



## 1914: War of the Peoples and Sacred Union

military-Earth thinking notebook

Le Général d'armée (2S) Pierre de PERCIN-NORTHUMBERLAND

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**General de Percin, after recalling popular sentiment on the eve of the conflict, describes below the terrible initial clashes in terms of human losses, concluded by the Battle of the Marne, a momentous episode for both sides.**

The year 1914 was, without a doubt, the most terrible year in our national history: almost 80,000 died in August alone, 27,000 of them on that dreadful day of Saturday, 22 August. And then came the Marne, where I believe that this immense victory of the exhausted soldiers was first of all their extraordinary willingness to face up to the situation in a patriotic spirit marked by a widespread awareness that the fate of the country was at stake. The Marne was first of all the victory of patriotism in this war of peoples that was the Great War.

The fifteen years that preceded the war were fertile in events of such importance that at several moments the war could seem imminent.

Certainly, after Fachoda (1898), common sense, not without difficulties, had made it possible to calm Franco-British rivalries, which were settled at least by the 1904 agreement (the Entente Cordiale). The Moroccan crisis between France and Germany seemed to be appeased with the Treaty of Algeciras (1906) when the crisis of Agadir (1911) came about; certainly, diplomacy triumphed once again, but public opinion, both French and German, had shown their aggressiveness. This crisis, keenly felt in each of the two countries, and the feeling of hatred that resulted from it, explain the sacred union (the word is from the President of the Republic, Poincaré) that manifested itself on the day of the mobilization. To this was added the question of Alsace-Lorraine, always present in the hearts of the French.

- The two Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913[1] had been regional conflicts, but they had shown the explosive situation that prevailed in the Balkans, especially since Austria-Hungary, at a time of exacerbated nationalist claims, was particularly hostile to Serbia, as Bosnia and Herzegovina was more than 50% Serb-owned.
- In this context, the Sarajevo attack certainly attracted attention, but for many people it still seemed to be a problem peculiar to Austria-Hungary and limited to the Balkans.

Austria wanted war to settle the Serbian question once and for all; Russia would go to war to support the Serbian people; France and England would support their Russian ally. Germany, perhaps reluctantly for some of its leaders, was taking the lead, declaring war on France with the support of its public opinion: this was a war of the peoples.

The French had long since shown their hostility to the Germans, but that did not mean that they wanted war; they felt a sense of aggression. The mobilization took place under quite remarkable conditions and this was far from being won in a country still torn by religious quarrels and deeply divided politically; the Dreyfus affair was not so far away.

This sacred union can be found even in the most pacifist intellectual circles; the rallying of men like Auguste Rodin or Anatole France shows it well.

Many foreigners follow this example in the name of defending freedom and civilization: Guillaume Apollinaire, of Russian nationality, asks for French nationality and joins our ranks, Blaise Cendrars, of Swiss nationality, joins in his turn, without forgetting the admirable American poet Allan Seeger who will find death on the Somme [2].

As soon as the fighting broke out, the Germans attacked both through Belgium and westwards to take Nancy.

After the defeat of Morhange, the armies recovered at the orders of General de Castelnau; Nancy was saved. The Bavarian Kronprinz, which was preparing its victorious entry into the big city, lost the battle of Lorraine. And without this victory of the Grand Couronné and the trouée de Charmes, the battle of the Marne could not have taken place.

In the north, after the defeat of Charleroi, the German armies continued to swell and, at the same time, their exactions multiplied on the civilian population: "Orchies, city of 5.000 inhabitants, no longer exists", as stated by Major von Mehring, commander of the Place de Valenciennes, who added "Houses, town hall and church have disappeared and there are no more inhabitants". Hostages are taken and shot, as in Senlis the mayor, Mr. Odent ...

The military losses are terrible with, as a consequence, a certain disorganization of the units, as for example, on August 22nd on the Sambre river, the 2nd <sup>Zouaves marching</sup> regiment which lost its head of corps, Lieutenant-Colonel Troussel, 21 officers and more than 1.000 non-commissioned officers and soldiers.

This enemy priest must be stopped, whatever the cost. But should we fight on the Marne

or further south on the Seine? Joffre opts for the more daring, the Marne. He knows that the setting up of 800,000 exhausted men will be difficult and that the cohesion of the units is not always assured. Lanrezac had just been relieved of his command and replaced by Franchet d'Esperey, Foch's 9th army <sup>asked for two</sup> days of respite and the French Marshal prepared the withdrawal of his expeditionary force by preparing to re-embark at La Rochelle. The President of the Republic and the government left Paris on 2 September.

Joffre, a man in the field, knows all this and, from his headquarters in Châtillon-sur-Seine, he talks to Gallieni, recalled from his retreat from Nice, whose headquarters is at the Victor Duruy high school in Paris, about how the 6th Maunoury army under his command will attack von Kluck's flank.

The Battle of the Marne, in fact rather a succession of actions conducted in a determined manner, is thus begun. The losses were again terrible and, among the dead, Charles Peguy, mowed down at Villeroy on the Ivorny embankment, who joined in death Alain Fournier and so many others; but the victory is there. For a time, the war of movement is interrupted, the armies are licking their wounds in the trenches, even the Christmas fraternization, which will not last!

At the end of 1914, French, English and Germans understood that this war, which had been hoped would be short, would be long, terrible, bloody and for an uncertain victory; for it was a struggle to the death, a real war of the peoples.

1] The first Balkan war of 1912 had enabled the Bulgarians and Serbs to drive the Turks out of Europe; the second, of 1913, had pitted Serbs and Bulgarians against each other in a bloody conflict that ended with the victory of the Serbs at the Treaty of Bucharest.

[2] Author of the premonitory poem "I have a rendezvous with death."

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