

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54592-1 - The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914

Douglas Porch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The March to the Marne

The French Army

1871-1914

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54592-1 - The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914

Douglas Porch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The March to the Marne

The French Army

1871-1914



DOUGLAS PORCH

Lecturer in History

University College of Wales, Aberystwyth

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54592-1 - The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914
Douglas Porch
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1981

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1981
First paperback edition 2003

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress catalogue card number 81-10139

ISBN 0 521 23883 8 hardback
ISBN 0 521 54592 7 paperback

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54592-1 - The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914

Douglas Porch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

XX

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
1 The army and the republic	1
2 The army and the nation	23
3 The high command	45
4 The Dreyfus affair	54
5 The Radical solution	73
6 The <i>affaire des fiches</i>	92
7 Anti-militarism and indiscipline	105
8 The colonial army	134
9 The army and the Nationalist Revival	169
10 The three-year law	191
11 The spirit of the offensive	213
12 The heavy artillery	232
13 Conclusion	246
<i>Appendix</i> 1 War Ministers 1871–1914	255
2 Army corps areas	256
<i>Notes</i>	257
<i>Select bibliography</i>	281
<i>Index</i>	291

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54592-1 - The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914

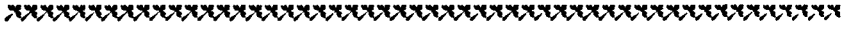
Douglas Porch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Françoise

Preface



‘It is desolating to realize that upon these frivolous old gentlemen, with their false mystery and their half developed “science” of war, rested the continued existence of European democracy’, wrote British historian Philip Guedalla of the French high command in 1914. Such opinions were not untypical in the aftermath of the Great War. The deficiencies of the French army in the opening months of that conflict were only too apparent. Indeed, France had an army which appeared unable to decide in which historical epoch it lived – its firepower was that of the 20th century, but its uniforms were virtually unchanged since the Second Empire, while its tactics were essentially those of the French Revolution.

The French army’s shortcomings were especially apparent in three areas: the high command contained a disturbing and almost fatally large number of incompetent generals whom Joffre was forced to sack in the heat of battle and exile to Limoges. In the process, the French language acquired a new word – *Limoger*. Secondly, the army remained committed to the doctrine of the offensive. Largely ineffective frontal attacks cost the French almost 2,500,000 casualties in the first 15 months of the war. Lastly, these tactical mistakes were compounded by an almost total absence of heavy artillery. French attacks were broken up by German artillery firing from distances beyond the reach of the light French 75s.

How does one explain the poor, not to say disastrous, performance of the French army in 1914? Historians, led by those of the ‘nation-in-arms’ school, see these mistakes as the inevitable result of France’s reliance on her professional soldiers: ‘The professional army implies the premature offensive of 1914, and this springs fatally from its very nature’, wrote Monteilhet, whose pioneering work on French military institutions has set the tone for subsequent studies. The 1914 offensive, his theory goes, was the result of a struggle over military organization between conservatives and republicans which dated from the French Revolution. The history of the French army since 1871 is seen as a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54592-1 - The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914

Douglas Porch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Preface

battle between the professional army and the 'nation-in-arms'. The French army, officered by men whose aristocratic origins and political views made them unsympathetic to the republic, fought to maintain an elite, professional army, highly trained and skilled in manoeuvre, capable of applying offensive doctrines of warfare. Republicans struggled to introduce a militia, or at least an army made up primarily of reservists, less adept at manoeuvre and able to fight only from behind breastworks and fortifications. After 1899, the Left made a concerted effort to 'republicanize' the forces. This failed. With the Nationalist Revival of 1911-1914, the professional army was victorious. The un-republican, and disastrous, doctrine of the offensive, based on a totally unrealistic appraisal of French military capabilities, triumphed with the three-year service law of 1913. Joffre, Foch and others ignored that the French were outnumbered and outgunned, disdained the use of reserves and took the offensive against a superior enemy.

This, then, is our received view of the French army in 1914. Like many models it appears logical on the surface. But the more I study the French army in this period, the less the facts appear to fit the theory. Was the officer corps dominated by aristocrats? Is it fair to say that officers were anti-republican after 1871? Of what did the Radicals' attempts to 'republicanize' the army after 1899 consist? Did the Nationalist Revival restore the 'professional' army after 1911? Was the Dreyfus affair simply a hiccup in civil-military relations from which the army quickly recovered? In an army as confused and disrupted as was the French army in 1914, can the tactical offensive and the lack of armaments really be said to be the product of a coherent policy? And many more. These may seem small points, perhaps, but when the nails begin to fall out, the entire edifice is in danger of collapse. In short, I believe that there is need for a book which attempts to explain the army's shortcomings in 1914 and to give a more balanced appreciation of the place of the army in the society and politics of post-1871 France.

I should like to thank the many people who have given me help and encouragement over the last few years: L. H. Gann, Patrick Bury and Christopher Andrew to whom I owe a great debt for their encouragement and helpful advice. Monsieur Jacques Millerand for permission to see his father's papers which, when I saw them, were not yet classified. I should also like to thank the University College of Wales, the Sir Earnest Cassell Trust, the Social Science Research Council, the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* and the Hoover Institution for grants which enabled me to complete my research. Lastly, I should like to thank my wife, to whom this book is dedicated, for her patience and understanding through the bouts of bad temper and ruined holidays.