



Reread Foch

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

(Re)read Foch! Today? What for?

General Gilles Bemelmans reminds us of what characterizes him: common sense, that of reality. At ground level, it is the case to say it. This aspect never disappears, even when he is in charge of the highest responsibilities.

It is completely out of date, today's war has nothing to do with the war of 14-18. And then it was a doctrinaire of the excessive offensive, it was affected by the spirit of the system. His principles are a pure intellectual construction. That is what we sometimes hear, when we do not have an inhibited interlocutor.

And yet, surprising as it may seem, Foch remains of a roborative reading, like those who recounted their experience under his orders (Weygand or Bugnet). We come out of it rejuvenated.

One finds there an atmosphere, a personality, but also the result of an education, a culture and a faith. Judge for yourself.

"I said, the railroad line... Without knowing! But I thought: it's either embankment or excavation. In any case, it's always a line that is well marked on the map and on the ground, and that can be used for shelter perhaps. Everyone sees it, everyone knows it. You have to stop on it, stick to it, it's simple! It was an embankment; we went to one side. And then there was the flooding. They stopped on the other side. Then we were shooting ducks! Yes, the Krauts were like ducks" [1].

That's what strikes you first: common sense, reality. At ground level, it is the case to say it. This aspect never disappears, even when it is charged with the highest responsibilities.

"Big business? I treat them as if they were small. It's not difficult. The method is always the same" [2].

The second element evident in his works is the cult of intellectual work. Reason at the service of action. An intelligence always on the alert, powerful because it is orderly and methodical. The sources of his lectures are significant in this regard:

"I have read Clausewitz... He's quite something! There was something in that book. He had been in the war, he knew it. Blücher, Scharnhorst too. They were lads. For men like them to get the better of the colossus that was Napoleon, they had to work. They were guided by patriotism. No doubt they were. But more importantly, the cause they had given themselves to... You always succeed when you give yourself a cause, when you don't scatter, when you don't want to touch everything [...] And Moltke too. Have you read his correspondence? That's where I drew everything from, because I always come back to 1870 [...] And I'm not talking about the Emperor! That one is the great master, the god! He is the most beautiful historical type that one can study because he had the sense of discipline, the clear concern for work, the horror of words, of phraseology that kills action" [3].

It is the same method he will apply during the war:

"What made my staff superior during the war, with the Weygands, the Destickers, the Georges, was that everyone studied the questions thoroughly, knew what they were about and decided in full knowledge of the facts. No fancy. No feeling. They say: "I think that..." - "We're chic. - "I think the enemy will do this... or that..." This is bad. "I believe..." You have to be sure! We must study, see its possibilities, the numbers, judge, decide, and then it's ok!" [4].

In uncertainty, it is still the force of knowledge and reasoning that prevails:

"Information? But it's useless, they're almost all false; we never know until after those that were true. I have never mentioned them. We see what we want to do; we see if we can do it with what we have, and then we do it... Intelligence on the enemy? You never know anything... On the night of the Marne, when I was told that the Germans were no longer there, I didn't understand! History? In hindsight, we only report information that we know was correct, but when we had to use it, we didn't know! You see, what is needed is not to wait for the information, but to know what you want. We do what we want, when we know what we want" [5].

To want, the word is essential; the third dominant element in Foch's work is will. No doubt based on a strong personality and great energy, but he cultivated it all his life.

He proved it at the Battle of the Marne when the IXth Army he commanded held its ground in unheard of conditions, because he understood that his role as a right-wing stopper was essential to success ("My right is sunkene, my left moves back, all is well, I attack", words that he did not pronounce, but which remained significant of his lucid analysis and his decision to make the gigantic stop hit succeed at all costs).

He showed it again in 18 at Doullens, when he had to persuade everyone - Haig, Pétain, Clemenceau - not to open the passage in front of the Friedensturm, which was very close

to flowing from the Oise into Paris.

"There's no more than fifty centimetres of ground to lose. You have to hold on to the ground. Remember October 1914 [...] The enemy struck right at the junction of the two doors. He pushed them back on Haig and Pétain. A new force must unite them [...] And above all let us not indicate to the troops a line of withdrawal, otherwise they will tend to rush to it.

And he won the decision, allowing the general offensive to be launched and victorious a few months later. A force of will that imposed it on all when his only son was killed in August 14. He isolated himself for half an hour and then resumed his command, dismissing the condolences with a "Yes, yes, leave".

There would still be much to say about his obsession with the result, his persuasiveness and diplomatic ability, his high-mindedness in the face of adversity and the partisan harassments from which he sometimes suffered.

The simplicity of his approach is itself a source of encouragement. It is accessible to everyone, with work and method, as Weygand reports.

"The Marshal is so sincere that he doesn't try to create any illusions at all, to only put his idea out there when it's ready. He is not afraid to let the work of his brain be seen. He says things as they come to him. We witness their birth, their hatching. Little by little we see the idea develop, become clearer. The Marshal hides nothing. There's only one thing that matters to him: the result. So he would turn his ideas upside down and take them from all sides, taking them by the scruff of the neck. Finally, he expressed them in a striking way in two or three sentences. When I left him, I could set to work and accomplish my task, in the way I had to" [6].

Reading Foch or those who knew him is a real breath of fresh air.

We discover a man who is both realistic and exceptionally tall, without fuss, armed with an unshakeable will and perfect simplicity.

Straddling the previous two centuries, his personality was built on a few pillars that have been consolidated throughout his life: reason versus sentimentalism, faith and duty versus abandonment. Add to this a solid sense of reality and methodical training, and you have the leader who led the allies to victory in 1918.

This testimony holds out the prospect of intelligent, lucid, practical and persevering action in seemingly overwhelming adversity.

It is an excellent antidote to discouragement, to "what good is it" and to the moron's fabrication.

Reading Foch is good for morale!

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In particular, he commanded the 54th artillery regiment then directed the senior staff course from 2004 to 2007.

His career has led him to develop a passion for tactics, command and military history.

[1]«Listening to Marshal Foch» Charles Bugnet - Ed. Grasset 1929 - p. 192-193 - October 1914 about the German offensive on Dixmude.

2) Op. cit. p. 53.

3) Op. cit. p. 59-60.

4) Op. cit. p. 56.

5) Op. cit. p. 121-122.

6) Op. cit. p. 25.

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