



General Édouard BRÉMOND (1868-1948) or the anti-Lawrence of Arabia

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

From the end of the Great War, the real staging, by the American journalist Thomas Lowell and the British military writer Liddell Hart in particular, of T.E.'s dazzling personality. Lawrence and his action at the side of Emir Faisal during the Arab revolt tended to make the role and place of the French contingents deployed in the Hijaz from the second half of 1916 sink into oblivion. In 1919-1921, in the Levant, the difficult establishment of the French mandate on Syria and the diplomatic choices of Paris, which very early on recognised the Turkish nationalist government in Ankara, led to the not very glorious withdrawal from Cilicia.

In both cases, the representative of the French authority, Colonel Brémont, a victim of the upheavals of history despite his unreserved personal commitment, had to leave these territories and witness, from metropolitan France, the dismantling of his work. Nowadays forgotten by general historiography, despite the fact that he played a significant role in France's political and military action around the Mediterranean arc, Brémont had access to the French army and the French army late to the generalate to assume obscure territorial responsibilities in the south-west of France in the mid-1920s and joined the second section of general officers a few years later. A member of several scientific academies, he has published numerous articles and several reference works, based on his personal experience and his deep knowledge of the Muslim world, which today retain all their interest.

Contemporary of Lawrence, whom he met in particular on several occasions in Arabia, he is the author of a "...Hedjaz in the World War" published in 1931 to refute a number of fanciful or approximate assertions inserted by the author of the "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" in his "Revolt in the desert". Today, it is undoubtedly time to go beyond the Anglo-Hollywoodian figure imposed by David Lean in 1962 to find the action and thought of this French officer whose General Paul Azan was able to say that he "was not the office Islamicist, who studied the Koran in Kasimirski's translation and imagined, in an upholstered leather armchair, the measures to be taken to ensure the happiness of the

natives. He was the man who had lived among them, in the tent, in the village".

An exceptional career, from Algeria to Cilicia

An infantryman who graduated from the special military school of Saint-Cyr in 1890, the young Second Lieutenant Brémont was first posted to Algeria before taking part in the murderous Madagascar campaign in 1895, during which he distinguished himself in the flying column that entered Tananarive on 30 September. With the exception of the two years spent in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century to attend the École Supérieure de Guerre, and then again two years on the French front between August 1914 and August 1916 (during which he was wounded fire, cited and noted as an "outstanding corps commander"), his entire career was spent until 1921 in the military confines of Algiers (until 1907), in Western Morocco (until 1914), in Arabia (September 1916-1917) and in Cilicia (from January 1919). As he himself wrote when he took command of a regiment again in 1921, he then totalled 94 years of campaigning...

Such a career [1] yet is not, strictly speaking, exceptional in this golden age of colonial expansion under the Third Republic. On the other hand, the responsibilities taken on and the positions occupied made it more original and quite interesting: Brémont alternates military command and political functions in particularly delicate environments. He first took part in pacification operations against the tribes that were not submitted to the XIXth ^{Algerian-Tunisian} Corps or the Moroccan occupation corps, and then in the creation of the "Corps d'Occupation". He is in charge of the port police and the administration of the cities of Rabat-Salé, and is an intelligence officer of the Indigenous Affairs service for the Meknes region. He then supported the revolt of Sheriff Hussein of Mecca and brought the help of French riflemen, sappers and artillerymen to the Hashemite columns attacking the Hedjaz railway. He was finally appointed Chief Administrator of Cilicia, while the Turkish irregulars hold the mountains and the Kemalists put pressure on Paris for France to abandon the province.

In these different capacities, he was in turn engaged in the fight against local revolts and the control of tribes, then actor and defender of a guerrilla, finally in charge of a counter-subversion with essentially indigenous means. Passing from one side of the mirror to the other, alternately representing institutional legality or a form of legitimacy in the struggle against the power in place," he says. his great knowledge of the indigenous element and of the Arabic language, his long experience, his firmness of character and his judgement" give his writings a special tone.

A practitioner

The texts published during his career by General Brémont [2] testify to a constant concern for the real situation, the possible, and the taking into account of the facts. There can be no question here of comparing the literary qualities of Lawrence's writings with Brémont's direct and precise prose. In this respect, compared to "Revolt in the desert" or the "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," his "Hedjaz in the World War" sometimes seems more a report of operations than a historical account. This attention to concrete detail is vividly illustrated in the very long series of articles published by the Revue d'Infanterie between 1921 and 1922 and later collected by Lavauzelle under the title "...". Practical advice for metropolitan army officers called to serve in Africa or the Levant». Entering into the most prosaic and material aspects of the preparation of an overseas posting, he deals with all the social, family and human parameters, without ever forgetting the consequences, for

the person concerned in his future employment, of this or that act, or of this or that attitude (knowledge of the country, culture and language, intelligence, etc.).

This pragmatism was reflected in the orders he gave to his subordinates, as when he twice in 1916 and 1917 placed the French detachments deployed in Arabia on the orders of the British command, in defence of Rabeigh and in the attack on Medina. Even if his tactical proposals were not adopted by the staff in Cairo, even if he feared that the realization of French ambitions in Syria would not be possible. Even if his tactical proposals were not adopted by the staff in Cairo, even if he feared that the realisation of French ambitions in Syria would become more difficult, he carried out the orders he had received and showed rigorous intellectual discipline ("I can take part in a defeat, but not prevent it"). In his general directives to the leaders of the elements who were engaged alongside the Egyptian-British and Hashemite troops, he insisted on the trust that must reign between the French officers in Syria and the Egyptian-British forces. In his general directives to the leaders of the elements who were engaged alongside the Egyptian-British and Hashemite troops, he insisted on the trust that must reign between the French officers and the English command, on the desirable proximity between these same officers and the Emirs, but he did not forget either the living conditions of his men (rhythm of halts, drinking water supply, hygiene rules, etc.) or the conditions of life of the soldiers (the number of stops, the supply of drinking water, etc....), nor the operational necessities (rules of engagement, knowledge of the environment, etc...): You will organize an intelligence service... Nothing must happen without your knowledge. You must have 50 or 60 agents always on the road".

His school-leaving grades at the École Supérieure de Guerre had already pointed out, moreover, that Brémont was "quite gifted". for the study of the high questions of military art" and "fit for staff service, but will be better in the troop... Action is his forte".

Adaptation to missions without means, at the heart of the Franco-British opposition

In Arabia during the Great War or in Cilicia afterwards, Brémont was first directly commissioned by the French Government and was under the authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unfortunately, he will be quickly forgotten by the diplomatic world, which neglects, for example, to keep him informed of the Sykes-Picot agreements or conversations with Mustapha Kemal, but also the authorities of the War Ministry, who neglect to respond to his requests for resources and reinforcements.

On the British side, the responsibility for political control of the Arabian Peninsula has been taken away from the Viceroyalty of India and entrusted to the British High Representative in Cairo, through his armed wing, the Arab Bureau. Despite some differences of form between the various English authorities, the strategic objective is clearly set: to perpetuate London's dominant position on the route to India and its influence on the southern Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire. To meet these needs, despite the difficulties encountered on the French front and at Gallipoli, the United Kingdom maintains several hundred thousand men on the theatre in order to meet these needs, despite the difficulties encountered on the French front and at Gallipoli, the United Kingdom maintained several hundred thousand men on the operational theatres in Palestine and Mesopotamia and granted substantial financial aid to the sovereigns and emirs of Arabia, including numerous deliveries of arms and food. Within this general framework, we know that Lawrence, "political officer assigned to the post of Yambo", became in early 1917 the military adviser of Faisal. In spite of the quick statements that flourish under his pen in "The revolt in the desert" his real military role remains modest and

his successes few [3]: the capture of the port of Aqaba, poorly armed and defended by a meagre garrison that had not been supplied for several months, never had the epic character that the 1962 film wants to show; the rare successes of the film are not enough to make it a success. The rare successes of the fighting around Maan were the work of French artillerymen and machine-gunners; the sabotage of the railways (on the Hedjaz line as in Transjordan) owes more to the sappers of Brémont than to the Bedouins of Lawrence.

During his entire stay, Brémont travelled extensively, visiting all his subordinates, liaising with British and Hashemite civilian and military authorities. Every two or three days he met with a new interlocutor, clarifying his instructions, explaining his positions and reporting back to Paris. Each time, the attention to detail and the finesse of the analyses are evident in this Lyautey pupil.

Conclusion

Everything thus pitted the career officer from St. Cyrene, who had been mistreated under the harness of the colonial campaigns, against the British intellectual and officer of the British complement, a hero of literature with a tortured body and mind. "Valuable officer who had a long and brilliant military past, ... cultivated man, integrity, excellent Arabist", Brémont does not embroider. His style is clear, simple, his reasoning is methodically based on facts. No doubt he is less of a dreamer than the shooting star that was Lawrence, of whom Benoist-Méchin among many others made a hero in his collection with the evocative title (The longest dream in history: "... the longest dream in history"). Lawrence of Arabia, or the shattered dream...»»). But his experience of involvement in the Mediterranean and Muslim world, as well as his knowledge and practice of local populations, undoubtedly give his writings exceptional depth and keep them very topical.

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1) Individual file: SHD-Earth, 13Yd696.

2) See final bibliography.

3) See on this point for example: Cohen Gustave, "Case of Aldington v. Lawrence of Arabia", Homme et Monde, 3-1956, n° 116, pp. 487-497.

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