

Abstract

The French Foreign Legion has many traits and characteristics that may be labelled as strange, anachronistic or controversial. It is, however, a fully functional and well performing military unit. What are the inner mechanisms that allowed it to remain in existence until the present day?

If we leave out external influences and consider the Foreign Legion as a typical total institution, we can try to find and classify these factors. The first group of mechanisms is connected to admission and accession of the candidates to the Legion and includes a formal change of the applicants' identity, weakening of their links with their own personal history and an indoctrination aimed at creating a strong bond with the Foreign Legion. In the second category we find characteristics and processes that further deepen this acquired loyalty, such as rituals, customs, songs etc.

However, these mechanisms aren't always working properly. The French military campaign in Indochina after the end of the Second World War is an example of a situation where some of these functional prerequisites were limited or missing completely. The image of the Foreign Legion during the Indochina War was affected by the so-called *myth of German veterans*, according to which a major part of the Legion composed of legionaries of German descent and among them former soldiers of the Nazi Third Reich. Although popular literature and the period propaganda probably exaggerate this image, it certainly had a negative effect on the Legion and in this paper I argue that it was caused exactly by the fact that some of the mechanisms I analysed previously were defunct.

We can't condition the existence of the French Foreign Legion exclusively to these factors. Yet they are significant characteristics contributing to the viability of the Foreign Legion as a unique military organization.