



## French intelligence services during the Great War

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**The Great War gave intelligence its letters of nobility, embracing all espionage and counter-espionage activities, but also innovating in the field of psychological and subversive warfare. The <sup>2nd</sup> French intelligence office (intelligence) monitored the situation on all fronts, commented on the intelligence obtained, assessed enemy losses as well as the capability of its new weapons or tactics and reconstructed the organisation chart of its formations.**

Contrary to popular belief, in August 1914 France was well informed about the form that German aggression would take. Ten years earlier, a version of the Schlieffen plan had been recovered by the intelligence service (SR) of the 2nd <sup>Army</sup> Staff Office (EMA). Thanks to a systematic study of the German armed forces, railways, stations, and the cross-checking of information provided by Alsatian-Lorrain deserters or agents, the high command had been warned of the enemy's intentions. Having a precise assessment of the invading forces, it refused to admit that German reservists would be engaged in the front line. The disastrous summer cost nearly 300,000 men. Although the intelligence gathered was first-hand, it was not exploited to its full potential, as intelligence specialists came up against the scepticism of the command and its unshakeable faith in the over-zealous offensive that inspired Plan XVII. The "miracle" of the Marne happened because Joffre finally deigned to rely on the intelligence gathered.

During the war, French intelligence displayed a singular particularity. Following the departure of the Grand Quartier Général (GQG) for Vitry-le-François, the 2nd EMA office <sup>was emptied of</sup> its substance, but faced with the absence of information from the front, the Minister for War restored the staff of the 2nd EMA office. Appointed deputy chairman of the Paris telegraph control commission and obsessed by the devastation that German espionage could cause in France, Captain Ladoux was to play a decisive role. The "GQG

intelligence channel" thus coexisted with the "EMA intelligence channel". Admittedly, such a dichotomy has led to coordination difficulties and redundancies in the intelligence transmitted to decision-makers. Despite friction between their respective members, these two structures were not antinomic but complementary. The EMA quickly gave priority to strategic, technical, economic and social intelligence gathering on the enemy, as well as focusing on the fight against espionage in the interior. The HQG collected operational intelligence as much as it fought against espionage in the army zone. The urgency of the daily monitoring of operations served as a driving force for the evolution of the structures. French intelligence was therefore made up of a nebulous group of bodies that were independent of each other and sometimes rival, but tending towards the same objective: to facilitate victory over the Central Powers. Thanks to its global vision, the EMA realized that the character of the conflict was changing: the end of the war of movement and the stabilization of the fronts led the belligerents to want to win the decision by other means than frontal shock. The war had become total, leaving much room for technical innovation. Ingenuity was then rivalled in the search for intelligence from as far away as possible, which was no longer exclusively of a military nature. As early as 1915, attention was focused on the economic state of the adversary, on his moral strength in order to assess his resistance to wear and tear. This willingness to fight without neglecting anything to harm the adversary was the main factor that led to the development of subversive techniques and also explained the rise in power of one of their parries, counter-espionage. But to suggest that the EMA specialised in non-operational intelligence research in order to show its specificity would be a caricature of reality; one only has to read the intelligence bulletins of the various SRs to be convinced of this. Admittedly, the concepts of economic and psychological warfare found their most ardent defenders in Paris, but this does not mean that the HQG lost interest in them. However, the Parisian location of these analytical bodies, their proximity to political, diplomatic, academic, commercial or industrial authorities facilitated a greater openness to the world and the development of new means of struggle: to free itself from the constraints of the terrain, which were further reinforced by trench warfare, the use of airborne agents was introduced in 1915. Cooperation with Belgian resistance networks and the Intelligence Service increased the possibilities of espionage: No logistic depot, no convoy, no airfield was ignored by the allied services; one can therefore measure the repercussions of this performance on the war effort of the Centers and the difficulty to protect the secrecy of their offensives. Allied collaboration in intelligence matters was expressed through the creation of the Folkestone SR, but also through exchanges with the British, Belgian, Russian, Italian and then American SRs.

Ladoux succeeded in convincing Millerand of the need to reform counter-espionage. When the intelligence centralization section was created on May 28, 1915, he, its inventor, was asked to command it. Very persuasive, he saw his remit expand to include the control of border posts and the experimentation of techniques linked to aerial propaganda. Much more than a simple "centralization" service, the SCR provided the link with the General Security of the Ministry of the Interior, whose director had been under the orders of the Minister of War since 1914. A brilliant improviser as well as an avant-gardist, Ladoux certainly is. This creation and that in December of the 5th office of the <sup>EMA</sup> remain the best illustration of the global vision possessed by the character. This office encompasses SCR (counter-espionage activities in France and abroad) and SR (strategic intelligence research and clandestine actions among the enemy and neutrals); it also develops psychological and subversive warfare methods, as well as participating in the economic asphyxiation of the Central Empires. For the Great War provided the opportunity to set up research bodies specifically for economic warfare. This orientation was a response to the need to make the blockade contributing to the asphyxiation of Germany more effective, as the civil services engaged in this task had enormous intelligence needs to identify

neutral firms suspected of smuggling and to establish lists of vital products for the production of the opposing trusts. The agents had to take extraordinary risks to penetrate the secrets of the German arms industry. In this feverish environment, the espionage process was bound to evolve constantly. Convinced of the very special nature of secret warfare, Ladoux tried to inculcate in his men innovative methods of action, shocking for the time. They earned him the blacklisting of his direct superiors, who were anxious not to compromise themselves. His rough side, his exuberance (his disturbing successes too) would precipitate his ouster in 1917. The methods of concealing messages, both through the development of increasingly sophisticated sympathetic inks and the development of complex encryption systems, also marked this race for technical progress. Finally, the psychological and propaganda aspect was not forgotten: balloons and then planes carrying leaflets were used by the SR to flood the invaded territories and Germany, hastening the moral disintegration of the adversary.

The German attack on Verdun in 1916, although announced by the SR, took command "by surprise". Once again, the warning was not heeded, nor were Driant's warnings. The general staff was still unable to take advantage of the information transmitted about the enemy to ward off his blows. Offensively, despite an influx of increasingly reliable information, attacks continued to be mounted as if the enemy was incapable of reacting. Nevertheless, the <sup>2nd</sup> bureau organizes the training of regimental intelligence officers and issues mementos to rationalize and optimize the search for information. In February 1917, the 5th <sup>office of</sup> the EMA is abolished and it is a renovated 2nd office that <sup>resumes</sup> the activities of intelligence and secret warfare.

The offensive of April 1917 took place. The failure can be attributed to Nivelle's denial of intelligence. Faced with the losses, the choice had to be made: to wait for "the Americans and the tanks", or to continue like that and stop the fight "for lack of fighters". Should the SRs be blamed for not sufficiently demonstrating to the command that this way of fighting was suicidal? No, and that's the saddest thing. Better and better organized, with more and more efficient equipment, the 2nd offices in the operational <sup>chain</sup> perfectly described what they knew about enemy defences. However, out of sufficiency or incompetence, the command did not take this information into consideration.

It is with Pétain that the state of mind towards the SRs evolved significantly. Named after the hecatomb, he was convinced that "fire kills" and wanted to limit losses by inquiring into all elements aimed at knowing the enemy's plans. His aim is to guard against surprises in the defensive and, in the offensive, to hit him with sure blows with a minimum of casualties. The episode of the mutinies will show the unpleasant side of an SR when he turns against his brothers in arms. His shenanigans, tending to mask the responsibility of the command for the outbreak of the revolts, were clearly established; his attempt to deHis attempt to disguise the responsibility of the command for the outbreak of the uprisings was clearly established; his attempt to disguise the fact that the negligence of the Minister of the Interior was at the root of everything went bankrupt at the Malvy trial. Moreover, the involvement of some of his officials in the investigation of the "treason cases" has further tarnished his reputation; the summary sentences handed down by the court in the case of Malvy have been ignored. The expeditious convictions of the <sup>Third</sup> Council of War, made possible by the provision of "too well-written" files, cast doubt on the morality of counter-espionage: Since the Dreyfus affair, it is not clear that their mentality has changed. In Paris, the proximity of the authorities has not always allowed active or complementary officers to maintain perfect independence, but some unscrupulous officers have taken advantage of their position as information providers to

have their political ideas, which seemed to correspond to the needs of national defence, accredited. Left-wing politicians, such as Malvy or Caillaux, paid the price, but history quickly repaired this injustice [1].

Appointed generalissimo of the Allied armies in 1918, Foch knew how to use intelligence to defeat his adversary. At that time, crossing information from various sources, the 2nd GQG office <sup>provided</sup> excellent intelligence summaries, allowing for considerable successes such as the failure of the Friedensturm or, until the Armistice, the successive breakthroughs of the Ludendorff front. Pétain has sometimes been reproached for being wait-and-see and less biting than Foch, but did they consider intelligence differently? The "arithmetic stun" of 1918, i.e. the blows dealt by the latter on the German front until victory, was only possible thanks to an aggressive policy of seeking contact intelligence encouraged by the former. To claim that the command was not interested in intelligence would thus be a lie: for a long time, it retained only those who served their own convictions. With trench warfare, he wanted to know the order of battle and the state of enemy casualties, as well as the economic, political and moral situation in Germany. As the swing of forces from one front to the other heralded offensives, the study of rail traffic became fundamental. On the front, the collection of contact information became the business of all, the patrol boats bringing back in our lines objects, documents and prisoners; alongside the airmen, the infantrymen provided mass intelligence to the 2nd offices. The techniques of observation also made great progress: from aerostation, one passed to aerial photographs allowing the use of cartographic scales up to 1/5,000. In doubling the 2<sup>nd</sup> corps office, the artillery intelligence service showed the importance of the location of the enemy's batteries and trenches. Other techniques were born: listening, radio direction finding, sound tracking and observations made by the ground observation sections, which helped create a dense network capable of reconstructing the enemy's deployment and follow his movements from the front to the depths of his device.

Starting from almost nothing, French intelligence showed its strong capacity for innovation during the war. Often deprived of clear directives, lacking recognition for its work, it had much merit. Even if its results may have appeared uneven until 1918, its bodies generally responded to their mission of informing decision-makers by making it possible to circumvent threats. Through various syntheses, the SRs facilitated the development of staff operational plans. According to the very words of their 1914 enemies (who cannot be called Francophiles) or even the British, they did not have to be ashamed of their results. Through a skilful mix of reflection and improvisation, relying on strong personalities, they contributed greatly to the defeat of William II's army. For them, this world conflict was an opportunity to create and experiment with new techniques of action that would set the rules of secret warfare everywhere and then contribute to the emergence of the "special services" of the Second World War. Unfortunately, it should be pointed out that the military decision would probably have been reached more quickly if, even before August 1914, the command had been willing to trust them by setting aside its a priori preconceptions and by convincing itself of the erroneous nature of some of its strategic convictions.

1) Idem, pp. 1542 to 1670.

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