

## Naval War College Review

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Volume 28  
Number 3 *May-June*

Article 6

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1975

# The French Military and the Problem of Twentieth Century War

David B. Ralston

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### Recommended Citation

Ralston, David B. (1975) "The French Military and the Problem of Twentieth Century War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 28 : No. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol28/iss3/6>

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*The technological and social changes that have overtaken and outdated the traditionally autonomous role of the military in society have nowhere had more serious ramifications than in the Army of France. Faced first with the breakdown of autonomy in the bloodshed of World War I, then the stagnation and collapse of both political and military institutions in the Second World War, and finally with the politico-military environment of revolutionary war, the French have time and again had to reexamine their own relationship to political leaders and renew their search for the proper role of the military in 20th century Western society.*

## **THE FRENCH MILITARY AND THE PROBLEM OF TWENTIETH CENTURY WAR**

An article prepared  
by  
Professor David B. Ralston

Of all the established institutions in Western democratic society, the armed forces are among the more conservative in terms of how they envision their function. Their ideas normally reflect their own experience in the most recent exercise of their presumed primary task—the defense and/or promotion of state interests through the systematic application of violence. However, gaining empirical knowledge from contemporary practice can be costly in terms of blood and treasure, and the conflict generally is terminated before the lessons can be fruitfully applied. In the end, one is forced to study past experience and extrapolate from it what are hoped to be significant developments for the future.

Responsible military authorities are usually awake to the potential value of scientific or technological advances, but

much more difficult to perceive and assess are the transformations in war fostered by large-scale social, political, and even psychological trends within a given society—transformations characteristic of war over the past six or seven decades.

At the start of the 20th century, the fundamental presuppositions of the military authorities in France and in the other states of Europe concerning the nature of war were derived from the experience of the previous 250 years. War was understood to be a circumscribed affair, waged for a definite end. Hostilities were carried on and managed exclusively by the soldiers, a group apart from the rest of the body politic whose status and conduct were subject to special legal codes and definitions. Military operations tended to be limited in geographic scope and the involvement

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of the populace in war was, for the most part, incidental. If the wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era did not quite fit this mold, most contemporary soldiers and statesmen looked upon them as an aberrant interlude and were happy to return to saner ways at their conclusion.

War further constituted a special, exceptional legal state. It was entered upon in compliance with certain well-understood and accepted legal formalities and could be terminated in a similar way, all of which gave to war a kind of autonomy from the other activities of society. The concept of autonomy extended to the military themselves, a consequence of their necessary preoccupation with violence in a society otherwise devoted to theoretically peaceful pursuits.

The 20th century has witnessed a vast increase in the scale of war and along with it a diminution in its autonomy. The industrialization of Europe, by bringing about an exponential increase in productivity, made possible the mobilization for war of a far larger proportion of the human and material energies of society than heretofore. Industrialization also contributed to breaking down the parochial compartmentalization of life characteristic of an agricultural society, thereby facilitating the social and psychological mobilization of what had been a fragmented and often inert populace. There has been a concomitant lessening in the conventional limitations on the conduct of war. The breakdown of war's traditional restraints combined with technological advances in weaponry have led to the increased participation in hostilities of nonmilitary elements in society, participation not necessarily of a voluntary nature.

At the same time, the boundaries separating war from peace have grown less distinct. The traditional legal formalities governing the advent and conclusion of hostilities have tended to be

disregarded, with the result that a major military undertaking is now accepted as possible without any declaration of war or official measures to put society on a war footing. Even the privacy of war, stemming from the relative isolation of the battlefield, has declined, as the vicarious participation of noncombatants has been made possible through the progressively more involving media of news photography, the newsreel, and finally television.

For the military, whose own particular conception of their function and role in society has traditionally depended on the autonomy of war, this transformation in its nature has created a number of problems. No Western nation has had a more extensive involvement with the changing form of war in the 20th century than France nor experienced more varying fortunes. The French military have had to go to greater lengths than any other soldiers to attempt to cope with the problems caused by the breakdown in war's autonomy, and for that reason, if for no other, a cursory examination of their experience may be instructive.

The basic assumption of the French high command at the advent of the First World War was that they would have exclusive responsibility for the conduct of military operations—at the behest of the civilian authorities—in order to achieve a generally agreed upon goal of national policy. That the conflict would involve far greater numbers than in the past through the application of universal military service was understood and accepted, but it did not appear to weigh upon their rather limited conception of the nature of war itself. Nor was their view really changed by the exponential increase in the scale of the conflict as the belligerents sought to break the stalemate on the Western Front through the sheer weight of manpower and firepower, while in the process mobilizing all available material, fiscal, and psychological resources.

The French high command showed little inclination to interfere in this process of mobilizing the nonmilitary energies of the nation, content to let the competent civil authorities take full responsibility. At the same time, they resisted any attempt by the government to intervene in the elaboration and execution of military operations. Within the so-called Zone of the Armies, Joffre was all powerful,<sup>1</sup> and as long as he had the support of the political authorities, he had no reason to assert himself beyond its boundaries. As the war dragged on and the sacrifices demanded of the French people became wholly disproportionate to what was being won on the field of battle, the civil authorities were driven by political necessity to assert some kind of control over the high command in its conduct of operations.<sup>2</sup> Much as this may have been distasteful to the military, they accepted it.

The French experience in this respect differed markedly from that in Germany. There, similar pressures had led to the virtual collapse of the regular political institutions. Indeed, by 1917 Ludendorff and the high command had arrogated the role of political arbiter. In the wake of Germany's defeat, Ludendorff paid a grudging tribute to the efficacy of the civilian leadership in France and Great Britain, considering it a crucial factor in the final outcome of the war.<sup>3</sup> Ludendorff was later to become one of the more vociferous and articulate proponents of the concept of total war. In general, the French military were silent on the subject, the experience of World War I not having noticeably enlarged their view as to the nature of modern war, except to give them a greater appreciation of the effectiveness of the reserves and the virtues of materiel. For the rest, the experience of war provided apparent confirmation to the soundness of the implicit division of labor between the French political and military authorities.

During the interwar years, efforts made to extrapolate from the wartime experience and to lay the legal groundwork for the more efficient mobilization of national resources in the event of another conflict aroused little interest on the part of the military.<sup>4</sup> Nor, despite the experience of World War I, were they concerned with what had come to be the crucial role of civilian morale in modern conflict. The possibility of fruitful cooperation between the civil and military chiefs in this area was further hampered by a lack of mutual understanding, especially in the 1930's. It was the view of the majority of the French officers that the only possible response to a government such as the Popular Front, which was dominated by the Socialists and supported by the Communists, was disciplined exasperation. A small minority went much further, giving vent to their discontent in activities that can only be characterized as seditious. The standard rhetoric of the Left as to the Fascist and praetorian proclivities of the military did little to promote understanding.

Whatever the inadequacies of the French military that were revealed in the campaign of 1940, they were aggravated by the listless quality of French political leadership. As indicative as the collapse of the French Army was the vote (10 July 1940) by which the Republic adjourned *sine die*, and political power passed to France's most eminent living soldier and possibly most respected citizen, Marshal Pétain.

In their assessment of the causes of the defeat, the soldiers quite understandably were reluctant to dwell upon their own deficiencies. The national calamity was, in their view, caused by general unpreparedness, not only in terms of military materiel but also in terms of France's moral and psychological stamina. Here the fault was imputed to lie with the civil authorities. With the abdication of the republican leaders, it was incumbent that the

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military take the necessary lead in sponsoring a national program of moral reeducation. They would in this moment of national crisis step out of their traditionally restricted autonomous sphere, thus transcending the compartmentalization of responsibilities which had until then served both their interests and those of the nation equally well. The irony of the situation was that the first conscious effort by the French military to meet the challenge to military autonomy inherent in the expanded scale of 20th century war was based on a code of ideals which were believed archaic by the great mass of French people. These ideals were based on the values of a rural society—static, disciplined, hierarchical—with a large role reserved for the Church.

The ultimate justification for a program of moral reeducation undertaken by the soldiers of the Vichy regime could be understood as military. They hoped that after an extended period of retraining and regeneration the French people would once again be ready to enter the war, but for the moment, the primary interest of the soldiers seemed to be pedagogical. The French educational system with its emphasis on purely intellectual matters was considered to have been a haven for advocates of antinational, socialistic ideals. The defeat of 1940 was taken as proof of the system's deficiencies in preparing French youth for the perils of the modern world. A new system of education would stress the virtues of group solidarity, physical conditioning, and moral stamina, along with the usual intellectual values, in the development of the future leaders of France. The most notable manifestation of this vision was the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse* where young Frenchmen of all classes gathered in camps away from the debilitating influences of the cities and worked together under military sponsorship on various socially valuable projects.<sup>5</sup> But the military found it frus-

trating that the French people seemed, for the most part, to be disinterested in their rather anachronistic program of societal improvement and impervious to the lessons which they were being taught. The soldiers had sought to break down the barrier separating themselves from civilian society for the betterment of that society only to be met by what they took to be incomprehension and ingratitude.

If circumstances, along with their own particular ideological vision, led a considerable portion of the French military into educational rather than military endeavors during the Vichy years, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942 set the stage for the return to combat of the units stationed there. The soldiers of the North African army were able, through some rather tortuous political maneuvers, to defy the Pétain government and join the Allies. They formed the nucleus of what was to be a respectable French contribution to the final victory and after 1945 provided the foundation upon which the army of the Fourth Republic was built. In this way the institutional continuity of the army was assured and an organic link with the past preserved. By a fundamentally arbitrary act, those who had not taken up arms by 6 June 1944, largely soldiers stationed in metropolitan France, were made liable to dismissal. They were made to bear the onus for the political and military sins of the rest.<sup>6</sup>

The French Army may have survived the war with its autonomy relatively unimpaired, but its mission and purpose in the postwar years were ill defined. The traditional mission of defending national soil was patently beyond its capabilities. Indeed, in an age of superpowers and nuclear armaments and at a moment when minimal subsistence was the overriding concern of the French populace, the exigencies of national defense as traditionally understood by the French military were neither

relevant nor compelling, possibly even to the soldiers themselves. A new mission was to define itself very soon in Indochina, one which extended into the Algerian campaign and which, over the next 16 years, would occupy an ever increasing portion of their energies. In their efforts to accomplish this mission, a vital and significant minority within the military were driven to reformulate their whole conception of military operations in the modern world, and, as a consequence, what should be their role vis-a-vis both state and society.

French policy in Indochina was a product of the weakness and the confusions of French Government in the immediate postwar years. It was not rooted in any deeply felt resolve on the part of the French people to defend the Empire, and once it was underway, the French Government neither enunciated any clear policy as to what military operations were meant to achieve nor did it provide adequate means for their achievement. As for the soldiers in Indochina, they found themselves confronting a disquietingly unfamiliar form of warfare, one where the traditional goals of the destruction of the enemy's armed forces in battle and/or the physical occupation of his territory were no longer relevant or applicable. In this war there were no clearly delineated battlefronts and few pitched battles. A given piece of territory could be under overt French control by day and effective enemy control by night. While the armed forces of the Vietminh were for the most part indistinguishable from the mass of the population, the loyalty of the people to the traditional indigenous authorities and to their French overlords had been eroded by prolonged and skilled political work on the part of the insurgents.

For the Vietminh it was total war, all available economic, social, and political resources were mobilized to support the military goal of expelling the French. What was frustrating and eventually

infuriating for the military was that the commitment on the part of the Vietminh evoked no corresponding response on the part of the French Government and the French people. At home it was essentially a secondary issue with political ground rules that forbade the sending of conscripts to fight. While the men of the regular army, and in particular the graduates of Saint Cyr, suffered casualties which, proportionate to their numbers, were comparable to what they had undergone in World War I,<sup>7</sup> they received little or no moral, spiritual, or even political support from the French populace.

The lessons which the French military drew from their Indochinese misadventure led to the elaboration of the doctrine of *la guerre révolutionnaire*. It was in terms of this military doctrine that they would endeavor to suppress the Algerian uprising. In this doctrine the French Army articulated the idea that "military action should be secondary to psychological action, propaganda, . . . liaison with the people, and economic and social action. In the end, the qualities and methods of the ideological crusader were more effective in obtaining final victory than the qualities and methods of the soldier."<sup>8</sup> In Indochina, the military's understanding of the mission came too late. They were determined that it would not be the same story in Algeria.

It is understandable that the French military believed that they possessed advantages in Algeria which had been lacking in Indochina. For one thing, the French presence in Algeria was far stronger and more pervasive than it had been in Indochina, the consequence of a greater proportion of Europeans in the population, the proximity of the country to the French homeland, and its century or more of association with France. Algeria was, in fact, legally and constitutionally an integral part of the territory of the French Republic. Despite this fact, the administrative

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institutions of the French state, insofar as they concerned the majority of the native population, were weak and, when confronted by the outbreak of rebellion, threatened to collapse completely. Thus there existed an essential administrative void which the hidebound civil bureaucrats were incapable of filling. This led the army to assume almost complete authority and administrative responsibility for this vast territory.<sup>9</sup>

In going out among the native population and embarking on a program of social, economic, and educational reform, the military were acting in accordance with the doctrine of *la guerre révolutionnaire*. However, they were also engaged in a style of activity that was quite in keeping with the traditions of Gallieni and Lyautey and their disciples in the French colonial armies. Gallieni himself had written: "It is by combined use of politics and force that pacification of a country will be achieved. Political action is by far the more important."<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of revolutionary war elaborated by those who came to be considered the intellectual elite of the French Army in the 1950's owed much to Mao Tse-tung's practice of war among the masses and to some of the more exotic theories of crowd psychology and mass action. Nonetheless, it was also drawn from one of the mainstreams of French military thought.

While there were never more than a handful of officers who were advocates of the doctrines of revolutionary war, a great many were both aware of its tenets and profoundly disturbed by its possible implications. Despite their relatively small numbers, the advocates of this seemingly new form of war attained a remarkable ascendancy within the army in the 1950's. One reason may lie in the fact that no other theory of combat available seemed to be relevant to the post-1945 missions assumed by the army. Another possible reason was involved with national pride. As elabo-

rated in the pages of various military reviews, it took shape as a uniquely French response to the problem of Western defense strategy. While in the 1950's the United States appeared to be militarily musclebound with its adherence to massive retaliation, France possessed an ingenious military doctrine and an army able to meet the Communist threat in that sector where it was most likely to occur, the developing nations of the Third World.<sup>11</sup> If nothing else, it was reassuring evidence of the continuing intellectual vitality of the French military for all their misfortunes in the recent past.

As previously noted, the doctrine of revolutionary war could, in many respects, be seen as lineally descended from the theories of colonial war expounded by Gallieni and Lyautey. The Indochinese and Algerian conflicts were thus analogous to the campaigns conducted in these areas in the 19th century. Where the analogy breaks down, of course, is in the matter of scale. The 19th century endeavors were carried out by relatively small detachments of troops against isolated native tribes, while the French military in the 1950's had to deal with the nationally inspired rising of a whole people. The 19th century campaigns had been peripheral to the real concerns of the army; those of the mid-20th century were central and soon came to demand the commitment of a major portion of its energies.

While the army saw the Indochinese and Algerian engagements as a war, the majority of the French people did not. The civilian populace maintained a peacetime outlook even when the hostilities took place in an area that was legally and administratively a portion of the national patrimony, as was Algeria. The government did little to alter this state of mind, even though conscripts were being used in Algeria.<sup>12</sup> At no time in this 16-year period was a state of war declared to exist between France

and any other country, and the government thereby undermined the legal and moral justification for a number of the arbitrary measures which it found necessary to take.

The coexistence of prolonged hostilities with a predominantly peacetime mentality is indicative of a novel situation both for France and for other liberal Western states. War in the post-1945 world was ceasing to be a conventionally defined legal condition, with its own particular set of imperatives in terms of which certain liberal constitutional guarantees might be temporarily suspended if they could be construed as hindering the efforts of the forces in the field. In short, war was losing its autonomy as a condition in which relations between one society and another could be characterized by violence while, as a more or less natural concomitant, the soldiers were losing their exclusive, circumscribed role in society. Their primary function might still be the manipulation of violence, but other corollary duties could also fall within their sphere of competence, as happened in Algeria, because of the decrepitude of the responsible civilian authorities.

In retrospect, the whole question of how the French military met the challenges of 20th century war cannot be divorced from the question of how the civil authorities, working within the French political system, responded to the changing nature of war in this century. In World War I, the Republic, for all its fabled inefficiency and frivolity, performed as effectively as the political system of any of the major belligerents. If there were moments of friction between the civil and military authorities, the transition to total war was carried through expeditiously with the energies of French society.

The failure of the French military imagination in the interwar years is evident, but it was matched by an analogous failure within the nation's

social and political elite. Even if the military had not sought to keep their distance from the civilian world and had been open to currents of renovation and renewal, it is doubtful that French civil society could have been the source of such. Neither the civil nor the military authorities showed to particular advantage during World War II, and the experience of occupation and the resistance, contrary to the somewhat utopian hopes of the era, did not lead to any fresh starts politically. The sense of divisiveness and impotence that characterized the French political system in the 1930's persisted under the Fourth Republic, preventing the legally constituted civil authorities from providing any kind of systematic, coherent lead in the process of decolonization or, conversely, from mobilizing the energies of the nation for an all-out defense of the Empire. It was in Algeria that the deficiencies of the system reached a logical culmination.

The army was assigned the task of putting down the rebellion. Pacification would be ineffective without concurrent political and social work among the native population, and such work had no real meaning unless the military

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## BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Professor David B. Ralston did his undergraduate work at Yale and was awarded a Ph.D. from Columbia University. He has specialized in civil-military relations, 18th-20th century Europe, and has served on the faculties of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Columbia University. Professor Ralston's publications include *The Army of the Republic* (1967), *Soldiers and States*, editor (1966), and *Revolution: a Reader*, contributing editor (1971); he is currently on the Strategy faculty of the Naval War College.

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could guarantee a continuing French Government in Algeria. Well founded doubts as to the determination of the government in this regard led to growing dissidence within the army and to the belief on the part of the more fanatic among them that overt military action should be taken to impose upon the civil authorities the policies advocated by the soldiers in the field.<sup>13</sup>

The threat that the soldiers in Algeria might indeed attempt something of this nature contributed significantly to the train of events which brought de Gaulle to power. The tragic paradox for the military lay in the fact that when de Gaulle revealed himself willing and able to do the one thing a soldier asks of the civil authorities, namely to institute a firm and consistent policy for him to

carry out, certain of the leading military figures were too far committed to an opposing policy. Thus it was too late for a confrontation to be avoided. That confrontation, climaxed by the Revolt of the Generals of May 1961, signaled the end of a 20-year era during which the military had struggled, in the end unsuccessfully, to come to terms with the peculiar conditions of war as it has come to be waged in the middle of this century. It may also have marked the end of a much longer era in the history of France's armed forces, one extending back at least a century and a half, and perhaps even as far back as the reign of Louis XIV, during which they existed as a permanently organized corporate entity within but apart from the body politic.

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### NOTES

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12. Ambler, pp. 104-106.

13. Girardet, p. 141.

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