

NO OTHER LAW:
THE FRENCH ARMY AND THE DOCTRINE
OF THE OFFENSIVE

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INTRODUCTION

"The teachings of the past have borne fruit: the French Army has returned to its old traditions, and no longer recognizes any law in the conduct of operations but that of the offensive."¹

The search for a doctrine with which to successfully prosecute the next war is constant in all serious armed forces. Few would argue that the considerable emphasis accorded the search for doctrine is misplaced, for, ideally, the selection of doctrine will be accompanied by such critically associated actions as the selection and acquisition of weapons and other equipment to execute the doctrine, the development of war-fighting plans constructed around the tenets of the doctrine, and the "selling" of the strength and protective power of this new doctrine to the nation, its allies and, in a sense, to its enemies. An important decision, the selection of doctrine: One that can determine whether or not a nation will survive even before the first shot of war.

Armies always hope that their search will result in the adoption of a doctrine which, if truly and vigorously applied, will result in the defeat of the nation's enemies in battle. But what if the search goes awry? What might a nation expect if an imperfect, or "wrong" doctrine is adopted? History offers us an example of what can happen when the best people, with the best intentions, select a doctrine which is completely wrong for the time and the circumstances under which it is to be executed. That example is the French Army's selection of the doctrine with which it intended to fight its next major European war.

This paper will review the formulation of doctrine in the French Army during the period 1911-1914. In particular, it will address:

- The impact of the Franco-Prussian War on the French Army and people and, specifically, on the doctrinal development process;

¹Lieutenant Colonel L. Lucas, *The Evolution of Tactical Ideas in France and Germany During the War of 1914-1918*, translated from the French by Major P. J. Kieffer (Paris, 1923), p. 5.

- The genesis of the "doctrine of the offensive" and the promulgation of this doctrine throughout the army and the civilian populace;
- The effect of the doctrine on the selection of the weapons, uniforms, plans and tactics with which the French would fight World War I;
- An examination of how the doctrine fared during the Battle of the Frontiers in August 1914;
- The legacy of the employment of this doctrine.

The search for doctrine was a major occupation of the best minds in the French Army at the turn of this century. Intelligent, dedicated and experienced French officers in major commands, on the faculty of the *École de Guerre* and on the General Staff read, studied the histories of past conflicts and the likely characteristics of future ones, thought, debated various options and in near consensus developed and promulgated a clearly defined doctrine which was splendidly executed by French soldiers in the opening battles of The Great War. Unfortunately, it was exactly the wrong doctrine for the French Army to employ in 1914. It was a doctrine which very nearly resulted in the death of France. How could this search for doctrine, so earnestly conducted by so well-qualified a group of officers and national leaders have gone so wrong? For that answer, one must trace an intricate and fascinating story that began nearly half a century before the first shots of World War I.

IMPACT OF THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR

The search for doctrine by the French Army did not begin in the glamour and swirl that was France at the turn of the century. It began in 1870. In that year, the dull, gray Prussian mass crushed the descendants of the great Bonaparte in a war which lasted just six weeks. The completeness of the disgrace and bewilderment of the nation which considered itself to be the premiere warrior race of Europe was epitomized by Louis Napoleon himself, trailing sick and defeated through

Metz, jeered by old soldiers along the route, on his way to captivity in Germany.²

The disgrace of the defeat was surpassed only by the harshness of the Prussian peace terms. France was to surrender Lorraine and Alsace, two of her richest provinces, and pay reparations to the Prussians on a scale never before demanded. There was even to be constructed on the *Siegerstrasse* in Berlin a Victory Column topped with the mighty figure of Germania victorious. The column was to be garnished with scores of captured French cannons--dipped in captured French gold. All this was, for the French Army, too much to bear. The degradation would not be forgotten. The spirit of *revanche* was born.³

The French recovery from the war was as rapid and complete as the war had been terrible. The stale, inhibiting monarchy of the Second Empire was expunged and, by the time of the Paris exposition in 1878, the Prussian Army of Occupation had departed. The hated reparations payments were being paid off ahead of schedule and Paris again was a city of light, gaiety, and excitement. A new sense of confidence was in the land. Nowhere was this sense of confidence more evident than in the Army. In response to the poor showing of the French General Staff during the war significant reforms had been enacted. The *École de Guerre* had been established in 1875. Selection for attendance was by merit. Graduates, following the German model, would form the *État Major de l'Armée* (the General Staff) and would alternate assignments between line and staff positions.⁴ The "fops" of the Second Empire were replaced by dedicated young officers who sought to learn from the past and possessed a passion for the study of the profession of arms. Gone were the days when MacMahon had threatened to "remove from the promotion list any officer whose name I read on the cover of a book."⁵ Many old Army values and standards changed as well. But the thirst for revenge remained.

²Alister Horne, *The Price of Glory* (London, 1962), p. 15.

³Ibid., p. 16.

⁴Ronald H. Cole, "Forward With The Bayonet: The French Army Prepares for Offensive Warfare" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1975), p. 7.

⁵Horne, p. 16.

Part and parcel of the new spirit in the Army was the grim determination to set right the damage done to its honor. French officers, whose forefathers were at Austerlitz, Jena and Friedland, awaited impatiently the opportunity to redeem their honor, to dispel the clouds of 1870 and to show that theirs was again a first class army.⁶

This preoccupation with things military extended beyond those in uniform. The government, after great debate, voted to spend considerable treasure to construct a barrier of forts to replace the natural barriers of the Rhine and the Vosges lost in 1870 along with Alsace and Lorraine.⁷ In the arts, the paintings of de Neuville and Detaille depicted in beautiful detail the bravery, sense of duty, sacrifice, and above all, the *gloire* of the French soldier.⁸ The poetry of Déroulède exalted "the bugler who sounds the charge." A government-sponsored committee was established to recommend a program of military and patriotic education in French schools. Déroulède, selected as a member, saw the job of the committee as one of converting "the youth of our schools into a legion of brave Frenchmen" who would "follow the cult of the flag" and develop a true "taste for arms."⁹ All of this was underpinned by the popular philosophy of Henri Bergson with its emphasis on *élan vital*.¹⁰

⁶John B. Wolf, "Historical Perspective," in *Modern France: Problems of the Third and Fourth Republics*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton, 1951), p. 30.

⁷Horne, p. 17. Unfortunately, the splendid forts were completed about the same time the army began to eschew anything that smacked of the defensive. By the time the war began they had been denuded of both guns and effective troops to man them.

⁸Edouard Detaille, *L'Héroïsme d'un Siècle* (Paris, 1979) and Alphonse de Neuville, *L'Épopée de la Défaite* (Paris, 1979).

⁹Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army, 1871-1914* (Cambridge), p. 208.

¹⁰Horne, p. 18.

GENESIS

It was a time when emotions in the entire country ran high, and into this emotionally supercharged atmosphere was introduced the scandals that ripped the Army apart as the century drew to a close. Boulanger was followed by Dreyfus who was followed by Esterhazy who was followed by Dreyfus again. Ministers of War came and went with dizzying speed--some lasting only days.¹¹ The assaults on the institutions and traditions of the Army seemed to never stop. Predictably, the result within the Army was uncertainty, dislocation and a return of that awful sense that somehow, some way, the army was sick and inferior. A lager mentality and a hunger for simplicity, firm direction and freedom from ambiguity and self-doubt developed. It was into this fertile ground that the first seeds of the doctrine of the offensive, at any cost and under any circumstances, the *offensive a outrance*, were planted.

One of the first major theorists and writers on the doctrine of the offensive was Captain Georges Gilbert, a classmate of Joffre's at the *Polytechnique*. (Joffre, an engineer, did not attend the academy at Saint-Cyr.) By the nineties, Gilbert had become a major influence in French military thought.¹² His message was uncomplicated. He taught that the primary responsibility for the defeat of 1870 lay in the French Army's defensive state of mind, which had allowed the Germans to gain and maintain moral superiority throughout the war. This, quite simply, was the reason for the loss and the problem could be easily corrected. Gilbert spoke and the Army listened. He told his eager listeners that defensive thought and defensive action alone had cost France the victory. His words were calming and soothing to an army that desperately wanted to believe in itself and to be told that everything was all right. Although disease cut short his career, Gilbert, who had come to be regarded as a future leader of the Army, continued to write and speak. His ideas became the ideas of the *Ecole de Guerre*. He coined the phrase "*furia francaise*" and the initials "G.G." were the

¹¹Porch, p. 224.

¹²Captain B. H. Liddel Hart, *Foch, The Man of Orleans* (Boston, 1932), p. 28.

ideas of the *École de Guerre*. He coined the phrase "*furia française*" and the initials "G.G." were the most famous in all military writings of the time.¹³ But Gilbert was no longer on the active list. A serving officer of some influence was needed to preach the ideas within the Army. This officer would have to be a soldier of considerable intellect and stature and he would need an official forum from which to preach. The officer was to be Ferdinand Foch. His forum was to be no less than the Supreme War College, the *École de Guerre*.

FOCH: THE FIRES ARE LIGHTED

Foch attended the *École de Guerre* in 1885 and, only nine years later, in 1894, was assigned to the school as Professor of Strategy and Tactics. He served as an instructor for six years and was easily one of the most popular instructors at the school. Dapper, full of daring ideas and a fiery speaker, he rapidly attracted a devoted following of the brightest students at the college.¹⁴ In 1901 he ran afoul of the post-Dreyfus "catholic bashing" of Minister of War Louis André and was relieved of his post. He would return to the college a scant six years later, this time as commandant.¹⁵

In his lectures Foch, who had always dealt extensively in mystique, now blended the spiritual views of *élan* and *esprit* as expressed by Gilbert with the teachings of the philosophers Joseph de Maistre and Kolmar von der Goltz.¹⁶ "Victory = Will" was the centerpiece of his teachings.¹⁷ He told his students that battle was a struggle between two

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Cole, p. 202. Indeed, Foch was seen as "...a priest who judges, condemns, and teaches in the name of a dogma that inspires him... Foch is a prophet inspired by his God."

¹⁵Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁶Edward Mead Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, 1948), p. 220. In 1908, when Foch had been nominated to head the *École de Guerre*, Clemenceau commissioned a secret police investigation into his background. Among the items reported was the finding that Foch "... during his professorship at the *École de Guerre* had taught metaphysics, and metaphysics so abstruse that it made idiots of a number of his pupils."

¹⁷Ibid., p. 228.

wills and the only time a battle was lost was when one believed it was lost. Therefore, battles could be won as long as one did not believe himself beaten. Modern battle, even with its new weapons of great destruction, would be no different. From a narrow reading and interpretation of the works of Du Picq, Foch took the notion that "No enemy awaits you if you are determined and never are there two equal determinations." He conveniently ignored Du Picq's admonition that in any equation of wills the will of the enemy should not be forgotten.¹⁸

Foch did not teach that the "blind offensive" was the answer in all cases. In his two books, *The Conduct of War* and *Principles of War*, he wrote extensively of flexibility, security, and economy of force. He believed that the commander who immediately went into action at all points upon sighting the enemy would rapidly face stalemate because he would have no reserve forces with which to exploit the situation as it developed. Rather, he said, the commander should economize his forces and strike with his reserve at the point of enemy weakness. This would maintain the "will to conquer" of his men.¹⁹

Foch also studied and lectured on the heightened effects of firepower made possible by new weapons being introduced at the time, effects which most believed favored the defender. He disagreed with this assessment and blamed the defeat of 1870 on thinking of just this type. According to Foch, increases in the firepower of small arms and artillery favored the attackers who would "march straight on to the goal...preceded by violent fire...and throw themselves into the midst of the enemy ranks and finish the contest by means of cold steel, superior courage and will."²⁰

Some historians today argue that Foch never intended to become the "priest" of the *offensive à outrance* which he in fact became at the *École de Guerre*. Indeed, he himself later maintained that his thoughts had been misinterpreted, and in the midst of the slaughter of the initial battles of the war he cried out that all this was not what he

¹⁸Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁹Cole, p. 206.

²⁰Ibid., p. 209.

intended. History, however, can be a cruel judge, and the fact is that it was Foch who started the fire at the *École de Guerre*. When he left to assume the prestigious command of the XXth Corps at Nancy, he did nothing to put out the fire. Later, when it became obvious to even him that the fire was out of control and threatened to destroy the army-- at a time when brave officers were risking their careers by speaking out against the movement--all the commander of XXth Corps could manage was the weak justification that he had written for "faith rather than science."²¹

DE GRANDMAISON: REASON DISCARDED

The impact of the teachings of Foch was enormous. By 1914 the majority of the hundreds of students he had taught at the *École de Guerre*, the best and the brightest of the French Army, commanded divisions and brigades or held senior staff positions. Among these was a favorite pupil, Major Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison. Grandmaison had graduated from Saint-Cyr in 1883 and, following active service with the Foreign Legion in Tonkin, attended the *École de Guerre* in 1898. There he impressed his fellow students as one of the few with the maturity and knowledge to fully understand the content of Foch's courses. He also impressed Foch and graduated second in his class with the personal dossier notation of "*très bien*."²²

In 1906 de Grandmaison, predictably, was assigned to the General Staff. In the same year he published a book, his second, entitled *Dressage de L'Infanterie en vue du Combat Offensif*.²³ In this work he presented, for the first time, his views on tactics. Using both his experiences as a commander in combat and his own study of the recently completed Russo-Japanese War, de Grandmaison concluded that the direct offensive was still the best tactic and that recent developments in

²¹Hart, *Foch*, p. 62.

²²Joel A. Setzen, "The Doctrine of the Offensive in the French Army on the Eve of World War One" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1972), p. 83.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 84.

primary reason the Japanese had won was because they possessed the offensive spirit.²⁴

The argument has been made that there was another, more prudent side to de Grandmaison and that crediting him as the chief disciple of the *offensive à outrance* is unfair. While it is true that he, on occasion, displayed a more logical and realistic approach to tactics, de Grandmaison did not display this aspect of his thought for general public consumption.²⁵ The words that did reach the public were unequivocal: "For the attack, only two things are necessary; to know where the enemy is and to decide what to do. What the enemy intends to do is of no consequence."²⁶ The mission of the French forces was simple. They were to "...charge the enemy with the bayonet in order to destroy him (realizing that)...this result can be obtained only at the price of bloody sacrifice. All other conceptions should be rejected as contrary to the very nature of war."²⁷ What of plans? No plans were needed. One had only to locate and then "fly at the throats of the enemy." What of security? De Grandmaison answered that "imprudence is the best security."²⁸ To Liddell Hart it was a theory "based on the sentimental assumption that Frenchmen were braver than Germans." "The strategy of the matador," he said, "had been replaced with the strategy of the bull."²⁹

Still, the ideas of the *offensive à outrance* spread slowly until February 1911 when, in a single stroke, de Grandmaison was able to wed the French Army irrevocably to its fate. In that year General Victor

²⁴Ibid., p. 85.

²⁵Ibid., p. 98. In fact, when de Grandmaison assumed command of his regiment at Toul, he inaugurated a training program that was, for the most part, sensible. However, he always believed the primary weapon for the infantryman in the assault was the bayonet and that will conquered all.

²⁶Robert b. Asprey, *The First Battle of the Marne* (New York), p. 21.

²⁷Hoffman Nickerson, *The Armed Horde* (New York, 1942), p. 224.

²⁸David B. Ralston, *The Army of the Republic* (Cambridge), p. 351.

²⁹Hart, *Foch*, p. 59.

Michel, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, proposed a radical change in Plan XVI, the existing French war-fighting plan. Michel's proposal was based on the assumption that the Germans would violate Belgian neutrality in a wide sweep west of the river Meuse. He proposed to counter this sweep by shifting the major portion of French forces to the left toward the Belgian frontier at the expense of operations in the Alsace and Lorraine areas. These areas would be covered by a light deployment of forces. This, of course, greatly extended the French front, and to man this extended front Michel proposed to augment regular units with reservists much like the German system.³⁰

To the disciples of the school of the offensive, this proposal was completely unacceptable for two reasons. First, it proposed the use of reservists in front-line assignments. The spirit of the old long-service professional army was still very much alive and the regulars harbored feelings of both distrust and jealousy toward reservists. "Citizen soldiers" were seen to be "unfit" for the furious offensive operations planned by the General Staff.³¹ They lacked the unquestioning zeal needed to wage war with the bayonet. Anyway, they would not be required. The war, although sure to be bloody, was going to be a short one decided in the first violent battles by regular troops attacking always and everywhere.³² Second, the proposal called for the abandonment of large portions of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, lands which

³⁰Asprey, p. 20.

³¹Colonel W. A. Macbean, "The French Plan of Concentration and the Collapse of 1914," *The Journal of the Royal Artillery*, April 1923, p. 2. One of the reasons they were deemed unfit was that reserve units were made the dumping ground of the active army. Officers and non-commissioned officers who were deemed unacceptable performers in regular regiments were sent for duty with reserve units and were slated for duty with reserve troops on mobilization. There was no standardized peacetime training schedule or program for these units. Indeed, at the time of the outbreak of the war, many of the reserve units had never been embodied.

³²Cole, p. 308. The prolific French author and theorist, Major Henri Bonnal, believed the first battle would be instrumental in deciding the war, and that at any rate the fighting would be over in a month or less. On the German side, no less an authority than the great Schlieffen himself wrote that the advent of industrial society had rendered long wars a thing of the past.

had assumed an almost mystical quality since they had been "stolen" by the Prussians in 1870.

De Grandmaison, now a Lieutenant Colonel and Chief of the *Troisième Bureau* (operations) in the war ministry, seized upon the debate surrounding Michel's proposed plan to precipitate the rebellion of the "Young Turks." He scheduled and delivered two lectures at the new Center of Higher War Studies in which he called not only for the rejection of Michel's plan, but for Army-wide acceptance of the *offensive à outrance* doctrine as well. He argued passionately that what France needed to fight the Germans was a doctrine which had as its centerpiece the straightforward offensive, an offensive to the bitter end, every man's offensive, to be conducted simultaneously and everywhere. There was no further need for complex movement of forces, and no need for the use of reservists. Instinct was superior to intelligence.³³

The effect of de Grandmaison's lectures was electric and he succeeded in his aims beyond his greatest hopes. Not only was Michel's plan defeated, but Michel himself, long held by the "Young Turks" to be an impediment to the new ideas sweeping the Army, was sacked. General Gallieni refused to serve as his replacement on the grounds that he had helped unseat Michel. General Pau, the government's second choice, was an ardent Catholic and therefore unacceptable to many of the deputies in the government. By default then, the position went to Joffre, the government's third choice as Commander-in-Chief and an enthusiastic supporter of the new doctrine. De Grandmaison, selected for command of the 153rd Infantry Regiment at Toul, could depart for his command knowing that there would be no turning back now. Doctrine and supporting regulations and plans would be rewritten. The way was clear for the doctrine of the *offensive à outrance* to become law.³⁴

³³Ibid., p. 214.

³⁴Ibid., p. 225. De Grandmaison would command with distinction until his death in action at Soissons on 19 February 1915.

THE DOCTRINE CODIFIED

All that now remained was for the new doctrine to be codified and institutionalized within the Army. This was accomplished by the release of three important documents in 1913 and 1914: *The Regulations for the Conduct of Large Units* (28 October 1913), *The Decree on the Service of Armies in the Field* (2 December 1913) and *The Regulations for Infantry Maneuver* (20 April 1914).³⁵

The manner in which these regulations were drafted and issued to the Army was indicative of the state of the Army at the time. Joffre, through a series of inspections and observation of the annual grand maneuvers of 1912 and 1913, had assessed the Army to be in a poor state of readiness in several key areas. In 1913 he appointed commissions to deal with these deficiencies and to revise the standing regulations of 1895 and 1904, which he felt were out of date and ambiguous at the small unit level. What was needed, he felt, were regulations that were more prescriptive and left no room for misinterpretation or doubt. Further, the new regulations should reflect the new mood in the Army, the mood best expressed by de Grandmaison.³⁶

Normal procedure for the adoption of new regulations included their proposal to the Army as provisional. Comment or recommended modifications to proposed regulations would be solicited from commanders and staffs in the field and incorporated into the proposed regulations as applicable. This procedure was not followed with the regulations commissioned by Joffre. These regulations were the manifestation of the *offensive à outrance*, and they were not to be subjected to debate. They were to be accepted and applied immediately.³⁷

Under the new regulations, old ideas were to be discarded: "The passive defense is doomed to certain defeat; it is to be absolutely precluded."³⁸ Defense was to be permitted only as a local and very

³⁵Lucas, p. 4.

³⁶Setzen, p. 162.

³⁷Ibid., p. 163.

³⁸Lucas, p. 4.

temporary means of freeing up more soldiers at other points for the offensive. Indeed, it became career suicide for any French officer at the *École de Guerre* to offer a defensive solution to any war game or map exercise.³⁹

The mission of the infantry was not the only one changed by the new regulations. The mission of the artillery was no longer to prepare infantry objectives by preliminary fires, but to support the infantry attacks by "destroying obstacles which oppose its advance." French infantry, following this regulation, would later attack dug-in German positions without the benefit of preparatory artillery fires.⁴⁰

As seen, the new regulations had not been written without study of the effects of modern weapons as demonstrated in the Boer and Russo-Japanese Wars. The lessons, however, were either misread or were made to "fit" the new doctrine. The effects of firepower in the Transvaal and in Manchuria were explained away as simply being the result of "local conditions" or of the "national characteristics of the parties engaged."⁴¹ Joffre agreed with de Grandmaison that the Russo-Japanese War was "...a dazzling confirmation of (the)...view that the Boer War had not discredited the offense," but rather supported the popular notion that all advances in the amount and accuracy of firepower on the battlefield accrued to the attacker if only he possessed the superior morale and devotion.⁴²

³⁹Cole, p. 224. General Lanrezac, an instructor at the *École de Guerre* (and later the commander of the Fifth Army) once opened a class with "...the windows are closed and no one is listening at the doors. Very well! I am going to speak to you a little about the defensive!" It was also said at the time that Joffre's Plan XVII was so offensive in nature that he even had the customs officials attacking.

⁴⁰Lucas, p. 9.

⁴¹Setzen, p. 85.

⁴²Porch, p. 226.

WEAPONS, EQUIPMENT AND MANNING IMPACTS

The adoption of the doctrine of the offensive also drove other decisions made by the French General Staff. These decisions were to provide the Army with the weapons, equipment and war plans with which it would face the Germans in 1914.

The primary French artillery piece was the 75 millimeter--generally regarded as the finest quick-firing light artillery piece in the world. Not only was it a good gun, but it fit very well into the speed and rapid movement expected in the *offensive à outrance*. But the "75" had two major drawbacks. First, it was a light artillery piece--not much good against fortifications. Second, it had an extremely flat trajectory--not much good against troops who were dug in. To be effective against such targets, a heavier, higher trajectory artillery piece was needed. To equip the French Army with heavy artillery would have been very expensive, however, and the government preferred to listen to the "Young Turks" who assessed heavy artillery to be "useless" and a hindrance to armies which depended on rapid advance as a key to success.⁴³ General Langlois, a student of Foch and the editor of the military review patronized by the "Young Turks," compared the relative strengths and weaknesses of the French and German armies before the war. In an article written in 1907, he noted that the French had only fifty-seven percent as much artillery as the Germans, but he wrote that "...if we compare the value of the personnel, the individual values, we have an incontestable advantage over our neighbors. Germany will always have the advantage of us in numbers; but we can compensate for that advantage by utilizing the precious qualities of race that are peculiar to us."⁴⁴ Reliance on these "precious qualities of race" had the predictable result. In August, 1914, German artillery weapons, stores, and capabilities far exceeded those of France in every category.⁴⁵

⁴³Richard M. Watt, *Dare Call It Treason* (New York, 1963), p. 30. To his credit, Joffre tried to improve the artillery situation, but the best he could do was to cause modifications in the 75mm round which would, at least, heighten its trajectory.

⁴⁴Earle, *Modern France*, p. 39.

⁴⁵Cole, p. 118.

The French rifle of the day was the Lebel, a bolt action rifle adopted in 1886. Although the Lebel was the first magazine rifle fielded by a European army, it was fed by a fixed, tubular magazine into which each cartridge had to be loaded individually. The German Mauser, on the other hand, could be reloaded a magazine at a time.⁴⁶ To its credit, the Lebel was very long, over five feet with the bayonet attached. Although it was difficult to reload during the attack, this great length made it the ideal weapon to carry out a doctrine based on massed bayonet assaults. "The French soldier can do anything with the bayonet except sit on it" went the popular saying of the day, and the French people expected that the stern application of cold steel would make quick work of the Germans.⁴⁷

And what of the machine gun, that new weapon that had caused such carnage in Manchuria and the Balkans? The French machine gun, the St. Etienne, had been introduced into the inventory in 1910 and was dutifully trotted out on each Army maneuver to impress foreign journalists. The gun was, however, quite heavy and a bit complicated to operate. All in all, it seemed to be not in concert with the *de Grandmaison* spirit and was generally left with the rear elements. Official Army opinion was expressed when, after seeing the gun in action, the Inspector General of Infantry ruled that the gun would "not make the slightest difference to anything."⁴⁸

The new doctrine was also instrumental in the debate concerning the uniform the *poilu* would wear into combat. Fighting in the Transvaal, in Manchuria and in the Balkans had demonstrated the advantages of being less visible on the battlefield. Other nations had taken these lessons to heart. The British had adopted khaki and the Germans had changed from Prussian blue to field gray, but the French soldier was to go to war wearing the same blue coats, red kepis, and red trousers the Army had worn in the Crimea. "To banish all that is colorful, all that gives

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 120.

⁴⁷Watt, p. 29.

⁴⁸Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York, 1962), p. 37.

the soldier his vivid aspect," wrote the *Echo de Paris*, "is to go contrary to both French taste and military function. "Messimy, French minister of war and an observer of the war in the Balkans, pointed out that the two might no longer be synonymous. The final verdict on the debate was to be delivered by M. Entienne, a former minister of war. "Eliminate red trousers? Never! *Le pantalon rouge c'est la France!* (Red trousers are France!)." ⁴⁹ Red was symbolic of the spirit of the new doctrine. "That blind and imbecile attachment to the most visible of all colors was to have cruel consequences," Messimy wrote later. ⁵⁰

Implementation of the doctrine also led to a near-fatal redistribution of French forces on the eve of the war. As we have seen, the *offensive à outrance* frowned on defensive thinking at any level. Inevitably, the stationing of French forces in the line of forts constructed by de Riviere following the Franco-Prussian War attracted the disapproval of the new General Staff. Garrison duty for regular army soldiers was seen as disgraceful and a waste. General de Castelnau, commander of the Second French Army, stated in 1913 that "fortified places are a nuisance to me and they take away my men. I don't want anything to do with them." ⁵¹ Weapons and men were withdrawn from the forts. Forts were to be manned instead by inadequately trained and poorly equipped reservists.

⁴⁹Horne, p. 20.

⁵⁰Tuchman, p. 38.

⁵¹Horne, p. 116. The General got his wish. By order of Joffre, the manning of most of the major forts consisted of reservists or even local city garrisons by 1915. Further, they had been stripped of most of their guns as well. The result was to render de Riviere's splendid line of forts almost defenseless to the oncoming Germans. For example, at the time it was attacked, Fort Douaumont, the key fortification in the Verdun line, was manned not by the 500 regulars normally stationed there, but by a Territorial Force Sergeant-Major and fifty-six men. The great fort was to fall to a German squad.

WAR PLANS

But the greatest impact the adoption of the new doctrine was to have on the French conduct of the war in its initial stage was the war-fighting plan it spawned--Plan XVII. The last "traditional" plan of the General Staff, Plan XVI, had been issued in 1909. The plan called for the implementation of a defensive-offensive strategy in which the bulk of the French Army, deployed in depth behind de Riviere's forts at Epinal and Verdun, would hold for a month or so until the massive Russian Army could complete its mobilization. When the Russians attacked in the East, the French, along with the British, would counterattack in the West.⁵² This plan stood until 1911 when General Michel submitted his plan proposing the shifting of the bulk of the forces to the Belgian frontier. It was this submission that led to de Grandmaison's two lectures, the doctrinal debate, the triumph of the "Young Turks" and the relief of Michel. It now fell to the new Commander-in-Chief, Joffre, to formulate a replacement plan.

Two events had altered the world in which Plan XVI had been conceived and both would have a dramatic effect on its replacement. First, Britain had ended her "splendid isolation" and with amazing speed had moved from a casual *entente* with France in 1904 to an unofficial but firm military commitment in 1911.⁵³ The secret accords, officially denied by the British government right up to the beginning of the war, proclaimed the support of France and Belgium if Germany attacked as the *raison d'être* for the British Army.

Why the sudden shift in British attention to land operations on the continent? Beginning in 1905, the British General Staff conducted a series of war games concerning the likely outcome of a wide German sweep through France. In each instance, the "German" forces, with amazing speed and overwhelming strength, ripped through the French and Belgian defenders and were quickly established on the Channel. The prospect of a European continent dominated by the Kaiser certainly did not appeal to the British. But how to stop a German sweep through France? The war

⁵²Asprey, p. 20.

⁵³Cole, p. 304.

games yielded only one solution--early commitment of the entire British Expeditionary Force.⁵⁴ Sir Henry Wilson, Director of Military Operations on the British General Staff and an ardent francophile, met in secret on 20 July 1911 with General Auguste Dubail, French Army Chief of Staff, and together they formulated the plans under which the British Expeditionary Force would enter World War One three years later.⁵⁵

The second event that significantly affected French war planning concerned Russia. Unlike the secret accords France had with Britain, the military alliance of 1894 she had with Russia was public and well known. The degree of recovery the Russian Army had made since its beating in Manchuria was a subject of hot debate in French military circles, but one fact was unarguable--the Russians had to attack in the East if the French were to defeat Germany in the West. Hard work by Dubail and Premier Poincaré resulted in an agreement under which Russia would quickly launch an attack in the East, even before she had completed mobilization. The key point was that in order to secure this promise from the Czar, Poincaré promised that France would launch an attack quickly into Alsace and Lorraine in the West.⁵⁶

These accords were to place preconditions on the formulation of Plan XVII. With the Russian agreement, France abandoned her last hope of developing a realistic defensive/offensive strategy based on sound logic and the real-world weaknesses of the French Army. She was now bound to a hurried, immediate offensive. In the British agreement, war planners saw a chance to redress German numerical superiority and assigned unrealistic numbers and capabilities to the likely British commitment. This "cooking" of numbers continued until the most "adept" staff officers even claimed parity with the Germans!⁵⁷

⁵⁴General Sir Percy Radcliffe, "With France: The "W.F." Plan and the Genesis of the Western Front," *Stand To!*, Number 10 (Spring 1984), p. 7. During conversations concerning the British deployment, General Wilson asked Foch how many British soldiers the French would consider acceptable as an extension of the left wing. Foch made his now-famous reply, "A single soldier will do and we will make certain that he is killed."

⁵⁵Cole, p. 304.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 307.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 308.

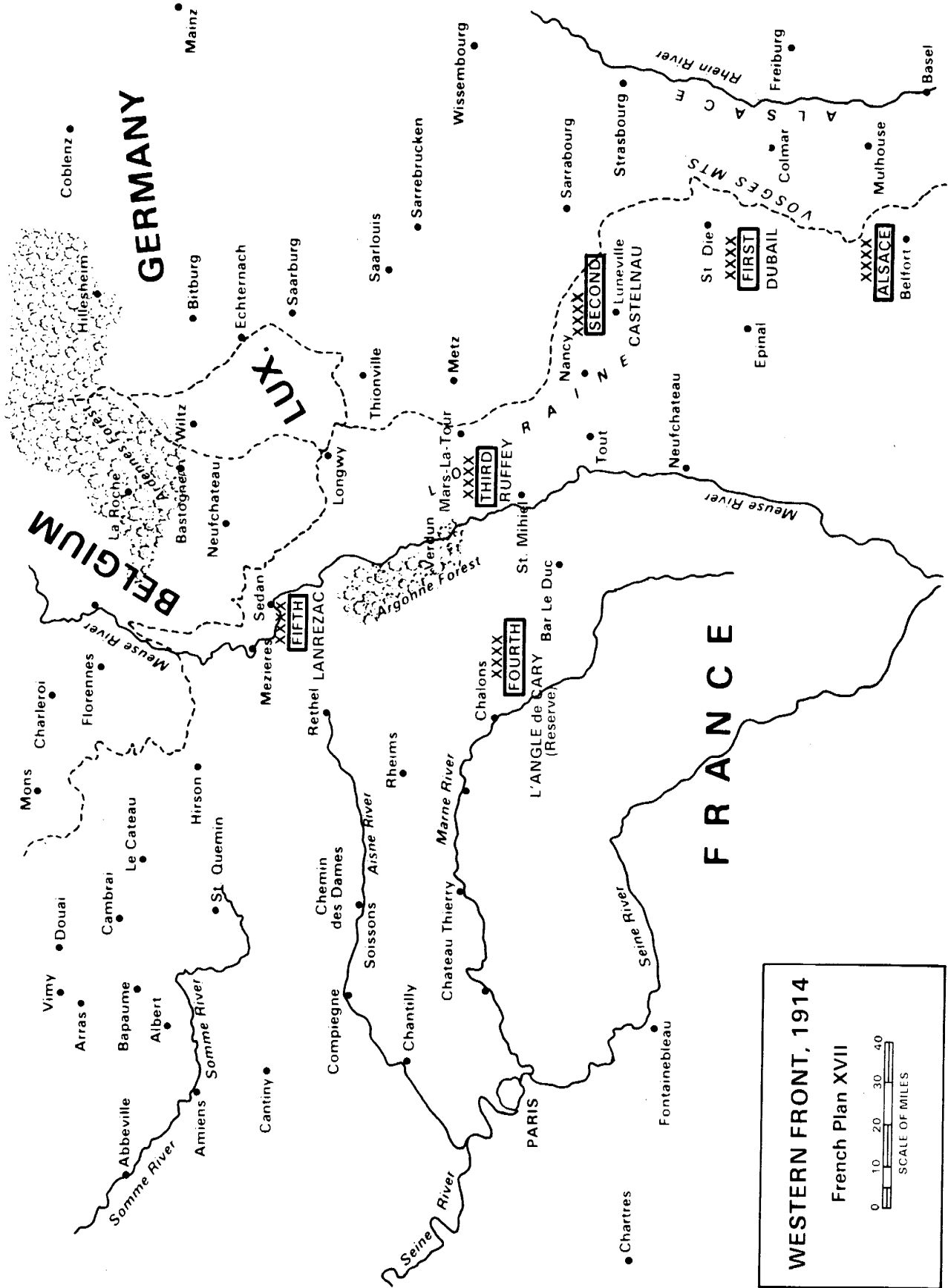
Under these conditions, and with these limitations, work on Plan XVII continued. Its central ideas had been formulated years earlier by Foch. It would, of course, be based on the doctrine of the offensive and would be, Joffre said, "opportunistic" and "flexible."⁵⁸ Flexible it was, to the point of vagueness. Foch's main idea was simple and simply put: "We must get to Berlin by going through Mainz" he wrote cryptically while Commandant of the *Ecole de Guerre*.⁵⁹ Under Joffre's direction, the plan was completed and became the plan of record on 7 February 1914. Predictably, it opened with a flourish: "Whatever the circumstance, it is the Commander-in-Chief's intention to advance with all forces united to the attack of the German armies."⁶⁰

Plan XVII was based on the premise that the German Army would concentrate on the common frontier in the Lorraine area and cross the border at a number of points as soon as possible after war was declared. The primary mission of the German forces engaged in this "hastened attack," or *attaque brusquée*, would be to disrupt the French plan of concentration of its armies and then turn to the defeat of those armies in detail. In the best traditions of the doctrine of the offensive, the French counter to this plan was to launch a hasty attack of their own. To do this, five armies, a cavalry corps and assorted reserves were to concentrate on the frontier. The First and Second Armies were to advance toward the Saar into Lorraine. The Army of Alsace had a limited offensive mission across the border and, interestingly, a psychological operations mission aimed at raising the Frenchmen of German-occupied Alsace in revolt. The Third Army, opposite Metz, was to act as liaison between the First and Second Armies on the right and the Fifth Army on the left and, on order, to clear the Germans out of the fortress of Metz. The Fifth Army, facing the Ardennes, was either to attack between Metz and Thionville or northeast into the German flank if the attackers came through Luxembourg or Belgium. The Fourth Army was to be held in

⁵⁸Tuchman, p. 41.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 40.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 41.



RAND

WESTERN FRONT, 1914

French Plan XVII



reserve near the center of the line and a group of army reserve divisions was placed at each end of the line in a passive mission in accordance with the low regard they merited in the eyes of the regular force.⁶¹

The plan had significant problems. First, it was based on the assumption that a major portion of the German Army would be deployed on the common frontier. This, in spite of the fact that hard intelligence depicting a wide German sweep west of the Meuse had been in French hands since 1904.⁶² But the General Staff, under Joffre's guidance, refused to be influenced by any reports which indicated a German plan for a major violation of Belgian territory, and positioned over one-half of all French forces south of Metz.⁶³ Joffre, of course, was aware of the possibility of a German attack through Belgium. He considered the threat serious enough to prepare two versions, or "cases," of Plan XVII for implementation. Under "Case I," combat would be limited to French and German soil, but under Case II the war would be extended into Belgium. Typically, however, he saw French operations in Belgium as almost exclusively offensive in nature. Earlier in the development of Plan XVII, Joffre had even proposed an attack of his own through Belgium into the German flank. He was dissuaded only by the flat refusal of Premier Poincare and by the somewhat disquieting information from the British that "...if France is first to violate Belgian neutrality, the Belgian army will surely march with the Germans, and the British Government would then be called upon to pressure France into respecting its neutrality...."⁶⁴ Under no circumstances, however, would he position

⁶¹Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Real War 1914-1918* (Boston, 1930), p. 50.

⁶²Cole, p. 296. In 1904 a German calling himself "The Avenger" offered to sell the French a top secret plan for 600,000 francs. The French secret service met with the mysterious man whose face was always swathed in bandages and purchased the plan. The most fascinating document in the package of papers purchased was a map which depicted areas of concentration for the German forces and, most important, their invasion routes of march. These routes clearly showed the German plan to invade Belgium and swing in a wide arc to the West to envelop French forces on the frontier. The identity of "The Avenger" was never known.

⁶³Macbean, p. 9.

⁶⁴Setzen, p. 173.

forces on the Belgian frontier in a purely defensive mode as proposed in Michel's ill-fated plan.

A second major problem with the plan concerned the number of German corps the French thought they would face in the first days of the war. The General Staff absolutely refused to believe the Germans would employ reserves in the front lines. Solid information to the contrary had been received by French intelligence, but the planners preferred to believe instead the skillful German disinformation campaign which told them exactly what they wanted to hear. The Kaiser himself, in a much-publicized speech to the *Reichstag*, pledged that the attacking echelons of the German Army would be composed of regular soldiers only, and that there would be "no fathers of a family in the first line."⁶⁵ This declaration was seen as proof that the war, when it came, would be fought by professional soldiers on each side. Here too, the Germans held the advantage in every category. No matter. The superior bravery and *élan vital* of the French soldier would overcome the baser material advantages of the Hun.⁶⁶

A third problem with the plan was that it concentrated French forces in a narrow band along the common frontier. This concentration was ordered not only because of the belief that the main German attack would be launched across Lorraine, but also because of the General Staff's fear of the German (*attaque brusquée*). This fear was largely self-generated and had been used by the General Staff during the 1913 debates as an argument to lengthen the period of conscription to three years. What transpired, in fact, was that the French General Staff then began to believe the rumors which they themselves had started!⁶⁷

Finally, the plan was one of concentration only. Joffre himself insisted that the plan was not to be interpreted as a plan of operations. To him, the plan of concentration, or where the armies were to mass, was a plan to be completed by the General Staff and submitted to the Commanding General for approval. The plan of operations,

⁶⁵Horne, p. 24.

⁶⁶R. Earnest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History* (New York, 1977), p. 917.

⁶⁷Macbean, p. 10.

however, was the personal preserve of the Commanding General and could be developed only after the war had begun. Whether or not Joffre had a plan of his own we will never know. He consulted no one and wrote nothing. His generals entered the war with no clue as to his intent.⁶⁸

Joffre never discussed the plan with his commanders. He got around this by telling each commander only the part of the plan that concerned him. No commander received a complete copy of the plan. Commanders could form an idea of the total plan only by piecing together the parts on their own. What little they did know of the plan was enough to cause great concern. Three of the five army commanders openly opposed the plan. When they attempted to voice their concerns, they found that no forum for discussion existed.⁶⁹

It should be emphasized that the majority of the senior leadership of the Army subscribed wholeheartedly to the tenets of the new doctrine and would, when war came, carry out those tenets with vigor. This did not preclude, however, opposition to Plan XVII. This opposition smoldered and then burst into open flame. General Gallieni, the tough, experienced commander of the Fifth Army, was so astounded by his designated area of concentration that he appealed to the General Staff for clarification of what surely must be a mistake in the plan. He was informed that the area he had been given was indeed the planned area of concentration for his army. He appealed directly to Joffre to amend Plan XVII so that the Fifth Army could at least outpost the Belgian frontier. Joffre refused. Gallieni, always a soldier of principle, resigned. Joffre offered the command of the army to General Alexis Hargon. He repeated the demands of Gallieni and, when Joffre again refused, Hargon declined command of the army. Joffre, himself a third choice for the position he held, had to give the Fifth Army to his third choice, the excitable, uncertain General Louis Lanrezac.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Setzen, p. 180. Joffre did call a meeting of his army commanders as they left for the front. (It is probably significant that only three of five attended.) This would be Joffre's only chance to impart his intent to his subordinates, to open up and tell them of his hopes and concerns. He did not. He told them nothing and, when Dubail attempted to get clarification of and additional support for his part of Plan XVII, Joffre was icy and made it quite plain that he wished no discussion of his intent. On this happy note, the meeting ended.

⁶⁹Macbean, p. 8.

⁷⁰Cole, p. 341. Lanrezac would not hold the command long. He was uncertain and timid, and confidence in his abilities (especially by the

Clearly, Plan XVII had precipitated a major crisis of confidence in the French Army. Senior leaders did not accept the premises upon which the plan was based and, therefore, did not accept the plan itself. The General Staff, reeling under the constant questioning and growing lack of faith in their abilities, desperately needed some tangible justification for the disposition of forces as laid out in the plan. As none in fact existed, the staff decided to invent a justification of its own. What followed was an incredible fraud and the most bizarre episode in the nation's preparation for the war.

THE RAILWAY CARRIAGE PLAN

In December 1913, when the debate over the soundness of Plan XVII was at its height, a General Staff officer anonymously published a pamphlet purported to be the actual German plan of concentration.⁷¹ The author, Lieutenant Colonel Edmond Buat, claimed to have found the copy of the plan under his seat during a train trip in Germany. The German attack, wrote Buat in his pamphlet, would be centered on Mézières and would violate Belgium only to the extent needed to turn the French left. The attack was to be conducted with a force of 1,300,000 men divided into a hard core of 905,000 regular troops and a follow-on force of 400,000 reservists to whom secondary missions would be assigned. None of these reservists would attack in the front line.⁷² The pamphlet served well those who wished to degrade the possible employment of

British on his flank) dropped until Joffre had to replace him during the Battle of the Marne.

⁷¹Macbean, p. 11. Known as the "Railway Carriage Plan," the actual documents were never seen by anyone but Buat, but such was the state of mind within the Army at the time that he was believed anyway. Buat himself proved to be quite an ethical gymnast for later, without any remorse or professional guilt, he personally admitted the pamphlet was a fake and his account a lie. Buat, who perpetrated the hoax as a justification for proceeding with Plan XVII, became a general officer and held numerous important assignments in the post-war army. There is no evidence that Joffre was aware of the hoax, but it must be noted that the Commander-in-Chief took no action against Buat when the lie was discovered.

⁷²Setzen, p. 182.

reserves, and championed a plan which advocated offensive combat at the expense of all else. It was exactly, conveniently, what the French expected. And, it was exactly wrong.

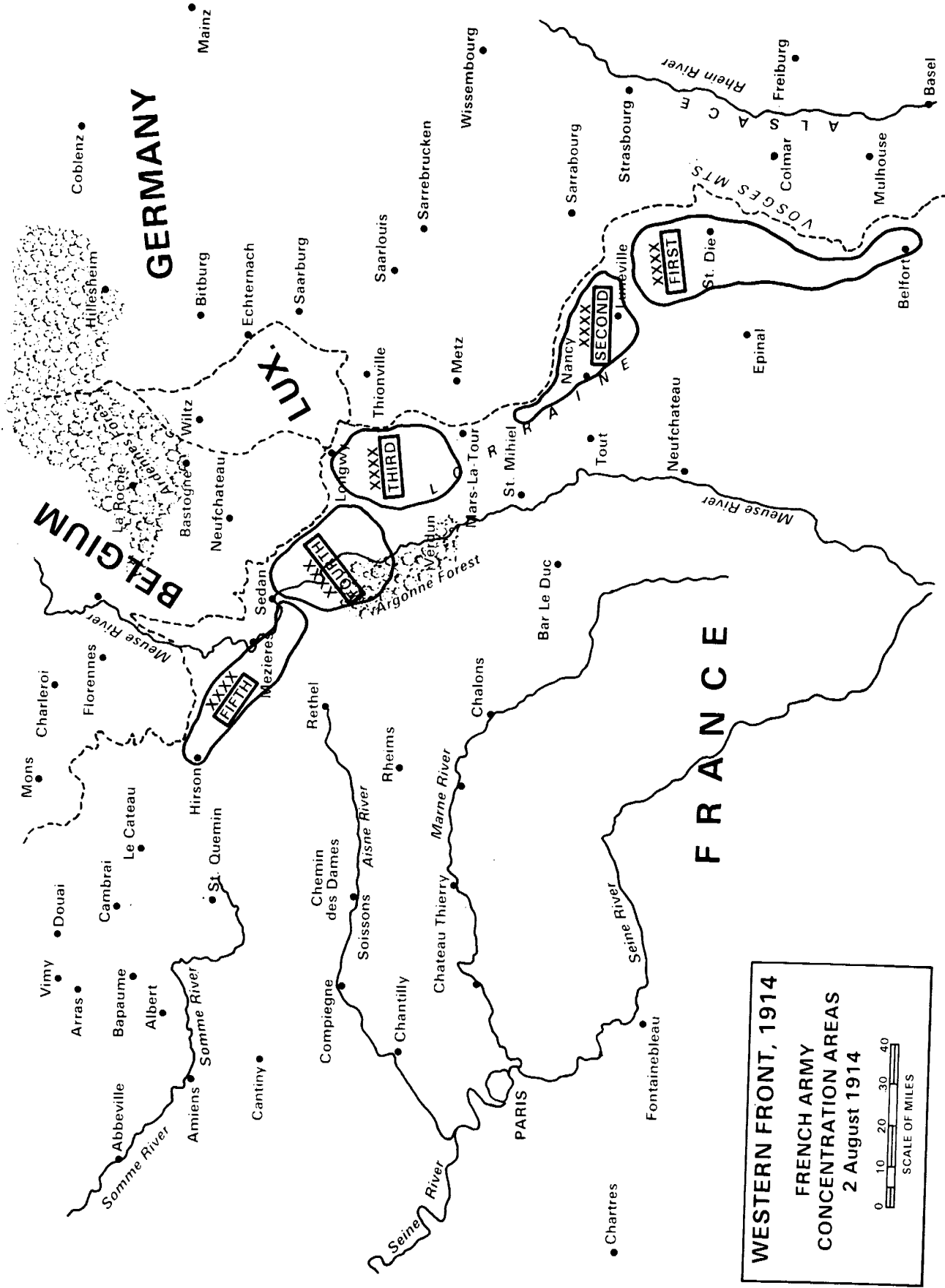
Buat's hoax was to have a telling effect. It was the prime agent in two decisions which nearly cost the French the war. The first concerned the placement of the main French reserve, the Fourth Army. This reserve force had been placed near the center of the French line and, from this position, could have reacted to enemy actions either from the east (Lorraine) or from the north (Belgium). Buat's pamphlet seemed to answer the question of where the main German attack would occur. Therefore, Joffre reasoned, there was no need to hold the Fourth Army in reserve. On 2 August, the first day of French mobilization, he moved the Fourth Army out of its reserve position and into the line between the Third and Fifth Armies. This action served only to thicken the French line. The line was not extended along the Belgian frontier and, most important, French operational flexibility was markedly reduced.⁷³

The second significant result of Buat's hoax demonstrated how deeply the pamphlet was believed and how tenaciously the French General Staff held to their pre-war assessments of enemy intentions. On 6 August the General Staff issued an intelligence report of German activities up to that date. Although the staff was in full knowledge of the German full-scale attack on Liege the day prior, the report stated that the Germans were merely "... executing a plan of concentration conceived two years ago, which we came to know of." The planned French attacks into Lorraine would continue as scheduled--and as if the massive, deadly threat now clearly sweeping down from the north did not exist.⁷⁴ The report suited the doctrine of the offensive, a doctrine which held that the actions and intentions of the enemy were, after all, of little moment.⁷⁵

⁷³Cole, p. 328.

⁷⁴Macbean, p. 15.

⁷⁵Ibid. The General Staff was determined to make the pieces fit into the picture they had preordained. As late as 20 August, when the Germans were pouring into Belgium, General Berthelot was telephoning commanders that "...reports on German forces in Belgium are greatly exaggerated. There is no cause for alarm."



WESTERN FRONT, 1914
FRENCH ARMY
CONCENTRATION AREAS
2 August 1914

0 10 20 30 40
SCALE OF MILES

THE TEST OF WAR

The heated debate surrounding Plan XVII ended in the cataclysm of August 1914. The Great War had begun. The two huge armies marched toward each other--supremely confident Germans certain of a repeat of the glorious events of 1870 and determined young Frenchmen, hungry for their revenge, singing *La Marseillaise* as they moved quickly forward to settle old scores. With near insane joy they ripped up the hated frontier marker posts on the border at Alsace and, in a gesture worthy of their determination and consuming sense of purpose, sent them to be laid on the grave of the patriotic poet, *Déroulède*.⁷⁶

Under the hot sun that August of 1914, the two forces crashed together. The French fought exactly as they had been trained. Upon meeting an enemy force, they attacked, full of the *furia francaise*, but without effective artillery support, without plans, and without regard to the enemy situation. There are reports of attacks that were launched when the enemy was still five hundred meters away: Five hundred meters to advance over open ground, at the double if possible, carrying heavy packs and other gear, singing, screaming, eager to close with the enemy and apply the cold steel of the bayonet. The terrible result was predictable. The Germans waited behind their machine guns in well-sited positions until the order was given to fire. Coldly, methodically they traversed their Maxims left and right along the lines of advancing infantry, lines already decimated by artillery fire, until the attacks were broken and the few survivors had withdrawn out of range. Astoundingly, the survivors would many times attack again and again until whole units ceased to exist as fighting entities. Looking out over the recently harvested wheat fields, one could see a different harvest. Observers commented that the fields appeared to be carpeted in red and blue.⁷⁷ Major General Sir Edward Spears, then a British liaison officer to Joffre's staff, was present at the slaughter. He wrote: "The sense of the tragic futility of it will never quite fade from the minds of those who saw these brave men, dashing across the open, to the sound

⁷⁶Horne, p. 25.

⁷⁷Ibid.

of drums and bugles, clad in the old red caps and trousers....The gallant officers who led them were entirely ignorant of the stopping power of modern firearms, and many of them thought it chic to die in white gloves."⁷⁸

The war would cost France one-and-a-half million dead and four-and-a-half million wounded.⁷⁹ Numbers such as these are virtually inconceivable. Their sheer magnitude renders them nearly meaningless. But even more unbelievable is the fact that the French lost 300,000 men in the first month of the war as all the while the General Staff continued to insist that all that was needed to make the *offensive à outrance* a success was more determination on the part of the soldiers charged with executing it.⁸⁰ The horror exacted psychological casualties as well. At Sarrebourg and later at Charleroi corps commanders ran, and a division commander, after panicking, committed suicide.⁸¹ The "cost" of the doctrine of the "offensive at any cost" was found to be quite high indeed.

The offensive in Lorraine failed, of course. Three weeks into the war the French were on the defensive everywhere. Joffre refused to accept the responsibility for the defeats. Instead he began a purge which would eventually result in the relief of thirty-three general officers. He also, to his eternal disgrace, sent a report to the war minister in which he claimed the plan had failed in large measure because the French soldier had not displayed the "offensive qualities" required.⁸² This, as they died by the thousands implementing his orders. It was beginning to look like 1870 all over again. The German High Command, confident of quick victory, had already cast an "entry into Paris" medallion for issue on the day they occupied the city. But they

⁷⁸Major-General Sir Edward Spears, *Liaison 1914* (London, 1968), p. 36.

⁷⁹General Sir John Hackett, *The Profession of Arms* (London, 1983), p. 149.

⁸⁰Setzen, p. 212.

⁸¹Asprey, p. 60.

⁸²Setzen, p. 212.

were not fighting the French Army of 1870. These were different men-- in many ways. The *poilu* had taken a beating, but he was not broken. At the Marne he turned on his attackers and demonstrated beyond doubt that he was the son of those who had stood at Austerlitz and Valmy.

LEGACY

The General Staff did finally see the error of its ways. Foch, certainly one of the individuals mainly responsible for the adoption of the failed doctrine, was fully aware of the horror he had helped create and fully aware that it must be stopped immediately. He summoned his staff to him at the first opportunity and confided in them that "...it remains for you to forget what you have learned, and for me to do the opposite of what I have taught you."⁸³ In November, the Army began a comprehensive effort to repair the damage done by the adherence to the doctrine. But in a larger sense, much of the damage was irreparable and would have telling effects on the French Army for many years. The doctrine, for example, had resulted in the needless deaths of much of the core of the Army--its professional officers and non-commissioned officers. The memorial tablet at Saint-Cyr contains only one entry for the first year of the war, "The Class Of 1914."⁸⁴ These leaders would be sorely missed in the years of war ahead and, at the time of the mutinies, their steadying influence, which perhaps could have precluded some measure of that tragic episode, would be absent.

But the legacy of the adoption of the doctrine of the offensive was even more terrible in another sense. The wanton slaughter it spawned produced a similar reaction in all those who lived through it--a grim determination never to allow such slaughter again. This resolve was carried from the battlefields to the highest offices of the Army and the government and resulted in the promulgation of the doctrine with which the French would enter the next war. The result of the *offensive à outrance* was to produce within the French people a state of mind which was as defensively minded at the end of the war as it had been

⁸³Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, p. 229.

⁸⁴Hackett, p. 149.

offensively minded at its beginning. This defensive mindset was to be translated into a static notion of war, exemplified by the construction of the Maginot Line, and by a sense of professional pessimism and stagnation in the French Army and people. Those charged with examination of the Great War and the selection of a doctrine with which to fight the next war were already, once again, making the wrong decisions--decisions which would result in the humiliating defeat of 1940. From 1870, to 1914, to 1940, the wheel of history had come round again.

CONCLUSIONS

Doctrine, then, is not simply a collection of "buzz words" and dry concepts suitable only for conference room sparring. The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate, through the use of historical example, that the selection of fundamental war-fighting doctrine is one of the most important choices an army must make and to illustrate the fateful consequences should the wrong choice be made. Hopefully, the paper has also strengthened the argument that any serious analysis of the performance of an armed force in combat must include a detailed look at that force's doctrine. This example clearly illustrates the pitfalls awaiting the analyst should he study only force structures, weapons or martial ardor in the evaluation of a nation's army. The question the analyst must constantly ask is why "they" are the way they are. Close study of "their" doctrine will often answer this crucial question.⁸⁵

The 1986 edition of Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, the U.S. Army's keystone war-fighting manual, defines doctrine as the "... condensed expression of (an army's) approach to fighting campaigns, major operations, battles and engagements. Tactics, techniques, procedures, organizations, support structures, equipment and training must all derive from it."⁸⁶ The selection of an imperfect or

⁸⁵I am indebted to Kenneth Watman for his ideas on the importance of the study of doctrine in the analysis of military issues.

⁸⁶Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington, May 1986), p. 6.

inappropriate doctrine could, as seen in the example presented, be accompanied by the choice of equipment and application of tactics which, while they might be perfectly suited to the doctrine selected, are totally inappropriate for the conflict in which they are to be employed.

The French selected just such a doctrine and attempted to employ it in The Great War. This error of poor selection was compounded by the attempt to then transform that doctrine into strategy. The dilemma the French General Staff faced was the implementation of a doctrine that bore little resemblance to strategic reality. Political realities, military force ratios and reliable intelligence all argued for an offensive-defensive doctrine which would have better supported the twin, basic, strategic aims of any state in war, the survival of the nation and the defeat of the enemy. But, consistent with the lack of logic that characterized most issues concerning the doctrine of the offensive, this dilemma was "resolved" by mixing and blurring the definitions and purposes of doctrine and strategy until French "strategy," such as existed, became simply a means for implementing the doctrine of the offensive to which the Army had become totally and irrevocably joined. Joffre himself admitted that he entered the war with "...no preconceived idea, other than a full determination to take the offensive with all my forces assembled."⁸⁷ As the French government had no firm, delineated strategy for the conduct of the war, this operational aimlessness was unquestioned and led to the adoption of Plan XVII, the futile and extremely wasteful attacks into Alsace and Lorraine in August 1914 and, very nearly, a repeat of the national humiliation of 1870.

The selection of a doctrine which is ill-suited to the needs of a nation can, then, lead to defeat in battle and needless loss of life. However, as terrible as these outcomes are, the true importance one should attach to the selection and development of a war-fighting doctrine is best demonstrated when one considers the worst that can result from a poor choice--the loss of freedom and national sovereignty.

⁸⁷David Jablonsky, "Strategy and the Operational Level of War," *Parameters*, Vol. XVII, No. 1 (Spring 1987), p. 73.

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NO OTHER LAW: THE FRENCH ARMY AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE OFFENSIVE

Sanders