



## The "colonial role" of the army: the spirit of Lyautey

military-Earth thinking notebook

Madame Julie d'ANDURAIN

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**When Hubert Lyautey published his article on the "colonial role of the army" in January 1900 in the very famous *Revue des deux mondes*, he showed a real political sense because, basically, the date of publication corresponds to at a time when, in France, we are moving towards the creation of an autonomous colonial army after having hesitated during interminable parliamentary debates that have been going on for more than twenty years. Given that most of the conquests are now complete, the question arises as to what the scope of action of this new force will be in the future. The new force was refused the title of "colonial army" in favour of the less martial title of "colonial troops" when the law of July 1900 was passed. Published in the largest literary journal of the time, this text shows how much Lyautey - and behind him a large part of the colonials - wanted to participate in the political debate, how much the army of the Third Republic was not as dumb as it was said.**

### A timeless text

If the "colonial role of the army" has gone through history to be constantly cited as a reference, it is largely because Lyautey (1854-1934), a critical spirit and man of synthesis, was the first to be cited as a reference. This is largely because Lyautey (1854-1934), a critical mind and man of synthesis, both condemned those he accused of waging the "Negro war" and made strong proposals for the future use of the colonial army that was to be set up. A text that is both summary and prospective at the same time, it proposes above all to present a method of penetrating territories by definitively condemning the use of large columns to prefer a concentric progression, by circles, according to the method praised by Gallieni, the method known as the oil stain method. The publication is also a tool in the hands of a young lieutenant-colonel who, not being a colonial in the strict sense, nevertheless aspires to the highest positions in the Colonial, which he already sees as a "sacred militia". A text of allegiance to a patron, General Gallieni (1849-1916), from a "colt" who is neither a porpoise nor a bigor but who, after a long period of service,

was a "colt". He was neither a porpoise nor a bigor but, after having temporarily given up a career in the cavalry in metropolitan France, discovered a passion for the colonial question upon his arrival in Tonkin in 1894. With this article, he reinvests an editorial practice first tested under the seal of anonymity in 1890 with a discourse very similar in its structure, if not in its substance (the "social role of the officer"). If it was a question then of proposing to metropolitan officers, on the basis of a very asserted social Catholicism, a mission of education of the French nation in the prolongation of that entrusted to the teacher, the goal in 1900 was not so much different. It is simply a transposition to other worlds of the French colonial empire of the idea of education and administration orchestrated by officers, an idea that will be translated politically under the name of protectorate. In 1900, Lyautey proposed replacing the officer-educator of the nation he had imagined in 1890 for the metropolis with the officer-administrator of the conquered territories. Beyond that, Lyautey preached for his parish, as it was nothing more or less than to justify the employment of officers in the colonies when they were divided into different rival corps (the XIXth corps in Algeria, for example), the Foreign Legion which became a colonial troop in 1883 with the creation of two foreign regiments, the Navy) and competed with the civilian administrators who came from the colonial school. Because of the end of the conquests, they all feared a reduction in the size of the armies. It was therefore a question of anticipating future reforms and proposing a new way of operating for the army.

### **The disqualification of column tactics and the search for the "right man»**

As so often, Lyautey's speech is very ambiguous or very complicated. But it is based on a classic practice in the military world, which consists of disqualifying one tactic, even if subliminally, in order to propose another. In fact, he very clearly contrasts the tactic of column with that of progressive occupation. However, his thinking is nuanced in that he does not completely condemn the classic and traditional military expeditionary device which, for him, has proven its worth at the Pyramids, at Algiers, Denghil-Tepé, Abomey or Tunisia, but he regards it as the ultima ratio, while recommending that operations should be short, effective and scientifically combined. On the other hand, he very clearly rebels against what he calls the "spearhead column", i.e. an expedition launched against a more or less military objective and which has no concern for a permanent occupation, discreetly believing that it is doomed to failure. At the time of writing, it is easy to imagine that he is referring to some contemporary colonial tragedies such as the massacre of the Crampel column in 1891, that of Bonnier's column at Timbuktu in 1894, the destruction of the Braulot mission in August 1897 in front of Samory or that of the Bretonnet mission in Togbao (July 1899). Lyautey also remembers the unfortunate experiences in Madagascar where the French made the observation that the Combes and Oudri columns were ineffective against the Fahavalos and that, in the face of the insurrectionary situation, it was necessary to go through the construction of posts. In reality, his text is a scathing criticism of the tactics of the "Sudanese", those officers who - mainly for climatic reasons - are obliged to resort to the use of large, heavily armed columns. They destroy the enemies in their path without having the time to rebuild anything because, because of the winter (July to October), the troops are forced to retreat back to their base for almost six months of the year. Thus, as they march forward, they advance to conquer without any real concern to settle. The criticism is not new because the English - General Wolseley in particular - have already made a spell on the use of large columns in their campaign of Achantis in 1873. In the same way, no one in the colonial military milieu is unaware that operations are more often than not imposed by circumstances (as Colonel Monteil would recount years later). But the criticism also finds its justification in the taking of command of a "Sudanese", General Borgnis-Desbordes, at the head of the troops in Indochina (1899).

Lyautey thus hides behind the denunciation of a possible "spirit of button" to discreetly disqualify Borgnis-Desbordes by considering that he is not the "right man in the right place", a concept that we see appearing in a way that is not very clear. This concept is recurrent in colonial literature around 1895 and is then found in the speeches of Paul Doumer (1897) or in the General Report on the pacification, organization and colonization of Madagascar by General Gallieni in 1898. Thus, Lyautey's allusions are limpid: to the "Sudanese", he very much prefers the "Tonkinese" embodied by Gallieni.

### The praise of Gallieni and the oil stain method

The "colonial role of the army" is therefore above all a text of allegiance to Gallieni just as the "social role of the officer" previously celebrated the link between Albert de Mun and the young Lyautey. Beyond the celebration of the coryphée, Lyautey seeks to synthesize the essential elements of the method observed in Tonkin and then in Madagascar. He also seeks to reassure the political power. The choice of the oil-spot method is based on a geographical postulate, that of being able to create isolates - military circles that are grouped together in larger military territories - free of insurgency so that they can advance from there and eventually isolate the pirates from the areas from which they draw their food and booty. The tactic was tried out in Tonkin as early as 1893 by the commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> military territory, Commander Pennequin, who was ingenious in finding new methods to contain the pirates.

At the beginning of 1895, it began to receive some formalisation. The country is divided into five regions - one civilian territory corresponding to the Delta, pacified, and four military territories that form border marches in the upper region. In these military territories, the colonels (Chapelet, Gallieni, Thomasset and Servière) had very extensive powers in the manner of what had been achieved in Algeria at the time of the Arab offices. Gallieni experimented with his tactics in the 2<sup>nd</sup> military territory and quickly agreed on its value. In his work "Three columns in Tonkin" he writes that the oil stain method is "the most efficient and the safest of all colonial conquest methods" (p. 36). He gives an account of his operations in Cai-Kinh, on the upper Song-Cau, in the Yen-The, carried out between 1894 and 1895, at the end of which he established "principles of pacification and organization". Although Gallieni did not invent this "organisation that works", he systematised the principle in Madagascar between October 1896 and May 1897. In his General Report on Pacification in Madagascar (1896-1899), he develops the idea that "this method of pacification consisting in constantly staining oil had proved its worth in Sudan and Tonkin", thus giving credit to the "Sudanese" for knowing how to use it. In reality, the practice was more applicable in Tonkin or Madagascar, where reasons of the geographical structure of the territories and the long practical experience of the military had made it possible to develop the tactic. All this was formalised in 1900 in La Pacification de Madagascar, a text written by Captain Hellot, who recalled how much the nature of the country around Tananarive facilitated the implementation of the doctrine and tactics. All of them actually draw on the reflections of Commander Pennequin - the famous P. cited in the "colonial role of the army" - who had tried to respond to the criticism of the converging columns and proposed, with Governor General Lanessan, a combination of posts and columns that would lead to the organisation of military territories. However, insofar as the establishment of military circles - the principle of which had its roots in Bugeaud's policy in Algeria - gave rise to fears of the establishment of a "sword regime", it was necessary to reassure the political authorities about the choice of the "right man". The whole art of Gallieni and his successors was less to gloss over the profound meaning of military territories than to assure the civil power of a rapid return to

civilian administration once the territory was pacified.

By his speech, more political than military, Lyautey thus justifies exceptional situations and the inevitable recourse to proconsuls while ensuring that, when they are well chosen, political power has nothing to fear. In hollow, he paints as much a portrait of his leader as that which would later be his, in Morocco.

Julie d'Andurain, a PhD in history, is director of studies at the CDEF's research office. A historian of the colonial fact, she works essentially on the links existing between the political world and the colonial world at the time of the conquest. She has published a book on the capture of Samory (SOTECA 2012)[1], and is about to deliver a biography of Henri Gouraud to Perrin.

1) See her article in Cahiers n° 30.

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