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IMAGINING COALITION WARFARE

French and British Military Language Policy before 1914

»The war has made this people conscious of its ignorance of foreign countries and their peoples. [...] Ignorance of the mental attitude and aspirations of the German people may not have been the cause of the war; it certainly prevented due preparation and hampered our efforts after the war had begun; it still darkens our counsels. Similar ignorance of France, greater ignorance of Italy, abysmal ignorance of Russia, have impeded the effective prosecution of the war, and will impede friendly and cooperative action after the war is over¹.«

In a report commissioned by the British government in 1916 and published in 1918, a group of experts reached the conclusion that foreign language skills and the education necessary to obtain them had been largely deficient in Great Britain in the years preceding the First World War. For the authors of the report there is a clear link between competence in foreign languages and knowledge and understanding of other countries – a noted lack of both being problematic both to the peacetime economy and in the case of tension between nations leading ultimately to military conflict.

While the quotation above applies to British society as a whole, the actual report devotes several specific sections to military language provision at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries². Military language handling is presented not only as the result of prior experience and combined effects of the school system and surrounding attitudes to foreign languages in society at large, but also as an indicator of anticipation of war to come and the British army's mental and logistical preparedness.

The Franco-British coalition negotiations from 1905 onwards have been largely studied as far as the factual order of events is concerned³ and in particular the extent of commitment envisaged by various elements of the British military, diplomatic and political personnel⁴. We know far less about the mental and logistical adjustments necessary for the preparation of a co-

1 Committee to Enquire into the Position of Modern Languages in the Educational System of Great Britain, Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister to enquire into the Position of Modern Languages in the Educational System of Great Britain, London 1918, p. 11.

2 See in particular *ibid.*, p. 14–15.

3 Starting with papers such as: John D. HARGREAVES, The Origin of the Anglo-French Military Conversations in 1905, in: *History* 36 (1951), p. 244–248.

4 Samuel R. WILLIAMSON, *The Politics of Grand Strategy. Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914*, Cambridge 1969; Paul M. KENNEDY (ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914*, London, Boston 1979; Keith WILSON, *The Policy of Entente. Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy 1904–1914*, Cambridge 1985; Roy A. PRETE, French Strategic Planning and the Deployment of the BEF in France in 1914, in: *Canadian Journal of History* 24 (1989),

alition which had hardly any prior experience of joint operations (the 1900–1901 operations in China happened in a very different and much larger coalition setting). Language strategies provide an inroad into these very military and also very cultural questions. What do British and French national language strategies tell us about the institutional set-up for war? To what extent do national differences emerge from this comparison and, crucially, how are they merged and associated in the coalition negotiations between 1905 and 1914?

The first of France's two distinct military language strategies is of essentially colonial nature. It was developed after the military conquest of Algeria in 1830. Military interpreters who had played an early role in Napoleon's Expedition to Egypt⁵ were now included in a major overhaul of military logistics, leading to an increasing specializing of various military sub-branches⁶. By 1854, a hierarchical system was in place where military interpreters who needed to have French citizenship were recruited by competitive exam before progressing through specific ranks with pay rises⁷. They had to swear an oath when they started working as military interpreters: »I swear to obey the constitution and be faithful to the Emperor; I also swear to interpret faithfully the documents and speeches I am asked to translate and to keep their secret⁸«.

This oath points to the complex position of the military interpreter who, during the military administration of Algeria, had many administrative tasks, including a key role in the running of the judicial system. By recruiting essentially metropolitan French citizens and establishing a distinct hierarchy outside that of standard progression for NCOs and officers, the French army chose individuals with language skills in order to set up a body of administrators on the ground.

The second part of the French military language strategy is a direct consequence of the 1870–1871 war against Prussia. In December 1884 the Minister of War Campenon wrote a confidential letter to the military governors of Paris and Lyon and to the generals commanding the army corps in order to notify them of a project for constituting a corps of reserve military interpreters⁹. He reminded them that »during the 1870 war [...] an imperial decree had created, within the Army of the Rhine, a special body of interpreters¹⁰ and proposes to put in place such a structure »during peacetime and to extend it even to the Italian and Spanish languages¹¹. These interpreters »should be able not only to read and translate the language, but above all be capable of sustaining a conversation, interrogating a prisoner and reading manuscripts with ease¹². The aim of the letter was to request information on the available personnel in the various army structures, including lists of names of suitable officers.

The replies must have been satisfactory, as a major development in army language strategy

p. 42–62; Elizabeth GREENHALGH, *Victory Through Coalition*, Cambridge 2005, (Cambridge Military Histories), p. 12–17.

5 Edmond CARY, *La Traduction dans le monde moderne*, Genève 1956, p. 134.

6 The essential text on the evolution of this professional body is: Alain MESSAOUDI, *Renseigner, enseigner. Les interprètes militaires et la constitution d'un premier corpus savant »algérien«* (1830–1870), in: *Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle* 41(2010), p. 97–112; he makes considerable use of this contemporary document which remains an important source of information. Laurent-Charles FÉRAUD, *Les Interprètes de l'armée d'Afrique*. Archives du corps. Suivi d'une notice sur les interprètes civils et judiciaires, Alger 1876.

7 MESSAOUDI *Renseigner, enseigner* (as in n. 6), p. 104.

8 Décret du 4 février 1854, portant sur la réorganisation du corps des interprètes de l'armée d'Algérie, in: *Le Moniteur universel*, Journal officiel de l'Empire français, 17.2.1854, p. 1, art.14.

9 Service historique de la Défense Vincennes (SHD), Département armée de terre, 7 N 23, Lettre collective confidentielle du ministre de la Guerre à M.M. Les Gouverneurs de Paris et de Lyon, à M.M. Les Généraux Comt des Corps d'Armée, 12 décembre 1884.

10 *Ibid.*, Translation by Franziska Heimbürger.

11 *Ibid.*, Translation by Franziska Heimbürger.

12 *Ibid.*, Translation by Franziska Heimbürger.

was subsequently put in place by a decree, creating the Corps spécial d'interprètes de réserve, a special corps of reserve military interpreters in 1886¹³. The decree specified two important elements. First of all, »this body is not divided into military ranks or classes«¹⁴. It was not so much a military corps, as a list of suitable individuals. Secondly, it stated that »the reserve military interpreters are to be chosen among the reserve officers and those in the territorial army, or among the foreign language teachers employed at universities, or among other individuals with suitable skills«¹⁵. It seems this new strategy needed a large base in order to establish a suitable starting point.

The recruitment of these interpreters was organised by competitive exam, described briefly in the decree. There was to be a written exam of translation from and into the language of military texts, an oral military exam, a physical aptitude test, specifically for horse riding, but above all an oral exam described as follows:

»Oral language exam: show sufficient ability to make enquiries among natives; interrogate prisoners and deserters; read correspondence or other more or less legible documents; interpret habitual abbreviations; evaluate the content of newspapers; explain public notices, etc.«¹⁶

We can clearly see that these military interpreters were to be recruited for Intelligence tasks in order to serve in wartime against a country whose language they spoke. In 1910 a further decree separated the interpreters into three hierarchical levels (*interprète stagiaire*, *officier interprète 3^e classe*, *officier interprète 2^e classe*), specifying that they were to swear the second half of the oath originally put into place for the colonial interpreters¹⁷, and noting that in case of war, reserve military interpreters were to be mobilised with the 2^e Bureau, the army section responsible for Intelligence work.

On the eve of the First World War, the French army thus had established channels for recruiting lower-rank interpreters for use in colonial contexts and reserve officers for intelligence tasks. Both could be influenced directly by modifying the number of places open per language in the yearly competitive examination. Language skills were the preserve of specialists; the army as a whole did not deploy great efforts in language training of officers or men¹⁸. This was an efficient solution to the problem of supply and demand as far as language skills in the army were concerned. By maintaining lists of qualified individuals who could be called up in case of military need, the army could keep cost low and yet maintain a high degree of flexibility.

The actual languages provided for by the French military language strategy were limited on the one hand to Arabic for use in the North-African settlement colonies and on the other hand to continental European languages of countries against which France could potentially find itself engaged in military conflict. The larger cultural context of language skills in the French population at the beginning of the 20th century needs to be understood not only in relation to the school system and later language teaching provision, but also to emigration patterns and temporary work abroad. These led to large communities of French citizens living in other

13 Decree dated 27th December 1886, published in the »Bulletin officiel« of the first week of 1887, p. 6.

14 Ibid. Translation by Franziska Heimburger.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Décret du 4 février 1854, portant réorganisation du corps des interprètes de l'armée d'Algérie, (as in n. 8).

18 P. DE PARDIÉLLAN, *Les langues étrangères et leur pratique dans les grandes armées européennes*, Paris 1892, p. 6–16.

countries and acquiring foreign language skills¹⁹, who would be mobilised and recalled to their country of origin should war be declared.

The British choice in military language strategy was very different from the French mode of functioning, both as far as colonial situations were concerned and for Intelligence purposes. The earliest traces in the British archives are from 1885 when an exam was organised in order to qualify interpreters for army use²⁰. This was in fact a task delegated by the Minister for War to the body created in 1855 in order to organise the recruiting of civil servants for all government needs – the Civil Service Commission. Crucially, these exams do not have the same objective of recruiting a separate body of language specialists as was the case for French colonial military purposes. For the British army, these exams were voluntary and supplementary qualifications for regular officers. Upon obtaining a satisfactory result in the exam, the officers had their qualification as military interpreter recorded in the personnel file and saw their name published on the list of officers qualified as military interpreters in the language in question in the annual »Army Lists«. A further significant distinction concerns the relevant languages. While in the French case the competitive exams were opened for certain languages chosen by the French Army, the British system provided for »any language European or Oriental they may elect to take up«²¹ and thus included rarer languages such as Hausa and Swahili alongside more traditional choices like French, German, and Russian.

These exams were in fact highly selective as contemporary compilations of results show in Fig. 1. While the success rates vary, they never rise above 50 % and are in fact mostly lower than 30 % of candidates. These figures also show another aspect of language handling: while five languages (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Turkish) were encouraged with financial rewards for successful candidates, this was not the case for the 13 other languages. We must assume that there were other, less directly material benefits for officers in passing interpreter qualifications in such languages, quite possible linked to career prospects at home and especially serving abroad.

Overall the languages on offer reflect the diverse nature of the British colonial empire, but also contain surprises. It is not immediately obvious in what manner languages such as Norwegian, Swedish and Romanian would have been of use to officers, other than those serving as military attachés in the respective countries. It is also clear that the British military language strategy was deliberately wide open, rather than limited to a certain number of languages with direct strategic implications for Britain. Financial incentives were nevertheless used in order to increase the number of qualified officers for languages that were of direct interest to key points of political focus. This is the case of Russian because of the perceived Russian threat to the Indian possessions, but also for Arabic, probably due to the importance of Egypt for British trade.

This system of voluntary qualification of officers in the language of their choice does not seem to have satisfied the military authorities in the long run. In 1899 a working group was set up in order to develop a »General Language Scheme«²². In 1901 a commission called the »Akers-Douglas-Committee« studied the question and suggested extending financial incentives, going as far as proposing a raise in the daily rate of pay for an officer who had qualified as an in-

19 For a general impression, see: Michel HUBER, *La population de la France pendant la guerre avec un appendice sur les revenus avant et après la guerre*, Paris 1931, p. 81.

20 National Archives (NA) Kew CSC 3/146, War Arrangements for the Examination of Army Officers in Modern Languages with a View to Their Acting as Interpreters.

21 General Orders by His Royal Highness the Field Marshall Commanding in Chief, 1st May 1886, p. 80. Conserved in NA Kew CSC 3/146 War Arrangements for the Examination of Army Officers in Modern Languages with a View to their Acting as Interpreters.

22 NA Kew, WO 32/8880, Scheme for Encouraging the Study of Foreign Languages by Officers with Rewards for Proficiency, working document by Staff Captain H. De Prée dated 30th August 1906, specifying that the project has »been under consideration for seven years«.

Date	Languages with rewards										Languages other than those for which rewards are given										Grand Totals
	Arabic	Chinese	Japanese	Russian	Turkish	Total	Danish	Dutch	French	German	Greek	Hansa	Italian	Romanian	Portuguese	Spanish	Swahili	Norwegian	Swedish	Total	
1893	No. Examined	2	-	8	9	19	-	18	17	1	-	4	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	42	61
	Qual. as Interpr.	-	-	-	3	3	-	6	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	9	12
1894	No. Examined	5	-	15	4	24	-	32	20	-	-	8	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	63	87
	Qual. as Interpr.	-	-	5	2	7	-	8	10	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	21	28
1895	No. Examined	6	-	11	4	21	-	25	20	-	-	3	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	53	74
	Qual. as Interpr.	2	-	3	-	5	-	4	4	-	-	2	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	16	21
1896	No. Examined	5	-	2	1	8	-	40	17	1	1	2	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	65	73
	Qual. as Interpr.	3	-	-	1	4	-	13	8	-	1	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	25	29
1897	No. Examined	6	-	5	2	13	-	35	22	1	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	62	75
	Qual. as Interpr.	3	-	-	-	3	-	9	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	18
1898	No. Examined	4	-	6	3	13	-	49	34	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	89	102
	Qual. as Interpr.	2	-	-	1	3	-	17	12	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	31	34
1899	No. Examined	7	1	13	5	26	1	47	25	1	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	81	107
	Qual. as Interpr.	2	-	4	3	9	-	13	6	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	20	29
1903	No. Examined	2	-	1	15	18	-	67	26	2	-	6	-	-	1	4	-	-	-	108	126
	Qual. as Interpr.	-	-	2	-	2	-	16	7	-	-	1	-	-	1	3	-	-	-	28	30
1904	No. Examined	10	-	1	30	2	43	87	39	1	-	4	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	139	182
	Qual. as Interpr.	4	-	4	-	8	-	23	4	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	32	40
Total Examined		47	1	2	105	30	185	7	400	220	7	1	40	-	1	22	-	1	2	702	887
Total Interpreters		16	-	18	10	44	-	113	58	-	11	-	11	-	1	11	-	1	1	197	241
Average Examined		5	-	12	3	20	-	46	26	1	-	4	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	78	98
Average Interpr.		2	-	2	1	5	-	13	7	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	22	27
Av. % of Interpr.		40	-	17	33	25	-	29	28	-	-	25	-	-	50	-	-	-	-	28	27

Fig. 1: NA WO 32/8880 Scheme for encouraging the study of foreign languages by officers with rewards for proficiency.

interpreter²³. This suggestion was rejected, probably because of its considerable cost if applied to the entire British Army.

In 1905 a concrete proposal entitled »Scheme M – Encouragement of the Study of Languages« was finally published²⁴ and followed in 1907 by an official brochure outlining the precise modalities²⁵. These subsequent sets of instructions detail the components of the language exams – on the oral side the examination was to comprise of »Conversation – to include test of the candidate's knowledge of the country concerned, something of its history and military affairs, and ability to conduct an ordinary polite conversation« as well as »oral translation from a British or foreign training manual«²⁶. Written examinations included prose and unseen translation as well as dictation and two more unusual tests: »Writing a private or official letter in the language, a précis being given« and »Extempore translation (to be taken from an ordinary newspaper and read out by the examiner) from the language«²⁷.

There is a further significant evolution in the interpreter qualification process: an officer wishing to qualify as an interpreter could ask for special leave to be spent in the country of the language in question. If his stay was of at least two months and he then succeeded in passing the examination to qualify as an interpreter, he would be paid a grant to cover part of the expense incurred by the stay abroad. These grants were of 30 pounds for most languages; French, however, was only recompensed with 23 pounds, while German was worth 50 pounds. The British army thus developed a subtle mechanism for influencing language choice among officers and encouraging the study of those languages they deemed most necessary, while avoiding the French route of creating specific language specialists. In making a stay in the country and success in the exam a necessary condition for obtaining the grant, the army made a deliberate choice to encourage spoken language skills and idiomatic usage over purely academic and theoretical language. It also reduced the need for language courses provided by the army as a part of the necessary skills were to be obtained through self-study in the respective country.

This policy was put into place from 1907 onwards. We can study the development by analysing the numbers of officers listed as qualified interpreters per year in the Army Lists. Fig. 2 shows the evolution of the three principal languages:

We can see that, beside the significant increase in overall figures, the power balance between the languages shifts. While Russian is in first position with the greatest number of officers choosing to qualify as interpreters in that language until 1900, it is then overtaken by French which becomes increasingly important in the run-up to the First World War. German is in third position until the very eve of the conflict, with the figures for 1914, which place it ahead of Russian. Explaining these figures is not a straightforward task as they represent a necessarily complex reality. Officers chose to pursue a language and chose which language or indeed languages to offer for examination²⁸. The decrease in the number of Russian speakers among British officers between the 1880s and 1900 is most probably linked to the perceived decline in the Rus-

23 NA Kew, WO 32/8880 » Scheme for Encouraging the Study of Foreign Languages by Officers with Rewards for Proficiency «, report by Director of Staff Duties D. Hutchinson dated 25th October 1905.

24 NA Kew, WO 32/8880 »Scheme for Encouraging the Study of Foreign Languages by Officers with Rewards for Proficiency«.

25 British Library Asia Pacific Collections, 231-22, IOR/L/MIL/7/9855, Regulations relating to the Study of Foreign Languages, included in Army Orders dated 1st June 1907.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Indeed a significant number of individuals appear for several languages. The best-known »serial linguist« is James Moncrieff Grierson, later Lieutenant General, who qualified in 1886 in Russian, German and French before adding Hindustani and Pashtu amongst others during various postings abroad.

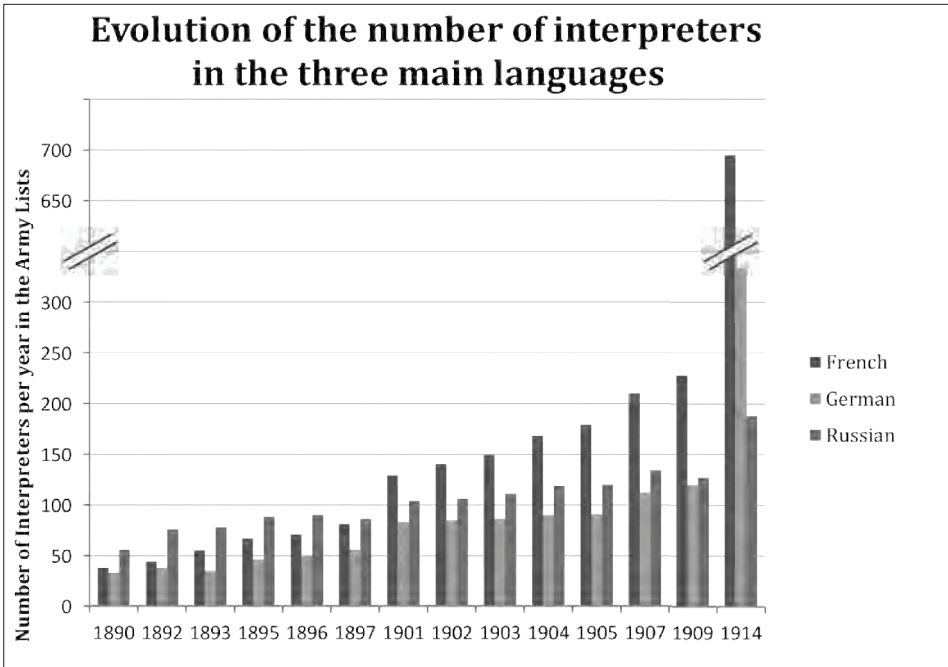


Fig. 2: Figures compiled from lists of officers qualified as interpreters in the published Army Lists. The figures for any given year include all qualified officers at that point and are thus cumulative rather than showing only newly qualified officers.

sian threat to British possessions in India²⁹. The very significant increase for French towards the end of the period may be a result of the new reimbursement system, which encouraged officers with some level of French from their schooling or travels to come forward and pass the exam in order to obtain the fixed amount of 23 pounds, a sum which probably meant they made a profit even considering the obligatory two-month-stay in the country.

The skills examined by the Civil Service Commission in order for officers to qualify as interpreters differ significantly from those required for French reserve military interpreters. We find no indication of special skills in military Intelligence against enemy countries (asking civilians for information, interrogating prisoners of war and deserters). Rather than being used for Intelligence purposes, British officers who qualified as interpreters seemed to have been recruited with the idea that their communication skills would be useful in interactions with local elites, for example in writing letters and conducting »polite conversation«. This raises important questions about specific national military cultures and their impact on the training of officers. In the British case language skills formed part of the necessary equipment of officers in an army with important duties as an imperial police force.

The British army pursued a different strategy as far as language use »on the ground« during military interventions was concerned. The 1912 Field Service Regulations have the following to say about the use of orderlies and guides:

²⁹ As suggested by John. McDERMOTT, *The Revolution in British Military Thinking from the Boer War to the Moroccan Crisis*, in: KENNEDY (ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers* (as in n. 4), p. 107.

»1. Orderlies are complementary to communication by signal, a certain establishment of orderlies being permanently allotted to the signal service (see Appendix I). They may be mounted on animals, motor cars, motor cycles, or bicycles, or be on foot. The general staff is responsible that they are distributed as required for purposes of communication.

The administrative services and departments provide themselves with orderlies from their own personnel, or by the enrolment of civilians. Should suitable civilians not be available, orderlies for permanent offices and signal stations on the lines of communication or in garrisons, will be detailed from military sources by the adjutant-general's staff³⁰.«

The British Army preferred to solve communication problems on the ground by the ad-hoc recruitment of civilians. Note that language skills are mentioned nowhere in the specifications about local orderlies, guides, and scouts – when it is quite obvious that they must at least have had to have been vaguely conversant in English. There is no clear contemporary justification for this choice which appears to have depended on the ability to identify a sufficient number of trustworthy locals. We can suppose that the long history of informal British trade networks had led to the emergence of a significant number of English-speakers, especially on the trade routes and in ports³¹.

In his PhD thesis, Jim Beach retraces the origins of the Intelligence Service to the Boer War with its extensive use of native guides and scouts with good knowledge of the lie of the land³². Here we find a second case where language was a secondary qualification, requested in addition to the actual skills necessary for the specific job. Officers qualified as interpreters were officers first and there appears to have been little systematic organisation as to whether they obtained postings where their foreign language skills were of direct use. Similarly, guides and scouts were recruited for their capacity to fulfil specific tasks such as transmitting messages or gathering information ahead of regular army patrols.

Our examination of the French and British approaches towards military language handling has revealed a number of significant differences. For the French side, language tasks were the responsibility of professionals recruited to that end due to their specific language skills, while for the British language was only ever a part of a larger communications and information task for which the appropriate individual needed to be identified. Neither of their strategies specifically foresaw the needs of prolonged coalition warfare and while the British army saw large numbers of officers qualify in French, especially in the years immediately preceding the war, there was no formal encouragement of English-language skills in the French army. The preparation for joint coalition warfare in the pre-war years must therefore be scrutinised with a view towards identifying what attempts were made to make these very different language strategies work together.

We find the first indications regarding communications on joint language strategy between the French and British armies in a report by Lieutenant-General Grierson towards the end of 1905³³. Samuel Williamson believes that the origins of this document are to be found in early negotiations which took place between Grierson and Huguet, the French military attaché in

30 General Staff War Office, *Field Service Regulations*, London 1912, p. 41.

31 As indicated, for example in: Simon SCHAFFER, Lissa ROBERTS, Kapil RAJ, James DELBOURGO (ed.), *The Brokered World. Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820*, Sagamore Beach, MA 2009.

32 Jim BEACH, *British Intelligence and the German Army 1914–1918*, PhD thesis, University College London 2004, p. 126.

33 NA Kew, WO 106/49 C *Preparation of Expeditionary Force*, Original Memo Lt Gen Grierson. The date on the cover is 1905.

London³⁴. The memo by Grierson contains a section entitled »Various Special Arrangements« which mentions aspects of communication arrangements with regard to two distinct groups: liaison officers and interpreters on the ground with the British units.

As far as communication at officer level was concerned, the system envisaged in the memo was very one-sided. Despite the relatively large number of qualified French interpreters among the British officers, the bulk of the work in coordinating the coalition was to be accomplished by individuals designated by the French army:

»An officer of the army of the country in which operations take place will be attached to the staff of each of the following units:

Army Corps
 Infantry, Cavalry, or Mounted Infantry Divisions
 Cavalry or Mounted Infantry Brigade
 Divisional Troops of an Infantry Division
 Corps Troops of an Army Corp«³⁵.

The only British personnel to be detached was to be the following:

»A British general officer, with an officer of the General Staff as his assistant, will be attached to the head-quarters of the Commander-in-chief of the allied army, and another general officer, with a General Staff officer as his assistant, to the nearest allied army operating on one or other flank of the British forces. A field officer will also be attached to the Director-General of the local military railway service, to represent the interests of the British forces«³⁶.

Grierson specifies that the officers of the country where the hostilities take place are to be placed under the authority of their British superiors in the units to which they are attached – a very difficult proposition both individually and institutionally, yet one which is coherent with the practice of relying on trustworthy locals that can be integrated into British army frameworks.

Secondly the memo specifies another category of intermediaries who would again be provided by the French army. These were to be »non-commissioned officers of the French Reserve mounted on bicycles [who] will be attached to each unit of the British Army as interpreters or orderlies«³⁷. The association of the two terms is significant here as it shows a continuation of the doctrine evolved from the Boer War onwards about the use of guides, scouts, and orderlies.

On the French side, Grierson's proposition combining the »traditional« liaison officers and the new interpreter-guides was duly noted: »General Staff W asks for the use of a certain number of interpreters (of non-commissioned rank and equipped with bicycles) in order to accomplish information transmission between the two armies«³⁸. In 1908 a new summary document specifies that »the F army will provide the W army with a certain number of officer or

34 34 WILLIAMSON, *The Politics of Grand Strategy* (as in n. 4), p. 65.

35 NA Kew, WO 106/49 C Preparation of Expeditionary Force, Original Memo Lt Gen Grierson.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 SHD Vincennes, DAT 17 N 1782, Note sur la composition de l'armée anglaise destinée à opérer sur le continent dans le cas d'une guerre entre la France et l'Allemagne, London, 22th January 1906. Translation by Franziska Heimburger. »W« is the code name for the British army used throughout the French documentation on the negotiations.

Éléments	par unité		au total	
	Officiers	Ss-off. et h. d.t.	Officiers	Troupe
Grand quartier général	2	4	2	4
Quartier général d'armée	1	2	2	4
Quartier général de la Div. de Cav.	1	2	1	2
État major de Division	1	1	6	6
Rég. de caval. ou bat. d'inf. montée	2	12	36	216
Escadron divisionnaire		2		50
Groupe d'artillerie		2		50
C. montée du Génie		1		4
C. divisionnaire du Génie		1		12
C. de télégraphie sans fil		2		2
C. de signaux divisionnaire		2		12
C. de signaux des troupes d'armée		2		8
Bataillon d'infanterie		2		146
Trains divisionnaires		4		24
Colonne divisionnaire		1		6
Colonne de troupes d'armée		1		1
Train de Division de cavalerie		5		5
Total	n/a	n/a	47	548

Fig. 3: SHD Vincennes, DAT 17 N 1782, Tableau du nombre des interprètes à attacher à l'armée W, 20th September 1911.

NCO interpreters, to be determined as far as possible following the propositions of W General Staff³⁹. No more details on the employment of interpreters is forthcoming and it is not clear as to how the French intended to meet their promise. As the interpreters in European languages in the French army were of the reserve officer type, we can assume that it was these who were to be used.

The negotiations restarted in 1911 – as a consequence on the one hand of international tensions surrounding the second Moroccan crisis and on the other of the nomination in Britain of the great Francophile Henry Wilson as Director of Military Operations⁴⁰. On September 19th 1911, the British side transmitted their interpreter needs, amounting to 47 officers and 548 rank interpreters⁴¹.

Several details are significant in this table (Fig.3). First of all, two thirds of the officers and 40 % of the rank interpreters are detailed for the eighteen regiments of cavalry and mounted infantry. This confirms the British understanding of these men as guides who were to accompany patrols, the natural role of the cavalry in joint operations.

On the French side this proposal met with general approval. It is here that we find the first mention of hierarchical distinction between the different types of interpreters to be provided by the French army, a distinction that the British initially highlight: »General Staff W. has

39 SHD Vincennes, DAT 17 N 1782, note du 8 janvier 1908 résumant les principales dispositions prévues pour le cas d'une coopération militaire F.W. Translation by Franziska Heimburger.

40 WILLIAMSON, *The Politics of Grand Strategy* (as in n. 4), p. 69.

41 NA Kew, WO 106/49A/1 History of the growth of the scheme; preparation of a plan for rendering military assistance to France, and notes on Entrainment and Embarkation. Address by Maj. Gen. Radcliffe on inception and working of scheme.

asked for this [rank] personnel to be employed only as interpreters and be distinct from the officer-personnel which will be attached to General Staff W to ensure liaison with General Staff F«⁴². For the French army this led to a double realisation: the limited numbers of reserve officer interpreters available would have to be used for the liaison tasks detailed by the British for officer interpreters. The 540 rank interpreters would have to be provided by a different, still to be invented, mechanism as, because of its system of recruiting interpreters described earlier, the French army did not yet have any other rank English language interpreters. The recruitment by competitive exam such as that which had been in place for the Arabic language was not a possibility because the negotiations between Britain and France were still secret and non-binding for the British side. An official opening of 540 posts for contact interpreters would immediately have drawn international attention as well as being problematic for the French army, as the selected interpreters would then be on full army pay until an eventual possible war with an eventual British intervention.

A solution was finally developed

The 1st and 3rd Army corps and the military governor of Paris would be asked to find for certain supply and provisions operations entailing contact with foreign countries, NCOs and men from the rank who speak the language W fluently. They should also be able to ride a horse or a bicycle in order to handle their eventual missions⁴³.

While the British had asked for interpreters as guides to the local terrain, the French here continue their recruitment logic of selecting on language skills alone, with an economic function as pretext. As these instructions were passed down to the regiments, they each established a list of suitable individuals. In at least a certain number of cases this task appears to have been delegated to the gendarmes. As one interpreter André Maurois wrote: »One day a gendarme had come to see my parents and had asked my mother whether I spoke English. Her positive reply meant I was added to the list. There was no exam, none of those concerned were forewarned. My mother forgot to tell me about the visit⁴⁴.«

Maurois himself was later to write of his considerable surprise at having been chosen and of his limited English language skills⁴⁵. When we consider, however, the pretext that was given publicly for this selection of interpreters, which linked it to economic negotiations, we understand better why Maurois, who was at that point the principal buyer for his family's textile enterprise in Normandy, would have been designated by the local gendarme as a suitable person.

In conclusion we can thus note that the very different military language strategies in place in the British and French armies at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries were coordinated in the secret pre-war negotiations by maintaining elements of each side's preferred procedures. The British preferred to rely on trusted local manpower for intelligence and scouting and were relieved to see the French agree to provide these services. The French were used to selecting language professionals on the basis of their language skills and were thus quick to extend their capacity to do this when they received the British demand. The theoretical agreement was therefore amicably reached and joined the other subject areas such as railway and port logistics which had been decided well in advance of an eventual British intervention. The very different national military traditions in handling languages do not seem to have been discussed and there is certainly no trace of these being taken into consideration for future joint coalition warfare.

42 SHD Vincennes, DAT, 17 N 1782, Minute d'une note remise au Colonel Huguet, dated 30th September 1911.

43 SHD Vincennes, DAT, 17 N 1782, Note pour le 3^e bureau de l'état-major de l'armée, dated 28th September 1911.

44 André MAUROIS, *Mémoires*, Paris 1970, p. 114. Translation by Franziska Heimburger.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

Looking forward to the actual outbreak of the conflict, it is also clear as to how this seemingly ideal solution would quickly reach its limits. A group of untrained individuals were to take on tasks under the dual authority of the French army, who selected them and considered them as their own military personnel, and as limited to strictly linguistic tasks, and of the British army who considered them as loaned to them for the duration of the military conflict as multi-purpose personnel for assistance in all manner of tasks on the ground.

This inevitably led to tensions and as late as October 1918 we find the case of an interpreter Paul-Louis Petit who was attached to a different unit to resolve a disagreement⁴⁶. He had applied the French rules for acting as a military interpreter (confirmed by official texts emanating from the French Military Mission attached to the British Forces) and thus complained that the British staff captain who had asked him to buy food for the mess had committed an *«excès de pouvoir»*⁴⁷, that he had abused his position. The British officers had, quite naturally, complained about what they perceived as an uncooperative interpreter who could not even be counted on to carry out the most basic tasks while on foreign operations.

The British army, which the Leathes report had considered essentially unprepared as far as foreign language tasks were concerned, approached their intervention on the continent very much in the same framework as previous overseas engagements in colonial contexts. The French army viewed communication, as they had in North Africa, as a task which was to be handled by language specialists acting as neutral conduits. It was thus up to each individual interpreter to forge a viable role and status, operating between these very different national military cultures.

46 SHD Vincennes, DAT 17 N 476, carnet de notes Paul-Louis Petit, comment by the French liaison officer dated 14th October 1918.

47 Ibid.