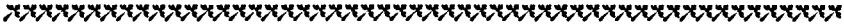


I



The army and the republic

‘At this moment’, Leon Gambetta wrote to his father on 19 February 1871, ‘I have only one preoccupation: after our fruitless efforts to drive out the foreigner, to try to save at least our republican institutions.’¹ Few rated his chances of success. Only days earlier the French electorate, asked to choose between peace or war, handed a crushing mandate to the ‘Prussians of the interior’, monarchists determined to smother the Third Republic in its cradle. Over the next eight years a combination of Gambetta’s political sagacity, and extraordinary ineptitude on the part of his opponents, transformed the Third Republic from a provisional political experiment into France’s longest lasting regime in modern times. However, one question mark dangled over their otherwise total victory, one vital institution remained possibly steeled against political progress: the army.

The relationship between the French army and the regime provides one of the central themes in the history of the Third Republic. Historians have argued that the republic and its army were uneasy bedfellows from the beginning. A high command inherited from Louis-Napoleon combined with an influx of aristocratic and increasingly Jesuit-educated officers with thinly disguised royalist opinions to create an officer corps with a distinctly anti-republican disposition. To this political and social antipathy was added an organization which was warmed-up Second Empire, and which favoured the dominance of a professional military caste over the more democratic organization of the ‘nation-in-arms’, blocking the penetration of republican ideas. Even Gambetta and his supporters, visibly shaken by the Commune, bartered a few of their political principles for security from social upheaval. The army remained, like Banquo’s ghost, an unwelcomed guest at a republican feast. ‘The basic trouble with the new army was that it was not a “new” army, but an old one’, wrote American historian Edward L. Katzenbach.

There were the same old generals, with many of the same old ideas, leading the same old units. The new legislation on effectives, organization and cadres

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passed in the 1870s may have paid lip-service to certain republican ideas or even introduced ideas favoured by the republicans . . . but, on the whole, the spirit behind the reforms was that of the old professional army. Republican elements and ideas were treated with suspicion. Thus, what happened in the years between 1871 and 1876, when France was a republic without republicans, was that an anti-republican officer corps managed to get so thoroughly entrenched that in France from this time on the army was never to be, in a strict sense, a political reflexion of the state . . . The situation which made for a Boulanger affair and a Dreyfus case and which eventually sent four thousand odd officers over to Vichy was that the army of the republic was to remain an army which was by no means solidly republican.²

The striking resemblance between the old army and the new had been spotted early on. The new era of national dedication and reconciliation behind the army announced by Marshal MacMahon's June 1871 Longchamps review, when 120,000 troops filed past in an atmosphere shimmering with patriotic emotion, caused the more cynical spectators like the novelist 'Gyp' to conclude that 'it was still the magnificent army of the empire'.³ The high command formed the army's most obvious link with the past. Gambetta lamented that the top army posts remained in the hands of 'the vanquished and incompetent men of the last war', and reckoned that of 18 metropolitan army corps commanders, only one, General Clinchant, was a republican.⁴ Although France had a republic, the National Assembly, dominated by monarchists, was prepared to express its gratitude to the old army for suppressing the Commune by putting it back on the payroll. The post-war Rank Revision Committee reduced in rank 14 generals named by Gambetta and placed four on the retired list, creating a discontented group of 'Gambettist generals' who saw their demotion as punishment for serving the republic, while at the same time returning the forces to the safe hands of the conservative old guard, the best insurance against radical change and 'republicanization'.

However, the political motivation of the Rank Revision Committee has almost certainly been exaggerated. In the first place, serving in the republican phase of the war constituted no disgrace, and a number of generals who had done so immediately moved into high positions in the new army: Borel was named chief of the general staff and served as war minister between 1877 and 1879, while Clinchant, Ducrot, Bourbaki and Chanzy occupied corps commands. Trochu, who had commanded Paris during the Prussian siege, took an influential place on committees named to study army reform. Others, like Farre, Billot and Saussier, all sympathetic to the republic, were given posts of responsibility which became those of high command after 1879. If many old generals returned from captivity to important commands, it was largely because

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the new regime needed experienced military technicians to reconstruct a badly disabled defence machine and the republican phase of the war had thrown up few obvious candidates. But those who had been impressive – Clinchant, Billot, Chanzy and Saussier – were assigned important positions in the forces, regardless of political sympathies. While Freycinet thought General Bourbaki belonged to nature's second XV, his brilliant pre-war record and exalted reputation among his colleagues insured for him a high post. Competence, then, weighed more heavily than politics in the naming of generals to top commands.

While republicans read sinister intentions into the rank reshuffling in 1871, such readjustments are the rule rather than the exception following a prolonged conflict. The creation of new armies required more officers to staff them and the subsequent rank inflation had to be pricked at the war's end. The British army in 1946 saw brigadiers reduced to majors, while similiar readjustments occurred in the American army. In this context, the demotions ordered by the Rank Revision Committee seem measured. In 1871, the task was complicated by the two phases of the war, imperial and republican. Desperate for officers to lead the new formations, republicans often catapulted professional soldiers who had managed to escape capture to high rank; sergeants became captains as did many men, not a few foreigners among them, with spurious military antecedents or on the basis of tenuous personal recommendations. Some infantry lieutenants complained that they had returned from captivity to find their old sergeants promoted to captain.⁵ Emile Mayer, an artillery officer and veteran of 1870 who eventually quit the army, complained that these hastily promoted NCOs usually proved 'mediocre' officers.⁶ 'There were some extraordinary, scandalous and intolerable results', wrote General du Barail, war minister in 1874, of this wartime 'orgy of promotions'. '[But] as no officer thought that he had been unjustly promoted, [the Committee] was assailed by a wave of anger and a deluge of recriminations'.⁷ This was not an easy problem to sort out, and after rewarding depressingly few cases of outstanding service, the Committee usually fell back on seniority as their major guideline, demonstrating a not uncommon professional reaction against queue jumpers out to violate the army's most sacred promotion rule. With Marshal MacMahon temporarily settled into the presidency, the cronyism of the old army on more than one occasion reasserted itself in the selection of men for high posts. But the personal relationships of the old army, the traditional deference paid to seniority and the sheer absence of obvious replacements for the old guard played a far more important role than politics in the Committee's decisions. A few ambitious officers attempted to make political capital out of what was basically a professional rearrangement, representing themselves

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as abused because they had fought for the republic. 'Following the rapid and even scandalous promotion of some, career ambitions were stimulated', wrote Emile Mayer. 'The decisions of the Rank Revision Committee stirred up the military world.'⁸ Colonel Carrey de Bellemare, who escaped from the besieged Metz to serve the republic as a major general, went a long way towards creating the 'Gambettist generals' when he unsuccessfully appealed his reduction to brigadier to Gambetta. Du Barail reckoned that Bellemare's motives were more personal than political.⁹ But the fact remains that many of the 'Gambettist generals' were generals none the less – something most of them had not been in January 1870.

Whatever the intentions of the Rank Revision Committee, historians have argued that the result of its decisions was to entrench at the top of the military hierarchy an anti-republican elite which communicated its conservative prejudices to successive generations of officers. 'The men in command of the French army over the next two or three decades would all have begun their careers under Napoleon III or before', wrote Ralston.¹⁰ Raoul Girardet makes the same point: 'One must remember that the upper ranks, colonels and generals, had all been educated under the empire and they could not fail to retain most of the reflexes, tastes and prejudices of their first military education, inevitably bound up for many of them with a certain nostalgia for a regime which raised the glory and the prestige of the uniform to such heights.'¹¹

But we cannot rely on such statements to explain the political attitudes of French officers after 1870. Governmental instability meant that *all* French regimes since 1789 had inherited an army 'educated' under previous governments. Nor was the Third Republic the first government to be made nervous by the prospect of political disloyalty in the barracks. Relations between the *ancien régime* and the army had never been particularly close, which explains in part why so many officers were quick to desert the Bourbons for the prospect of a command in the revolutionary armies after 1789.¹² Robespierre's distrust of his generals was such that more than one chose desertion as a preferable alternative to the scaffold while even Bonaparte found his marshals unwilling to support him in 1814. The spectre of the army's desertion of Louis XVIII during the Hundred Days of Napoleon's return from Elba haunted civil-military relations throughout the Restoration. The executions of Marshal Ney, 'Bravest of the Brave', Colonel La Bedoyère, the first officer to rally to Napoleon in 1814, Generals Mouton-Duvernet and Chartran in the aftermath of Waterloo, and the gaoling and exile of several others, were measures hardly calculated to establish an atmosphere of trust and confidence between

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soldiers and the government. 15,000 Napoleonic officers were sent home on half pay in 1815, their places often taken by aristocrats chosen for their loyalty rather than their military qualities. Despite efforts by ex-Napoleonic Marshal Gouvion-Saint-Cyr, war minister in the moderate Richelieu government of 1817, to guarantee the rights of old soldiers, Napoleonic veterans were tolerated rather than encouraged: promotion and postings went to émigrés and loyalists, while messes were often dangerously divided between royalist 'gentils-hommes' and Napoleonic 'vilains'.

After a series of plots led by regular soldiers or ex-Napoleonic 'demi-soldes' failed to topple the Restoration, the government and the army settled back into an uneasy truce which was shattered by the July Ordinances of 1830. After only half-heartedly opposing the insurgents on the 28th, the Bourbon army simply melted away. Most officers must have reasoned with Major Barrès, a Napoleonic veteran who once already in 1820 had narrowly escaped dismissal for refusing to toast the king with sufficient vigour:

To accept battle would have been to doom to certain death the fifteen officers and two hundred men whom I had with me and to doom to destruction the barracks, the valuable stores and the neighbouring houses. Torrents of blood would flow and my memory would be held responsible for all these calamities; and for whom? For a perjured king, for an inept government imposed on France by foreign bayonets. Until then I had served faithfully and conscientiously. I had nothing with which to reproach myself as regard to the Bourbons, but this wretched, ill-advised sovereign had broken his oath, had he not freed me from mine?¹³

The first attempts by the young July Monarchy to curry favour with the army by reinstating many of the 'demi-soldes' sacked in 1815 badly misfired. Regular officers were less than content to see the Napoleonic veterans slip into jobs which they had hoped to occupy themselves. The government quickly realized that the loyalty of the army would be won by guaranteeing its future, not by pandering to the political traditions of the past. An 1832 law regularized the promotion procedure, thereby removing complaints of political favouritism so often levelled at the Restoration. An 1834 law further stabilized an officer's position by declaring that his rank was his property and could be taken from him only in exceptional circumstances. This removed the threat of arbitrary or politically motivated dismissals, not uncommon in the past, and gave an officer the status and security of tenure of a civil servant.

Loyalty to the state had replaced the Bourbon's notion of loyalty to the sovereign. The divisive years of the Restoration had undermined

comradeship and professional standards and placed an officer's job in jeopardy. Soldiers now declared themselves to be political non-combatants, men who served France, not a particular regime. Even Louis-Philippe's son, the Duc d'Aumale, respected this social contract in 1848 when as Governor General of Algeria he gracefully retired rather than precipitate a civil war.

Republicans after 1870 not infrequently cited the army's participation in Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's *coup d'état* of 2 December 1851 as proof of its essentially Bonapartist inclinations. By appealing to the conservative instincts and ambitions of a few Algerian generals led by Saint-Arnaud, the Second Empire rode to power on the point of a bayonet. Any hesitation on the part of the soldiers in case this enterprise was in any way illegal was smoothed by Louis-Napoleon's constitutional position as commander-in-chief. 'Solicited by both parties, the army, in the very name of the obedience owed the constitutional authorities, could not refuse to take sides', wrote Girardet.¹⁴

Yet rather than a break with the political neutrality of the past, a blot on an otherwise clean copybook, the *coup d'état* of 1851 was perfectly consistent with the army's attitude toward politics. The army did not care who sat in the Tuileries or the Elysée, so long as the government was strong and showed a demonstrable affection for the forces. Saint-Arnaud's objection to the Second Republic was not that it was a republic, but that it was a weak republic. Weak regimes opened the future to question, tempting officers to warm themselves by the fires of the nation's political passions. His 2 December 1851 coup, which installed Louis-Napoleon as emperor, did not herald the entrance of the army into politics. Rather, it signalled the end of a political debate in the barracks which had undermined discipline and even witnessed NCOs running for parliament. One of Louis-Napoleon's first acts was to bar officers from sitting in the Corps Législatif, something which had been done neither by the Bourbon Restoration nor the July Monarchy.

The army was wedded to order, not to a particular regime, and the officer corps would have disintegrated under any attempt to impose a political view. A long history of changing regimes had left a residue of political traditions and tastes among a socially diverse soldiery. After the Bourbon Restoration had attempted unsuccessfully to direct the opinions of the officer corps down the narrow channels of political loyalty, subsequent regimes were content with political neutrality. Divergent political views had long been tolerated in the army – both monarchs and marshals had conceded an officer's right to keep his own discreet counsel. Artillerymen and sappers were distinguished throughout the nineteenth century by their republican sentiments, prominent

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in political demonstrations under the July Monarchy and voting 'no' in Louis-Napoleon's 1852 referendum called to endorse the empire, and yet they enjoyed the special favour of the Emperor. The medical corps, army administration and supply corps were also reckoned to contain many officers sympathetic to the Left.¹⁸ Cavaignac, le Flô, and Lamoricière, all keen republicans, enjoyed rapid promotion under Louis-Philippe, while Trochu, an Orleanist, found this no impediment to his career under Napoleon III, until he published *L'Armée française en 1867*, critical of army organization rather than of the regime's politics. Even officer purges following each change of regime were only partly political: in 1815, the Bourbons had to scale down the vast army bequeathed to them by Napoleon, while, in 1830, pressure for promotion meant that some officers had to make way for ambitious youngsters whose careers had stagnated during 15 years of peace. In 1848, only 84 officers lost their jobs, and in 1851, Louis-Napoleon sacked a few outspoken republican officers. Nor were many officers sorry to see the back of Louis-Napoleon in 1870, for far from absorbing the 'reflexes, tastes and prejudices of their first military education', they felt that Louis-Napoleon had thrown open promotion to favouritism and neglected vital military reforms, leading France down the road to defeat and social revolution.

The army's tradition of political neutrality was sorely tested in the decade following the Franco-Prussian War. The republic had risen from the cinders of the empire on 4 September 1870, as news of the surrender of Sedan reached Paris. But five months of defeat and frustration which culminated in the crushing monarchist victory in the February 1871 elections for the National Assembly threw the future of the regime into doubt. The monarchist triumph proved ephemeral, however. The by-elections of July 1871 returned 99 republican deputies and only 15 monarchists, initiating the swing which eventually was to win the republic for the republicans. Four days after the vote, the monarchists received a disastrous setback when the Comte de Chambord, the Bourbon pretender, announced that he would only rule beneath the white banner of the *ancien régime*. This declaration, which was clearly unacceptable to the Orleanists and Bonapartists, not to mention the republicans, was tantamount to an abdication. The Right realized that time was not on their side. Fearing that new elections would return a 'red' assembly, they resisted demands from the Left that, having ratified the peace treaty, it should step aside and make way for a newly elected body. In such a finely balanced contest, a war of nerves between Left and Right, both sides quickly realized that the attitude of the army might prove crucial. 'It is upon it, upon its bad disposition carefully maintained and stimulated towards the republicans,

that the reactionaries of all kinds are speculating', Gambetta wrote in December 1876.¹⁶

The traditional respect of the man on horseback for order, the unsavoury reputation as dangerous radicals which clung to republicans like Gambetta, and the traditional links between the power elite and high command seemed to throw the advantage in this tug-of-war for the army's loyalties to the monarchists. Certainly in the imperious General Ducrot, hero of Sedan and the siege of Paris and commander of the 8th army corps at Bourges, they found a keen supporter. Montaudon, Lebrun, Douai, Picard, Bourbaki and Espivent were among the most important of a number of other generals counted in the anti-republican camp. Gambetta did not fear a *pronunciamento* from a gaggle of army chiefs – such an initiative was unlikely and certainly out of character. However, he did fear that if the quarrel between monarchists and republicans ever reached a show-down, the attitude of the generals could prove decisive.¹⁷ 'We are not on the verge of a coup d'état and we are working to make it impossible', Gambetta declared. Republicans sought to guarantee the political neutrality of the army. To do this, they must win a number of senior officers to their camp and to assure the mass of the forces that there was no incompatibility between a republican regime and the professional interests of the army.

Many generals had serious reservations about the new regime, but Gambetta could count a few recruits among senior officers. Clinchant, commander of the first army corps at Lille, was the only republican corps commander, but, lower down, de Galliffet, de Bellemare, Saussier, Pajol, de Wimpffen, Billot, Boulanger and Thibaudin formed a phalanx of brigadiers and colonels destined for high command in a republic controlled by republicans. While the high command was certainly not republican, neither was it wholly reactionary, and its divisions denied the Right its support. Already in July 1872, British military attaché Colonel Connolly noted that the high command was slipping towards political neutrality: 'In short, those who are ready to sacrifice their personal feelings to the cause of order and stability are in the great majority.'¹⁸ Right-wing generals spoke only for themselves, not for the army. 'Everyone listened to General Changarnier speaking for the army', wrote War Minister General du Barail, 'without dreaming that if he left a great name and a great reputation in the army, he had been absent for almost a quarter-century and had no solid, firm support as he claimed. As for myself, the indispensable agent [for a coup], no-one asked my opinion.'¹⁹ 'My old friend Changarnier was no more than a pretentious and destitute old man', wrote Charles de Rémusat.²⁰

In the over-heated political atmosphere of the republic's first decade, the surprising thing is not that a few officers took an active interest

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in political affairs, but that the vast majority of officers, generals included, respected the army's apolitical traditions. And even of those who jumped into the political lists, the Right by no means held the monopoly. Of 16 army officers who sat in the National Assembly in 1873, nine sat with the Right and seven with the republicans, and this became eight to seven with the November 1873 resignation of General Ducrot.²¹

In 1876 and 1878, Gambetta's two secret studies of the political opinions of the officer corps revealed the army's political divisions while pointing up that republicans were winning converts. Beneath a grumbling crust of colonels and generals lay a mass of officers sympathetic to the republic. 'Some of the major generals are legitimists, some are Orleanists, most are Bonapartists', wrote one of Gambetta's military informers in November 1877.

If republicanism is beginning to make converts among the brigadiers it still has some way to go: they share the same opinions as the major generals. Among the colonels, lieutenant colonels and majors, there are still several legitimists, Orleanists and Bonapartists. The rest are republicans. Among captains, lieutenants and sub-lieutenants the only Bonapartists are Corsicans and the only legitimists are graduates of the rue des Postes [a Jesuit preparatory school for Saint-Cyr] and not even all of them. Ninety-nine per cent of the rest are republicans.

The *Times* special correspondent wrote on 5 November 1877:

Wherever I have been, I have constantly heard this: 'We are in daily communication with the officers of the garrison, and we are perfectly certain that the mass of them will be no party to a crime against the nation. A very large proportion of the younger officers are known to be republicans, and in every command there are colonels and general officers who are known to be with us.'

Other civilians were struck by 'the republican sentiments' of army officers, especially artillerymen and sappers.²²

The reason for the budding affection between the republic and its army was a simple one: soldiers were increasingly convinced that republicans sought to resurrect French military power. Already from his captivity, Gallifet had admired the heroic defence directed by the men of Tours. He expressed his 'shame at the capitulation of Sedan and Metz' and of the generals 'who abandoned without orders the field of battle at Sedan . . . Gambetta and Trochu have all my respect; their energy doubles my shame.'²³

With the bulk of the professional army locked up with its emperor at Sedan and Metz, the republic was declared on 4 September 1870. Gambetta, who once had called for the regular army to be scrapped

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and French defence entrusted to a *levée en masse* on the outbreak of war, at last had an opportunity to put his ideas into practice. The experience convinced him that something might be said for military preparation after all. Together with Freycinet, defence delegate in the new Government of National Defence, Gambetta attempted to piece together a force from the remnants of the professional army, *gardes mobiles* and assorted adventurers including Garibaldi and the rump of his Red Shirts. Perhaps the guillotine was the missing ingredient, but the miracles of 1792–93 were not repeated. Augustin Cochin described the Government of National Defence as ‘Waterloo combined with 1848 . . . not the Great Republic but a watered-down parody of it.’²⁴ Ignorant of the art of war and the demands of army organization, the two amateurs blundered from defeat to defeat, organizing operations without consulting their generals and hamstrung by the shortage and diversity of their armaments. Without experienced officers and NCOs, enthusiastic recruits faltered under fire. Von Moltke was not the Duke of Brunswick. The Prussian juggernaut rolled on and French soldiers ran away in increasingly larger batches. Following the battle of Le Mans in January 1871, General Chanzy estimated that fully 70,000 French soldiers had deserted,²⁵ virtually the equivalent of the entire German force confronting him.

The reorganization of the army was the first priority of the new republic. Defeat had been a hard school for the Gambettists but it had given them an experience and maturity in military questions which would often not be matched by their opponents. ‘Let it be understood’, Gambetta said in his first post-war speech at Bordeaux in June 1871, ‘that every boy born in France is born a soldier as well as a citizen.’ Seven years later at Romans, his attitudes remained unchanged: ‘This army must be the first concern of the republican party . . . the armed representation of the elite of the French nation.’²⁶ Contacts between officers and republican politicians were extended. Gambetta’s newspaper, *La République française*, devoted column after column to military reform while soldiers were invited to write in their grievances, republicans realizing unlike most conservatives that the army’s major concerns were professional and not political. This was good politics as well as being in the national interest. Officers would queue up behind the party which opted to keep the army strong and bolster the prestige of its leaders. ‘The day that the republic will give [lieutenants a pay rise]’, he wrote, ‘it will have all their sympathy and their support.’²⁷ The more intelligent officers realized early on that Gambetta was a man eager for reform.²⁸ A new spirit was abroad in the army, more studious, more professional than before 1870. And while it is true that there was nothing specifically ‘republican’ about the new reforms, it is