

Evolution of the French Army organization and command structures (1870-1914)

During the Third Republic, the command organization of the French Army is inseparable from the political power. In 1914, the state of the high command of the French Army is the result of a lengthy process initiated just after the defeat of 1871. As a matter of fact, it was progressively developed during peacetime, "Revenge" being the main driving purpose, and also according to requirements.

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The trauma of 1871 forces the French military to think about a new organization for the Army high command. On June 8, 1871, a Presidential Decree reorganizes the central administration of the War Department. Three directorates are created : personnel, equipment, and budget. In addition, a position of chief of staff to the secretary of defense is instituted. Simultaneously, he is the chief of the minister's personal staff. He exercises authority over two offices :

- The first one deals with general correspondence, troop movements, awards, and collective decrees.

- The second one deals with historical matters, military statistics, library, collection of maps and plans, geodesy,

topography, engraving and photography.

Though an imitation of the German general staff, this structure is noticeably different. Contrary to Germany, during peacetime, the French government gives the military authority no power and no initiative. The fate of the Chief of Staff and of the chief of the personal staff, positions detained by the same general officer, is linked with that of the secretary - a source of some wavering. However, the organization of the high command is left unresolved because priority is given to the reconstruction of the forces. The Higher War Council is created for that purpose in 1872. It is an advisory body designed to assist in solving Army organizational problems. For that purpose, on

July 24, 1783, a law institutes the standing of permanent army corps. The French Army, now a viable tool, can set up a general staff in the War department. The March 12, 1874 decree, "*... organization of the War Secretary general staff*", sets up such organization. The Chief of the general staff ceases as chief of the personal staff. Working alongside with him there are two deputies to assist in the management of six new offices :

- Army organization, mobilization, and manning ; statistics, history ; operations, training, and topography ; railways and staging areas ; correspondence ; service support, and general accounting.

Although more flexible than the previous, this organization still

does not define responsibilities - command and control of the Army at war is not settled. In case of mobilization, the organization would ensure, at best, a relatively good rear support, under the War Secretary's control. The chief of the general staff is still only a direct assistant of the secretary and wavering still prevails. If the minister were to fall, he would too. So, from 1871 to 1886, France has 12 different chiefs of general staff when, in Germany, Moltke or von Schlieffen appeared irremovable. The decree dated June 1st 1883 is an attempt toward a wartime command and control organization. It plans, in wartime, to split the general staff into one "interior" general staff for the War Secretary, and one large armed

forces general staff. At that time, the general staff of the War Secretary is almost fully made up of war college graduates according to the law dated March 20 1880.

However, the question of the commander in chief has yet to be solved. In that regard, the Higher War Council is reformed. The defense committee (created by a ministerial decree dated July 28 1872), tasked with advising on how to create, keep and to do away with fortified towns, is of no use from 1888 as the new "fortress frontier" of France has then been completed. The decree of May 12 1888 changes the defense committee as it enlarges its competence. It is renamed the Higher War Council. The secretary of defense is bound to ask for its advice

about any matter related to mobilization or strategy, and, as it pertains to this article, about the Army general organization. Its members are those general officers likely to assume the command of a field army in wartime but have no command position in peacetime. The decree of May 26, 1888 sets a new stage. It specifies that the general

officers that are members of the Higher War Council should be given a letter, even in peacetime, specifying the structure of the army they would be assuming command of in wartime. However, the required cooperation between command and the general staff is not yet a reality.

On May 6, 1890, by decree, the general staff of the secretary

is designated as the Army Staff (EMA). Lead by the Army chief of staff, he directly reports to the secretary, however in wartime he becomes a vice chief of staff to the commander in chief of the main army group. Likewise, his staff is to become the framework of the operating armies' staffs. As the decree stipulates, the Army Staff is tasked with all defense and operations studies

and plans. An attempt is made to connect the command (Higher War Council) with its staff (EMA). The decree sets an additional mission of the Army Staff - *"the preparation and the coordination of the Higher War Council efforts and of its members charged with special missions"*. This disposition lasts about ten years without any major change. The vice-

president of the Higher War Council is the virtual person in command of the main French army group ; but, he still does not exert any influence over the Army Staff. The later is headed by the chief of the general staff who, in wartime, is a subordinate and a direct assistant to the commander of the main army group. However, in peacetime, his authority, placed

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Lessons learned

under the control of the secretary of defense, is as much important as that of the vice-president of the Higher War Council.

The issue of wartime command is solved in 1911 and 1912. To compensate for the lack of connection between the vice-president of the Higher War Council and the Army Staff, the War Secretary forwards a decree signed by the President of the Republic on July 28 1911. This decree reorganizes both the Higher War Council and the Army Staff. The position of vice-president of the Higher War Council is abolished. The chairmanship is given to the War secretary, or, in his absence, to the chief of the general staff, head of the Army Staff. As for the Army Staff, it is still split in two echelons. One mobile echelon, upon mobilization, goes forward with the chief of the general staff who,

in the meantime, became the main army group commander. He is accompanied by the first deputy chief of staff who himself became the army group vice chief of staff. The other echelon, stationary, is kept in close proximity to the secretary along with the other two deputies of the Army Staff when mobilization occurs.

The duality of power still exists, however the decree of January 20, 1912, puts an end to *“the double-headed staff paradox”* by removing the chief of staff position. From then on the chief of the general staff settles the personnel issues. He is directly in charge of the Army Staff and, to face this heavy task, he is entitled delegate signing authority to the three deputies who can directly report to the secretary for matters dealing with their own responsibility. The Army Staff is

divided into three groups, each one headed by a deputy chief of staff. Upon mobilization, the 1st group divides into two echelons. One mobile echelon intended to be the core of the campaign staff, the chief of which becomes the vice chief of staff of the main army group. And one stationary echelon stays in the territory from which the warring units have left from. The 2nd and 3rd groups in charge of organizational matters are kept unchanged.

The commander of the armies is not given the title of “généralissime” but rather that of Chief of the general staff. His competence is clearly defined and his authority firmly established. In August 1914 the High Command, as created by the Messimy and Millerand decrees of 1911 and 1912, is in charge of conducting war operations. The chief of the

general staff, General Joffre takes command of the Northern and Northeastern armies. The Higher War Council gets scattered ; its members are now at the head of their pre-designated armies together with the staff they are used to work with. The Army Staff splits in two groups. One becomes the High Headquarters and the HQs of a number of armies ; the other one becomes the staff of the Army.

Upon war declaration, the respective competences of the government and of the high command is defined by two laws. First, the decree of October 28, 1913, stipulates that the government watches over the vital interests of the country. It sets out the war political objectives, distributes the resources to the military. Second, the decree of December 2, 1913, splits the territory

into two areas : one Army area, placed under control of the general commander in chief, and one interior area under the authority of the War Secretary. The commanding general uses the High Headquarters, and the War secretary uses the staff of the Army. Within the month of August, the relationship between general Joffre and the War Secretary, Adolphe Messimy, becomes more tense by the day : each one attempting to gain complete control of the conduct of the war.

1 editor's note : This conclusion has been added by the publishing director.

The French High Command organization of 1914 has been the result of a lengthy maturation - rather slow for a country preparing for a war of revenge. It may not look so perfect to the 21st Century observer familiar with current command structures. The later resulted from the crises and conflicts of the 20th Century, and a continuous transformation of the armed forces. Nevertheless, the process ensured an excellent preparation for the First World War - more particularly a result of the continuity of the transition from peace to war that had been missing so much in 1870. It also enabled to conduct operations on the Western front, later on all fronts, to end, after four years of fierce battles and of tremendous sacrifice, in a stunning military victory¹.

Commanding organization in operation in pictures



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