

**PRELUDE TO THE MARNE:
GENERAL JOFFRE'S MISSION TO RUSSIA (AUGUST, 1913)¹**

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Abstract. *In August 1911, the French General Dubail went to Russia to tighten the relations between France and its ally, in the context of the Moroccan crisis. He was received by the Czar and his top advisors. The Russian Army would take the offensive once the front line troops were in place. It would throw itself against East Prussia on the 16th day. From now on, the Russians too saw the offensive as the sole key to success. In July 1912, it was the Russian superior officers' turn to visit France. General Gilinski, the Army Chief-of-Staff, conversed with General Joffre, the newly designated generalissimo, to whom he promised a Russian offensive the 15th day after the mobilization. In September, the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich, taking leave of his hosts after the maneuvers of Poitou, invited General Joffre to Russia for the grand Russian maneuvers the following year. To accompany him, Joffre chose collaborators from all the armed forces. Joffre did not want to let his action to be dictated to him, even by his allies. Nicholas II accepted the composition of the mission on June 18th, 1913.*

Haunted by the risk of the overrun of French forces by more powerful German armies at the beginning of operations, General Joffre insisted on the necessity of accelerating Russian mobilization to the maximum and launching an offensive as soon as possible with the already operational fraction of the army. This question was vital for France. The invasion of Belgium, said Joffre to Grand Duke Nicholas, had to be considered as the most probable hypothesis. Outside of this fundamental gain, the members of the French mission created or reinforced useful contacts with their Russian comrades. The French influence seemed to grow. However, Joffre also discerned, beyond the exterior expressions of friendship, the existence of a Germanophile party, led by the Minister of War. The future gave reason to Joffre, as the Minister ended by being arrested and judged. Joffre stigmatized also the growing influence of Rasputin, who, it was said, was responsible for naming Sukomlinov and thus, the discredit that resulted for the regime. If Joffre and his companions returned from Russia reassured about the army as a whole, they could also, already, detect, at least among

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¹ Translated from French original text by Peter Yemc.

the most lucid, the first signs of the collapse of the autocracy and the beginnings of the revolution. The officers who accompanied the future "victor of the Marne" were also some of the last French to taste the condemned splendor of the Imperial Court of Russia.

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Following its defeat in 1871, which cost it Alsace and a part of Lorraine, France remained isolated on the European chessboard, while in 1882 and 1883, Bismarck's Germany allied itself with Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Romania under the Triple Alliance. Germany also maintained good relations with the Czarist Empire, in order to guard against a war on two fronts. However, the dismissal of the old chancellor by Wilhelm II and the German *Weltpolitik* had the consequence, at the beginning of the 1890's, of pushing Russia towards France; on April 17, 1892 a military convention was concluded between the two countries. Not only, at the eve of the Great War, did the Franco-Russian alliance remain a pillar of France's foreign policy, but the entire French security system developed itself considerably during the first years of the 20th century. First, there were the assurances given by Italy: in 1902, the southern neighbor promised to remain neutral in case of a Franco-German war. There was then the historic reconciliation with Britain, the great work of Theophile Delcassé, artisan of the Cordial Entente, signed in April 1904. Being allied with both Russia and Britain, France did not miss the opportunity to consolidate the system, driving the two last powers to conclude an accord in 1907: the Triple Entente was built. Less than ten years after the death of Bismarck, his entire system was overwhelmed.

The war against Japan and the revolution of 1905 had again shown the weaknesses of a Russia that was believed until then to be invincible. It was common knowledge that the Russian giant would have to confront some considerable difficulties if there was a European war. Due to the lack of denseness of Russian railroads, their weak output and the shortage of rolling stock, the mobilization and concentration of the army would only be able to be carried out very slowly². On the other hand, a wind of reforms had blown on the armed forces since 1905. The Czar retired the majority of the old veterans of the Russo-Turk War of 1877, and replaced them by more modern officers. His army was trained in foreign schools, notably in France, which does not happen without provoking some resistance among a portion of the officers, filled with pro-Slavic pride. This period of reorganization was characterized above all by the research into perfecting their equipment; even the education of the soldier was made the object of all their efforts. Nonetheless, the doctrine remained vague and oriented towards defense³.

² Maréchal Joffre, *Mémoires*, Paris, 1932, vol. 1, p. 192.

³ Service historique de la Défense (SHD), Vincennes, 1 N 17, Cours du capitaine Langlois à l'école supérieure de Guerre, 1912-1913 (Captain's Langlois Lessons at War Academy).

Now, the French strategies, influenced by the theories of Colonel de Grandmaison, swore by the doctrine of offensive⁴.

In August 1911, the French General Dubail went to Russia to tighten the relations between France and its ally, under the context of the Moroccan crisis. He was received by the Czar and his top advisors. "He gathered that the mobilization and concentration would be activated by every possible means," wrote General Joffre, "and that in any case, we should not wait till the concentration is fully achieved to act." The Russian Army would take the offensive once the front line troops were in place. It would throw itself against East Prussia on the 16th day. From now on, the Russians too saw the offensive as the sole key to success. "It is to the very heart that we attack Germany," affirmed the Czar. "The common objective must be Berlin."⁵ In July 1912, it was the Russian superior officers' turn to visit France. General Gilinski, the Army Chief-of-Staff, conversed with General Joffre, the newly designated generalissimo, to whom he promises a Russian offensive the 15th day after the mobilization. In September, the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich, taking leave of his hosts after the maneuvers of Poitou, invited General Joffre to Russia for the grand Russian maneuvers of the following year⁶.

Without counting the fleet, the Russian Army in 1913 consisted of a strength of 1,300,000 men, a number greater than all the soldiers of the other armies of the Triple Alliance combined, even with the Romanian army included. The number of qualified reservists approached four million men. The militia, comparable to the French regional defense, consisted of 900,000 men. More than eight million men were old enough to carry arms, though they were not yet trained. Twenty-seven army corps were stationed in Europe, three in the Caucasus, two in Turkistan and five and a half in Siberia⁷.

Composition of the Mission

To accompany him, Joffre chose collaborators from all the armed forces; Generals d'Amade (commanding the 6th Army Corps in Châlons-sur-Marne), Dor de Lastours (commanding the 3rd Cavalry Division), Desaleux (Governor of Maubeuge), Hély d'Oissel (member of the Technical Committee of the General Staff), Delarue (Inspector of the Engineers); Colonel Berthelot of the 94th Infantry

⁴ See *Dressage de l'Infanterie en vue du combat offensif*, Paris-Nancy, 1906, 3^d éd. 1908. – *Deux Conférences faites aux officiers de l'état-major de l'armée (février 1911). La Notion de sûreté et l'engagement des grandes unités*, Paris-Nancy, 1911. – See also Akavia Gideon Joseph, *Decisive Victory and Correct Doctrine: Cults in French Military Thought before 1914, a Rereating of Ardant du Picq, Ferdinand Foch and Loyzeay (sic) de Grandmaison*, Stanford, 1993. – Howard Michael, 'Men against Fire: the Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914' in Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig & Felix Gilbert (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton, 1986, pp. 510-526. – Cochet François & Porte Rémy, *Dictionnaire de la Grande Guerre*, Paris, 2008, p. 491 & 774-776. – Snyder John, *The Ideology of Offensive: Military Decision-Making and the Disasters of 1914*, Ithaca-Londres, 1984. – Van Evera Stephen, 'The Cult of the Offensive', *International Security*, summer 1984, vol. 9, n° 1, pp. 58-107.

⁵ Joffre, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 26-27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 129-131.

⁷ SHD, Langlois, *op. cit.*

Regiment from Bar-le-Duc; Lieutenant-colonels d'Armau de Pouydraguin (Head of the Office of Transportation), Dupont (Head of the 2nd Bureau – Intelligence Service), Weygand (of the 5th Regiment of Hussars, sent to the Center for Higher Military Studies), and Dumesnil (Artillery Commander of the 18th Army Corps in Bordeaux); Commanders Renouard and Bel (from the General Staff); and Captains Wibratte (from the General Staff, specifically the War Ministry) and Langlois (from the 2nd Bureau of the General Staff)⁸. In addition, the Grand Duke Serge, director of the Russian Artillery, jealous of his independence in relation to that of Grand Duke Nicholas, who had a hand in military affairs, had personally invited General Châtelain, the Artillery Inspector. Other Russian personalities had insisted that General de Castelnau make the trip. Their request was not met: Joffre did not want to let his action to be dictated to him, even by his allies⁹. Nicholas II accepted the composition of the mission on June 18th, 1913.

Very few non-commissioned officers or troops made the trip. It is advisable to note the presence of the interpreters: Brigadier (corporal) Rebotier, from the 4th Artillery Regiment, appointed orderly to General Joffre because he possessed a thorough understanding of the Russian language¹⁰; also corporal-secretary Landru, from the 22nd Section of Clerks and Military Administration, named adjunct to Captain Langlois, charged with the responsibility of the details of the mission¹¹. Russian orderlies would be furnished for all the French officers.

Presentations

The members of the mission, all carrying diplomatic passports, traveled in civilian clothes by the *North Express* to Berlin via Cologne, but without any stops. They crossed the Russian border the night of August 2nd. The welcoming committee comprised General Voronine, commanding the 13th Infantry Division; Colonel Kotzebué, aide-de-camp of Grand Duke Nicolas; Marquis de Laguiche, the French military attaché and his adjunct, Commander Wehrlin.

The next day, after his arrival to the camp of Krasnoie-Selo, where the French were received at the train station with military honors, Joffre conversed at length with Nicholas Nikolayevich and presented to him the other members of the mission. Then, the French and Russian officers dined together at the table of the Grand Duke, a very influential and competent relative of the Czar. Everyone recognized in him a firm and elevated character. One would fear the severity with which he demanded that each fulfills his task to the best of his ability. Even those who were displeased by this severity could hardly prevent themselves from conceding that he legitimized himself by the passionate love he had for military affairs, and by the manner with which he gave of himself and fulfilled his functions. At the age of 57, the appointed generalissimo of the Russian armies

⁸ The author of a lecture on the Russian Army at the War Academy during the years 1912-1913, from which we have drawn a certain number of pieces of information.

⁹ SHD, 1 N 17, Military attaché in Russia to War Office (Ministère de la Guerre), June 1st, 1913.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1 N 17, War Office to colonel of the 4th AR, July 8th, 1913.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1 N 17, War Office to commander of the 22^c section de commis, July 8th, 1913.

was the eldest son of Grand Duke Nicholas, who commanded at the head of the Imperial Armies engaged in the war against the Turks (1877-1878), and the nephew of the Czar Alexander II. He married the Grand Duchess Anastasia, daughter of King Nicolas I of Montenegro. An officer in the General Staff, commanding the Regiment of the Guard (1877), he was then aide-de-camp and Inspector General of the Cavalry (1895-1905), Commander-in-Chief of the military sector of St. Petersburg and finally President of the National Defense Council (1905-1908).

It was he who directed the maneuvers of the Russian Army. The troops, shut up in the barracks all winter, were at the Krasnoïe-Selo camp for the summer and remained there until the first frosts. Each summer was dedicated to overall education, then to maneuvers in combined detachments and finally to large maneuvers which brought together 40,000 men. The soldiers lived in makeshift quarters equipped with a chapel and the officers, who spent themselves four to five months per year at the camp, lived in barracks of rudimentary comfort. Both soldiers and officers bivouacked on the ground during the maneuvers. On the other hand, once they returned to the garrison, the officers made themselves comfortable. One could cite the example of one of the heroes of the Manchurian War, known to share the life of the troops at the front – even in the trenches occasionally – and who, then, presided over reviews sitting comfortably in a coach in which he no longer deigned to go out. The French officers took several days to familiarize themselves with the stark contrasts of the Russian Army, which they found from high to low within the hierarchy. They noted quickly how difficult it was to make a well-balanced judgment about this enormous force.

During the afternoon of August 3, the French took a special train to St. Petersburg, where they had, reserved for them in luxury hotels, rooms with views over the Nevski Perspective. The rest of the day was dedicated to courtesy visits to different ministers or to discovering the town. That evening, the French ambassador offered them a lavish dinner attended also by the eleven Russian officers attached to the mission, the President of the Council, the Ministers of the Navy and War, as well as several military personalities¹². The 4th of August, in the morning, the members of the mission left the capital by a special train before boarding a yacht, which took them to Peterhof. This ‘Stone Court’ (*Petrodvorets*), along the Gulf of Finland, magnificent in its architecture and landscaping from the 18th century, constituted one of the summer residences of the Emperor, thirty kilometers from the capital. Seven gardens and more than twenty palaces and pavilions were spread over several natural terraces. The French traveled quickly through the gardens. While protected by high walls, the immense properties were also guarded by mounted Cossacks, who actively patrolled the alleys.

It was at Peterhof that Nicholas II gave his first ceremonial audience to the representatives of the allied nation¹³. The master of ceremonies introduced the guests of his sovereign in a great square salon where the walls were decorated with a multitude of small portraits. The officers, arranged on order of rank and

¹² *Le Temps*, August 4th, 1913.

¹³ *Ibid.*, August 5th, 1913.

seniority, waited a long moment while the Czar conversed first with the French generalissimo. Suddenly, the two men appeared. Joffre presented his companions one after another. Nicholas II had a nice word – in French, of course – for each of them. He inquired about their garrison and their weapons.

“With small height and a soft, dreamy face,” writes Weygand, “Czar Nicholas II was hit all of a sudden by an expression of great kindness. He wore a very simple uniform with few decorations. Like many monarchs, he was timid. When he was embarrassed, he acknowledged the discomfort with a gesture of his right hand lifting to his shoulder the buckle of his belt. During the first part of our stay in Russia, we let ourselves hope that we would be presented to the Empress who would have appeared accompanied by the Czarevich. This presentation was set back several times, for diverse reasons, but relying always on the health of the young prince. It never took place. The nerve sickness from which they said the Empress suffered, and the affliction from which her son suffered were sufficient reasons to explain this absence, of which we had the distinct feeling it was advisable to speak as little as possible.”¹⁴

The ceremony finishes around 11 o'clock when the Emperor retired. After the light meal, the guests of the Czar went to the islet of Zaiatchi (of the Hares) surrounded by the Great Neva and the Canal of Kronwerk. They entered the fortress, *Peter and Paul*, through St. Peter's door, which was adorned with a bicephalous eagle. It was there that, in 1703, Peter I the Great decided to found the splendid city of St. Petersburg. A part of the building, the Troubetskoï bastion, housed the political prison where the Czarevich Alexis, son of Peter I, Dostoyevsky, Bakunine and Gorky, among others, had been 'guests'. The French respectfully entered the hall, the work of the Italian architect Trezzini, and the splendors of the orthodoxy burst into their eyes. But they did not come as tourists. Like General Dubail and his retinue in 1911, they went to bow before the tomb of Alexander III, promoter of the alliance with France. Joffre placed a wreath. The sarcophagus of the Czar was neighbor to those of other great personalities in Russian history: Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Nicolas I, with their tombs nearly all in white marble (with imperial eagles of gilded bronze at the corners of the sovereigns'). Into the stone of the sepulcher of Alexander III was sealed a golden wreath of laurels, offered by President of the French Republic Félix Faure in 1897, and a golden sword, a gift from his successor Émile Loubet in 1902.

Through Contact with the Russian Officers

The French continued their visits, each time within the military circles. Officers had the chance to distribute a good portion of the 300 personal cards that the government had demanded them to bring. They noted within the Russian officer corps important contrasts, which stemmed from their method of recruitment. The enormous size of the army obligated them to train a considerable number of officers, from which they could choose without difficulty. The antimilitarist and

¹⁴ Weygand General Maxime, *Mémoires. Idéal vécu*, Paris, 1953, vol. 1, pp. 48-50.

socialist feelings widespread among the students, the new attraction of the best elements to business or industry and the numeric weakness of the elites themselves explained the mediocre level of many of the cadets. How was it possible to create under these conditions, homogenous officer corps, even if the vast majority of the officers recruited among the sons of the small landed proprietors? If they were not nobles, the cadets saw themselves granted personal nobility with their rank of non-commissioned officer. The rank of general conferred on them hereditary nobility.

The image of the French officers held by the cadets of the Czar's army became modified after these first contacts. Like most of the French officers, each one of the cadets fed off of a certain number of stereotypes inherited from the contemplation of the type of men that one could meet at that time in Paris, in the thermal cities or on the Riviera (Côte d'Azur). The Russians holding these views only represented a fraction of the wealthiest of the caste. It was these lucky ones who spent two months out of the year in France looking for the distractions, which were missing in Russia, and compensated themselves for the austerity of life that they had to endure the rest of the year. Still, most of the Russian officers were far from taking the big train (back to France). Their colleagues working in the country immediately warn the visitors: they had not to forge their opinions based on the lavish receptions offered by their hosts. In order to honor their allies, the Russians spent without care, knowing full well that the rubles exhausted for the brilliant galas would be missed at the end of the month. Like all those who had the opportunity to be admitted into the private lives of the Russian officers, the companions of Joffre were shocked by the extreme simplicity of their existence. The noisy feasts of Sobranie (the Officers' Club) constituted only one sort of compensation for the mediocrity of everyday life. This was why Paris paid for part of the expenses of the trip.

That evening, it was the French military attaché who received the guests of the Czar. "The first impressions of the members of the mission were the best," affirmed *Le Temps*. "The Russian cordiality touched them greatly. The journals publish extremely sympathetic articles. The *Novoie Vremia*, in particular, says that the whole Russian nation joins in the words and wishes of the Grand Duke."¹⁵

Opening of the Maneuvers

The French officers return to Krasnoie-Selo on the 5th of August. Their hosts showed them the immense camp, which contained a vast and varied exercise terrain. They attended the *Zaria* (Retreat). This ceremony lasted many long hours. It marked, with the review of the Emperor, the opening of the period of the maneuvers that were to take place during the trip. Mounted on a horse, the Czar slowly passed in front of the troops. The soldiers lined up for as far as the eye was able to see. An important chief of staff, joined by some members of the imperial family and other personalities, accompanied the sovereign for some distance. One noted, in

¹⁵ *Le Temps*, August 8th, 1913.

particular, the presence of the Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana, each one an honorary regimental colonel. The French mission received the honor of following the review from the front row. The Russians demanded that the French absolutely remain in this place. They quickly understood the pertinence of this advice.

“We were subject,” writes Weygand, “to a veritable assault from behind by a part of a small German mission, which had arrived the same time as our own. The Russians acted as vigilant guards to defend us against the invaders and permit us to remain grouped behind General Joffre, who rode next to Grand Duke Nicolas.”¹⁶

Several times during the trip, German and French officers would engage in small exchanges of bittersweet remarks, even if the greatest courtesy would preside over their relations. It was a delegation of the 8th Prussian Hussars, come to congratulate the Czar on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his nomination as honorary colonel of the Regiment¹⁷. The presence of officers of the *Kaiser* at the maneuvers was not surprising: despite the Franco-Russian alliance, William II and his cousin Nicholas II maintained, in effect, friendly relations. Moreover, German officers attended maneuvers of the French army and vice versa. However, the *Temps* correspondent notes: “It is not pure coincidence that brought the delegation of Prussian Hussars at the moment of the General Joffre’s trip to Russia. Last year, it was Port-Baltic (Cronstadt) that had the object to thwart the effect produced by the visit of Mr. Poincaré [new President of the French Republic]. As it was told to me by a high personality whom I cannot name, Berlin does not miss an opportunity to try to compromise the Russians in the eyes of their allies.”¹⁸

At Krasnoie-Selo, the Czar liked to feel the pulse of his army. “There was, during the entire duration of the review, a cheer that went on, that reemerged at the moment when it appeared to die down, all like a new wave which forms just as the preceding one crashes on the shore,” remembered Weygand¹⁹. The outdoor prayer, which followed the review, called the blessing of Christ on the maneuvers. All the French were strongly impressed by the solemn character of this oration, presided by the sovereign himself, surrounded by hundreds of officers, priests and celebrities. Yet, many of them, according to Weygand, could not help asking themselves:

“This religion, of which the Czar was the head, to which the people subjected and attached themselves, appeared, as with the devotion of these soldiers toward the imperial family, two solid seats of the Russian throne. But what was there behind this façade?”²⁰

The diplomat Jules-François Blondel left us an account capturing this evening, which, a few months later, would seem to him already several hundreds of years old.

“That evening, the whole army was arranged before us at the edge of a wood. The group of guests stands near a narrow hillock on which the Emperor was going to take his place, between two sentinels, bayonets on their guns. Then we see,

¹⁶ Weygand, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vol 1, p. 54.

¹⁸ *Le Temps*, August 8th, 1913.

¹⁹ Weygand, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

advancing towards Nicholas II, an old non-commissioned officer, charged with reciting the prayer. The Czar mumbles the responses. It was not hard to see that this monarch was all-powerful, with the spiritual just as with the temporal. An incessant agitation brings his trembling hands to his face, his neck, his shoulders, to his back, the buckle of his belt, the buttons of his uniform. With the air of good and evil in front of him, how could a feeling of compassion not be felt? But the short prayer ends, the malaise dissipates, the Emperor mounts his horse. Following an escort including Joffre and the officers of his mission, he rides at the head of the troops. A cheer rises and continues as far as the Emperor's group progresses. This escapes our view, the swollen shout in an immense clamor. In writing these lines, I can hear again a long cheer, first thin, hesitant, then rolling like a rumble of thunder in the clouds of dust raised by the cavalry: I can see again the waning summer twilight descend on this moving plain, and the darkened edge of the forest."²¹

The end of that day stayed memorable as well because of the "gigantic banquet" offered to the French mission by the members of the St. Petersburg Officers Club. "This edifice at the base of the imperial casket was intended to be big enough so that any officer arriving from his garrison could find lodging there during his stay in the capital." General Joffre or Colonel Berthelot, known for their appetites, were able to give their full effort. In this chapter, recounted Blondel, "I remember first of a long table occupying a large room and covered with flowers, bottles and provisions. How many meters of sturgeon, kilos of caviar, liters of vodka, could these trestles support? Only as hors-d'oeuvres even. In an immense hall the feast awaited us, but I unfortunately do not remember the menu."²² It was pantagruelic in any case, not to be doubted, and left in Berthelot an unforgettable memory. This is evidenced by the remarks of Joseph Lionel, one of his officers in the 53rd Reserve Division, in 1915: "He liked to evoke the banquet in which he participated during his mission to Russia in 1913, and the issue that he was nearly the only guest not to have been under the table."²³

The Troops during Summer Maneuvers

The morning of August 7th, the French witnessed, in the company of the Czar, the review: 68 battalions, 70 squadrons, and 30 batteries were reunited at the camp. Like the previous year, the French ambassador, Delcassé, was present, which appeared to be new proof of a Franco-Russian friendship.

"It was remarked, wrote *Le Temps* that, with a special attention, the Czar cares about associating the French ambassador with every event given in honor of the French mission. It is thus that Mr. Delcassé was the only ambassador invited to the retreat and the dinner of the 5th, the review and lunches at Krasnoie-Selo the 7th and the military dinner of the 9th."²⁴

²¹ Blondel Jules-François, *Au fil de la Carrière*, Paris, 1960, pp. 44-46.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

²³ Laniel Joseph, *Jours de gloire et jours cruels*, Paris, 1971, pp. 44-46.

²⁴ *Le Temps*, August 10th, 1913.

The guests of the Czar ate lunch under the imperial tent. During the rest of the trip, if any particular festivity was not arranged, the meals would be eaten in this immense wooden barracks, hung with grayish brown cloth with broad bands of color. The multicolored coats of arms and displays decorated the walls. Three or four times during the course of the trip, the Czar came to preside over the table himself. Ordinarily, the personalities or officers of the Emperor's House took it upon themselves to seat the guests, without any idea of protocol. It was therefore possible to choose their neighbor, provided that they did not group themselves between the French. This tent also served as a meeting room. The other officers ate lunch and dinner in the mess hall of each regiment, a building that attracted looks by having a very elegant and much sought-after architecture.

During the afternoon, military courses were organized. The interludes of the theater, operettas and comedies, sometimes in Russian, and some ballets closed an already very full day. The 8th, after some visits to St. Petersburg, the French were allowed to watch live-fire maneuvers. They finally discovered the Russian army, this famous steamroller capable of crushing the German army. They observed, for the first time in great number, these allied soldiers that they had had the occasion to cross in Paris during one of their visits. From the beginning, they noted that it was difficult to follow the exact progress of the maneuvers. The themes were rarely related completely to the observers, and they were often related too late. Their Russian comrades, who were visibly ordered to show them only the well-performed aspects of the exercises, constantly escorted the French.

"In the attacks," wrote Weygand, "the infantry was trained to progress while concealing themselves well under the eyes of the adversary and the Russian officers triumphed when, at the moment when the end of the maneuver was sounded, we saw emerge thousands of men from covers or from fold of a terrain which had seemed empty."²⁵

Le Temps congratulated the increasing frequency of the exchanges of view points between the Russians and French:

"This strengthening operates, in effect, in a continuous manner and it marks, year after year, a greater and greater degree of confidence, regard and humility between the two armies."²⁶

Who was the soldier? Indeed, the strictly Russian element constituted the framework of the troops, but one also found Ukrainians, Polish, Romanians from Bessarabia, soldiers from the Baltics, Armenians, Georgians, Muslims of multiple origins (Azerbaijanis, Chechens, Tartars...), Siberians etc. Only the Finnish were exempted from military service, according to one of the clauses of the Treaty of Friedrikshavn (1809), as well as the most primitive populations of the Empire, such as the Samoyeds. The contingent was called each year to fulfill the needs of the army. It numbered 455,000 men in 1912. The service lasted three years for the infantry and artillery and four years for all the other branches of the armed service. There were numerous cases of exemption. Very often, the service

²⁵ Weygand, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 52.

²⁶ *Le Temps*, August 11th, 1913.

was carried out very far from the home of the recruit. The recruit therefore spent most of his time in the regiment, as passes of leave were very rare. And still, as they married very young in Russia, more than 30% of soldiers have wives, and even children. Most of the soldiers were completely illiterate. The Russian non-commissioned officer, as noted by his French counterpart, possessed the same faults and qualities, indeed slightly improved, as the troops. He could in no way be compared with his French counterpart. This did not prevent him from being a lover of the theater. Each regiment had his troupe.

August 9th, all of the French and a part of their hosts attended artillery exercises at the polygon of Luga. This camp measured 12 kilometers by 10 kilometers. It was bordered by a narrow outlying railroad, marked in squares by subterranean telegraph wires, and punctuated by a series of concrete bunkers, which permitted fire and observation in any direction. There were even moving targets²⁷. The practice of the artillery at that time was to fulfill, with energy, its support role of the infantry and to achieve this by occupying positions near enough to be effective. That evening, Joffre and his entourage were invited to Imperial dinner at Peterhof Palace²⁸.

Cronstadt

The maritime part of the Russian defense was not forgotten, despite the absence of sailors in the French delegation. August 10th was dedicated to a visit to the Cronstadt base. After the capture of the fleet at Port Arthur in 1904, and the disaster of Tsushima the following year, the Russian navy had become the laughing stock of the Western navies. Some heads had still decided to succeed in reconstructing a fleet worthy of its name in several years. It was one of them, Admiral von Essen, adjutant of the Navy Academy in 1880 and commander of the Baltic Fleet since 1908, who welcomed Joffre. It was there, on July 25th, 1891, that the Franco-Russian alliance was sealed aboard the visiting French command ship. At Krasnoie-Gorka, the powerful naval battery situated along the coast south of the harbor, the Russians offered their guests a firing at the sea, directed by Grand Duke Serge. Returning to camp that evening, the French witnessed, just after dinner, a night maneuver that lasted until two in the morning²⁹.

August 11th, there was a trip to the Engineers camp of Oust-Ijora, on the Neva, forty kilometers away: the French observed fortified works, the destruction of secondary fortifications, smoke clouds, and a pontoon bridge. After lunch at the camp, they returned to Krasnoie-Selo. August 12th, a public holiday, was marked by a lunch offered by General Gilinski, Head of the General Staff. Berthelot accompanied Joffre to St. Petersburg, "to address serious affairs with the Head of the Russian Chiefs of Staff"³⁰. The discussions were followed by dinner at the

²⁷ Weygand, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 52.

²⁸ *Le Temps*, August 11th, 1913.

²⁹ Private Archives (Jean-Claude Dubois), Berthelot to Louise Berthelot, his sister-in-law, August 11th, 1913.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

camp. The next day, the Czar inspected the troops arriving from other conscriptions, including those from the regiment of his brother, Grand Duke Mickael. The delegation, invited to the Imperial dinner, attended afterward a gala spectacle given at the camp theater³¹.

The afternoon of August 15th, the French observed brigade maneuvers at war strength around the Choulkovo heights. The next day, there were maneuvers of the Cavalry Corps at Kaporskaia. The Russian cavalry passed as one of the best in the world. It was reputed for its much reduced use of the sword point and for its excessive use of the saber edge during combat. Each one of the guests noted the calm of the Russian horseman, the mastery that he exercised on his mount, and admired particularly the Cossacks, notably those from the Don. These very particular soldiers lived in territory reserved for them, where, in exchange for numerous privileges and an almost complete exemption from taxes, they were forced to follow extremely severe rules in regard to their military service. Each Cossack owned his own horse. The cavalry, outside of its scout role, was employed to defend against infantry and also to attack it. This practice appeared to be a reaction to their misguided use during the war against Japan.

But, were the horsemen effective in a modern war? Weygand doubted it. At the end of the maneuver, he wrote, the regiments of the Guard executed “a cavalcade, incontestably simple. More than a hundred squadrons of cuirassiers, dragoons, light cavalry and Cossacks succeeded in an erratic charge. Mechanically, the movement was well executed. We could not say to what tactical situation it responded. It seemed infantile to us”³². Weygand would be able, without a doubt, to note this reflection – unless he napped – before the new play that was shown to him – or rather inflicted on him – that evening. Division maneuvers took place again near Koltushi on the afternoon of Sunday the 17th. These did not look at all like the other maneuvers.

“One maneuver which was spoken much about before it took place,” wrote Weygand, “and which the entourage of the Emperor would not see happen without a certain apprehension, was to be for the Southern Finnish theater, where the Russians, always considered as oppressors, meet only hostility. Moreover, the path to bring them to the chosen region passed in front of the Putilov factories, where the workers had some rather advanced ideas. The precautions taken for the itinerary that the Czar had taken there and back were truly a model of the style, without speaking of the escort or of the Imperial car. On the two sides of the route and facing the outside, there was a first network of police or men appearing in similar formations, and gamekeepers. On one side or the other of the route, in the fields at varying distances following the terrain, a second rather dense network of infantrymen insured the broader security. Finally, even further still, and in general on the crests that dominate the route, Cossack horsemen exercised their surveillance.

³¹ *Le Temps*, August 15th, 1913.

³² Weygand, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 53-54.

“I had not saved any other memory of that maneuver, which took place on a Sunday with magnificent weather, a day of a spectacle offered by the Finnish villages, wrote Weygand. Around the wooden churches, generally built on small knolls, were grouped women and children all in their national dress. As if to brighten up the sadness of this great flat countryside and to alleviate its dull coloring, their costumes were of varied and bright colors. As for the Imperial security, everything happened as best it could. The evening after the dinner, Prince Troubetskoi, head of the convoy of the Emperor – the special Cossack escort – confides in me his relief to see a day so feared end happily.”³³

The French were very surprised by these precautions, rarely used with the official movements of French personalities. Without a doubt, they were far from measuring, at this date, the problems that stirred up the diversity and complexity of this vast Empire, of which the cohesion still seemed solid, but which in a few years, the progress of revolutionary ideas would render formidable.

The Grand Finale: The Regiments of the Guard in Action

After a free day on August 18th, came the day of feasts and the parade of the famous Preobrajenski Regiment. The Guard was arranged in front of the rest of the army and its troops were themselves arranged according to their seniority. It was a chosen and cherished troupe. The officers were only recruited from the best families. The men were the best in the Empire, with great neatness and in regard to their size and physical condition. But they were but a single troupe in the parade. Grand Duke Nicholas saw to it that the service was carried out rigorously. Weygand remembered above all the performances of the Grand Duchesses’ regiments:

“After the maneuver, the officers, non-commissioned officers, and a good number of the soldiers of these two units were reunited in a large circle, in the center of which appeared the Czar and the two princesses who were wearing the uniforms of their regiments. It was a spectacle touching to notice with what devotion, what fervor of expression, and regard all approached their Emperor and their fragile colonels. The circle narrowed little by little, conversations which seemed in confidence began. Immense provision carts containing sandwiches and drinks were drawn up, [to which] all the great personalities present did their best honors.”³⁴

The dinner offered the evening of the presentation of the Guard passed all which the French had seen up to then: “The term colossal is the only one suitable,” assessed Weygand. After the meal, the diverse regiments of the Guard invited the French officers to their table.

“Following one another, amidst the songs and unchained cheerfulness came cups of hot coffee with sugar and glasses of iced champagne. The Franco-Russian

³³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 52-53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 55.

friendship was the object of the most inflamed toasts. If there had only been toasts that would have been fine. But all of a sudden, after a shock of glasses had broken the goblet in my hand, I feel a mustached and bearded mouth pressing against mine. I shiver again in horror writing this. The remarkable and a little French fashion of manifesting the amity for France confirmed for me that the hour of depart had arrived. It was already very late. But when I wanted to leave, Grand Duke Nicholas barred the door with his big arms while declaring to me that we could not leave our comrades at this early hour. I had to sit down again for two more hours and could only escape when the awaited-for hour of the Gypsies came.”³⁵

The End of the Trip

After a new day of rest on August 20th, the maneuvers of the army corps closed the military activities. The Russian War Minister and Head of the General Staff gave a great dinner at the military casino of St. Petersburg³⁶, in honor of the French delegation, which General Sukomlinov and the Ambassador Delcassé attend. Before leaving for his resort in the Crimea, the Emperor bid farewell to the mission during a dinner at the Krasnoie-Selo camp and gave Joffre and all the French officer decorations and gifts³⁷.

A little before departure from the camp, a Russian officer accidentally killed himself. The burial of this colonel of the Guard took place in the chapel of his regiment. The open coffin, according to the Orthodox rites, was placed on the ground, in the middle of the sanctuary. The widow of the soldier bent over to hug her husband one last time, and brought up to the coffin, a boy of five or six, who gave him a kiss. Joffre, known for his anticlericalism, had himself to attend the ceremony. During the mass, a priest passed to those attending small candles on a silver platter. Everyone took one, and the generalissimo, not wanting to single himself out, did the same. The candles were lit one by one. A bell was rung to call those attending to kneel. After a look around, Joffre imitated his neighbors. General Dor de Lastours, on his right, catches the eye of Weygand: “It will make me laugh until my death to remember the spectacle of our dear General Joffre on his knees, holding a lit candle in his hands.”³⁸

Before the departure of the French delegation, a final lunch was given at the camp on August 23rd. Grand Duke Nicholas wished it a safe return. General Joffre gave a fitting speech. At the end of the afternoon, the mission left Krasnoie-Selo for St. Petersburg³⁹. There, the French offered a goodbye dinner for the Minister of War and the Russian military authorities. Joffre gave the first toast to the Czar and the Russian national anthem funneled in. Sukomlinov

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ SHD, 1 N 17, Programme du séjour de la Mission (July, 1913).

³⁷ *Le Temps*, August 21st, 1913.

³⁸ Weygand, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 56.

³⁹ *Le Temps*, August 25th, 1913.

replied in wishing prosperity to France and the French army at which point it was the *Marseillaise* that was heard. Joffre thanked his hosts for their welcome during the long visit.

“In opening your doors to us, you have wanted, with a legitimate pride, to permit us to note the considerable work which has been accomplished in the Russian army and give us proof of the solidarity of support which we will find with it... We admired the flexibility, the vigor and the endurance of your infantry, the daring and spirit of your horsemen, the science and maneuver qualities of your artillery, the skill and professional knowledge of your engineers. We will return to France with an unalterable confidence in the high value of your army and its eminent command.”⁴⁰

But, beyond this speech, the real impression of the French was rather different, as revealed in a report sent to the War Minister, Eugène Étienne, by one of the members of the mission. It was first the value of the maneuvers that was doubted. They occurred, indeed, in very short sequences, contrary to those practiced in the French army. They had very well-known surroundings and followed hypotheses which could vary infinitely and which were concluded in advance. The maps were used little and there was not any chief of staff present from the regions east of Moscow. The officers often had the tendency to create parties without respecting the order of battle. Even though this practice had shown its limits during the war against Japan, it persisted, and was even more surprising as there was no army where the *esprit de corps* was more powerful or respected than in the Russian army. The commanders of the large units hardly multiplied the exercises. The Chiefs of Staff very rarely placed themselves in situations of war. Consequently, the orders were given too slowly, even when the unit concerned was of little importance. The lack of organization was another characteristic trait: the Chiefs of Staff hardly preoccupied themselves with the supply corps; so much so, that a regiment on maneuvers did not know on what it would subsist, instead relying on its neighboring regiments.

When they were marching, the Russian troops, the French noticed, formed formations similar to those in the French army, but the appearance they showed was significantly different, especially for the infantry. Order was not always rigorously respected. This disorder did not appear to prevent the officers from demanding paces of equal length as those of the French infantry, and this despite the nature of the paths, comparable to forest paths without any maintenance. They marched in any condition and at any hour. For lodging, the War Academy recommended a type of closed billet where the tents complete, with the bivouac, the shelter offered by the villages. Outside of this, the living places only played a minor role. “You put yourself behind a village and soon you have a blaze under your nose,” declared the Russian officers to their French comrades. These wooden villages were once burned without remorse to prevent the advance of Napoleon’s armies.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, August 26th, 1913.

Moving on to combat, the formations and method of deployment did not present notable differences with those currently in use in France. The French noted the rapid speed with which the movements were executed, at a near gymnastic or racing pace. The soldiers were, in general, in very good physical condition. They were clothed in a campaign uniform of khaki fabric or in a grayish brown outfit that did not contrast with anything, above all in northern Russia, with its gray-greenish horizon that was not dotted with any bright color. One had to remark to the French how visible at long distance was the red band of the officer's kepi that was not worn during campaigns, or that of the French regulation saddle blankets. The evolution of the doctrine and the new regulations advocated the support of movement by artillery fire and the immediate deployment of channels capable of creating this. It did not seem possible to envision an energetic offensive without an abundant and vigorous fire. The transmissions were, during the maneuvers, the object of all attention. Like in France, balloons, airplanes, and spotlights were called upon. Briefly, "the maneuvers make visible an instruction given with care according to energetic and offensive doctrines. What light is shown on is the renowned endurance of the Russian soldier. But they are all done without reservists."⁴¹

On the train that brought them from St. Petersburg to Moscow, Joffre and the members of his mission evoked already, far from indiscrete eyes, the multiple facets of the voyage, which – unknown to them at that time, of course – would be the last of high French military officials to Russia before the war. They were welcomed at the Moscow train station by a representative of the Court Minister, members of the consulate, and of the French colony. Vice-Consul Auquel gave praise to "the valiant French Army" and evoked in warm terms "the patriotism of the French living in Moscow, which will assert itself in the coming times."⁴² During the two days that this stop lasted, the members of the mission had just enough time to visit the Kremlin and to make a small pilgrimage to the hill where Napoleon watched the scared city burn. The train stopped in Warsaw, where Weygand experienced some moods, as his stepmother was Polish. In Berlin, Lieutenant-Colonels Weygand and Armau de Pouydraguin – an Alsatian who spoke German fluently – obtained permission from Joffre to visit the town.

Conclusion: The Consequences of the Trip

It was certainly during this journey, where tourism mixed with study that the Republic made its salute. Indeed, between two parades and two banquets, General Joffre had extremely serious and precise discussions with important members of the Russian Army. Always haunted by the risk of the overrun of French forces by more powerful German armies at the beginning of operations, he insisted once again on the necessity of accelerating the Russian mobilization to the maximum and launching an offensive as soon as possible with the already operational fraction

⁴¹ The judgment on the Czar's army is taken from an anonymous report in SHD, 1 N 17, *Résumé sur l'armée russe*.

⁴² *Le Temps*, August 29th, 1913.

of the army. This question was vital for France, as was seen. The invasion of Belgium, said Joffre to Grand Duke Nicholas, had to be considered as the most probable hypothesis.

The Grand Duke, wrote the generalissimo of the French Armies, “gave the assurance that we would have satisfaction; he understood admirably the necessity for the Russian Army to take a rapid offensive, no matter what risks this may take; he has to relieve our front at any price, if the Germans were to try, from the beginning of hostilities, to advance against our forces. We saw with what generous and loyal manner the great chief spoke. It is for me a need to say this.”⁴³ In August, 1914 The Grand Duke threw his unprepared troops against East Prussia’s forces and pulled to the East, German divisions withdrawn from the Western front. This initiative contributed to save France at the Marne but costed the Russians the disasters of Tannenberg and the Mazure lakes and the massacre of their best officers. “The simple manners of your generalissimo, frank and reserved,” says Grand Duke Paul, another eminent member of the imperial family, to Maurice Paléologue, the new ambassador of the French Republic in St. Petersburg, “the justice of his spirit, the solidity of his military knowledge, the discretion of his counsels and his critiques, produced the best impression on all those who approached him.”⁴⁴ In the end, Joffre succeeded in completely turning the opinion of the Russians in favor of France, nothing less. The Russian Chiefs of Staff had, just before then, rejected a premature attack that seemed to them, and justifiably so, destined to fail.

Outside of this fundamental gain, the members of the French mission created or reinforced useful contacts with their Russian comrades. The French influence seemed to grow. However, Joffre also discerned, beyond the exterior expressions of friendship, the existence of a Germanophile party, led by the Minister of War. Sukomlinov, who had admittedly driven the Russian Army down the most modern paths, “promised all that we wanted, but never held to anything” and the French generalissimo did not hesitate to doubt the integrity of such a man. The future gave reason to Joffre, as the Minister ended by being arrested and judged. Joffre stigmatized also the growing influence of Rasputin, who, it was said, was responsible for naming Sukomlinov and thus, the discredit that resulted for the regime.

“During our stay at the camp, concluded the generalissimo in his *Memoires*, we witnessed numerous maneuvers. They seemed to us to be above all, directed as if they were a parade, without being preoccupied by sufficiently taking into account the realities of war. The army had a good appearance; the men appeared vigorous and well trained.”⁴⁵

If Joffre and his companions returned from Russia reassured about the army as a whole, they could also, already, detect, at least among the most lucid, the first signs of the collapse of the autocracy and the beginnings of the revolution. The officers who accompanied the future “victor of the Marne” were also some of the last French to taste the condemned splendor of the Imperial Court of Russia.

⁴³ Joffre, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 132-133.

⁴⁴ Paléologue Maurice, *Au Quai d’Orsay à la veille de la tourmente*, Paris, 1947, p. 197.

⁴⁵ Joffre, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 132-133.

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