

## **What was the strategic purpose of Plan XVII?**

### **Introduction**

In order to answer the question stated in the heading, I will clarify the prevailing French strategic thinking at the time. I will argue that the Plan XVII was not a French aberration of strategic thought but the logical, and to its time adapted articulation of Napoleonic warfare as formulated by Clausewitz and Jomini. I will show that policy ceded to some extent its supremacy to strategy because in a mercantile antagonistic world-view of international relations the aims of war and the aims in war tend to be unlimited and therefore they become one.

### **What were the terminology and the understanding in French strategic thinking at the time?**

In order to limit the still existing confusion in terminology of strategic thinking, I will summarize, as a common reference point, the shared understanding of the French strategic thinking at the time when the Plan XVII was forged.

In paraphrasing and citing Carl von Clausewitz extensively, Marshal Foch recognizes in the Napoleonic wars the articulation of modern warfare.<sup>1</sup> Adhering to the world-view of antagonistic realism, states struggle selfishly for resources and world-riches. Furthermore, this predominant mercantilist struggle aims for the amassing of national income at the expense of other states in order to satisfy the own people's growing needs. Additionally, war is seen as a means to increase national income. Consequently, war is of national interest and capable of accumulating national power in particular. As proof of the validity of his world-view, Foch mentions Germany's annexation of Alsace-Lorraine.<sup>2</sup> With this world-view, French independence could be guaranteed only if German independence and the grasp for world-power were curtailed.<sup>3</sup> Foch adds that in a time of armed struggle for vital national interest,

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<sup>1</sup> Foch (1996), p. 114-141

<sup>2</sup> Foch (1996), p. 127-129

<sup>3</sup> Stevenson (1982), p. 212

war will demand utmost effort of the whole nation.<sup>4</sup> In order to survive such a struggle, the nation has to mobilize all its material and moral strength. Consequently, Foch's outlook on future war is that it would be national in its character.<sup>5</sup> The government is responsible for securing vital national interests and therefore sets political aims of war.<sup>6</sup> However, future war would be in its formulation a war of movement producing an effect of shock in hurtling amassed armed forces in superior numbers swiftly against the surprised enemy.<sup>7</sup> Foch concludes that there can be only one aim in such a war: the destruction of the opponent's material and moral means of resistance.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise the enemy would not give in.<sup>9</sup> One has to seek out the enemy's armed forces – his real centre of power – in order to fight and destroy them. To keep the social and economical interruption due to war as brief as possible, one has to direct and engage the armed forces in such a way that leads them as quickly and as certainly as possible to the enemy's centre of power.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, to impose one's will one has to act. According to Foch, to cause the desired effect in war one has to apply force.<sup>11</sup> The sole means that exists for this end is the battle.<sup>12</sup> The one who takes the initiative will be in control of events because it is him who decides when, where, how and why to act. The one who is inactive will be controlled by events. This principle applies on both the strategic and tactical level.<sup>13</sup>

Foch understands strategy as the means for preparation of tactical decisions.<sup>14</sup> This preparation manifests itself in the manoeuvring of forces, known as strategic operations, that aims to stage the battle in the most advantageous conditions.<sup>15</sup> However, it is the battle on the tactical level that ultimately decides victory or defeat.<sup>16</sup> Raoul Castex puts it concisely: 'Without good strategy, the best tactics bring a feeble return; without tactical superiority, the best strategy fails.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> see also Clausewitz (1989), p. 77, 585-586: Clausewitz's description of the tendency of escalation as a feature in the nature of war.

<sup>5</sup> Martel (1996), p. 75 art. 7

<sup>6</sup> Martel (1996), p. 73 art. 1

<sup>7</sup> Foch (1996), p. 117, 439-440

<sup>8</sup> Martel (1996), p. 75 art. 8

<sup>9</sup> Foch (1996), p. 114-115, 129

<sup>10</sup> Foch (1996), p. 135, 428; Martel (1996), p. 73 art. 2-4

<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 75, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Foch (1996), p. 125-126

<sup>13</sup> Foch (1996), p. 430; Martel (1996), p. 74 art. 6.

French strategic thinking reflects without any doubt Jomini's thoughts concerning the advantages in seizing the initiative of manoeuvring. See Jomini (1998), p. 395; Jomini (1994), p. 85

<sup>14</sup> Foch (1996), p. 135

<sup>15</sup> Foch (1996), p. 135, 429

<sup>16</sup> Martel (1996), p. 74 art. 5

<sup>17</sup> Castex (1994), p. 10

The battle is understood as a series of armed encounters and tactical actions that spans a campaign as a whole in which the combined results lead ultimately to the decision – to victory.<sup>18</sup> Foch distinguishes between two kinds of battle: the *bataille-manoeuvre* and the *bataille parallèle*.<sup>19</sup> The former is seen as the way to seize the initiative that will be crowned with success. Whereas the latter is seen as doomed because it is passive in its conception. The two differ in their use of reserves and concentration of forces. The *bataille-manoeuvre* amasses its armed forces in a concentrated main effort on a chosen point in a theatre of operation while leaving feeble forces on other points. Additionally, the commander-in-chief keeps an adequate large and mobile reserve in order to engage it in an opportune moment in a decisive attack. Only this decisive attack is capable of assuring the desired result: the overthrow of the enemy. On the other hand the *bataille parallèle* tries to act everywhere on a extended front in a theatre of operation. It has, therefore, no main effort and is engaged in a battle of attrition. Its reserves are merely used to plug weak spots while not being able to force a decision. Either way, a battle cannot be purely defensive in order to be decisive. A purely defensive battle is led by the side, merely holding on to its positions, that simply keeps warding off the other's offensive onslaught. Without resuming the offensive with a counter-attack as soon as the scales have been tipped to one's own advantage by the initial defensive stance, one would never disorganise and thus destroy the weakened enemy. What is more, without resuming an offensive stance at some time, one would certainly be crushed in the short or long run because the opponent's armed forces, without being pressed by the enemy's seizure of the initiative, would simply recover and repeat their own offensive. Consequently, only the offensive – taken either at the outset or developed out of an initially defensive stance – can deliver victory.<sup>20</sup>

On the tactical level, Foch observes the pre-eminent importance of the ever-increasing firepower on the battlefield.<sup>21</sup> He recognises that even the most ardent troops would not overcome the hail of fire of modern weapons of an organised enemy without adapted tactics. In an attack, the ensuing losses would be too severe and demoralising to attain its objectives.<sup>22</sup> In amassing rifles and artillery and concentrating their fire on a chosen point in

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<sup>18</sup> Foch (1996), p. 428

<sup>19</sup> Foch (1996), p. 445-452

<sup>20</sup> Foch (1996), p. 430; Martel (1996), p. 74 art. 6; Jomini (1994), p. 21, 84-86, 206-207; Foch's comments concerning the defence, the offence, the initiative and the use of reserves are similar to Jomini's explanations; see as well Clausewitz (1989), p. 363-366, 370-371, 598, 600

<sup>21</sup> Foch (1996), p. 501

<sup>22</sup> Foch (1996), p. 515

combat, one would be able to gain the superiority in firepower. This superiority of firepower would support the preparation, the assault and the exploitation of the decisive attack.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, the French strategic thinking at the eve of the First World War signifies the logical conclusion of Jomini's and Clausewitz's interpretation of Napoleonic warfare in age of mercantile nationalism. Far from being extravagant or unsound, French strategic theory simply underlines the advantage of the initiative on the strategic and tactical level. The implications of the increasing firepower in modern battle were neither ignored nor brushed aside, as it is often said, by mere emphasising morale and *furia francese*. Furthermore, Douglas Porch states that 'the Germans, backed by heavy artillery and a well-rehearsed flanking manoeuvre, managed to take their offensive deep into France.'<sup>24</sup> Despite the acknowledgement of supremacy of policy over strategy in theory, the French government accepted the unlimited aim of annihilation of all enemy's means of resistance and thus stood aside for strategy.<sup>25</sup>

### **Which strategic, political and economical considerations shaped the Plan XVII?**

The French main concern about the forthcoming armed struggle with Germany was that it must be short and decisive in order to prevent possible conflagration of the fragile 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic. In contrast with Germany, France, with its ever-increasing material inferiority, had to gain material superiority over Germany before getting involved in an armed struggle. In order to accomplish this, France needed allies. However, even with a British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of promised 150,000 soldiers on the continent, France would merely attain parity in manpower. It was therefore crucial to divide German forces. Threatened by Russia, Germany had to earmark considerable forces to stem a possible invasion on her eastern front thus weakening her strength on the western front. However, for France, the British commitment was less important from the point of view of additional man-power than for British Treasury loans and the supremacy of the Royal Navy at sea. The Royal Navy would not only guarantee the protection of France's Atlantic coast from the sea and safeguard trade and commerce during the war but, at the same time, would deny Germany's trading through naval blockade. Furthermore, French diplomacy and strategic planning had to take into

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<sup>23</sup> Foch (1996), p. 489-517

<sup>24</sup> Porch (1989), p. 375

<sup>25</sup> Joffre (1932), p. 30: M. Fallières, President of the Council of National Defence, stated at the Elysée on January 9, 1912: "We are determined to march straight against the enemy without hesitation, the offensive alone

account British reluctance to commit the BEF if war was only fought in the east of Europe, as well as British guarantees on behalf of Belgium's neutrality. In addition, the time Russia needed to mobilise and deploy her troops had to be taken into consideration.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, one had to consider, according to Marshal Joffre, the possibility that

... the Germans might return to the old von Moltke plan of an immediate offensive directed against the Russians, with the purpose of getting the better of them before they had finished their mobilization, combined with an aggressive defensive temporarily maintained against the French.<sup>27</sup>

Above all, the strategic planning had to consider domestic politics in order to rally the whole nation to support the war effort and to withstand the ultimate test that war represents for the state. The doctrine of the offensive oozes self-assurance of the strong and takes destiny in its own hands. Being in harmony with the predominant French intellectual climate at the time, it was not only a shared ground by both Left and Right but it served as a much needed moral boost for the French military as well.<sup>28</sup> The claim to Alsace-Lorraine which France made known within hours of the outbreak of war has to be seen in the this light because, as D. Stevenson remarks, 'before 1914 Governments and the vast majority of the public had concurred that it would be wrong to start war for the sake of Alsace-Lorraine.'<sup>29</sup> Any way, this claim was of no importance for military operations as long as the strategic thinking was dominated by the idea of annihilation of all enemy's means of resistance.

Despite the obvious military advantage, a pre-emptive offensive through Belgium in advance of a German violation of Belgian neutrality was out of question for the sake of the alliance with the Britain.<sup>30</sup> The Mediterranean as the zone of operation for the French navy and Italian neutrality towards a German-French struggle enabled the French High Command to replace active alpine units with reserve units and transfer active units from Africa, and thus concentrating a maximum of troops in the European theatre of operation facing the sole enemy: Germany.<sup>31</sup> However, one crucial strategic problem still had to be solved. How could the British be committed at the outset? The only sure trigger for the British commitment on France's behalf was a German violation of Belgian neutrality. If Germany seized the initiative against Russia whilst keeping a defensive stance at her western border, France would be

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is suited to the temperament of our soldiers, and it ought to assure us the victory, provided we are willing to consecrate to the effort all our forces without exception."

<sup>26</sup> Joffre (1932), p. 49, 54, 56; Carrias (1960), p. 266

<sup>27</sup> Joffre (1932), p. 20

<sup>28</sup> Gat (2001), p. 384, 440; Carrias (1960), p. 266-268; Porch (1989), p. 369

<sup>29</sup> Stevenson (1982), p. 12, 200

<sup>30</sup> Corvisier (1997), p. 9; Joffre (1932), p 51, 54

forced by treaty to resume the offensive against Germany. This would have left France in the embarrassing situation to appear as the aggressor and might have jeopardised British involvement alongside France. A violation of Belgian neutrality by France might even have driven Belgium and Britain into the hands of the Germans. Consequently, the idea was sound in its logic to encourage Russia to speed up her mobilisation and to attack Germany in the east as soon as possible. This was essential in order to tie down at least five or six German corps while France would resume the offensive against Germany in Luxembourg and Lorraine.<sup>32</sup> Only this combined and concerted effort could prevent Germany from profiting by her interior position in hurtling her masses against Russia and France successively. The Plan XVII represents, therefore, an initial concentration of French armed forces with the broad idea to seize the initiative at the outset in Lorraine and Luxembourg to forestall any German offensive, and to be ready with a considerable reserve to administer the decisive blow against German armed forces with an operational manoeuvre either against an attack coming from Belgium or against an attack coming from Alsace and from the region of Belfort in the case of Germany's violation of Swiss neutrality.<sup>33</sup> This disposition not only covered Paris from a straight blow from the direction of Metz-Toul-Verdun, but apparently left a weak left flank that was prone to be enveloped by German forces through Belgium. It can be suggested, therefore, that the French offensive thinking and the Plan XVII lured Germany into an initial offensive against France and also into the violation of Belgium's neutrality. Consequently, the Plan XVII took all political, economical and strategic matters into consideration and found an apparently convincing solution for a short and decisive war against Germany.

The idea to carry the battle outside the French borders was less of the result of economic consideration – to spare French soil – than the consequence of the idea, so predominant in French strategic thinking, of seizing the initiative.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The Plan XVII is by no means the result of fanaticism or divorce from reality. It is forged in the mould of the predominant world-view and thinking of both intellectual and strategic communities. The Plan XVII reflects not only political, economical and strategic

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<sup>31</sup> Joffre (1932), p. 49-50, 52, 84, 90

<sup>32</sup> Williamson (1989), p. 135; Joffre (1932), p. 23, 51

<sup>33</sup> Martel (1996), p. 56; Lanrezac (1929), p. 67-69; Joffre (1932), p. 42, 45, 67-69, 76-77

<sup>34</sup> Joffre (1932), p. 20, 67f.

considerations, but represents the insight that in war one has to adapt plans according to the ever changing circumstances. Leo Tolstoy states that

No battle...takes place as those who planned it anticipated..... A countless number of free forces (for nowhere is man freer than during a battle, where it is a question of life and death) influence the course taken by the fight, and that course never can be known in advance and never coincides with the direction of any one force.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, the emphasis upon the initiative represents the deep rooted wish of human kind to be in control of events, to master and direct their unfolding.

The Plan XVII was just one of a long series of war plans against Germany which were forged only according to shifting balances of power without any explicitly stated limiting political aims. Therefore, one can suppose that there existed a mutual understanding between French political and military leadership. The understanding that whatever the aims of war against Germany might be, the primary aim must be to destroy the enemy's material and moral forces, or be vanquished. Consequently, there is no reason to state any other aim than annihilation. The aims of war and the aims in war become one. The Plan XVII has, therefore, one sole strategic purpose: the destruction of all enemy's material and moral means of resistance in a short and decisive battle. The annihilation of the enemy's armed forces is the *Leitmotiv* in a war that is thought to be a struggle for national survival. Anything else is done in order to second this aim. The fostering of alliances with foreign states, the forging of the *union sacrée* to rally support for the war effort at home, the passing of legislation concerning conscription and length of military service, the construction of railways, the research and development of strategic thinking and tactics, the abstaining in violation of neutral countries; they all aim at the same purpose: to render the military machine as effective as possible and to be superior in material and moral forces in order to prevail in the future war.

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<sup>35</sup> Tolstoy (1998), p. 1069

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