



Furia Francese: representations, limits and reality

BRENNUS 4.0

Colonel Fabrice Clée

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Forced to retreat from Naples in the summer of 1495, French King Charles VIII's campaign came to a stop when facing the League of Venice near Fornovo. The gallantry and the fierceness of the French troops, led by the King himself, were highlighted by Italian chroniclers who spoke of Furia Francese. This expression survived through the years and glorified the irresistible impulse of French troops in combat when appropriately led. Since the battle of Fornovo, France has been involved in 49 major conflicts.

It has fought 185 battles and won 132 of them. With these victories the French Army holds the record in Europe, way beyond all other European nations. French people often wage war. And they generally wage it well, with singularity and consistency, and by relying on the heritage of their history and geography. This was confirmed throughout French military history, from Gergovia to Gao, via Fornovo, Valmy, Austerlitz, Waterloo, La Marne, Bir-Hakeim, Chipyong-ni, Vrbajna and Alasay. All these victories and defeats foster a particular spirit of warfighting, deeply rooted in our representations of how war has to be fought.

This paper argues for the specificity of the French fighting spirit, mainly described at the end of the 19th century, but also its limits and abuses, and mostly what this spirit should cover today. 19th century military authors underlined the fearlessness that characterizes French soldiers and motivates them to naturally confront danger at the risk of their own lives. French military operations in the 21st century are still based on the same virtues that were supposed to be inherent to the French soldier. Bravery, boldness, physical strength, discipline and Esprit de corps give to the troops the sufficient mass to oppose and break up the enemy.

Combat is mainly associated with shock and fire. Fire superiority gained a foothold in modern warfare but it is by no means the only key to success. Stand-off fire does not allow control of the field. Regardless of culture and technological evolutions that have

affected combat, essential warfare components remain unchanged: maneuver, adaptation, resilience and cultural awareness. Fighting spirit contributes to the first principle of war, namely freedom of action. It is key to both political and strategic authority. It is strongly related to the ability to coerce the enemy and to deprive him of his freedom of action. Thucydides stated 25 centuries ago that "the strength of the city does not rely on its ships, nor on its ramparts, but on the character of its citizens".

Warriors who died in Valmy, Chemin des Dames, Bir-Hakeim, and Uzbin weren't victims but citizens who fell for their country's security, its defense and sovereignty. Their sacrifices form their fellow citizens' determination to protect their values and way of life. This fighting spirit cannot and should not be the prerogative of soldiers. This would acknowledge the dissociation of the Nation and its Army. This statement is above anything else a common heritage. It is rooted in representations, a particularly rich history, a geography, a mentality and values specific to our society. Indeed, this posture enables our Nation to affirm its determination to wage war up to hand-to-hand combat and bladed weapons to defend its values and way of life. The bayonet is therefore considered as a symbolic weapon that discourages the enemy from acting, making him question his ability to win and eventually give up. French people's responses to the terrorist attacks of 2015 proved that its combativeness and determination are not, as of today, a mere creation of the mind.

Titre : Colonel Fabrice Clée

Auteur(s) : Colonel Fabrice Clée

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