

Swarthmore College

Works

French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works

French & Francophone Studies

2017

At The Edge Of The World: The Heroic Century Of The French Foreign Legion

Jean-Vincent Blanchard

Swarthmore College, jblanch1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french>



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jean-Vincent Blanchard. (2017). "At The Edge Of The World: The Heroic Century Of The French Foreign Legion". *At The Edge Of The World: The Heroic Century Of The French Foreign Legion*.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french/66>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Introduction

Fes took early twentieth-century European travelers by surprise. Approaching the Moroccan city from the west, from Meknes, they saw Fes rise like a citadel in the midst of a wide rocky valley, with nothing outside its fierce defenses but barren land punctuated here and there by a prickly pear cactus, a palm tree, or a wild geranium. The city's nine miles of ramparts and a belt of lush gardens enclosed a tangle of narrow streets, the medina, where ninety thousand people lived in a fascinating concentration of humanity. At dusk, when a low sun gave the city's walls, towers, and bastions a soft golden glow, Fes shone as the ancient, vibrant heart of Morocco.

May 28, 1912, was Fes's most dangerous day and one of its most memorable. After the Sultan of Morocco, Abdelhafid, and France's diplomatic representative, Eugène Regnault, declared Morocco to be a French protectorate on March 30, 1912, the sultan elite guard revolted and, together with the poorest of the population, massacred sixty-three French officers and civilians. French reprisals were equally ferocious. Resentment simmered in Fes over the following weeks, and it spread through the entire city. By the end of May, tensions between the Moroccans and the French reached their nadir. Fifteen thousand warriors coming from the surrounding mountains attacked the city to take it back from the foreigners who still occupied it. After four days of fighting, on May 28, the warriors stood ready to descend again to deal the final blow. European civilians and French personnel were trapped in the labyrinth of the medina, unable to evacuate given the number of wounded that lay sheltered in the hospital.

Right outside the walls of Fes, the Foreign Legion, an essential asset of the city's French military forces, was positioned to bear the brunt of this last

attack. Companies of legionnaires were assembled to the north, on a ridge overlooking the city, by the sixteenth-century ruined tombs of the Marinids, an old dynasty of sultans. More legionnaires stood ready for action at the camp of Dar Dbibagh, to the southwest of the city walls.

The Europeans trapped inside, as well as many citizens of Fes, put their last hopes on these legionnaires, who had trained in sweltering Algeria to be fearless. As an all-volunteer corps of the French army, founded in 1831 with a special right to hire foreign-born recruits, the Legion had distinguished itself in France's colonial conquests, building an empire from Algeria to Indochina, from Madagascar to Morocco. From the 1830s until well after World War I, the Foreign Legion were essential troops in a colonial expansion in the professed name of civilization and racial superiority, at a time of rising nationalism and murderous rivalries between European powers.

In one of Fes's palaces with a shaded courtyard, a veteran of the French colonial wars, Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey, oversaw the defense of the siege as the appointed resident-general of Morocco, entrusted with both civil and military powers. Resident-General Lyautey had entered Fes four days earlier to find himself in the thorniest situation. Sultan Abdelhafid, whom he had met upon his arrival, wished to abdicate. The ulemas, Fes's highest clergy, told Lyautey that nothing they or the sultan could do would avert a disaster. The wealthy elite merchants, the *chorfas*, were said to be negotiating with the Amazigh (Berber; plural Imazighen) chiefs to facilitate their assault on the city. News came that the attackers had removed the saintly robes kept in the shrine of Moulay Idriss II, Fes's founder and patron saint.

The last attack on Fes began at four o'clock in the afternoon of May 28. Thousands of warriors poured down on Fes in a clamor of cries and rifle shots. In no time they were massing at the gates, or climbing the crumbling parts of the walls, and quickly disappearing in the maze of the medina.

On the roof terrace of his headquarters, Lyautey smoked cigarette after cigarette. The wave of fighting rolled toward the palace. Shots were fired. Lyautey and his officers understood that they were now cut off from any communication with the outside. The resident-general pointed his spyglass toward the Marinids site on the mountain and saw the legionnaires advancing.

The roots of Lyautey's admiration and confidence in the colonial army corps of the Legion ran deep. He had first become acquainted with the Legion as a French army officer, when he was dispatched successively in 1894 and 1897 to Southeast Asia and the African island of Madagascar, to solidify recent French colonial conquests. There, among the different corps of the

French colonial army, was the Legion. Lyautey steadily rose in rank, giving orders to the legionnaires as they conquered western Algeria, and then Morocco. Afterwards, as the resident-general in that kingdom from 1912 to 1925, a colonial viceroy who had acquired an international reputation, he demonstrated political, administrative, and military talents, relying again on the Legion to accomplish his mission. He would write on the centennial anniversary of the Legion, in 1931:

You all know that I am a legionnaire both in body and soul. Since 1894, in the Tonkin, I constantly marched with the Legion, in Madagascar, in the South Oranais, at the head of the Oran military division, at the border between Algeria and Morocco, and then in Morocco. All that without respite until 1925, for thirty-one years in a row.¹

Crucial to the Legion's aims and missions was Lyautey's project of conquering "by winning hearts and minds." As an architect of French colonial expansion, Lyautey wanted to build roads, market places, and schools to show the benefits of the French occupation and slowly gain the people's trust in what the French viewed as a civilizing mission. With sincere declarations of respect for Moroccan culture and Islam in general, he protected the cultural heritage by encouraging traditional arts and preserving the urban fabric of Moroccan cities. The Legion played a key role in realizing these projects thanks to the astounding variety of skills—engineering and otherwise—that the legionnaires brought to the corps. This is why Lyautey saw the corps as the quintessential troop in his vision of a colonization. The Legion would help spread French civilization like an "oil slick," a *tache d'huile*—the metaphor used by Lyautey himself and his colonial mentor, Joseph Gallieni.

In the courtyard of Mnebhi Palace, on May 28, 1912, Lyautey's aides-de-camp were gathering crates of papers with cans of gasoline nearby, should these papers need to be burned. Lyautey had not slept for two days, yet three hours into the attack, he remained remarkably calm, confident that the Foreign Legion and the other corps of the army would prevail. He ordered dinner to be served on the terrace of his palace, overlooking the medina and the war scene. Days later, the resident-general recounted the night in a letter to a friend:

I had in my company a charming little poet, Lieutenant Droin . . .

We took his book to the dinner table so that we could read

the most successful verses, just as the skirmishers were firing from the terrace and other officers were taking their tour of duty. The night, I must say, was beautiful, and the moonlight perfectly lit those white-robed Moroccans tumbling down towards the city. The moment had to be lived.²

Twenty-two years after claiming Morocco for themselves, the French were still fighting courageous Amazigh resistance fighters in the Atlas Mountains, to the point where they had to resort to extraordinary force and weaponry, and accept mass casualties. When the Moroccans objected to their country's being led by the French, troublemakers had to be put down by force. The Legion was the perfect troop for that, too. "The Maréchal attacked his problem with unflinching energy, using tact when tact was needed, and the Foreign Legion when things had gone beyond the limits of mere talk," wrote Prince Aage of Denmark, one of the most popular soldiers to ever join the corps, in the early 1920s.³

The Legion showed appreciation for the marshal. As a group of foreign-born soldiers, legionnaires did not have a country, but they had a corps to rely on, and exceptional officers who fostered much of that relationship. Lyautey embodied this empathy and leadership. He was the strategist who led his troops to victory, but he was also their protector outside of the war theater, treating the soldiers with humanity. When the rowdy behavior of the legionnaires came under criticism, he replied that one "did not build empires with virgins."⁴ Sensitive to the hardships the legionnaires endured in the field, Lyautey built rest houses for them to use when they were on leave or in retirement (Salé, Oran). Conversely, many legionnaires sent to Lyautey remembrances and expressions of respect.

The legionnaire as a colonial soldier created an archetype in an epic of conquest, and that is key to understanding the kinship between the military leader Lyautey and the Foreign Legion. The Legion became the stuff of legend when news from the colonies became of interest to more than foreign affairs politicians and commercial lobbies. During the first decades of the twentieth century, newspaper articles, memoirs, novels, movies, and songs featured the Legion's exploits. By the time of the 1912 siege of Fes, the soldiers of the corps already had an enviable reputation for sustaining fire with much panache. One of the most famous works that spread the romance of the Legion was Percival C. Wren's *Beau Geste*, published in 1924. Wren's novel established some typical images of the legionnaire's life: a figure standing at edge of the Sahara, wearing a blue coat and a white kepi,

a flat-topped cap in the shape of an elliptic cylinder, with a visor and a white cloth flap to protect the neck from the sun; guarding a mud-brick fort against attacks from Algerian and Moroccan warriors; stomaching the sadistic impulses of an all-powerful officer who wants to push his soldiers to the limit of their human capacities; finding redemption and an existential purpose through camaraderie and abnegation. The legionnaires were featured in several films such as *Morocco*, in 1930, starring Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich.

Not only did the public eagerly consume these images of fit, alert men, but generations of young men entertained the thought of joining the French Foreign Legion. The phrase “. . . or else I’m going to join the Legion!” was a token expression of dissatisfaction at the deepest level, an uncompromising stance toward life, and perhaps a penchant for melodrama. To become a legionnaire was an alternative option, and many felt its allure. Englishman Brian Stuart explained what happened after he took time off at a movie theater in London, one fateful afternoon:

I forget the title of the film being shown at the cinema, but it was of the blood, bullets, bayonets, and brutality variety—with a few luscious Arab maidens here and there—dealing with the French Foreign Legion. The blue smoke of a Balkan Sobranie curled above my head as I descended the marble staircase and out into Charing Cross Road. I made up my mind to join the Foreign Legion.⁵

Blood, bullets, bayonets, and women in an Arab land: How and why did the Legion come to exert such a mysterious attraction, embodying both the violence of war and the lure of exoticism? Who were these men, and how did these “dogs of war” fight so efficiently?

Edith Piaf’s popular “*Mon légionnaire*” defined the nature of the mythical colonial soldier. French singers had been celebrating the Legion with popular songs for years, but this memorable piece, its lyrics written by Raymond Asso to a tune composed by Marguerite Monnot in 1936, struck a chord with the public.⁶ Piaf sang of her longing after a night of lovemaking with one of the blond and tattooed recruits of the Legion—at the time, a substantial majority of them were Germans or Northern Europeans:

He had very light eyes
That flashed brightly at times

*Il avait de grands yeux très clairs
Où parfois passaient des éclairs*

| | |
|--|---|
| Like a thunderstorm though the sky. | <i>Comme au ciel passent des orages.</i> |
| He was covered in tattoos | <i>Il était plein de tatouages</i> |
| That I never fully understood. | <i>Que j'ai jamais très bien compris.</i> |
| On his neck: "Never seen, never taken." | <i>Son cou portait: "Pas vu, pas pris."</i> |
| Over his heart one could read: "No one." | <i>Sur son cœur on lisait: "Personne."</i> |
| On his right arm, one word: "Think." | <i>Sur son bras droit un mot:</i> |
| | <i>"Raisonne."</i> |

This is the legionnaire: moody, marginal, and uncompromising. In the song Piaf regretted not having asked the name of her lover, and he did not volunteer information either, because the figure of the legionnaire is characteristically that of a mysterious man who speaks little. He is a man without a past, since his past is likely the reason he had to join the ranks of the Legion in the first place. The Legion had a reputation for harboring political refugees, ex-convicts, scions of aristocratic families leaving behind gambling debts, plain adventurers attracted by the prospect of life in warm countries, and many more with broken hearts or other lamentations. The Foreign Legion asked few questions. It took all those who were physically fit to join, and then made sure that their pay was well earned over their five-year contract.

The training of the legionnaire was infamous for its long, exhausting marches in the desert during which trainees were burdened by unbearably heavy backpacks. Discipline could be iron-fisted. A culture of hard boozing and sex with prostitutes provided distraction for the disgruntled moments of release called *partir en bombe*. Officers regularly closed their eyes on this behavior, because they knew that a peculiar depressive affliction of the legionnaire known as *le cafard*—the “cockroach”—might set even more heavily on their troops, bringing the deepest funk and loathing of the world, with consequences often tragic. Georges d’Esparbès, whose *Les Mystères de la Légion étrangère* played a key role in popularizing the image of the incurably moody legionnaire in the year of the siege of Fes, described the ailment with these words: “The cafard gains entry in the cerebral matter, there it drags its thin legs, slips into a crevice, trots along, crawls, noses about, and thus corrupts all comprehension.”⁷ Nowhere was the deleterious effect of *le cafard* felt more strongly than at those outposts at the edge of the desert, or in the wilderness of the Atlas Mountains, where solitude and the barren landscape would often return the legionnaire’s thoughts to his lonesome destiny.

Still, the “Legion of the Damned” offered hope for redemption. Out of so many differences in nationalities, creeds, and tormented pasts emerged a sense of togetherness that could make a battalion of legionnaires a superior

force. First and foremost, legionnaires fought for the Legion itself. They fought under the mottos, "Legio Patria Nostra" ("The Legion is our only country") and "Honneur et Fidélité" ("Honor and Fidelity"), which eloquently captured the goal of forming a steel-clad esprit de corps. After bouts of *le cafard* and episodes of *la bombe*, a newly found solidarity, backed with the lingering notion that there is not much to this earthly life, gave the legionnaires discipline. Hence this striking description of combat:

Grimly, silently, swiftly, the Legion advanced, Major Büschenschütz at the head. There was no cheering, no waving of banners; just a line of khaki-clad, lean-jawed soldiers setting out to accomplish a professional task. Here and there a man stumbled, pitched forward on his face, to twitch a bit and then lie still. Automatically the gap was filled, and in less time than it takes to tell it here, the battalion closed with the enemy and got to work with the bayonet.⁸

Legion solidarity instilled desperate courage under fire, and in man-to-man combat. Aage remarked in his memoirs, "At the moment of death, wherever they are, legionnaires vomit and blaspheme their disgust for life and for men."⁹ Beyond the battlefield, the value of loyalty permeated the whole existence of the legionnaire. When a soldier shouted "Come to me, Legion!" in glorious action, but also during a brawl, from the depths of the seediest joint of a Moroccan medina, his fellow men pounced to the rescue without asking any question, as described by the legionnaire Frederic Martyn, soon to arrive in Indochina:

Outside, before anything that was not legionnaire, the Legion clustered together and presented a united front. '*Oh! La Légion!*' Upon that cry legionnaires would come out from everywhere, they did not question the motives of the one who called. Without any discussion, they united against others.¹⁰

The tradition of unswerving loyalty apparently originated at the Siege of Constantine in 1837, when Captain Achille Leroy de Saint-Arnaud pronounced the words in the midst of an epic assault and rallied his platoon.

The French government used these soldiers for their most difficult missions, especially since their deaths were much less costly politically than

those of French citizens. The legionnaires took it in stride, determined as they were to perform their destiny as a band of outcasts. Such was the dark ethos that brought solidarity to the Foreign Legion. They were known to toast one another in the most desperate moments, or break out singing, showing a touch of artistry that was at the core of the legionnaire's stance on life—and death.

Like the legionnaires, Lyautey had a taste for adventure and the exotic, and a resolutely anticonformist attitude. Lyautey had an artist's soul, with talents as master of ceremonies and as a fine writer elected to the Académie Française the year he became resident-general. He cut a dandyish figure, wearing a burnous and living in a tent decorated with the finest rugs. He had the physique to play the part.

Just like his cherished soldiers, Lyautey hated civilian life and what it had come to represent in a rapidly modernizing Europe: bureaucracy, the banality of existence, and manufactured life and leisure. Lyautey, too, swung from feelings of exhilaration to bouts of deep depression during which, in spite of his immense achievements, he proclaimed that he was wasting his life. This expression of disenchantment became even more acute after World War I, when all the illusions of a morally superior civilization collapsed.

To understand the Legion is to appreciate the paradoxes it embodied. On pages and pages of memoirs, otherwise redolent of pessimism and a drive toward self-destruction, a spiritual trajectory appeared. In Antoine Sylvère's autobiographical novel, *Le Légionnaire Flutsch*, Sylvère, a seventeen-year-old post office clerk caught fabricating fake money orders, flees the French authorities in 1905 and joins the Legion under the following credentials: "Gabriel Flutsch, Luxembourgeois, 1m77 and 76kg" (five feet ten inches, 168 pounds), service number 16674. His story not only provided a vivid testimony of life in the Legion in turn-of-the-century colonial Algeria but also delineated a typical itinerary, that of a youngster in need of structure and experience who grew into a responsible man through the experience of the regiment's hardship. The day Flutsch realized that he was now free in the most existential sense of the word, he decided to surrender to French justice, which forgave him and dropped all charges. Enlisting in the Legion was understood as entering an ersatz religious order. Flutsch explained:

One enters here as one enters a convent when overtaken by the faith. The first novitiate lasts five years. After that, the legionnaire realizes that he does not belong to that world outside the Legion and that he cannot live in it anymore. What happens next is

exactly what would happen to a drunkard who is sent back to his own after five years [of willful sobriety]. In general, he only aspires to return to the bonds of the community that formed him, that liberated him from needing any rule.¹¹

Georges d'Esparbès, in his *Les Mystères de la Légion étrangère*, describes the corps as a "monastery of action" that one joined as others chose to become Carthusian monks. Legionnaire Flutsch called it a cloister, the "monastery of unbelievers."¹² The commemorative book that the Legion published in the wake of its centennial celebrations, in 1931, echoed that particular trope of religious engagement, disillusion, and personal quest: "Along with monasteries, the Legion is the last refuge of all those who bear in themselves the nostalgia of what they would want to be, of what they could be."¹³ "One does not join the Legion for the billy," went an old saying, meaning that life entailed a renunciation of certain worldly comforts for the sake of enlightenment. When he suffered from his most acute bouts of *le cafard* in his youth, Lyautey had retreated into a Carthusian monastery located deep in the solitude of the French Alps. In Morocco, he nicknamed his closest circle of officers his *zawiya*, an Islamic religious fraternity.¹⁴ Major Zinovy Peshkov, another famous officer of Prince Aage's generation, observed, as he stood in the solitude of an outpost in the middle of Morocco, "Yes, I like these nights when I am on the rounds, even if the weather is terrible. The depth of my heart is opened, and I hear strange calls. I do not know from whence they come. I cannot define them. They come from some obscure source."¹⁵

At the edge of the world, self-loathing and estrangement could lead to revelation. The desert, the colonies, were a mirror in which soldiers such as the legionnaires and their high officers like Lyautey fought their own demons. A riveting contradiction appears: How could men both challenge the modernization of Western society and carry out one of its core projects, colonization? Attraction and destruction, narcissism and self-loathing, are key elements of the Legion's story.

Through memoirs and testimonies, many of which remain unpublished; through the material the Legion put out to shape the image of its corps; or through some infamous anti-Legion propaganda (mostly German) that sought to counter the fascination exerted by this corps, the myth of the Legion emerged. The Legion's "Heroic Age" ran from the early 1880s to the 1930s, largely under the command of Lyautey, and accompanied the formative time of the French Third Republic's political regime. This was also a time of rising nationalism, of modernization, and of globalization. Exotic

images circulated ever more rapidly and widely in the artistic effervescence of the Belle Époque, a crucial factor in the emergence of the Legion's myth. In the end, the archetype of the legionnaire set the standard of what a man ought to be, defining an ideal of masculinity for generations.

"*Non, je ne regrette rien*," sang Piaf in another world-famous song that few know she dedicated to the Foreign Legion in the midst of the Algerian War—she recorded it in 1960. Life's contradictions resolved—the good, the bad, both the pleasures and the chagrins forgotten—a new life started with time spent at the Legion. "With my memories, I lit a fire," added Piaf in her song. For the legionnaire, it could happen right away, or years after joining. Many never made it to that point of absolution so eagerly sought.