"The consequences would certainly be fatal": Voting Rights and the French Army 1920-1928

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The Third Republic claimed to be the regime of universal suffrage, and it enshrined the principle of universal male military service. Historians have long noted that despite exalting universal suffrage, it denied women the right to vote, but they have ignored how the regime also denied suffrage to men completing their universal military service. This contradiction created endemic conflicts, one of which emerged in the decade following the Great War. During the 1920s, the competition between the Socialist and Communist Parties spilled over into a debate about military reform, which pushed voting rights for soldiers to forefront of political consciousness and provoked an anti-suffrage reaction from French generals that reinforced and exposed their continuing skepticism toward the Third Republic.

The disenfranchisement of soldiers and sailors went back to the founding of the regime when leaders decided to keep the military outside of the political system. General Louis Trochu, the President of the Government of National Defense who played an important early role in rebuilding the Third Republic's Army, summed up the case for separation when he argued that, “The ideal constitution is that which creates an army whose instincts, beliefs, and habits make up a corporation distinct from the rest of the population.”

In accordance with Trochu’s sentiments, the 1872 Army Law that folded Napoleon III’s old Imperial Army into the new regime sought to keep soldiers out of politics and politics out of the Army by denying soldiers political rights. The law specifically prohibited anyone on active duty in the military from voting.

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2 Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 82-5. Huntington believed that there were many types of subjective control, but only one type of objective control. He would probably have described the French model as subjective control, because it failed to keep the military out of politics, but I term it a form of objective control because it sought to control the military through creating separate spheres rather than the civilianization that is the core of subjective control.
including career officers and non-commissioned officers, conscripts, and even temporarily recalled reservists. This added soldiers to the list of people deemed unable to exercise universal suffrage responsibly, a list that included minors, convicted criminals, foreign residents of France, women, and the insane.

Segregating of the military from democratic politics backfired. Instead of preventing civil-military conflicts, it fostered them. The pre-1914 history of the Republic was littered with, and defined by, civil-military conflicts including the Boulanger Affair, the 1893 Mirman Affair, the Dreyfus Affair, the Affair of the Cards, the 1910 Devève Affair, and the 1912 Michel Command Crisis. This string of crises revealed to contemporaries and scholars alike that the Third Republic’s government and Army had a badly flawed relationship. Even when the military and civilian worlds were not locked in conflict, they were influencing each other in ways Trochu counseled against.

In the wake of the Great War of 1914-1918, civilian reformers from the Radical (Parti républicain, radical et radical-socialiste), Socialist (Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière, hereafter SFIO), and Communist Parties (Section française de l’Internationale communiste, hereafter SFIC) tried to republicanize the Army by making it function more like the civilian world. The reform movement was not a cohesive entity, but most of its members shared a desire to reduce the military’s ability to wage aggressive wars and limit the authority of professional officers by changing the Army’s force structure and its legal relationship to the civilian world. The parties of the Left all hoped that by taming the Army, they could prevent the possibility that conservative and monarchist officers would lead a reactionary political movement and that republicanization would reduce or eliminate officers’ potential support for future wars of aggression.

Some civilian military reformers, especially Socialists and Communists, advocated undoing the 1872 Army Law and extending the right to vote and hold elective office to soldiers. The moderate Radical Party and its non-Marxist allies were the less committed to extending the suffrage to soldiers and more interested

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6. For examples of civilian-military interactions and conflicts in the 1871-1918 period, see Rachel Chrastil, *Organizing for War: France 1870-1914* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), and Bock, *Un parlementarisme de guerre*. 
in reducing the term of conscript service. Although some factions within the party supported expanding voting rights, most Radical leaders remained attached to prewar arguments against giving soldiers the right to vote because they feared it would give anti-republican officers the ability to influence elections by controlling their soldiers' votes.\(^7\)

Extending universal suffrage to soldiers was part of all the major Socialist military bills in the 1920s, but there was little chance that soldiers would get voting rights until the *Cartel de gauches*, a coalition of centrist and leftist parties, won the May 1924 elections. The Cartel’s victory brought the Radical Party to power at the head of a coalition that included Socialist support. After the 1924 elections, the Socialist deputies Pierre Renaudel, Albert Thomas, and Joseph Paul-Boncour tried to extend suffrage rights in the face of conservative and centrist opposition.\(^8\) They proposed new Army laws and sought to amend other deputies’ bills to add military suffrage rights.

The Communists’ strong support for military suffrage undermined the entire effort, but helped the party compete with the Socialists. Military leaders suspected that the Communist Party hoped to use military suffrage as a Trojan Horse to turn the barracks into a recruiting ground, while the Socialists recognized that the PCF’s rhetoric was at least as much a political attack on the SFIO as it was an earnest attempt to subvert the Army. Although the military elite would have been hostile regardless of the Communists’ position, the SFIC’s strong support for suffrage drove away some possible supporters. Many Socialists and some Radicals who would normally have supported extending the suffrage opposed the effort in the 1920s because they believed it was part of a Communist intrigue being organized by Moscow.

The 1925-1926 Rif War exacerbated Army leaders’ fear of expanding the franchise. As David Slavin has shown, the war triggered an active Communist campaign to undermine the war effort from within the Army.\(^9\) The Communists

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\(^7\) John Sherwood, *Georges Mandel and the Third Republic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 122-3. Although in the late-nineteenth century, the Radicals had supported abolishing the Senate, and championed disestablishment, by the 1920s, they generally opposed any major changes to the Third Republic’s political system. In 1931, Radical senators blocked the electoral reform bill supported by André Tardieu’s cabinet, but prepared by the independent conservative Georges Mandel, that would have extended the suffrage to women.


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featured serving soldiers and sailors as speakers in anti-war and party rallies. They urged soldiers to strike against their officers and fraternize with strikers, protesters, or opposing soldiers. Speakers also called for conscripts and workers to unite and turn any war into a revolutionary civil war.\textsuperscript{10}

There was a significant gap between the Communist Party’s rhetoric and the effects it had on workers and soldiers. Although only a few soldiers actually fraternized or mutinied, calls for fraternization were an important part of Marxist political rhetoric from before the Great War. During 1925, Communist leaders, including the future fascist turncoat Jacques Doriot, clamored for action against the war. Doriot urged troops to fraternize with the Rifians and predicted that unless stopped quickly, the war would lead to another World War.\textsuperscript{11}

During the Communist’s October 1925 party conference, General Secretary Albert Trient explained party policy as an attempt to use opposition to colonial wars to turn a military defeat into a class revolution. He called for troops to fraternize to break the power of “officers bought by French capitalism.”\textsuperscript{12} Trient was calling on the party to adapt its attacks against factory owners and working conditions for use against the Army in anti-war and anti-conscription campaigns. He hoped to tap into post-war France’s deep vein of anti-militarism and use it to expand party membership.\textsuperscript{13}

Although some Communist Party members believed that they could force an end to the Rif War, others must have recognized the near impossibility for using fraternization or strikes to turn a colonial war, even a major one, into a revolutionary civil war back in France. However, taking an aggressively anti-war stance allowed party leaders to placate Moscow, which was demanding action based on overly optimistic assessments of the anti-war movement’s chances of success. It also helped the PCF compete with the SFIO for support from leftwing militants by putting the Socialists in the awkward position of either supporting the war and losing the mantle of antimilitarism to the Communists or opposing the war and risking the destruction of their alliance with the Radicals.

The Communist Party targeted conscripts with three specialist journals. The first journal, \textit{Le Conscrit}, was aimed at men as they were entering into military life. The mainstay of the effort thought was \textit{Le Caserne} which regularly

\textsuperscript{10} Séance 19 October 1925, F 7 13091, Archives Nationales (AN), Paris; séance 10 October 1925, F 7 13092, AN.

\textsuperscript{11} M. Marty, “War for Banque des Pays-Bas,” 21 May 1925; Report 6 June 1925; Report 3 July 1925; Report 25 May 1925, F 7 13171, AN.

\textsuperscript{12} Parti Communiste Française, 20 Oct. 1925, F 7 13091, AN.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{La Caserne} (Paris), 20 Mai 1925, F 7 13174, AN; Report Draguignan, 6 June 1925, and 10 Oct. 1925, F 7 13175, AN.
condemned the allegedly-brutal and uncaring officers and attacked the poor conditions soldiers were made to endure. At the end of a conscript's term, he could read *Le Liberé* which emphasized the poor treatment of reservists. The troika of Communist papers claimed that living conditions for conscripts were bad, that food was substandard, and that fatiguing exercises weakened conscripts' health. The attacks were modeled on Communist criticisms of the living and working conditions capitalism created for French workers. The papers trumpeted examples of courageous conscripts who spoke out against their officers and the conditions of military life as examples for others to follow. The 5 September 1925 issue of *La Caserne* reported that sailors stationed in Paris had protested against the poor quality of their food and were facing a *conseil de guerre* (count martial). The 20 May 1925 issue of *La Caserne* accused Foreign Legion officers of abusing their men and using the military justice system to suppress opposition to their brutality. The paper claimed dozens of legionaries were in jail for complaining about poor food or harsh and unfair treatment by their officers. All three papers' editorials condemned the injustice of prosecuting soldiers for protesting against their alleged oppression in ways that would have been legally protected in civilian life and urged other conscripts to stand up for themselves.

The Communist anti-war campaigners tried to use serving soldiers and sailors in their propaganda efforts. In August of 1925, the Communist Party had three sailors appear at a local party congress, in full uniform, to denounce the military justice system and military prisons. Their presence signaled the party's rejection of the separation of the military from the political system and the rights that underpinned it. Political activity by serving members of the armed forces was strictly illegal, and the Communists' use of uniformed personnel was a challenge to the legitimacy of both the armed forces, and the "bourgeois" Republic. It alarmed military leaders because they saw it as proof that in the next war, an unknown number of conscripts would obey orders from the Communist Party to sabotage military operations.

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14 Police list of known anti-militarist journals, F 7 13099, AN. Police records indicate that *Caserne* published 14,000 copies per issue in 1927. Military and police records throughout the 1920s and 1930s indicated that the Communist papers were regularly found inside army bases.

15 *La Caserne*, May-October 1925.

16 *Le Caserne*, 20 Mai 1925, F 7 13174, AN; *Le Caserne*, 5 September 1925, F 7 13175, AN; *La Caserne*, May-October 1925.

17 Report 7165 Ministry of the Interior (Direction Générale de la Sûreté Générale) à Ministry of the Navy (Navy General Staff – 2nd Bureau B), Commandant Chenouard. F 7 13090, AN. Sûreté Général agents successfully identified one of the speakers as Mathieu Tomei, a sailor stationed in Provence.
Communist propaganda aimed to puncture the military’s mystique by showing that army life was just civilian life with a different set of taskmasters. In May 1925, as the Rif War was beginning, Communists posters proclaimed that it was a “War wanted and caused by French imperialism in order to steal the Rif’s mineral riches” and “to permit the Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas to realize new and scandalous profits.”\textsuperscript{18} Communist speakers blamed the war on “high finance” and urged conscripted workers in France to join a General Strike because the reinforcements sent to Morocco meant that the weakened Army might not be able to break a strike in France if workers inside the military joined with the strikers.\textsuperscript{19} By repeating the criticism of factory bosses and aiming it at the officer corps, Communist propagandists undermined the claim that the Army functioned differently from the civilian world or represented a higher national purpose. The Communists also hoped that weakening or destroying the authority of the conseils de guerre would allow them to propagandize and form functioning party cells inside the military.

Military and civil authorities tried to stop Communist propaganda aimed at soldiers. Civilian law banned the distribution of material that advocated soldiers disobeying orders, which it termed “provocation to disobedience,” and military law prohibited the possession or distribution of any form of propaganda deemed anti-military or which military leaders believed advocated disobedience. Both the military and civilian authorities repeatedly prosecuted men for possessing and distributing the three Communist military newspapers.\textsuperscript{20} In October 1925, members of the Communist Party’s Comité d’action were arrested charged with provoking soldiers to disobedience by calling on them to fraternize with Riffian forces.\textsuperscript{21}

Throughout 1925 and 1926, the police maintained steady pressure on anti-war groups trying to propagandize the armed forces. Despite systematic repression, by November 1925 the police had only arrested 351 people for provoking military personnel to disobedience. This small number of arrests suggests that, although the Communists’ campaign greatly worried military leaders, the militant antiwar movement was a very small force.\textsuperscript{22}

The military elite and civilian political leaders feared Communist propaganda, in part, because they believed the Communists were infiltrating the

\textsuperscript{18} Poster (Tours), 31 Mai 1925, F 7 13092, AN.
\textsuperscript{19} Police Circular, 10 October 1925, F 7 13092, AN.
\textsuperscript{20} “Etat des sanctions prises contre des militaires qui sont livrés à des faits d’excitation à la désobéissance ou de propagande Communiste,” Report from Military Intelligence (2\textsuperscript{nd} Bureau), 24 May 1927, F 7 13099, AN; Rapport Draguignan F 7 13174, AN; F 7 13176, AN.
\textsuperscript{21} Le Temps (Paris), 12 October 1925, F 7 12919, AN.
\textsuperscript{22} Police surveillance report, 23 Oct 1925; Police surveillance report, 12 Nov 1925, F 7 13171, AN.
French Army. In May 1927, Minister of War Paul Painlevé summarized Army reports in a letter to Minister of the Interior Albert Sarraut. Painlevé reported that between Jan 1925 and June 1926, roughly the period of the Rif War, there were 1371 soldiers and sailors convicted of politically motivated disobedience of orders. Painlevé concluded that “Doubtless the menacing Communist campaigns of that period had an influence on the grave breaches of military discipline.”

Painlevé’s claims appeared impressive, but they rested on a distortion of military records. While he claimed that all of the arrests were from the period just before the beginning to the Rif War until the end of major combat operations, a penciled marginal note on the original list he drew from made clear that he was actually citing statistics from January 1924 until May 1927. That is, he calculated the number of convictions over a four-year period and claimed they were from an eighteen-month period. Painlevé distorted his information in an attempt to convince Sarraut that the Communists were a mortal danger that needed to be fought. He knew he was exaggerating his evidence, but he had internalized his generals’ exaggerated fear of Communist subversion.

Counter-intelligence officers believed Communists claims that the PCF had cells operating throughout the Army. Intelligence reports suggested there were hundreds of cells in combat units and bases all over France as well as in the colonies and the occupied Rhineland. Military and police investigators claimed there were 52 active cells inside units in the Paris Military Region, 27 in Metz, 36 in Nancy and Strasbourg, and 32 cells in units outside of France. Military and police officials cooperated to identify potential Communists among the new draftees. Counter-intelligence officers maintained lists identifying the number and names of suspected Communists in each draft contingent for each department in France. Over the course of 1925, military observers noted an overall increase in Communist conscripts. Although the trend alarmed officers, the numbers were actually modest. For example, in the spring of 1925 counter-intelligence officer identified a new Communist group in the department of Aisne, but it only had fourteen members. Even though many units were stationed in Alsace and the liberated parts of Lorraine, there were only one hundred twenty-one identified Communists in that region.

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23 Note from Minister of War Paul Painlevé to Minister of the Interior Albert Sarraut, Undated (May 1927), F 13099, AN.
24 Annex to Note from Minister of War Paul Painlevé to Minister of the Interior Albert Sarraut containing report from the 2nd Bureau of the Army General Staff. Annex dated 24 May 1927, F 13099, AN.
25 Annex to Note from Minister of War Paul Painlevé to Minister of the Interior Albert Sarraut containing report from the 2nd Bureau of the Army General Staff. Annex dated 24 May 1927; Report, Army General Staff, 28 April 1927, F 13099, AN.
26 Surveillance des Conscrits Communiste 1925, F 7 13156, AN.
During 1926, security officials worried that the Rif War was causing an increase in the number of soldiers speaking out against the military in public meetings. Investigators determined that many of the serving soldiers speaking at Communist meetings did not have prewar records as Communists or pacifists. Counter-intelligence officers interpreted that as proof that Communist propaganda and recruiters were winning converts inside the military. This was enough to convince many senior officers that Communist propaganda was succeeding in establishing a surreptitious organization that could compromise the Army’s effectiveness against internal or external enemies.

Communist propaganda succeeded in convincing some leftwing activists and many military officers that the party was successfully infiltrating the armed forces, but in the processes it exposed the infiltration effort, which relied on secrecy to work, and thus triggered a crippling response from the security services. Militaires accused of receiving or spreading Communist propaganda were tried before conseils de guerre. Sentences ranged from eight days for a soldier of the 109th Heavy Artillery Regiment who was convicted of reading *Le Caserne* to as much as ten years for some soldiers implicated in the 1924 Landau Affair. The Landau Affair involved several soldiers, including two noncommissioned officers, stationed in the French Army of Occupation in the German Rhineland. A conseil de guerre held in Mainz convicted them of distributing Communist propaganda to other soldiers during the Ruhr Crisis. The propaganda urged French troops to fraternize with German civilians, refuse to obey their officers, and side with German workers against French financial interests. Other common offenses included singing the *Internationale*, attending Communist meetings, working at Communist meetings, and distributing Communist pamphlets. One soldier in the 25th Infantry Regiment received a sixty-day sentence for writing an article for the Communist daily *L’Humanité*.

Led by Marshal Philippe Pétain, the General Staff and Conseil supérieur de la guerre sought to maintain the Third Republic’s traditional separation between the Army and the civilian world. The generals opposed granting political rights to soldiers and prioritized protecting the Army from the republican political system because they believed voting, and the associated rights that came with it, were a greater threat to military cohesion than were further cuts in force structure. The generals resisted major cuts or major changes in the legal status of

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27 2 May 1926 Congrès des Conscrits, région Parisienne, F 13157, AN.
28 “BE/I Le Ministre de la Guerre À Monsieur le Ministre de l’Intérieur,” 24 Mai 1927, F 7 13099, AN.
29 “BE/I Le Ministre de la Guerre À Monsieur le Ministre de l’Intérieur,” 24 Mai 1927, F 7 13099, AN.
soldiers, but kept the lines of communication with the cabinet open and negotiations continued throughout the 1925-1928 period.

The generals’ delaying tactics succeeded in buying them the time they needed to outlast the crisis. The Cartel was inherently unstable because of the SFIO’s refusal to fully embrace a coalition with the Radicals. By late-1926 a financial crisis and internal conflicts between the Cartel’s members brought down the cabinet and led to the creation of a new coalition of the Radicals and the Center and Right under the Raymond Poincaré. Under Pétain’s guidance, the army chiefs agreed to a compromise with the Minister of War, Paul Painlevé, who remained at the Ministry of War under Poincaré. On 8 November 1926 the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre pronounced in favor of a one year service law, provided that soldiers did not receive political rights and the Army was allowed to increase the number of career soldiers to 100,000.30

During the debate on the 1927 Army Law, Renaudel tried to amend the government’s bill to grant soldiers the right to vote. He argued that it was unjust to allow young men exempted from the draft due to physical or mental incapacity to vote, while denying the same rights to conscripts fulfilling their duty as citizens. He wanted soldiers to have full political rights, but was willing to embrace gradualism if it advanced his cause. To that end, he offered a compromise, suggesting soldiers receive the right to vote, but not to stand for office, unless they were on leave for at least one year. Following the General Staff’s advice, Painlevé opposed it. 31 Communist parliamentarians attempted to shame vacillating Radical deputies into supporting the extension of suffrage rights with negative comparisons between “Universal Suffrage” in France and other countries, especially the Soviet Union and Fascist Italy, both of which granted soldiers at least some voting rights. 32 Painlevé and the cabinet opposed the amendment, which was easily defeated. 33

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30 Procès-verbal, Conseil supérieur de la guerre, dossier 1, 8 November 1926, 1 N 13, SHAT Supplément.
31 “Amendement no. 14” (Renaudel); Response to “Amendement no. 14” (Renaudel), 1 July 1927; No. 9 “Amendement au projet de loi relative au recrutement de l’armée présenté par M Pierre Renaudel,” 23 June 1927, dossier 1, 5 N 10, SHAT Supplément.
32 “Droits Accord aux militaire en Nature de vote,” 10 February 1927, 7 N 2678, SHAT. In the Soviet Union, soldiers officially had full political rights, unless they were of “bourgeois origin.” Soldiers had the right to vote and run for office in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Portugal, Austria, and Switzerland. In the United Kingdom and Greece, soldiers had full political rights, but had to resign if elected to office. Some countries, Czechoslovakia for example, allowed all soldiers to vote, but only officers and career NCOs to run for office. The Turks were slightly more restrictive, allowing all soldiers to vote, but only officers could stand for office. The United States allowed all soldiers to vote, but none could run for office. Poland banned active-duty
Marshal Pétain and his commanders believed that a politically enfranchised conscript army would become a breeding ground of anti-militarism and anti-patriotism. In notes to the cabinet and meetings with ministers, commanders explained their fear that if soldiers became voters, they would have to allow anti-military, Communist, and pacifist political materials and activity inside bases. In July 1927, in response to one of Pierre Renaudel’s seemingly endless amendments to the 1927 Army bill that would have given soldiers the vote, the General Staff laid out why its members opposed military suffrage. The note explained, “To accord the right to vote to soldiers would be to recognize their right to express their opinions, to spread propaganda, [and] to criticize the government. The exercise of the right to vote may work with the moral characteristics of other races, for ours, the consequences would certainly be fatal.”

Drawing on their experiences with the 1917 Army Mutiny on the Chemin-des-Dames, the 1919 Black Sea Mutiny, and the Russian Revolution, as well as their understanding of the causes of the Paris Commune, senior officers assumed that exposure to anti-military propaganda would sap soldiers’ morale and weaken discipline, leading to revolutionary risings among the troops. During debates, the General Staff provided Minister of War Paul Painlevé with detailed responses to speeches or amendments that proposed any change to the total ban on active duty soldiers voting, holding elected office, or campaigning.

soldiers of all ranks from voting, but allowed officers to stand for office, while Romania denied soldiers both the suffrage and the right to run of office, but reserved four senate seats for generals. France was not, however, alone in barring soldiers from voting and from running for office. France was joined by Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Germany in banning all political rights for soldiers. Fascist Italy used a graduated system; enlisted men could not vote or run, NCOs could run for the lower house, and officers could vote and stand for all offices.

“Amendement no. 14” (Renaudel); Response to “Amendement no. 14” (Renaudel), 1 July 1927; No. 9 “Amendement au projet de loi relative au recrutement de l’armée présenté par M Pierre Renaudel,” 23 June 1927, dossier 1, 5 N 10 Supplément, SHAT.

Response to “Amendement No 14” (Renaudel), 1 July 1927, dossier 1, 5 N 10 Supplément, SHAT.

F/7 13174, AN. See also, Denis Rolland, La Grève des Tranchées: Les mutineries de 1917 (Paris: Imago, 2005).

For example see: Response to Amendment 17 to Article 11 of the 1927 Army Law, Army General Staff, dossier 1, undated; Response to Amendment 27 to Article 17 of the 1927 Army Law, Army General Staff, dossier 1, 4 July 1927; Response to Amendment 44 to Article 99 of the 1927 Army Law, Army General Staff, dossier 1, undated, 5 N 10 Supplément, SHAT. In the last case the General Staff included two notes. The first explained what the, allegedly poorly written, Communist amendment appeared to mean, and a second note which indicated that the General Staff had argued against previous
One typical example was a 7 July 1927 note from the General Staff advising Painlevé that granting soldiers the suffrage was “inadmissible because of the consequences which would result for [military] discipline.”

Faced with simultaneous challenges to the Army’s combat capacity and the conservative political and cultural values they prized, French officers chose to preserve the Army’s allegedly apolitical atmosphere and strict hierarchy by sacrificing force structure. The compromise cut the number of conscripts in arms at any given time by one third, from one and half classes down to one class. That involved a reduction of about 90,000 men based on a yearly class of roughly 180,000 men. When Pétain and the CSG made the decision to negotiate they faced a choice between defending the Army’s legal separation from the political regime by sacrificing combat power, or trying to maximize the army’s combat power by accepting limited republicanization. When military leaders chose the former over the latter, they revealed their belief that subversion was a greater danger to France than were foreign armies. The debate on military suffrage and officers’ overreaction to the Communist campaign exposed their belief that the republican political system was not just different from the Army’s way of operating, but intrinsically alien and inherently dangerous to the Army.

The long debate over military suffrage combined with the Communist Party’s attempts to infiltrate and subvert the Army to hold officers’ attention on questions surrounding political activity in the military during the mid-1920s. This hardened their opposition to military suffrage by associating it with Communism and reinforced their assumption that voting and political engagement were antithetical to military discipline. Ironically, the Communist campaign against the French Army, the Rif War, and soldiers’ political disenfranchisement succeeded but in a way Communist leaders never imagined. The campaign failed to end the war, grant voting rights to soldiers, establish a critical mass of Communists inside the Army, or inflict long-term damage on the SFIO in any the ways Communist leaders had hoped and military leaders feared. However, the propaganda campaign tied to the subversion efforts succeeded in convincing military leaders and some civilian politicians that the campaign could have worked. By reinforcing officers’ hostility to electoral democracy the campaign undermined the Third Republic because officers reacted to their perception of the Communist danger by blaming democratic institutions and hardening their opposition to suffrage and the political system it represented. The military suffrage debates of the 1920s did not cause the fall of the Republic and the creation of the Vichy Regime, but the military’s central role in creating Vichy amendments that had the same effect so many times that it did not feel any need to rehash its arguments.

37 Response to “Amendement No 70” (Bougère), Article 9, 7 July 1927, dossier 1, 5 N 10 Supplément, SHAT.
suggests that more work is needed on the structural factors that kept the officer corps outside of the mainstream of the Third Republic, and one of those factors was the disenfranchisement of French soldiers.