

### The State of the French Army.

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If there be just now a curiosity in Europe, it is to know exactly what France is doing in order to rebuild her strength. No full description of it exists in print; it is by personal inquiry alone that the elements of the tale can be scraped together. The following details have been collected by that means, from several sources: they are, of course, most incomplete; but, so far as they extend, they are correct. Their publication cannot possibly do harm to France, for the Prussian staff office knows all about them, and a vast deal more besides.

The subject is divisible into many sections; but in order to adopt the simplest plan, it is grouped here into three heads only—Direction, Organization, and Matériel.

The faculty of "direction" is so notable a quality of the French—they are such admirable conductors of great industrial undertakings—they succeed so remarkable in "administration" in nearly all its forms—that a similar capacity might, presumptively, be looked for in the ruling of their army. Their civil government, their railways, their manufactories, their steamships, are ordered with such skill that their military management might, not unreasonably, be expected to exhibit a somewhat analogous ability, and to attain a somewhat parallel success. The methods employed are virtually identical in the two cases, but the same national characteristics which have enabled the French to become so prosperous and so rich have largely aided to disintegrate their material strength; and their fighting power has been enfeebled by the very spirit of official prejudice, of bureaucratic excellencies, of hierarchical despotism, which has contributed to make the fortune of their railway companies.

The unsatisfactory situation of the French army is not, however, a consequence of over admiration only. Routine and red tapism have, it is true, a terrible deal to answer for, but they are not the sole cause of actual deficiencies. The temperament of the race has also helped to generate them; *insouciance*, self confidence, and *chauvinism* have had a share—and not a small one—in producing the break down.

#### THE MAIN CAUSE OF WEAKNESS.

But here lies the main cause of the weakness of the French army; it has no supreme head; it is governed by no vigorous and independent mind; it is directed by no strong initiating genius, by no will capable of beating down the special obstacles of the position. It has long been, and continues still to be, the property of the "bureaux."

The spirit of the officers is far superior, as a whole, to that of the Ministry which presides over them. The majority of the officers have known the humiliation of defeat, and have keenly felt that they must work to wipe it out; a good many of them have struggled, with infinitely more good will than their chiefs, against the crushing pressure of usage and tradition, and have taken seriously to study, regardless of the rooted prejudice which has so long existed amongst the generals against "cossacks" as reading officers are called. The number of new books which they are producing is really wonderful; and that those books are bought and read is proved by the fact that Dumaine, the army publisher, is selling now about twelve times as many volumes as he could get rid of before the war. And many of the writers have attained real excellence. The names of some

of them—of Fay, of Samuel, of Lewal, for instance—have become almost as authoritative on military questions as those of the best known authors in the German and English army.

But they are not all of this progressive class. A large number of them have to contend against a difficulty which follows them through life, and renders it impossible for them to keep pace with the new necessities, which the scientific character of modern war is now imposing on all soldiers—they want early education. The officers who have passed through the military school at St. Cyr are of course well trained for their labor, and they constitute about two thirds of the entire number; but by far the greater portion of the other third are unfit to begin to learn at thirty, the age at which, in ordinary cases, they are promoted from the ranks. To this considerable section of French officers the higher branches of military instruction are inaccessible; as corporals and sergeants they were excellent, but they are altogether unprepared for the intellectual efforts which now attach to military command, and for the new obligations and responsibilities which it creates. And this element of inferiority has largely grown since 1870, from the following cause: A quantity of former non-commissioned officers who had left the army, presented themselves for service as soon as the war broke out, and, in the dearth of qualified officers, were appointed lieutenants, captains, and some of them even majors, in the new regiments which were got together in the departments. To recompense their patriotic zeal, the commission for the revision of grades confirmed the greater part of them as officers after the peace, though generally in lower ranks than they had been temporarily called upon to occupy. The result is that, according to calculations which seem to be admitted everywhere as correct, about one sixth of the present officers of our army have acquired their commissions in this way. There are amongst them some intelligent and clever men; but there is no denying that the great mass of this particular group are ignorant of everything which constitutes an ordinary education; they all can read and write, but there stops the knowledge of a good many of them. It is computed that twenty years must pass before the army will get quite rid of this heavy stock of incapacity.

There is, however, fortunately, a majority of instructed and enlightened men, and it is to them that the army will, in all probability, owe its regeneration. They are full of energy and hope, and sentiment of duty, and are bent on winning back the ancient fame of the French arms. They wisely recognize that, in these days, that result can only be attained by new principles of action, supported by hard work, and they have begun already to set to those around them an example of what a modern officer should be. This very merit, however, produces a new difficulty: for the anxious zeal of these modern soldiers, their longing for progress and reform, in no way correspond with the obstinate obstructive and unresponsive routine of the Ministry of War. The result is, that bitterness and disappointment are slowly growing in their hearts; that a good many of the best men are beginning to feel themselves ill used; and even, which is serious, that something very much like antagonism is vaguely looming in their breast between the earnest innovators who are eager to do everything, and the stolid Ministry which will allow them to do nothing. An example may usefully be given of the sort of difficulties which are arising from this opposition.

Discouragement is a plant which grows fast, and whose fruit ripens quickly: routine is a bad manure for a crop of progress; and as the system of direction now followed in the French army is substantially the same as that which existed before the war, and which was manifestly the main cause of the disasters of France, nobody can pretend that any good result can be obtained by perpetuating it. That direction must be radically changed if France is ever to become really strong again.

#### DEFECTS OF ORGANIZATION.

With a direction such as has been just described, it will surprise no one to be told that organization is defective too; it could not, indeed be otherwise. But the responsibility of its actual insufficiencies does not rest exclusively with the Ministry: the Chamber has some share of it to bear; it exercised at prodigious length its right of examining and modifying the new projects of arrangement; it spent months and years in discussion and debate upon them; it successively adopted three organic military laws, but it was omitted, thus far, all legislation on those to grave points—the Staff Corps and the Intendance. These latter questions were certainly as urgent as all the rest; for nothing came out more clearly from the late war than that both staff and commissariat had utterly broken down; but they remain untouched. The measures actually voted are as follows: The universal Service Law, the Army Organization Bill, and the "loi des cadres," which has lately been the pretext of so much real or fictitious emotion in Germany.

The first of these enactments, the "loi sur le recrutement," dates from July 27, 1872. By it the principle of obligatory service was adopted and made applicable to every citizen between the ages of twenty and forty; the first nine years being passed in the active army and its reserve, and the eleven remaining years in the newly constituted territorial army and its reserve. But as the annual number of new conscripts was by this plan so considerable, that all of them could not be enrolled without creating far too large an army for a peace footing, it was decided that each year's conscripts should be divided into two parts (according to the conscription numbers); that one only of those parts should be called up to the colors for effective service, and that the other part should merely be enrolled for a period varying from six to twelve months, and then should be permanently sent away *en congé*. Furthermore, the expedient of "one-year volunteers" was adopted. Three years have passed since these arrangements became law, but, to this day, the reserve of the active army has not been really constituted, while the territorial army and its reserve have not even been framed on paper; its officers are not selected, and not one single soldier who belongs to it knows the number of his regiment. In reality the new law—which was to change everything, and to convert the whole nation into an army—has produced, thus far, but two new facts, the incorporation for six months of the second portion of the contingent (which, previously, was liberated altogether) and the "one-year volunteers." The object of this latter institution was to enable young men who were studying for liberal professions to escape the risk of falling into the first portion of the contingent, and of being thereby tied to active service for five years, by permitting them, under certain conditions, to pass only twelve months in the army, though continuing, of course, to form part of it in the reserve. The principal of these condi-