



## DECISIVE BATTLES OF THE WORLD

### (7) THE BATTLE OF VALMY

**I**N precise terms, it is not easy to say exactly what the Battle of Valmy decided. While it was being fought between the French revolutionary armies in 1792 and the invading Germans, the National Convention was debating the constitution of the new Republic in Paris. If it had been lost the debate would have been useless. France once again would have been ruled by an oppressive monarchy. Napoleon might well have remained a subordinate officer, having no status to bring him into the ranks of the elite which officered the old French army.

It was won, and France did become a republic, and Napoleon became Emperor of France. But the thing begun then has never seemed to come to an end. France ever since has been in such a state of political unrest it has never been possible to say with confidence that the revolution was successful. "No settled system of Government," says Creasy, "that shall endure from generation to generation, that shall be proof against corruption and popular violence, seems capable of taking root among the French."

#### Valmy Decided Something

If we look in France, and especially now, for those things which revolutions are begun to secure, we find singularly little excuse for believing that the revolution of 1792 accomplished its purpose. But if we look beyond France, and into the true meaning of the history of Europe; if we examine the temper of the European peoples, we can see that Valmy did decide something. It established the right and ability of common people to resent oppression, organise against it, and overthrow it. It established the catchphrase, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," until all the poor and starving of the world had heard of it and fed themselves upon it, waiting for the day when by force of arms they could take what the years had refused them. The French revolution ended the days of despotic monarchs in Europe. It was not so much a cause or an effect to be weighed, pro and con, as an inspiration which every dictator, commoner or king, has since had to reckon with. And it was Valmy which preserved the revolution.

#### Before the Battle

The situation on September 20, 1792, was this:

In Paris the Convention was debating the establishment of a Republic.

From Germany the Duke of Brunswick had led into France a powerful army bent on destroying the revolutionary regime, enhancing the military prestige of Prussia, and, most important, restoring to power the supporters of the French monarchy who were marching with it.

In France itself there was chaos. Louis XVI. had not yet been beheaded. The country was divided between the driving forces of the revolution and the monarchy. Substantial elements were organised to throw the Convention out of Paris.

#### A Disorganised Army

The army was as much disorganised as the people. It had been created by a monarchical government. It had been officered by the aristocracy, upon whose prestige its spirit and discipline relied. This discipline had gone, most of the old officers had gone, many of the legionnaires had deserted and crossed the frontiers to rally to the armies forming against revolutionary France. Its greatest single strength was in the Carmagnole levies, which were liberally sprinkled with agitators and the murdering scum which the revolution had inevitably brought to the surface.

Already this army had been ignominiously defeated. Austria was at this time weak at home, and France saw a chance to steal away Austria's dominant position in the Netherlands. But every move in the campaign had ended dis-

gracefully. There was no unity in the French army, no spirit, no disciplined courage.

#### Brunswick's Force

While the French were running so busily away from every Austrian they encountered, Brunswick was collecting a great army on the Rhine. Under him he had 60,000 Prussians, 45,000 Austrians, and 15,000 supporters of the French monarchy. All he could see against him on the road to Paris were 23,000 men at Sedan, and 20,000 at Metz.

Between these two points Brunswick made his advance. On August 20 the fortress of Longwy surrendered without giving trouble. Verdun followed almost as easily on September 2. These initial successes brought Brunswick between Kellerman on his left, with 20,000 men from the post at Metz, and the garrison of Sedan on his right. He could now strike right and left with his immensely superior forces and open a military promenade to Paris.

Fortunately for the Convention, while Kellerman was able to hold together his men on the French right flank, Dumouriez controlled the forces available at Sedan.

Although the fortresses had fallen, there still remained the ridge of the Argonne. Behind this Dumouriez gathered the Sedan troops. With them he fortified all the defiles in the chain and was confident of holding Brunswick in this Thermopylae. While detachments held these passes he moved his main body under cover of the Argonne to a strong position at St. Menesould, where Kellerman could make an effective junction.

#### Hitch in the Plans

There was a hitch in his plans which might well have proved fatal. An Austrian force cut through one of the passes, and threatened a flanking movement. But Dumouriez rapidly recovered. He assembled his men once again and withdrew them entirely to the strong position in the south. The way was now clear for Brunswick to march on Paris, but Dumouriez had enough men to threaten his rear if that should happen, and the engagement was forced on the invaders. Kellerman, meanwhile, had received word of the movements of the men from Sedan, and was able to come up in time to reinforce his commander-in-chief. By the time Brunswick had pushed his much larger and less mobile

army through the Argonne, and deployed on the southern facings, Kellerman had come completely round behind Dumouriez and established himself across the Aube River on the plateau of Valmy.

This was not actually the position which Dumouriez had designed for him. It was too far forward. Between Kellerman and the army of Dumouriez there was a gap into which the German army might easily have cut.

#### The French Stood Firm

On September 20 the opposing forces faced each other. Brunswick was actually closer now to Paris than the defenders of Paris. He moved his right wing first, to gain Kellerman's left flank and exposed rear, and so cut him off from retreat towards Chalons. The rest of Brunswick's army moved to make the left pincer of an encircling movement.

When fog over the ground cleared at 10 a.m. the French could see moving towards and round them these two menacing arms of the invaders. They were heavily outnumbered, and their only tradition was the tradition of flight and retreat. But they held good ground and there was spirit in them if a general could be found to make use of it. Carlyle described the Carnagnoles: "... this uncertain heap of shriekers, mutineers, were they once drilled and inured, will become a phalanx of mass of fighters; ... who require only bread and gunpowder; very sons of fire; the adroitest, hastiest, hottest, ever seen perhaps since Attila's time."

#### The Cannonade of Valmy

After the fog lifted the battle resolved itself almost into anti-climax. It was mainly artillery action and there is no tale to tell of great slaughter. The French under Kellerman held their position, and Brunswick's army retreated. After that one day of ineffectual attack and repulse, Brunswick remained in the northern provinces until shortage of material and sickness reduced his great army until only the wreck of it remained.

There was nothing dramatic about the battle, except the great events which waited upon it. Perhaps those rough soldiers under Kellerman anticipated in their own way the verdict of Goethe, who was present as a spectator:

"From this place, and from this day forth, begins a new era in the world's history; and you can all say you were present at its birth."

#### "Cannon-Fever" Goethe As A War Correspondent

**G**OETHE as a war correspondent must have been almost the most incongruous figure ever seen on any battlefield. At the battle of Valmy, described on this page, he was present as a spectator. He had accompanied the Army of the Duke of Brunswick out of curiosity, and when battle was actually joined, he decided to find out for himself what it felt like to be under fire. Here is his description of what he calls "Cannon-fever":

"Quite alone, and left to myself, I rode away on the heights to the left, and (Continued on next page)

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