CHAPTER THREE

THE LEGACY OF THE JEUNE ÉCOLE

After the fall of the Goblet cabinet Aube retired to provincial life for the last three years of his life, and there was no one with his capacity ready to represent and develop further the ideas of the *jeune école*. His intellectual predecessor, Grivel, had died at the age of fifty-five of fever in Senegal in 1882, while Aube’s most active advocate, Gabriel Charmes, died at the age of thirty-six just at the start of Aube’s ministry.

The early 1890s, however, saw a revival of theoretical discussions among naval officers that were strongly inspired by Aube and Charmes. Some of these officers were prolific writers, but they did not hold formal positions in which they could exercise any significant influence on the organisation of the French Navy. These officers were, however, important in that they further developed the theories of the *jeune école* and thereby maintained it as a clear and coherent alternative to the traditionalists who were back in office in the Ministry of Marine.

The first radical ministry to take office during the Third Republic, that of Léon Bourgeois in November 1895, and the appointment of the civilian politician Edouard Lockroy as Minister of Marine, represented the return to power of the *jeune école*. His first period of office lasted six months. He was appointed Minister of Marine a second time in June 1898, and held the office until June the following year. Lockroy’s ideas on the challenges facing the French Navy and how it should be organised were in accordance with, and were probably inspired by, the best and most prominent *jeune école* thinker in the post-Aube era, Admiral Fournier. These two men exercised considerable influence over the French Navy because of the prominent positions they held. One of the important decisions made by Lockroy as Minister of Marine was to establish a naval staff college. Lokcroy appointed Admiral Fournier as the first commander of the college. However, the staff college did not turn into an institution preaching the gospel of the *jeune école*. Most of the lecturers in strategy, tactics and international law tried to give a presentation as accurate as possible of the strategic challenges facing the French Navy, although few of them can be said to have had an unbiased view of the different schools within naval thought. The *jeune école*'s
prominent position on the curriculum of the college was primarily due to the fact that the jeune école represented the only coherent alternative naval theory to that of the traditionalists. The staff college became, along with the Superior Council, newspapers and magazines, and to some extent the Parliament, one of the arenas in which naval strategy was discussed and formulated in the 1890s.

THE STRATEGIC OUTLOOK OF THE FRENCH NAVY UP TO THE FASHODA CRISIS

In a confidential 90-page memorandum on the status of the French Navy written in the aftermath of the Fashoda Crisis, the Minister of Marine, Jean-Louis de Lanessan, sharply criticised French naval strategy as it had been practiced more or less since the establishment of the Triple Alliance. During these years it had been almost an absolute rule that one did not “take any interest in England. One dismissed any idea of war against this power, and consequently, one did not in any manner consider organising our navy with an eye to such a war […]”, Lanessan argued.¹

Lanessan’s allegation that the French naval establishment had been almost single-mindedly occupied with the Triple Alliance as a potential enemy through most of the 1880s and 1890s was not unfounded. We have seen how Aube during his period as Minister of Marine encountered opposition when he attempted to draw up manoeuvres which designated Great Britain the enemy. As we shall see, the strategic considerations and the operational planning of the General Staff of the Ministry of Marine and the commanders in chief in Toulon and Brest also focused on the Triple Alliance well into the second half of the 1890s.

French concerns over the Triple Alliance’s naval ambitions in the late 1880s were not unfounded. Italy entered into several diplomatic agreements in the late 1880s to check the ambitions to change the Mediterranean status quo that it believed France to be harbouring.² These agreements and naval diplomacy in the form of port calls and

¹ SHM, BB4-2437: Note de M. de Lanessan sur la situation et les besoins de notre marine, November 1899, p. 3.
² Great Britain, Germany and Austria were all involved in different forms of naval diplomacy to convince the French of the strength of the coalition against them. Ropp: The Development of a Modern Navy, pp. 192–195.