



The universal service and the social role of the officer. Do we still have to read Lyautey?

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After recalling the historical and social context of its publication, Mr. Matthieu Meissonnier shows why, twenty years after the suspension of conscription, and at a time when we are actively reflecting on the establishment of a universal national service, we should still read "On the social role of the officer in universal military service".

"In truth, Marshal Lyautey has not finished serving France." This is how Charles de Gaulle expressed himself during the transfer of his ashes to the Invalides on May 10, 1962. Let's bet that Emmanuel Macron could have said the same words, as the universal national service project seems to be part of his filiation. At the Hôtel de Brienne, on 13 July last, did he not emphasise "the singular expertise of the armed forces with regard to young people"?

It was on 15 March 1891 that "Du rôle social de l'officier dans le service militaire universel" appeared in La Revue des deux Mondes (The Review of the Two Worlds) in the pen of the then captain, commanding the 1st squadron of the 4th chasseurs regiment at Saint-Germain-en-Laye. This article, published without a signature, quickly acquired great resonance and drew on its author both strong criticism and brilliant praise, from the President of the Republic to the Emperor of Germany. Reissued several times, it has become a classic, a slogan.

But almost 130 years after its publication, does it still deserve to be an officer's bedside book? Is it of any interest other than historical, 20 years after the end of conscription? Are the reflections on a universal national service sufficient to unearth a text that is better known by its title than by its content?

To answer these questions, we must try to understand how it became the "book of the day", why it has become a reference over time and, finally, question its topicality in a society and an army that have been profoundly transformed.

Du Rôle social de l'officier (The Social Role of the Officer) is going to receive a wide response because it "crystallizes the era" by combining the experience of a young officer with the political and military context of the moment.

This article is first of all the fruit of Lyautey's evolution from monarchist conservatism to liberalism, via social Catholicism, and his contrasting military experience.

From 1874, under the impetus of Albert de Mun, he actively participated in the work of Catholic workers' circles, which mobilised young people from the elite for the training of underprivileged youth. In 1883, his meetings with the Count of Chambord and above all Pope Leo XIII amplified his twofold evolution towards rallying to the Republic and social action.

In these early years, Lyautey's military vocation seemed uncertain. Having passed the Saint-Cyr examination while preparing for the Polytechnique, he joined the army in October 1873, but he will regret it for a long time. Independent and original, he suffered from the constraints of military life. He was very critical of his training and his comrades. He could not stand the routine and smallness of barracks life. Following the dissolution of the staff corps in 1880, he was assigned to the 2nd Hussars. It was an opportunity for him to do an OPEX before the letter. The Algerian confines are the baptism of fire of the young officer and leave a lasting mark on his style of action and closeness to the troop. The next four years, from 1883 to 1887, are the third highlight of this first part of his career. As aide-de-camp to General L'Hotte, inspector of the cavalry, he acquired an overall vision of the army's problems. He became convinced that in order to reform the army and make his ideas triumph, it was necessary to use opinion.

This personal journey takes place in a very particular political, religious and military context. Let us recall it briefly.

The 1880s were the years when the republican regime was strengthened after the crisis of 1877, which saw Parliament triumph over Mac-Mahon. In 1883, the Earl of Chambord died. In 1886, the law of exile was passed, and the princes were stripped of their posts in the army. The laws on freedom of the press (1881), freedom of association (1884) and schools (1881, 1882 and 1886) also opened the secular struggle.

Leo XIII accompanied this movement. In 1890, with the "Toast of Algiers", Cardinal Lavigerie began the rallying cry, which was recorded in the encyclical In the midst of solicitude two years later. In the meantime, in May 1891, he had published Rerum novarum, the first social encyclical of the Church giving full legitimacy to social Catholicism.

On the military level, important reforms were implemented with political as well as operational aims. These included, on the one hand, the abolition of the staff corps and, on the other hand, the creation of the School of War, social measures for the benefit of soldiers (1886), the We may mention, on the one hand, the abolition of the staff corps and the creation of the War School, social measures for the benefit of soldiers (1886), the adoption of the Lebel rifle and, above all, in 1889, the adoption of the Universal Military Service Act, which abolished exemptions while reducing the duration from five to three years.

These years were also those of a tension between a widely shared vision of the army as the "Holy Ark" of patriotism and revenge, and the rise of the "Holy Ark" of patriotism and revenge. An anti-militarism forged in the sometimes disastrous experience of military

service of which the works of Courteline or Abel Hermant, a future academician, are representative. At the same time, in the army, as abroad, there was a reformist current in the army, aimed at drawing the consequences of the social question and conscription from which Lyautey was to draw inspiration (Lewal, Chasseloup-Laubat, Dragominov).

Thus, when Lyautey was appointed to Saint-Germain at the end of 1887, he took part in a broad movement of opinion. But things were not yet ripe. The law on universal service had not yet been passed and Lyautey was missing two elements: his successful experience at the head of a squadron and the formalisation of his ideas in contact with the Parisian intelligentsia.

His assignment to the 4th Chasseurs was not by chance. His corps commander, Colonel Donop, was in charge of studying the new conditions of training. A prominent officer, he took part in the *Revue de la Cavalerie* and developed innovative ideas. Lyautey found support in him to set up the "social squadron", which he will report on in his article. On the strength of his experience in Algeria and his years of inspection, Lyautey tackles his task with passion. Unlike many officers of his generation, he is present in his squadron, trains its officers himself and gets to know his riders. He rejected the theoretical instruction in use in favour of practical instruction, explained in clear language and showing the goal, even using the game. It is also a matter of winning hearts, of living as close as possible to the troop. He cares about living conditions: he creates a dining room so that meals are no longer taken in the bedrooms. He tries to take them away from idleness, dancing and the bistro by creating a home, a library, a reading and writing room, by providing games and non-alcoholic drinks. Aware of the excesses of the ranks and the defects of military life at the time, rather than, like others, burn them out, he read in public Hermant's book (*Le cavalier Miserey* -1887), he read it, bought a stock of it and gave it to all the young officers arriving at the squadron! If he had the support of his colonel, the "social squadron" was partly financed by private donations that he collected from Parisian high society.

This was the second facet of the years 1887-1890, when Lyautey's intense social life became more intellectual than worldly, more liberal and social than conservative. The people he met allowed him to refine his ideas and were the linchpin of the publication and success of the *Rôle social de l'officier*. Among them, the most decisive was Viscount Eugène-Melchior de Voguë, an influential writer, active in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, which was widely read by officers at the time. He became his mentor and introduced him to republican circles, for example to Ernest Lavisse, who oriented student associations towards social service, patriotism and civic duties.

Thus, when the law on universal military service was passed, it was naturally that Voguë asked him to write a study on the issues at stake in the reform. Originally, the idea was to prepare an article for Voguë to sign. But once the text was in hand, considering the work completed and after having advised Lyautey to make a few modifications to moderate the subject, he proposed it for publication. This is Lyautey's long-awaited opportunity.

So what is the content of this essay published in March 1891? How was it received?

The consequences of the industrial revolution on society, especially the class struggle, are the starting point of the reasoning. According to his social catholic fibre, Lyautey wants to find the ways and means of reconciliation: "Walk, no longer with demands or repression in hand, but hand in hand, in the broad and noble path of social progress".

In order to accomplish this action with the youth and progressively throughout the whole social body, Lyautey looks for the adapted tool and finds it:

"It's the corps of twenty thousand French officers." Indeed, the law of universal service ensures that an entire age group will pass through its hands for three years. "All [...] receive, for a period of their lives, the imprint of a lieutenant, a captain, a colonel. Apart from this obligatory point of passage, do officers have other reasons to claim to be the nation's training cadre? Lyautey answers in the affirmative. He believes that the officer corps has evolved. It is better trained. The officer has two additional advantages: "In contact with [his subordinates], he fully shares their work, their fatigue, and yet derives no benefit from it. His gain does not depend, like that of industrialists, on the pain of his men. ... Everything contributes to his personal independence and the disinterestedness of his action.

This group, however, deplors Lyautey, has not become aware of its role. Worse still, it allows old practices to continue. Lyautey takes up the harmful influence that the passage in the army can have on some young people: "Many young men bring back to their families from their time in the army a diminished sense of morality, a disdain for the simple and laborious life, and, in the physical order, habits of intemperance and vitiated blood which they pass on! Nor do officers command properly. They know their men too little. It is not only a question of humanism, there is a military motive: "A troop well in hand, less educated, is better than a troop more educated, less in hand. While the length of service is shorter, it is necessary to force things to create esprit de corps. This will be all the more necessary as commitments become rarer and many will see fire for the first time in the next conflict.

For Lyautey, one must love his men and win their affection before seeking to instruct them. He rebels against a false Anglomania that leads him to wrap himself in an impassive morgue. According to him, military schools produce officers who consider their men as automatons and are only interested in equipment and technique, especially in the cavalry: "The tool has been carefully studied: the cannon, the rifle, the horse; and as little as possible the worker, by whom alone the tool will be worthwhile. This is so true that in the cavalry, for example, it is extremely well to know one's horses much better than one's men [...]" "As for my men, I cannot remember their names, it is a kind of memory that I miss [...]. They are bullies, by the way".

Lyautey thus makes himself the apostle of a close command and "management by example". We must seize every opportunity, the walks, the rests, the grooming, the meals, to cultivate the bond of trust. Soldiers must also be provided with an environment adapted to these new objectives by improving their routine. With regard to non-commissioned officers, he advocates education, initiative and responsibility. No abuse should be allowed, but they should be "absolutely involved", aware of their central role in the results.

In a context where peacetime has become the normal state of military life, the social mission must be the officer's main focus when dealing with conscripts. For an officer, the ideal would no longer be in a life of war and adventure, but in "the fruitful conception of the modern role of the officer who has become the educator of the entire nation".

However, Lyautey did not conceive of this specific role without preparation. He also envisages the place that school should take. He believes that " ... every college today is, to some extent, a cadet school".

"Every college teacher ... will not have done a useless job if he has taken every opportunity to instil in these young souls the military spirit And it seems to us that it will be a revolution. For him, in short, "military service must become the salutary complement of all education".

Thus, Lyautey brings several important innovations:

- the awareness of the eminently political nature of universal military service beyond military necessity;
- the central role in the nation of the professional army from the moment it receives the mission of educating an entire age group;
- the intuition of a "citizen's path" and the link in the training of young people between school and the army;
- the need for a radical change in command methods and the consideration of the military condition.

The article soon provoked controversy in the army, where many felt under attack, and outside, in Parliament and in intellectual circles. Abroad, it aroused curiosity and reaction. It was translated in Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia.

Readers from his circle wanted to see in this article only a rallying to the regime and a socialist profession of faith. Indeed, the law on universal military service of 15 July 1889, although intended to level the playing field with Germany in terms of manpower, may have appeared to be a bullying of officers who were convinced that in three years it was not possible to complete the training.

On the other hand, several newspapers gave positive accounts. The identity of the author is known as soon as it is published. The President of the Republic, warned by his officer son, spoke about it in the Council of Ministers, which led Lyautey to be summoned by Freycinet, Minister of War. But he gets out without sanction. In the army, if it was especially in the cavalry that one felt targeted, the colonial army, with Gallieni, welcomed his theses. In many regiments, the article was put into practice. In any case, it had a real popular resonance, as some 133,000 books were sent to him to fill the shelves of the libraries of companies, squadrons and batteries! The author is now the man in fashion, he is asked to give lectures.

If Lyautey has created enmities, the article does not hinder his advancement, on the contrary. He was promoted to squadron leader in 1893, at the top of his class. He made his breakthrough in progressive and republican circles. His ideas prevailed.

As early as 1901, a course on the social mission of the officer was created in Saint-Cyr. In 1902, 1903 and 1904, several directives appeared under the impetus of General André, then Minister of War, for the installation of hostels, reading rooms, and the organisation of educational conferences. The world conflicts will confirm Lyautey's intuitions, anchoring the principles he had identified.

Twenty years after the suspension of conscription, at a time when we are actively thinking about the establishment of a universal national service, should we still read the Social Role of the Officer?

Obviously, the work is not without wrinkles. Since 1891, the army and society have changed. They are no longer conscripts under duress but conscious of the threat hanging over the country (Germany, Warsaw Pact), but volunteers that the army recruits on the

labour market to carry out external operations that are often far away and internal operations that may appear to be undue burdens. Managers have to juggle several imperatives: loyalty, managing multiple projections, preserving training, not forgetting the question of equipment availability... The units now have real experience of fire. The units now have real experience of fire. Consequently, the social role, as the vocation of a peacetime army, may appear to be far removed from the emergencies of the moment and as a certain paternalism out of step with the younger generations.

However, dusted off, Lyautey's work remains a reference. The style of command based on trust and training strength has not aged. It is even intrinsic to the style of command in the Army. Concern for men and their living conditions also remains relevant in a society where comfort is more widespread and where the military condition has become essential to recruitment and training. Even if certain aspects may raise questions with regard to the safety and efficiency of operations, the regulation of mobiles being just one example.

The political dimension of the officer's social role remains just as important. By understanding that the 1889 law made the regiments one of the crucibles of the Republic, a place of military training as much as a republican one, the army puts its know-how and know-how at the service of the ambition of the people. Lyautey gave the military institution a central role in a historical period when institutions and traditions specific to the French identity were being born. Thus, the social role of the officer was gradually to embody the very essence of military service and participate in its mythology.

For this reason, the idea of an educational role for armies is still very present today, motivating the many political and social demands. In addition to ad hoc arrangements (SMA, SMV, EPIDE, etc.), the armed forces are given a special role, together with national education, in the training of young people, which has been formalised in the protocols between the two ministries since the early 1980s. It is also significant that this approach was initiated by a Left that inherited the Third Republic.

But where Lyautey may have been misunderstood is in the balance and relationship between social role and military objective. For him, social action in the army was not intended to replace school, but to strengthen the defence of the country. The role of the military does not result from the social objective, but it is from the military objective that the social role results.

With the Social Role of the Officer, Marshal Lyautey signed a founding document that must be read to understand the origin of the regiment's home as well as that of the universal service project!

Since then, the French army has held a singular place. The nation asks it for a social and educational commitment, which takes its roots in the process by which it became part of the Republic at the end of the 19th century. It is because Lyautey's article is one of its main milestones that it has taken its place among the republican achievements alongside free public schooling or secularism.

The closeness of the officer to his men, the will to win their support and the attention to their living conditions remained among the characteristics of the French-style command. This is Lyautey's second great legacy.

Finally, by publishing, outside the hierarchy, *Le rôle social de l'officier* (The Social Role of the Officer), Marshal Lyautey took a very real, but carefully thought-out risk to publicise

the results of his original and promising action. Thinking and daring beyond conservatism and fear, isn't this also one of the good reasons to read or reread Lyautey today?

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