance was upgraded in 1899, largely through the efforts of the secretive, hard-working, and durable French Foreign Minister Théophile Delcassé, who more or less personally ran foreign policy from 1898 to 1905. After 1899, the two countries committed themselves not just to mutual security, but to maintaining the balance of power in Europe. Just what this meant in practice, however, remained ambiguous until August 1914. In the meantime, Republican France kept the public about as ignorant of the great strategic choices being made as did autocratic Russia. The French public was not even told about the Alliance until 1897, and many of its secret clauses remained unknown even to senior officials until war broke out. Nor did France confine secret diplomacy to its relations with Russia. In 1902, Italy promised, in a secret agreement, to remain neutral should Germany or Austria-Hungary attack France. Britain also found itself drawn subtly and secretly into the anti-German alliance.

In addition to its alliances, France based its status as a Great Power on its overseas empire. France had been acquiring colonies since the seventeenth century. By 1914, France had a global empire second only to that of Britain, with territories ranging from North and West Africa, to Indochina, to a number of islands in the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans, as well as in the Caribbean. Some of these colonies, such as St. Pierre and Miquelon, two fishing islands off the Canadian coast, and the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, remain French today.

Like its rivals, France greatly extended its imperial conquests in the late-nineteenth century, for diverse reasons. In the mercantilist tradition of colonialism, France sought raw materials and markets for finished goods. The Third Republic also sought global expansion as an alternative to brooding about an unattainable *revanche* in Alsace and Lorraine. It could cloak imperialism in the rhetoric of a “*mission civilisatrice*,” or “civilizing mission” to bring the blessings of Frenchness to distant parts of the world. Such an approach earned expansionists scorn, indelicately expressed, from the nationalist Right. “I had two sisters [Alsace and Lorraine],” proclaimed Right-wing deputy Paul Déroulède, “and you are offering me two domestic servants.”¹

More than was the case elsewhere, French imperial expansion was the creature of the colonial army. Often on their own initiative and not always rationally, colonial officers would launch expeditions that would net vast tracts of economically dubious land, such as most of the Sahara Desert. These acquisitions would then have to be administered and, as the expression of the day had it, “pacified.” One colonial officer, Charles Mangin, who would hold several major commands during the Great War, argued in 1910 that France should raise a huge colonial army that could definitively solve the problem of France’s demographic inferiority to Germany.² Mangin’s scheme drew criticism from those appalled at the prospect of metropolitan France depending on non-white soldiers for its defense. But like Mangin, most French officers and politicians sought expansion as some form of long-term geopolitical investment. Countries acquired colonies before World War I much the same way they acquired battleships, and for much the same reasons. Imperialists, in France, and elsewhere, foresaw a twentieth century in which huge geopolitical blocs far larger than the nation-states of Europe would dominate the world. One such bloc had plainly formed in the United States; many saw the potential for another in Russia. Imperialists concluded that if Europe expected to dominate international politics in the twentieth century as thoroughly as it had in the nineteenth, empires would have to move from the margin to the center of strategic thinking.

Imperial politics both complicated and clarified the position of France in Europe by August 1914. The great rival of France in the quest for colonies at the end of the nineteenth century was not Germany, but Britain. The nadir of this rivalry came in 1898, during the “scramble for Africa,” when much of the continent was divided up among competing European powers. An entrepreneurial French officer, Colonel

¹ According to one version, Déroulède said “and you are offering me twenty Negroes.”

² Charles Mangin, *La Force noire* (Paris: Hachette, 1911).

Jean-Baptiste Marchand, led a mission of a few Frenchmen and some 150 Senegalese soldiers to claim southern Sudan. The French sought thereby to control the upper Nile River and thus the main water supply of the British protectorate of Egypt. In September 1898, Marchand's outpost at Fashoda encountered a much larger force led by H. H. Kitchener (later British minister of war during the Great War). After a tense military and diplomatic stand-off that nearly brought France and Britain to war, Marchand was ordered to withdraw, in the greatest international humiliation France had experienced since 1871.

Yet whatever ill will the French might bear the British over Africa, France very much needed Britain's support on the continent. Attaching Britain to the Franco-Russian alliance could help deter a general war in Europe. Moreover, the world's greatest naval and financial power would prove a critical ally if prewar plans for a short, decisive war went awry – as indeed proved the case. Britain and France resolved their colonial rivalry gradually in the ten years preceding the outbreak of the Great War. In 1904, France agreed to give Britain a free hand in Egypt, in exchange (again in a secret clause) for British support for what proved to be the last great French imperial conquest before 1914, its protectorate over Morocco. Germany, now clearly worried about the resurgence of its enemy across the Rhine, invoked two major diplomatic crises over Morocco, in 1905–6 and again in 1911–12. Both times, French primacy over Morocco was affirmed, thanks largely to British support. Even more important, Anglo-French naval cooperation closely linked the fortunes of the two countries. Britain, greatly concerned about the expanding German navy, needed allies at sea. A series of secret letters in the fall of 1912 between British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Gray and French Ambassador to Britain Paul Cambon affirmed that the British navy would assume primary responsibility for guarding the English Channel, while the French navy would do the same in the Mediterranean. The latter was of crucial interest to the British because of the Suez Canal, which guaranteed British access to India. These letters did not, to be sure, obligate Britain to join a general European war. But they did give Britain a strategic interest in heading off a French defeat on the continent that had not been there in 1870–1.

While the French position became more secure in the West, the Franco-Russian alliance, still the cornerstone of French security, came under pressure in the last years before 1914. The problem was the seething cauldron of the Balkans, where France had no strategic interests and where Russian interests could not have been stronger. Russia, Austria-Hungary, the ever-crumbling Ottoman Empire, and a proliferating array

of (often mutually antagonistic) nationalist groups all vied for influence over the Balkans. The Congress of Berlin in 1878 had awarded administration of the former Ottoman province of Bosnia-Herzegovina to Austria-Hungary. Germany's support of this move had helped create the Franco-Russian alliance in the first place. But when Austria-Hungary formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, a furious Russia invoked a major diplomatic crisis. France offered no support, and Russia had to climb down. But Russia returned the favor in 1911–12, when it declined to support France in the second Moroccan crisis. Diplomats throughout Europe came to wonder just what sort of crisis *would* bring the alliance into force.

But as the political meaning of the Franco-Russian alliance seemed increasingly ambiguous, its military provisions became increasingly precise. Among other things, this indicated a serious lack of communication between the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of War in France. As early as August 1911, and at French urging, the Russian army committed itself to taking the offensive immediately against Germany in the event of war, the chronic logistical difficulties of the tsar's forces notwithstanding. The French supreme commander Joseph Joffre visited Russia in the summer of 1913 and further clarified mutual obligations. France would take the offensive within eleven days of the outbreak of war, Russia within fifteen. It was assumed (correctly) that Germany would direct the bulk of its forces toward France at the outset of a general conflict. It was also assumed (incorrectly) that the speediest possible Russian attack would help guarantee the success of the French Plan XVII, as will be explained further below.

All this being said, from a position of defeat and isolation in 1871, the politicians and diplomats of the Third Republic had reestablished France as a Great Power, in Europe and in the world. Yet new dangers replaced the old. Through the Russian alliance, the French had indirectly tied their fate to the perpetually volatile Balkans, where everyone agreed France had no particular interests. Doubts lingered over the stability of the tsarist regime itself, particularly after the near-revolution of 1905. Moreover, France had revived its fortunes at the risk of helping to create the conditions for the general European war its alliances had been constructed to deter. Germany, in effect, had become encircled. No one doubted that France, Russia, and Britain could bring to bear more men, materiel, and money than Germany and Austria-Hungary – in the long run. German military planners concluded, therefore, that they could not permit a two-front war to *have* a long run. German generals bet on fortune favoring the swift, as it had in 1870.

The army and the Republic

War shaped the entire history of the Third Republic, its predilection for diplomacy over military conflict notwithstanding. The regime was born at war against Germany in 1871 and died at war against Germany in 1940. Conflict with the Reich, actual or potential, haunted each of the 100 or so governments that presided over France in between. French military revival after 1871 took place against the backdrop of the contentious and at times tortured relationship between the French army and the French republic.

Throughout the history of the Third Republic, parties and factions at all points on the political spectrum fought over the soul of the army. Catholics and monarchists admired and advocated traditional military virtues of order and hierarchy. But militarism also had roots on the political Left. Revolutionaries since 1789 had echoed the cry of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “Every soldier a citizen, every citizen a soldier.” Universal male conscription, which ended completely in France only in June 2001, institutionalized the *levée en masse* of 1793, in which the Republic ordered its entire population of young men to organize in battalions bearing the banner “The French people risen against tyranny.” French political culture profoundly shaped the French army, and vice versa. The French army of August 1914 reflected a variety of antagonisms and compromises at work in the preceding decades.

Their admiration for militarism during the Revolution notwithstanding, most Republicans looked on the army with suspicion or worse. Few dared raise a voice against Napoleon, the greatest guardian of French *gloire*. But had not a certain General Bonaparte swept aside the Republic after 1799 in favor of personal military rule? In the decades before 1914, distrust centered on professional officers, who Republicans saw, sometimes correctly, as enemies of the regime. General Georges Boulanger, a charismatic figure who could draw support from workers and Socialists as well as monarchists, led an unfocused and ultimately unsuccessful political movement against the Republic in 1887–8. Its primary result was to reinforce Republican suspicions of professional officers who went into politics.

Far more serious was the protracted Dreyfus Affair. In December 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of having given secret French military documents to the Germans. Initially, little controversy surrounded the conviction. Even later defenders of Dreyfus, such as Radical politician Georges Clemenceau and Socialist Jean Jaurès lamented that he had been given a life sentence on Devil’s Island rather than the death penalty. Only the Dreyfus family, wealthy Jewish industrialists from Alsace who

had chosen French citizenship in 1871, continued to believe Dreyfus's protestations of innocence. They lobbied tirelessly for a review of the conviction, gradually gaining ground among intellectuals and a few influential politicians. The "Affair" proper began on January 13, 1898, when France's most famous man of letters, Émile Zola, published his famous open letter to the president of the Republic in Clemenceau's newspaper *L'Aurore*. Titled "J'accuse," Zola's letter accused the War Ministry of a willful miscarriage of justice.

From the beginning, the case against Dreyfus rested on evidence manufactured by his former colleagues in the counterespionage unit of the army general staff.³ Yet as suspicions of the handling of the case mounted, the professional officer corps closed ranks. The counter-espionage unit continued to provide evidence of its own invention, and the senior command silenced voices of dissent within the army itself. This made the Affair a matter of professional autonomy versus the rule of law. The Nationalist Right, led by writer Maurice Barrès and a host of like-minded notables, came to the defense of the army. The archbishop of Paris and the Catholic press intervened in ways that highlighted the anti-Semitic overtones of the Affair. As Right and Left mobilized against each other, the Dreyfus Affair became one of the great domestic political crises of modern France. The army tried Dreyfus again in the summer of 1899, when a divided court martial arrived at the bizarre verdict of guilty of treason with attenuating circumstances. He was sentenced again, to ten years' detention. But by this time, the political landscape had changed in favor of the Dreyfusard forces. A Center-Left "government of republican defense" was formed that arranged for a presidential pardon. But the fallout from the Dreyfus Affair had barely begun.

The coalition that came to power in 1899 saw its first task as settling scores with what it perceived to be the institutional enemies of the Republic – the professional army and the Catholic Church. Military promotions became strictly centralized under the Ministry of War, now under the direction of only the most reliable Republican figures. Reformers meant to break what they saw as the Catholic and monarchist hold over the officer corps, even at the expense of professional competence. General Louis André, minister from 1900–4, wrote: "To attain my goal, my first preoccupation was to seek out among the anonymous and silent mass of officers, those whose republican sentiments could single them out for my attention . . . How did one recognize them? I resolved to fix my attention

³ Documents were indeed being passed to the Germans, before and after the conviction of Dreyfus. It is now generally agreed that the guilty party was another officer in the counterespionage section, Major Ferdinand Esterhazy.

upon those recommended by no one.” In 1904, the *Affaire des Fiches* broke when it became known that the ministry had gathered information on candidates’ political and religious views from the Masonic Grand Orient. In 1905, the National Assembly renounced the 1805 Concordat between France and the Catholic Church, thus separating church and state. The state ceased to pay clerical salaries, and assumed title over all church property. The most strident anticlericals insisted on adding insult to injury by making the army participate in the mean-spirited enterprise of taking inventories of individual churches. The Republic thus ordered Catholic officers to choose between faith and country, the Pope having expressly commanded Catholics in France to resist the new legislation. Civil-military relations reached their lowest level since the Third Republic began.

Yet the army and the Republic could not remain enemies forever, if only because of the increasingly dangerous international situation. And while many officers bitterly resented “civilian interference” in the Dreyfus Affair and were appalled at efforts to “republicanize” the army, few saw any realistic alternative to the Republican regime. The army and the Republic gradually came to terms in the last years before the Great War. The French army of August 1914 is best viewed as a collection of compromises, representative of the *modus vivendi* at work in the national community as a whole.

One such compromise involved conscription. We have already seen that compulsory military service had deep roots in France before 1914 and in the Republican tradition. The obligation to take up arms for the Republic, in Richard Challener’s words, constituted “both the badge and the moral consequence of citizenship.”⁴ Each young man had a “class” indicated by the year in which his cohort turned twenty. Elaborate rituals involving parades, bands, costumes, and much else evolved in localities throughout France to celebrate the induction of each class to military service. These comprised rites of manhood as much as citizenship. There is no question that conscription and the cultural baggage it carried continually reinscribed the essentially male nature of citizenship in France through most of the twentieth century.

This being said, there existed a wide range of views in France on conscription and the citizen-soldier it produced. While conservatives and reactionaries certainly advocated a large standing army, they believed that the recalcitrant masses drafted into the colors could be controlled only by a powerful and professional officer corps – the very corporate entity

⁴ R. D. Challener, *The French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 1866–1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 4.

that had worked so hard to frame Dreyfus. Centrist opinion remained suspicious of a professional military caste. Republicans writ large wanted conscription to be fair and to produce a large, efficient, and egalitarian army, and to do so cheaply. Republican objectives thus proved mutually inconsistent. Generally speaking, the Left detested conscription as the tool of militarists, imperialists, and industrialists, who saw the army as tool with which to break strikes. Yet the sentiment was far from universal. Socialist leader Jean Jaurès in *L'Armée nouvelle* (1911) advocated an armed citizen's militia on the Swiss model, led by a tiny officer corps of 4,000 professionals drawn from the working class.

Conscription law in France reflected a continuing compromise among these opinions. Before 1913, the trend involved reducing the term of active service and eliminating categories of exemption, so that the obligation of military service fell more equally over the whole male population. The 1872 law provided for five years of active service, though the number of men actually called up from a given class varied from year to year, depending on need, as determined by the war ministry. A lottery determined just who would be called upon to serve. An 1889 law reduced service to three years, and made some restrictions on exemptions. A 1905 law, passed at the height of the ascendance of the Dreyfusards and in the same year as the law separating church and state, reduced active service to two years and abolished practically all exemptions.

The army and the Republic definitively made peace with each other through the passage of the Three-years Law in May 1913, a measure long advocated by military professionals. Germany had steadily expanded its army by drafting a higher percentage of the available population. France, already conscripting virtually its entire cohort every year, could increase the size of its army in the short run only by increasing the term of service. The military impact of the law in August 1914 proved minimal. In fact, it probably weakened the French army in the last year before the war by further thinning the already sparse supply of trained commissioned and non-commissioned officers. The real importance of the law was political, in the way it heralded the national consensus that would carry France through most of the Great War.

On the surface, political conflict over the law seemed ferocious. *Troisannistes* (Three-yearists) battled opponents of the law, just as Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards had battled each other fourteen years earlier, and using much the same language. The Russians made it clear that they saw the Three-years Law as essential to maintaining the alliance. Nationalist proponents of the law continually invoked dire concerns for national security. After the passage of the law, a number of anti-militarist demonstrations broke out, particularly in the Left-leaning south

of France. There were also a few mutinies in units stationed in the south, supported particularly by young men who learned abruptly and to their considerable dismay that their release from military service would be delayed by a year. In the general election of May 1914, the *Troisannistes* lost some fifty seats, and hopes on the Left brightened for a reduction in military service. Yet the Center-Left government formed by René Viviani and approved by a large majority in the Chamber of Deputies comprised ten ministers who had voted for the law, only five who had voted against it, and two who had abstained. Machinations continued, virtually up to the moment when the diplomatic crisis silenced internal debate. But it was by no means clear that the law would have been overturned even if there had been no war.

In perhaps surprising ways, the rise of the doctrine of the offensive in France also reflected the evolving compromise between the army and the Republic. Two principles lay at the heart of the doctrine, known in France as “*offensive à outrance* (offense to the limit)” – the primacy of attacking over defending, and the primacy of moral over physical force. French planners believed that the best, indeed the only, defense was a good offense, and that the safety of France lay in bringing the war to the enemy. In 1903, the then Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinand Foch gave a famous series of lectures at the staff college, the *École de Guerre*, in which he observed: “War = Moral superiority of the victors; moral depression of the vanquished. Battle = the contest between the two wills.”⁵ Tactically, *offensive à outrance* meant simply getting as close to the enemy positions as possible, and then attacking as one man *à la baïonnette* (with the bayonet), and accepting whatever casualties would result. The doctrine did not, as is still often argued, ignore the increased killing power of heavy artillery, high-powered and accurate rifles, and the machine-gun. Rather, strategists and tacticians had seen the offense prevail in situations that seemed strongly to favor the defense, notably in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905–6. To be sure, most military historians today see the doctrine of the offensive as a dubious choice for a country whose main military problem was a substantial demographic inferiority to its most likely adversary.

Yet at the time, the “doctrine of the offensive” captivated military and civilian imagination on the political Right, Left, and Center in the last years before the Great War. It rendered respectable nationalist aggression, at least once a war was actually underway. Professional officers, monarchist, republican, or otherwise, could advocate the doctrine as a means of regaining collective self-respect after the Dreyfus debacle. Supporting the

⁵ Marshal Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War*, first English edition, Hilaire Belloc, trans. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1918 [originally published in French in 1904], p. 287.

offensive even enabled triumphant Republicans to show that they held national ferocity no less dear than their rivals. Republicans also appreciated the emphasis the doctrine placed at the tactical level on the highly motivated individual citizen-soldier.

The Center-Right and Center-Left coalitions that ruled France in the last years before the war concluded that suitably “republican” generals devoted to the offensive could be invested with immense power. The government upgraded the post of Chief of General Staff with the appointment of General Joseph Joffre in 1911. Previously, one general had responsibility for preparing the army for war, another for actually commanding forces in the field should war break out. Now, one man became responsible for training, doctrine, strategy, mobilization, and, most importantly, the disposition of the French forces. Some historians have even suggested that Joffre had more authority than his German counterpart Helmut von Moltke, and had become more powerful than any French officer since Napoleon Bonaparte. Throughout his career, Joffre conveyed an impression of solidity and unflappability, not least because of his considerable physical girth. The War Ministry abandoned a scheme to enforce the retirement of any officer who could not mount a horse, for reasons clear from Joffre’s photographs. He kept his views on politics, and much else, to himself. But all believed him to be a solid Republican.

Under the influence of the bright and energetic staff officers around him, known collectively as the “Young Turks,” Joffre created Plan XVII, the last of the many French war plans before 1914 preparing for a general European war. Contrary to its historical reputation, the plan did not in itself require a French offensive into Alsace and Lorraine, which resulted from a decision made by Joffre himself in August 1914. Even his most senior subordinates had little discretion in the field. Army commanders, in charge of hundreds of thousands of men in some cases, could alter operations only in close cooperation with Joffre’s liaison officers. These officers played a crucial role in the wholesale purge of field commanders that took place after the defeats along the frontiers.

The rigid centralization at the top of the command structure contrasted sharply with highly devolved authority at the bottom, above all at the moment of the attack. This thinning of command authority had been foreseen and even advocated by theorists of the offensive. Colonel Charles Ardant du Picq, one of the founding fathers of the doctrine of the offensive, had foreseen even before the Franco-Prussian War that discipline could no longer primarily be maintained vertically, through the physical and emotional intimidation of inferior by superior. Rather, discipline among large modern armies had to function first and foremost

horizontally, through mutual surveillance among men who knew each other well.⁶ The moral force that enabled the attack to prevail over superior defensive firepower, therefore, was highly democratic in nature. The last infantry regulations before the war, published in April 1914, prescribed attacks in which operational authority would devolve progressively from the regimental, battalion, company, and section levels. At the last stage of the attack, dispersed formations of highly motivated soldiers would descend as one man upon the enemy, bayonets fixed. Such a state of mind, of course, required extensive training and indoctrination, possible only after the Three-years Law was fully applied, and, equally important, fully funded.

Therein hangs the significance of a third area of compromise between the army and the Republic, over military funding. Given the stakes, the Third Republic prepared for a general European war frugally, not to say parsimoniously. To the end of its days, the Third Republic held dear its credentials as a middle-class regime. France would not create an income tax until January 1916, by which time the war had hugely strained public finance. To be sure, France allocated some 42 percent of all government spending to national defense by 1913, far larger than Germany's 20 percent, and huge by today's standards. But this was a large piece of a relatively small fiscal pie. As elsewhere in Europe, low and often regressive taxation supported low levels of governmental service of all kinds. German defense budgets drew from a far larger economy. France also spent far more than Germany on its empire, at the expense of defenses at home. While precise comparisons remain notoriously difficult, most contemporaries and historians agree that Germany spent much more per soldier. The professional command regained considerable operational and ideological autonomy in the last years before the Great War, but, for better or worse, it never had the means to effectively remake the army in the image of the doctrine of the offensive.

The gap between wish and fulfillment proved especially pronounced with junior and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), the very people who were supposed to bring the doctrine of the offensive from the Paris military *salons* to the conscripts garrisoned throughout France. French officers were always far worse paid than their counterparts in Germany. As the prestige of the army fell after the Dreyfus Affair, the number of talented young men interested in military careers fell with it, as shown by the number of applications to military academies and by deteriorating

⁶ Charles Ardant du Picq, *Battle Studies* (New York: Macmillan, 1921 [originally published in French in 1868]).

admissions standards. The cautious reconciliation between the army and the Republic had barely begun to stabilize the situation before the war broke out. The situation was even worse for NCOs, ironically in part because of the Napoleonic tradition of promotion by merit. In Germany and Britain before 1914, men of modest backgrounds could only rarely obtain a commission. But they could achieve real if class-specific status as career NCOs. In France, talented NCOs were regularly siphoned off into the officer corps. German infantry companies in peacetime had eighteen to twenty career NCOs; French companies had eight or nine, in addition to a couple of draftees promoted after one year of service. The stereotype of the prewar French NCO was that of an ignorant brute unable to make anything of himself in civilian life.

The French army had serious material shortcomings as well. France had so few training camps that only one-third of active soldiers could expect to spend time there in a given year. The French had 2,500 machine-guns in August 1914, the Germans 4,500. The French had 3,800 of their soon-to-be-legendary 75mm artillery piece, but the Germans had 6,000 of their roughly comparable 77mm guns. The French had practically no heavy artillery, which contributed handily to their initial collapse before the German invasion.

Even the French uniforms of August 1914, dark blue jackets and red trousers, dated from the last century. By that time, all of the other Great Powers had abandoned uniforms that presented such obvious targets. Historians have often, but mistakenly, attributed the persistence of the colorful French uniform to stubborn myopia on the part of the French high command. But support for the anachronistic attire really spoke to a more broad-based and ancient notion that soldiers who go off to war should do so as beautifully appointed as possible. Heroes had to dress the part, most of all in a democracy, in which the army represented the sovereign people at war. Military practicality gained ground slowly over such powerful notions. Only on July 9, 1914, just one month before the war broke out, would the National Assembly pass a law providing for the grayish-blue "*bleu horizon* (horizon blue)" uniform, the one most identified with French soldiers of the Great War. French soldiers of August 1914 would face the Germans looking much like their fathers and grandfathers in 1870.

Denied the funds to do much else, conscripts before the war spent much of their military service in drill and menial work in garrisons strewn throughout France. The Republic used its army from time to time to break strikes, though by definition this never had much military utility. More often military ritual was the most common means of breaking the

tedium of military life. Ceremonies constitute an important aspect of military experience anywhere, whether a given army is at peace or at war. In France before August 1914, ritual enabled the army and the Republic to display their reconciliation before the general population. Bastille Day, the French national holiday of July 14, provided much opportunity for such displays. Infantry, cavalry, and artillery would stage parades and mock military engagements in large public spaces. Martial music would precede patriotic speeches by local notables. The point of such displays was not lost on one Center-Left newspaper in Normandy, which commented in July 1913: “The greatest progress the army has made has been to become the image of the Republic, while at the same time becoming, as certain reactionary generals themselves recognize, ‘the greatest army in the world.’” Military maneuvers, supposedly the most “realistic” approximation of warfare in peacetime, also had a highly ritualistic component. Armies would meet, brave charges would be first ordered then stopped at the crucial moment, bands would play, and generals would distribute praise liberally. Recriminations as to the unpreparedness of the French forces would follow only later, in newspapers and behind the closed doors of staff meetings.

In many ways, then, the French army was indeed “unprepared” for a general European war. The Third Republic had conceived an “immense plan,” in Tocqueville’s words sixty years earlier, to create a mass conscript army of citizen-soldiers. It had rehabilitated and given immense power to its high command, which had embraced a popular if militarily dubious doctrine. Yet France funded its twentieth-century doctrine on nineteenth-century budgets. This, plus the relatively recent nature of the reconciliation between the army and the Republic, limited the actual impact of the doctrine of the offensive on the soldiers who would face the Germans in August 1914. Of course, if the doctrine was as ill-advised as most subsequent historiography has argued, neglecting it in the training of the rank and file with it did not necessarily disserve them. French soldiers, raised in the schools of the Republic and some of the most literate soldiers in Europe, ultimately had more political cues than military ones.

It also bears pointing out that “preparedness” is always a relative rather than an absolute concept. Each army of 1914 could tell its sad tale of underfunding, political interference, and poor training – including Germany. In May 1914, Austro-Hungarian commander Conrad von Hötzendorf asked his German counterpart, Helmut von Moltke, what he would do if the Schlieffen Plan, the prewar German plan to invade north-eastern France through Belgium, failed to produce a decisive result. In a famous response, Moltke replied vaguely: “Well, I will do what I can. We are not superior to the French.”

August 1914 and the *Union sacrée*

In the summer of 1914, the “long nineteenth century” came to an end. On June 28, 1914, Serbian nationalists assassinated the heir to the Habsburg thrones, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo. By early August, the murder had set a match to the power keg of European power politics. Austria-Hungary, backed by Germany, declared war on Serbia. Russia went to war with the Central Powers to back Serbia and preserve its credibility in the Balkans. The Schlieffen Plan drew France and ultimately Britain into what became the long-feared general European war.

But for most of the summer of 1914, internal rather than external crises dominated newspaper headlines in France. Charles Humbert laid the groundwork for a scandal following a speech in the Senate in July 1914, in which he laid out in scathing and accurate detail the material problems facing the French military, most notably its lack of heavy artillery. But as the wheels of secret diplomacy turned almost silently, the liveliest public scandal in France involved the trial of the wife of former finance minister Joseph Caillaux. Mme. Caillaux had shot the editor of the newspaper *Le Figaro* for publishing the Caillaux love letters, written before Joseph’s divorce from his first wife. The “Affaire Caillaux” was the real “July crisis” up to July 28, when a jury (to general amazement) acquitted Mme. Caillaux. On that same day, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

As we have seen, the Franco-Russian alliance sought to deter Germany through the threat of an unwinnable two-front war against a superior alliance. The Germans formed a pessimistic military response to this diplomatic problem, which made the two-front war a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Schlieffen Plan called for an immediate invasion of France through Belgium. German planners reasoned that France could mobilize far more quickly than Russia, and thus had to be confronted first. Germany could exhibit a preponderance of force in the path of the invasion, particularly since (unlike France) it deployed reserve units in the front lines. The Germans hoped to knock out France before the Russian “steam-roller” could be fully mobilized. With the Western Front secured, the German forces could be redeployed to the East. Germany thus had to invade France if Germany and Russia went to war, whether or not France played a role in the preceding diplomatic quarrel.

The determinism of the Schlieffen Plan did not mean that French politicians and diplomats lacked activity in the summer of 1914. President Poincaré played the central role in French crisis management. A native of the “lost province” of Lorraine, Poincaré was a conservative nationalist, elected president in 1913, the same year as the passage of the Three-years Law. Certainly, Poincaré proved one of the stronger presidents of

the Third Republic, particularly in foreign policy. Through clever maneuvering behind the scenes, Poincaré saw to it that foreign ministers either shared his point of view or were so inexperienced that they needed to depend on him for guidance and support. Viviani, foreign minister as well as premier in August 1914, fell into the latter category. It was also widely assumed that Viviani was merely a place-holder for Caillaux, until the scandal over his wife died down. In his memoirs, Poincaré described himself as Viviani's tutor, particularly in affairs concerning Germany: "I showed him that I have never had serious difficulties with Germany because I've always used great firmness toward her."

On July 20, about three weeks after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Poincaré and Viviani arrived in Russia on a long-planned state visit. By that time, Russian diplomats knew in a general sense that Austria-Hungary, with German backing, planned a definitive show-down with Serbia. According to Poincaré's diary, the only record that survives of the meetings of French and Russian officials, Poincaré had made it clear that France intended to stand by its Russian ally, though it encouraged restraint on both Austria-Hungary and Serbia. The Austro-Hungarians delayed slightly the delivery of their ultimatum to Serbia, to make sure that Poincaré and Viviani did not hear of it before they left Russia. From July 23 to July 29, the two highest officials of France were quite literally at sea, and could receive only fragmentary and garbled radio accounts of developments. During a brief stop in Sweden on July 25, Poincaré advised the Russians to tell Serbia to accept as many of the Austro-Hungarian conditions as possible.

By the time Poincaré and Viviani arrived back in Paris, Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia, and Russia had begun its muddled mobilization. Events had reached a point of no return, and Germany began to put the Schlieffen Plan into effect. France no longer even had the option of abandoning its Russian ally. On July 31, German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg sent a remarkable telegram to Baron von Schoen, German ambassador to France:

If, as is not to be presumed, the French Government declares its willingness to remain neutral, will Your Excellency [Ambassador Schoen] declare to the French government that as a guarantee for neutrality we must demand the fortresses of Toul and Verdun.

France at this point had two options. It could accept war, or the undoing of the whole great enterprise since 1871 of rehabilitating France as a Great Power. Most of the Great Powers made real choices in August 1914 – Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, even Britain. France had made plenty of real choices in the preceding decades – to form an alliance

with Russia in 1894, to upgrade that alliance in 1899, and to clarify its military provisions in 1913. But realistically, by August 1914, France had no choice but to go to war.

On the same day as the telegram to Schoen, a driven, and most say crazed, nationalist named René Villain shot and killed Jean Jaurès, leader of the French socialists and arguably the most respected socialist in Europe of the day. One of the greatest orators of prewar Europe, Jaurès had worked ceaselessly to encourage working-class people to prevent a general European war by refusing to take part in it. But he had always made a delicate distinction between agitating against war before it broke out and supporting the nation once it did. As late as July 29, Jaurès had spoken to a crowd of 5,000 (with 10,000 waiting outside) in Brussels exhorting socialists throughout Europe to put pressure on their leaders to exercise restraint in the looming disaster. His death has often been interpreted as the murder of the last best chance to stop the Great War before it began, and indeed to transform Europe through peaceful means. Of course, we can never know just what Jaurès would have done once the German invasion began. But certainly Jaurès never agreed with Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, who argued in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) that the workers had no country. "This is the sarcastic denial of history itself," Jaurès had once written, "the idea sacrificed to a whim." Certainly, his successors in labor unions and in the Socialist Party itself supported the defense of the nation.

President Poincaré coined the term *Union sacrée* (sacred union) in a letter addressed to the Chamber of Deputies and to the nation, in which he proclaimed that "nothing will break the *Union sacrée* in the face of the enemy." The term unified, among other things, civil and traditional religion. The term is perhaps best known through its more theatrical representations. In the Chamber of Deputies, Édouard Vaillant, who took part in the Commune, the Paris popular uprising that followed the defeat of 1870, shook hands for the first time with Albert de Mun, who had been an officer in the French army that suppressed it. Even Eric Satie felt motivated briefly to join a militia assigned to ensure public order in the Paris suburb of Arcueil-Cachan. More ominously, the term *Union sacrée* also conjures up images of thousands of chipper French soldiers marching on urban train stations en route to the front, and even of young officers from the military academy of Saint Cyr turned out to face the German machine-guns in their plumed hats and white gloves.

But the most prevalent reaction to the outbreak of war in France was not mindless, aggressive patriotism. The real character of the *Union sacrée* was more subtle, complex, and substantial. The French people in August 1914 faced war with shock, sadness, and consternation. On August 1, an

automobile drove up to the mayor's office in the village of Saint-Lormel (with a population of 816) in the department Côtes du Nord in Brittany. A gendarme got out of the car and disappeared inside. A few minutes later, the church bells began to ring. The town's schoolteacher, Mme. Le Mée, heard an old woman mutter, "Here it is, the bell is tolling for our boys." But the national community from the outset showed great resolve to win a war forced upon the French by the invader. In the words of a schoolteacher from the Breton town of Glomel: "The men of all classes, from all careers and of all shades of opinion went forward, solemnly, but with great strength." Neither was the symbolism of the occasion lost on a teacher from the hamlet of Champsaur, in the mountainous Hautes-Alpes. Seven bells echoed across the valleys, each announcing the general mobilization. "It was not the first time I heard of all them all together," he remarked. "But it was the first time I heard them ring with one voice." Perhaps the greatest enterprise, and the one that Alexis de Tocqueville had found so lacking in the middle of the previous century, the creation of a unified and durable national community, at last actually existed.

The Union sacrée emerged through inclusion, through the integration of communities hitherto excluded from the configuration of forces that ruled the Third Republic. We have seen how this process began even before the war, with the reconciliation between the army and the Republic. Peace broke out in 1914 between the Republic and its other great foe in the Dreyfus Affair, the Catholic Church. Still overwhelmingly Catholic, the French in and out of uniform flocked to churches as mobilization began. Pope Pius X, with followers on both sides of the war, desperately sought neutrality and issued vain appeals to both sides to make peace. But French Catholicism rallied to the national cause from the outset. In August 1915, the Catholic clerical journal *La Revue du Clergé Français* captured the tone of the mobilization perfectly, by effortlessly uniting the cause of God with the cause of France:

France cannot lose. The world would be denied that of which she is the exquisite adornment, the Church that of which she is the tireless apostle, and God himself the service of a generous knight.

Clergy in France were not exempt from military service, yet only a small minority of the 25,000 priests mobilized served as chaplains. Most served in the ranks with their compatriots. Those often excluded from the mainstream for reasons of religion, Protestants and Jews, likewise flocked to the colors. The Republic returned these impressive gestures of loyalty. Poincaré spoke early and often of his thanks for the *foi patriotique* (patriotic faith) shown both by the organized religions of France and by individual believers.