



A historical look at the expression of the soldier

Freedom of Expression

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Published on 29/04/2019

Histoire & stratégie

At the beginning of the 21st century, the media in the broadest sense of the term are increasingly occupying the space of communication and are thus constantly participating in the societal debate, becoming a key player in theThe question of the place and role of the military in this area is raised by certain more or less recent cases such as that of Generals Desportes and Soubelet. The same applies to defence associations or groups such as the G2S.

A historical approach can undeniably help to answer this question by contributing to reflection and even indicating modes of action. In this fact sheet, the historical perspective is approached chronologically with the beginnings of the Third Republic to end with the first years of the 21st century. It is also necessary to distinguish the public expression of the military from the issue of social dialogue, which will not be dealt with in this article, even if these two subjects are clearly linked.

The beginnings of the Third Republic were marked by lively political-military debates at a time when universal suffrage was imposed and press freedom was highly proclaimed. Only the military were banned from public expression and the right to vote. Are they therefore "sub-citizens" when their mission is precisely to defend the country?

From then on, in the years 1890-1914, there was a gradual loosening of the rules governing the media. The rules governing the public expression of the military, including in particular the rules relating to the right of association, with the creation of garrison chapters around the structure of the message circles.

From 1910-1912, as a result of the "fiche affair", but also of the more liberal evolution of French society, the debate began on the prior authorisation that was imposed on any officer wishing to publish. Finally, in 1913, this was no longer necessary and officers could publish like all other citizens. Control was exercised only after the fact and an officer could no longer be sanctioned for his writings on the grounds of "manifest disturbance of

public order", which objectively rarely occurred. In fact, when an officer publishes a book that has met with some success, he or she receives a letter of congratulations signed by the minister! It was also the most flourishing period for the major publishers "specialising" in military matters, such as Lavauzelle or Berger-Levrault.

Let us not forget that, on the eve of the 1914 war, the military "peri" or "para" press included more than twenty titles, from dailies to quarters, and there were no longer any officers who left the service (sometimes temporarily) to exercise electoral mandates.

The situation remained broadly the same during the first part of the inter-war period. In the 1920s, there was a veritable intellectual ferment with a very large number of publications on all doctrinal and employment issues. Contrary to popular belief, the questions of motorization, use of tanks, support of ground troops by the air force, etc., but also cultural and social issues (place of armies in society, role of the armed forces, etc.) were not only discussed (role in the country...) or geopolitical issues (linked to the colonial empire and its development, France's place in the world, disarmament and the League of Nations...) are the subject of many articles and books. Overall, this is the "golden age" of public expression by the military.

Everything changed with the appointment of General Gamelin as Chief of State. Everything changed with the appointment of General Gamelin as Chief of the General Staff and Commander-in-Chief Designated for Wartime in early 1935. One of his very first directives was to prohibit the publication of studies by the military unless they were approved in advance, or even corrected beforehand, by the General Staff. Thus, almost overnight, production was exhausted... with the corollary of the impoverishment of military thought since there was no longer any debate. The events of May-June 1940 are to be seen as part of this process.

After 1945, the question of the public expression of the military was little discussed. Engaged in Indochina, but above all under-equipped, under-manned and under-trained, the army was above all concerned with its reconstruction in a context of general shortages.

It is only with the end of the Indochina war and the emergence of the Algerian conflict that we again see an increase in the number of works published by the military, very often linked to the major issues of the moment, such as the "atomic" question and the counter-revolutionary war.

The affair of the generals and the end of the Algerian war mark a new rupture.

During the first twenty years of the 5th Republic, the army effectively became the "great mute" that it had almost never been. During the first twenty years of the 5th Republic, the army effectively became the "great mute" that it had hardly ever been since 1871, even if this expression, it should be remembered, is above all linked to the absence of the right to vote for the military until after the Second World War. The official doctrine cannot be called into question. It is a return in practice to Mac Mahon's phrase: "I strike from promotion the officer whose name I see on the cover of a book".

This is how the law of 13 July 1972 "on the general status of military personnel", which replaced or annulled Marshal Soult's laws of 1832 and 1834, themselves revised in 1928 and 1935, assimilated serving military personnel to the "general status of military personnel". to civil servants and makes them once again subject to obtaining ministerial authorisation to speak on major subjects of interest to the life of the country, its defence and diplomacy. Except for epsilon, this was the status quo.

From the beginning of the 1980s, a reverse, albeit very slow, swing of the pendulum was observed when heads of state and government were to be appointed to the presidency. The army chiefs of staff officially announced that they wanted to promote the expression of the military in the image of the general. Lagarde with "the year of the captains", to encourage the public expression of the officer and, more generally, to make information an act of command, first of all internally within the institution, then externally towards civil society. To quote him: "this lack of information arouses mistrust, encourages fabrication and undermines cohesion. You must be convinced of this, but the objectives I have just defined will only really be achieved when all managers, aware of what is at stake, accept the risk of a greater opening up of the army to the outside world".

Thus, the armies are becoming aware of the need to reconnect with society after more than three decades of commitment and are therefore taking up the issue of communication. In this sense, the SIRPA, created at that time, made considerable efforts to familiarise civil society with the armed forces, but this opening to the public was not easy. The visceral mistrust that officers have always had for what they saw as the harmful role of the media had to be overcome.

Moreover, the right and freedom of expression, whether or not it is left to the officers, then conditions the good or bad relations they have with journalists.

This movement is developing only gradually, as the weight of habit remains strong. Today, several dozen books are published each year by officers, to which must be added a very large number of articles published in the civil press and the general public.

However, an article can always bring its author to the wrath of the authorities of the Ministry of Defence if the ideas developed call into question the official communication, which was the case with the Louvois files or the "civilianisation" of management positions in the Ministry. Indeed, article 4 of the Act of 24 March 2005 defining the general status of military personnel emphasizes that while "opinions or beliefs (...) are free (...), they may be expressed only outside the service and with the reserve required by the military state ". Thus the limits to their right of expression would be military secrecy and political neutrality, all of which are encompassed in a rather imprecise notion, the duty of reserve, a right which applies to generals who have left active service and are placed "in the second section (2s)".

Paradoxically, the freedom of expression of military personnel, reaffirmed in the latest General Disciplinary Regulations, has probably never been so strong, all the more so as the image of the armed forces has never been so good for decades, but the reluctance of those concerned to "think outside the box" remains a reality. A former Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) said, "We don't hear enough from the military leaders, which is damaging to the military community, which needs to hear from the CDS and the Chiefs of the Defence Staff to feel recognized by the nation . Why risk placing yourself at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the hierarchy by making atypical speeches when the places for advancement are increasingly counted... It should also be mentioned that seventy percent of the military are on fixed-term contracts. Moreover, very few officers have chosen to invest in the new field of Internet sites and social networks . Thus, only four active army officers now run websites and blogs, a new societal factor that could eventually change this situation.

Thus, the historical perspective clearly underlines the alternation, setbacks or advances that accompany, according to circumstances and political powers, the expression of the military in the public domain and their positioning in the City. It also underlines the close link between freedom of expression for the military and their development and place in society. Finally, it demonstrates that the current situation, perceived as rather as restrictive in terms of expression, is in no way an obstacle, quite the contrary.

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Release date 01/04/2019
