An Institutional Battle: France's Plan XVII and the Doctrine of the Offensive, 1870–1914

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Abstract

The centerpiece of pre-1914 politics in the French Third Republic was the military. After the fall of the Second French Empire and Napoleon III in 1870, both the political right and political left sought to create a French Army reflective of its social and ideological principles. The right aimed to uphold and strengthen the Catholic and conservative institution of the professional Army. The left hoped to abolish the professional Army and instead create a citizen militia which it saw as a means of democratizing the military. The battleground of the right and left in the Third Republic was the doctrine of the offensive—if war should break out with Germany once more, would France take an offensive or defensive posture? This offensive doctrine, developed between 1871 and 1914, would ultimately be adopted in the form of Plan XVII. Plan XVII was intended to be a sweeping offensive against German forces in Alsace-Lorraine, Belgium, and Luxembourg. But, in the years following the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906), the left began to worry the Army was too powerful—and that the doctrine of the offensive was symptomatic of this larger problem. I argue that the French left's ideological rejection of the offensive became an institutionalized part of the civilian government by 1914, leading to the collapse of Plan XVII. It was in the critical first hours of the Great War that officials at the highest levels of the civilian government were apprehensive about executing Plan XVII, fating the offensive for failure.

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Acknowledgements

Plan XVII is a topic I have examined, reexamined, and contemplated for some years now. I have long since intended to write on the subject, and it has been the pleasure of my undergraduate experience at Northwestern to do so. I would first like to thank Dr. Robin Bates for advising me throughout this process. It was in his class *Europe in the Age of Total War* two years ago that I first began to formulate the arguments presented in this thesis. His vast knowledge of French history and expert guidance made my thesis possible. Thank you, Dr. Bates, for your confidence in me as a writer, a historian, and a student—both this year and my time at Northwestern as a whole. I would also like to thank Dr. Keith Woodhouse. You gave me the tools to succeed in writing my thesis, both through your support and through training me to write as a historian. In the library, I would like to recognize Geoff Morse. Thank you for assisting me in my research. Finally, thank you to my parents. Dad, you taught me how to write well. Thank you. This thesis could not have been realized without the knowledge and skills you have bestowed upon me. Mom, thank you for encouraging in me an appreciation for government and the military. The observations and analyses presented in this thesis are deeply rooted in my own study of the world and culture which you have introduced to me since childhood.

Introduction: A Failed Plan

The second of September, 1870 was the darkest of days for France. Her emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew and namesake, became a prisoner of the invading Prussian Army.[1] Her defenders, encircled with the emperor at the town of Sedan, began a long march to Prussian prisoner-of-war camps. Her government, robbed of its leader, scrambled to put France in order.[2] The Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and the Battle of Sedan were, in the strongest sense of the word, humiliating. This was, after all, the same people which had conquered most of Europe not sixty years prior; defeated the Holy Roman Empire in 1648; nearly drove England from the Continent in the Hundred Years' War; and halted the Umayyad invasion at the Battle of Tours in 732. But despite however impressive a military history France boasted, it was not enough to save the French Army from its own ineptitude. And, in the forty-four years following, the Army of the newly established French Third Republic wrestled with the failure of Sedan so that France might never again suffer such a defeat.

The third of August, 1914 could have been the beginning of a similar fate for France, and perhaps one harsher than before. But we know the story of France in the Great War—a story which began with a German declaration of war on 3 August 1914 and ended in a railcar at Compiègne Forest on 11 November 1918. The First World War can sometimes appear to be one, indistinguishable block of barbed wire, futile infantry assaults, and rat-infested trenches that lasted four long years until an armistice was reached. But in the years preceding World War One, this was hardly how the French high command thought the next war with Germany would play out. The high command anticipated a short conflict of quick, brutal offensives. This prediction

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[1] Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871*, 3rd ed. (London, UK: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 222-223.
[2] Raymond Recouly, *The Third Republic*, trans. E. F. Buckley (London, UK: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1928), 2-3.

was epitomized by a little-known scheme to swiftly defeat Germany: *Plan XVII*. The objective of Plan XVII was the offensive destruction of the German Army through frontal assaults in Alsace-Lorraine, southern Belgium, and Luxembourg. The reclamation of Alsace-Lorraine, a region annexed by the German Empire following the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, was a key aim of Plan XVII. Supported by an intense dedication to the study of Napoleonic tactics, an adherence to the traditionally offensive-minded culture of the French Army, and the work of brilliant military thinkers such as Ferdinand Foch and Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison, Plan XVII had potential for success.

But Plan XVII was a catastrophic failure. This was in large part due to infighting between the political left and right in the Third Republic—a battle which would intensify over the half-century between the end of the Franco-Prussian War and the beginning of the First World War. Skepticism among the French left and right; debates over the legacy of Napoleon and the French Revolution; and fear for the Republic's very survival would directly shape Plan XVII and its outcome. These ongoing ideological clashes were manifested in the civilian government's aversion to Plan XVII, heavily influenced by left-wing mistrust of the professional Army. The civilian government's reluctant implementation of Plan XVII would prove ruinous for France in the opening days of WWI, leading to the plan's utter collapse. This is the story of a nation which had the right commanders and the right conceptions of warfare at the right time, based on the lessons of Sedan and a revival of Napoleonic thought. Despite these reforms, the French Army could not overcome its worst enemy: itself.

At the center of Plan XVII's failure were fundamental differences in how the Army and the civilian government viewed their respective roles. As the Third Republic inched closer to summer of 1914, the Army consistently wanted, to use the term of German philosopher Carl

Schmitt, to institute a political "state of exception."[3] Perhaps uncoincidentally, the "state of exception" has its origins in the French Revolution.[4] The military of the Third Republic sought the suspension of democratic institutions to advance its own vision of public good, and to realize a France without cumbersome republican politics in times of war. The Army attempted to usurp the powers of the government and even acted outside French law. The culmination of the Army's desire for a state of exception was Plan XVII. As will be discussed, Plan XVII and the Army's new offensive doctrine necessitated a resolve, expediency, and violent execution unattainable by the normal functions of the civilian government. In the context of 1914, France would have to set aside appearing to be a victim of authoritarian German aggression on the international stage. Plan XVII demanded that France take a bolder stance, even if early mobilization or a preemptive strike against Germany was necessary. The absence of a political state of exception in August 1914 and the civilian government's inaction would ultimately cause the failure of Plan XVII.

The issues which plagued Plan XVII are neither abnormal nor uncommon in military and political history. In any democracy, there is tension between the military and the government. The military is a politically conservative, authoritarian institution. Democratic governments are, by nature, liberal. Though these two institutions coexist, they have largely different objectives. The purpose of the military is to produce battlefield victory. The function of the government is to establish and uphold justice, citizens' rights, and public order. In war, these aims often clash. Plan XVII was an illumination of this tension. But Plan XVII also revealed an important lesson: for the military and democratic government to function effectively, it is best that each should stay in its own domain. In other words, the generals ought to fight wars and the politicians ought

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[3] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1, 4.
[4] Ibid, 5. The precursor to the state of exception was the *état de siège* ("state of siege"), whereby functions of state usually performed by the civilian government were entrusted to the military. The *état de siège* was first mentioned as part of a decree by the French Constituent Assembly in July of 1791.

to concern themselves with matters of state. Though at odds with democracy itself, a political state of exception is sometimes necessary to achieve military victory. Such was the case of Plan XVII.

Plan XVII had its genesis in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. In the decades following 1871, the Army underwent a period of reconstruction.[5] From 1871 to 1914, the French high command changed its operational and tactical doctrine, organization, and plans in the event of a future war with Germany. By 1912, newly appointed Chief of the General Staff Joseph Joffre determined the best course of action for France would be an offensive-minded force concentration plan.[6] This was not a plan of rigid deployments and movements, but a plan of flexibility with one general purpose: to attack the Germans in an all-out, sweeping offensive.[7] The specifics of Joffre's attack plan, however, were to be unknown to individual commanders—both to maintain secrecy and to allow immediate changes as enemy movements became clear.[8] In total, Joffre planned for 21 corps, 10 cavalry divisions, 14 reserve divisions, two colonial divisions, and one Alpine division to be deployed between Southwestern Belgium and Mulhouse.[9] This accounted for five French field armies. On paper, Joffre's plan was simple and achievable: to attack and overwhelm the invading Germans. The doctrine of *offensive à outrance* ("offensive to excess")—an idea forged in the writings of Foch and Grandmaison—embodied Joffre's all-out attack. Individual soldiers were to be aided in their assault by French *élan*

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[5] Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 4-5.
[6] Joseph Joffre, *The Personal Memoirs of Joffre, Field Marshal of the French Army*, trans. T. Bentley Mott, 1st ed., vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 83.
[7] Ibid, 92; Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 37; Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Scribner, 1923), 285.
[8] Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 287.
[9] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 92.

("spirit") and defeat the Germans through greater determination to conquer. Plan XVII, however, proved to be disastrous in its application.

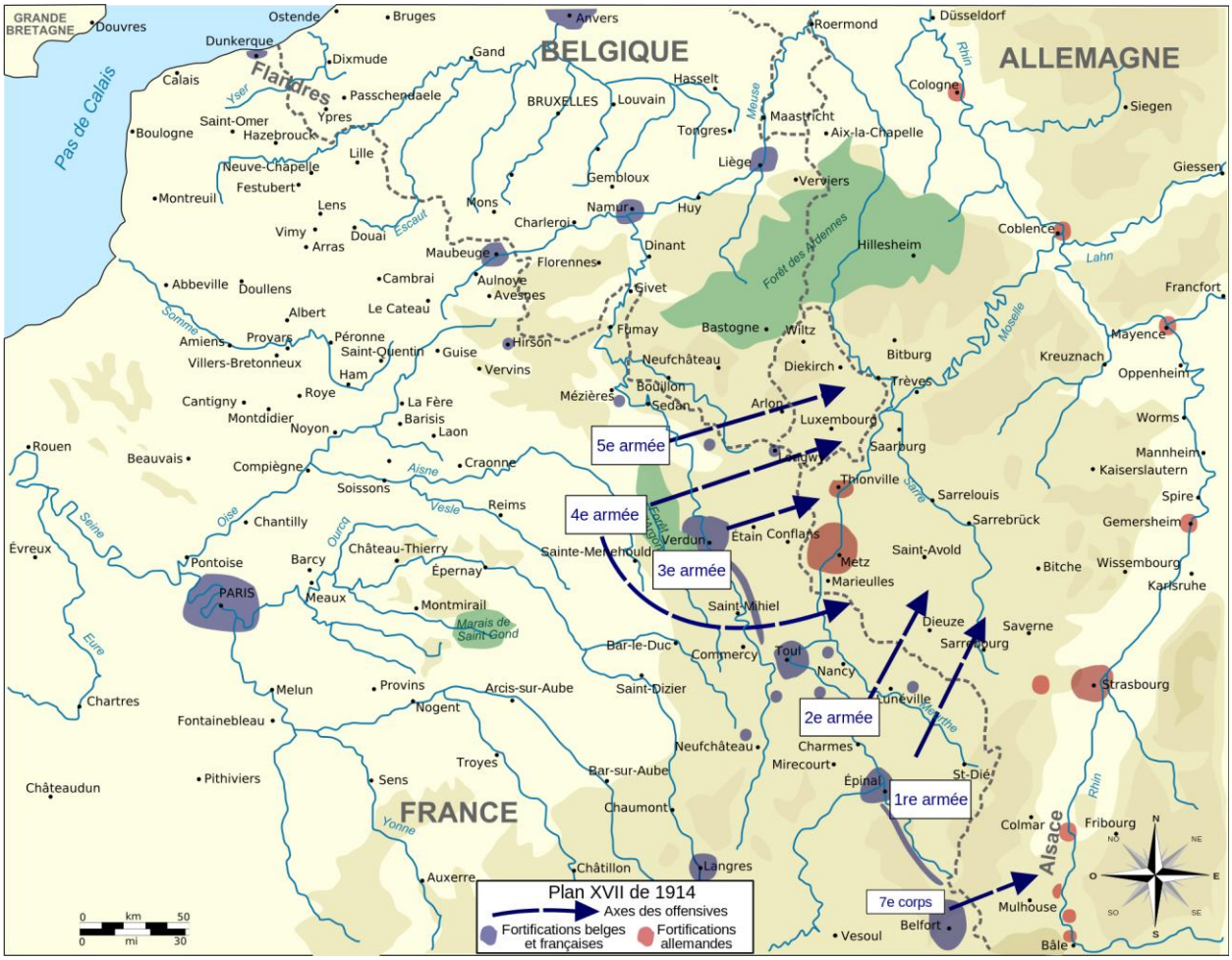

Figure 1. *Plan XVII de 1914*. Image from User: Lvcvlvs, October 21, 2013. Wikicommons.

By 4 August 1914, Germany had declared war on France. After several delays in mobilization, the first French troops began an offensive in German-held Alsace-Lorraine from 7-8 August.[10] These initial engagements with German forces largely met with success.[11] Attacks in Alsace-Lorraine, however, were primarily diversionary in nature; Joffre's main objective was to

[10] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 57.
[11] Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York, NY: The Random House Publishing Group, 1962), 208. For a more detailed outline of Plan XVII, see chapters eleven, thirteen, and fourteen.

strike the German center using Third Army to drive into Luxemburg and northern Alsace; Fourth Army to support the Third; and Fifth Army to strike at southern Belgium. Fifth Army was of particular importance to Plan XVII's success. Commanded by General Charles Lanrezac, Fifth Army was the far left wing of the French war plan. Lanrezac's advance was to be a crushing blow to the German center, facilitated by the favorable geography of the Belgian Ardennes. On the whole, Plan XVII was intended to reflect the French Army's greatest strength—a flexible, adaptable agility based on rapid infantry movement and unimpeded by clumsy heavy artillery and machine guns.[12]

Despite Plan XVII's initial successes, the French Army would suffer catastrophic losses in the month following. Engagements at Mulhouse, Haelen, Lorraine, the Ardennes, Charleroi, and Mons would collectively become known as the Battle of the Frontiers. By 24 August, Joffre had abandoned his hopes to break the German center in Belgium and Luxembourg and ordered Third, Fourth, and Fifth Armies to retreat and position themselves between Verdun and Maubeuge, an extension of the French line to cover a significant portion of the Belgian border and an effective recognition of the offensive's failure.[13] On 1 September—and on the forty-fourth anniversary of the Battle of Sedan—Joffre permitted Fourth and Fifth Armies to retreat 100km near the rivers Aube and Seine.[14] Plan XVII had collapsed, and France would be saved only by the Miracle of the Marne. There, the French halted the advancing Germans in a sweeping, makeshift counteroffensive.[15] The French victory, which famed philosopher Henri Bergson likened to the triumphs of Joan of Arc during the Hundred Years' War, was neither

[12] Ibid, 207.
[13] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 76.
[14] Ibid, 81.
[15] Tuchman, *The Guns of August,* 434-435.

extensively planned nor perfectly executed.[16] France held on for dear life. Renowned German General Helmuth von Moltke the Younger later remarked that only élan truly halted the German advance and saved France from defeat.[17] While a true miracle for the people of France, the German retreat to the river Aisne and the French pursuit of German forces ultimately ushered in a bloody four years of trench warfare.

Figure 2. *French Infantry Marching, 1914.* Photograph from Zachery Tyson Brown, December 14, 2018. The Strategy Bridge. Original author unknown.

[16] Ibid, 436.
[17] Ibid.

Many historians have argued that Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive were destined for failure and fundamentally misguided.[18] They are incorrect. Offensive operations and tactics were well suited to the culture of the French Army and based on recent developments in European warfare. Within relevant scholarship, the historical context of Plan XVII's development is largely dismissed. In her famous book *The Guns of August*, Barbara Tuchman categorizes Plan XVII as a product of "hearts and hopes" rather than the reality of modern warfare, which strongly favored a defensive posture.[19] As Winston Churchill writes in his first volume of *The World Crisis* regarding the failure of the French war plan, "[s]o much for 'Plan XVII."[20] Tuchman and Churchill shared the belief that mass infantry assaults had little chance of success. Similarly, military historian B. H. Liddell Hart condemned the French Army's doctrine of the offensive even more harshly, criticizing it as "illogical."[21] For well-known historians such as Tuchman, Churchill, and Hart—and a great many others, as well—Plan XVII failed on the basis of its own merits, or lack thereof.

Some historians have placed greater emphasis on the political circumstances of the Third Republic in their analysis of Plan XVII's failure, moving beyond simple criticism of Joffre's plan as operationally and tactically weak. In his 1984 book *The Ideology of the Offensive,* political scientist Jack Snyder argues that the French Army adopted the doctrine of the offensive

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[18] Ronald H. Cole, "Victor Michel: The Unwanted Clairvoyant of the French High Command," *Military Affairs* 43, no. 4 (1979), https://doi.org/10.2307/1986754; Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 285-287; W. A. Stewart, "Lanrezac, Joffre, and Plan XVII," The RAND Corporation, July 1967, 2, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2009/P3637.pdf; Jason Waggoner, "French War Plan XVII: Why Did French Military Planners Not Foresee the Tactical Inevitability of Germany's Schlieffen Plan?," *Infantry Magazine, U.S. Army Infantry School* 100, no. 2 (2011): 15; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1984), 50; Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 75.

[19] Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 43.

[20] Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 287.

[21] B. H. Liddell Hart, *Foch, the Man of Orleans* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1932), 26.

for institutional and political reasons.[22] To Snyder, the deeply right-wing French Army felt threatened by the rise of the French left after the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906). So, the Army adopted an offensive military plan to thwart leftist reorganization efforts within the military.[23] Snyder implies that institutional reaction, being primarily responsible for the rise of the offensive in French military thought, bore the brunt of the blame for Plan XVII's failure. Historian Douglas Porch agrees with Snyder that the Army's embrace of the offensive was due to political and institutional factors.[24] For Porch, the political issues surrounding Plan XVII originated with the French Revolution.[25] Uncoincidentally, the political terms "left" and "right" emerged during the French Revolution, the former categorizing the French monarchy's opponents and the latter its proponents.[26] It was this long-standing tension between the political right and political left which ultimately drove the military to adopt a plan bound for failure.

Some military historians are more charitable in their evaluation of Plan XVII. Jonathan House regarded Plan XVII as rational given the circumstances of prevailing European military thought.[27] As House argues, most of Europe believed the next Continental war would be quick and brutal—making large-scale offensive operations the most likely mode of warfare.[28] Though not without his own criticisms, Jason Waggoner also argues that Plan XVII made sense in the context of the early twentieth century. However, as will be discussed over the next three chapters, Plan XVII would ultimately be brought down by the actions of the civilian government.

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[22] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, 54.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981), vii.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Geoffrey M. Hodgson, *Wrong Turnings: How the Left Got Lost* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 32.
[27] Jonathan M. House, "The Decisive Attack: A New Look at French Infantry Tactics on the Eve of World War I," *Military Affairs* 40, no. 4 (1976): 164, https://doi.org/10.2307/1986698.
[28] Ibid; Waggoner, "French War Plan XVII," 16.

The government's refusal to grant Joffre preemptive access to Belgium, for instance, forced the French Army to unrealistically disregard the possibility of the Germans violating the Low Countries' neutrality—a point recognized by Waggoner.[29] Similarly, historian Philip M. Flammer argues that Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive were sound in a historical context, implying that tactical and operational considerations were only one facet of Plan XVII's downfall.[30]

Plan XVII's harshest critics do not examine the most pressing factors in Plan XVII's demise aside from an outright assertion that the offensive was a poor idea and doomed to fail. There is a largely unexplored side of the story: the actions of the civilian government. The government of the Third Republic consistently impeded the execution of Joffre's plan, defeating Plan XVII before the first shots were fired. Jack Snyder, for instance, overlooks the role of the French left within the civilian government in his analysis. Just as the political right viewed leftist military reform efforts as an existential threat to the Army, the French left reacted similarly towards right-wing attempts at undermining the Third Republic, and with tangible effects for Plan XVII. The Dreyfus Affair birthed a new brand of French leftism opposed to militarism, the professional Army, and the offensive. I have coined the term 'reactionary left' to describe this movement. 'Reactionary', as used in the context of the 'reactionary left', should not be confused with the usual definition of the word as right-wing or ultraconservative. Rather, 'reactionary left' reflects the left's opposition to the development of offensive tactics and operations as antithetical to the legacy of the French Revolution, a *reaction* to developments in the French right wing. Certain elements of the reactionary left caused the civilian government to hesitate in a moment

[29] Waggoner, "French War Plan XVII," 18.
[30] Philip M. Flammer, "The Schlieffen Plan and Plan XVII: A Short Critique," *Military Affairs* 30, no. 4 (March 1, 1967): 207, 209, https://doi.org/10.2307/1985401.

of decisive battle, losing the French Army the initiative and condemning Plan XVII to utter failure. In scholarship, the deep-rooted political issues of the civilian government—and its corresponding consequences in July and August 1914—have been overlooked for one, simple reason: Plan XVII's success was never generally considered viable. And, as Plan XVII purportedly failed of its own accord, a serious examination of the civilian government was unnecessary. I intend to change this viewpoint.

This thesis will begin with an overview of offensive operations and tactics from the end of the Franco-Prussian War until the outbreak of World War One, broadly drawing on the legacy of Sedan, the political history of the Third Republic, significant national events such as the Dreyfus Affair and the Second Morocco Crisis, and the development of offensive thought within the Army to explain the origins of Plan XVII. Subsequently, I will demonstrate that Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive were both rational and feasible ideas of warfare. I will also explore the leftist view of warfare and the genesis of the reactionary left. Lastly, I will discuss the failure of Plan XVII and the impact of the reactionary left in the first days of the Great War.

The following three chapters draw extensively on the memoirs of General Joseph Joffre, President Raymond Poincaré, and Prime Minister René Viviani.[31] The memoirs of Joffre, Poincaré, and Viviani appear to not only be reliable but provide significant insight into the personal thoughts and character of the Third Republic's leading figures. As much of this thesis examines personal political beliefs and the broader effect of these convictions, these memoirs are invaluable sources for understanding Joffre, Poincaré, and Viviani as men, not just military and political figures. The writings of Foch and Grandmaison serve as broadly representative of

[31] In France, the President is elected by the whole population, is head of state, and is primarily responsible for foreign policy and national security. The Prime Minister is appointed by the President, is head of government, and is primarily responsible for domestic matters within France. In the United States, the President is head of both state and government.

offensive thinkers within the French Army. Foch and Grandmaison were two of the most vocal and influential proponents of the offensive in the early twentieth century. Finally, the writings of Jean Jaurès are principally used to demonstrate leftist views on the Army. Though the French left varied tremendously from the sources represented in this thesis—as did the French right—Jaurès is used to convey the generally antimilitarist attitudes of the left. As one of the most prominent voices of the French left during the early twentieth century, Jaurès provides an accurate and widely read account of leftist views on the Army. The following argument demonstrates the political origins of Plan XVII's failure at the highest levels, deeply rooted in the French Army and government as institutions.

In his famous book *Essence of Decision*, political scientist Graham T. Allison argues that the manner in which a government acts depends on each constituent institution within said government.[32] The conduct of a state is determined by a myriad of internal factors. Much the same held true for the Third Republic prior to the First World War. Just as the offensive was an intrinsic part of the Army which gave rise to Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive, antimilitarism and defense were similarly part of the civilian government. These competing motivations ultimately led to the downfall of Plan XVII, and nearly led to the downfall of France herself.

Wars, campaigns, and battles are not lost for any one reason, nor are they the fault of any one institution. Often, much deeper factors are the root cause. Most immediately visible are operational and tactical considerations. Less apparent are political and institutional motivations. Understanding *why* the institutional and the political matter to a given situation and *how* such circumstances came to be necessitates a historical perspective. While this examination could

[32] Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 1st ed. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 144-145.

stretch back years, decades, or centuries, the lesson remains the same: understanding the true causes of why states in crisis and conflict act as they do requires greater consideration than just an inquiry into the most recent political developments, and demands a multitude of perspectives. And that is precisely what I aim to do with Plan XVII.

Chapter One: From Sedan to the Offensive

1871–1914

On 2 September 1870, a defeated Napoleon III rode beyond the French lines near Sedan to attempt a parley with King Wilhelm of Prussia.[1] Instead, he was greeted by Wilhelm's Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. Bismarck, rather disinterested in the pleas of the French Emperor, was well aware of the precarious position of the French Army: it was encircled, with no other option but capitulation. And, upon the Army's surrender and Napoleon III's formal submission to the Prussians, his audience with Wilhelm was granted. After a short conversation with the Prussian King, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte began a humiliating journey to a castle in Kassel, where he was to be interned as the last vestiges of French resistance crumbled.[2] With the French Army crushed and the emperor a prisoner of war, the little-known town of Sedan would go down in French history as the site of her most embarrassing defeat, save for perhaps June of 1940. On 28 January 1871, a besieged Paris finally fell to the advancing Prussians and France surrendered. Though the French had fought with honor, the newly-formed Government of National Defense determined the continued defense of Paris to be plainly untenable; the French government had few rations to give its people.[3] Thus began the long process of rebuilding France and her military.

The humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War and the Battle of Sedan prompted the French Army to reevaluate and modify its mode of tactics and operations in the decades following 1871. Though hardly in a linear fashion, the French Army gradually moved towards the adoption of an

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[1] Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871*, 3rd ed. (London, UK: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 222.
[2] Ibid, 223.
[3] H. de Villemessant, "L'armistice," *Le Figaro*, January 29, 1871, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k272119p/f1.item.zoom.

offensive military doctrine. This would become the basis for Plan XVII in 1914. However, the doctrine of the offensive was defined not by military merit, but rather by politics; deep-rooted mistrust between the military and the republican government festered under the guise of mutual cooperation. At the center of political division in France was the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. In 1871, French socialists proclaimed the creation of the "Paris Commune," an independent communist state encompassing the whole of the city. The memory of the Paris Commune would linger in the mind of the French left throughout the first decades of the Third Republic.[4] The Government of National Defense quickly and brutally suppressed the Paris Commune during the "Bloody Week" in 1871, an event which would later become a rallying cry for the French left on the eve of the First World War.[5]

Leftist skepticism towards the Army and anger over the Bloody Week resurfaced during one of the Third Republic's most cataclysmic events: the Dreyfus Affair. The Dreyfus Affair gave the civilian government and the French left reason to question the Army's motives for adopting an offensive doctrine—was the deeply conservative military attempting to strengthen its political position to the detriment of the Republic, and to democracy itself? After all, the Army withheld evidence and acted outside the purview of the law to falsely convict Captain Alfred Dreyfus of espionage, even when the facts of the case suggested his innocence. So, the Dreyfus Affair caused the implementation of offensive military doctrine to become a matter of politics rather than a matter of effective operational and tactical thinking. In the years following the Dreyfus Affair, leftist obstacles to military development did irreparable damage to the Army,

[4] Raymond Recouly, *The Third Republic*, trans. E. F. Buckley (London, UK: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1928), 28-29.
[5] Ibid, 41.

primarily through suppression of offensive doctrine proponents such as Ferdinand Foch.[6] Specifically, Radical republicans and socialists who united to form the left-leaning *Parti radical* in 1901 posed a significant threat to the military. Additionally, the rift between the military and civilian government was deepened by calls from Radicals and socialists to abandon the professional, offensive-inclined professional Army in lieu of a citizen militia focused on defensive tactics and strategy. In their view, a citizen militia could have served as a bulwark against the growing power of the professional Army. Growing mistrust of the military would impede the continued implementation of the offensive, at least until 1911. In 1911, the Second Morocco (Agadir) Crisis reignited support for the military and gave Army leaders an opportunity to vigorously implement offensive tactics and operations. It was this post-Agadir momentum which finally prompted the creation of Plan XVII.

The Legacy of Sedan

1871–1911

The Third Republic had a rocky beginning. Following Napoleon III's defeat and capture at the Battle of Sedan, the spirit of Napoleon I's *Grande Armée* was crushed once again, and much to the delight of the Prussians.[7] Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, Chief of Staff of the Prussian Army, had enveloped the Army of Napoleon III and Marshal Patrice de

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[6] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Radical-Socialist Party," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, July 28, 2017), https://www.britannica.com/topic/Radical-Socialist-Party; J. E. S. Hayward, "The Official Philosophy of the French Third Republic: Léon Bourgeois and Solidarism," *International Review of Social History* 6, no. 1 (1961): 20. The Radical republicans were a bloc of left-leaning, pro-democratic elements in the government of the Third Republic. They were opposed to the center-left Moderate (also called 'Opportunist') republican faction. In 1901, the Radical republicans and socialists would ally to create the *Parti radical* in France, still active in the modern day. Within the context of this paper, the lowercase 'republican' is used to refer to both Radical and Moderate republicans in France.

[7] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: Norton, 2001), 278. *Le Grande Armée* ("The Grand Army") specifically referred to the French Army under Napoleon I.

MacMahon in the Commune of Sedan.[8] MacMahon and the emperor's forces attempted to break Moltke's encirclement but were driven back by superior Prussian positioning, firepower, and troop concentration. Napoleon III was forced to abdicate and was exiled to Great Britain—a fate eerily similar to that of his uncle 55 years prior. The French Army was a shell of its former self and the nation disgraced. For a people which prided itself on military strength, 2 September, 1870 was indeed a dark day for France.

By March of 1871, France was in crisis. Socialists in Paris proclaimed the creation of the "Paris Commune" and sought to create an independent government. In response, monarchists, Bonapartists, and republicans formed the Government of National Defense in Versailles to retake Paris from the revolutionaries. At the behest of the government, Marshal MacMahon led the newly created Army of Versailles to crush the Paris Commune during the Bloody Week, leaving nearly 20,000 dead.[9] But despite broad political unity to defeat the Paris Commune, many moderate and left-leaning republicans continued to eye the professional Army with suspicion, particularly in the wake of the Bloody Week. Military historian Douglas Porch aptly describes the Army of the Third Republic as, "like Banquo's ghost, an unwelcomed guest at a republican feast."[10] It was entirely possible that in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune another Napoleon III would rise to power with military support and overthrow the Republic, just as the former emperor did in 1852.

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[8] "Definition: Commune," Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (Insee, October 13, 2013), https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/definition/c1468. In France, a "commune" is analogous to an incorporated town in the United States and Canada. Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, the Elder's nephew, would command German forces at the outbreak of World War One.

[9] Recouly, *The Third Republic*, 37-38. French leader Adolphe Thiers successfully withdrew professional French forces from Paris, allowing the Commune to come to power.

[10] Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army, 1871-1914* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1.

The Franco-Prussian War finally drew attention to deep-rooted issues in the French Army. According to one 1873 report, Sedan was a product of an "absence of preparation, organization, and direction."[11] Though victorious in the Crimean War and the Second War of Italian Independence, France had not fought a war against a more powerful European military since Napoleon I. Napoleon III's military was vastly under-equipped for a war with the Prussians. But Sedan prompted a critical and sobering self-examination of capability that the French Army had so desperately lacked in 1870. In the decade after the Franco-Prussian War, the Army undertook significant reform efforts. In 1875, the Army created the *École de Guerre*, France's premier merit-based military academy. Following the École's establishment, the government of the Third Republic formed the General Staff in emulation of the Prussians.[12]

These much-needed reforms were fueled by militant republicans—both right-wing and left-wing alike—who embraced *revanche* ("revenge"). In the context of the late nineteenth century, revanche referred to aggressive French nationalism in support of reclaiming the lost territory of Alsace-Lorraine. Among the foremost revanchists were leftist Prime Ministers Léon Gambetta and Charles de Freycinet who sought to "[reconstruct] the army on a solid national foundation."[13] Prominent politician Louis-Jules Trochu, head of the Government of National Defense from 1870-1871, aligned himself with Gambetta and Freycinet. Trochu, an Orleanist, supported the restoration of the House of Orléans to the royal throne of France and continuing

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[11] Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 4.
[12] Charles W. Sanders, "No Other Law: The French Army and the Doctrine of the Offensive," The RAND Corporation (The RAND Corporation, March 1987), 3, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2005/P7331.pdf.
[13] Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1984), 50; Porch, *March to the Marne*, 32.

the legacy of King Louis Philippe I's constitutional monarchy.[14] The Army's revival initially came from a broad political coalition.

Throughout the 1880's and 1890's, the Army's reforms of the 1870's began to bear fruit. The French officer corps rose to the forefront of military thought in Europe, perhaps in large part due to the establishment of institutions such as the École. The professional Army grew to be a quasi-monastic institution, separated from the rest of French society with its own culture and norms which necessitated utter devotion to professional soldiery. Freycinet referred to this as "social regeneration through the army," a bulwark against the social and governmental degeneration which, Freycinet argued, was chiefly responsible for France's defeat in 1871. For revanchists such as Freycinet, the Franco-Prussian War was a *moral* and *spiritual* failure. The "social regeneration" of which he spoke was soon manifested through a decisive shift towards offensive doctrine and an increased emphasis on defeating an enemy through sheer will.

The 1880's and early 1890's was the "golden age" of the French Army in the Third Republic.[15] The professional Army had changed drastically since the calamity and stagnation of September 1870, and the General Staff largely evaded the ire of the civilian government. In the intellectual sphere, French military thought began to turn decisively towards the offensive. This was primarily a reaction to perceived overemphasis on defensive operations and tactics during the Franco-Prussian War.[16] Robust discourse fostered by institutions such as the École enabled influential theorists to explore the unconventional, modern, and decisive tactics and operations which would eventually shape the Army of 1914. Early on in the Third Republic's life, thinkers such as Captain Georges Gilbert began to explore alternatives to the traditionally defensive

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[14] Nigel Aston, "Orleanism 1780-1830," *History Today* 38 (1988): 41. Louis Philippe I reigned from 1830-1848.
[15] Porch, *March to the Marne*, 44.
[16] Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War*, trans. Hilaire Belloc, 4th ed. (London, UK: Chapman & Hall, Ltd., 1939), 284. First printed in 1903.

posture of the post-Sedan Army. He concluded that the Army's "defensive state of mind" was to blame for the 1870 defeat.[17] For men such as Gilbert, the defensive doctrine of 1870 was closely related to Freycinet's charge of moral and spiritual corruption in the military.[18] Passive defense indicated a lack of *will* to conquer. Gilbert would soon be joined by names such as Ferdinand Foch and his pupil Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison, two of the most influential architects of pre-World War One operations and tactics. On the technological level, France outpaced her rivals. The invention of the *Fusil Modèle 1886* "Lebel" rifle was the first mass-produced military firearm to use smokeless powder, drastically increasing the effective range of infantry fire.[19] In his book *The Principles of War,* Ferdinand Foch wrote that the advantages of modern small arms were "indisputable," and harnessing its power was essential to executing a successful attack in modern warfare.[20] Armed with fresh ideas and the most modern rifle in the world, it appeared the French Army and the doctrine of the offensive were destined for success.[21] But in 1894, the progress of the Army was halted.

The Dreyfus Affair was the single greatest blunder of the pre-WWI French Army. Artillery Captain Alfred Dreyfus of Alsace-Lorraine was falsely convicted of treason for providing military secrets to Berlin. And, when new evidence suggested Dreyfus' innocence, the military suppressed it. *L'Affaire* was a disaster for proponents of the offensive. The civilian government now believed the Army was undermining the Republic, and actively disrupted any attempts perceived to strengthen the Army's political position, including the doctrine of the

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[17] B. H. Liddell Hart, *Foch, the Man of Orleans* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1932), 28.
[18] Ibid. Gilbert referred to the Army's spiritual regeneration as *furia francese* ("French fury").
[19] Luc Guillou, "Quelques Fusils Lebel Atypiques," *Gazette des Armes*, May 2012, 26-27, https://web.archive.org/web/20131118183751/http://fr.1001mags.com/parution/gazette-des-armes/numero-442-mai-2012/page-26-27-texte-integral.
[20] Foch, *Principles of War,* 327.
[21] Hart, *The Man of Orleans*, 31. Theorist Ferdinand Foch argued that "any improvement in firearms is bound to add strength to the offensive," of which the adoption of the Lebel rifle was key.

offensive.[22] With the Army's credibility destroyed, two competing political factions soon formed: the supporters of Dreyfus (known as Dreyfusards) and those who maintained his guilt (the anti-Dreyfusards). The former consisted primarily of Radical republicans and socialists; the latter of pro-Army, right-wing elements.[23] Deep, underlying mistrust between the Army and the Republic surfaced again. According to Douglas Porch, this schism exposed the continued potential for confusion among both the civilian government and the Army.[24]

Within the Army, proponents of the offensive bore the brunt of the civilian government's wrath. The administration of the new Prime Minister Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau made numerous concessions to the Dreyfusards and the Radical republicans, including a purge of dubiously republican elements in the Army.[25] As the intellectual center of the Army, the École was reorganized to fit the agenda of the civilian government. The political left of the Third Republic was anti-Catholic and skeptical of the political right. The new policies of the Waldeck-Rousseau administration resulted in the removal of many Catholics and conservatives from teaching positions, including Ferdinand Foch.[26] For the Dreyfusards, the advances of the 1870's through 1890's represented everything wrong with the Army. The spirit of revanche and the resulting offensive tendencies of military intellectuals lent political power to the General Staff, and offensive maneuvers required an elite and professional fighting force, effectively excluding average civilians—from whom the Radicals and socialists drew support—from serious military

[22] In France, the Dreyfus Affair is sometimes referred to as simply *L'Affaire*.
[23] The Dreyfus Affair served as a 'battleground' for the future debate on offensive warfare in the Army. Among Dreyfus' supporters were notably Jean Jaurès, Adolphe Messimy, and Georges Clemenceau.
[24] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 54.
[25] Ibid, 62. Prime Minister Waldeck-Rousseau, a moderate follower of Gambetta, was pushed increasingly to the left by Radical republicans in his cabinet until his resignation in 1902.
[26] Hart, *The Man of Orleans*, 33.

service.[27] The once moderate Waldeck-Rousseau now feared a potential military coup against the republican government by the High Command, a paranoid claim fueled by the Prime Minister's leftist, anti-Catholic Minister of War, General André.[28] The overwhelming majority of offensive doctrine proponents were Catholic and conservative, and André withheld their recommended promotions and reassigned these officers from influential positions. Among moderate and left-leaning elements of the French public, support for the Army began to wane, too.

The Dreyfus Affair coincided with the rise of anti-militarism among middle class republicans, fueled by the fading memory of Sedan and loss of revanche.[29] But with the publication of Emile Zola's famous *J'Accuse…!* in 1898, "political indignation on the left now boiled over into a political crusade" against the professional Army.[30] In response, the Army became a primarily reactionary institution and set aside the advances of the 1870's and 1880's to fight—as they viewed the situation—for the Army's very survival. Widespread antimilitarism reignited calls from the political left to reform the Army, and would later inform Jean Jaurès' suggestion to create a defensive "nation in arms" model in lieu of the small, bureaucratic professional Army, a suggestion modeled after the Army of the First French Republic in the 1790's.[31] For many, the Army of the Third Republic was the Army of the Bloody Week once again—fighting against the people of France. Left-wing criticisms of the Army morphed into attempts to contain the High Command's power and limit its influence on French politics, as seen through Waldeck-Rousseau's appointment of the Radical General André as Minister of

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[27] Foch, *Principles of War,* 286-287. Foch wrote of true victory as a product of "moral victory," dependent upon the will of the individual soldier, his commander, and that of the whole Army to conquer. Foch envisioned an Army composed of anything *but* the 'average' person.
[28] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 76.
[29] Porch, *March to the Marne*, 55.
[30] Ibid, 59.
[31] Jean Jaurès, *Democracy & Military Service: An Abbreviated Translation of the Armée Nouvelle of Jean Jaurès*, ed. C.G. Coulton (London, UK: Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1916), 16.

War. Though publicly contained to an anti-Catholic and anti-conservative purge of the Army, left-wing efforts at Army reform were soon manifested through an explicit opposition to offensive military doctrine.

For socialists and Radical republicans, the Dreyfus Affair was a reinvigoration of the French Revolution a century prior. The Army became, in Porch's words, "fodder for their political guillotine" in a struggle for republican national revival.[32] Ultimately, the political motivations of the French left—and its manifestation in the Army reforms in the early twentieth century—would drive the French Army to failure in 1914. For those on the left, the Army embodied everything wrong with the pre-Revolution *Ancien Régime*: it was conservative, elitist, and overwhelmingly Catholic.[33] And, like the Ancien Régime, the Army was reactionary. With the military cornered and out of favor with the middle class, the High Command went to great pains to shut down the "nation in arms" suggestion of Jaurès and preserve the legacy of Napoleon III's professional Army.

The Dreyfus Affair changed the face of relations between the government and the military. Post-Dreyfus Affair, Army advancements of the past 30 years became antithetical to the Radical republican and socialist mission of curbing the Army's power. Curiously, leftist figures such as Gambetta and Freycinet had previously supported strengthening the Army, a consequence of revanche. Much of the left's distaste for the Army was likely due to the absence of revanchist nationalism in the public sphere in the 1890's and early 1900's.[34] The French left of the early twentieth century began to depart sharply from the left of Gambetta and Freycinet.

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[32] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 73.
[33] Heather Campbell, "Ancien Régime," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, April 8, 2019), https://www.britannica.com/event/ancien-regime. The Ancien Régime or "Old Regime" referred to the political system of France from the latter Middle Ages to 1789.
[34] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 41.

Socialists in particular favored "virtually eliminat[ing] the traditional standing army," Jack Snyder writes, "which the socialists execrated because of its role in suppressing the Paris Commune in 1871."[35] This was most explicitly expressed by Jaurès in his *L'Armée Nouvelle*; he called for the abolition of the Army in favor of a "Militia System" such as during the Revolution.[36] For the left, a strong Army meant a strong political right, threatening the Republic in the same manner as the Government of National Defense did in 1871. But one aspect of the Army was particularly threatening to the socialists and Radical republicans: the doctrine of the offensive.

The Army's gradual embrace of the offensive was undoubtedly a product of Sedan. And for persons such as Gilbert, Grandmaison, and Foch, the offensive's worth rested in its tactical and operational merit alone. But the Dreyfus Affair caused a shift in the Army's view of the offensive from the practical to the ideological. Attacks on the prestige of the Army during the Dreyfus Affair—and increasing calls for a militia-style system—triggered pushback from the Army. In *The Ideology of the Offensive,* political scientist Jack Snyder argues that the Army's embrace of the offensive during the early twentieth century was institutional resistance against an increasingly hostile civilian government.[37] The revanchist language of figures such as Foch and Grandmaison likely concerned the left for the same reason as did the conservative tendencies of many officers. Revanche provided the Army power, credibility, and prestige. Most importantly, an offensive Army excluded average citizens with limited training from military service. As Foch wrote, "[d]iscipline is the strength of armies."[38] Foch and Grandmaison rejected the socialist and Radical republican revival of the Revolutionary citizen-soldier. Given their lack

[35] Ibid, 48.
[36] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 3.
[37] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, 54.
[38] Foch, *Principles of War*, 293.

of discipline and serious devotion to the Army, these troops were unsuited to decisive, offensive operations. Whether proponents of the offensive originally saw professional soldiering as an intrinsically *political* issue was unclear. But given that Jaurès' *L'Armée Nouvelle* was published four years after Foch's *Principles of War*, the genesis of offensive doctrine as a political battleground likely rested with the socialists and Radical republicans. Particularly repulsive to advocates of a citizen army and defensive doctrine was the explicit nationalism of the offensive, which had its origins in the rhetoric of Gambetta, Freycinet, and Trochu. Anti-German sentiment and French nationalism implied the true enemy of the Third Republic lay across the Rhine, not in rue Saint-Dominique, undermining the narrative by figures such as André that the Army was intent on destroying the Third Republic.[39]

Offensive doctrine was not the intrinsic enemy of socialists, Radical republicans, and Dreyfusards. Rather, the offensive displayed symptoms of the pro-Army sentiment the left wished to dispel. And, Snyder is correct that the Army partly saw the offensive as a tool to regain lost prestige. But if the Army's embrace of the offensive was reactionary, so was the left's criticism. Snyder's thesis of the Army embracing the offensive as a means of self-preservation is equally true of people such as Jaurès. Jaurès believed that "the establishment of a defensive organization so formidable that every thought of aggression is put out of the mind of even the most insolent and rapacious" was among "the highest aims of the Socialist Party."[40] The political left grew to dislike the doctrine of the offensive only *after* its potential benefits to the Army were fully revealed. The left's opposition to the offensive was ideological insofar as the citizen militia of Jaurès was concerned. It was political not in the traditional sense, but political on an institutional level. That is, thwarting the Army's attempts at implementing offensive operations

[39] Rue Saint-Dominique is the historical and contemporary home of the French War Ministry.
[40] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 2.

and tactics both ideologically aligned with the mission of many on the left and assisted in preserving the Third Republic as an institution. However, the Army would soon adopt the doctrine of the offensive along similar grounds of institutional politics and would seize upon the Agadir Crisis of 1911 to do so.

Agadir and the Rise of the Offensive

1911–1912

In 1830, France invaded Algeria—beginning more than 130 years of French control over much of North Africa. For the rest of the nineteenth century, two areas of North Africa were largely unoccupied by any European power: the Sultanate of Morocco and Ottoman Tripolitania (Libya). By the turn of the twentieth century, France began to exercise significant influence over Morocco. In 1904, France signed a secret agreement with Britain to support mutual hegemony over Morocco and Egypt, respectively.[41] A similar agreement was reached with Spain. But despite initial German recognition of the Anglo-French agreement in 1904, by 1905 Berlin openly challenged French influence in Morocco during the First Morocco Crisis. Following the arrival of a French delegation in Fez in 1905, Sultan Abdelaziz of Morocco contested French influence as a violation of the 1880 Treaty of Madrid and appealed to Kaiser Wilhelm II for assistance.[42] In 1905, the Kaiser met with the Sultan and offered German support for continued Moroccan independence. The matter of French dominance over Morocco—and London's support for Paris through the 1904 Agreement and the Entente Cordiale—was settled during the

[41] Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Scribner, 1923), 15.
[42] The Treaty of Madrid (1880) regulated and recognized certain European conquests in Morocco and allowed limited employment of Moroccans in European industries in the country.

Algeciras Conference of 1906. With British support, Russia, Spain, the United States, and Italy reaffirmed France's claim on Morocco, humiliating Berlin.[43]

Despite the consensus of the Algeciras Conference, Berlin again tested French resolve during the Second Moroccan (Agadir) Crisis of 1911. In 1911, a rebellion broke out against French-aligned Sultan Abd Al-Hafid in Morocco. Under the pretext of protecting German citizens in Morocco, Kaiserliche Marine gunboat *SMS Panther* positioned itself near the coastal city of Agadir. To end the Crisis, Prime Minister Joseph Caillaux's government came to an agreement with Berlin whereby Paris conceded territory in the French Congo to German Cameroon in exchange for German recognition of Morocco as a French protectorate.[44] Though war was avoided, the French public was furious.[45] Gone was the anti-militarism of the 1890's and the Dreyfus Affair. The memory of Alsace-Lorraine once again entered the public consciousness, and France prepared for war. But while the civilian government and public saw humiliation, the military saw an opportunity.

The First Morocco Crisis changed little in the way of curbing Radical republican and socialist efforts to create a citizen army. In fact, 1905 saw the adoption of a shortened, two-year length of service for the Army, part of the effort to move away from the professional Army and towards Jaurès' vision of a nation-in-arms based upon universal military service.[46] But if the success of Algeciras reinforced the Radical republican and socialist vision for the Army, the defeat of Agadir inflamed a "Nationalist Revival" as Porch describes.[47] By 1913, France had

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[43] Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 27.
[44] Maurice Zimmerman, "L'accord Franco-Allemand du 4 Novembre 1911 au sujet du Maroc et du Congo," *Annales de Géographie* 116 (1912), 185.
[45] Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Sydney, Australia: Harper Collins, 2012), 208-209, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Sleepwalkers/TE0iZ4U2ZvUC?hl=en&gbpv=0.
[46] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, 70-71; Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 8, 9.
[47] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 169.

replaced the 1905 service law with a three-year requirement at the behest of the Army High Command. The drastic shift in support for the military was political in nature and demonstrated Porch's belief that in 1911, a large portion of the French public was prepared for war with Berlin.[48] As Raymond Poincaré wrote in his memoirs, Agadir again fueled post-1871 revanche, which "imposed on us a thick and thin hostility against a neighbouring nation whenever and wherever international questions might be at issue."[49] The Agadir Crisis stirred nationalism and stoked fears of potential war with Germany. Marshal Joffre later admitted that, for the first time since the Franco-Prussian War, many in France thought that war with Germany was possible over the issue of Morocco.[50]

At the height of the Second Morocco Crisis, the socialist and Radical vision for an active-reserve integrated defensive Army was still popular. From January to July 1911, the politically moderate General Victor-Constant Michel was commander-in-chief designate of the French Army.[51] As Snyder writes, "Michel was one of the 'republican' generals who sympathized with civilian critics of traditional military ways and rose to prominence for largely political reasons."[52] Like Joffre, Michel feared imminent war with Germany. But unlike his peers in the professional Army, Michel assessed that a defensive military strategy was most beneficial to the French position.[53] Michel actively advocated for integration of reserve units with active-duty units to form a *demi-brigade* as during the French Revolution, an effort to increase the overall

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Raymond Poincaré, *The Memoirs of Raymond Poincaré, 1912,* trans. George Arthur, vol. 1 (London, UK: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1926), 2.
[50] Joseph Joffre, *The Personal Memoirs of Joffre, Field Marshal of the French Army*, trans. T. Bentley Mott, 1st ed., vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 7.
[51] Michel's official title was "Vice President of the Superior War Council."
[52] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 49.
[53] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 8.

size of the French Army.[54] Jaurès likewise argued for integration of reserve and territorial troops with the active duty Army as means of achieving frontline numerical parity with Berlin.[55] Despite whatever practical reasons for which a defensive strategy was presented, prominent figures on the left held that "[g]overnments which shrink from the immediate use of all their reserve forces confess, by their hesitation, the existence of elements of aggression and injustice in their policy."[56] For Jaurès, this contrasted with the "justice and uprightness" of the nation-in-arms, perhaps reminiscent of the French Revolutionary Wars and the republican fervor with which these conflicts were fought.[57] An aim of Radical republicans and socialists before and during the Agadir Crisis was—regardless of perceived merits to the defensive—to advance and reinvigorate the spirit of the French Revolution. While true that the Army adopted a defensive posture immediately following the Franco-Prussian War, the rejection of offensive doctrine during the 1870's and 1880's was arguably a reaction to the shock of the Army's dismal state. Michel and Jaurès' support of the defensive was political, then. But rising Franco-German tensions during the Second Morocco Crisis would soon give the right the victory it needed to radically change French military doctrine.

Right-wing proponents of offensive doctrine capitalized on the Agadir Crisis to advance their vision of professional excellence and offensive doctrine in the French Army. On 29 July 1911, General Joseph Joffre was appointed Chief of the Army Staff by War Minister Adolphe Messimy. Messimy, himself a man of the left, chose Joffre for both his ability as a brilliant

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[54] Ibid; Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 49. During the French Revolution, professional soldiers, national guardsmen, and volunteers were grouped together in a 'demi-brigade', a standardization effort to increase the effective size of the French Army.
[55] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 39. The 'Territorial Army' was effectively a reserve national guard.
[56] Ibid, 17.
[57] Ibid.

logistician and for his moderate political views.[58] Joffre was a steady hand with deep connections to both Republicans and the military establishment. But Joffre, with his inoffensive political convictions and generally amateurish understanding of grand military operations, became "a modern Delphic oracle, the mouthpiece of a military priesthood among whom Grandmaison was the actual augur and General de Castelnau the officiating high priest," as B.H. Liddell Hart writes.[59] Proponents of the offensive seized upon the newfound political moderacy of the civilian government to aggressively implement their 'cult of the offensive'. However practical the initial offensive concepts of Grandmaison and Foch were, Messimy's appointment of Joffre demonstrated a decisive shift from the pragmatic to the political among offensive-minded right-wingers in the military.

The revival of revanche, the rejection of the defensive, and the return of offensive, politically conservative thinkers in the Army coincided with the rise of the right wing in the civilian government. In January 1912, Raymond Poincaré was appointed Prime Minister of France following the surge in French nationalism that accompanied Agadir. Poincaré was a member of the center-right Democratic Republican Alliance, a sharp deviation from the left-wing politics of his predecessor, Joseph Caillaux.[60] The Poincaré government, like the reemergence of the offensive in the Army, reflected support for revanche. Revanche, however, was antithetical to leftist principles; its accompanying offensive doctrine threatened to give the professional Army too much power. The citizen militia and defensive doctrine promoted by figures such as Jaurès provided a safety net for the Republic through embedding civilian

[58] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 15.
[59] Hart, *The Man of Orleans*, 61. Castelnau was a prominent General before and during the First World War.
[60] Charles Johnston, "Caillaux's Secret Power Through French Masonry," *The New York Times*, February 24, 1918. Caillaux was well known for his ardent left-wing beliefs. Many on the right associated Caillaux with socialism, anticlericalism, and conspiratorial claims of secretly manipulating the government through "Latin Freemasonry."

republican supporters in the military, ensuring the Army would never again threaten to overthrow the Republic. With the possible exception of War Minister Adolphe Messimy and former Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, left-wing support for revanche and offensive military modernization efforts—such as during the time of Gambetta and Freycinet—was absent. In fact, according to Porch, there were "deliberate attempts by Radical reformers to lower the social and intellectual level of the officer corps" prior to the Agadir Crisis.[61] Radical administrations of the post-Dreyfus, pre-Agadir Third Republic were attempting to preserve republican institutions through military democratization. For the left, the Dreyfus Affair proved the military was anti-republican, and ought to be treated with caution. The rise of the Poincaré government, however, reversed the antimilitarist trend of the post-Dreyfus civilian government.

Within the Army, the new Poincaré government and the appointment of Joffre provided the offensive 'cultists' an opportunity to implement an offensive doctrine. And, to whatever degree that Joffre was simply a "mouthpiece" for Grandmaison and Castelneau, Joffre fully embraced the necessity of offensive operations to the culture of the Army and to the success of warfare.[62] The President, the center-right Armand Fallières, was equally supportive of a shift to the offensive. In a meeting of the Council of National Defense on 9 January 1912, Fallières stated that "[w]e are resolved… to march straight against the enemy without any thought of the consequences. The offensive suits the temperament of our soldiers and ought to bring us victory…"[63] Both civilian political figures and the Army High Command began to reflect Foch's contention that "[i]n tactics, *action* is the governing rule of war," a long-standing tradition of the French Army since Napoleon I.[64] For the first time, the revival of revanche post-Agadir brought

[61] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 83.
[62] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 27.
[63] Ibid, 48.
[64] Foch, *Principles of War,* 284.

the necessity of French élan to popularity within the highest levels of the civilian government in direct reflection of the Army's values. This offensive 'fighting spirit' of élan harkened back to the legacy of Napoleon I's massed infantry attacks, fueled by militant French nationalism on the back of the Agadir Crisis. The result was the creation of Plan XVII.

Across the Rhine, Germany was experiencing a similar resurgence of nationalism. Much like in France, right-wing elements of the press condemned the Franco-German Accords of 1911 as too generous to Paris, and an insult to German imperial ambitions.[65] Chief of the Great German General Staff Helmuth von Moltke the Younger even *encouraged* the prospect of war with France during the Agadir Crisis.[66] Following the Second Morocco Crisis, Moltke turned to the age-old question of all German strategists: given Germany would have to fight a two-front war—and provided neither France nor Russia could be capitulated without a majority concentration of German forces—was Paris or St. Petersburg to be the initial target of the German Army?[67] Perhaps prompted by the Agadir Crisis, Moltke became determined to launch an immediate offensive against France, and in a manner not so different from Plan XVII.[68]

Plan XVII: A Political Genesis

1912–1914

With revanche and the offensive now firmly established within the civilian government and the military, the Army became the powerful institution the Radical republicans and socialists had feared. After Joffre's appointment, Messimy merged the functions of Vice President of the Superior Council of War with that of Chief of the Army Staff to form the position of Chief of the

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[65] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers,* 209.
[66] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 147-148.
[67] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers,* 513.
[68] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 149.

General Staff. Joffre was invested with *absolute* power over the Army's plans, deployment, doctrine, and operations in times of war.[69] Joffre wasted no time in implementing a new, radical offensive strategy.[70] He sought to normalize Foch's principle of "intentional, resolute, and sudden action of masses acting by surprise" by insisting to leftist critics of the offensive that "[n]othing in all this was revolutionary or even questionable."[71] Much like how the Radical and socialist embrace of a defensive, militia-based Army organization was a reaction to the Dreyfus Affair and fears of increasing military power, Joffre and the High Command's efforts to make the doctrine of the offensive more 'palatable' was a proportional response. The left had sought to make defensive doctrine and Revolutionary military values mainstream. Joffre and the right reoriented the French Army to the offensive élan of Napoleon I and the Army's post-1871 renaissance. But despite the civilian government's seeming embrace of the offensive in 1912, Joffre and the Army remained apprehensive of anti-military civilian interference in formulating Plan XVII.

Joffre understood that the potential for civilian interference in Plan XVII was still great. The new Chief of the General Staff had experience in handling the often difficult civilian authorities, and had mastered balancing his own goals with those of government bureaucracy to achieve his aims.[72] So, Joffre concluded that any future war plans were to be focused on force concentration rather than rigid, specific maneuvers. He plausibly did so for two reasons. First, an ambiguous plan of attack minimized the possibility for microscopic, bureaucratic examination and interference. Second, and in the true spirit of the offensive, was *flexibility.* That is, Joffre wished to rapidly assess the situation in the opening days of military action against Germany and

[69] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 17.
[70] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 24.
[71] Foch, *Principles of War,* 297; Joffre, *Memoirs,* 32.
[72] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 15.

deploy the Army accordingly.[73] Foch had similarly emphasized the necessity of "quickness and nimbleness in preparing *an attack.*"[74] Although the potential for governmental interference in military planning was not part of Foch's reasoning, the popularity of the offensive among the anti-republican right—and given the inherently conservative nature of the Army—the avoidance of political interference was joined at the hip with a vigorous offensive.

The issue of Belgian neutrality epitomized Joffre's fear of civilian interference in military planning. Though General Michel and Joffre were vastly different commanders, they agreed on one possibility: that in the event of war, the Germans might violate Belgian neutrality to launch an offensive in northeast France. But where Michel proposed a defensive posture, Joffre saw an opportunity to strike the Germans in Belgium and decisively crush their advance at the war's immediate outset. To facilitate this, Joffre planned for General Lanrezac's French Fifth Army to launch an offensive between Namur and Arlon in Belgium, driving a salient into the German center and right. Joffre believed that "[i]n the case of war with Germany, the plan which would be most fruitful in decisive results consists in taking from the very start a vigorous offensive in order to crush by a single blow the organized forces of the enemy."[75] Joffre's request was simple: should France hear of a German invasion in Belgium, French forces ought to immediately move to assault the German forces and swiftly crush the invasion force. There existed only one problem. As the civilian government controlled international affairs, Joffre required its consent to violate Belgian neutrality. If the civilian government hesitated to give permission, the advantage of the "quickness and nimbleness" Foch wrote of would be lost. He communicated as much to Poincaré's cabinet in 1912 during the early stages of Plan XVII's

[73] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 68.
[74] Foch, *Principles of War,* 293.
[75] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 50.

formulation. Poincaré, then Prime Minister, said that the government would only support violating Belgian neutrality if a "positive menace of German invasion" existed.[76] The vagueness of Poincaré's response infuriated Joffre, and understandably so. An absolute confirmation of German invasion would take, at Joffre's estimate, ten or eleven days after mobilization, ruining French chances at seizing the initiative against the Germans.[77]

Joffre had effectively asked the civilian government to endorse a political state of exception in the event of war with Germany. His proposed plan to violate Belgian neutrality was an attempted usurpation of the powers of the government to control international affairs. The government's rejection of his proposal was unsurprising. Ignoring Belgian neutrality implied the civilian government was not *truly* in control of France—the Army was. Preventing the Army from operating under a state of exception was a principal objective of the French left; events such as the Bloody Week and the Dreyfus Affair were directly enabled by extraordinary circumstances. The Franco-Prussian War had sanctioned the Bloody Week and the Army's hubris had permitted Captain Dreyfus' extralegal conviction. As Jaurès wrote, the objective of the socialist left was "not to militarize the democracy but to democratize the military."[78] History had demonstrated the Army to be untrustworthy when given power. It was entirely possible, then, that Poincaré shared similar views to that of the French left: if given too much power through Plan XVII, the military would again abuse its authority in a state of exception.

Poincaré's hesitancy to fully embrace offensive à outrance contained elements of the pre-Agadir military skepticism which had gripped the civilian government since the Dreyfus Affair. Poincaré upheld the policy of the Radical Caillaux before him, effectively placing restrictions on

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[76] Ibid, 53.
[77] Ibid, 49.
[78] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* xi.

the limits of Joffre's command authority as Doughty argues.[79] While Poincaré's exact thoughts on curtailing military power for sake of republican preservation were unclear, the then-Prime Minister's ambiguous statement nevertheless had the same effect as the Radical Caillaux's prior rejection: to rein in Joffre and his ability to wage war. In his memoirs, Poincaré would later defend the "moral and diplomatic reasons" for his decision which "outweighed purely military considerations," implicitly accusing Joffre of a narrow-minded approach to warfare.[80] Moreover, Poincaré fully understood the potential for a preemptive German invasion of Belgium and the necessity of meeting the German armies as early as possible. As Joffre reportedly told Poincaré in 1912, "[t]he situation will be infinitely more advantageous if we are permitted to extend our left beyond our frontier into the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and onto Belgian territory."[81] Poincaré's argument that "moral and diplomatic" issues prevented an early strike against the Germans in Belgium for fear of losing British support was void by Poincaré's own admission. In his memoirs, the Prime Minister wrote that the British were unbeholden to sending an expeditionary force to France in the event of war with Germany.[82] With no guarantee of British support, Poincaré had lackluster grounds on which to reasonably contest Joffre's proposed violation of Belgian neutrality. Aside from a fear of angering London, there were no immediate, tangible military consequences for entry into Belgium following the first reports of German activity. The more plausible answer was that Poincaré held onto some of the fears which drove the post-Dreyfus left-wing reforms of the Army: to limit the power of the High Command. From

[79] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 21.
[80] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1912*, 116.
[81] Robert Doughty, "French Strategy in 1914: Joffre's Own," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 2 (April 2003): 440, https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0112.
[82] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1912*, 93.

its inception, Plan XVII was riddled with political issues. And the doctrine of the offensive would suffer the brunt of the Third Republic's political discord.

Politics defined the creation of Plan XVII. The memory of the Paris Commune and the Bloody Week arose once again in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair. In response, the French left set out to republicanize the Army—a trend which would not be reversed until after the Second Morocco Crisis in 1911. The humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine drove a renaissance of the offensive military doctrine of Napoleon I, brought into the modern age by Ferdinand Foch, Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison, and Georges Gilbert. Though initially a product of tactical and strategic necessity to remedy the failure of 1870, the offensive soon became a political issue. After the Dreyfus Affair, Radical republicans and socialists viewed the offensive as giving too much power to the Army; offensive maneuvers demanded a small, professional, and elite fighting force. To curb the Army's power, prominent leftists such as Jean Jaurès proposed a defensive citizen militia model of military organization, as during the French Revolution. But with the Agadir Crisis of 1911 and the possibility of conflict with Germany closer than ever before in the life of the Third Republic, the Army regained its power as a product of revanchist French nationalism once again dominating the political sphere. With Joffre now leading the Army and invested with absolute authority, right-wing proponents of the offensive quickly worked to implement their ideas, the product of which was Plan XVII.

Between 1871 and 1914, there was deep tension between the civilian government and the Army in the Third Republic. As will be explored, this strained relationship dates to the French Revolutionary Wars of 1792-1802. This was, perhaps, part of a greater trend in Europe as a whole: fundamental hostility between the military and government. As Christopher Clark writes in *The Sleepwalkers,* the outbreak of the Great War could be seen as a pan-European military

"usurpation" of the government, resulting in widespread militarism.[83] It is worth asking *why* the government and the military seemed to consistently be at odds throughout Europe. While the Third Republic and Plan XVII were extreme examples of military-civilian hostility, a general conclusion might be drawn: that European militaries perceived civilian-led governments as antithetical to effectively waging war. In the words of Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, "Our diplomats have always hurled us into misfortune… Our generals have always saved us."[84] This was most certainly true with Plan XVII and the civilian government—politicians at the highest levels of the Third Republic failed to grasp the basic needs of offensive warfare. Over the following two chapters, the origins and extent of the civilian government's apprehension and ineffectiveness will be fully examined, and with greater implications for our understanding of military-civilian relations than just within the context of the Third Republic.

[83] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers,* 215.
[84] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 129.

Chapter Two: New Doctrines, Old Politics

1792–1914

Foch and Grandmaison's doctrine of offensive à outrance—which called for massive infantry assaults—was tactically sound, and reasonable in its aims. Likewise, Plan XVII provided an adaptable scheme of force concentration to fit the doctrine of the offensive at the operational level. However, not all historians view Joffre's plan in this manner. According to Jack Snyder, the failure of Plan XVII was a product of the Army's "organizational ideology"—problematic "beliefs about the nature of war, prescriptions for healthy military institutions, and doctrines for military operations."[1] Snyder argues that offensive à outrance was inherently flawed, and was a reaction to the growth of leftism and a means of preserving the Army as a professional, conservative institution. Other historians have argued similarly, deriding the offensive as a plainly untenable strategy.[2] They are incorrect; offensive à outrance was a viable, informed mode of warfare for the French, dragged down by an apprehensive civilian government.

For Snyder, the Army's adoption of the offensive was an institutional reaction to the rise and popularity of leftist antimilitarism after the Dreyfus Affair, and a means to safeguard the

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[1] Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1984), 50, 31.

[2] Ronald H. Cole, "Victor Michel: The Unwanted Clairvoyant of the French High Command," *Military Affairs* 43, no. 4 (1979): https://doi.org/10.2307/1986754; Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Scribner, 1923), 285-287; W. A. Stewart, "Lanrezac, Joffre, and Plan XVII," The RAND Corporation, July 1967, 2, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2009/P3637.pdf; Jason Waggoner, "French War Plan XVII: Why Did French Military Planners Not Foresee the Tactical Inevitability of Germany's Schlieffen Plan?," *Infantry Magazine, U.S. Army Infantry School* 100, no. 2 (2011): 15; Philip M. Flammer, "The Schlieffen Plan and Plan XVII: A Short Critique," *Military Affairs* 30, no. 4 (March 1, 1967): 207, https://doi.org/10.2307/1985401; Jonathan M. House, "The Decisive Attack: A New Look at French Infantry Tactics on the Eve of World War I," *Military Affairs* 40, no. 4 (1976): 164, https://doi.org/10.2307/1986698. It is important to note that Flammer and House defend Plan XVII and offensive à outrance as feasible given the historical circumstances of the early twentieth century, and this reference is solely intended to recognize their observation that criticism of Plan XVII is common among historians.

professional Army from leftist interference.[3] But the converse was also true. The rise of leftist antimilitarism was itself an institutional reaction to the perceived threat the military posed to the Republic, chiefly manifested in efforts to implement defensive military operations and tactics. At the outset of the Great War, these originally leftist ideas began to transcend the divide between historically left-wing and right-wing conceptions of the military. Left-wing skepticism of the military and designs for its reorganization became an institutional part of the Third Republic's government. Ultimately, the institutionalized influence of the left led to the overall hesitancy of the civilian government to faithfully execute Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive, contributing to the French Army's defeat in the Battle of the Frontiers.

The leftist position on the military in the early twentieth century is broadly examined in this chapter, primarily through the lens of Jean Jaurès' writings. The story of tension between the political left and right regarding the military began in 1792 with the French Revolutionary Wars and the *Levée en Masse* ("mass conscription").[4] Throughout the next 120 years, these debates again erupted during times of national crisis—most notably during the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Dreyfus Affair. It was these debates and events on which Jaurès and much of the left built their opposition to the offensive, the professional Army, and the reintroduction of Napoleonic tactics, operations, and nationalist sentiments reminiscent of the First Empire. The Paris Commune and the Dreyfus Affair, then, will be revisited and reexamined through the lens of Jaurès writings to understand the origins of his ideas and of the 'reactionary left'. This reactionary left, which rose to prominence in the early twentieth century, was a product of both

[3] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 52.
[4] The Levée en Masse of 1793 was instituted to supply manpower to the Army during the French Revolutionary Wars.

the Paris Commune and the Dreyfus Affair. It would be this same reactionary left which would bring about disastrous consequences for Plan XVII in August 1914.

Foch and Grandmaison: Serious Tacticians

1903–1913

At fifty years old in 1911, Colonel Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison was among the youngest proponents of offensive tactics and operations in the upper echelons of the French Army. Himself a student of Foch, Grandmaison was the first to articulate the elder strategist's belief in offensive, active military operations as offensive à outrance, placing a heavy emphasis on élan as necessary to produce victory.[5] Following the dismissal of General Michel in 1911—and after Minister of War Adolphe Messimy appointed Joffre to the Superior War Council—Grandmaison became heavily influential owing to two lectures delivered at the War College.[6] In 1906, Grandmaison published *Dressage de l'infanterie* and posited that "offensive infantry combat can be defined in one word: move forward."[7] For Grandmaison, the offensive was new to the Third Republic but well-known to France; France's greatest victories were the product of relentless attack and high morale.[8] The offensive was consistent with French military history. Foch came to a similar conclusion: that the offensive was almost *natural* for the French Army,

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[5] Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War*, trans. Hilaire Belloc, 4th ed. (London, UK: Chapman & Hall, Ltd., 1939), 284; Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York, NY: The Random House Publishing Group, 1962), 33.
[6] Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 33. At the time, Grandmaison was Director of the Bureau of Military Operations, sometimes referred to as the "Troisème Bureau" in reference to the Deuxième Bureau, the Third Republic's military intelligence agency.
[7] Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison, *Dressage de l'infanterie en vue du combat offensif. Avec une préface du Général Langlois*, 3rd ed. (Paris, France: Berger-Levrault, 1916), 65. Original text read: "…le combat offensif de l'infanterie se définit en un mot: avancer."
[8] Ibid, 43.

and the future of warfare rested in the victories of Napoleon, France's greatest offensive tactician.[9]

It was logical for Foch and Grandmaison to draw on the history of the French Army to justify the doctrine of the offensive, particularly Napoleonic tactics. In *Principles of War*, Foch called for "[the application of] superior forces to one point" to rout the enemy.[10] At Austerlitz in 1805, perhaps France's greatest military victory, Napoleon epitomized offensive à outrance through a surprise, massed infantry assault against the Austro-Russian center on Pratzen Heights.[11] He did similarly at Marengo in 1800; the bridge at Lodi in 1796; and forced a Russian retreat at Borodino in 1812. The legacy and victories of Napoleon were heavily embedded both in the culture of the French Army and France as a whole. Foch and Grandmaison were intent on reviving this Napoleonic spirit through the doctrine of the offensive. In many of Napoleon's greatest victories, the French Army found itself at a numerical disadvantage. Uncoincidentally, the German Empire held consistent numerical superiority over the French. By 1913, Germany's active forces numbered 800,000 men to France's 500,000.[12] For Foch and Grandmaison, an offensive doctrine was plausibly a means of 'bridging the gap' in the Franco-German force disparity, replicating Napoleonic tactics at the strategic and operational levels. The culture of the Grande Armée exemplified the élan which enabled Napoleon to overcome superior enemy forces. It was plausible that by harnessing the legacy and culture of Napoleon's Army, French forces might overcome the numerically superior German enemy. From a historical perspective,

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[9] Foch, *Principles of War*, 294.
[10] Ibid, 298.
[11] R. G. Burton, *From Boulogne to Austerlitz, Napoleon's Campaign of 1805* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1912), 88.
[12] Raymond Recouly, *The Third Republic*, trans. E. F. Buckley (London, UK: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1928), 258.

the French Army was successful in massive, concentrated frontal assaults—even when faced with a numerically superior opponent.

The lynchpin of offensive à outrance was the unexpected attack. Grandmaison wrote that a strong attack depended upon "speed (surprise;) and in the immediate threat of confrontation (shock)."[13] In *Principles of War,* Foch concurred with ancient Greek historian and philosopher Xenophon that "surprise strikes with terror even those who are much the stronger party" in warfare.[14] Implied by Grandmaison and Foch's comments was the seizure of the immediate initiative in the attack rather than operating in reaction to enemy movements. The vastly less numerous population of France demanded such a radical strategy. After all, it was the stagnant, passive, and defensive Army of MacMahon which was encircled at Sedan. But in order for an immediate, overwhelming, and unexpected attack to be successful, it was necessary for individual soldiers to be courageous. While primarily a tactical recommendation on the part of Grandmaison to be executed in smaller, localized command structures, Foch—and later Joffre—saw the unexpected attack as an operational matter.[15] In his formulation of Plan XVII, Joffre advocated "from the very start a vigorous offensive" of the entire French Army against German forces, an implementation of offensive à outrance at the operational level.[16] But the offensive's success was hardly assured, and it was incumbent upon each and every French infantryman to display a *will* to conquer his opponent.

Élan was to drive the success of offensive à outrance, heavily influenced by the cultural history of the French Army. Stemming from his extensive knowledge of Napoleonic tactics,

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[13] Grandmaison, *Dressage de l'infanterie,* 165. Original text reads: "Sa force est dans la rapidité (surprise;) et dans la menace immédiate d'abor-dage (choc)."
[14] Foch, *Principles of War*, 291.
[15] Ibid, 296.
[16] Joseph Joffre, *The Personal Memoirs of Joffre, Field Marshal of the French Army*, trans. T. Bentley Mott, 1st ed., vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 50.

Foch believed certain superior qualities were natural to the French soldier. Foch wrote that the French soldier was "undeniably superior to the one beyond the Vosges in his racial qualities, activity, intelligence, spirit, power of exaltation, devotion, patriotism: he is the mameluke as opposed to the French cavalrymen."[17] Foch compared the modern French soldier to those of Napoleon at the Battle of the Pyramids, an implicit justification of élan as the centerpiece of offensive à outrance. Grandmaison also believed in the 'invincible' French soldier. He asserted that fear was the only true enemy facing the infantryman, to be conquered by a superior will in the same tradition as Foch wrote of in *Principles of War*.[18] Foch and Grandmaison's views were relevant to an ongoing conversation within the French left: solidarism. Spearheaded by Prime Minister Léon Bourgeois in the 1890's, French solidarism sought a united society of persons to achieve an "associationist and statist socialism."[19] This applied to the international world order, too, and solidarism advocated for an equal association between countries.[20] Solidarism was directly opposed to the conservative culture of the military, particularly the idea that the French infantryman was "undeniably superior"; an equal association of countries and people rebuked the long-held military idea that the French were the finest soldiers in Europe. By extension, solidarism refuted the Napoleonic élan which had propelled France to great victories a century prior—an idea which would do so again according to Foch and Grandmaison. Through élan, Foch and Grandmaison made the offensive part of the national conversation. Much to the contrary of solidarism, they created a 'renaissance' of the Army's historical values of victory through superior will.

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[17] Foch, *Principles of War*, 285. The Vosges mountains are the natural border between France and Germany in Alsace-Lorraine.
[18] Grandmaison, *Dressage de l'infanterie*, 2.
[19] J. E. S. Hayward, "The Official Philosophy of the French Third Republic: Léon Bourgeois and Solidarism," *International Review of Social History* 6, no. 1 (1961): 19.
[20] Ibid, 41-42.

On the international stage, Foch and Grandmaison had little reason to doubt offensive à outrance at the tactical level, and the broader idea of a vigorous offensive at the operational level. The concept of the 'short war' was central to offensive military planning. Owing to an examination of the Franco-Prussian War, the Italian Wars of Unification, and the Russo-Japanese War, the next European war was widely believed to be quick and brutal.[21] In his memoirs, Joffre articulated this widespread "Short War Mentality" to be a product of developments in modern arms.[22] A prolonged modern war was unthinkable to European military planners at the time. Due to technological advancements, such a war would bring about far too much death and destruction to even be remotely considered.[23] Given the short conflicts of the nineteenth century—and to preserve Europe from the slaughter that a lengthy modern conflict would invariably become—a quick, offensive campaign was the aim of Foch and Grandmaison. Across the river Rhine, the German Empire came to a similar conclusion: the next war was going to be quick, based on the same lessons Foch, Grandmaison, and later Joffre took from the nineteenth century. Alfred von Schlieffen, the architect of the German offensive of 1914, was similarly intent on a "rapid, low-cost, decisive victory."[24] The French were hardly outliers in their embrace of the offensive to conform to the modern 'mold' of a short war, and the driving evidence for this belief was widespread throughout Europe.

The swift, decisive attack demanded by offensive à outrance and Plan XVII was not the "ideology" advanced by historians such as Snyder.[25] Other historians such as Ronald Cole view the Foch-Grandmaison offensive doctrine with contempt for its lack of reserve units intended to

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[21] Waggoner, "French War Plan XVII," 16.
[22] Ibid; Joffre, *Memoirs,* 45.
[23] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 66-67.
[24] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 108.
[25] Ibid, 57;

reinforce immediate frontal assaults, arguing that this was inconsistent with traditional Napoleonic tactics.[26] Renowned historian B. H. Liddell Hart writes that Foch's contention that "Victory = moral superiority in the victors" is "illogical in order, and so incomplete."[27] A common argument among historians of the First World War is the perceived dogmatic nature of swift, brutal offensives carried out by soldiers of superior will. It was undeniable that elements of the offensive could have been improved upon—Foch, Grandmaison, and Joffre arguably underestimated the importance of long-range artillery and machine guns.[28] But the application of Napoleonic tactics in offensive à outrance was logical. Achieving large-scale numerical superiority was impossible; France had a population of 40 million, whereas Germany possessed a population of 67 million in 1914. Thus Foch and Grandmaison revived the Napoleonic tactic of massive frontal assaults at isolated points to achieve localized numerical superiority and break the enemy, but at the operational level.[29] Sedan proved that defense did not produce victory in the face of a superior enemy. French numerical inferiority, reasonable aversion to defensive tactics and strategy, and belief in a short future conflict demanded nothing less than the vigorous offensive advocated for by Foch and Grandmaison, and later implemented by Joffre.

Some historians also categorize élan as outlandish. In a 1987 essay written while at the RAND Corporation, historian Charles Sanders argues that Grandmaison epitomized "reason discarded" and took Foch's ideas of conquest through superior will to the extreme.[30] Many historians including Sanders do not discuss that the perception of superiority was an active part

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[26] Cole, "The Unwanted Clairvoyant," 200.
[27] Foch, *Principles of War*, 287; B. H. Liddell Hart, *Foch, the Man of Orleans* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1932), 26.
[28] Cole, "The Unwanted Clairvoyant," 200.
[29] Foch, *Principles of War*, 298.
[30] Charles W. Sanders, "No Other Law: The French Army and the Doctrine of the Offensive," The RAND Corporation (The RAND Corporation, March 1987), 8-9, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2005/P7331.pdf.

of the national conversation, as evidenced through solidarism—the political right and political left disagreed on issues of French nationalism and the place of the Frenchman in the international world order. For Foch and Grandmaison, an offensive 'superior will' intrinsic to the French infantryman likely represented their right-wing political beliefs, and remained in direct conversation with the solidarism of the left. Perhaps, then, élan deserves more serious consideration than present in relevant scholarship. Moreover, the underlying principle of élan was that warfare was a moral struggle, and victory was to be obtained through a greater will to win. In Foch's mind, the difference between victory and defeat rested in the soldiers' perception of the battle. In other words, "[a] battle lost is a battle one thinks one has lost."[31] This was justified on Napoleon's belief that "*tactics, order,* and *maneuvers*" enabled a numerically inferior force to defeat a greater one through the individual soldier's greater confidence in his abilities and moral courage to defeat the enemy.[32] And therein rested the true intention of élan and the 'superior will' of the French soldier as explained by Foch: to express a Napoleonic emphasis on moral courage during an offensive in a contemporary setting, a far less dogmatic principle than commonly expressed by historians.

Historians also condemn the "short war mentality" of Foch, Grandmaison, and Joffre as shortsighted. B. H. Liddell Hart contends that a more serious examination of the American Civil War would have revealed the advantages of defensive strategies and tactics and uncovered the long, attritional nature of modern warfare.[33] Hart is correct. The American Civil War deserved more thought among Foch, Grandmaison, and Joffre. But this problem was not isolated to the French. For instance, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder allegedly categorized the army of General

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[31] Foch, *Principles of War,* 286. The exact quote comes from Joseph de Maistre.
[32] Ibid, 284.
[33] Hart, *The Man of Orleans,* 31.

Sherman as "an armed mob."[34] The dismissal of non-European conflicts from serious consideration was common practice. Grandmaison, for instance, focused his analysis primarily on the Russo-Japanese and the Boer Wars in *Dressage de l'infanterie*, for these were conflicts involving European powers.[35] The issue of a narrowed analysis of warfare was commonplace for the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. More leniency is owed to the architects of offensive à outrance and Plan XVII, then. Hart's argument is eerily similar to the common charge of dogmatism levied against Foch and Grandmaison for their belief in the "superior" will of the French infantryman. Although a contextually sound strategy based on substantial evidence and history, the doctrine of the offensive and Plan XVII ultimately failed. But its failure was hardly the product of thoroughly misplaced tactical and operational planning. Rather, the civilian government was responsible for loss of initiative and surprise in the opening days of the Great War, leading to France's near defeat.

Jean Jaurès and the Socialist View of Warfare

1792–1907

If the ideas of Ferdinand Foch and Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison were born out of an attempted imitation of Napoleon's greatest victories, then the left's tendency to embrace the defensive was the product of a rejection of Napoleon's legacy and an embrace of the First French Republic. Beginning in 1792, France began to conscript citizens in a nation-in-arms scheme to combat the invading armies of the First Coalition.[36] While the French Army was met with defeat

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[34] Joseph Glatthaar, *The American Civil War: the War in the West, 1863-1865*, vol. 4 (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2001), 91.
[35] Grandmaison, *Dressage de l'infanterie,* 1.
[36] Jean Jaurès, *Democracy & Military Service; an Abbreviated Translation of the Armée Nouvelle of Jean Jaurès*, ed. C. G. Coulton (London, UK: Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, & Co., 1916), 41.

in its initial engagements, the poorly equipped militiamen stopped the armies of Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire at Valmy on 20 September 1792 in one of the first victories of the new French Republic. By 1793, the government called for a Levée en Masse to repel the First Coalition.[37] The War of the First Coalition was primarily defensive. Engagements at Valmy, Quiberon, and Toulon all took place on French soil. While recognizing the shortcomings of a militia, Jaurès argued that the ill-equipped, poorly trained armies of the Revolutionary Wars were somewhat effective. In his book *L'Armée Nouvelle,* Jaurès presented military service as a fulfillment of republican ideals. In the words of the 1793 Levée en Masse declaration, "all Frenchmen are in permanent requisition for the service of the armies."[38] Applied in a modern context with improved training and equipment, Jaurès believed that this concept of universal military service—and with a focus on defensive operations—would be best suited to any potential future conflicts.[39]

For Jaurès, the nation-in-arms embodied the democratic principles of the French Revolution. The fixation of antimilitarist socialists and Radical republicans was a return to the early militia system of the First Republic. This was not antimilitarism in the modern sense, however. As Raoul Girardet argues, antimilitarism during the Third Republic was a "nationalism of the Left."[40] Though antimilitarist in its opposition to the predominantly right-wing beliefs of the professional Army, the left was not anti-war. Rather, the left wished to build an Army reflective of republican values.[41] For leftists such as Jaurès, the Republic *was* the nation.[42] For

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[37] F. M. Anderson, ed., *The Constitutions and Other Select Documents Illustrative of the History of France, 1789-1907,* 2d Ed. (Minneapolis, MN: H. W. Wilson Co., 1908), 184-185.
[38] Ibid, 184.
[39] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 51.
[40] Elizabeth Propes, "Re-Thinking Antimilitarism: France 1898-1914," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 37, no. 1 (2011): 46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41403710. Quotation originally from Girardet's *Le nationalisme français* (Paris, 1983). Reproduced as written in Propes' article.
[41] Ibid, 48.
[42] Ibid, 50.

many on the right, meanwhile, the Republic and the French nation were separate entities, the latter guarded by a prestigious professional Army.[43]

For however much nostalgia was contained in his desire to return to the days of the early Revolution, Jaurès railed against the appeal that offensive theorists made to French nationalism and Napoleonic pride.[44] In his view, proponents of offensive Napoleonic tactics ignored the greatest tool of Napoleon: the French nation in total war, achieved primarily through the Levée en Masse of 1793.[45] Jaurès argued that offensive thinkers such as Foch and Grandmaison misread the success of Napoleon on two levels. First, Napoleon's victories were enabled by a massive citizen army. Second, the nationalism to which these right-leaning theorists appealed was not the nationalism of the French Revolution most in-line with the values of the Third Republic, but that of a post-Ancien Régime Napoleonic France.[46] Only because of the ultimate 'victory' of Napoleon's republican enemies in establishing a democratic government, then, should a defensive nation-in-arms strategy be most suited to the character of the Third Republic.[47] For Jaurès, the victories of Napoleon were *enabled* by left-wing Revolutionary politics.

At the operational level, Jaurès advocated for the defensive. The defensive organization of the Army was one of the "aims" of French socialism, and Jaurès primarily framed defensive operations as a response to the political circumstances of the Third Republic.[48] French democracy significantly hindered the possibility of an all-out, immediate offensive—no one man

[43] Ibid.
[44] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 22.
[45] Ibid, 25.
[46] Ibid, 23.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid, 2.

could order mobilization or declare war.[49] There was no state of exception under which such an operation could have been effectively executed. In response, the French nation-in-arms should concentrate itself far from the frontier. While Jaurès conceded that some territory would be lost to enemy forces, this was necessary for the effective concentration of citizen forces—to eventually launch an "irresistible offensive" against the enemy.[50] Largely absent from Jaurès' discussion in *L'Armée Nouvelle*, however, was a thorough examination of the defensive tactics demanded of the initial encounters with the enemy and the subsequent "irresistible" offensive. While he made mention of a "*covering vanguard"* meant to hamper the enemy's advance, Jaurès' prescription for a successful defensive-offensive strategy lacked the detail of his offensive-minded counterparts.[51] Jaurès primarily wrote from a strategic and operational point of view, then.

Jaurès' ideas were also popular among other prominent leftists. As famous Marxist-socialist writer Paul Lafargue wrote in an April 1907 edition of *L'Humanité,* the socialist newspaper of Jean Jaurès, "[o]nly the army is national."[52] Well-known Dreyfusard Georges Duruy believed that "[a] spirit of caste" dominated the officer corps, and that the Army required bottom-up reconstruction.[53] As historian H. L. Wesseling assesses, the Army became a "refuge" for enemies of the left, the legacy of the Revolution, and the Third Republic as a whole.[54] As articulated by Lafargue, it was precisely because the Army was representative of the nation as a whole that a Republican reconstruction was necessary, primarily through the removal of the

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[49] Ibid, 36.
[50] Ibid, 35.
[51] Ibid, 39.
[52]Paul Lafargue, "Armée de Mercenaires," *L'Humanité*, April 1, 1907, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k251260j/f1.item.zoom.
[53]Georges Duruy, "Lettre De M. Georges Duruy," in *Lieutenant "Marceau" / L'Officier Educateur National* (Bordeaux, France: Hachette Bnf, 1905), ix.
[54] H. L. Wesseling, *Soldier and Warrior: French Attitudes toward the Army and War on the Eve of the First World War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 7.

"caste" Duruy was chiefly concerned with. Implicit with Jaurès writing was *using* the Army as a means to build a more Republican France. While Jaurès admitted some elements of his push for a defensive, nation-in-arms scheme were political, his underlying message of using the Army to fulfill the spirit of the First Republic was an institutional mode of politics akin to the argument Jack Snyder posits for the right.[55] But while the right sought to preserve the last vestiges of Napoleonic France through adopting the offensive, Jaurès and others on the left implicitly wished to do the opposite through the defensive and by eroding the authority of the professional Army.

While Jaurès explicitly justified his defensive, nation-in-arms strategy as feasible on military merit alone, Jaurès and others on the French left may have seen the defensive as a means to Republicanize the Army. As one anonymous French colonel scandalously wrote in 1900, "the army wants the death of the Republic, for the simple reason that the Republic is disorder, indiscipline; while the army is order, discipline; this is clear."[56] The intent of the antimilitarist left, as seen in a 1907 study published by *L'Humanité,* was to fully integrate the Army into the Third Republic to ensure an egalitarian application of civilian authority and law throughout the entirety of French society.[57] The military "caste," while the principal enemy of the left as it pertained to the Army, seemed to have little to do with socialist views on class—or if so only superficially.[58] Just as Jaurès invoked the memory of the First Republic to justify his nation-in-arms scheme, the French left was more broadly driven by reestablishing the citizen army of 1792-1799 as a means of fulfilling Revolutionary ideas and protecting democratic institutions.

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[55] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 52.
[56] Un Colonel, *La nation et l'armée* (Paris, France: Armand Colin et Cie, 1900), 18.
[57] Maurice Allard, "Antimilitarisme et conflits internationaux," *L'Humanite*, August 13, 1907, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2513918/f1.item.zoom.
[58] Ibid; Duruy, "Lettre de M. Georges Duruy," ix.

This was, perhaps, not so different from the Napoleonic nostalgia present in the writings of offensive proponents that Jaurès so heavily criticized. But if the First Republic and the Levée en Masse was the template for the French left's plans for a modern Army, the Dreyfus Affair was the most important event in their attempted implementation of the nation-in-arms.

The Dreyfus Affair, the Nation-in-Arms, and Victor-Constant Michel

1894–1911

The morning of 15 October 1894 was the beginning of the end for the monastic, elite institution known as the French Army. Or at least it should have been. The French Army's Secret Service had found a curious document in the wastebasket of the German military attaché in Paris, Maximilian von Schwartzkoppen. It was a letter, the contents of which included information on tactics, positioning of French troops, and a confidential field artillery manual.[59] The latter detail led French authorities to believe that the informant was himself an artillery officer. Captain Alfred Dreyfus became the primary suspect as the source of this information. The deeply right-wing military's accusation was solidified by Dreyfus being a Jewish man.[60] And, after only a brief and nervous conversation with General de Boisdeffre, Chief of Staff of the French Army, Dreyfus was arrested and imprisoned.[61] Shortly thereafter, Dreyfus was convicted by the War Council and sentenced to life in prison at the infamous Devil's Island in French Guiana. But, his conviction was fraught with error and prejudice. A "secret dossier," of which the defense knew

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[59] Raymond Recouly, *The Third Republic*, trans. E. F. Buckley (London, UK: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1928), 197; Michel Winock, "Le bordereau accusateur," L'Histoire (L'Histoire, February 8, 2022), https://www.lhistoire.fr/pi%C3%A8ces-%C3%A0-conviction/le-bordereau-accusateur. Recouly, who wrote *The Third Republic* as part of a series entitled *The National History of France*, focuses on providing an objective account of the Third Republic's history.

[60] Recouly, *The Third Republic*, 197.

[61] Ibid.

nothing, was submitted to the War Council in a blatant disregard for the rule of law.[62] To make matters worse, Colonel Picquart—one of Dreyfus' initial accusers—became convinced of the captain's innocence upon examination of further evidence. The high command ordered this evidence be suppressed.[63] Nevertheless, Picquart's submission of his newfound evidence to the Dreyfus family convinced many that the captain was innocent. And, with the publication of Émile Zola's "J'Accuse…!" in the newspaper *L'Aurore*, the case for Dreyfus' innocence gained a large following.[64] But just as the battle for Dreyfus' freedom gained steam, so did another political battle: the Dreyfusards versus the anti-Dreyfusards; the political left versus the political right; and the civilian government versus the military.

The chief concern of the left was not to protect the Army. The left sought justice. In the words of Georges Clemenceau, "[t]here is no fatherland without law."[65] Despite widespread calls for justice, the civilian government was slow to respond. Dreyfus was not retried until June of 1899. Shockingly, by a vote of five to two, the conviction held.[66] It took the moderate Prime Minister Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau to pardon Dreyfus. This was not a victory for justice; it was a triumph of reason and the political structure of the Third Republic. Even in light of new evidence, the War Council *still* convicted Dreyfus. The Army had, in effect, suspended the rule of law during the Dreyfus Affair. The Army likely operated under the impression that their extrajudicial conviction of Captain Dreyfus was somehow beneficial to the general public. But, in doing so, the Army assumed both a legislative and an executive position separate from the

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[62] Ibid, 198-199.
[63] Ibid, 200.
[64] Émile Zola, "J'Accuse…!," *L'Aurore*, January 13, 1898, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k701453s/f1.item.zoom.
[65] Georges Clemenceau, *L'Iniquité*, ed. P. V. Stock (Paris, France: Ancienne Librairie Tresse & Stock, 1899), 140. From an article entitled "Les artisans de défaites" attributed to 17 January 1898. Exact language reads: "Il n'y a pas de patrie sans droit." Translation from: Hannah Arendt, "From the Dreyfus Affair to France Today," *Jewish Social Studies* 4, no. 3 (July 1942): 196, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4615201.
[66] Recouly, *The Third Republic*, 203.

government of the Third Republic. That is, the War Council arbitrarily denied Captain Dreyfus his basic right to review all evidence for and against himself and convicted Dreyfus on false grounds. Dreyfus' trial was a deviation from the rule of law in France, and the Army could have rightly been charged with functioning under a state of exception. The underlying problem—that the Army thought itself above the law—had yet to be corrected.

While himself a moderate, Waldeck-Rousseau's government shifted decidedly to the left.[67] His coalition cabinet left him in a precarious position; he needed to appease Radicals, socialists, and moderates. When it came to the Army, the Waldeck-Rousseau government and the left found its champion of reform in General André, appointed Minister of War in 1900.[68] Among André's reforms was reshaping the "caste" Duruy discussed; pushing for a two-year mandatory term of service; ridding the military of state-funded luxury; and encouraging unmarried officers to engage with the civilian population through abolishing a common mess area.[69] André, much to the delight of the left, took reform a step further than was demanded by the Waldeck-Rousseau administration. In late 1904, it was discovered that André, himself a Freemason, was gathering information on officers' political beliefs through Masonic lodges. André promoted the officers deemed to possess the most 'republican' beliefs, perhaps another effort of the Radicals and socialists to republicanize the Army.[70] This became known as the *affaire des fiches*—the "affair of cards." In January of 1905, the government of the Radical Émile Combes fell, likely due to fallout from the scandal. But the Dreyfus Affair and the rise of

[67]Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army, 1871-1914* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 71-72.
[68] Ibid, 74.
[69] Ibid, 79-80.
[70] Georges Clemenceau, "L'armée cléricale et L'armée républicaine" *L'Aurore*, November 5, 1904, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7292683/f1.item.zoom.

leftism in the civilian government would have even greater implications for the Army through changes to its very doctrine.

During this period of left-wing domination of the civilian government, the Army moved closer to the nation-in-arms scheme advocated by Jaurès. Arguably the most radical change in the early twentieth century French Army was the institution of universal male military service, with the only exception being for medical purposes.[71] In *L'Armée Nouvelle,* Jaurès praised universal service—and the gradual reduction of a seven years' term to a two years' term—as "the most striking demonstration of equality before the law."[72] But this hardly appeased the French left. Jaurès then advocated for just a *six month* term of service.[73] Nevertheless, the immediate reduction in service from three to two years meant a smaller pool of active duty troops, and forced the High Command to more seriously consider the role of reservists in any military plans. This new, two-year conscription law reflected the original Levée en Masse of 1793; unless a public official, special dispensation was afforded to no one, and all male citizens were trained as soldiers.[74] A short term of service necessitated a shift from the offensive tactics and operations of Napoleon, who so heavily relied on professional soldiers for the execution of his plans.

The Army also adopted a more defensive strategy to potentially accommodate the widespread integration of reservists with active-duty units, best seen in General Michel's 1911 reorganization proposal to the War Council. In a move to appease republican and left-wing politicians, General Victor-Constant Michel was appointed Vice President of the Superior War

[71] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 51.
[72] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 8.
[73] Ibid, 9.
[74] Anderson, *The Constitutions and Other Select Documents Illustrative of the History of France,* 184-185.

Council in 1911.[75] While unclear if Michel held left-wing political beliefs in the same vein as André, Michel was most definitely a republican, and his support for the nation-in-arms endeared him to moderates and leftists.[76] In the mind of Michel, the most pressing strategic matter was that of the active force disparity between France and Germany.[77] To this, his proposed solution was the integration of active and reserve troops to form a "demi-brigade," best suited to the defensive-offensive strategy which the High Command had then adopted.[78] These new demi-brigades were to consist of one regiment of active-duty troops and one of reservists.[79] Much like how Jaurès presented the nation-in-arms and the defensive as necessary purely based on the circumstances of the Third Republic, Michel's proposal was similarly offered. In *L'Armée Nouvelle*, Jaurès likewise argued that a return to the organization and strategy of the French Revolution was not intrinsically political. It was nevertheless plausible that Michel's plan had some political motivation to it—his prescription for the Army's organization certainly fit the ideas of the left. In the words of Joffre, the issue of demi-brigades became chiefly a "political question."[80]

While making absolute conclusions about the political nature of Michel's plan or the reasons behind his appointment is difficult for lack of available evidence, some possible answers may be drawn from the writings and opinions of Michel's peers. As David Ralston argues, Michel's appointment was likely based on political interests and personal connections rather than

[75] Cole, "The Unwanted Clairvoyant," 199.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid, 200.
[78] Ibid, 200-201; Joffre, *Memoirs,* 10.
[79] Cole, "The Unwanted Clairvoyant," 200. While Michel's demi-brigade consisted of a 1:1 ratio of active-duty troops to reservists, the demi-brigades of the French Revolution were one part professional troops, one part national guardsmen, and one part volunteers.
[80] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 8.

the actual merit of his ideas.[81] Ralston's assessment is plausible; Michel was widely derided as incompetent, and, in the words of Adolphe Messimy, "ill-informed about questions pertaining to a mobilization."[82] Himself a man of the left and a supporter of Alfred Dreyfus, Messimy was an ardent proponent of moderate military reform.[83] Though Messimy came to reject Michel's nation-in-arms concept of the demi-brigade, Messimy's lack of confidence in Michel raised questions as to exactly *how* Michel rose to such a position, and why he was there in the first place. Ronald Cole's answer—that Michel was chosen to appease the left—seems particularly likely in light of these unanswered questions. A reasonable conclusion was that the left-wing shift of the civilian government post-Dreyfus Affair and the ensuing nation-in-arms reforms and attempts to Republicanize the Army had chiefly manifested themselves in the appointment of Michel, despite however ambiguous his leftist sympathies may have been.

Although scant evidence existed to suggest Michel saw his defensive strategy as a bulwark against increasing military power, many on the left saw the 'nation-in-arms' as a means to forcefully preserve the Republic, if necessary. While public leftist concerns over a potential military coup were not as visible as during July 1914, many on the left thought that the military was actively threatening the Republic.[84] This was most certainly the case behind closed doors; recall that General André attempted to convince Waldeck-Rousseau of a potential overthrow of

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[81] David B. Ralston, *The Army of the Republic: The Place of the Military in the Political Evolution of France, 1871-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967), 326.
[82] Ibid, 330. Reproduced as translated by Ralston. For original text, see: Adolphe Messimy, *Mes souvenirs*, (Paris, France: Plon, 1937), 71.
[83] Assemblée Nationale, "Adolphe Messimy," Adolphe Messimy - Base de données des députés français depuis 1789 (Assemblée nationale), accessed February 6, 2023, https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/%28num_dept%29/5219; Adolphe Messimy, *La paix armée: la France peut en alléger le poids*, (Paris, France: V. Giard & E. Briére, 1903), 30. The period of 1911-1912 marked Messimy's first tenure as Minister of War under the government of Prime Minister Joseph Caillaux. He would later return in 1914 under René Viviani.
[84] "La Commune!," *La Croix*, July 30, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2589823/f1.item.zoom.

the Republic.[85] Likewise, the memory of General Boulanger's attempted coup in 1889 potentially contributed to leftist fears that the right was attempting to seize power once again and suspend democratic institutions. Boulanger, who had formed a broad coalition of royalists and working-class conservatives hostile to French republicanism, gained a large following in the Paris metropolitan area. And, while Boulanger did not enjoy the explicit support of the military, it was probable that the General's formal ties to the Army stoked the left's fears of a coup akin to that of Louis Napoleon (Napoleon III) in 1851.[86]

Jaurès and the left alleged that not only was the Army attempting to operate outside French civil law, but the post-Dreyfus situation was far more grave than even the Bloody Week of 1871.[87] In *La paix armée,* Messimy compared the Army to a hypertrophic heart, the implication of which was that the Army would cause the slow destruction of the Republic.[88] It would be reasonable to conclude that many elements of the left, including both Radicals and socialists, viewed the Army as an existential threat to the Republic—whether they agreed with Michel's precise plan or not. It was possible, then, that Michel was a mouthpiece of sorts for the general attitude of many leftists towards the military, and in not so different a manner as Hart claimed of Joffre.[89] His staunchly Republican beliefs suggested he was familiar with leftist propositions to reform the Army, at least in part. While important to understanding Michel as a person, his political beliefs were almost irrelevant to the fact that he *did* attempt to implement the left's Revolutionary vision of the French Army—perhaps demonstrating the large-scale institutionalization of left-wing ideas after the Dreyfus Affair.

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[85] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 76.
[86] Bruce Fulton, "The Boulanger Affair Revisited: The Preservation of the Third Republic, 1889," *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 2 (1991): 310-311, https://doi.org/10.2307/286459.
[87] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 75.
[88] Messimy, *La paix armée,* 30.
[89] Hart, *The Man of Orleans,* 61.

To those on the left, the Dreyfus Affair exposed the professional French Army for what they had long believed it to be: a relic of a past age, too focused on protecting itself as the last vestige of Napoleonic France to understand the demands of modern warfare and the needs of the Third Republic.[90] But for however much the French right and the military was reactionary towards the left's nation-in-arms concept, the left's rejection of French patriotism, militarism, and Napoleonic pride was a "reaction" in its own right.[91] It was entirely possible that serious support for a defensive military strategy based on a nation-in-arms Army organization was itself a response to the growing power of the military in the Third Republic, the most recent example of which was the Dreyfus Affair.

The Origins of the Reactionary Left

1871–1914

In *Ideology of the Offensive,* Jack Snyder discusses the Army's embrace of the offensive as an impulsive response to progressing republicanization efforts after the Dreyfus Affair.[92] However, Snyder does not discuss the opposite—how the perceived threat of the military to the Republic fueled institutional backlash by the civilian government. In *March to the Marne,* Porch claims that "[a] history of the socialist Left [in France] before 1914 is largely a history of its attitudes toward the army."[93] If Porch's claim is even partly true—as the evidence suggests it to be—then the attitude of the left towards the Army was in some capacity reactionary.

Despite the claims of Jean Jaurès in *L'Armée Nouvelle,* the story of the French left in the Third Republic as antimilitarist and anti-Army began in 1871 with MacMahon's suppression of

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[90] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 23.
[91] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 57; Ralston, *Army of the Republic,* 319.
[92] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 54-57.
[93] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 109.

the Paris Commune.[94] For many socialists in the early twentieth century such as Jaurès, the memory of the Commune remained fresh—and the wound it left still stung. On 28 May 1911, the 40th anniversary of the Paris Commune's defeat, Jaurès published a long article in *L'Humanité* commemorating the valor of the Commune's defenders and vowed the ultimate victory of the proletariat.[95] He implied in his article that the Paris Commune was effectively a continuation of the French Revolution, the ultimate fulfillment of which was socialism.[96] Other articles, such as one written by prominent socialist Pierre Renaudel the day prior, hinted at the potentially violent nature of the Paris Commune's commemoration, cementing the Commune as part of the French Revolution's legacy.[97] Jaurès' and Renaudel's comments revealed two core beliefs about the Commune within the French left in the early 20th century, or at least among *L'Humanité*'s most devoted readers. First, the French Revolution was a left-wing movement, and the Commune aimed to fulfill the mission of 1789, an ongoing battle throughout the early twentieth century. Second, the French left should still feel anger towards the military for the Commune's suppression during the Bloody Week. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the immediate concern of some French socialists in July and August 1914 was to capitalize on the situation and establish a state akin to the Paris Commune, and through force of arms if necessary.[98] The anger the left felt towards the Army never entirely subsided, then.[99]

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[94] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 75.
[95] Jean Jaurès, "Souvenir de jours tragiques," *L'Humanité,* May 28, 1911, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k252760c/f1.item.zoom.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Pierre Renaudel, "L'anniversaire de la semaine sanglante," *L'Humanité,* May 27, 1911, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k252759f/f1.item.zoom.
[98] "La Commune!," *La Croix,* July 30, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2589823/f1.item.zoom.
[99] Recouly, *The Third Republic,* 219. This reference is intended to reflect Recouly's recognition that French socialists found the military incompatible with ensuring the safety of the Republic and advancing the ideas of socialism.

The Dreyfus Affair reignited the left's antimilitarism, this time in public.[100] As Propes identifies, the primary concern of left-wing antimilitarists was that the Army's values were inconsistent with those of the Republic, potentially leading to the erosion of civil authority.[101] Clemenceau warned of a similar situation—that the military operated on its own terms and outside the rule of law, as evidenced by the Dreyfus Affair.[102] While hardly explicit in the same vein as General André's efforts to convince Waldeck-Rousseau of a military conspiracy against the Republic, the message was the same.[103] The antimilitarist left would not have been concerned for the Army's republican values if there was not a possibility that it was a threat to the Republic. Whether this threat was specifically physical as suggested by André or cultural and societal was unclear, but the answer was likely all of the above. As Hannah Arendt argues of the French right, a legacy of the Dreyfus Affair was increased skepticism of the civilian government.[104] The attitudes of the left—both explicit and implicit—suggested that these same conspiratorial sentiments were widespread, and not just isolated to pro-military elements of French society.

As the Dreyfus Affair unfolded in the 1890's, solidarism erupted in the Third Republic.[105] On 11 November 1895, Léon Bourgeois became Prime Minister of France. Armed with new ideas on how to unite the political left and political right, Bourgeois published the first edition of his treatise on Solidarism, *Solidarité,* in 1896 based on a series of articles he wrote for *La Nouvelle Revue*.[106] In many ways, solidarism was an amalgamation of capitalism and socialism.[107] However, this should neither be confused with the post-First World War Third

[100] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 75; Propes, "Re-thinking Antimilitarism," 51.
[101] Propes, "Re-thinking Antimilitarism," 51.
[102] Clemenceau, *L'Iniquité,* 140.
[103] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 76.
[104] Arendt, "From the Dreyfus Affair to France Today," 198.
[105] Hayward, "Léon Bourgeois and Solidarism," 21.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid, 24.

Position nor the solidarism of the French right-wing later in the twentieth century; Bourgeois' solidarism was thoroughly antimilitarist.[108] This 'middle ground' Bourgeois advocated for consisted of increased state protections for human rights and the establishment of social programs.[109] Bourgeois' policy for the Army was one of diplomatic resolution above all else—solidarism was for people of all nations, not just the French.[110] His political position might best have been described as left-leaning.[111] In *Solidarité*, Bourgeois referred to himself as "the most liberal of socialists."[112]

The impact of solidarism on the continuing military discussion within the left was twofold. First, while antimilitarist, solidarism stood against even the "nationalism of the left" of people such as Jaurès, Clemenceau, and Lafargue.[113] Solidarism opposed the military on principle rather than politics, and should be categorized as thoroughly antinationalist. Leftist nationalism in France—particularly as it pertained to the military—invoked the memory of the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, and the nation-in-arms.[114] Likewise, militaristic right-wing nationalism primarily drew its strength from the rhetoric Foch used in *Principles of War*, that the French were superior soldiers, and imitating Napoleon would propel France once again to the glory of the First Empire.[115] While Bourgeois' solidarism was opposed to both, his self-

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[108] Ibid; Jonathan Marcus, *The National Front and French Politics: The Resistible Rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995), 36.
[109] Ibid, 23; Léon Bourgeois, *Solidarité*, 7th ed. (Paris, France: Librarie Armand Colin, 1912), 9.
[110] Hayward, "Léon Bourgeois and Solidarism", 24.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Bourgeois, *Solidarité,* 188. Original text reads: "Ce qui seul est intéressant et caractéristique, c'est l'adjectif qui suit le mot et le particularise. Socialiste; donc, je le veux bien, mais socialiste; libéral, *le plus libéral des socialistes*. Mon socialisme tend à la réalisation des conditions dans lesquelles l'individu, tout individu, se développera le plus pleinement, atteindra au maximum d'extension de toutes ses énergies, de toutes ses facultés, possédera la liberté véritable…" Emphasis added.
[113] Propes, "Re-thinking Antimilitarism," 46. While Jaurès, Clemenceau, and Lafargue differed in their views of the military's place in the Republic, none could be called antinationalist in the same vein as Bourgeois—despite however strongly the military and the right attempted to paint them as such.
[114] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 41; Jaurès, "Souvenir de jours tragiques"; Renaudel, "L'anniversaire de la semaine sanglante."
[115] Foch, *Principles of War,* 285.

proclaimed leftist views indicated that he likely more closely aligned with the antimilitarism of Jaurès. Second, solidarism implicitly challenged the offensive à outrance and élan of Foch and Grandmaison.[116] The doctrine of the offensive was, by nature, exclusionary to the detriment of the Germans and to the benefit of the individual French soldier. It was only through the superior will Foch wrote of that the French would be able to overcome the enemy in a massive assault, a spirit that was *intrinsic* to the Frenchman.[117] But according to Bourgeois' solidarism, an equal association of nations was necessary to ensure peace.[118] The French could not simultaneously be both superior to their opponents and equal; the doctrine of the offensive as understood by men such as Foch and Grandmaison demanded some level of enemy inferiority.

Solidarism undermined the Army at an existential level. Bourgeois was particularly keen on establishing international arms control and force reduction agreements, relegating the military to a far lesser role in French society than before.[119] He justified his concerns on the basis that a less powerful military would enable greater economic growth—France's "armed peace" was burdensome to the public and the treasury of France.[120] Bourgeois' ideas for military reform—albeit from a primarily international perspective—were eerily similar to the cost-cutting and republicanization reforms of General André, and perhaps even more extensive.[121] Three factors indicated Bourgeois' engagement with anti-Army leftist ideas. First, the initial publication of *Solidarité* as a completed work came in 1896, during the height of the Dreyfus Affair. It would be reasonable to conclude that *L'Affaire* influenced the solidarist movement to a significant

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[116] Ibid, 284; Tuchman, *The Guns of August,* 33.
[117] Foch, *Principles of War,* 285.
[118] Alexandre Niess, "Léon Bourgeois (1851-1925), juriste et ange de la paix," *Parlement[s], Revue D'histoire Politique* 1, no. 11 (2009): https://doi.org/https://www.cairn.info/revue-parlements1-2009-1-page-135.htm. See paragraph thirteen for precise citation.
[119] Léon Bourgeois, *Pour la société des nations* (Paris, France: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1910), 37.
[120] Ibid, 35-36; 36.
[121] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 79-80.

extent. Second, Jaurès and Bourgeois both wrote of the necessity of an international arbiter to resolve conflict, and how this ought to be joined at the hip to the organization of the military itself for the betterment of the nation.[122] Third, Bourgeois implicitly said that the military was a threat to the Republic. His concern for the economic effects of military spending during peacetime in *Pour la société des nations* masterfully hid another, more damning general criticism of the military: the standing professional Army itself. Bourgeois was concerned that the standing Army was unbeneficial to the Republic, if not outright detrimental. Recall that Jaurès in *L'Armée Nouvelle* proposed the nation-in-arms in lieu of a massive force of active troops. While Bourgeois justified his concerns along economic lines, the effect was more or less the same as Jaurès basic concern—that the Army was problematic. This reactionary left, while perhaps less immediately visible than the right-wing military reactionaries, was most certainly present. General André, Jean Jaurès, and Leon Bourgeois' solidarist movement laid the groundwork for antimilitarism in the civilian government in 1914, chiefly born out of a general skepticism of the professional Army's intentions.

The story of the doctrine of the offensive began in 1870 with the end of the Franco-Prussian War. At the turn of the twentieth century, military thinkers Ferdinand Foch and Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison began to succeed in popularizing an offensive doctrine. But one major obstacle stood in the way of the offensive: the French left. Since the First Republic, the left remained skeptical of the professional Army. The Paris Commune's suppression prompted the French left—both republicans and socialists alike—to reconsider the role of the Army in French life, lest 1871 be repeated again. The Dreyfus Affair reignited antimilitarism and coincided with the rise of solidarism in France, an ideology opposed to the Napoleonic French supremacy

[122] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* vi; Bourgeois, *Pour la société des nations,* 34-37.

espoused by people such as Foch and Grandmaison. The Paris Commune, the Dreyfus Affair, and growing suspicion of the military facilitated the formation of a reactionary left in France, a direct response to the growing power of the military. The general attitudes of the French left were best seen in Jean Jaurès' 1907 *L'Armée Nouvelle,* and General Michel attempted to fulfill the defensive nation-in-arms scheme the socialist leader set forth. Though the reforms of General André and the Waldeck-Rousseau administration; the attempted expulsion of the right from the Army in the *affaire des fiches*; and Michel's plan for demi-brigades would all be set aside by 1914, the underlying left-wing antimilitarist and defensive attitudes of the twenty years prior remained in some capacity.

The basic concern of the French left was that if given enough power, the Army would abuse its authority as during the Paris Commune and the Dreyfus Affair. The professional Army and the Republic were, in many ways, incompatible entities. Jaurès had the foresight in *L'Armée Nouvelle* to say that the nation-in-arms of the First Republic was far more consistent with the values of democratic French society than the professional Army was. This was at the center of the tension between offensive and defensive tactics and operations—was an offensive doctrine really part of a "democratic and peaceful policy" and in-line with the aims of the Third Republic?[123] For many on the left, the answer would have likely been a resounding 'no'. As Plan XVII demonstrated, Foch and Grandmaison's designs for an immediate offensive were likely unattainable under the processes of the civilian government. Joffre himself even predicted that, prior to an offensive through Belgium, it would take at least a week and a half to confirm the Germans had first violated Belgian neutrality—a requirement the government refused to lift.[124] The offensive *necessitated* a state of exception.

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[123] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 18.
[124] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 49.

The state of exception demanded by the doctrine of the offensive was not the "archetype" of extraordinary circumstances usually imagined in times of emergency or crisis.[125] Until 3 August 1914, France would be at peace with Germany. But offensive theorists wanted an *immediate* offensive to occur, implying that the conditions necessary for such an offensive to take place would have to exist *prior* to the outbreak of war. Joffre understood this, which was why he petitioned the War Council for approval to violate Belgian neutrality at the future outset of war.[126] This state of exception would have been implemented during peacetime with no clear external threat other than the expectation that war with Germany would break out at some point. Though some claims of the left—including that the Army intended to depose the government—were misguided, leftist skepticism of the military highlighted a real and pressing issue in the Third Republic. If the Army was granted additional powers, the government of France might have become drastically more authoritarian and antidemocratic. But the reactionary left went far beyond just protecting the Third Republic's civilian government. The reactionary left actively attacked the Army and sought to mold it in the image of the Third Republic. The reactionary left's consistent assaults on the professional Army, efforts to remove anti-republican officers from high-level positions, and fearmongering that the military would overthrow the Third Republic would ultimately prove responsible for the defeat of Plan XVII.

[125] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 41.
[126] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 49.

Chapter Three: Plan XVII and the Reactionary Left

29 July–6 September 1914

The actions of the civilian government on the eve of the First World War directly contributed to the failure of Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive. At the highest levels of the Third Republic, the hesitancy and indecisiveness of Raymond Poincaré and René Viviani caused the most harm to Plan XVII. Some historians have interpreted the civilian government's indecision and defensive posturing as necessary to secure British support and avoid appearing as an aggressor against Germany.[1] There was, however, more to the story. Poincaré and Viviani were also motivated by a much deeper issue: institutionalized reactionary leftism. Widespread antimilitarist beliefs popular within the French left after the Dreyfus Affair—such as the nation-in-arms, defensive military posturing, and fixation on international support—became an intrinsic part of the Third Republic's government by 1914. Skepticism of the Army transcended explicitly left–right politics; this was a battle between the Army and the Republic as institutions. Poincaré, a man of the right, and Viviani, a man of the left, epitomized institutionalized antimilitarism on the eve of the First World War. The military-civilian divide evident in Plan XVII was a problem characteristic of most liberal democracies: fundamental discord between the military and the government.

A thorough discussion of the civilian government's influence on the outcome of Plan XVII is largely absent from relevant scholarship.[2] This is due to the common view among

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[1] Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Scribner, 1923), 281-282; Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 21; James E. Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914* (London, UK: MacMillan, 1922), 25.

[2] Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1984); Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Harvard University Press, 2008); W. A. Stewart, "Lanrezac, Joffre, and Plan XVII," The RAND Corporation, July 1967, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2009/P3637.pdf.

historians that Plan XVII was bound to fail from its inception.[3] As demonstrated in chapter two, Plan XVII was worthy of serious consideration. Chapter three reveals that not only did the civilian government interfere significantly in the execution of Plan XVII, but was also primarily responsible for France's defeat during the Battle of the Frontiers. The actions and writings of Poincaré and Viviani indicated that skepticism of the Army was the cause of this hesitation. This was the same antimilitarism which had become popular on the French left after the Dreyfus Affair among figures such as Léon Bourgeois and Jean Jaurès, leaving institutionalized reactionary leftism as the most plausible explanation for their failure to execute Plan XVII as intended.

The July Crisis and the Struggle for General Mobilization

29 July–2 August 1914

29 July 1914 should have been the beginning of Plan XVII's execution. As German reservists mobilized to the east, President Poincaré and Prime Minister Viviani were greeted in Paris following their trip to Tsar Nicholas II in St. Petersburg.[4] News of German mobilization and deteriorating Austro-Serbian negotiations begged the question: would there be a European "conflagration?"[5] France prepared for the real and imminent possibility of armed conflict with Berlin. But while Poincaré and Viviani shook hands along the Champs-Élysées, Joseph Joffre seethed. The government's temporary head while Poincaré and Viviani were in Russia, Jean-

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[3] Ronald H. Cole, "Victor Michel: The Unwanted Clairvoyant of the French High Command," *Military Affairs* 43, no. 4 (1979): https://doi.org/10.2307/1986754; Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 285-287; W. A. Stewart, "Lanrezac, Joffre, and Plan XVII," 2; Jason Waggoner, "French War Plan XVII: Why Did French Military Planners Not Foresee the Tactical Inevitability of Germany's Schlieffen Plan?," *Infantry Magazine, U.S. Army Infantry School* 100, no. 2 (2011): 15.

[4] Raymond Recouly, *The Third Republic*, trans. E. F. Buckley (London, UK: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1928), 284.

[5] "Aurons-nous la conflagration européenne?," *La Croix*, July 29, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k258981q/f1.item.zoom.

Baptiste Bienvenu-Martin, had denied Joffre preemptive mobilization for fear of appearing too aggressive. The initiative was handed to the Germans, and Joffre was well aware of the consequences. Joffre derided this "timid attitude" as a product of Poincaré and Viviani's absence, though *cautious* may have been a more appropriate word to categorize the leadership of Bienvenu-Martin.[6]

"The Crab" knew that time was of the essence, and wasted none in presenting Minister of War Messimy his request for general mobilization of all French forces, both active and reserve.[7] Messimy conveyed Joffre's plan to the Cabinet on 30 July. The Cabinet decided that provided no troops would be moved via railway and reservists were not mobilized, a protective force could take up positions ten kilometers (six miles) from the German border.[8] German troops, however, had been operating along the Franco-German border since the day prior.[9] Around noon on 30 July, Berlin newspaper *Lokal Anzeiger* reported that the general mobilization order had been issued by the Kaiser.[10] While the German government came to deny the newspaper's reporting, French Ambassador Jules Cambon believed that the Kaiser had privately decided on mobilization on 29 July.[11] Most curious, however, was that the French government did not respond. Cambon was convinced mobilization had occurred, arguably sufficient grounds on which to justify a full mobilization of the French Army. Whether this was a product of the Cabinet's hesitancy to act on Cambon's information, Cambon's failure to relay his concerns over the Reichstag's suspicious denial, or other factors was unclear. But Joffre was the only one to

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[6] Joseph Joffre, *The Personal Memoirs of Joffre, Field Marshal of the French Army*, trans. T. Bentley Mott, 1st ed., vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 119.
[7] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 15. General Joffre was often referred to as "the Crab" by his peers, both in reference to the circumference of his waist and his staunchly centrist political convictions.
[8] Recouly, *The Third Republic*, 285-286; Joffre, *Memoirs,* 122-123.
[9] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 120.
[10] Recouly, *The Third Republic*, 286.
[11] Ibid.

take a realistic view of the situation: war was imminent, and pretending otherwise was wasting precious time.

Many in the French government believed reports of German mobilization to be an attempt by Berlin to trick the French into attacking early and thus turn international public opinion against France.[12] The government was attempting to avoid the situation of 1870, whereby Bismarck tricked the French into attacking first through the Ems Dispatch. But the government was not the only party concerned with repeating the turmoil and violence of the Franco-Prussian War and its aftermath. Some elements of the public were concerned that should war break out, socialists and Radical republicans would attempt to capitalize on France's political turmoil and reestablish the Paris Commune in one form or another. Though only representative of a small part of the national conversation of France at the Great War's outset, newspapers provided an excellent lens through which to examine the politics of the Third Republic. One Catholic newspaper sometimes reflective of right-wing views, *La Croix*, was of particular importance to understanding the conservative view of the Paris Commune's legacy. Adjacent to a commemoration of a French Colonel in the Franco-Prussian War, *La Croix* printed an excerpt from leftist, antiwar journal *La Guerre Sociale* with the title "La Commune!"[13] *La Guerre Sociale* entreated its supporters to "remember" before laying down arms at the conclusion of the present conflict—perhaps intended to invoke the memory of 1871.[14] In response, the editor of *La Croix* asked: "*How can such horrors [be] print[ed] freely?*"[15] The editor of *La Croix* expressed a deep, underlying issue between the left and the right in France:

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[12] René Viviani, *As We See It*, trans. Thomas R. Ybarra (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1923), 195.
[13] "La Commune!," *La Croix*, July 30, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2589823/f1.item.zoom.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid. Original text reads: "*Comment de telles horreurs peuvent-elles s'imprimer librement?*" Emphasis was original to source.

support for democracy itself. *La Croix* had effectively implied that republican functions of government such as protections for free speech ought to have been suspended in the interest of national security and to prevent another Paris Commune from rising to power. Likewise, the deeply right-wing Army expressed reservations about the operation of democratic government, as evident through Joffre's continued complaints that the civilian government was inactive and impotent in its response to German aggression. It seemed that while the far-left flirted with the idea of reviving the Paris Commune, elements of the right seriously considered a state of exception, free from the so-called restrictions of French democracy, as their only recourse.

While Joffre pleaded for mobilization and the prospect of war inflamed political tensions, René Viviani occupied himself with the *Lokal Anzeiger* newspaper article—or at least he wanted to be perceived as such. This news—combined with the hunch of Cambon that the mobilization order had been given—was probably enough to invoke a general mobilization, particularly given that Austria had done so in the early hours of 30 July.[16] In his memoirs, Viviani certainly presented this as so, invoking the findings of Alexander Kerensky's government in 1917 that "on July 30th, Russian mobilization had become absolutely necessary."[17] But throughout his discussion of the events immediately preceding the outbreak of the Great War, Viviani portrayed himself as in lock-step with both the General Staff and the rest of the civilian government. For instance, Viviani falsely claimed that he *concurred* with Joffre in the 30 July Cabinet meeting to limit the covering force to within six miles of the German border.[18] In fact, it was Minister of War Messimy and the Cabinet who prohibited mobilization of reserves, use of railways, and troop activity within six miles of the German border, and Joffre "strongly protested" this

[16] Viviani, *As We See It*, 175.
[17] Ibid, 180.
[18] Ibid, 194.

decision; Joffre was not even present at the meeting to make his case for mobilization.[19] Against the better advice of Joffre, Viviani was directly responsible for a delay in mobilization—the first serious blunder of the civilian government in Plan XVII's execution. Worst of all, Viviani recognized the detrimental effect of his hesitation and depicted himself in concurrence with Joffre on 30 July, as if falsely aligning himself with the decision's harshest critic would inoculate himself from criticism.

In the early hours of 30 July, René Viviani and Raymond Poincaré mulled over an ominous telegram from St. Petersburg: Russia was mobilizing.[20] After careful consideration—and with Poincaré's full approval—Viviani replied that France "will do nothing which might afford a pretext to Germany for either a general or partial mobilisation of her armed forces."[21] Thus began the French President's involvement in the demise of Plan XVII and offensive à outrance. He, like Viviani and Joffre, understood war was imminent. Yet, Poincaré preferred a more diplomatic strategy: to wait for British support and ensure international opinion stood with France, a position largely consistent with that of Viviani. Their attitude was epitomized in another of Viviani's telegrams from 30 July, this one to Paul Cambon, the Ambassador to England and elder brother of Jules:

> Our [war] plan, conceived in the spirit of the offensive, provided, however, that the fighting position of our covering troops should be as near to the frontier as possible. By leaving a strip of territory undefended against sudden aggression of the enemy, the government of the Republic hopes to prove that France does not bear, any more than Russia, the responsibility for the attack.[22]

Viviani asked that the elder Cambon relay this message to Sir Edward Grey, Britain's secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. In plain, unambiguous language, Viviani revealed the folly of the

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[19] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 123.
[20] Raymond Poincaré, *The Memoirs of Raymond Poincaré, 1913-1914*, trans. George Arthur, vol. 2 (London, UK: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1928), 220.
[21] Ibid, 221.
[22] Viviani, *As We See It*, 192.

civilian government: Plan XVII—and the offensive, surprising, and vigorous spirit in which it was intended to be executed—was to be set aside for sake of demonstrating to the world and to Britain that France was not the aggressor.

While Germany prepared for war and Viviani stripped the offensive of its teeth, Poincaré, in his own words, operated as President in a "painfully passive" capacity.[23] By 31 July, little changed in the Third Republic's position; Poincaré still held hope that public support from the British could still deter Germany from going to war.[24] The concern of perception articulated in Viviani's telegraph to Paul Cambon the day prior still held true, even though Russia had indicated that war was inevitable. In fairness to Viviani and Poincaré, British support was preferable, if not entirely crucial, to any sort of prolonged conflict with Germany. But in a telegram on the evening of 31 July, Sir Edward Grey indicated that Britain would militarily support France should war break out between Paris and Berlin.[25] Poincaré and Viviani's greatest concern—that England would not support France—was alleviated. Among many senior statesmen of the Third Republic, including Clemenceau, British support was critical to the success of any military operation taken against Germany.[26] The leadership of the civilian government finally had British support, if only by word of Sir Edward rather than public announcement.[27] France was not to be perceived as the aggressor. Nevertheless, the Third Republic continued to prioritize a defensive posture and insist on the precedence of geostrategic positioning over the implementation of offensive operations.

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[23] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1913-1914,* 242.
[24] Ibid, 244.
[25] Ibid, 246.
[26] Robert A. Doughty, "French Strategy in 1914: Joffre's Own," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 2 (April 2003): pp. 435.
[27] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1913-1914,* 264.

On 31 July, the public still remained divided on the issue of war. On the right, nationalist newspaper *L'Intransigeant* reassured its readers that even if war broke out, France would have an ample supply of food.[28] Similarly, *La Croix* focused its reporting on battle preparations and published a long front-page article on the "true" battle between God and those who sought to expel Him from French society.[29] The target was likely the antimilitarist, anticlerical left. But as the right prepared for war, the left advocated for peace. *L'Humanité*, the socialist newspaper of Jean Jaurès, displayed solidarity with socialists protesting the escalation of the July Crisis in Essen, Germany.[30] In German-occupied Alsace-Lorraine, socialists gathered in Strasbourg, Metz, Mulhouse, and Colmar in opposition to the war.[31] In Italy, socialist leaders demanded that Rome declare absolute neutrality.[32] Both within France and among bordering countries, *L'Humanité* encouraged "the desire for peace."[33]

While evidence to suggest left-wing news outlets were equally as concerned with international perception and antimilitarism as the civilian government was dubious at best, the conversations taking place at the highest levels of government were likely somewhat reflective of the attitudes expressed by French newspapers. However, the positions of Viviani, Poincaré, Joffre, and Messimy were not necessarily informed by individual political beliefs. Joffre, for instance, was a man of the center. Poincaré was a man of the right, yet was hesitant to fully commit to war by 31 July. This suggested that the military-civilian government 'political' divide was not in the binary, left-right sense as the public. Rather, the politics of the July Crisis and the

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[28] Leon Bailby, "Si la guerre éclatait nous aurions des vivres: une enquête rassurante," *L'Intransigeant*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k787174h/f1.item.zoom.
[29] "La vraie question," *La Croix*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k258983g/f1.item.zoom.
[30] "Les meetings socialistes," *L'Humanité*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k253901k/f1.item.zoom.
[31] Ibid, 2.
[32] "Vibrante protestation des socialistes Italiens," *L'Humanité*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k253901k/f1.item.zoom.
[33] "La volonté de paix," *L'Humanité*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k253901k/f1.item.zoom.

opening days of World War One was institutional. The hesitancy of the civilian government was not relegated to left-wing politicians, despite however much skepticism of the offensive aligned with left-wing politics. Likewise, Joffre was not a staunch conservative, yet reflected the institutional interests of the Army and of the political right.

Far removed from the increasingly restless populace, Joffre sat uncomfortably; the situation was now grave, and he pleaded with the government to remove the six mile limit on the French covering forces. The Cabinet decided that the Army was allowed to move up to the German border, but not to cross it.[34] According to Poincaré, Joffre concurred that despite the Kaiser's declaration of war against Moscow, no French troops should violate German territory; it was critical for Joffre, as it was Poincaré, for France to play the victim.[35] However, the Cabinet only partially acceded to Joffre's demands and still prohibited the General from calling up reserve units—a restriction he was less than enthused about.[36] Later that evening, Joffre learned of the Kaiser's "Declaration of Danger of War" and again entreated the Cabinet for a general mobilization of French forces.[37] Still, the Cabinet refused to immediately declare a general mobilization. The civilian government's unwillingness to commit to the offensive and Joffre's insistence on early mobilization were perhaps representative of the greater debate surrounding a political state of exception as expressed by the editor of *La Croix* on 30 July. Much to the annoyance and frustration of Joffre, Poincaré, Viviani, and the Cabinet continued to act in a deliberative, democratic manner—the exact opposite of the quick and decisive action that offensive à outrance demanded.

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[34] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1913-1914,* 275.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 126.
[37] Ibid.

Near midnight on 1 August, Poincaré was awakened by the Russian Ambassador, Alexander Isvolsky. Germany had declared war on Russia.[38] The time had come for France to mobilize and strike Germany. Plan XVII was to finally be set in motion—or at least it should have been. It was abundantly clear that the situation was entirely out of control, and that peace could not be preserved.[39] Around 9 o'clock AM on 1 August, Joffre sent a memorandum to Messimy warning that German preparations were far exceeding that of the French.[40] After much debate at the Cabinet Council, and having finally secured the unconditional support of Messimy, Joffre prevailed: Poincaré, Viviani, and Messimy signed a general mobilization order to be given at midnight on 2 August.[41] The state of exception that the right and the military had hoped for was to be finally granted.

As the civilian government finally came to terms with the reality of war, tragedy struck. By the morning of 1 August, the front cover of *Le Petit Parisien*, a newspaper founded by Radical Louis Andrieux in 1876, exclaimed: "*On a assassiné Jaurès*"—"we assassinated Jaurès."[42] On the evening of 31 July, the beloved socialist leader was gunned down by Raoul Villain, a French nationalist, as Jaurès dined at a Paris café. The civilian government expected widespread social unrest from the French left. Upon hearing the news of Jaurès' assassination, Joffre and the Cabinet decided that a brigade of Cuirassiers of the First Cavalry Division should remain behind in Paris to quell potential unrest. Curiously, Joffre would later claim that a peaceful population was largely the product of the impending conflict, and that the danger of

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[38] Ibid, 272.
[39] Ibid, 127.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 128.
[42] Jean Dupuy, "Heures tragiques," *Le Petit Parisien*, August 1, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5651441/f1.item.zoom.

German invasion united the left and right alike.[43] The evidence, however, told a different story. Directly below the announcement, Viviani entreated the public to refrain from protests and demonstrations in light of the rapidly deteriorating international situation.[44] While his pleas largely held, the threat of violence was not to be taken lightly. *L'Humanité* called Jaurès a "militant" and a "martyr" and equated his death to that of a war hero.[45] The issue of *L'Humanite* of 1 August set a similar tone to that of *La Guerre Sociale*: the French left was ready to fight for peace, for the martyred Jaurès, and for the potential establishment of a socialist state. Their war was not with the Germans, but rather with the French right and the Army.

The Failure of Plan XVII

2 August–6 September 1914

2 August 1914 proved to be the greatest blunder of the civilian government in the execution of Plan XVII. The question of Belgian neutrality had yet to be settled. Since his appointment as Generalissimo in 1911, Joffre, like his predecessor Michel, was keenly aware of the ambiguous threat Belgium posed.[46] In a memo to the Foreign Office on 11 October 1911, Joffre wrote that both the French and the Germans "would have every advantage in developing their maneuver through Belgium."[47] In the context of Plan XVII and offensive à outrance, this meant "taking from the very start a vigorous offensive in order to crush by a single blow the organized forces of the enemy."[48] An offensive through Belgium would have been most effective

[43] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 126.
[44] Jean Dupuy, "Une proclamation du gouvernement," *Le Petit Parisien*, August 1, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5651441/f1.item.zoom.
[45] "A notre directeur," *L'Humanité*, August 1, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k253902z/f1.item.zoom.
[46] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 15.
[47] Ibid, 41.
[48] Ibid, 50.

as a preemptive strike, or at least undertaken at the first mention of German violation of Belgian neutrality. But President Poincaré would only permit a violation of Belgian neutrality if a "positive menace" of invasion by the Germans was present—an ambiguous comment which frustrated the General.[49] Moreover, Joffre estimated that it might take ten or eleven days before intelligence and an accurate confirmation of German activities in Belgium could be reported.[50] His prediction would prove correct. Bogged down by poor intelligence and a late mobilization, French Fifth Army did not enter Belgium until 19 August, three days after Liège was captured by the Germans.

Poincaré's insistence on a "positive menace" of German invasion was sufficiently vague as to confuse the entirety of Joffre's planned operations and restricted available intelligence to confirm or deny the presence of German troops in the country. Owing to Poincaré's position, Messimy prohibited even planes and small cavalry detachments from performing reconnaissance in Belgium, even after Germany had announced that "force of arms" would be used to enter Belgium.[51] His position, well-established since Joffre's initial inquiry into violating Belgian neutrality during Plan XVII's formulation in 1912, was the same as expressed by Viviani's telegram on 30 July: the politics of perception was more important than the fulfillment of the offensive doctrine around which Plan XVII was structured. This was a conscious death sentence for the offensive, handed down by politicians with a cynical view of Joffre's pleas to mobilize and strike the Germans before it was too late. And, more broadly, the civilian government was incapable of understanding that a state of exception was necessary to properly execute Plan XVII and produce military victory. While general incompetence certainly played a role in the

[49] Ibid, 53; Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 21.
[50] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 49.
[51] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 54; 55.

sedentary strategy of Poincaré, Viviani, and Messimy—despite however keen on vigorous warfare the Minister of War indicated verbally—the indecisiveness of the civilian government was deliberate.[52] Nevertheless, the civilian government was in some regards justified in its hesitancy to commit to the offensive. As proven by the Bloody Week and the Dreyfus Affair, the Third Republic had good reason to distrust the professional Army—and particularly a doctrine which strengthened its overall political position. Though circumstances necessitated that the High Command be given free rein to execute Plan XVII as they pleased, the Army had shown itself to be unworthy of the civilian government's trust. In the case of the Dreyfus Affair, the Army became a self-defeating institution. The Army *itself* had falsely convicted Captain Dreyfus, and in August 1914 the High Command felt the full effects of the Dreyfus Affair through the hesitancy of the civilian government.

As described in the introduction to this thesis, the ensuing Battle of the Frontiers ended in complete disaster for the French. In Alsace-Lorraine, the French "battered themselves in vain" and were slaughtered by German machine gun fire, entrenched troops, and heavy artillery.[53] In the Ardennes, the Third and Fourth Armies were repulsed by Crown Prince Wilhelm.[54] In Belgium, General Lanrezac's Fifth Army—among whose maneuvers were most promising for a successful offensive—was being encircled by the German First, Second, and Third Armies.[55] But for Lanrezac and many other French commanders, the doctrine of the offensive was already beaten, and there was little to dispute that claim.[56] By 28 August, and with the French left in a

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[52] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 151-152. In a letter to Joffre on 10 August, Messimy demanded that any officer displaying "weakness or cowardice" should be court-martialed and sentenced to death.
[53] Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 286.
[54] Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York, NY: The Random House Publishing Group, 1962), 243.
[55] Ibid, 245.
[56] Ibid, 244.

full retreat, Joffre ordered a defensive line formed near Paris.[57] And, on 5 September 1914, the First Battle of the Marne would begin—and so would an arduous, terrible, and bloody four years of trench warfare, to be broken during the Hundred Days' Offensive in 1918 by none other than the architect of the offensive himself: Ferdinand Foch.

The role of the civilian government during the days immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War has not been widely examined. Many historians such as Douglas Porch consider the failure of Plan XVII and offensive à outrance to be a product of "the army's very lack of confidence" and deeply rooted in a century-long "sentimental adherence" to the tactics of Napoleonic armies.[58] Porch argues that the offensive was a dogmatic principle which transcended the left-right political divide in France.[59] Jack Snyder argues a similar point: that right-wing fears over the institution of a nation-in-arms concept led to an embrace of the offensive as a bulwark against the ideas of socialist leader Jean Jaurès.[60] Predicated on this point of view—and why the immediate events of July and August 1914 remain unexamined in their bearing on Plan XVII's execution—is the assumption that the offensive was inherently flawed, and doomed from the start. In the words of W. A. Stewart of the RAND Corporation, offensive à outrance and Plan XVII were "ill-conceived even if they could have been well executed."[61] But it is precisely within the offensive's execution that Plan XVII failed. The ideas of Foch and Grandmaison—and Joffre's implementation of these ideas—were consistent with the history and culture of the French Army, and sound given the prevailing knowledge of the era. While elements of offensive à outrance left much to be desired, the ignorance of the civilian

[57] Recouly, *The Third Republic,* 305.
[58] Porch, *March to the Marne,* 214.
[59] Ibid, 216, 250.
[60] Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive,* 53.
[61] Stewart, "Lanrezac, Joffre, and Plan XVII," 2.

government towards Joffre's requests, their delays in mobilization, and misplaced faith in the potential for peace prevented the surprising, quick, and decisive offensive of which Foch and Grandmaison wrote of to begin with. The right was perhaps correct, then, that the democratic institutions of the Third Republic were detrimental to the function of the military. The analysis of historians such as Porch, Snyder, Stewart, and B. H. Liddell Hart is not so much an analysis of the offensive put forth by Foch and Grandmaison themselves, but of the offensive as skewed by an imperfect civilian government. It is impossible to evaluate the offensive à outrance of 1914 as the true product of Foch and Grandmaison, and therefore impossible to ignore the immediate effects of the civilian government's interference, even if long-standing political factors had a significant impact on the doctrine of the offensive.

Other historians are far more charitable towards Plan XVII and offensive à outrance. Philip Flammer argues that while the Schlieffen Plan is often perceived as brilliant and Plan XVII foolhardy, both were the product of a similar expectation of a short war.[62] In other words, the mentality which led to the creation of Plan XVII was a reasonable product of an early twentieth century perspective on warfare—even if an overreliance on élan was misguided.[63] Jonathan House posits that offensive French infantry tactics were rational, and the failure of Plan XVII was a product of the widespread European "short war mentality" Waggoner writes of.[64] Flammer and House illuminate the key point of this chapter: outside factors had a significant bearing on the failure of Plan XVII. But largely missing from Flammer and House is a discussion

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[62] Philip M. Flammer, "The Schlieffen Plan and Plan XVII: A Short Critique," *Military Affairs* 30, no. 4 (March 1, 1967): 207, https://doi.org/10.2307/1985401.
[63] Ibid, 212.
[64] Jonathan M. House, "The Decisive Attack: A New Look at French Infantry Tactics on the Eve of World War I," *Military Affairs* 40, no. 4 (1976): 164, https://doi.org/10.2307/1986698; Jason Waggoner, "French War Plan XVII: Why Did French Military Planners Not Foresee the Tactical Inevitability of Germany's Schlieffen Plan?," *Infantry Magazine, U.S. Army Infantry School* 100, no. 2 (2011): 16.

of the relationship between long-term factors and immediate factors in Plan XVII's demise. Plan XVII was a serious operational plan and offensive à outrance a serious set of tactical principles. The immediate actions of the civilian government, however, prevented the effective execution of France's war plan.

The civilian government of the Third Republic failed to truly embrace the spirit of offensive à outrance. While complete disregard for international law was hardly advisable, Poincaré, Viviani, and Messimy actively ignored German and Russian mobilization, instead holding out a naïve belief that peace might still be assured and the situation would remedy itself. Failing that, Viviani's telegram to Paul Cambon highlighted a deliberate disregard for offensive à outrance in favor of securing an agreeable attitude from the British. Foch and Grandmaison wrote of attacking vigorously, and by surprise—designed to benefit a numerically inferior force.[65] But the government of the Third Republic did not provide even the chance for an immediate offensive to take place. Superficially, the government of the Third Republic could be called incompetent, or too concerned with the opinion of Britain. This was accurate, but somewhat incomplete. At the core of Plan XVII's failure was an enduring strain on the relationship between the military and the civilian government. Joffre wanted an early offensive through Belgium; Poincaré and Viviani were worried about angering the British and appearing too 'undemocratic' on the world stage. The High Command wanted to remove the six mile limit on French covering forces; Viviani and his cabinet feared this was too aggressive. It could be said, then, that the civilian government was too fixated on the normal functions of French

[65] Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War*, trans. Hilaire Belloc, 4th ed. (London, UK: Chapman & Hall, Ltd., 1939), 297; Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison, *Dressage de l'infanterie en vue du combat offensif. Avec une préface du Général Langlois*, 3rd ed. (Paris, France: Berger-Levrault, 1916), 165.

democracy to understand that the gravity of the July Crisis necessitated a state of exception if France had any chance at defeating Germany swiftly.

The Reactionary Left and the Civilian Government

29 July–6 September 1914

After twenty years of infighting between the political right and political left, it seemed that the left-wing military ideas which had once dominated discussion on the Army were gone. Michel's demi-brigade proposal was shot down; France had just elected the right-wing Raymond Poincaré as President; a three-year service law was implemented; and Joffre, a strong proponent of the offensive, had carefully crafted Plan XVII. But, while the ultimate 'triumph' of the professional Army may have appeared to be true from the outside, some elements of left-wing Army reforms and ideas remained in the opening stages of the First World War, and at the highest levels of the civilian government. The civilian government's belief in continued arbitration and hesitancy to mobilize the French Army was a manifestation of leftist antimilitarism and bias towards a defensive nation-in-arms strategy.

As late as the evening of 31 July, President Poincaré, Prime Minister Viviani, and Minister of War—albeit to varying degrees—still thought peace was possible.[66] According to Joffre, Viviani was particularly problematic and continued to delay a general mobilization order, but he painted Poincaré and Messimy as more willing to consider the real and imminent possibility of war.[67] Their optimism was not shared by all others, however. On 31 July, an article on the front cover of *La Croix* recognized that peace talks were failing across Europe.[68]

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[66] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1913-1914*, 127.
[67] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 125.
[68] "La journée," *La Croix*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k258983g/f1.item.zoom.

Similarly, *Le Petit Parisien* warned that the situation was "grave" and that the British government was pessimistic about the possibility of peace.[69] Though the civilian government's desire for peace was certainly admirable, continued delays in full mobilization demonstrated a fundamental lack of realistic expectations. This continued into 1 August. Joffre's view that war was no longer preventable reflected the opinion of newspapers such as *Le Petit Parisien* and *La Croix*, indicating that the inevitable prospect of war was not just relegated to the French High Command.[70] The civilian government's skewed perception of the July Crisis raised many questions as to the reasons behind their gross misreading of the situation. From available evidence, it appeared that leftist antimilitarism was primarily responsible.

Of the three most important men in the civilian government at the Great War's outbreak—Poincaré, Viviani, and Messimy—René Viviani was the most left-leaning. But despite being a member of the left-leaning *Parti républicain-socialiste*, Viviani was by no means a Dreyfusard, and was an avowed antisemite.[71] In many ways, then, he did not fit the typical mold of a left-wing French politician. He was, however, a socialist much in the same vein as Jaurès.[72] Whether Viviani shared Jaurès' exact antimilitarist beliefs was questionable, but there was some evidence to suggest that their beliefs were similar. In *As We See It*, Viviani lamented that all of France—himself included—placed too much faith in peace.[73] While this piece of evidence should be treated with caution, three conclusions may be drawn. First, Viviani recognized for *himself* that he was too optimistic about continued peace with Germany. Second,

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[69] Jean Dupuy, "La situation est grave dit-on a Berlin," *Le Petit Parisien*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k565143n/f1.item.zoom; Jean Dupuy, "Le pessimisme est extrême a Londres," *Le Petit Parisien*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k565143n/f1.item.zoom.
[70] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 127.
[71] Eugen Weber, "Jews, Antisemitism, and the Origins of the Holocaust," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 5, no. 1 (1978): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298706.
[72] Vita and Pensiero, "Review: Zum Französischen Einigungsk by Rosa Luxemburg," *Rivista internazionale di scienze sociali e discipline ausiliarie* 26, no. 102 (June 1901): 287-288, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41573621.
[73] Viviani, *As We See It*, 43.

Viviani's hesitation to mobilize and later admittance he was *wrong* to believe so firmly in peace could have indicated that he held some left-wing antimilitarist beliefs, at least during the outbreak of the Great War.[74] Third, Viviani's assertion that France as a *whole* was too optimistic about continued peace with Germany was patently untrue. Joffre's insistence on early mobilization; Foch and Grandmaison's writings on the necessity of immediate offensives; and the French press' recognition of the imminence of war while Viviani refused Joffre's requests disproved Viviani.[75] The military was certainly aware of the situation as it unfolded. And, when the time came for the Army to mobilize, Viviani hesitated. Much like his false claim that he was in consistent agreement with Joffre regarding Plan XVII's execution in the days leading up to the First World War, Viviani again attempted to shield himself from blame.[76] The blatant contradiction of Viviani's statements and the facts of Plan XVII's unraveling indicated that not only did Viviani *know* he bore some responsibility for the outcome of Plan XVII, but also that there was some additional motivating factor to this hesitancy. It was plausible that antimilitarist sentiments were responsible, certainly a possibility given Viviani's background, associations, and political beliefs. But leftist antimilitarism extended beyond just those on the political left. Antimilitarism was *institutional* within the civilian government.

Poincaré's antimilitarism—if it could be classified as such—was evident in both his prewar career and in the opening days of the Great War. In a February 1912 conversation with Joffre, he denied the General the possibility of moving troops into Belgium until a German

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[74] Joffre, *Memoirs*, 125. Joffre mentioned Viviani was apprehensive about a general mobilization order.
[75] Recouly, *The Third Republic*, 285-286; Joffre, *Memoirs*, 122-123; Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1913-1914*, 275; Foch, *Principles of War*, 291-292; Grandmaison, *Dressage de l'infanterie*, 165; "La vraie question," *La Croix*, July 31, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k258983g/f1.item.zoom; "Aurons-nous la conflagration européenne?," *La Croix*, July 29, 1914, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k258981q/f1.item.zoom.
[76] Viviani, *As We See It*, 194.

invasion could be absolutely confirmed, an order which would prove disastrous in 1914.[77] Poincaré later admitted not only that he knew a German invasion of Belgium was possible, but that he held out hope that Germany would choose *not* to violate Belgian neutrality until the very last minute.[78] The most curious of Poincaré's statements, however, came as part of a public proclamation on 1 August 1914. In a formal address to the whole of France, Poincaré justified mobilization not on the idea that war was inevitable, but that other, non-democratic countries in Europe had effectively mobilized without an actual mobilization order being given.[79] He framed mobilization as necessary given the political circumstances of the Third Republic and as a response to the "anticipated execution" of adversary mobilization.[80] Poincaré wanted to ensure that mobilization was undertaken in a specifically republican manner; democratic France was the victim, not the German Empire. This, rather than the mobilization itself, appears to have been his foremost concern. His 1 August Proclamation had political overtones, and was potentially meant to reinforce civilian authority over the military and Republicanism as a whole. According to Poincaré, democracy did not allow for an unofficial mobilization. At first glance, Poincaré seemed to imply that the Republic was a hindrance to the mobilization that other countries had effectively undertaken already, the basic criticism of the Third Republic espoused by the Army. However, Poincaré *himself* was responsible for the Third Republic's hesitancy to commit to mobilization beforehand. It was perhaps for the same "moral and diplomatic reasons" as Poincaré had denied Joffre preemptive access to Belgium that he did so again for early

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[77] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 53; Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 21; Doughty, "French Strategy in 1914," 439–440.
[78] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1912,* 119.
[79] Raymond Poincaré, "Proclamation du Président de la République," in *Messages, discours, allocutions, lettres, et télégrammes de M. Raymond Poincaré,* ed. Bloud & Gay (Paris, France: Bloud & Gay, 1918), 4–5.
[80] Ibid, 4. Original text reads: "Des puissances dont la législation constitutionnelle ne ressemble pas à la nôtre ont, sans avoir pris un décret de mobilisation, commencé et poursuivi les préparatifs qui équivalent, en réalité, à la mobilisation même et qui n'en sont que l'exécution anticipée."

mobilization.[81] In other words, Poincaré acted as his own impediment to earlier mobilization. Much like Viviani, the President's hesitancy raised questions of motivation—a likely answer to which was some form of antimilitarism.

Although neither Viviani nor Poincaré could not be called an antimilitarist in precisely the same right as someone such as Jaurès, their hesitancy to mobilize the Army and continued belief in peace talks—even when it was perhaps unbeneficial to France—contained shreds of leftist antimilitarism. Viviani's commendable optimism that peace could be maintained was reminiscent of Bourgeois' insistence on diplomacy and to avoid war at all costs. As for Poincaré, his statements indicated that he was heavily motivated by preserving the institution of the Republic. As was the case for many socialist antimilitarists at the turn of the century, the Republic was the French nation to Poincaré, not the Army.[82] Though this comparison may not necessarily have appeared to determine the absolute presence of left-wing antimilitarism among Poincaré and Viviani, they were certainly more antimilitarist than the politically centrist Joffre, who pleaded for an earlier mobilization to no avail.[83] But given Joffre's centrism, the left-leaning Messimy's enthusiasm for war with Germany, and the right-leaning Poincaré's faith in the Republic over the Army, antimilitarism in the civilian government on the eve of World War One was not, strictly speaking, a leftist issue in 1914. Rather, it would be more accurate to classify the civilian government's hesitant attitude as a product of the post-Dreyfus French left, hints of which still remained and drove decision-making in late July through early August 1914.

The most significant expression of left-wing influence was a continued interest in defensive military operations. Viviani's predisposition to defensive operations could have rightly

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[81] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1912*, 116.
[82] Elizabeth Propes, "Re-Thinking Antimilitarism: France 1898-1914," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 37, no. 1 (2011): 50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41403710.
[83] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 15.

been summarized in his 30 July telegram to Paul Cambon in London, whereby the Prime Minister explicitly disregarded France's offensive doctrine in favor of a defensive posture for sake of international appearances.[84] This was potentially a manifestation of Viviani's antimilitarism and left-wing views. In *L'Armée Nouvelle,* Jaurès advocated for a similar course of action: to abandon a stretch of French territory at the outset of a conflict with Germany.[85] On a broader scale, Jaurès wrote that the role of France was "to help the World to the attainment of peace by an emphatic repudiation of all aggressive thought, and by an ardent propaganda in favour of arbitration and equity… and this great concentration of moral power would radiate Victory."[86] Such was precisely Viviani's appeal to the elder Cambon. In the Prime Minister's view, peace could have potentially continued—or, in the event of conflict, British support secured—through a defensive posture.

There was evidence to suggest that Viviani was partially supportive of Jaurès' nation-in-arms scheme, too. The increase of active military service from a term of two years to three years in 1913 angered many socialists such as Jaurès; he wanted a *six month* term of service, to truly facilitate the creation of the citizen-soldier.[87] As Prime Minister, Viviani did not rule out the republican demand for the law's amendment, circumstances permitting.[88] Though he did not ultimately recommend the law's amendment, Viviani's intent was merely to appease the moderate and leftist parties in the civilian government.[89] Viviani was at least partially open to the idea of reducing the Three Years' Law to fit a republican agenda, and had no ideological objections against doing so.

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[84] Viviani, *As We See It,* 192.
[85] Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 35.
[86] Ibid, 5.
[87] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1913-1914,* 37; Jaurès, *L'Armée Nouvelle,* 52.
[88] Viviani, *As We See It,* 82.
[89] Ibid, 83.

But most of all, Viviani deeply shared Jaurès' view of the Army during the French Revolution. In his book *La restauration,* Viviani wrote that the "armed adventures" of the Revolution "would cost democracy."[90] Notably, Viviani identified Maximilian Robespierre as the sole leading figure of the French Revolution who fully understood that the military would lead to the death of the Republic, painting Robespierre and the Revolutionary left as guardians of democracy against the Army. Viviani also derided Napoleon's France as "despotism," and closely connected the French Army to the rule of Napoleon throughout his work.[91] Viviani embraced Jaurès' view of the Army, and of the defensive—that the return of Napoleonic ideals to the military was to be neither accepted nor trusted. This, in union with his willingness to take up defensive military operations and openness to appeasing the left through amending the Three Years' Law, suggested Viviani was to some degree an antimilitarist, partially accepting of the nation-in-arms, and moderately skeptical of the professional military. It would be reasonable to suspect, then, that left-wing bias influenced his decision making in late July and early August 1914.

Much like Viviani, Poincaré's bias towards a defensive military strategy was most evident in his continued negotiation efforts. In a 31 July letter to King George V, Poincaré still wrote of the possibility that peace could be maintained in Europe through the assistance of the United Kingdom.[92] Though far from unusual that Poincaré still held out hopes for peace, his appeal to international support and desire for France to secure a favorable view amongst allies

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[90] René Viviani and Jean Jaurès, *Histoire Socialiste tome VII: La Restauration* (Paris, France: Jules Rouff et Cie, 1906), 66. Original text reads: "Ce n'est pas seulement parce que Robespierre, gardien vigilant des trésors civiques, a toujours redouté le péril militaire et fut, peut-être, le seul révolutionnaire qui ait eu la prescience de tout ce que les aventures armées coûteraient à la démocratie."

[91] Ibid, 7.

[92] Raymond Poincaré, "Lettre au roi George V," in *Messages, discours, allocutions, lettres, et télégrammes de M. Raymond Poincaré,* ed. Bloud & Gay (Bloud & Gay, 1918), 1-3.

through defensive posturing was somewhat misguided. Despite Joffre's understanding that war was inevitable, Poincaré did not place his faith in the Army, and placed no faith in the offensive.[93] In his memoirs, Poincaré justified his and Viviani's hesitancy to commit to assisting Russia in a potential war with Germany as buying time for further peace talks.[94] The same probably applied to a general mobilization order—he did not want to provoke the Germans. And, when Russia did send word of mobilization, Poincaré and Viviani both strongly protested.[95] As a 1 August telegram from Paul Cambon revealed to Poincaré, the British government would only consider intervention if France was clearly the defender and Germany the aggressor.[96] It could certainly be argued that Poincaré's embrace of the defensive was simply the product of a sincere desire for peace and to secure British support. And, while this was certainly true in part, his public concern with mobilization in a specifically democratic manner was certainly curious, as if he meant to alleviate some sort of skepticism surrounding the military. While Poincaré waited for confirmation of British support and the French Army sat ten kilometers from the Franco-German border, German troops began encroaching on French soil. Given the long history of adversarial governmental attitudes towards the Army since the Dreyfus Affair, Poincaré's heavy emphasis on republican values in mobilization, and placement of the French Army on the defensive, it was certainly possible that Poincaré's actions on the eve of the First World War were in some part reactionary.

The reactionary left of the Third Republic was chiefly manifested through opposition to the Army. As left-leaning governments instituted measures to reform the military, antimilitarism became a part of the civilian government. Skepticism of the military was no longer just a left–

[93] Joffre, *Memoirs,* 127.
[94] Poincaré, *Memoirs, 1913-1914,* 250.
[95] Ibid, 253-254.
[96] Ibid, 263-264.

right issue. In August 1914, there were two separate French 'nations'—a militarist France and a democratic France. The former, focused entirely on defeating the Germans, required some state of exception to achieve battlefield victory. The latter, preoccupied with the notion that the military would abuse its power, directed its energies towards safeguarding the Republic from the Army. Tension between the government and the military is a feature of most, if not all democracies. Since the French Revolution, how and when a democracy ought to grant the military extraordinary powers in times of crisis has been a difficult question for many governments, and was hardly isolated to France in the First World War.[97] But, as the Bloody Week and the Dreyfus Affair demonstrated, *if* and *when* the military ought to be allowed to operate under a state of exception should be seriously considered, lest there be disastrous consequences. Likewise, as seen in Plan XVII, *not* providing the military exceptional powers can also be detrimental, and with a grievous outcome. But the French Army of 1914 was not the French Army of the Bloody Week and the Dreyfus Affair. Poincaré and Viviani were well-aware that a state of exception was necessary to execute Plan XVII, and Joffre's pleas for mobilization left the President and Prime Minister little excuse for their indecision. If not for the Miracle of the Marne, Poincaré and Viviani could have quite possibly been responsible for the defeat of France in the First World War.

[97] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

Conclusion

Plan XVII was the single greatest chance France had to rapidly defeat Germany in the First World War. The French plan epitomized the ardent belief of Foch and Grandmaison in élan and offensive à outrance to overwhelm the Germans. Joffre implemented their writings at the operational level, demanding an immediate offensive against the German armies. Joffre's faith in the offensive was supported by both the lessons of Sedan and the widespread European expectation of a short war. But, the immediate hesitations of the civilian government had serious repercussions for Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive in the opening days of the Great War. At its core, this hesitation was motivated by a deep-rooted skepticism of the military, antimilitarism, and a predisposition to defensive tactics and operations as a means of fulfilling the Revolutionary spirit of the First Republic.

Plan XVII was neither a failure of tactics nor operations. Plan XVII was a failure of imagination. The factors which led to widespread mistrust of the military and the rise of the antimilitarist left, namely the Dreyfus Affair, were entirely preventable. The Army gave the French left—and the French people as a whole—reason to doubt its intentions by acting outside of French law. The pre-1914 Army of the Third Republic was a self-defeating institution; the Army itself caused leftist administrations to fear that another Bloody Week would occur or another Napoleon III or General Boulanger would seize power.

Nevertheless, the failure of Plan XVII was tragic, even if it was self-inflicted. The Great War was not destined to become the prolonged conflict it evolved into after the First Battle of the Marne. While counterfactual scenarios ought to be treated with caution, Plan XVII had a real possibility for success. If Joffre's plan had broken the German center in Belgium and Luxembourg, the Great War would certainly have been a vastly different conflict, and perhaps of

a far lesser duration. This is not to say, however, that the French left ought to be blamed for Plan XVII's failure. On the contrary, left-wing critics of the professional Army were certainly justified in their attempts to change the culture and organization of the French Army. Though both the left and the right remained grounded in some form of reality, both sides used each other's fears—and subsequent attempts to alleviate said fears—to reinforce their own positions. And, while offensive operations and tactics presented a greater chance of making the First World War a quick and decisive conflict, Jaurès' defensive nation-in-arms scheme was a serious idea with significant potential. But, as in any scenario in which two competing ideas vie for implementation, complete dedication to one—as Plan XVII and offensive à outrance demanded—is unlikely, if not impossible entirely.

The story of Plan XVII is a microcosm of a larger trend in reconciling democracy and the professional military, and one which can be found readily available in everyday life here in the United States. Georges Clemenceau once said that "War is too serious a business to be left to the Generals."[1] From personal experience, I can assure you that this is not a popular position among veterans or active duty personnel. Many veterans of the Korean War, for instance, blame Truman's relief of MacArthur as the chief reason for the continued existence of North Korea. Similarly, one of the basic criticisms of the United States in the Vietnam War among veterans is that politicians were primarily responsible for a lack of will to win, or that the United States should have further escalated Operation Rolling Thunder, or even used tactical nuclear weapons to force Hanoi's capitulation. The basic charge of the military against democratic governments—

[1] Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses, "Too Serious a Matter to Be Left to the Generals? Parliament and the Army in Wartime Portugal, 1914-18," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 1 (January 1998): pp. 85-96, https://www.jstor.org/stable/260998, 85.

whether it be World War One, Korea, Vietnam, or countless other conflicts—is this: if the politicians had let the military do its job, we could have won.

From a purely military perspective, these objections appear to have some merit. The aim of any military is to achieve victory in combat. Impeding this objective is contrary to the purpose of the military. However, these objections have an eerie precedent: the post-WWI 'stab-in-the-back' myth in Germany. Many Germans believed they did not militarily lose the First World War—it was the politicians who negotiated the Treaty of Versailles and humiliated the nation. It was entirely possible (and likely) that the United States and many other similar countries lost wars of their own accord without being cheated by politicians. Similarly, it could be argued that North Korea exists as a product of MacArthur's overextension of US forces, or that US escalation of the Vietnam War drove ordinary people to take up arms against the United States, ultimately leading to Washington's defeat.

I cannot speak to the validity of the charges raised against the United States. I can, however, confidently state that these ideas are a real and present part of our society. In the context of Plan XVII, Raymond Poincaré and René Viviani prevented Joffre from early mobilization and from immediately moving Fifth Army into Belgium. In the days and hours in which these delays occurred, Plan XVII and the doctrine of the offensive were defeated before the first shots were fired. The politicians *did* impede military victory, and the case of Plan XVII may be one of the few instances with substantial evidence to support such a claim. But, worst of all, the Army was the cause of its own defeat, and the cause of Poincaré and Viviani's hesitation to begin with. The Dreyfus Affair demonstrated that the French Army had the capacity to be subversive, dishonest, and anti-republican—giving rise to skepticism, Jaurès' nation-in-arms concept, and reigniting the memory of the Paris Commune and the Bloody Week.

The basic problem of Plan XVII's execution was that the civilian government refused to grant the Army a state of exception. This is effectively the same objection as that of many veterans in our society: that the government has consistently refused to let the military do its job. Underlying this divide are the government and the military as institutions. Those who claim the government impeded victory are likely motivated by the objectives of the military. Similarly, government officials are unlikely to sympathize with the intention of achieving victory at all costs. While an explicit left–right divide on the issue of the military is certainly possible as evidenced by Plan XVII, it is far more probable that individual opinions are heavily informed by an individual institutional attachment—despite however much the values of some on the left may align with democratic governments or the principles of people on the right might align with the military.

This information suggests a new way of thinking about the military and democratic government: as competing institutions. Both are necessary for the basic functions of a healthy state. Though sometimes antithetical to one another, the military and democratic governments have the potential to coexist. Plan XVII was a blueprint as to how *not* to balance these two. In the early days and hours of the Great War, the government of the Third Republic placed the normal, peacetime functions of government over Germany's immediate military defeat. This was a mistake, and the incorrect moment to shield democracy from the state of exception necessary to achieve victory. Even in a democracy, the usual operations of government must sometimes be suspended in times of crisis. Such was the lesson of Plan XVII.

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