



## Learning to think about young officers in the 21st century: what can we learn from Foch's pedagogical principles?

Earth Thought Notebooks

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**Even if the thought, the ideas and the manner in which he professed them are still the subject of debate<sup>[1]</sup>, Lieutenant-Colonel Foch remains profoundly current through his pedagogical methods, which went beyond the framework of the War School of the time. Clearly very much inspired by Ignatian pedagogy, these methods contributed to forging a base of staff officers and to influencing leaders who were able to demonstrate sufficient intellectual and moral qualities to create the conditions for the victory of 1918. Far from being obsolete, this pedagogy, open and modern, constitutes a reference and a source of inspiration that is particularly well adapted for trainers involved today in the field of command teaching.**

**1] Rémy Porte and François Cochet (dir.), Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929) - Apprenez à penser, Actes du colloque Foch de 2008, Éditions Soteca 14-18, 2010.**

"Can war be taught? Does its nature permit it? If war can be taught, what is it about? How far does it extend? What is the method of preparing you for action [...] and to what faculties of your mind is it directed in order to exercise them, to develop them, to prepare the man for action, and also what provisions does it require of you?"<sup>1]</sup> It was in these terms that the squadron commander, then Lieutenant-Colonel Foch, addressed the officers training at the École supérieure de guerre in 1895, opening his course on military history, strategy and general tactics. Starting from the observation that "the reality of the battlefield is that one does not study there: one simply does what one can to apply what one knows" [2], he forcefully demonstrated, during a particularly rich and well-supported first intervention, that only through constant work, especially in the study of history and military sciences, can one acquire the knowledge (theory, doctrine and principles) indispensable for reflection.

A collective acquisition of this knowledge, based on analysis and reason, also makes it possible to adhere to commonly accepted principles, to develop a common "grammar" [3] and a common intellectual frame of reference. This community of methods and ideas is indispensable in a staff where collective work, convergence of efforts and a common

understanding of the goals to be achieved are paramount. This erudition is therefore indispensable, but not sufficient, because the application of this knowledge to concrete cases must then allow this knowledge to be confronted with particular cases.

In war, it is therefore important to know "fixed principles, to be applied in a variable way, according to the circumstances, to each case which is always particular and needs to be considered in itself" [4]. 4] To adapt these principles to the circumstances, it is essential, according to him, to relate each operation to "a *raison d'être*, i.e. an object. This object, once determined, determines the nature and value of the means to be used, the use to be made of forces. This object, in each case, is the answer to the famous question [...]: what is it all about" [5] This demonstration thus leads him first of all to recommend to his audience: "Learn to think!" and then to affirm during a conference on discipline and freedom of action: "Who says leader therefore says man of character, that goes without saying, but also a man capable of understanding and combining to obey" [6]. 6] The whole of the action of Foch, the pedagogue, is therefore based on this key idea: to develop the ability to think of officers in order to give them the capacity to adapt to the contingencies of war.

The validity of this questioning, this reasoning and these conclusions, we can only note, is as valid as ever, at a time when France seems to be settling permanently in an unstable strategic context, marked by an acceleration of technological, cultural and societal upheavals, and when conflict itself seems to be changing shape.

Beyond the hagiographical accounts of the immediate post-war period, Foch's reputation remains tainted to this day, e by sometimes harsh criticism from former students, historians and strategists such as Raymond Aron[7] and Basil Liddell Hart[8]. 8] His two main works would not reflect his poor public speaking skills and his inability to express his ideas in a way that would be intelligible to his students. The latter would thus have retained from his lectures only a few fragmentary aphorisms, without understanding the globality of his teaching. Moreover, having been overly influenced by Clausewitz and having poorly analysed the paradigm of modern warfare, he would not have anticipated the Great War in an appropriate manner. Although a polytechnician, he would not have taken sufficient account of technological progress and developments in armament leading ultimately to the paralysis of the maneuver in the fall of 1914. It would therefore have perpetuated, in the middle of the industrial age, an art of warfare and tactics dating back to the Napoleonic wars without taking sufficient account of the lessons of the first modern conflicts: the Civil War, the Boer War and the Russian-Japanese conflict. Inexperienced and intellectually ill-prepared, he would therefore have multiplied unfortunate and humanly costly decisions during the first three years of the conflict. Can a more nuanced judgement be made?

Assistant professor, then head of course, Foch taught at the Military School until 1901 and trained six officer classes, few of whom remained indifferent to his teaching. He returned as Brigadier General and Director of the École supérieure de guerre from 1907 to 1911. During these two postings, the future marshal followed in the footsteps of military thinkers and strategists such as Gen.ral Lewal[9] and Colonel Derrecagaix[10], who were responsible for training not only officers in the staff speciality, but also the future leaders of the army of revenge. Before judging the relevance of Foch's teaching, it is therefore important to place it in the context of the refoundation of French military thought after the defeat of 1870. Begun with Lewal, Derrecagaix and continued by Bonnal[11], this refoundation ends with Foch's redefinition of the principles of warfare on the eve of the

conflict. Gathered together to be published with the authorization of the War Ministry, Foch's lectures give him the opportunity to deliver his ideas in "... the first edition of his book, "The War of the World". The principles of war»[12] in 1903 and "On the conduct of war»[13] in 1904. As he acknowledges, these works do not, however, constitute "a complete, methodical, even less academic account of the heart of war, but simply a discussion of some of the main points of the conduct of the troops and especially the direction to be given to the mind so that it always conceives a rational maneuver" [14].

However, on the strength of the success of these publications, he became, notably through the teaching given by his successors at the School of War, including Lieutenant-Colonel Pétain[15], one of the principal theorists of the excessive offensive. His principles were taken up again in 1908 by Lieutenant-Colonel de Grandmaison, who in 1911 became head of the 3rd<sup>bureau</sup> of the army general staff, and was responsible for developing his doctrine[16]. 16] Foch, in this capacity, thus did not distance himself from the very offensive state of mind which then characterized not only the French officer corps[17], but also all European armies. Through his thesis on Clausewitz in 2008, General Benoît Durieux endeavors to rehabilitate Foch, emphasizing that his writings "reveal a thorough reading, and which manages to identify the most important points, whether it is a question of reciprocal actions, the characteristics of real war, the influence of chance, probabilities, war as a continuation of politics or the paradoxical trinity" [18]. Thus, as General Durieux demonstrates, a deep and solid French thought of war exists in 1914. In spite of the first setbacks of the summer of 1914, then of the bogging down in the trenches, this military thought will prove to be neither more nor less deficient than that of the adversary in the end.

The reality of the "luminous courses", "models of clarity" [19] that he dispensed was, it seems, more contrasted. "His sentences are hashed, incomplete, disdainful of grammatical correction. He proceeds by jerks, neglects transitions, designates by "he" the person he is thinking of, without having named him. His conversation is therefore a series of riddles. It is full of holes. It is then that pantomime comes to his rescue" [20]. While it is true that Foch never shone by the clarity of his speech in everyday life, the reproach of complete incomprehension of his words during his speeches, which were prepared and therefore written down, seems both severe and unjustified. In 1908, going back to the causes of the 1870 defeat, Jean Jaurès stressed that within the French army, "the generators of the French army were not the only ones to be defeated. They had courage, some even of culture and spirit, but they had no common doctrine on war; they seemed to be ignorant of the most essential methods. (...). A system of common ideas on the conduct of major operations could have corrected some of this dispersion of consciences. But they lacked such a system. In fact, paralyzed by the disorder of their army, by their ignorance of the Great War, they did not even have those qualities of initiative, daring and drive which until then seemed to be the characteristics of the French race" [21]. It is thus inaccurate to report that forty years after the disaster of 1870, Foch, through his teaching, had not largely contributed to bringing to the officer corps that uniqueness of reference and method that were so lacking in the previous generation.

After the conflict, taking up an essential aspect of the teaching he had given, Marshal Foch declared: "The war taught me that to succeed, I must have a goal, a plan, a method. To have a goal, you have to know what you want, to make a plan, you have to know what you can do. ...] Having a goal is as a general rule, elementary in daily life, to achieve any result. Choose one for yourself. Make a plan. Set your agenda. And with that, be consistent in your ideas, concentrate your efforts, do not disperse your attention" [22]. In this aspect

also, one cannot deny that his teaching contributed in an essential way to the performance of the French staffs during the conflict. Thus, the best way to evaluate Foch's contribution to the training of officers is undoubtedly to be found in the remarks made by Marshal Joffre in 1918: "During the first weeks of the war, we could not have done what we did if the great staffs had not remained like rocks in the middle of the storm, spreading around them clarity and composure. They kept in the most exhausting labor, in the course of a terrible moral trial, a lucidity of judgment, an ease of adaptation, a skill of execution from which victory had to come out" [23].

Finally, in the field of the moral edification of future leaders advocated by Foch from his earliest conferences, it is undeniable that sin is a source of great suffering, a source of great pain, a source of suffering, a source of great suffering. In the field of the moral edification of future leaders advocated by Foch from his first lectures, it is undeniable that the pedagogue was able to shed admirable light in his teaching on the link between strength of character, capacity for work, aptitude for reflection and aptitude for action. "This means that strategy is only a matter of character and common sense, that to arrive on the ground with this double capacity, it is necessary to have a good understanding of how to work and how to think and act. It must have been developed through exercise, it must have been practiced in the military humanities, studied and solved concrete cases" [24]. Exemplary in this field, he showed throughout the conflict an energy and an unshakeable voluntarism, as the president of the Council Georges Clemenceau recounts in justifying his choice to designate Foch as generalissimo in 1917: "I said to myself: let's try Foch! At least we will die with the gun in our hands! I left that sensible, sensible man Pétain; I adopted that madman Foch. It's the madman who got us out of there!" [25].

"The starting point? It was the college. Those were the principles we received there. We all left with the same baggage to walk in life: this baggage is our principles [...] but what was the source of these principles? They were our teachers. They taught us not only by precepts, but also by example" [26]. Raised "among the good fathers" from 1866 until his integration at the École polytechnique in 1871, we find without difficulty in Foch's pedagogical style the great principles of Jesuit teaching. He was, moreover, reproached for this during the difficult period, marked by anticlericalism, at the end of the century, as was his brother Germain Foch's membership in the Society of Jesus. It is likely that his advancement suffered as a result.

Let us first go back to the definitions. Pedagogy (from the Greek  $\pi\alpha\iota\delta\alpha\gamma\omicron\gamma\eta$ , direction or education of children) refers to the art of education. The term brings together the teaching methods and practices required to transmit skills, that is to say, knowledge (knowledge), know-how (abilities) or life skills (attitudes)[27]. For the Jesuits, pedagogy cannot simply be reduced to a method, "it must include a view of the world and a vision of the ideal human being to be formed. On this will rest the goal and the end towards which all aspects of an educational tradition are directed. From this, too, will come the criteria for the choice of the means to be employed in the educational process" [28]. Understood in the light of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, "the pedagogical model of the Jesuits describes both the constant interrelation between experience, felt is also the ideal portrait of the dynamic relationship between teacher and taught in the journey of the latter in order to acquire ever greater knowledge and freedom" [29]. Ignatian pedagogy is thus based on five fundamental principles:

- context, that is to say, attention to each student, in his or her environment, in order to bring him or her up to the maximum of his or her potential;



- experience: the pupil is a whole whose body, mind and heart deserve to be educated, and all knowledge must be experienced in order to become a skill, and then a way of being;
- reflection: the student's knowledge of himself enables him to seek the meaning of his actions and to deduce appropriate choices;
- action, which is consubstantial with the desire to commit oneself to the community;
- and finally, the teacher's accompaniment of the development of his pupils through evaluation in order to enable them to progress.

Not surprisingly, therefore, we find in Foch's style, pedagogical methods and writings all the Ignatian principles.

Contextualisation first of all. Apart from his lectures, Foch endeavoured to provide the trainee officers with permanent and individualised support, especially during tutorials in small groups[30]. 30] As director of the École supérieure de guerre, he was accompanied each day by two different students during his equestrian outings on the Champs-de-Mars. He was thus given the opportunity to share and discuss daily with younger officers his views, principles, conception of command, decision-making and above all the strength of character required to exercise command[31]. 31] In this last area, Foch was probably influenced by one of his former professors, General Cardot,[32] for whom the outcome of an engagement did not depend on the balance of physical forces, but on the balance of moral forces. Taking up Joseph de Maistre, for whom "a lost battle is a battle we believe we've lost" [33], Foch had already asserted in his lectures that "a won battle is a battle in which we don't want to admit we're defeated". It is therefore this individualization of teaching, whether he is a teacher or the director of the School of War, which also allows the future marshal to imprint his principles on a lasting basis and to participate directly in the moral edification of the students in his charge. "For Foch, principles - that is to say, the moral level established as a rule of life - seemed to prevail over mere knowledge. Principles are acquired more by example than by dogmatic learning" [34].

Work, reflection with a view to action and the acquisition of experience. For Foch, these three notions are indissociable. The first chapter of the "Principles of war" deals first of all with the training to be given to warlords. According to him, military education before 1870 was deeply marked by a scientific approach. "These theories, which had been believed to be exact by basing them solely on certain and mathematical data, had the misfortune of being radically false, because they had left out the most important element of the problem, man, because they tended to make war an exact science" [35]. 35] The development of military art was excluded from this, since according to the doxa of the time, only confrontation in combat allowed the leader to reveal his talent and to develop his experience. This lack of teaching of a commonly understood doctrine and principles thus led to Sedan's capitulation. The whole purpose of the overhaul of military thought initiated in 1876 by Lewal was therefore based on the awakening and development among French officers of a true culture of the art of war. Twenty years later, Foch is still fully committed to this approach. He would subscribe to it again after the world war. "We have to work, always work to keep up to date, because the means are evolving, the solutions are different every day. It's utopian to wage the next war with the methods of the last one. The leader of the day will have to improvise new solutions.

Work... great improvisations on the battlefield are only the result of previous meditations" [36]. These meditations must of course be based on a more solid foundation than just theoretical knowledge. Foch therefore intends to allow trainee officers to develop their

experience through practical work he conducts, from study trips where he excels to the correction of written assignments he directs with passion [37]. Following Bonnal, whom he succeeded, Foch perfected the systematic use of military history, following the example of the Prussians and before that of Napoleon himself. Foch's pedagogy thus does not aim to make the officer a scholar, but to enable him to create references that he will be able to relate to a particular situation, once he is confronted with it. According to him, only meditation and reflection are therefore likely to create the capacity for adaptation. This reflection can only be relevant if it is based on an understanding of the principles of war and not on a dogmatic learning of knowledge. "It is first of all a question of understanding truths, therefore freedom of mind, not prejudices, prevention, fixed ideas, opinions accepted without discussion, for the sole reason that one has always heard or seen it done. Reason is the only criterion" [38]. 38] This pedagogy is therefore based on a voluntarist approach on the part of the student. No one learns to think if he is forced to do so. The method requires time, of course. That is why he asked for and obtained the authorization of the Minister of War in 1909 to extend, "on a trial basis", the teaching of the War School by an additional year, thus bringing it to three years, as in Germany. This extension, reserved for the first fifteen graduates in the graduation class, became the Centre des hautes études militaires in 1910.

"...] There is a Foch who is still very much in tune with the times; he is the Foch, the pedagogue and philosopher who, beyond the transformations in military techniques, opens the mind to the profound meaning of eternal principles" [39].

So what must we retain from Foch and from the reading of his principles? As a follower of Clausewitz, his conception of war and maneuver was invalidated from the very first days of the Great War. He was, however, one of the essential architects of the revival of French military thought in the pre-war period, and contributed in this capacity with Lewal, Derrecagaix, Pétain, Lanrezac and Mordacq [40], to the development of the French military thought of the pre-war period.<sup>40]</sup> to develop in the officer corps a real ability to apply methods of operational thinking, particularly crucial at the height of the conflict and the first setbacks suffered by the French army. This military thinking is still today one of the foundations of strategic and tactical reasoning in France.

But it is above all his determination, his strength of character and the example he was able to set both as an educator and as a warlord that constitute a reference in the field of command teaching today. This stubbornness in not recognizing himself as defeated, his undeniable gift for coordinating and federating the allies in 1918, based on a corps of staff officers and chiefs that he had directly helped to train and harden, undeniably led to victory. It is therefore on these crucial aspects of the selection and training of future military decision-makers that it seems appropriate to focus today. How can we continue to enable officers in the 21st century to adopt this pugnacious and open-minded approach to the rapid changes that characterise our times, while applying rational decision-making methods? There is no doubt that these training methods must continue to be based on the individualisation of the acquisition of knowledge, on guided and unrestrained reflection by experienced managers who are familiar with operational decision-making methods and collective and collaborative work. Above all, however, this training must continue to contribute to strengthening the character, situational awareness and imagination of future military decision-makers.

- 1] Ferdinand Foch, "[1] Ferdinand Foch.Lectures given at the War College."Berger-Levrault, 1903, reprinted. Economica, 2007.
- 2] Ferdinand Foch, Op. cit.
- 3] Ferdinand Foch, Op. cit.
- 4] Ferdinand Foch, Op. cit.
- 5] Locution borrowed from the Prussian General Julius von Verdy du Vernois during the Austro-Prussian war at the battle of Gitschin in 1866.
- 6] Ferdinand Foch, Op. cit.
- 7] Raymond Aron, "Thinking the war"Gallimard, 1976, reprinted. 1999.
- 8] Basil Liddel Hart, "[8] Basil Liddel Hart.Strategy"1954, reprinted. Perrin, 2007.
- 9] Jules Lewal presided over the creation and directed the new École Militaire Supérieure (Superior Military School) from 1877 to 1880.
- 10] Victor Derrecagaix was second in command and director of studies at the École supérieure de guerre from 1883 to 1885. A prolific author, he made a name for himself in particular by publishing "...".Modern Warfare"Paris, Baudoin, 1885.
- 11] Henri Bonnal was Foch's predecessor as head of the military history, strategy and general tactics course from 1892 to 1896. It was he who introduced the pedagogical method of concrete cases based on the study of historical examples.
- 12] Ferdinand Foch, op. cit.
- 13] Ferdinand Foch, "[13] Ferdinand Foch.On the conduct of the war"Berger-Levrault, 1904, reprinted. Economica, 2000.
- 14] Ferdinand Foch, Op. cit.
- 15] Philippe Pétain was assistant professor at the École supérieure de guerre from 1904 to 1907; then, from 1908 to 1911, he held the chair of infantry tactics. More moderate on the principle of excessive offensive, he nevertheless refuted the dogma of the defensive prescribed by the 1867 instruction, "the offensive alone can lead to victory".
- 16] Louis de Grandmaison, "...Training the infantry for offensive combat", Berger-Levrault, 1908.
- 17] A few officers, however, remained more measured with regard to this doctrine, including Charles Lanrezac. Professor, then director of studies and second in command of the Ecole de Guerre from 1898 to 1901, Lanrezac opposed the systematic and preconceived use of the excessive offensive. He advocated a more subtle and considered use of the offensive mode: "If each subordinate corps commander has the right to stuff, head down, on the first opponent within his reach, the commander-in-chief is powerless to exercise the slightest guiding action". It is also attributed to him a famous formula addressed to Nivelle in 1917: "Let's attack, let's attack... like the moon!".
- 18] Benoît Durieux, Rapport de défenance de la thèse pour le doctorat en histoire de Benoît Durieux"Clausewitz et la réflexion sur la guerre en France, 1807-2007", Revue stratégique, n°97-98, 2009.
- 19] Jacques Mortane, "Life and death of Foch", Edition des Portiques, 1929, quoted in Jean-Christophe Notin, "Foch", Perrin, 2008.
- 20] Emile Mayer, "Our Chiefs of 1914", Stock, 1930.
- 21] Jean Jaurès, "The political and moral vice of the regime", quoted in Emile Zola, "The Debacle", Pocket, 1993.
- 22] Charles Bugnet, "Listening to Marshal Foch", Grasset, reprinted 2017.
- 23] Quoted in Jacques Deschamps, "La guerremoderne (1885). Une contribution à la culture stratégique des états-majors français de la Première Guerre mondiale", Revue stratégique, n°99, 2010.

24] Ferdinand Foch, Op. cit.

25] Jean Martet, "The Tiger", Albin Michel, 1930, quoted in Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon, "Pétain", Perrin, 2014.

26] Quoted in François Gaquère, ".Popular life of Marshal Foch", Maison de la Bonne Presse, 1929.

27] Encyclopedia Larousse.

28] Guillemette de la Borie, "Y a-t-il une pédagogie jésuite", La Croix, 28/04/2009.

29] Karl Rahner, "[29] Karl Rahner, "The Ignatian Spirit: Writings on the Exercises and the Spirituality of the Founder of the Order.", Cerf, 2016.

30] Jean Christophe Notin, "Foch", Perrin, 2008.

31] Charles Bugnet, Op. cit.

32] Lucien Cardot, a professor in 1885, was the first to introduce Clausewitz to the École supérieure de guerre, the year Foch joined as a trainee. Quoted in Raymond Aron, "Penser la guerre, Clausewitz, t. II, L'âge planétaire" **Gallimard**, 1976.

33] Joseph Marie de Maistre, "[33] Joseph Marie de Maistre, ".The Evenings of St. Petersburg or Talks on the Temporal Government of Providence" 1821, Edimaf, reprinted 2017.

By Count Joseph Marie de Maistre

34] François Cochet, "Foch: de l'hagiographie à l'histoire, introduction by Rémy Porte and François Cochet (eds.), Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929) - Apprenez à penser, Actes du colloque Foch de 2008", Éditions Soteca 14-18, 2010.

35] Ferdinand Foch, Op. cit.

36] Ferdinand Foch, Lecture at the Naval School, 1920.

37] Jean Christophe Notin, op. cit.

38] Ferdinand Foch, op. cit.

39] Martin Motte, "Ferdinand Foch(1851-1929)", Les cahiers du CESAT, no. 26, December 2011.

40] Henri Mordacq was a professor at the War College, then at the CHEM from 1909 to 1911. Like Pétain, he questioned the dogma of the excessive offensive and anticipated before the beginning of the war its long duration and its economic implications.

At the end of the École militaire interarmes, promotion "Combats de Tu-Lê" (1992-1994), Colonel Fabrice CLÉE chose the Engineer's weapon, in which he spent the first part of his career. He commanded the joint civil-military action group. He was associated with the teaching of tactical reasoning methods and planning for the benefit of higher military education.(Staff College, Superior Staff Course, Superior Joint Course and the Land Group of the War College). He is currently Deputy Head of the Doctrine Division of the CDEC.

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