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Furia francese : representations, limits and reality checks

Or why the French armed forces kept a bayonet on the HK416

by colonel Fabrice Clée, Head of the Research and Forward Planning Department

“All the Gods decided to get married. Each one took the wife assigned to him. The God of War (Polemos), got the final draw. Only the Goddess of Excess (Hybris) was left. He fell madly in love and married her. This is why everywhere she went, he went with her. Everywhere one can find excess, in cities or among nations, war and fighting will be not far behind¹”.

“Everywhere you look today, there are claims that war has become an academic matter, that we need scholars... But war, as long as it remains war in which we risk our lives, will always be essentially driven by instinct²”.

“Contrary to conventional American wisdom, the French liked to fight. I accompanied them when they, Afghan troops and a handful of Americans invaded a Taliban-held valley. Despite comments from people who have no actual experience with them, French troops don't run from a contact. They like to advance toward the enemy and shoot. A lot³”.



Since the Battle of Fornovo in 1495, Europe has experienced, both within and outside its own borders, 125 major conflicts. France has been one of the main belligerents in 49 of them. During the same period, France entered into 185 battles and won 132 of them, giving our country's forces the record for victories in Europe, a considerable way ahead of the United Kingdom and Germany.

Writer Michel Audiard had one of his characters make light of the French's unique attitude to war, “My dear Ludwig, you've got the wrong

idea about the French. We're so hung up on liberty, which goes back all the way to '89. We butchered half of Europe in the name of that principle. Ever since Napoleon laid waste to Poland, we're not going to let anybody else get away with that behavior! We'd just wind up frustrated”. Historian François Cochet stresses this point more seriously in a recent book⁵, “The French claim to be fans of peace, but show no hesitation in getting involved in armed conflict. The French therefore wage war on a regular basis. Generally they are quite good at it. They are consistent. As a product of their history and geography, the French have their very own way of waging war. This continuity and this particularity is evident throughout French military history, from Gergovia to Gao, including Fornovo, Valmy, Austerlitz, la Marne, Bir-Hakeim, Chip-yong-ni, the battles of Vrbajna bridge or Alasay”.

This article will provide a brief overview of the unique nature of the French warfighting spirit. It will focus on how this spirit has been described from the latter half of the 19th century onwards. This article will also lay out the limits and misadventures of the French attitude, and most importantly, what it can and should stand for today.

Having failed in his attempt to occupy Naples during the first war in Italy, King Charles VIII withdrew to France with his army during the summer of 1495. On the 6th of July that year, the French Army would clash with the Holy League at the Battle of Fornovo. The League intended to prevent the Army from crossing the Alps. The French were faced with a coalition far greater in number, and yet they managed to counter-attack and, defying all expectations, to push back the enemy disposition. Italian writers made careful note of the bravery and fervor displayed by the French troops, led by the King himself. The expression attributed to this victory, “*furia francese*”, would follow the French for centuries to come. It encapsulated the French troops' signature momentum during combat when under proper command.





The defeats of 1870-1871 were attributed to the defensive mindset of the imperial army. Military writers and supporters of vengeance underscored the intrepid nature of the French soldier, which naturally propelled him toward danger and risking his life. This nature is what justified the strict dogma of the exacerbated offensive prior to 1914. This dogma was influenced by a partial, or somewhat biased reading of Ardant du Picq. The trend of “moral fortitude” had determined the assumption that victory was only within the grasp of the party with the strongest will to win. In other words, “in order to win, we must break by force the fighting disposition of the enemy. This break will require attacks that will push us to our limit, without any reservations, and it can only be achieved through bloody sacrifice (...) the offensive alone gives positive results. Success in war has always been achieved by the generals who wanted and who sought battle; those who merely endured it were always defeated⁶”.

A few officers who were teaching at the *Ecole supérieure de guerre* at the time, including who was before Lieutenant Colonel Pétain and Colonel Lanrezac, did not go so far as to completely call into question this dogma, but they did raise concerns over the absence of any genuine tactical reflection in doctrine prior to 1914. In particular, they criticized the 1901 military instruction code, which advocated charges of the main units, with the bayonet mounted on the rifle⁷. Instead, these

officers urged for maneuver, material power, movement and initiative. In 1931, Paul Valéry wrote to Marshal Pétain, stressing the discrepancy between doctrine that dated from before the war and the reality of modern combat from the summer of 1914 onwards, “This is what you discovered : that fire kills. I would not say that this was something unknown until you spoke up. We simply preferred to ignore it. How could this come to pass? We can never construct theories without paying the cost of real experience. There is no other field in which theories are more necessary than that of preparing for war. We must imagine the practice in order to establish the tenets⁸”.

How can we explain this gap in French military thinking from prior to 1914, which was also the view held by all Western nations at the time, and the reality of industrial war? After all, the precursors to this style of war lay in the lessons learned from the war of succession, the Boer war and the Russian Japanese conflict. A debate had nonetheless been sparked, as the military writer, Réginald Kann observed in 1905, which pitted against each other, “two opinions or schools of thought: the ‘new’ school which favored enveloping and the ‘historic’ school which utilized mass on a decisive point. In the first case, the main means of action is fire, in the second, it is shock⁹”.

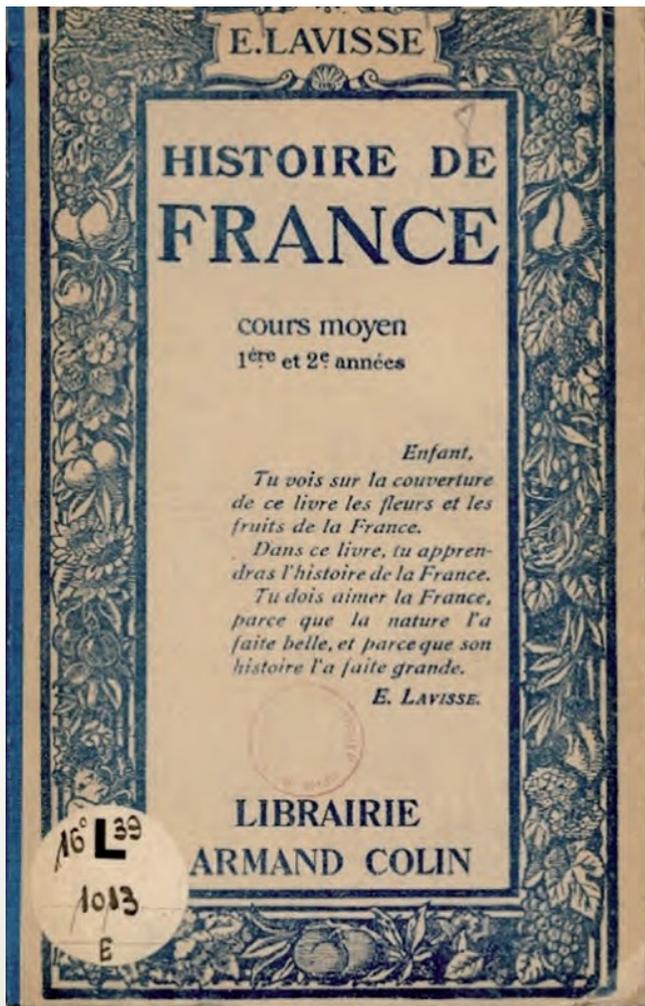
In the end, it was the second school that gained prominence, as advocated by Generals Langlois and Bonnal (head of the former *Ecole supérieure de guerre*).

Warfighting virtues are what undoubtedly laid the basis of the design of military operations at the time. These virtues had been identified during antiquity and were supposedly inherent to the French soldier. Courage, boldness, physical strength, discipline and *esprit de corps* are what enabled the French soldiers alone to give the troop that charged or received an assault the mass necessary to disrupt or absorb an enemy disposition.

The majority of ancient philosophers described a degree of courage synonymous with virility. Socrates suggested that a courageous man is one who “remains fearless in the presence of a noble death or near-death peril¹⁰”. According to Socrates, this quality strikes the right balance between cowardice and recklessness. This is a quality sometimes encountered among certain peoples such as the Celts, whose only fear was the sky falling down¹¹. Socrates stressed that such unbridled recklessness could be dangerous and lead to disarray. “Moreover, he who feared absolutely nothing, neither earthquakes nor the floods of the rising sea, could only be a madman, or a completely insensitive one, as they say the Celts are¹²”. The audacity of the Celts was also noted by Caesar, to give unity to his Western conquests and to give greater impetus to his victories, “The inhabitants of Gaul have always been at war more than other men, particularly in the first shock¹³”.

The warrior qualities associated with the Gallic people came to the fore again at the end of the 19th century. Renan, Bainville, Vidal de La Blache and Lavissee all gave rise to the **national narrative** that France had been in need of since the war of 1870 had ended. “You will see that [your fathers] shed their blood in

glorious battles for France to be honored among all nations. In this way, you will learn what you owe to your forefathers, and why your first duty is to love your country, the land of your fathers, above all else¹⁴. The warfighting spirit of the French people was personified through the figures of Vercingetorix, Clovis, Joan of Arc and Napoleon. The battles of Gergovia (52 BC), Poitiers (732 not 1356), Bouvines (1214), Marignan (1515), Valmy (1792) and Austerlitz (1805) became landmark dates in the history of the French people in arms.



At the time, fighting with blades, either with a sabre or bayonet, on foot or on horseback, was still the norm. The romantic figure of the soldier and his faithful "blade", who triumphed in hand-to-hand combat, took root in people's minds. Historian Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau points out that, "before the implementation of modern weapons, Western soldiers on the battlefield would fight in 'an upright position'. They had to do so because their weapon, the powder rifle, could only be reloaded while standing. [...] The vertical position was certainly imposed on the soldier by the technological conditions of combat. However, it was also highly valued and rewarding for those taking part. [...] For in the extreme danger of the battlefield, we stood up straight. Physically of course, but also morally¹⁵". Over the course of the century, this cliché would fuel the myth of the French fighter, with his martial qualities and his *furia francese*.

It would become part of the collective unconscious as the perfect encapsulation of France's very soul and values.

For the majority of French military thinkers, this perception of the French fighter was further bolstered towards the end of the 19th century by the resounding memory of the revolutionary and Napoleonic campaigns, as propagated by studies conducted by the Swiss researcher, Jomini and the Prussian researcher, Clausewitz. 19th century French cultural and doctrinal representations often reduced the concept of "the struggle" to its paroxysmal phase: assault. From antiquity onwards, combat has always been associated with **shock**, contact with the opponent and even hand-to-hand combat and sword fighting. In practice, this requires resolute individual and collective qualities: physical strength, moral strength, discipline. To access them, temporary denial is required of deeply rooted social, cultural and psychological forces: compassion, respect for the lives of others and, above all, survival instinct. In its most total forms, this denial entails the absolute negation of the opponent's humanity, as well as individual transcendence reached via death in combat, which makes it possible to overcome fear, paralysis and the unspeakable instinct of destruction, inherent to the extreme violence of the situations encountered.

Aristotle asserted that, "the noblest form of death is the one encountered in war in the midst of the greatest danger¹⁶". However, this ideal represents both the origin and the consequence of the murderous ideological, strategic and tactical thought processes that led to the disasters of Crecy (1346), Poitiers (1356), Azincourt (1415), the heroic but futile charges of the Margueritte division in Sedan, in September 1870 and the bitter setbacks of the summer of 1914. One of the most salient examples of this took place on 22 August 1914; the only battle along the borders saw 27,000 French troops killed in a single day. Western strategists and staffs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries underestimated the power of industrial **fire** and how its effects are multiplied during maneuver. The power of the air force, the quasi-surgical precision of artillery, as well as the power of missiles and ultimately nuclear fire, seemed to have put a definitive end to the predominance of shock.

However, while the ascendancy of fire seems to be a firmly established part of modern warfare, it is by no means the only key to success. Indirect fire, practiced at a safe distance (stand-



off), does not allow permanent control of the land environment, its human aspect in particular. History, and more particularly recent Western interventions, has shown that fire alone does not lead to strategic victory, nor guaranteed lasting peace. Despite all the technological and cultural breakthroughs to have influenced warfare from the Neolithic period to the present day, its essential components remain the same, both today and, most likely, for a long time to come. These are: shock, fire, maneuver, adaptation to adversity and contingency management. The only variable factor is how these components combine.

The setbacks of the summer of 1914 thereby proved that the warfighting spirit could not be limited to the ability to use shock. As the conflict continued, it became clear that a profound and rapid change of mindset was needed. Over time, this mindset came to be defined by moral, if not spiritual¹⁷, and intellectual dispositions. These allow the fighter, at every level of responsibility, to both lead and to endure shock, to deliver and bear fire, to combine the two when the opportunity arises, in order to maneuver and, most importantly, as time goes on, to be able to counter the uncertainty underlying all forms of combat.

As a result, endurance, rusticity and resilience were added to the qualities needed, not only by fighters in the Great War, but also by civilians in the rear and political leaders. The Marne counter-offensive in September 1914 and the Battle of Verdun from February 1916 onwards especially, are perfect examples of the polymorphous and shared mindset that enabled the entire country to adapt rapidly to the evolving and unpredictable nature of war. To use Clausewitz's metaphor: "War is a chameleon".

The warfighting spirit must therefore be adaptable to each new context and each new confrontation, with all the new forms of adversity and new technological, cultural or tactical breakthroughs they entail. It is this very ability to adapt, psychologically, ideologically and operationally, that made possible the victory of 1918, the anniversary of which we celebrated last year.

In 1925, French Army doctrine was in the process of renewal in the aftermath of the war. That year, one of the trainees at the *Ecole supérieure de guerre*, a young Captain Charles de Gaulle, wrote an article warning his contemporaries against a return to an overly conceptual approach that was too far dissociated from the true nature of war. Instead, de Gaulle called for, "this taste for the concrete, this gift of measure, this sense of reality that enlightens boldness, inspires maneuver and fuels action¹⁸". With the turn of operations in 1939, followed by the defeat of 1940, he was proved right. Failure systematically finds its source in the discrepancy between a nation's moral capability to wage war, its military doctrine and the reality of combat engagement.

However, it would be disingenuous to either deny or merely underestimate the importance of contact combat. Shock (either potential or underway) is a necessary evil. Emperor Napoleon used flowery language to sum this up, "in war, like in

love, ending it all has to be up, close and personal¹⁹". A sentiment shared in the early 1980s by Swiss military historian, Colonel Daniel Reichel, who reminded us that, "the primary element, absolutely fundamental for fighting, is shock". For him, fire and maneuver "are certainly necessary complementary factors, but in the end only shock makes them war effective²⁰". And yet, as Ardant du Picq noted, shock remains an extremely rare occurrence in the history of war. Generally speaking, either the troop that is charged by another will scatter and flee in panic before the two collide, or it will hold its ground and make the attacker take a step back before reaching contact. To become convinced of this, it should be noted that the amount of actual hand-to-hand combat does not match the place it occupies in the collective imagination.



In fact, the bayonet was responsible for only 4.5% of French veterans' known wounds during the period 1792-1815. During the American Civil War, only 1% of victims suffered bayonet wounds. However, the First World War still saw bayonet use during assault, supplemented by knives, shovels, handguns, grenades and flame-throwers, which proved more effective within the confines of the trenches. In 1916, Captain de Gaulle was wounded in the thigh by bayonet in the Douaumont sector. However, according to statistics from the Joint Health Service, losses caused by bladed weapons did not exceed 0.9% in 1914 and disappeared completely by 1917. However, these observations only partially reflect the reality of contact combat.

By "shock", Reichel does not only refer to its kinetic aspect. He also points to the psychological effect induced, which leads to "a paralysis of the will and reflexes of the defense", "a kind of brutal and sordid revelation, according to which the situation would be hopeless". The real purpose of shock is therefore how the opponent is perceived, rather than just his physical integrity. An overwhelming effect can be achieved via assault, but it can also be achieved by "fire, or the threat of fire", which is in this respect "an extension of shock".

This assertion can be supported by the example of the *Bataillon de Corée* to the east of Seoul, in the Wonju sector. During an action led by the U.S 2nd Infantry Division, the French were placed under the command of General Ridgway. Lieutenant Colonel Monclar's volunteers made a name for themselves

during the very violent fighting in Chipyeong-ni. "Shortly after midnight the deafening sound of whistles and bugles signaled the initial Chinese attack. This first attack was met and defeated by Monclar's French battalion in close hand-to-hand fighting. The heroic French confused the Chinese raiders by cranking their own sirens before charging with fixed bayonets



howling all the way - the Chinese were rattled and they turned and fled. The Battalion of Korea will always be remembered for the legendary bayonet charge at Chipyeong-ni. The spirited defense set the tone for the rest of the defenders of Chipyeong-ni that night²².

During that commitment, out of habit, the French had fixed their bayonets prior to the firefight. They used them

when, finally, hand-to-hand combat became necessary. It was during one of these assaults that Lieutenant Gildas Lebourier, who was wearing a red scarf to stand out to his men, drew the attention of American journalists. Observers thought that the Chinese soldiers were more afraid of the bayonets that they could actually see, than of the bullets, invisible to the human eyes. Later, General Ridgway reportedly stated, "The bayonet may not be the last secret weapon of the United Nations Armed Forces, but it has an indisputable aggressive power. I had heard twice about the bayonet in the Korean War, once from the Turks, once from the French. All units will be reminded that this instrument is much more than just a can opener²³". As for Monclar, he believed that the importance of the bayonet had been overblown. However, he did acknowledge its eminent psychological effect, both for his men at the paroxysm of combat and for the enemy, paralyzed by the brutal and unexpected French counter-attacks²⁴.

Even in modern commitments where firepower is dominant, the mechanical and psychological **ability to use shock** remains an essential factor. Shock is not, however, sufficient for countering adversity and difficulty, regulating uncertainty and fear, and, ultimately, controlling the environment. That is covered by the definition of pugnacity.

In order to take or withstand impact simultaneously and over time, there is a clear need for special individual qualities. Without these, there can be no control over what may be unleashed through instinct, fear, fatigue, discomfort and outbursts of violence in the most extreme of situations. In 1922, Henry Morel-Journal described a situation that turned into an assault towards the end of the Great War: "A bayonet charge is a band of frightened people, who throw themselves forward with their eyes shut and their weapons clutched to their chests²⁵". Courage, pugnacity, rusticity and self-control are not

innate or persistent virtues. Nor can they really be taught. They stem from a combination of contextual and biological influences, all of which are complex and poorly understood. The faculties likely to boost the ideal warfighting spirit remain difficult, and even dangerous to distinguish.

French First World War historians are often divided into two schools. The first believes that the fighters "consented" to their sacrifice out of patriotism. The second believes that there were several ways in which the *poilus* were "forced"²⁶. We will not pick a side here, as that is a debate best left to the historians. There are coherent and convincing arguments on both sides. Nonetheless, we can attempt a character study of combatants throughout the 20th century, without going so far as to classify them. Any attempt at classification would be meaningless. Unless it put forward a caricature of the fighters concerned, it would fail to reflect the diverse range of behavior displayed when under fire or the fact that, without exception, troops are flawed, sensitive to the wear and tear of combat and very often inconsistent. As Joseph Conrad describes so well in his novel *Lord Jim*²⁷, the same individual can behave heroically at one point in time and totally fail to in the next, regardless of his will and his initial qualities. The reverse can also be true, as Ernst Jünger reported of his own experience in *Storm of Steel*.²⁸

As such, it is certain that for some of those involved, combat was something to be endured and experienced in a mainly passive manner. However, it would be unfair to write off these fighters as mere pawns. Throughout the 20th century, scores of young Frenchmen enlisted or anticipated the call to arms out of a sense of duty, patriotism, or simply a taste for adventure, only to discover that they could not adapt to the harsh conditions of combat.

The French expeditionary force in Indochina was entirely made up of volunteers. Nonetheless, it experienced its own share of desertions and defections when confronted with the enemy, as shown by the case of the "Nam Youn rats" in Dien Bien Phu. There is an indisputable proportion of passive combatants, but the exact amount remains difficult to assess. In his study on combat²⁹, Colonel Michel Goya estimated that, under certain circumstances, passive combatants could represent up to 80% of the fighting mass. This figure may seem a lot, but it is backed up by the examples provided by the historian. These individuals did not necessarily went as far as desertion, unless their lives were at stake. They were not likely to play a decisive role



in the conduct of operations. They also did not count among the troops involved in the mutinies of 1917, who were, considering the numbers involved, relatively few in number.

Fighters in the First World War displayed an extraordinary degree of endurance in withstanding the challenges they faced. For some among them, the mission of defending the country and respecting the duty of citizenship was sacred. This was therefore enough of an individual motivation for withstanding discomfort, proximity to violence, and the possibility of death or injury. Given the amount of correspondence and testimonial from this profile of fighter, this mindset was probably the driving force behind most troops involved in the two World Wars. The refusal of defeat and the spirit of resistance embodied by the first free Frenchmen, followed by ideologically diametrically opposed figures such as Jean Moulin, François de La Rocque, Pierre Georges, also known as "Colonel Fabien", or Honoré d'Estienne d'Orves, are also a remarkable illustration of civic engagement, to the point of the ultimate sacrifice.

With this general framework established, the diverse walks of life and underlying motivations of each combatant both at the outbreak of conflict and throughout, mean that it would still be too simplistic to try to confine them to distinct and definite categories. To do so would assume that the soldiers' state of mind did not change over the course of the challenges they faced.

We are thus inclined to believe that warfighting qualities can, collectively, alter, develop and be reinforced before and during the midst of the action. For many combatants, even now, war can give meaning to their lives and offer a form of transcend-

ence through group identity, especially once the fighting is over. Preparing for fighting and fighting itself sees the partial eradication of social boundaries. Specific ties are forged in camaraderie, solidarity and *esprit de corps*. Confronting violence, danger, death and bereavement usually gives rise to a powerful identity factor. There is a feeling of pride in belonging to a very closed community of fighters, capable of self-sacrifice for a cause, an ideal, or even a way of life.

This is a state of mind venerated in the works of writers such as historian Dominique Venner, "Men of war come from another time, another sky. They are the final followers of a strict religion. The one of courage and death. They are the type that take their morning shave before they go to die. They believe in the redemption of man by the virtue of exercise and marching. They look after their physical fitness and good looks. They grant themselves the luxury of rising early in the icy mornings and strenuous walks for the joy of exerting oneself. They are the last poets of absolute gratuitousness³⁰."

This near priestly calling becomes all the stronger when it is bestowed the medals that distinguish the warrior from the mere mortal. Monclar points out that, "rewards are a strong and powerful stimulant for morale³¹". The Coppola film, *Gardens of Stone* from the late 1980s contains a turn of phrase often coined by young French fighters returning from combat, "Well, here's to us and those like us. Damn few left³²." It sums up the unique feeling of those who have experienced fire. In addition, traditions, ceremonial rites (kepi ceremonies, standard ceremonies, medal ceremonies) as well branch-specific traditions, such as Camerone celebrations for legionnaires, Bazeilles for colonials, Sidi-Brahim for *chasseurs*, branch anniversary celebrations, far from being relics of the past, fuel the powerful feeling of integration and identification of individuals within a particular group. Identity phenomenon can also be explained by each fighter's latent need to instill the war experience with a higher purpose, in order to justify the sacrifices and losses involved.

Finally, there is one last type of fighter who stands out in all conflicts: the **absolute warrior**. For them, combat reveals who they are as an individual. In combat, they are able to take advantage of their extraordinary qualities. One immediately thinks of Conan, the fictional character created by Roger Verce³³, as well as the formidable fighters, Georges Guynemer, Ernst Jünger, Marcel Bigeard, Roger Vandenberghe, among countless others. They show that ordinary citizens, who were not at all predestined to warfighting, can sometimes become exceptional soldiers. For them, the fighting coming to an end proves a much more difficult ordeal than the fighting itself ever did.

This is what journalist Eric Deschodt describes in his biography of Captain Claude Barrès³⁴. "The dull peace sought by de Gaulle fell over France and life lost its meaning. There is so much to do, to be built and rebuilt. But there are stonemasons for that and the SAS do not see themselves as stonemasons. They don't like it, they don't know anything, they just want to fight. They got caught up in the war frenzy." This was a feeling shared by



many French and German veterans after WWI. In the 1990s, what emerged from there was a major historiographical concept: brutalization³⁵. This is the meaning of this quote attributed to Ernst von Salomon: "Kinder, Geniesst Den Krieg... Der Friede Wird Fürchterlich"³⁶. The trivialization of violence and the sanctification of the war experience had led to brutalization, which may have fueled the rise of European totalitarianism during the interwar period.

Besides individual qualities and martial postures, the **role of leaders** is essential for spurring on and keeping up the necessary momentum and cohesion at crucial moments. Leaders themselves are not spared by uncertainty, discomfort, fear and being overwhelmed. In addition to designing and conducting the action, the essential role of a leader is to give it constant meaning and purpose, especially once it has been complete. The philosopher Alain, whose real name Émile-Auguste Chartier, had received an exemption from combat, but despite this, and his pacifist convictions, he did not hesitate to enlist in 1914. He did not support the idea of remaining in the rear when the best were sent to the frontline, "Military art goes beyond what men may want. At the moment when human forces reach their limit, we must walk again; at the moment when the position can't be held any longer, we must still hold on. When men are crushed by inexorable forces, it is necessary to find a way to bring out the last convulsions that will give victory"³⁷.



To deny the fundamental role of the leader in combat, whatever rank he holds, and to assimilate all combatants into a coherent mass with a will of its own, is therefore not only absurd, it is a fundamental negation of historical facts. The takeover of the Vrbanja bridge in May 1995, as recounted by Lieutenant Bruno Héluin³⁸ and the statement of his unit commander, Captain François Lecointre, underlines the role of the leader and what he himself can experience during the action. "The precise moment when I ultimately realize what it's going to be... What I feel is fear as well. Because I'm starting to understand what's going to happen. The moment when I realize what is going to happen and how close it is going to be, is the moment when we give the order to put the bayonets on the rifles"³⁹.

The military leader, whether in the field or in charge of con-

ducting operations at the highest level, remains essential **for guiding and supervising the action**. Another major ideological and historical misunderstanding is to seek to dissociate senior military officials from the fighting troop, thereby denying their essential role in the success or failure of operations. The leaders are held accountable by the nation for the lives of the troops under their command. It would be a disservice to overlook their ability to instill a fighting spirit and the will to win, if only through the trust that they inspire. It would be ignorant or intellectually dishonest to refute that prior to becoming great leaders, that they had also generally been part of this fighting mass. At the end of 1950, the French expeditionary forces in Indochina were given a boost with the appointment of General de Lattre de Tassigny⁴⁰. The fact he had been wounded five times during the Great War is particularly relevant here. In 1917, the President of the Council, Georges Clemenceau was not pulling any punches when he made Foch generalissimo, "I said to myself: let's try Foch! At least we'll die with a rifle in our hands! I left this sane and reasonable man, Pétain and I adopted a madman, Foch. It was the madman who pulled us out of there!"⁴¹. Finally, it is relevant to note that Foch and de Lattre both lost a son to the enemy, which casts aside the grievance commonly put to senior military officials at the time, of having no interest in the casualties.

On the other hand, extreme abuse of the warrior spirit, when left unchecked, can lead to a dangerous disassociation with reality. It can lead to the trivialization of losses, unnecessary and even counter-productive violence, and in the worst cases, to abusive behavior. Brutalization had in fact already been touched upon by Clausewitz with the term absolute war (*absoluter Krieg*). Clausewitz broke the concept down into what he called an "astonishing/remarkable trinity", by highlighting that in war there exists, "[...] the original violence of its element, hatred and animosity, which must be considered as a blind natural impulse, then the play of probabilities and chance that make it a free activity of the soul, and its subordinate nature as an instrument of politics, whereby it belongs to pure understanding. The first of these three aspects is of particular interest to the people, the second to the commander and his army, and the third to the government"⁴². The concept draws a permanent link between the three points of a triangle: first the people and their passions, then the Army, its character and effectiveness, and finally the State and its political objectives. Clausewitz reminds us that war is first and foremost a political instrument. It is merely a continuation of political relations between several competitors.

War does not suspend relations with the adversary or adversaries, who remain the interlocutors in a political dialogue that has taken on a violent and armed form. In this dialectic of wills, the primary goal is always to exhaust the opponent's will by making him realize the improbability of success or its skyrocketing cost.

It is therefore incumbent upon both political decision-makers and military leaders to demonstrate the nation's determination to a fair extent and to resume negotiations once the military objectives have been achieved. The warrior spirit must be un-

derstood via the Clausewitz Trinity. **There can be no coherent warrior spirit without the expression of political will.** Marc Bloch insists that “our government's inability to honestly define its war aims”⁴³ (footnote)³³, without fully clearing them with the military leaders of the time, was one of the root causes of the disaster of 1940.



This moral disposition should be framed by and measured against clearly defined political ambitions. The warfighting spirit will ultimately lead to the use of any necessary and strictly sufficient force in order to achieve those objectives. The philosopher Monique Castillo clearly describes the problem that arose from the Clausewitzian analysis of the phenomenon of war; it stresses the responsibility of both the person who, within a democracy, decides on the use of armed violence, and the military leader, who has the role of supervising the *furia francese* in action. “Strength is a burden on us, it is not a material instrument to be used at will; it needs solidarity, ethics and even spirituality. It is a figure of culture that returns to violence when it “naturalizes”, that is, when it naturalizes justice, honor or dignity by transforming them into the physical violence unleashed. Europeans learned this at their own expense in the wars of the still recent past. There were voices clamoring to be heard that said that peace is the ultimate state of strength. Peace, true peace, is not a weak state to which man resigns himself. Nor is it a reservoir indifferent to the good and the bad. It is strength”⁴⁴.

The warfighting spirit is thus constitutive of the first principle of war: freedom of action. This principle is the key to both political and strategic authorities and the ability to have enough influence on the enemy as to deprive him of it. Twenty five centuries ago, Thucydides stated that “the strength of the city is not in its ships, nor in its ramparts, but in the character of its citizens”⁴⁵. The soldiers who fell at Valmy, on the Chemin des Dames, at Bir-Hakeim, the resistance fighters of the *Maquis du Vercors*, the people killed in Uzbini.... all of these people were not victims, they were citizens who died for the defense of the values and security of their country.

This warfighting spirit cannot and must not be the prerogative of the soldier alone. If this were the case, it would cause a split between the nation and its army for a long time to come. The development of a parallel warrior spirit, disconnected from

the political ambitions and societal realities of the present day, would at best be a simple mistake and at worst, a new road to military failure.

After all, the warfighting spirit is a moral posture that is part of our common heritage. It is rooted in how it has been depicted throughout the particularly rich history, geography, mentality and values specific to our society. At a time when our adversaries have started to bypass Western nuclear power and technological superiority with hybrid modes of action, our warfighting spirit is what can guarantee our renewed deterrent capacity. This posture confirms a nation's determination to commit to hand-to-hand combat and symbolically, in sword fighting, to defend its values and its way of life. The opponent will be likely discouraged from taking action, as he questions his ability to win, before giving up. Even after the attacks of January and November 2015, the reactions of French people on the whole indicate that their combativeness and determination are not just a figment of the imagination. However, much like national identity, a warfighting spirit can neither be decreed nor taught. Values can only be passed on via genuine civic education on our shared past and not just that of our country, rid of any ideological clichés that are harmful to national cohesion. A future universal national service scheme is currently under study. Naturally, this invites us to consider how we can create the necessary synergy the national education system and the Armed Forces in order to promote the transmission of these values. The stakes are high. This bolstering of the French warfighting spirit does have a purely national aspect. And yet, far from being a sign of cultural isolationism, it could, on the contrary, give impetus to the development of a truly European defense spirit which, thus far, has been slow to emerge.

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