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Leadership and Demands of the Imperial Guard

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LEADERSHIP AND DEMANDS OF THE IMPERIAL GUARD

BY PAUL,
SOLDIER OF THE FORMER IMPERIAL GUARD.

TRANSLATED BY:
GEORGE OVERTON AND KENYA TAPIA

“He who serves his country well does not need elders.”
Voltaire

PARIS.

1814.

Translators' Introduction:

For years, under Napoleon, the French Army fought hard and won numerous important victories. Although many died, they were a united cause and made much progress under Napoleon up until his defeat at Leipzig on October 19th, 1813. However, with Napoleon now gone, new leaders indicted him as a thief and a bandit, effectively discrediting both Napoleon and his soldiers who had worked so hard for their nation's cause. One soldier, Paul, writes in "Leadership and Demands of the Imperial Guard" against this newfound sentiment.

Free of intrigue and any kind of political parties, a soldier knows neither pride nor the lowliness of courts. The nation appoints him a leader. Loyal to the country, it is all he knows, he is happy to die for her.

For twenty years, the country subjected to various factions always found us on the path of honor. Loyal to her cause, from our blood we have brought to the heights of military greatness such people as Jean Victor Marie Moreau¹, Jean-Charles Pichegru², and Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte³. Ambitions mislead them; ungrateful and treacherous to the country, they turned their weapons against her! Under General Hoche⁴, we brought peace to Vendée⁵ and returned to their duties men who had separated their cause from that of the nation—who, under the pretext of avenging a king victim of his kindness and frailty, made the French blood run within France.

In the upheavals of the Revolution, we lavished our blood against the enemies of the country. Under a skillful leader, Italy saw us emerge and triumph. Germany trembled at our success. We blindly followed the leader that the nation gave us. Under the National Convention⁶ and the Directory⁷, we were faithful to honor and to the nation. Under General Bonaparte, under the consuls, under Emperor Napoleon, proclaimed by the people and the army, we have not changed.

The man that France appointed Emperor, that France called her tutelary genius, that France saw triumph for twenty years on her behalf—who was betrayed by his allies, deceived by the first body of the nation, and sold out by those whom he had spoiled with rewards—is treated as an infamous bandit. And we who shared his laurels are scolded for the tears we have shed for his retreat. No! The cowards who sold him out did not witness his last goodbyes. They did not see that warrior who, for twenty years, spent his days on the battlefield of which he was always master, tell us: "Frenchmen! Be united, be happy. The French blood belongs to the nation; that's why we lavished it. Today, the fight is against me alone. I would be guilty to further risk the chances of battle; I do not want a single Frenchman to die for my own cause." They said that he had promised the looting of Paris to his army. He knew the heart of his soldiers all too well to make such a suggestion. He never thought of that. They said that he had given order to blow up the capital, but he did not want a single Frenchman to die for his cause. He refused our arms that could defend him. We would all have died for him; honor gave us that duty, and the nation had entrusted him to us.

¹ TR.—Jean Victor Marie Moreau (1763 – 1813) was a French general who helped Napoleon to power but later became his rival.

² TR.—Charles Pichegru (1761 – 1804) was a French general and political figure of the French Revolution.

³ TR.—Jean Bernadotte (1763 – 1844) was the King of Sweden who served a long career in the French Army.

⁴ TR.—Lazare Hoche (1768 – 1797) was a French general in the Revolutionary Army.

⁵ TR.—Vendée is a region in France in which a counterrevolution rebellion took place from 1793-96.

⁶ TR.—The National Convention was a constitutional and legislative assembly governing France from 1792-5.

⁷ TR.—The Directory was an executive governing body in France following the Convention from 1795-9.

That man who formerly made Europe tremble—who was the idol of his army of which he was the father and who will be the world’s object of admiration—preferred to separate himself from this France, where each step recalls his genius, rather than to see it delivered to the horrors of war and give birth to a new Vendée.

Napoleon’s abdication and his last words announced to the army that it was going to undergo a change in leadership. Each day we learned of the operations in Paris; we received notices in which the one who eight days earlier had been deified and called the only support of the Great Empire, was now being treated as a bandit and filthy criminal. They even denounced the victor of Marengo⁸ as a coward. The example from the past had taught us to not give any credence to such writings. The faction of Orléans⁹ had used them as a means of murdering the virtuous Louis XVI. All the political parties that had been prominent in the revolution, until the consulship, behaved in such a manner.

We waited at Fontainebleau¹⁰ for the orders of the nation, which was represented by the provisional government. We saw with sorrow that, in order to keep its stronghold, the government was using the lowest and most treacherous methods. To our old captain, it imputed crimes that to this day are unknown to the French. The progress of the new political party was quick. The people remained passive. And we, loyal to our dear motto *Honor and Nation*, accepted with the submissiveness that soldiers owe to the will of the nation Louis XVI¹¹’s brother’s nomination to the throne—and the act that recalled the old nobility to its former position. However, we had the horrors of Vendée in front of our eyes. We knew that someone called Chabanne¹², who called himself Louis XVIII¹³’s military assistant, had treated us as bandits and rebels in his letters. We knew that this very Chabanne had proposed, on behalf of his master, to buy the French army in exchange for gold and honors!

A soldier suffers and never mutters a word. For us, factions had disappeared; the leader of the state had just been appointed. Louis, in taking up the nation’s cause, enslaved us to his own. Proud to defend the throne, we took an oath of loyalty to the leader of France.

Several units of our guard served as his escort when the French monarch made his entrance into the capital. The testimonies of satisfaction that were given to us on our way assured us that France still found us worthy of her. Our sad and strict demeanor suited our situation. We had just been separated from a leader who had always driven us to glory, and for the first time, the army saw its enemies without making them tremble.

The contrast of our position with that which we had held for twenty-five years reminded us of the victor in Italy¹⁴. But this memory, dear to our hearts, did not change anything in our behavior.

We were astonished to see the King dating his decrees from the nineteenth year of his reign. We thought that a king only reigned from the day when those who were entrusted to him were made happy. A soldier does not know what happens in the cabinets. In the various courts of Europe, where the fate of weapons led us, we never heard about Louis.

⁸ TR.—The Battle of Marengo was fought on June 14th, 1800 in Northern Italy. Here, Napoleon drove the Austrians out of Italy, enhancing the political position of the French Army.

⁹ TR.—Around seventy miles southwest of Paris, Orléans has historically been the site of high class French royalty.

¹⁰ TR.—Fontainebleau is a commune about thirty miles south of Paris.

¹¹ TR.—Louis XVI ruled France from 1774 to 1793 until his execution by guillotine.

¹² TR.—Soldiers in Napoleon’s army believed Chabanne to be among Louis XVIII’s key military aides.

¹³ TR.—Louis XVIII ruled France from 1814 to 1824. During the Revolution, he spent twenty-three years in exile in England.

¹⁴ TR.—In Italy, Napoleon won a notable victory against the Austrians in 1800 at the Battle of Marengo.

When France opened its political process so that everyone could express their desire for a leader, our heart agreed with theirs. The throne was vacant; Louis was not even in France. The Civil Code and the victories of Italy and Marengo rose Napoleon to the Empire. In him, the army saw its first leader, and the other bodies of the nation saw their first legislator. Raised in camps, we do not know the reasons why thrones are given or taken away; we only know to defend them. We always looked at the throne as the central point where the wills of the nation were united, and the one who sits there as the primary subject of the nation is entrusted with the volitions of all.

Louis, in sitting on France's throne, had promised not to change anything. But he stopped trusting the army with the protection of the throne and trusting those soldiers who, for twenty years, lavished their blood to support the honor of the country. In our place, he called upon the Swiss. He called upon these nobles—of whom the majority had abandoned the nation, and among whom several had marched against it. They forgot about our services and, to the King, they made us out as rebels. May Louis scrupulously examine our behavior towards the last leader that the nation had entrusted to us. May he remember those who abandoned Louis XVI, and watch those who surround him. The King will come back from his mistake, and bring back close to the throne those who should never have parted with it.

I do not call upon those men who, for twenty-five years, abandoned their former king and who today shamelessly spread the name of their fathers whom they dishonored. I call upon the Frenchmen and upon the King. If the heroic deeds of a long series of ancestors do not speak for us, then we offer our wounds and our laurels. The twenty-five years that our blood lavished for our country answers to France and her motto, to which we will always be loyal.

Honor and Nation.