CHAPTER ONE

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE
JEUNE ÉCOLE

The theoretical foundation of the *jeune école* was mainly formulated by Théophile Aube, the founding father of the *jeune école*, and one of its most prominent advocates, Gabriel Charmes. In 1882, on a voyage to the Levant, Charmes had contracted the malady that led to his death a few years later. He met Aube during the latter’s recovery from the illness he had caught in Martinique. Certain historians and officers have wished to attribute some of the more radical aspects of the *jeune école*’s theories to Charmes.¹ There is, however, little reason to make such a distinction. Setting aside the touch of naïveté that characterized some of Charmes arguments, he and Aube developed a unity of views that makes it difficult to distinguish between the ideas of the two men. The arguments put forward by Charmes in the mid-1880s represented a logical development of Aube’s earlier writings. As Vice Admiral P.H. Colomb noted concerning the influence of Aube on Charmes’s writings: “it is only reasonable to suppose that though the hands are those of Esau, yet the voice is that of Jacob.”²

THE PREDECESSOR OF THE JEUNE ÉCOLE

Some of the basic features of the *jeune école*’s theory had already been expressed in the late 1860s by Captain Richild Grivel. A starting point for Grivel’s naval ideas was his assertion that France’s historical experience of naval warfare had shown that great encounters between battle fleets represented a severe danger for the inferior power.³ His analysis of fleet warfare also represented in many ways a theoretical point of

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departure for what was later to become the *jeune école*, and Grivel is often treated as its precursor.\(^4\) Although Grivel announced a change of direction in French naval thought that was further pursued by the *jeune école*, his reasons for adopting a new strategy designed for an inferior power was based on historical experience. The *jeune école*, for its part, mixed historical experience with an analysis of technological change and a good portion of technological optimism. Grivel’s historical analysis convinced him that France had to follow two completely distinct strategies, depending on who the enemy was. The Navy should be designed for use against two different kinds of foe: Against an inferior navy France should stick to *la grande guerre maritime*, a form of warfare Grivel defined as “to blockade the littoral of [the enemy], sweep from the seas its foreign trade, and undertake a major diversion in its rear.”\(^5\) Against a superior enemy the French Navy should pursue commercial warfare with cruisers.

Grivel used recent examples such as the Crimean War and the war against Austria in 1859 to highlight the options open to a superior navy. The Crimean War apparently showed that France, then allied with the strongest navy, could conduct extensive combined operations overseas, at the same time blockading Russian ports in the Baltic and the Black Sea and consequently eliminating Russian seaborne trade. French naval superiority in the 1859 war against Austria had again enabled France to choose between the options that Grivel argued constituted *la grande guerre maritime*: In order to be able to conduct such operations one would have to acquire supremacy over the great sea roads by defeating the enemy’s battle fleet.

Grivel speculated about a potential war against Prussia and stated that the French Navy would then be master of the sea and able to conduct all the operations of *la grande guerre maritime*:

> As master of the sea, could not France blockade at will the numerous ports of the North German Confederation and actively pursue its seaborne trade on the seas [...]? Could not our navy attack the enemy’s shores in the Baltic or the North Sea, creating there diversions large enough to


\(^5\) Grivel: *De la guerre maritime*, p. 277.