



Marshal Foch in 1918 Interallied Command and operative art

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Lieutenant-Colonel (H) Claude Franc shows us the actual conditions of the exercise of the inter-allied command exercised by Marshal Foch.

Knowing that he would not obtain any results through a directive form of command, Foch always acted flexibly. Moreover, he is credited with the aphorism, in fact from Sarrail to Salonika, according to which "he admired Napoleon much less since he had commanded a coalition".

Thus Foch, as Supreme Allied Commander in 1918, always advocated persuasion as the only method of command, which, it is true, was hardly in keeping with his character!

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Foch Allied Commander-in-Chief

First of all, what was his staff? Organized ex nihilo , since it did not previously exist, Foch's Allied Chief of Staff was set up from that of the (French) Chief of Staff of the Army, a position that had previously been his. It was therefore an exclusively French staff, under the orders of General Weygand, operating according to the French procedures in force at

the time. The Allied armies, in fact essentially British and American, detached liaison officers of a lower rank. It was by no means a "combined" staff in the multinational sense that we know today, the forces not being integrated in the "joint" sense of the term. Like Eisenhower twenty-five years later, Foch did not command, as Eisenhower did twenty-five years later, groups of armies made available to him by coalition governments, but national armies, commanded by a national commander-in-chief, very directly subordinate to his national chain of command. Comparison is not right with Eisenhower and even less so with SHAPE.

Foch made direct contact, personally, with these subordinate commanders in chief, usually on an individual basis, very rarely through summit conferences. During the eight months of intense operations that his command underwent, Foch held in all only two inter-allied conferences: The first, in July, to comment on his directive to resume offensive operations and to give his planning guidelines; the second, at the very beginning of November, to finalize the draft armistice conditions to be imposed on defeated Germany.

As regards his contacts with his national "counterparts", Foch, known for his thoroughness and sharpness, never departed from perfect courtesy, always respecting their respective national interests. Only with regard to Pétain has he been particularly directive. Each commander-in-chief retained the possibility of appealing to his government for arbitration if he considered himself "aggrieved" by a decision of the commander-in-chief of the allied armies. Foch had no difficulty in convincing Clemenceau to take away this "right of appeal" from Pétain in June, at a time when their conceptions were totally divergent, Pétain and Foch were in agreement. Pétain wanting to shorten his front to replenish his reserves, Foch, much less alarmed by the scale of the German advance, planned a counter-attack [1].

Knowing that he would not obtain any results through a directive form of command, Foch always acted flexibly. He is, moreover, credited with the aphorism, in fact from Sarrail to Salonika, according to which "he admired Napoleon much less since he had commanded a coalition". Thus Foch, as Supreme Allied Commander in 1918, always advocated persuasion as the only method of command, which, it is true, was hardly in keeping with his character!

"The single command, especially when it must be exercised over leaders of another nation, of another race, cannot be imposed by decree. The only one who imposes it is the man charged with exercising it, acting through his ascendancy on those with whom he must collaborate (...) In short, my idea comes down to this: when command is exercised over allied armies, dry, imperative, categorical orders would produce no results. The one who gives them must know how to make them fully accepted by the one to whom they are addressed, to obtain his confidence and adhesion. There is no other way for him to command (...). When armies fight together, it is absolutely impossible to achieve unity of command other than through this moral influence. In other words, it is not coercion that acts, but only persuasion.

For what is the use of giving orders when, for all kinds of material and moral reasons, they cannot be carried out? Men, especially foreigners, must be taken as they are and not as we would like them to be.

The relations he had with Pershing and Pétain are significant of his "interallied" style of leadership. With the former, a commander a foreign chief, Foch put all forms of it, while vis-à-vis Pétain, a French general, he considered him a subordinate: When the large American units were set up, Pershing wanted them to be united into a national army, of

which he would be in command, a legitimate claim; while Pétain, faced with a serious crisis in French manpower, wanted them to be united into a national army. Pétain, faced with a serious crisis in French manpower, envisaged that the large American units could be distributed within the French armies, which, moreover, had the advantage of having their general staffs, still relatively inexperienced, on the prowl. Foch arbitrated in favour of Pershing in the name of interallied solidarity. Similarly, in the autumn, when the American offensive in the Argonne was trampling on the inexperience of the young American army by the incompetence of its éClemenceau, noting these failures, urged Foch to obtain Pershing's replacement, which would have been, for sure, the source of a serious inter-allied crisis. Foch vigorously opposed it and even stopped Gouraud's offensive on his left flank, which would not be relaunched until the American army was put back in order. Foch's leniency towards Pershing particularly indisposed Clemenceau, and relations between the two Frenchmen suffered as a result.

Conversely, with Pétain, relations were those of a leader to a subordinate: in June, observing that the French commander-in-chief was not inclined to prepare the counter-attacks he was planning, but even considered shortening his front [3], Foch brought his CP closer to Provins where where Pétain's CP was based, and every morning for three weeks, Weygand went to the French HQG to check that his counterpart, the Major General of the French armies, was complying with Foch's orders. Moreover, considering that General Anthoine, Major General, was the damned soul of Pétain who kept him in his pessimism, Foch obtained his replacement and his replacement by Buat, who was more attached to his ideas. These frictions and this "short reins" command of the French HQG by Foch were at the source of the tense relations between the "houses" of Foch and Pétain after the war.

On 18 July, while Pétain cancelled a new Mangin offensive to use this army to plug the breach created by Ludendorff in the south of the Marne, in one hour, Foch cancelled the G's order. French H.Q., confirmed Mangin's action and directly activated Fayolle himself, commanding the G.A.R. [5].

Foch and the appearance of the operative art

Beyond this formal aspect of Foch's inter-allied command, his great contribution was the recourse to the operative art which he certainly applied "while walking" and which was only formally codified later, notably by Soviet military thought.

In fact, the military leaders, whether of the Entente or the Germans, found themselves blocked at the strategic level by the tactical impasse, imposed by fire, which prohibited any action to break the opposing front, an indispensable precondition for the resumption of the war of movement with objectives of strategic scope.

On the German side, Ludendorff had failed by launching tactical offensives (Picardy, Chemin des Dames, Champagne) which he had pushed to their extreme limits. He had pushed them to their extreme limits, but without ever managing to stop the game of the opposing reserves, which always managed to plug the breaches they had made, sometimes even to counter-attack.

Seeing this constraint, in a very pragmatic way, Foch decided not to try to break through the German front, but, initially, to undermine it, by attacks at limited range, taking turns at each other, which made the game of the few reserves still remaining to the Germans obsolete. Above all, however, these attacks weakened the German front, which was

attacked everywhere in a very short space of time. In a second phase, once the German front was thus thrown off balance, Foch launched his general offensive, attacking everywhere and simultaneously the enemy apparatus, which could only retreat, releasing one after the other its railway bypasses that supported its lines of communication. In doing so, the Germans would soon be faced with the choice of either capitulating or withdrawing to the Reich, with the risk of their front collapsing completely each day. We know with what success the government born of the German revolution chose the first solution by masking, through a remarkable communication operation, the real military disaster by the legend of the "stab in the back" [6].

6] Why evoke the term "operative art" on this subject? Because Foch has moved away from the tactical level, entrusted to the national armies. Thus, as Allied Commander-in-Chief, Foch always situated his thinking and his conceptions at the global level of the theatre, without going into the particular tactical aspects of this or that sector of the front. It was this "top-down" perception of the theatre that provided the overall coherence to all the attacks designed and launched by Foch. However, it did not reach the strategic level - which, moreover, has always been lacking in the conduct of the war - which would have aimed to ensure that the different theatres played in a coherent and complementary manner: the Western front including the Italian theater, and the armies of the East in the Macedonian theater [7].

7] Regarding the role played by Foch and his place in the conduct of operations, Fayolle said quite rightly: "Foch gives me the orders, Pétain provides me with the means, and I implement" [8].

8] This written, it must be noted that the joint level, consubstantial to the operational art, escaped Foch: the British Flying Corps, like the French air division, remained subordinate to its national HQG. Moreover, Foch never expressed the slightest intention of raising their command to his level.

What can we learn from this first experience of Allied command?

The major lesson was respect for national interests. Even if Foch did not have a multinational staff, he always put these interests at the forefront of his concerns, even if they ran counter to immediate operational imperatives. This will be exactly the same less than twenty years later when Eisenhower commands Allied forces in Europe. For the same reasons, Bradley will always feel aggrieved by Montgomery, especially when the Allied coalition's logistical priorities are assigned to him for a high-risk operation, Marketgarden, which will end in a dismal failure at Arnhem . Whereas today, within any multinational coalition, the impregnation of national interests tends to fade in the face of the leadership of the dominant nation that imposes its goals, organisation and modes of operation.

As for the recourse to operative art, applied by him in a very empirical way, it must be acknowledged that Foch was the initiator. Admittedly, he did not exercise joint responsibilities in the sense that we understand it today. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that, at the time, military aeronautics did not constitute an army as such, even if it operated in an environment other than the land framework, but remained subordinate to the land command.

Concerning the operative art, it was taken up and formally codified by the Soviet command before being implemented by the Red Army in the successive phases of the reconquest of its territory, Poland and the eastern part of the Reich between 1943 and 1945.

Thus, both in the level of command that came under his responsibility and in the form he took to exercise it in 1918, Foch was a forerunner of what was played out in terms of command organisation during the following conflict, even if the circumstances, and therefore the forms, were radically different from one conflict to the next.

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1) This was successfully conducted by Mangin on 11 June.

2) In Recouly. «The Foch Memorial». Paris. Les éditions de France 1929. 343 pages. Pages 15 to 24.

3) On 4 June, Pétain gave Foch a personal note recommending a shortening of the front by withdrawing to the north to the Somme and abandoning it to the east of Lorraine. Foch took no action, denounced this maneuver to the French government and ordered Mangin to counter-attack.

4) This did not help relations between Pétain and Weygand, which were particularly detestable in 1934 when the Prime Minister was Minister of War and Weygand was appointed Generalissimo Generalissimo.

5) Group of reserve armies on which Mangin depends. See Fayolle, "Secret Notebooks of the Great War" Paris, Plon, 1964.

6) Socialist Ebert welcomed the German units retreating and joining the Reich at the end of November with the words: "I salute an undefeated army!"

7) It was this lack of a strategic politico-military level that allowed London to negotiate and sign the armistice with the Ottoman Gate, without putting Franchet d'Espèrey in the "loop".

8) Fayolle, op. cit.

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