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General Foch



# GENERAL FOCH

THE MAN OF THE HOUR

BY MAJOR R. M. JOHNSTON



The first authentic account of the life of the famous Allied Commander under whom our soldiers are fighting, written by one of America's most eminent historians.



Opus 362  
J. B. Bopp

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GENERAL FOCH

*An Appreciation*



# GENERAL FOCH

THE MAN OF THE HOUR

BY

MAJOR ROBERT M. JOHNSTON  
U.S.N.A.



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TO  
OUR BRAVE COMRADES OF  
THE  
FRENCH ARMY



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# GENERAL FOCH

## I

### YOUTH

AS THESE words are written, early in May, 1918, all eyes in the Western World are fixed on Ferdinand Foch. All eyes are fixed on the generalissimo of the decimated and decimating host fighting to withstand the renewed, and as yet the most dangerous, thrust of the Teutons. The least error, the least faltering, and neither judgment nor courage may possibly ever avail again. The eye, the brain, the heart of a single man must pierce and must master this crisis. And Foch is that man, by the acclamation of the French Army.

More than that. Foch is the typical French soldier. In him there live again the Christian faith and serene fearlessness of Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*; the continuous intellectual effort, the will, the power to learn, of Turenne; the tirelessness and dependability of that prince

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of subordinates, Desaix; the clarity, brevity, and force of that most brilliant of military styl-ists, Ardant du Picq. Something of all these heroes may be found in Foch; the enemies of France have already discovered it.

He was born on the 4th of August, 1851, at Tarbes, a little city in the Pyrenees, where his father held an administrative post. It was only a few weeks later that Louis Bonaparte put through his successful *coup d'état*; and the youth of the future commander-in-chief of the French armies was therefore passed during the brief period in which the Second Empire attempted to reproduce the military glories of the First. War followed war at intervals almost as rapid as during the reign of the Great Napoleon. Their scale was less, however; there was not behind them, as had been the case half a cen- tury earlier, splendid causes and great ideas; and they ended in a disaster which had little to redeem it, as had the heroic struggle of the first Emperor in 1812-15. The heartrending collapse of France at Metz and Sedan came

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just a few months too early in the life of Foch for him to participate in these events; but military impressions were constantly before him during his school years, and the strongest impression of all came just at the moment when the military career was opening before him.

His education was obtained in provincial cities, at Rodez, at Saint-Étienne, and at Metz, so soon afterwards to be the scene of Bazaine's tragedy. In 1867, at Saint-Étienne, he came under the influence of clerical teachers, and it may be that it was then that he formed those strictly religious habits which he has maintained and that are quite distinctive of the man.<sup>1</sup> At Metz he prepared for the *École Polytechnique*, which he entered in 1871. During the whole course of his education he showed a marked talent for precise studies, such as geometry and logic; and he was early marked out by his teachers as showing unusual promise along those lines. On the other hand, he displayed the enthusiasm which was so current in

<sup>1</sup> For this and other details of a similar character our source is an admirable article in the *Correspondant*, March, 1915.

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those days for the history of the Napoleonic epoch.

It is not generally realized how well-defined a period there is in the history of France during which there coursed a great wave of nationalistic sentiment, based on the achievements of the heroes of the Revolution and the Empire. After Waterloo, for nearly twenty years, it was almost impossible even to mention the name of Napoleon in conversation; and the period contrasted in its drabness and pettiness with the catastrophic period which had just closed. Then, almost suddenly, in the thirties, the bars were raised, and for twenty years the romantic writers, poets, historians, and novelists let loose their imagination and their sometimes too vivid colors, on the deeds which they declared had immortalized France. Thiers' great romance, the "History of the Consulate and the Empire," Victor Hugo's resonant periods, Michelet's fervid patriotism and eloquence, all these, and others besides, had created a new spirit by means of a literature of the most intense appeal. And a schoolboy with the echoes



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of the guns of Sebastopol and Solferino ringing in his ears, if he had a shred of imagination, a shred of courage, a shred of generosity in his make-up, could not but devour such books. This was inevitably what Foch did. He was brought up on the campaigns of Bonaparte, as related by these writers. And at the very moment when he left his school-days behind him and entered into the arduous career of arms, all the material for another chapter in the history of France was unfolded before his eyes. But that chapter did not lend itself to the pen of a Hugo, or a Thiers, or a Michelet. Foch could not then suspect that he himself would become one of its historians, but a historian of a widely different type from Thiers, or Michelet, or Taine.

For twenty-five years following his entrance into the *École Polytechnique* the career of Foch offers no salient feature. He passed through various garrisons as an artillery officer, kept studying his profession, was promoted rather quickly to the rank of captain in 1878, and in 1884 was admitted to the *École de Guerre* as

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a student. Twelve years later, ranking then as a major, he returned to the *École de Guerre* as an instructor, and with that step opened an important chapter of his life. For the teaching of Foch in the domain of military history and theory was to sum up into its most effective form the whole doctrine of war as taught to the French High Command and Staff for a generation previous to the present conflict.

Before dealing with the extraordinarily interesting and important teaching of Foch at the *École de Guerre*, it may be as well to conclude a rapid summary of his army career. In 1901 he was unexpectedly removed from a professorship in which he had shown brilliant powers and a great influence over his students, and sent back to the line; he was at that time lieutenant-colonel. The period was a bad one in the French Army, following the Dreyfus affair; and many deserving officers were crossed in their careers for no reasons of professional validity. Foch was one of those who suffered, though he did not personally enter into any of the controversies of that unhappy period. His promotion, however,

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was unduly delayed, and it was not until 1907 that he became brigadier-general. In this rank he commanded, first of all, the artillery of the 5th Corps at Orléans; from this he was almost immediately transferred to the post for which he was preëminently marked out, that of commandant of the École de Guerre. There he immediately set to work to increase the efficiency of that institution and attempted, notwithstanding the somewhat blind opposition of the French Parliament, to extend the period of instruction of officers to three years. In 1911 he was given command of the 13th Division at Chaumont; and a year later he was promoted to command the 8th Corps. Soon after he was transferred to the command which was always reckoned, in the period before the war, the post of honor of the French Army, the 20th Corps, Headquarters Nancy. There it was that the war found him.

## II

### THE TEACHER AND THEORIST

THE subject-matter of the teaching of Foch at the *École de Guerre* is technical and not easily appreciable or interesting for the general public. Yet it is impossible to pass over this aspect of his life without some sort of notice. For he was the great teacher who, more than any man in the French Army, created the mode of thought under which its generals and Staff entered the present war; his portrait would be wholly inadequate unless this side of the man were brought out. But there is no subject studied by groups of specialists in our present civilization that requires more prolonged effort and on which more depends than that of the military art in its higher branches. This being so, the reader must be asked to follow, though only in very broad outline, a statement of this somewhat special question.

Prior to the period when Foch entered the *École de Guerre* as a student, there was no such

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thing in France as a technical study of the higher branches of the military art. Young men were well trained for entrance into the Army in all its branches; the technique of engineering, of artillery, and even of minor tactics in some phases, was relatively well taught, but when it came to handling brigades and divisions and army corps, and, which was still more important, the conduct of war as a whole, this was relegated to the workings of a seniority system, of the rule of thumb and the dispensations of Providence — on the whole an inadequate basis. The French Army had paid the price for this neglect in 1870. Bazaine's magnificent troops, markedly superior to the Germans as companies, as battalions, as regiments, had been thrown away because the brigadiers and divisional officers were none too good and because the High Command and Staff were absolutely ignorant of the handling of masses. And the Army knew it. After the war was over the Army was determined to study at the *École de Guerre* the solution of the problems of the handling of masses; and to solve these problems

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the best plan was obviously to study the last military demonstration which was available. This material for demonstration was naturally found in the campaign of 1870-71.

Beginning with Major Maillard, whose chair was later occupied by Foch, the professors and students of the *École de Guerre* set to work to study what really had happened in the Franco-Prussian War. That is, they studied it in the professional or technical sense, not in terms of patriotic history or political propaganda. At the same time it proved impossible for that generation of Frenchmen — and who shall blame them? — to retain a dispassionate attitude in studying the Germans. With whatever detachment the professors of the *École de Guerre* might analyze the Prussian manoeuvres on the Moselle, on the Meuse, or about Paris, sooner or later patriotism and the determination to regain the lost laurels of France asserted themselves. To them von Moltke could never be merely the chemist fusing his materials in the crucible in varying proportions; he was always the leader of that host of barbarian enemies that had torn a gaping

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wound through Alsace-Lorraine and pierced France to the heart.

When it came to Foch's turn to leave the student's bench and to climb into the professor's chair, this feature of the teaching at the *École de Guerre* became even more marked. Two of the courses which he delivered as Professor of Military History and Theory have long been in print;<sup>1</sup> they may be said to contain the most keen and subtle analysis of von Moltke's operations which has as yet appeared. With unerring logic Foch searches for the errors of the German system of operations and of the German conduct of operations. The indictment is complete and in its details convincing. As a whole, however, it falls just short of conviction, for the reason that by the time that Foch has finished with von Moltke, there is nothing whatever left of the German. The real fact, of course, is that von Moltke was an innovator, who worked

<sup>1</sup> *Principes de la Guerre; Conférences à l'École Supérieure de Guerre*, par le Colonel d'Artillerie, F. Foch (Paris, 1903); *De la Conduite de la Guerre, La Manœuvre pour la Bataille*, 2<sup>e</sup> Série des Conférences faites à l'École Supérieure de Guerre, par le Colonel d'Artillerie, F. Foch. (Paris, 1904.)

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against time, and who in 1870 was running a new-fangled machine which was decidedly crude at many points, and which, faced by a resolute opponent, would very likely have broken down altogether. But it is not proposed to discuss here the technical question of organization and command presented by the campaign of 1870.

In the study of the operations of the Franco-Prussian War, Foch sought in the most marked way to deduce logical lessons on which could be based a convincing, clean-cut, four-square theory of operations for the new French Army. And, as has already been indicated, he could not orient his mind in any such way as to look to a German model. He did better than that by going straight to the most secure basis which military thinkers of all ages and countries have as yet discovered for their formulas, and that is the psychological basis. In this, however, it may be remarked that he did not vastly differ from the Germans themselves, who in Clausewitz produced the father of modern military theory. But in Foch what we find is a singularly inde-



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pendent approach to a doctrine that is distinctively French.

In his continuous reference of military situations back to an analysis of morale, we always find a morale of a particular type presented to us. It is, indeed, the morale of Foch himself, and that is why in the opening lines of this study the figures of Bayard, of Turenne, of Desaix, and of Ardant du Picq were evoked. The characteristics of French military courage and of French morale have been so frequently and so vividly typified in the incidents of the present war that they do not need to be specifically set forth. Every reader will visualize the sharp and energetic profile of the French fighter in a form markedly different from that which he would associate with the British, the American, or any other fighting man. With a touch of imagination, a dash of musketeer combativeness, a tendency towards disputatious logic, and the dry physique of the swordsman, the French fighting man tells his own tale.

Foch does not hesitate to force the note on these lines. He adopts such extreme positions

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as that embodied in the statement that a battle is never materially lost so long as you have faith in victory. As advice, as example, as an indication of the essential attitude of mind of the soldier, it is the counsel of perfection; but as a doctrinal exposition of modern war, it somewhat obviously leaves a good deal out of account, such as the interplay of the economic factor, which holds such a large place in the most advanced military conceptions of to-day.

When Foch applied his psychological test to the operations of 1870, he recognized, as was indeed inevitable, that the morale of the German High Command was to a large extent the determining factor in the operations. He does not stint his praise of von Alvensleben for his superb handling of the situation at Vionville-Rezonville on the 16th of August; and he recognizes that generals perhaps less skilful did show, in this respect, the best military qualities. The truth, of course, was that Bazaine and his staff were incompetent and flaccid. It is in this question — that of the morale of the two High Commands — that Foch attempts to summarize the

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lesson of the campaign. And this much, at all events, is beyond doubt, that had the armies of France in 1870 been led by Foch and Joffre and Castelnau, the results would have been very different.

This is not an attempt to analyze, and far less to criticize, the military theories of General Foch. All we are concerned with is to get a clear view of his mentality and of what he taught, perhaps even of the emphasis in what he taught. That is why we can exclude from the discussion a whole range of theoretical matter that is undoubtedly of importance and interest, but which General Foch himself has not dwelt on. Two modes of thought as to the conduct of operations were in presence after the close of the war : mass strategy and linear strategy. The French school, searching for its models in Napoleon and sharply rejecting von Moltke, was wedded to the theory of mass strategy ; and over a whole generation did not alter its views. This governed the concentration of 1914, and still has, especially in certain negative ways, a deep influence on the French Command. It would

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not be fair to pass by this extremely important matter without at all events indicating that there is here a field of discussion of purely technical, and not psychological, character, into which General Foch did not choose to enter very deeply.

In teaching, it is not so much what a man teaches as how he teaches that matters. One of the general's former pupils declares: "The officers who passed through the *École de Guerre* between 1896 and 1907 will never lose the impression produced on them by their professor of strategy and tactics. The course was eagerly looked forward to as the fundamental teaching of the school. . . . Lieutenant-Colonel Foch did not disappoint their expectation, . . . he impressed them at once by the energy, the serenity, and the honesty of his face. The forehead was high; the nose straight and finely cut; the eyes gray blue and direct. He stood motionless while speaking; his tone was one of authority and conviction. . . . He was an excellent teacher because he had a passion for teaching. He threw himself bodily into his task and made

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incredible efforts to convince his hearers. When directing a skeleton or map manœuvre, he put his officers through a veritable course of intellectual gymnastics. It was impossible to circumvent him by approximations or compromises; he always held you up by his famous: 'Now what is the point?' . . . Yet this analytical method, pushed to an extreme, did not denote in Lieutenant-Colonel Foch a hesitating spirit. . . . To his intellectual qualities he adds complete self-mastery. Like General Joffre, he speaks little."

General Foch gave to his students the best that a teacher can give, and that is example. He was an enthusiast, almost a fanatic. His patriotism and his profession merged into a splendid effort of intellect in which his students delighted. Nothing could be more cutting, more merciless, than his searching out of the German errors of 1870, and nothing more inspiring, more fortifying than the national sentiment which behind every effort of critical analysis told of the hope of reversing the fortunes of war and of leading the French Army to victory over an

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hereditary enemy by mastering the study of leadership. Several classes of young officers, for the most part captains and majors, carefully selected for their high attainments from the whole of the Army, sat at Foch's feet at the *École de Guerre*, and carried away with them an unbounded devotion and faith in the man whose teaching they had been privileged to listen to. And a few years later, when the Army had settled down again after the unfortunate troubles associated with the Dreyfus case, it was these young officers who rapidly came to the front as the commanders of the French divisions for the war of the immediate future, the war of to-day. This enabled Foch, in part, to realize one of his great ambitions, which was that the French Army should be permeated with a sole and logical doctrine, that which the *École de Guerre* had taught. And it was from this group that there arose, just before the war, the idea that in the next conflict the French Army must necessarily adopt the offensive, the offensive at all costs.

Here we touch again, unfortunately, a diffi-

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cult theoretical question that must be left on one side. Without discussing the validity of the doctrine of the offensive at all costs, it will suffice to say that the High Command of the French Army, when the war broke out, was almost wholly, though not quite, composed of officers who accepted this doctrine, and that during a certain period of the present war this doctrine was put into operation. As to General Foch this much may be said, however, that he will undoubtedly attempt to show us at the present juncture the working of this doctrine in its soundest aspect. While maintaining, as he must, the best defensive that can be organized against the vast weight of the German armies, we know that he will seek, and seek with the keenest vision, for any point in the German line at which the counter-offensive blow can be launched.

It will be as well to quote here, in part, an appreciation of General Foch by a distinguished French officer which appeared in the *Correspondant* of March, 1915:—

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“All that is necessary for understanding the personality of General Foch is to turn over the pages of the works in which he has condensed his teachings at the *École de Guerre*. They lack something of the warmth . . . which gave such vitality to his teaching. Yet they show the man, with his character and his doctrine. . . . How does he attempt to formulate his theory of war?

“First, he lays down the position that to estimate only material factors is a mistake. . . . War is not an exact science, it is a terrifying and passionate drama! . . . Between knowing and doing there is an abyss, and this abyss can be traversed only if we start from knowledge and not from ignorance. . . . What we need is to learn how to think. But our teaching must aim at the practical. . . .

“General Foch founds the art of war on three basic conceptions: the preparation; the formation of a mass; the possibility of multiplying this mass by movement. Does modern war, therefore, mean merely a return to the barbarian, submerging everything by numbers?



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No, for we will introduce in the employment of these masses a method by application of the principle of the economy of forces. These masses will be distributed according to necessity in well-adjusted combinations, in time and in space, thus affording the means for effecting the concentration of numbers on the selected point.

“But to achieve this object we must have liberty of action. This can only be obtained by increased discipline. On this point General Foch has written a few pages that will live among the best relating to military duty. In War—he says—outside of the general-in-chief, there are only subordinates. While always thinking in terms of command, their first duty is to obey. But to obey is difficult, for, quite apart from the enemy, all sorts of circumstances arise to make difficult the execution of the orders received. To surmount these difficulties, what is necessary is a close mental discipline, but intelligent and active. A chief means a man, first of all, of high character, but also a man who can understand and who can

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adapt things so as to obey. . . . Discipline employs an active mind and reflection rather than an inactive mind — the silence-in-the-ranks business! Discipline, for a leader, does not mean merely the carrying-out of orders so far as it is possible to carry them out fairly or reasonably; it means comprehension of the ideas and views of the general who has issued the order, and all possible measures taken that will help to carry them out. . . . In our day the man who thinks he can live without ideas; who thinks he can get rid of what he calls abstract ideas; that he can live on a realist, rational, and positive basis and reduce to mere questions of knowing or to the employment of expedients, more or less ingenious, for getting along from day to day, will find that to avoid error, faults, disaster, there is but one way, but that the surest and most productive — the exclusive cult of two moral abstractions: duty and discipline. But this cult, to produce good results, demands knowledge and reason.

“Such teaching ranges much higher than what one usually finds in a course on military art.

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“He carries even further his analysis of the broad features of war: The difficulty is that you always have an opponent opposite you, who, in so far as his movements are free, has one supreme idea, which is to counteract your own. Hence, the idea of security, strategic and tactical; we must place the adversary, and fix him, so as to deprive him of his liberty of action. . . . This tactical view has been criticized as somewhat timid. . . . Foch appeared to exaggerate the principle of security. There has followed since a rather violent reaction against this doctrine. . . . But when the events of the present war are finally stated, it will be seen that he was right.

“This attitude on his part was not timidity, but well-reasoned prudence. In reality his doctrine was purely German, such as is found in Clausewitz and von der Goltz, that in war there is no decision but by violence and force. . . . To obtain results modern war sees but one means, the destruction of the organized forces of the opponent which is obtained by battle. This can therefore never produce results unless at some

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stage or other the offensive is adopted. Manœuvre is necessary if we are to apply superior force at a given point; and psychology demonstrates also its necessity for obtaining surprise by the sudden appearance of a danger which the enemy cannot ward off. . . . When we undertake to act, it is this moral force alone that will enable us to dominate events. . . . The most essential thing, therefore, in his opinion, is to form the mind and character of the leader so as to enable him to surmount the difficulties which await him. And in this connection he quotes Napoleon, who says — few men can form an adequate idea of the strength of character that is necessary for fighting a great battle, when we consider carefully all the consequences on which may turn the history of an army, or of a nation, and the possession of a throne. . . . General Foch in his historical examples, never fails to emphasize the rôle of the commander. . . . One of his qualifications, which can only be secured by study, is the method of command. It does not suffice to frame a brief and imperative order which suppresses discussion; . . . the mind of

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the subordinate must be informed, because a blind obedience does not in itself insure a rational and logical execution of the order of the commander-in-chief. His ideas must therefore be explained.”

Before concluding this brief statement as to Foch the teacher and theorist, it may be allowable to make a slight digression. In France, and Italy, and Germany, it is absolutely recognized that the greatest item in the efficiency of an army is to be found in its supreme control. With us, although things are rapidly changing for the better, an army is still popularly visualized as a constabulary force in which the matter of importance is the efficiency of the man who waves his baton at the street corner or dashes after a runaway horse. This conception will have to be relegated to the waste-paper basket before our army can attain a high efficiency. The principle at stake is, at bottom, extremely simple. If you place a poor captain at the head of a company of good soldiers, you will get no result. If you place a good captain at the head of a company

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of poor soldiers, you will get some result. If you leave the good captain with his poor soldiers for a very short while, they will become good soldiers, and you will then have a good captain, good soldiers, and the highest results. And this represents the greatest economy of life, the least strain on man power, and the most successful effort against the opponent. From this conception of the captain and company all that is necessary is to extend the idea, and in terms of geometrical progression, upwards. "The need for knowledge increases rapidly at each grade," says Foch.<sup>1</sup> The good major-general means a division that will do its war work, and a highly trained general staff, picked from the best brains of the army and put through special stages of specialized studies, will mean the successful conduct of war. While in France, and Italy, and Germany, the most eminent thinkers and teachers are selected to supervise the classroom instruction of the best officers in the service, we continue to neglect this fundamental aspect of military training. And the chief reason for this

<sup>1</sup> Bougsson, *Quatre Conférences*, preface.

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is that the average citizen is still imbued with the naïve conception that a boy who has been put through the course at West Point Academy is thereby, in some mysterious manner, fitted to conduct modern war. The fact is that only a very small percentage of officers of exceptional ability, who have studied all parts of their profession, are fitted to become students of the higher branches of the art of war; and even then the subject is so difficult that only the best teaching can insure their thorough competence, or, let us say, national safety.

### III

#### THE WAR

WE have already seen that on the outbreak of the war, General Foch was at the post of danger, at Nancy. Within six weeks of its outbreak he had played the greatest part, under General Joffre, in throwing back the German invasion. To make these matters a little clearer it may be as well to give a brief account of the relations of France and Germany, topographical and military. Nancy, where General Foch had his headquarters as commander of the 20th Corps, was right in the very narrow gap between the Vosges Mountains and Luxemburg which constituted the real point of contact between France and Germany in a military sense. Speaking in broad terms the frontier between the two countries is extremely short; from Luxemburg to Basle is roughly one hundred and fifty miles, and of this distance almost one half is covered by the very considerable military obstacle formed by the Vosges Mountains. There was never any



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great likelihood from 1871 down to 1914 that Germany would make a serious effort to push into France through the mountains.

In the early days after the war of 1870 France was preoccupied, almost wholly, with the problem of defence. The question was, how could she reconstruct her army, her finances? How could she secure her frontiers against another tide of German invasion? One part of her answer was to embark on an elaborate and very skilful scheme for fortifying the frontier, a measure which fitted admirably the dangers which 1870 had made clear and the mood, on the whole non-aggressive, of the French at that period. Had war broken out in the late seventies or the eighties, or even the early nineties, it would probably have taken the form of a German attempt to repeat the events of 1870 with increased power and increased speed, with the French ability to resist immensely increased by their scheme of frontier fortification.

Yet even at this epoch, let us say the late eighties, there was a grave difficulty in the situation as the German Staff looked out from Metz

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towards Verdun to the west, or Nancy to the south. Where von Moltke had been so successful in 1870 in pouring so large a mass as 400,000 men through so narrow a strip of country in such a very few days, how could you move the bulk of the increased German masses through this same strip, now heavily fortified, without risking congestion, slowness, and ineffective deployment?

If in 1890 this was still a question of the future, by 1900 it had become an actual question, for at this epoch the development of fire effects increased very rapidly, and the theories of the German Staff rapidly began to move in the direction of the precise calculation of frontal strains, whether for attack or for defence. With the development of such intense fire and with the defensive so much strengthened, had it not become possible to calculate, almost with mathematical precision, the number of well-trained troops that could hold a specific front for a given number of hours, or even days? If the calculation could be made for the defensive it could be at all events attempted for the offensive. And,

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indeed, it is very striking to note that the density of men to the front does not appear to have materially changed from the days of Napoleon down to our own; all that has changed is their disposition in depth.

Soon the German Staff had come to the conclusion that the difficulties of penetrating France along the Metz and Verdun line were almost insuperable. To get a deployment that would enable them to move their masses with the greatest velocity, and to obtain the maximum offensive power, involved striking the whole French northern frontier from the North Sea to Basle. Incidentally, it involved a breach of the neutrality of Belgium and Luxemburg; but in terms of international relations it was mistakenly assumed outside of Germany that the neutrality of these states would be observed; and the French soldiers had so long considered the problem of the Lorraine frontier, they were so admirably prepared for a defensive on that frontier, that they were unable to shift their ideas to parry the coming German blow. During the period before the war two conflicting

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currents of thought appeared in the French Army. One of these held that the neutrality of Belgium was sacred, and declined to consider the logical consequences involved in the linear strategy of von Moltke; the other attempted to warn the nation of precisely the danger that almost overwhelmed it in August, 1914. In this connection, it will be of interest to note the views expressed by General Foch in his course at the *École de Guerre*: —

“Let us predict the future from the past; and apply the principles of von Moltke to the concentration of to-morrow. Shall we see two German actions developed? One in Alsace-Lorraine and the other on the Lower Rhine? This would mean two attacks instead of one, separated by so long a distance that they would be unconnected. This is not worth considering.

“But the enemy action may for the sake of avoiding our fortifications be developed along the Lower Rhine through Belgium rather than through Alsace-Lorraine. This is unlikely, for the first object of the concentration will bring together, as rapidly as possible, all forces; this

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involves the largest possible use of the railroads, of the disentraining platforms, etc. The concentration will therefore take place in the district which is best equipped for that purpose. From this point of view the Lower Rhine is not comparable to Alsace-Lorraine. The concentration of to-morrow is written plainly on the ground by the number and density of the disentraining platforms. These platforms are in Alsace-Lorraine. . . .”

It must not be forgotten that it was before 1901 that General Foch emitted opinions apparently so contrary to facts. It has been somewhat unfortunate that, owing to the conspicuous part played by the General in the present war, his early books have been reprinted without revision, so that uninformed readers may suppose that he held these views down to the outbreak of hostilities. This is, on the whole, very improbable. But the point that remains is that these ideas were so ingrained, have been so authoritatively taught, and, in addition, were so convenient for political reasons, that when the war storm burst the French concentration

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was actually carried out on this false basis. Five large armies were massed in a comparatively circumscribed space looking mainly to the German attack through Lorraine. As is well enough known, it came through Belgium.

That German attack, in the light of the German theories of war evolved in the course of the preceding generation, proved to be one of the most remarkable military operations on record. It failed for a variety of reasons. Among those reasons, as we shall see presently, we shall have to reckon with General Foch; but before coming to that, this much should be said on the German side of the argument, that the whole manœuvre was somewhat over-theoretical and that their calculations failed at several points. The problem which the German General Staff had set itself to solve was how to execute a huge right wheel, with Metz as the pivot, the line being intended to reach a north-east and southwest bearing before the French mass could be disentangled from its Lorraine concentration and brought into line. As just stated, the calculations were wrong. It had not

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been foreseen that the Russian interposition might lead to the withdrawal of several army corps for service on the Eastern Front. The time calculations failed in that the extraordinarily rapid advance of the marching wing, while none too fast for securing the desired position, was yet so rapid that the alignment of the German divisions could not be maintained. The immense ammunition and supply requirements had not been accurately foreseen. So that when von Kluck's army had passed Paris and the battle of the Marne was engaged, there were already weaknesses in the situation of the Germans, and their blow was half spent. This does not in any way detract from the immense achievement of General Joffre in meeting them at that point, and of General Foch in playing so great a part as he did in the fighting that occurred.

With the patience and foresight that have given him so unique a place among the commanders of to-day, Joffre had carried out the concentration in Lorraine, refusing to disturb the working of the machine until the process

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was completed; he then succeeded in extending the mass of his armies southwestward and in connecting them with the group made up in part by the British Army of Sir John French, and of the great mass of French second-line troops which were beginning to assemble in the city of Paris under General Maunoury. Foch was given the 9th Army to command and found himself roughly in the centre of the line. Joffre's purpose was to meet the German advance by a counter-offensive all along his front, but his chief object in this counter-offensive was to concentrate superior forces against the open German right. By throwing the 5th Army, under General Franchet d'Esperey, the British Army and the 6th Army under General Maunoury, against von Kluck, he certainly acted in accord with the general situation. General Foch was immediately to the right of the 5th Army in the district lying roughly between Sézanne and Châlons-sur-Marne. The German line was weakest on the right, where von Kluck had an exposed situation with a considerable preponderance of numbers against him.



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It was strongest in the centre opposite Foch, where the German 2d Army under von Bülow, and part of the 3d Army under von Hausen, gave the enemy a local superiority of numbers. Among these troops were the Prussian Guard divisions.

Although we are not yet in possession of the documents on which a strictly accurate account of these events can be written, their general shape is not difficult to follow. By the 25th of August the effort of Joffre to establish a line between Verdun and Paris was so far advanced that the Official Communiqué declared: "We have escaped envelopment and are obtaining ourselves on enveloping position. Our two wings, in contact with the fortifications of Paris and of Verdun, are well supported and in a position to manœuvre."

On the 4th of September General Joffre issued his order for the counter-offensive, in which he said, among other things:—

"The hazardous position of the German 1st Army must be taken advantage of to concentrate against it the efforts of the Allied Armies on the

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left. All dispositions must be made in the course of the 5th of September for attacking on the 6th. . . .

“The 9th Army [Foch] will cover the right of the 5th Army south of the marshes of Saint-Gond and placing part of its forces on the plateau north of Sézanne.

“The offensive will be taken by the various armies on the 6th of September in the morning. — Joffre.”

In accordance with the orders of the Commander-in-Chief the offensive was, in fact, begun on the 6th. The 9th Army took its part in this movement; it was made up of the 9th Corps, the 11th Corps, the 42d Infantry Division, the Morocco Division, the 52d and 60th Reserve Divisions, and the 9th Cavalry Division. These forces were attacked by the Prussian Guard, the 10th Corps, and some portions of the 12th Corps, and had to give some ground along most of the front. On the following day the fighting was of the same general character, the French holding their ground somewhat better and on the left making a little headway. General Foch already

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had in mind a counter-offensive stroke on this side of his line.

On the 8th the fighting continued with extreme violence on both sides. The 42d Division gained some ground on the enemy, and the German Guard, farther to the east, found it more and more difficult to gain ground. It had come almost to a deadlock. On the 9th, Foch, who had had to support the heaviest attacks delivered by the Germans, was reënforced by the 10th Corps. Notwithstanding this, a furious attack by the Prussian Guard gained the enemy still further ground; but in the late afternoon, Foch, making use of the advantageous position he had succeeded in keeping on his left, launched his counter-offensive on La Fère-Champenoise. Already von Kluck, farther west, had found it impossible to maintain his positions; the German Command was hesitating; and Foch's constant counter-attacks and his important gain with the 42d Division seemed to demonstrate that the German effort had failed.

That night Foch issued orders for a counter-offensive on the whole front; and in the morning,

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at every point, the French advanced and found the Germans in retreat. The French regained, in the course of the day, most of the ground which they had previously lost, and headquarters were rapidly moved forward to La Fère-Champenoise. The Germans apparently made up their minds to leave this champagne-producing district with the utmost regret. Officers found it difficult to liquidate their losses and preferred to face the French vintages and succumb rather than to continue an ignominious flight! The French Staff, on their occupation of the village, found a large number of Germans in full but ineffective possession of a field of bottles! In the course of the next few days the movements of the two armies continued on the same general lines, until the Germans were found in position within the lines which they have virtually maintained since that day.

As was said previously, we are not yet in possession of very precise evidence as to the events of the battle of the Marne, but there can be no mistaking the significance of the step which General Joffre took a few days after its conclu-

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sion. It had become a matter of urgent necessity to place in command north of Paris, in the direction of Amiens and Calais, an officer who should check the German effort to reach the Channel; and of all his subordinates engaged at the Marne, he selected Foch for the task.

The efforts of the Allies on the one hand, and of the Germans on the other, to establish the best possible line from the neighborhood of Soissons to the coast, were in the nature of a scramble. It was largely a question of how soon reserve and improvised units could be brought up and the line patched in this way. There were several moments during which the Germans seemed to have great opportunities for striking in the direction of the Channel and securing far more advantageous positions than they were actually left with. That they did not succeed better was due, in great part, to the keen perception of the situation by General Foch and to the energetic measures he took to repair the errors and lapses of many of his subordinates. In this connection an anecdote is told which may be worth repeating: The British Army, what

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was left of it, was being moved back from Paris to the north. A considerable part of it was being detained at Saint-Omer. Only a few miles to the northeast the German advance had reached the valley of the Aire, and, to cover the British movement, Foch had sent to that point a cavalry corps of several divisions. If the Germans should succeed in driving away the cavalry, the British Army would be seriously threatened under conditions of grave disadvantage. At the close of the day General Foch's headquarters were rung up by the cavalry corps commander. The General himself seized the telephone. The corps commander informed him that he had withdrawn from the banks of the river Aire, as the Germans had been reënforced with infantry and artillery. "Did you throw the bulk of your forces into the fight?" — "No?" — "You will immediately reoccupy the banks of the Aire; you will line them with your machine guns and artillery; you will hold the enemy there to-morrow; and when all your guns have been destroyed or captured, you will report to Headquarters for further instructions." Such, at all events, is a story

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current among officers of the French Army, and even if it is inaccurate in its details, it certainly seems to give a true appreciation of the character of their General.

On this part of the front General Foch rendered the greatest services in the winter of 1914-15 under very critical circumstances. And later, with the strain somewhat lessened, he naturally, inevitably, turned his active mind to the study of the conditions of the warfare that was being developed between the two armies.

They were now pretty closely dug in; trench warfare was in full swing; and trench warfare was worthy of exact and scientific observation with a view to achieving the greatest possible results. In this, as in other fields of investigation, Foch showed himself to be one of the real leaders of the French Army. At this point one general remark must be hazarded, though with much reserve. It is of considerable interest to note among a few recent books on military theory by French and German writers that the Germans insist on the necessity of the war of

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manceuvre as a standard, while the French maintain that the war of positions is the only one worth discussing.<sup>1</sup> Now, at bottom, this is largely a verbal dispute. Considerable bodies of opposing troops that are equally well trained and well supplied with the material of war must almost inevitably, when in close contact, come to intrenching. But are there not situations in which armies will find conditions under which they can manœuvre? The real answer to this seems to be that under the densely populated conditions of western Europe this is extremely unlikely. On the other hand, in the less dense conditions of eastern Europe and under the still more favorable conditions that exist on continents like the African or American continents, manœuvring must play a large part. There is nothing more easy to understand than that the officers of the French Army, with the German incubus reposing on their shoulders and a front so restricted that it can be

<sup>1</sup> See Azan, *The War of Positions*, and Loringhoven, *Deductions from the World War*; both reviewed in the *Military Historian and Economist*, July, 1918.



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filled with troops, should be convinced that the only form of war worth studying is the war of positions. But the reason why this may fairly be described as a verbal dispute is that at bottom the question is not one of positions or of manœuvring, but of training.

The fact appears to be that trench fighting is a simple form of fighting. Superficially, of course, it appears very complex because it involves so many details of armament and of troop adjustments; but the point is that the time factor is very much reduced in importance; that position warfare is slow; and that opportunity is given for the preparation, and indeed in many cases for the rehearsal, of the attack. Under these conditions of preparation and rehearsal, troops of low training can perfectly well carry out restricted operations of an apparently complicated character. Seen more truly these operations are very limited in scope, and what the troops do not acquire is the ability to solve the unexpected problem on unknown ground. It is only the highly trained corps of officers, and therefore the highly trained army,

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that can solve any tactical problem that presents itself rapidly and under unforeseen conditions. And it is that form of training that at bottom constitutes the quality of an army. It is a great danger to admit that the war of positions is the only standard and that nothing more is necessary than to prepare troops to play a part in such a war. But on the other hand, as has already been said, it is only natural that, supporting the burden of the war as France has, with no margin at any time for doing more than what was immediately necessary to keep out the enemy, she should have adopted the opinion that there is nothing to be foreseen beyond the war of positions.

In 1916 General Foch played a conspicuous part in handling the French troops engaged in the battle of the Somme. Soon after this event General Joffre retired from the command of the French Army. In the changes that took place subsequently, and which eventually resulted in General Foch becoming Chief of Staff, the ideas of the *École de Guerre* triumphed. As a result of these changes, Gen-

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eral Pétain took over the supreme command, which he still apparently holds. For two years, more or less, 1916-17, Germany adopted a strictly defensive policy on the Western Front while she dealt her main blows at Russia. In the autumn of 1917 she succeeded in breaking down her eastern antagonist and in obtaining some sort of pacification. This placed her in the position of being able to resume offensive operations on the Western Front, strengthened in numbers, strengthened in the experience and selection of her Staff, and strengthened in the development of her war material. For some time the gravity of the situation was not fully appreciated, but when in the early part of 1918 a great German offensive was launched on the Western Front, it became apparent that the adjustment of the command of the Allies was inadequate and would have to be remedied. In this crisis General Foch was sought and was placed in supreme command of the Allied Armies in France.

## IV

### THE PRESENT CRISIS

WHEN the war began, the French Government, for very good reasons, decided to cover up the operations of its armies with secrecy. No casualty lists have yet been published. For a long time no mention was made of the name of any general, save that of the Commander-in-Chief alone. This was pushing things to an extreme that was both unnecessary and difficult to maintain. Presently the names of army commanders became known, but even then it was difficult to know much of the part they had played.

Yet enough has become public property to make it stand out very clearly that of all the subordinates of Joffre, Foch had the most consistent record, from the first days when the Germans were thrown back from le Grand-Couronne and Nancy to the moment when the present crisis was reached. Not only was his record the most consistent of that of any of

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the French generals, but it was a record with a special feature, and that was that it stood best with the English. For after the battle of the Marne, Foch had been charged with the joint control of the operations that had saved Calais and Boulogne from the German invaders, and had directed the movement of Sir John French's army towards Ypres.

He already knew the stiff battalions of the old British Army. He had followed the peace manœuvres in the eastern counties in 1912, and had then noted the solidity of the infantry units. At Ypres he met once more what was left of them, and indeed he was, for a short while, responsible for their operations. Always politic and always a gentleman, free moreover from administrative fussiness, Foch handled a delicate matter with tact, judgment, and firmness. The report of Sir John French on the Ypres fighting renders more than merely official tribute to the work of Foch. And it may be said that from this moment, he was the French general marked out as a possible joint commander of the Allied forces. The British

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Headquarters believed in him, appreciated his courteous and unassertive methods, and felt that a real soldier was controlling them.

In itself, this was for a long time insufficient to make the British Army, and the British Parliament behind it, willing to accept any proposal for a unified control of all the armies in France under a French general. Yet the case was a strong one. The French Army and people were bearing the brunt of the struggle. The French Staff was better trained for war than the English. Germany had shown from the outset that she regarded the French Army as her most formidable obstacle. If that army should be crushed there would be left no organized force in Europe capable of stemming the Teutonic tide. But these lessons, valid though they were, could not change the deep-flowing currents of British thought. Now, as so often before and through so many centuries, the view of England was somewhat narrowly circumscribed to that small strip of the Continent that unrolls its menacing estuaries and ports opposite the Channel passage and the mouth of the Thames. At

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all costs England was determined to fight for control of this region, and could not face the suggestion that the operations of her army might be governed by other considerations. This does not imply any disloyalty to France. England has shown herself loyal as an ally, and generous. It merely relates to a certain predominance or emphasis of ideas deeply rooted in the historic past.

But as the military situation became increasingly serious, so a popular demand for unified command arose. Various efforts were made to satisfy this demand, last of them the creation of the Versailles War Council. The fact was that there was as yet no widespread realization that for many months the army of Germany had been merely maintaining a defensive on the Western Front, and that the release of her first and second line divisions from the east meant an entirely changed situation. Then, when the moment came, the German Command did the theoretically correct thing; in face of all difficulties it launched an attack at the point at which the greatest military results were obtain-

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able. The base of the attack had to be extended over no less than 80,000 yards; and the numbers had to be placed at well over a million of men. Elaborately prepared for its task, and employing tactics speedier than any previously shown, the German Army struck a terrific blow. In a few days it got to within a gunshot of Amiens and a part of the British system of communications.

There were two or three days of more than anxiety. Part of the British Army was broken. Confusion pointed to imminent disaster; and then, at last, the step so long desired by thinking men was taken. Ferdinand Foch was announced as Generalissimo of all the Allied Armies in France. The appointment met with universal approval; that of the United States and of General Pershing was expressed in particularly warm terms.

Once more Foch reconstituted a broken front north of Paris with conspicuous ability. His troops reached the danger point in surprisingly short time. Infantry, transported by motors, patched up a line with the help of British bat-



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teries still surviving from the struggle. Keeping steadily northward he just succeeded in barring the road to Amiens; and when, a few days later, a second German blow, farther north, fell on the British position south of Ypres, again French divisions seemed to drop out of the skies to hold Kemmel Hill against the invaders.

Since then, a lull has spread temporarily over the battle-field. The foggy and gas-stricken plains of the Aire and of the Somme see the great hosts motionless, while from the North Sea to the Adriatic the constant rolling up of reënforcements, of supplies and of munitions, indicates that an even greater struggle is at hand. What human wisdom can foretell its consequences, immediate or remote?

We cannot expect the French Army to bear its disproportionate share of the Teutonic load continuously. We must not expect General Foch to perform miracles, even though we know he will attempt it. As soon as it is possible we want to bear our own part of the burden; first, to help; then, to relieve our friends

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and allies; in time, to assume an offensive aimed at the heart of Germany, to bring triumph to our just cause. Meanwhile, we stand, in such numbers and skill as we can now muster, joyously under the orders of Ferdinand Foch. We know we shall find no better leader; whatever the issue, we shall cherish his long and proven record as that of a great soldier and a great Frenchman. Our histories will record our pride at having fought under his orders.

THE END



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