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The French Foreign Legion

Keywords

Algeria; *anonymat*; French Foreign Legion; legionnaires; professional soldier

Q. When was the Foreign Legion established and why?

A. The French Foreign Legion was created by King Louis-Philippe on 10 March 1831. In many ways it was established as a result of political events in both France and Europe. The revolution of July 1830, which toppled the Bourbon monarchy in France, had attracted sympathizers in neighbouring European countries, who wanted to spread the revolution's ideals of liberty and equality to their own countries. When these attempts failed, many unsuccessful revolutionaries fled to France, and Paris became, more than ever, a hotbed of revolutionary thought.

Louis-Philippe hoped to strengthen his hold on the throne of France by 'purging' France of 'undesirable' elements. The creation of the Foreign Legion was formed, in the words of the French War Minister Soult, 'with the only purpose of creating an outlet and giving a destination to foreigners who flood into France and could cause trouble'. It was intended to remove from mainland France officers and soldiers who were felt to be awkward, excitable, or frankly dangerous subjects for the new monarchy.

Because Louis Philippe's predecessor, Charles X, had begun the conquest of Algeria in 1830, the new King had a ready-made purpose for his newly-formed *Légion étrangère*: it was to be stationed well away from France in Sidi bel Abbès, and was to complete the pacification of France's new colony, Algeria.

LOUIS PHILIPPE, ROI DES FRANÇAIS, à tous présent et à venir, SALUT :
vu la loi du 9 mars 1831. Sur le rapport de notre ministre secrétaire d'Etat au
département de la guerre NOUS AVONS ORDONNE ET ORDONNE CE
QUI SUIV

ART-1. Il sera formé une légion composée d'étrangers. Cette légion prendra la
dénomination de légion étrangère.

ART-2. Les bataillons de la légion étrangère auront la même formation que les
bataillons d'infanterie de ligne française, excepté qu'ils n'auront point de
compagnie d'élite. Chaque compagnie sera, autant que possible, composée
d'hommes de même nation et parlant la même langue.

ART-3. Pour la solde, les masses et son administration, la légion étrangère
sera assimilée aux régiments français. L'uniforme sera bleu, avec le simple
passepoil garance, et le pantalon de même couleur ; les boutons seront jaunes
et porteront les mots, 'légion étrangère'.

ART-4. Tout étranger qui voudra faire partie de la légion étrangère ne pourra y être admis qu'après avoir contracté, devant un sous-intendant militaire, un engagement volontaire.

ART-5. La durée de l'engagement sera de trois ans au moins et de cinq ans au plus.

ART-6. Pour être reçus ou s'engager, les étrangers devront n'avoir pas plus de 40 ans et avoir au moins 18 ans accompli, et la taille de 1,55. Ils devront en outre être porteurs : 1° De leur acte de naissance ou de toute autre pièce équivalente ; 2° D'un certificat de bonne vie mœurs ; 3° D'avoir un certificat d'acceptation de l'autorité militaire constatant qu'ils ont les qualités requises pour faire un bon service.

ART-7. En l'absence des deux premières pièces indiquées à l'article précédent, l'étranger sera envoyé devant l'officier général commandant qui décidera si l'engagement peut être reçu.

ART-8. Les militaires faisant partie de la légion étrangère pourront rengager pour deux ans au moins et pour cinq ans au plus. Les engagements ne donneront droit à une haute paie qu'autant que les militaires auront accompli cinq ans de service.

Q. How were men recruited into the Foreign Legion?

A. Until recently, recruits to the Foreign Legion had been largely voluntary. Over 100 different nationalities have joined the Legion's ranks, and one can plot the geography of international turmoil and upheaval by the recruitment statistics of the Legion: the revolutionary fervour of 1830 brought numerous refugees to France – Spaniards caught up in Liberal agitation, Italians fleeing the Duchies of Parma and Modena, Francophile Germans from Saxony, Hanover and the Rhineland; between 1870 and the First World War, there was a high proportion of Alsatians and Lorrainers; from 1920 onwards there was heavy enlistment from the Balkans, and particularly large numbers of White Russians fled to the Legion from the Soviet regime; in 1923, Fascist rule in Italy led to increasing numbers of recruits from that country, as was the case with Germans after 1933, Spaniards in 1938, and Poles and Czechs in 1939–40.

Because of its rule of '*anonymat*' (legionnaires give up their former civil identity on entering the legion), the French Foreign Legion has long had the reputation of harbouring criminals, vagabonds, and ne'er-do-wells. Indeed, in its early years, the Legion asked very little about the background of its recruits. As long as you looked healthy, could carry your pack, and were willing to fight for France, you were in. The Legion also has the reputation of providing a safe haven for men who are fleeing from their past for other reasons – a failed love affair, a family dispute, unemployment. The Legion's motto – '*Legio Patria Nostra*' – allows men to make a complete break with their past affiliations and devote themselves entirely to this institution, which, from now on, will become their only 'homeland'.

The Legion has also recruited its share of aristocrats, writers and statesmen – whose presence among its ranks adds to the mystery and glamour of the Legion.

Q. What was the military role of the Foreign Legion between 1831 and 1945?

A. On its creation, the French Foreign Legion was based in Sidi bel Abbès in Algeria, where it was immediately involved in the pacification of France's new colony. The Legion was deployed by France in all of its ensuing conflicts, including the colonial wars of conquest, Napoléon III's campaigns, the First and Second World Wars and the wars of decolonization. The legionnaires steadily gained a reputation for being 'the last men standing', and embodied the military virtues of sacrifice, bitter resistance, '*honneur et fidélité*', and a refusal to surrender. The expression '*faire Camerone*', referring to a heroic battle fought at a lonely farmhouse in Mexico in 1863, has come to mean fighting until the bitter end in the face of an overwhelming enemy, and epitomizes the Legion's approach to its military duties. When all else fails, bring in the Legion to do the job.

Q. What was the image of the Foreign Legion in French popular culture? How was the Legion represented in songs, books and films?

A. The French Foreign Legion is probably one of the most mythologized military corps in the world. It is a mysterious, enclosed institution, and jealously guards its secrets. The 'culture' of the Legion is one of a common language, a sense of shared history, and its own spiritual world – traditions, dress, cult personalities, sacred places and monuments. This culture creates a sense of identity, cohesion and belonging within the Legion, but it also makes the Legion almost irresistibly interesting to outsiders. The French Foreign Legion has always been surrounded by legend, romance and mystery, partly because of its rule of '*anonymat*', and the secrecy surrounding the identity of its recruits. Equally, the Legion's reputation for danger, glory, and heroism has made it a popular source for novelists and film-makers. P.C. Wren's novel of 1924, *Beau Geste*, (see also the famous 1939 film of the same name, starring Gary Cooper) is a classic tale of heroism and underpins several Legion myths. It is the story of the aristocratic Geste brothers who flee to the Legion, taking the blame for a crime they did not commit in order to protect the honour of their family. This narrative bolsters the notion that behind every legionnaire there lies a story of more than ordinary interest and suggests an upper-class presence in the ranks.



The status of the legionnaire as a professional soldier who is part of one of the toughest and most secret military corps in the world has made him into something of a heart-throb: the legionnaire is unattainable and therefore fatally attractive to women. In 'Mon Légionnaire', Piaf sings of her love and loss of an enigmatic and elusive tattooed Adonis:

Il était mince, il était beau,

Il sentait bon le sable chaud
Mon légionnaire

Je ne sais pas son nom,
Je ne sais rien de lui
Il m'a aimé toute la nuit
Mon légionnaire.

Popular culture's need for heroes, hard men and heart-throbs has changed little over the years, and the Legion still provides a ready source of violence, love, adventure, mystery, war, travel, and exoticism to fuel the narratives of novels and films (see Jean-Claude Van Damme's 1998 film, *Legionnaire*).



Claire Denis' film *Beau Travail* (1999), on the other hand, presents us with an aestheticized study of masculinity, and questions the postcolonial function of the Legion.



See also the Legion's Marching Song: 'Le Boudin':

Tiens, voilà du boudin, voilà du boudin, voilà du boudin
Pour les Alsaciens, les Suisses et les Lorrains
Pour les Belges, y en a plus, pour les Belges, y en a plus
Ce sont des tireurs au cul.

Au Tonkin, la Légion immortelle
A Tuyen-Quang illustre notre drapeau
Héros de Camerone et frères modèles
Dormez en paix dans vos tombeaux.

Au cours de nos campagnes lointaines
Affrontant la fièvre et le feu
Oublions nos peines,
La mort qui nous peine
La mort qui nous oublie si peu,
Nous la Légion.

To hear 'Le Boudin' sung, see:

<http://www.angelfire.com/fl/marcwitteveen/musicofthelegion.html>

Q. What military role did the Legion play during the wars of decolonization between 1945 and 1962? What impact did the end of empire have upon the Legion?

A. The Legion provided 40 per cent of the European troops who took part in the French war to regain Indochina. Never before had the Legion put such numbers into the field. There were four regiments of infantry, a regiment of armoured cavalry and its associated amphibious groups, and two battalions of paratroops, without counting the many independent companies – engineers, transport, repair and maintenance, air re-supply – about 30,000 men in total. This high investment in manpower made for high losses: 309 officers, 1,082 *sous-officiers* and 9,092 *légionnaires* lost their lives in the Indochina campaign.

Barely off the ships from Indochina, the Legion's troops became caught up in the Algerian War. This war had a particular relevance for legionnaires: they were defending what had been their homeland since 1830. However, in 1962, along with millions of *Pieds noirs* (European French residing in Algeria), the Legion was forced to leave its home forever. It is now based in Aubagne, in Southern France.

Q. What has been the role of the Legion since 1962?

A. The French Foreign Legion has had to reassess its role considerably in recent years. To some, the Legion is an embarrassing reminder of a colonial past that France would rather forget. For others, the Legion has a new, yet important function to fulfil. In the 1980s, the Legion's own magazine, *Képi Blanc*, ran the headline: 'Légionnaire, ton théâtre, le monde ...'. This has proved true: the Legion has been engaged under the flag of the United Nations in Lebanon, Bosnia, and Kosovo among others. More recently, the Legion has been put forward as a model upon which the creation of a unified pan-European Army would be based.

Key publication by Nikki Cooper

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Further reading

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