



BREAKING POINT  
OF THE  
FRENCH ARMY

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THE NIVELLE OFFENSIVE OF 1917

DAVID MURPHY

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David Murphy



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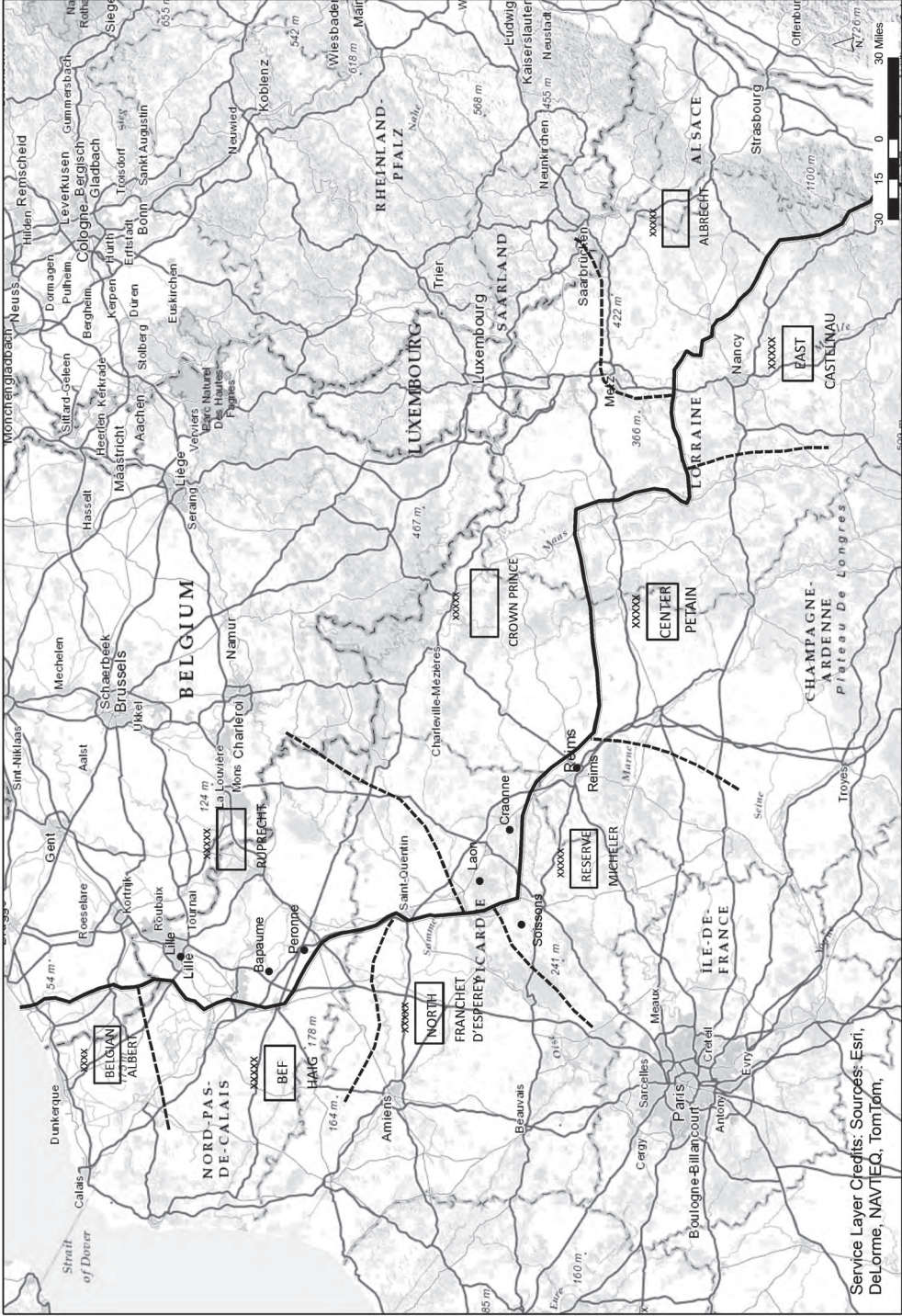
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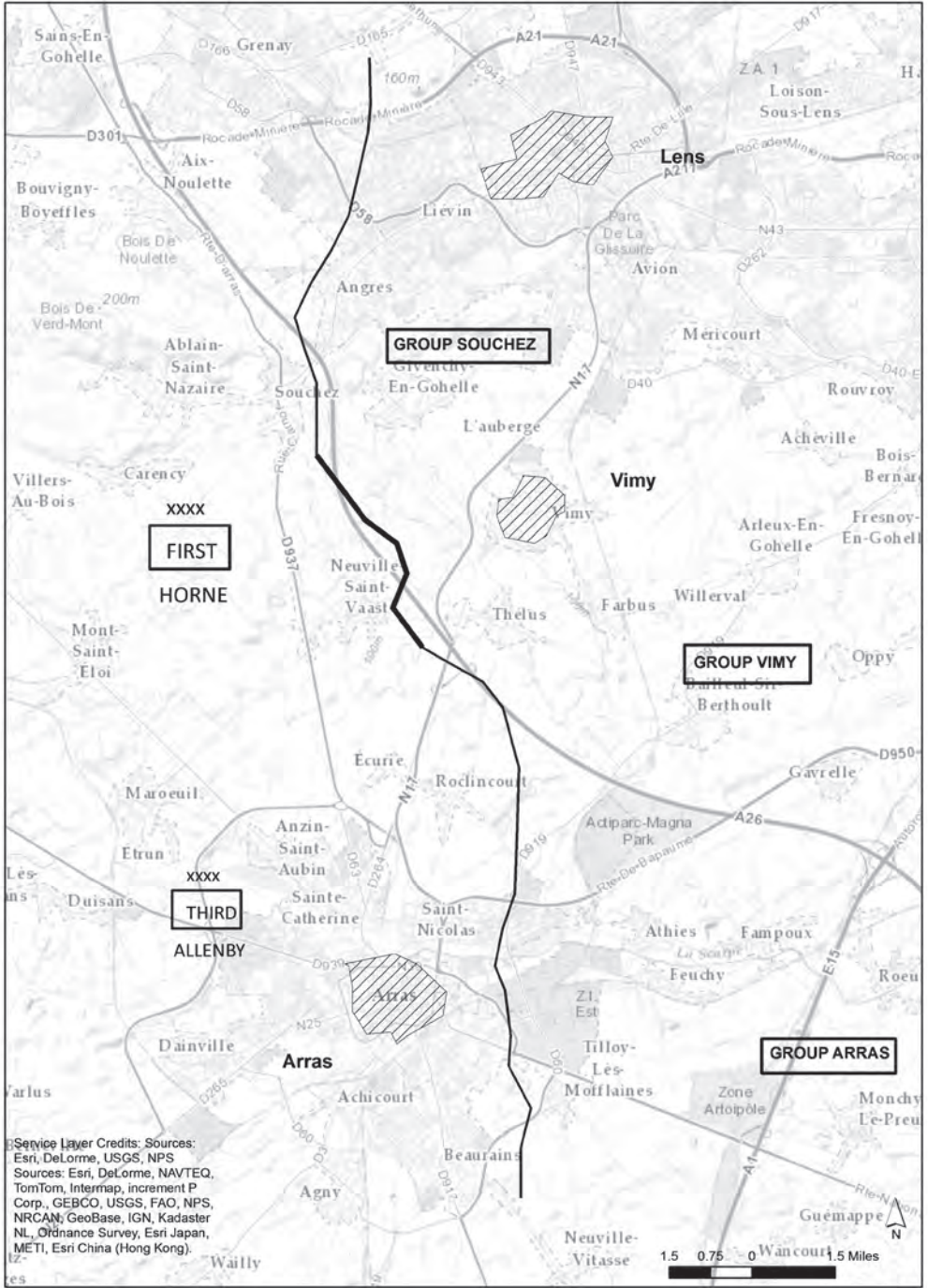
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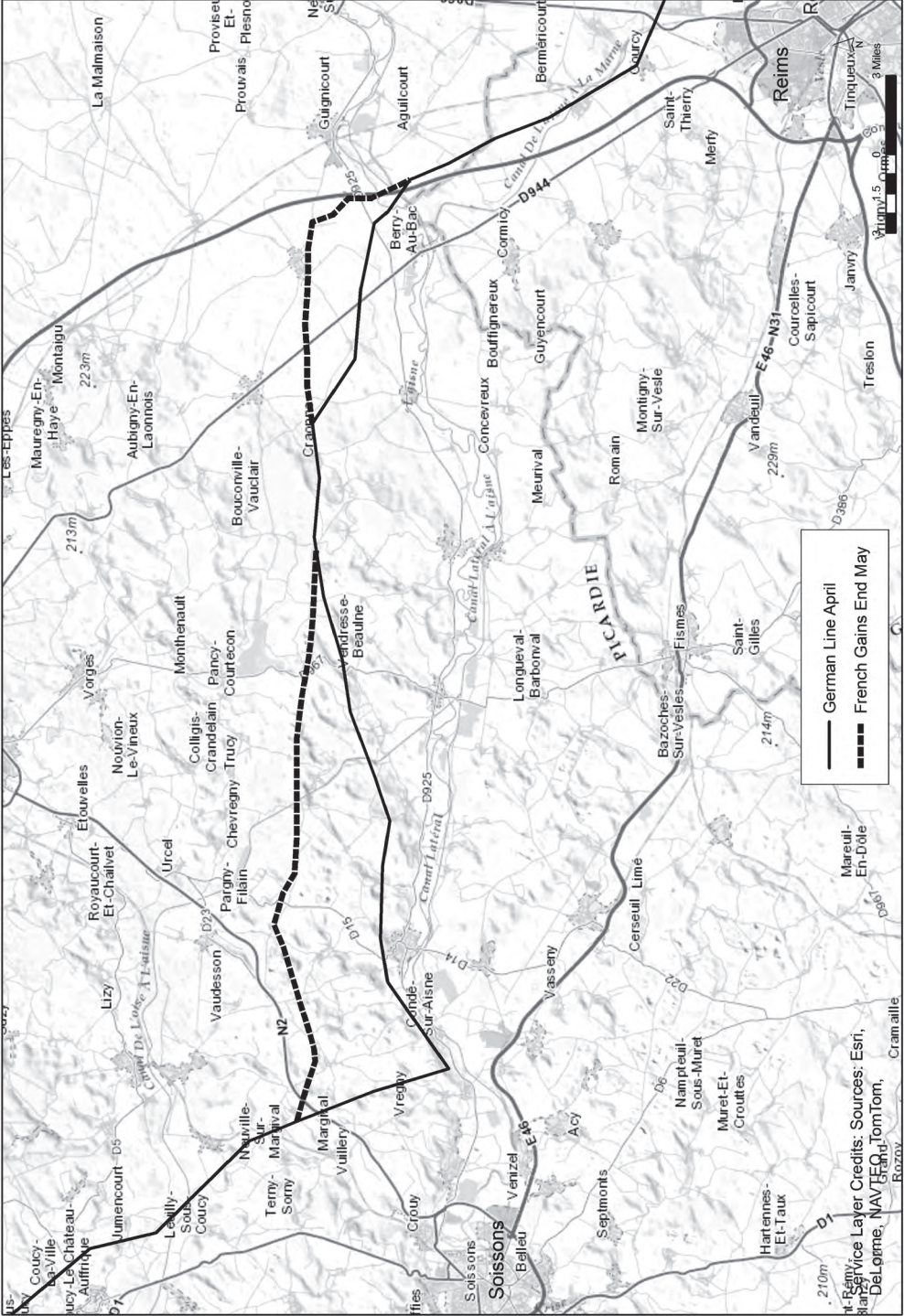


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Map 2. The front line in April 1917 after the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line.



Map 3. The BEF area of operations at Arras and Vimy, April 1917.



Map 4. French territorial gains by the end of the Nivelle Offensive in May 1917.

## Abbreviations

<i>AFGG</i>	<i>Les armées françaises dans la grande guerre</i> (11 tomes, Paris, 1922–37)
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
GAC	Groupe d'armées du centre
GAE	Groupe d'armées de l'est
GAN	Groupe d'armées du nord
GAR	Groupe d'armées de reserve
GQG	Grand Quartier Général
MEBU	Manschafts-Eisen-Beton Unterstand
MG	Machine Gun
SHD	Service Historique de la Défense, Château de Vincennes

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## Introduction

*Nivelle had a plan. It was based on the combination of overwhelming artillery support and well-prepared infantry attacks which had served him so well at Verdun. And it would succeed in forty-eight hours, or it could be called off. No more Sommes, no more Verduns.<sup>1</sup>*

On 14 July 1919 a grand victory parade took place in Paris. On the first Bastille Day since the end of the war, the people of France lined the Champs d'Elysees and the streets around the Arc de Triomphe. Parisians turned out in force while thousands travelled by train from around France to be present to mark the victory over the Central Powers and also to commemorate France's great sacrifices in the war. Planning for the event was not without its problems. Tragically, the French air ace Jean Navarre was killed on 10 April while practising to fly through the Arc as part of the parade.<sup>2</sup> In the final run-up to the parade, some territorial troops arrived in shabby uniforms and had to be hastily re-equipped at the last minute. During the night of 13/14 July a memorial cenotaph became stuck under the Arc itself and had to be freed by a unit of sweating army engineers. Also, members of the public invaded the seating reserved for dignitaries and had to be dislodged during the night by police, backed up by cavalry.

On 14 July the parade itself went ahead without any major hitch. A three-hour-long procession of troops passed through the Arc de Triomphe. They were led by a group of the war wounded and 'mutilés' in their wheelchairs, followed by Marshals Foch and Joffre, and Pétain leading army units; contingents from the other Allied nations also participated. The celebrations continued for the rest of the day with joyous crowds gathering in the squares and open areas of Paris.

There had also been some political 'unpleasantness' before the event. Field Marshal Haig had to be persuaded to attend, while General Diaz, the

senior Italian general, was not present. Question marks hung over some of the French generals and invitations were not certain. Maréchal Joffre, for example, whose star had by now definitely faded, was initially not invited and when he finally was, questions arose as to where he should be in the parade. In general, however, even senior French officers whose wartime record was far from glorious were invited to attend.

One notable exception was General Robert Nivelle, who was commanding French forces in North Africa at the time. Nivelle was specifically excluded and instead supervised a parade in Algeria. For Nivelle, this course of events must have seemed hard to believe. Just a few short years previously, he had been commander-in-chief of the French field armies. During late 1916 and early 1917 he had enjoyed huge public acclaim and had been a darling of the press. For a period of some months he held sway in military matters and associated with the premiers of both France and Britain and senior political figures from both governments. Senior generals within his own army, his former superiors, were his subordinates. And in 1917 he had a plan to win the war. Now, as victory was being celebrated in Paris, he had been relegated to command of a military backwater, removed from the centre of military life and political power. In 1917 Nivelle's career had been soaring like a meteor. Now he had crashed to earth. How had this come to pass?

On taking command of the French field armies in December 1916, General Robert Nivelle exuded total confidence to all who met him. His staff officers, the press, French and British politicians and Allied military commanders all found him energetic and plausible. Having revised French offensive plans for 1917, he pressed home his ideas at planning meetings and promised his listeners a 'splendid harvest of glory for the British and French armies'.<sup>3</sup>

For some, Nivelle was simply too plausible and his promises seemed too good to be true. General Lyautey and Paul Painlevé, who had both served as minister for war during Nivelle's term as the French *generalissimo*, were not convinced. Fellow generals, including Pétain, urged caution and doubted that the battlefield conditions would allow for the results Nivelle expected. Their respective doubts were all shown to be well founded. Rather than a stunning victory, Nivelle's offensive resulted in only modest gains in exchange for significant losses.

Yet the French political-military system served to enable Nivelle and his plans. Having presented him to the French nation as a military genius who would win the war, politicians and fellow generals lacked the resolve to remove Nivelle before the damage was done. Their collective lack of resolve facilitated a military failure at a time when France could not endure yet another reverse on the battlefield. The resulting collapse in army morale led to the ‘mutinies of 1917’, while public discontent grew. By the summer of 1917 France was in crisis. Dropping out of the war became a distinct possibility. As the American historian James L. Stokesbury put it, Nivelle claimed that he was going to win the war and ‘he very nearly did – for Germany’.<sup>4</sup>

Nivelle and his failed offensive are often dealt with only briefly by French and British historians. It is as though the memory is still too painful to discuss. While First World War generals hardly covered themselves in glory, least of all on the Western Front, Nivelle is seen as a particularly poor example of generalship. There is some justification for this. His offensive plans for 1917 were hugely ambitious and made no allowances for the difficult terrain over which he planned to attack. In his planning process, he neglected some of the most basic principles of war, not least in terms of operational security. In some ways, however, it could be argued that Nivelle was no worse than many French generals of the war and, in some cases, he was much better.

Why then did the failure of his plans have such drastic consequences? At a fundamental level, the impact of the failure was due to the timing of the offensive. By the spring of 1917 it was only reasonable for French soldiers, the government and the French public to expect that their generals had learned something since 1914. The failure of Nivelle’s offensive was dramatic proof that this was not the case. It seemed that the French army was caught in a cycle of costly offensives that must eventually destroy it. The sheer futility of these offensives drove the French army beyond its breaking point. As Pétain later put it, ‘they have ruined the heart of the French soldier’.<sup>5</sup>

If Nivelle’s failure highlighted the dysfunctional relationship between the French government, the army and the French people, it also illustrated flaws in the relationship between Britain and France. Nivelle allowed himself to be drawn into an intrigue to limit the power of Field Marshal Haig, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). These political

manoeuvrings soured the relationship between the British government and the Allied commander and his generals. In the wider strategic context of early 1917, these increased tensions could not have been more poorly timed. Russia was tottering, while the Allies' search for strategic alternatives in other theatres such as Salonika was bringing no real success. All of this came against a backdrop of an increasingly effective campaign by German U-boats. America's entry into the war in April 1917 brought no immediate relief to the Allied armies bogged down on the Western Front and elsewhere.

In every respect, Nivelle had timed his offensive at a time when only the victory that he promised would have been acceptable. His failure merely threw light on the flaws within France and also on the strategic problems faced by the Allies. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, the renowned historian of the French army, has pointed out that Nivelle is the only Allied general to have a Western Front battle named after him.<sup>6</sup> This is an entirely justified distinction. There may be some extenuating factors, and Nivelle was enabled in his behaviour by a whole cast of characters, but the ultimate call to go ahead with the offensive was his. French historians such as Denis Rolland and Nicholas Offenstadt have made considerable efforts to re-examine his actions and psychology, yet Nivelle remains one of the most contentious figures of the First World War, especially within France. It seems unlikely that this will change in the near future.



## Chapter 1

# The French Army, 1914–17

*So it was with the Austrians, the Belgians, the English, the Russians, the Turks and then the Italians. In a single week, twenty million men, busy with their lives and loves, with making money and planning a future, received the order to stop everything to go and kill other men.<sup>1</sup>*

**B**y the eve of the Nivelle Offensive the French army had already suffered hugely since the outbreak of war in 1914. From the opening operations of the war, the French army had consistently suffered large numbers of casualties and by late 1916 it had already suffered over a million killed, wounded or missing. Its army commanders seemed rooted in a pre-war doctrine of the offensive and thousands of young lives were squandered in a series of futile assaults throughout 1914, 1915 and 1916. During 1916 the French not only endured the German onslaught during the Battle of Verdun, but also contributed troops to the Somme Offensive. On taking command in December 1916, General Robert Nivelle seemed to promise a fresh approach and the hope of victory. Ultimately, he would push the damaged French army beyond its breaking point.<sup>2</sup>

The seeds of France's military difficulties during the First World War were firmly rooted in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1. The French army's performance in that war was little short of a shambles. While there were moments of undoubted heroism, the army emerged with its reputation badly tarnished. In terms of preparation and performance, it was found to be badly wanting at all levels. Its senior commanders performed poorly, while the logistics of the various field forces were a mess. Command and control was shambolic and this resulted in confusion and defeat on the battlefield. An official report on the debacle of 1870–1 later stated, 'We were beaten by the absence of preparation, organisation and direction, and by the small number of our soldiers more than by the arms of our enemies.'<sup>3</sup> The French

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army had simply proved that it was not fit for purpose. In the decades that followed, successive administrations applied themselves to military reform, while at the same time the French nation engaged in a conversation as to the role of the army in French society and politics.

At the military level, the shortcomings of the army during the war of 1870–1 seemed somewhat obvious. The means by which France's military could be made fit for modern war were less obvious, however. At the most basic level, a debate began as to how the army of the Third Republic should be organised. The debate centred on whether it should be a professional force of long-term, career soldiers or a large conscript army that would reflect the broad character of the French nation, enshrining the political ethos of the Third Republic. This broad debate continued up to 1911, the year of the Moroccan Crisis, without any real resolution. In the immediate aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, the general consensus was that France's military should be composed of professional soldiers with officers drawn from the aristocracy, gentry and bourgeoisie. This trend was reflected in the government's legislation for the reform of the army that was drawn up between 1871 and 1875, and the military gradually returned to a position of prominence and popularity in French society.

By the late 1880s, however, there were causes for concern. Liberals and members of the extreme left grew increasingly anxious at the growing militarism within French society. Sections of the national press seemed to pander to a military agenda and the dangers of this trend came to the fore during a series of scandals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

The Boulanger Affair of the late 1880s confirmed many of the fears of the anti-military faction. General Georges Boulanger was the virtual personification of anti-German aggressiveness, while also possessing huge political ambition. It is testament to his political influence during the 1880s that he was later claimed by members of both the extreme left and the extreme right in French politics. A distinguished veteran of the Franco-Prussian War, Boulanger was appointed as Minister of War in 1886, during the premiership of Charles de Freycinet. He immediately embarked upon a series of army reforms, including the adaptation of the Lebel rifle, the first-ever military service rifle to use smokeless powder. During 1887, however,

Boulangier engaged in a series of provocations against Germany, including building new military emplacements near the border at Belfort and banning the exporting of horses to Germany. The new administration of Maurice Rouvier viewed him as a risk and an embarrassment and Boulangier was sacked in May 1887. This dismissal seemed actually to increase Boulangier's popularity and the cult of 'Boulangisme' was born. By 1889 he enjoyed huge popular support and was elected as deputy for Paris with an enormous majority. Supported by an odd mix of leftists, Republicans, conservatives and (secretly) royalists, he seemed set to become the next prime minister of France, or perhaps its next dictator. Within his own faction, he was urged to seize power but his nerve failed and he fled the country, later being charged with conspiracy and treasonable activity. The publication of his secret correspondence with prominent royalists effectively destroyed his popular support. In 1891 he committed suicide in a Brussels cemetery beside the grave of his former mistress. In the aftermath of the Boulangier Affair, there was a backlash against all things military in France. While Boulangier had brought the country to the verge of dictatorship, politicians also resented the cost of maintaining France's professional army, while the public in turn begrudged the institution responsible for conscripting its young men for long periods.<sup>5</sup>

The infamous Dreyfus Affair, which dragged on for twelve years, was equally divisive within French politics and society, if not more so. Once again, the conduct of senior military officers was brought into the public gaze and they were found wanting. In 1894 Captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused of passing artillery secrets to the German military attaché. Dreyfus was tried in secret and found guilty on the basis of circumstantial and doctored evidence. Dismissed the service, he was sent to the notorious penal settlement on Devil's Island. Soon after, a campaign began to have him exonerated, led by Dreyfus' brother and other prominent figures including Émile Zola. In 1896 new information came to light that implicated another officer, Major Ferdinand Esterhazy, who was acquitted on the second day of his court-martial. Once again, the military establishment was implicated in a scandal that was dividing the country. The Dreyfusard camp was convinced that a vast injustice had taken place, while the anti-Dreyfusards believed that the honour of the army had to be protected at all costs. The case became

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increasingly bizarre. In 1898 Major H.J. Henry admitted that he had faked some of the original evidence, before committing suicide. Yet in a re-trial in 1899 Dreyfus was again found guilty and sentenced to a further ten years. Amid a public outcry, he was pardoned and released but the original verdict was not reversed until an appeals trial in 1906. He was eventually reinstated in the army and served during the First World War.<sup>6</sup>

In the aftermath of this scandal, it was obvious that senior officers of the general staff had featured among the now-discredited anti-Dreyfusard camp. As Anthony Clayton, the noted historian of the French army, has commented, ‘the army became decoupled from the political stage, its leaders widely, if wrongly, suspected of planning a coup d’état. Once again, questions were asked about the nature of the army and the choice of its officers.’<sup>7</sup>

This tendency for senior army officers to become embroiled in political matters continually tarnished the army’s reputation and gave various factions within French society cause for concern as to the role of the military within French society. While the army was still dealing with the fallout from the Dreyfus Affair, a further scandal rocked the political establishment and once again a faction within the army played a key role. The ‘Affaire des Fiches’ of 1904 confirmed the worst fears of those on the right in French politics as to the dangers of ‘republicanising’ the army. The national elections of 1902 returned a radical legislature, which formed a government in 1903 under Émile Combes, a reforming leftist prime minister who led the ‘Bloc des Gauches’ faction within parliament. Under this new government, a process was initiated to separate Church and State, the espoused purpose of which was to create a truly republican form of government and thus a truly republican France. The Minister of War, General Louis André, had begun a process of republicanisation within the army as early as 1900 but this accelerated under Combes’ new ministry.

Officers with known Leftist or Dreyfusard sympathies were fast-tracked for promotion. All officers were discouraged from going to mass or having other church associations. To the disgust of many officers, the army was used in the forcible expropriation of church property. More insidiously, André encouraged republican officers to spy on their brother officers and a system of files, or ‘fiches’, was compiled in order to record the activities of officers with church sympathies. André also made use of groups of Freemasons within the