Introduction

On the evening of 24 July 1914, the French war minister, Colonel Adolphe Messimy, summoned the commander-in-chief designate of the French Army, General Joseph Joffre. Messimy told him that, following the assassination in Sarajevo, Germany supported Austria-Hungary's firm stance against Serbia in the matter. That support would represent direct opposition to Russia's support for Serbia; hence France's military agreements with Russia might come into play. Joffre recorded in his memoirs that he replied to Messimy: 'Well, monsieur le ministre, if we have to make war we will do so.' It must be presumed, therefore, that Joffre believed that France could emerge victorious. This book examines the French Army, which Joffre was to use to defeat Germany, in order to evaluate how well it performed. It begins with the reforms following the disastrous Franco-Prussian war, when France was defeated and humiliated, examines the battles between 1914 and 1918, and explains how France did indeed emerge victorious to sit at the victors' table in 1919 for the signatures on the Treaty of Versailles.

The prelude to the First World War took place in North Africa. In 1911, at the height of the second Moroccan crisis, when the German gunboat *Panther* anchored off Agadir in order to protect the rights of German merchants in the North African country where French economic interests were growing, Europe feared a general war. France's then premier, Joseph Caillaux, asked Joffre what France's chances of victory were if such a war resulted from the crisis. He reminded Joffre that Napoleon Bonaparte had stated that a general should have at least a 70 per cent chance of victory before embarking on a battle, and Joffre replied that France did not possess such a margin. Caillaux ended the Moroccan crisis diplomatically, therefore, ceding a portion of the French Cameroons to Germany in return for German recognition of France's protectorate in Morocco. War had been averted for three years.

France's Army in 1914 was a relatively new institution and still evolving. After France lost the provinces of Alsace and much of Lorraine in the 1871 Treaty of Frankfurt following its defeat in the Franco-Prussian

war, everything had to be rebuilt. A new French Republic, the third, had to establish its authority and create a new Republican Army to meet the greatly increased power of the new German *Reich*, declared in Versailles in 1871, when the King of Prussia became Kaiser of a unified Germany. The professional army of Emperor Louis Napoleon was replaced by a republican conscript army, whose soldiers accepted compulsory military service as the male citizen's duty.

A brief discussion of the formation of this new Republican Army is followed by an operational history of the fighting between 1914 and 1918. This account examines both the high level of command, where strategy and tactics were decided, and command at lower levels, especially the divisional level where one infantry division's experience, that of 13 Infantry Division, is used as a series of narrative hooks to make more comprehensible the huge numbers involved in this, the first modern, industrial war. The book also introduces individual experiences, technological developments, military justice and military medicine to give a rounded picture of the French Army at war. The reader is directed to Robert A. Doughty's magisterial *Pyrrhic Victory* for more detail of the strategy and operations. Here, I link France's Army to the home front, through the relationship between civilian politicians and the high command, through the millions of letters exchanged and censored by the postal control commissions, and through the massive industrial mobilisation that gave the Army its weapons and munitions. I analyse the relations between France's Army and the principal Allies, at first Russia and Britain, and later the USA and Britain, because the First World War was, above all, a coalition war, and France provided moral leadership by supplying the largest army of the belligerent democracies. I examine France's Army in relation to the principal enemy, Germany, by detailing reactions to German tactics, and have carried the story into the post-war period. These three relationships – the Army and France; the Army and its Allies; the Army and its enemy – are interwoven throughout. By way of conclusion, the book ends by comparing the Army of 1914 with that of 1918, so as to highlight the changes and improvements showing the adaptability of France's Army after Joffre had accepted the prospect of war.

The image of the opening battles in 1914 is one of futile bayonet charges. Much of the fighting during 1915 is little known, as the British were not present in France in great numbers; even French historians have not examined that year's numerous battles. The 1916 battle of Verdun is well known, but not France's contribution to that year's second battle on the Somme. France's effort in 1918 is also little known, it being assumed that following 1917's mutinies, nothing more could be

expected from an exhausted army. Yet, during the 1918 German offensives, the French Army came to the rescue of the British and then withstood the assaults on their own front as well, before joining the final victorious months of fighting. Whatever the percentage chance of success that Joffre believed he possessed in 1914, by 1918 it was a French general, Ferdinand Foch, made marshal of France, who accepted the German signatures on the armistice document. In the end, Joffre's confidence in the French Army had been justified. That citizen army had learned, by hard experience and at great cost, how to fight and how to emerge victorious from a modern industrial war.

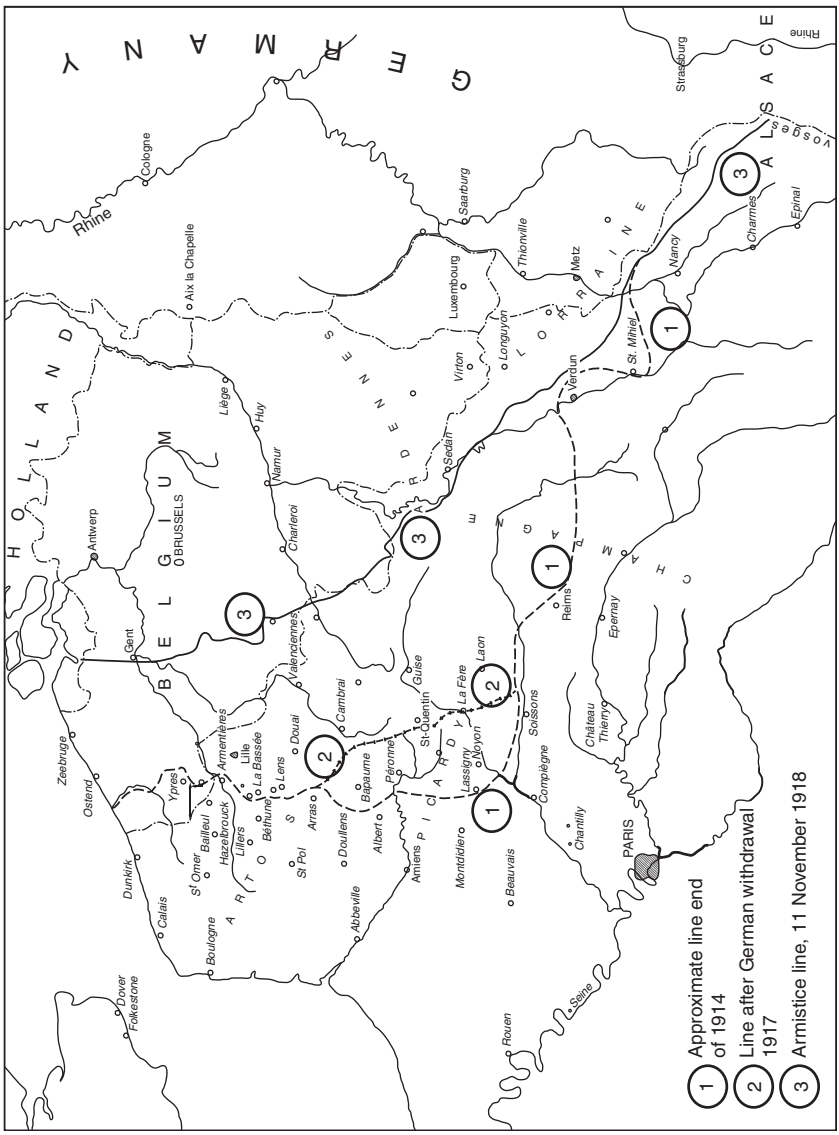
Table 1 *Political and military leaders, 1914–1918*

The politicians	
President of the Republic, 1913–1920	Raymond Poincaré (1860–1934)
Présidents du conseil (premiers)	*War ministers*
June 1914–October 1915	
René Viviani	Adolphe Messimy; Alexandre Millerand
October 1915–March 1917	
Aristide Briand	General Gallieni; General Roques; Admiral Lacaze
March–September 1917	(interim); General Lyautey
Alexandre Ribot	Paul Painlevé
September–November 1917	
Paul Painlevé	Paul Painlevé
November 1917–January 1920	
Georges Clemenceau	Georges Clemenceau

The military	
Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies	General (Marshal) Ferdinand Foch, from 26.3.18
Commander-in-Chief, French Army	*Chief of staff*
August 1914–December 1916	
General (Marshal) Joseph Joffre	General Belin; (from 22.3.15) General Pellé
December 1916–May 1917	
General Robert Nivelle	General Pont; (from 2.5.17) General Debeney
May 1917–November 1918	
General (Marshal) Philippe Pétain	General Debeney; (from 23.12.17) General Anthoine; (from 5.7.18) General Buat
Army group commanders	
*GAE: from 8.1.15	General Dubail
from 31.3.16	General Franchet d'Espèrey
from 27.12.16	General de Curières de Castelnau
*GAC: from 22.6.15	General de Curières de Castelnau
from12.12.15	General de Langle de Cary
from 2.5.17	General Pétain
from4.5.17	General Fayolle
*GAN: from 4.10.14	General Foch
from 27.12.16	General Franchet d'Espèrey
from 10.6.18	General Maistre
*GAR: from 1.1.17 until dissolved 8.5.17	General Micheler
from 23.2.18	General Fayolle
Individual witnesses cited frequently	
Charles Delvert (1879–1940), historian	101 RI in 124 DI
Abel Ferry (1881–1918), député	166 RI
Paul Pireaud (1890–1970), agriculteur	112 RAL (régiment d'artillerie lourde)

* GAE: Eastern Army Group; GAC: Central Army Group; GAN: Northern; GAR: Reserve

Fig. 1 Four témoins whose testimony recurs throughout this book
(a) Paul Pireaud, farmer from the Dordogne, SW France, and gunner in 112 Régiment d'artillerie lourde
(b) General Emile Fayolle, commander successively of 70 DR, XXXIII Corps, Sixth Army, French Forces in Italy, Reserve Army Group
(c) Colonel Emile Herbillon, liaison officer between GQG and the government
(d) Captain Charles Delvert, 101 RI, then HQ staff Fifth and First Armies



1. The Western Front, 1914–18

1 The pre-war Army

During the decades preceding the First World War, the French Army had an equivocal reputation. On the one hand, it possessed a glorious past in the campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte that were taught in European military academies, yet, on the other, it had suffered an ignominious defeat in 1870 by the Prussian Army, while under the command of Napoleon's nephew, self-declared Emperor Napoleon III. The glorious days of the *levée en masse*, when French citizens rose to the occasion and defeated the invader at Valmy in 1792, had been replaced by the inefficient mobilisation and performance of a professional army in 1870. Then, in 1894, right-wing and incompetent officers brought down international opprobrium on the Army, to add to the earlier military defeat, when its high command accused and convicted of treason an innocent artillery officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, and then covered up the conspiracy.

How, then, to explain the eventual victory of the Army of 1914 that endured more than four years of battles and trench stalemate fought on French territory at appalling cost in lives and treasure? How to explain that France sat at the victors' table at war's end? This victory is one of the glories of the much maligned Third Republic.

The political background, 1870–1911

France and the French Army had been crushed totally by the Prussian Army that invaded the national territory, won a resounding victory in eastern France at Sedan on the Meuse in September 1870, and forced Louis Napoleon into exile. Political upheaval followed as Paris refused to accept defeat and rejected the idea of an armistice sought by the newly established Third Republic. In 1871 the Paris Commune managed to deny reality for some weeks, but eventually was forced to capitulate. The political fallout created cleavages between Paris and the provinces, and between left and right, that continue to this day. The Treaty of Frankfurt, which ended the state of war between France and the newly

created German Empire (the second *Reich*), was signed on 28 May 1871. The treaty terms ceded the provinces of Alsace and much of Lorraine to the new power on France's eastern border, imposed a large financial indemnity, and installed German troops on French soil until such time as it was paid. The final humiliation was the crowning of Kaiser Wilhelm in the Galerie des Glaces of the Versailles palace outside Paris.

Despite the Third Republic's less than auspicious start, tremendous progress was made towards speedy recuperation and reform. The financial penalty was paid off in record time and the last German troops left France on 16 September 1873. The country's new constitutional laws had been passed earlier the same year, and the initial monarchist majority in the new bi-cameral legislature gave way gradually to the republicans. The rise of the political left was marked symbolically by the adoption in 1880 of Bastille Day (14 July) as the French national holiday.

The two great achievements of the Third French Republic, both largely due to the work of Jules Ferry, were the creation of a system of primary education and of a large colonial empire. Both had an influence on the French Army that fought in 1914–18. Ferry's Education Law of 1881 provided for free education up to the age of 13 for all boys and girls. The following year, that primary education became compulsory and 'laïque', that is non-religious. Ferry had already made provision for the training of teachers for the new schools; in 1879 he had obliged all départements to set up teacher training colleges for women, and the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure (founded 1831) welcomed women in Sèvres in 1881.

For Jules Ferry, the prime mover in the field of education, democracy and equal rights for all citizens were impossible without equality of education: 'the secularisation of schools and morality aims to create the unity of national spirit on a positive and uncontested basis'.[1] An historian of the French education system, Mona Ozouf, has drawn on her own experience to describe the value of schooling in creating an 'idea' of France.[2] By the time war was declared in 1914, therefore, virtually all French troops had received at least elementary education and had become literate, as the enormous volume of wartime letters sent between front and home attests. A large proportion of the 2.7 million boys attending school in 1896/97 would be mobilised in 1914.[3] The link with home and family that letters provided was invaluable in maintaining a degree of morale.

Whichever region of France the soldiers came from, they would have received the same 'idea' of France because of the unified and centralised bureaucracy already in place from Napoleonic times, and through the use of the same textbooks in all state schools. One mission of education was

to unify, especially through the encouragement of patriotism. Thus textbooks in history and civics were 'of influence in keeping hatred of Germany alive'.[4] The role of the *instituteur* and, increasingly, the *institutrice* was to promote civic values, particularly since it was popularly supposed that it was their German equivalents who had won victory at Sadowa (against the Austrians) and Sedan.

The republicans who used the elementary teachers to forge anew the French 'esprit national' after 1870 included the historian Ernest Lavisse among their number. He made an important contribution to the reform of university education and was director of the nation's foremost teacher training institution, the *Ecole normale*. He also produced the school textbooks which were used in the new primary schools, including the *Manuel d'instruction civique*.[5] Another textbook, compiled by Lavisse and used widely between 1880 and 1900 when the majority of the active French Army would have been educated, presented a 'thoroughly militarist' attitude to war. It was a series of heroic stories about French soldiers, chosen from the post-1870 period. The work was in its 24th edition by 1916. Its title, *Tu seras soldat*, clearly announces its theme and Lavisse's preface explained his aim in compiling the work: 'I have desired to teach the children to love it [the army] and to prepare them to fulfil a sacred duty, that of *military service*.'[6] Lavisse wrote in 1912:

> If the schoolboy does not carry with him the living memory of our national glories, if he does not know that his ancestors have fought on a thousand battlefields to unify our fatherland and to construct out of the chaos of our aging institutions the laws that made us free; if he does not become a citizen penetrated with his duties and a soldier who loves his rifle, the teacher will have wasted his time.[7]

Lavisse's emphasis on the military was reinforced by a decree promulgated in 1882 that established 'bataillons scolaires'. These extra-curricular 'school battalions' were meant to supplement the uneven provision of physical education and provided youngsters over the age of 14 with instruction on firing guns. Gymnastics clubs were also started, and in 1908 the war ministry instituted the Brevet d'Aptitude Militaire, or certificate of military training, to reward those boys who did well in such environments. The possession of the certificate usually meant a faster progression through the ranks, once its holder was conscripted. By 1913 there were 20,030 such holders, which does not constitute a large proportion of the population.[8]

Ferry's second achievement was France's colonial empire. Bismarck's post-war policy of keeping France isolated diplomatically was based on the belief that France could never be an ally, and he encouraged the

French to seek colonial expansion as a way both of distracting them from seeking any revenge for the Treaty of Frankfurt and also of creating trouble as France bumped up against Italy and Britain in Africa. In 1881 France took over Tunisia despite Italian pretensions to neighbouring Libya; in 1883 the French occupied Tonkin and Amman (both in present-day Vietnam) and added Laos in 1893 to what became the Indo-Chinese Union. A protectorate over Madagascar, off the east coast of Africa, was declared in 1885 and the island was annexed to France in 1896. A huge swathe of Africa was explored and French West Africa (AOF) and French Equatorial Africa (AEF) created south of the North African territories of Algeria and Tunisia. Egypt had to be left to the British, but most of Morocco became a French protectorate. Morocco would be a flash-point when Germany started to flex its colonial muscles, creating crises in 1905 and again in 1911.

Neither the French Army nor the war ministry was much interested in the military potential of these colonies.[9] Algeria was considered to be part of France and its three départements each sent two deputies and one senator to Paris to sit in the Assemblée nationale. The remaining colonies elected ten deputies and seven senators. The European colonists had little interest in training and arming native contingents, who might then rebel against their colonisers. It was not until after the second Morocco crisis that men such as Adolphe Messimy (war minister in 1911) and Charles Mangin (a colonial officer) began promoting the idea of large native armies.

Both Ferry's achievements – the provision of free, compulsory primary education and the creation of a colonial empire – affected the experience of French soldiers during the Great War. The fact that all (or the great majority) could read and write enabled the serving soldier to maintain the vital link with home and family and normality. France's colonies and overseas possessions supplied thousands of men, not simply as troops but more often as labour behind the lines, although this contribution was much less than its proponents had forecast pre-war. Nonetheless, France had nearly run out of men by 1918, and without colonial contingents the country would certainly have been forced to give up the fight for lack of manpower.

Questions of primary education and colonies were considered more important than the difficult task of forming a new Republican Army (despite the fact that more often than not the war minister was a military man). A presidential decree in July 1872 created the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre (War Ministry Supreme Council). Presided over by the President of the Republic, it brought together the premier and the senior generals, along with other military and political appointees, to advise on