



The "Young Turks" movement (1907-1915)

military-Earth thinking notebook

Le mouvement des «jeunes turcs» (1907-1915)

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Histoire & stratégie

The movement known as the Young Turks, which occurred in France only a few years before the Great War, is atypical in the history of military thought in that it was born, not from a disaster but from the anticipation of it by young officers hostile to political power and disappointed by the paralysis of their high hierarchy. This movement led to a collective hysteria which, under the name of the "offensive to excess", was the cause of great massacres but also, perhaps, of the iron will that made it possible to overcome the initial failures.

At a time when profound reforms are being undertaken in a general context of doubt, it is perhaps useful to see why and how such a movement could be born and imposed.

The sources of the malaise

The Young Turks movement was born first of all out of a divorce between the army and the country's intellectual elite at the dawn of the 20th century. This period is the one in which the idea is spreading that the war between European nations is over because of the interpenetration of economies, the triumph of positivist reason and the deterrence of modern armaments [1]. 1] But at the same time, for the first time in history, the wealthy classes and intellectuals were called up for military service. 2] They encounter an institution whose culture is still inherited from the Second Empire, even from the Ancien Régime, when "the soldier is recruited from the most vile part of the nation" (The Encyclopedia) . From this encounter was born, something new, a literature of barrack life, often unflattering for the army. 3] This critical movement (which gave rise in reaction to articles such as Lyautey's "Le rôle social de l'officier" in 1891), turned to anti-militarism after the Dreyfus affair (1898).

This divorce took a new turn with the arrival in power of the Radicals in 1899, determined to transform a corps of officers "recruited in traditionalist and Catholic circles and living in isolation, jealous of their autonomy and attached to the past" (Waldeck Rousseau). The

"fiche affair" (1904) brought this policy of purification to light and suddenly cast suspicion on the corps of general officers appointed under this political power. At the same time, anxious to reap the "peace dividend", the government drastically reduced capital expenditure (950 million francs for the purchase of new equipment out of a budget of 12 billion from 1900 to 1912). Worse still, in the absence of specialised forces, the army was massively employed in internal security missions, as part of congregation inventories (1905), strikes by miners in the North (1906) and winegrowers (1907). Anti-militarism spread among the working classes. There were 17,000 rebels in 1909.

The morale of the officers collapses. The candidacies at Saint-Cyr and Saint-Maixent fall. Departures multiplied, particularly among the Polytechnique students, for whom the military route would henceforth be marginal.

An intellectual rebellion

But this "contestation by flight" is coupled with a renewed anger against a "high command aged in outdated ideas, made distrustful by a period of agitated, skeptical and powerless politics" (Joffre). In 1905, Captain Jibé wrote in *L'armée nouvelle*: "the current generation of captains, even senior officers, is very surprised to see how little his tactical ideas fit in with those of the majority of our generals". In 1907, during an exercise, Lieutenant-Colonel de Grandmaison declared to General Percin "We are a certain number of young officers very convinced of the correctness of our ideas, of the superiority of our theories and our methods, and determined to make them prevail against all [4]".

4] This "small, hard-working, educated, daring military core, with a cult of energy and mastery of character" (Joffre) will finally be able to "take the lead in the development of a new military culture" (Joffre). (Joffre) was finally able to express itself from 1911 onwards with the change of government and above all the rapid rise in dangers which suddenly changed the perception that one had of the use of force. As surely as peace was certain, just a few years earlier, war now seemed inevitable. However, the French army was no longer ready for war (this was even one of the reasons why the war came about, as Germany wanted to take advantage of the opportunity of French weakness).

Noting the absence of a project on the part of the corps of generals, the Young Turks [5] decided to take matters into their own hands, not by political contestation, which they loathed, but by investing the doctrinal intellectual field, which had been rigid since the end of the 19th century. The first blow was given by the two lectures given in 1911 by Lieutenant-Colonel Loiseau de Grandmaison, of the 3rd Bureau of the Army ^{General Staff}, to the trainees of the recently created Centre des hautes études militaires. Grandmaison was then very representative of the young commissioned officers who participated in non-institutional military thought. Saint-cyrien, he had no technical sensibility, which made him miss all the technological innovations of his time (machine guns, airplanes, automobiles), but on the other hand he was passionate about the human pre-sciences of the time, notably "crowd psychology". Moral factors, "the only ones that count in war" according to him, are also a leitmotiv. These famous lectures defeated the official doctrine, judged by many to be too rigid and embodied at the time by Foch, director of the École supérieure de guerre [6]. 6] Contrary to the 1895 campaign service regulations, Grandmaison advocated boldness, decentralisation of command and "taking the opponent by the throat" by means of an immediate and direct assault.

A collective psychosis

As the Grandmaison conferences were a great success and did not give rise to any opposition, the Young Turks felt encouraged to express themselves by taking full advantage of the "officers' meetings", military bookshops and the many magazines available to them. They even benefited from the support of General Joffre, the new general-in-chief, who did not trust his generals and preferred to entrust the redefinition of doctrine to them. This led to the regulations of 1913-1914, in which "the French army, having returned to its traditions, no longer allowed any law other than the offensive to be applied in the conduct of operations".

Through concentric waves, the ideas of the "Young Turks", which coincided with the spiritualist and nationalist revival of the time, spread to the rest of the officer corps. A columnist in the Army Gazette of 28 March 1912 noted that "This salutary reaction, born of the dangers of the uncertain hour and of this salutary reaction, born of the dangers of the uncertain hour and a great shiver of patriotism, has won all hearts and all circles, making itself felt even in the smallest cogs of the army, shaking up the rules that had fallen asleep in blind pedantry". But as they spread, ideas become simpler and take an extreme turn. For Lieutenant-Colonel Montaigne, in "Win" (1913), "salvation is in the revolt of the will against reason". For his part, in "The French offensive" (1912), the Lieutenant (patented) Laure rejects "the progress of science and ideas that develop in the most civilized nations the microbe of utopias and the germ of failure of characters". This state of mind leads, especially among the third of Saint-cyrians who come from Catholic teaching [7], to the exaltation of sacrifice. The role of the officers is then, according to Captain Billard [8], to make soldiers "people who want to be killed". And indeed, 600,000 Frenchmen were to be killed before the intellectual hold of the Young Turks was definitively loosened at the end of 1915.

Teachings

Institutional thinking constructs models for the employment or organization of forces. It is capable of improving them but generally has great difficulty in refuting them when they are no longer appropriate. It is therefore necessary to be able to rely on alternative ideas which, in order to be new, must be free and therefore outside the institutional field. Free thinking then acts as an "opposition" to the dominant "majority". The difficulty then lies in the alternation, which can be "soft" or on the contrary be carried out by coups d'état.

French culture suffers from several defects in this respect. In the Cartesian tradition, concepts are first of all almost complete intellectual constructions that are then confronted with facts (or even illustrated by facts) [9]. In the aristocratic tradition, these constructions are also largely the monopoly of those who have an adequate "title" (university title, senior officers, if possible patented, and above all generals), all the more so since the head often identifies with the institution he represents.

Criticising an idea is therefore tantamount to criticising a leader, which is bound to provoke strong reactions and possibly damage the career of the insolent. During the Second Empire, the Marshal of Mac Mahon stripped of promotion any officer who had a name on a book and in the 1930s, General Gamelin imposed the imprimatur of his cabinet for any article. Free thought therefore tends to flourish only when dogma is destroyed by the enemy (1870, 1940), or when it is not or no longer applicable to the current situation and the "technostructure" is visibly incapable of making it evolve. One can then witness an "intellectual offensive" which, if not picked up by the institutional bodies, can "go to extremes". We have seen the case of the "Young Turks", but the case of the excesses of the followers of revolutionary war (Lacheroy, Trinquier, Argoud, etc...) who succeeded in imposing their ideas from 1957 to 1960 is very similar.

In an information society, benefiting from new means and greater freedom through the new general status, one cannot exclude the possibility that the feeling of frustration experienced by the "Young Turks" may be the result of the excesses of the followers of revolutionary war (Lacheroy, Trinquier, Argoud, etc.) who succeeded in imposing their ideas from 1957 to 1960. It unquestionably a part of the officer corps will not lead to a similar phenomenon as a result of a triggering phenomenon. In such a hypothesis, it will be necessary either to consider these officers as rebels or to accept the internal debate. In any case, it seems necessary to anticipate it.

1] The best anticipation of the future war is then the one made by the Polish banker Jean de Bloch in "... the war of the future...". The war"» (1898). This work is partly at the origin of the Hague Conference (1899).

2] Laws of 1889 and 1905.

[3] «Rider Miserey"d' Hermant, "NCOs" de Descaves, "Colonel Ramollot"de Leroy, etc...

[4] « 1914"...General Percin, Albin Michel, Paris, 1919.

5] With reference to the young officers who imposed reforms on the Sultan in 1909.

6] When Foch was appointed head of the 20th Corps just before the war, many officers complained of having at their head a general "so little offensive" (Weygand).

7] For 1% in 1847. «The Military Society from 1815 to the present day", Raoul Girardet. Paris, Perrin, 1998.

[8] «Infantry education"», 1913

9] As opposed to Hume's Empirism for whom truth is what is perceived and not what is logical.

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