

Joan of Arc : By the Standard or By the Sword

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Joan of Arcadia, the "Maid of Orléans," is one of the most celebrated historical figures of all time. Her life is one of the most compelling and researched stories ever recorded, from her humble upbringing as a peasant woman to her divine rise to power to become the most important figure of the Hundred Years War. Joan is known as many things; a Catholic saint, a heretic, an inspirer, a poster child for Feminist scholarship, a national heroine of France, but what about Joan as a soldier? Historical scholarship collectively agrees that Joan, whether she was conscious of it or not, reversed the decline of the French in the Hundred Years War. What is disputed is the extent of her military contribution to this sudden reversal. When looking at the historiography Joan's military involvement, there is a clear slope in change of interpretation. Early historical scholarship is much more prone to belittle Joan's military accomplishments as products of other leadership, luck, and naïve courage. Modern scholarship of Joan almost unanimously presents the opposite point of view, showing her to be extraordinarily intelligent and a military genius. This change is primarily due to two effects: a change of emphasis on sources and the change of historical scholarship. But before exploring the historiography with regards to Joan's military career, it is important to have a brief background of Joan's life and what it was that Joan actually did.

Joan was born in approximately 1412 AD, according to her claim that she was 19 years old when asked her age during her trial in 1431.¹ She was born in Domremy, a small village in northeastern France that was surrounded by hostile Burgundian lands.² She was born into a life of peasantry under her parents Jacques and Isabelle. At age twelve, Joan claims to have first had her visions while alone in a field. These visions would ultimately tell her to lead the expulsion of the English from France and bring the Dauphin Charles VII to Reims for coronation as King of France. At age sixteen, Joan petitioned for and finally received a visit to the Royal Court at Chinon to meet privately with the Dauphin. During her travels to Chinon, Joan wore men's clothing for fear of attack. From then on she would always be in male attire, until her capture. She in some way impressed the Dauphin, who made inquiries to her validity by ordering an inspection to see if she truly was a virgin. After being found a virgin, she persuaded the Dauphin to send her to the city of Orléans with an army to help relieve it from English siege.

On May 4, the French attacked and took the fortress Saint Loup and the next day captured the deserted fort of Saint Jean-la-Blanc. Assaulting the enemy again, despite opposition of French General Jean d'Orléans, "the Bastard," Joan opened the locked city gates and captured the fortress of Saint Augustine, sustaining fatigue and heavy losses.³ Then on May 7, Joan attempted an attack on the fortified boulevard Les

Tourelles, despite the war council's opposition. During the battle, she was wounded by an English arrow above her breast, precisely where she previously predicted she would be hit. Instructing the Abbé of Paquerel to stay near her, she explained "[f]or I have much to do, more than I ever had yet, and the blood will flow from my body, above my breast."⁴ She would be taken off the field, but would lead the final charge to take Tourelles. The battle of Tourelles was the last vital battle for Orléans as Joan was able to cross the bridge into the city of Orléans, despite the few remaining English soldiers.⁵ And so on May 8, 1429, ten days after Joan's arrival, the French had raised the Siege of Orléans. This proved to be Joan's most celebrated and impressive victory.

After this success, Joan convinced the Dauphin again to give her command of the army with Duke John II de Alençon to make their way to Reims for his coronation. She experienced a string of successes taking Jargeau June 12, Meung-sur-Loire on June the 15, and Beaugency on June 17. Then on June 18 Joan's army achieved a devastating victory over the English Commander Sir John Fastolf at the battle of Patay.⁶ Following the battle, the army traveled to the city of Auxerre, occupied by the English-allied Burgundians, and accepted its surrender on July 3. Next, the army reached the city of Troyes, performed a four day siege, then accepted the city's surrender without any losses. Joan and the army finally made it to Reims on July 16 and the coronation of King Charles VII followed. This was the peak of Joan's success.

With the amount of success the French had made, the French royal court negotiated a truce with the Duke of Burgundy, Phillip the Good, despite Joan's adamant requests to quickly attack Paris.⁷ The truce was later broken by the Burgundians, and on August 15, the French army of around 6,000-7,000 was met by an English force of 8,000- 9,000 led by John of Lancaster, the Duke of Burgundy. They fought, but no victor prevailed as the English remained fortified and tried to provoke a French attack that would never come.⁸ Lancaster left the next day to reinforce Paris, and the French assault of Paris followed on September 8. Joan was again injured, as she was hit in the leg by a crossbow arrow.⁹ However, she still continued to direct her troops, until the next morning when she received the order to withdraw the attack, suffering her first major defeat.¹⁰ Joan fought at La Charité briefly, but would withdraw the seemingly impossible attack. Hearing of Phillip the Good's plan to siege the French city of Compiègne, Joan left to defend the city, rallying men and winning a few small skirmishes outside the city of Lagny on her way.¹¹ On May 23, 1430, Joan was surrounded and captured by Burgundian forces after ordering a retreat and being the last of the French to leave. This marks the end of Joan's career as a soldier of the French Army.

Although Joan was held by the Burgundians until she was bought by the English government, King Charles VII never attempted to pay her ransom. Her highly controversial trial was conducted in Rouen, France in 1431 and as a result she was tricked into signing an abjuration document pertaining to her conviction of heresy.¹² In exchange for her life, she was forced to wear women's clothing to avoid execution for the repeated offense of heresy¹³. However, in prison she was later found in male attire. Some historians believe she was sexually assaulted and wore it in defense. Others believe that her dress was stolen, and she had no other clothes to wear. In any event, she was unfairly found violating her abjuration and was burned at the stake on May 30, 1431. This trial would later be deemed a political scam and unjust under canon-

law found by the retrial, or the "nullification trial," starting in 1452 and ending in 1456. The ecclesiastical court found Joan innocent and a martyr.

When answering the question if Joan was a significant contributor to the French military strategy, most modern historians would view the transcripts of Joan's "condemnation trial" as a skewed interpretation of her success, and find the nullification trial testimonies much more truthful. Early historians reverse, however, this same argument back upon the transcripts of the nullification trial. The most outspoken voice of this argument comes from medieval historian Edouard Perroy. Published in 1945, Perroy's book, *The Hundred Years War*, argues that the second trial is less conclusive when compared to the first because it tries to "prove too much."¹⁴ He argues that the trial was not performed in an entirely objective manner. First he describes the trial as being performed "too late:"¹⁵ "[i]ts testimony relates memories already distant and, so to speak, hazy with legend."¹⁶ Besides the time gap of over twenty years, Perroy also argues that the testimonies were embellished with the agenda to clear Joan's name. He writes that the testimonies "come from these same comrades of hers, legitimately and sincerely anxious to clear her memory of an infamous condemnation, and at the same time rehabilitate a king now victorious."¹⁷ With his reluctance accept the validity of the nullification trial as a source, it is understandable that Perroy takes the viewpoint that Joan is anything but a military genius.

In the chapter of his book devoted to Joan's military career in the Hundred Years War, he states vehemently that "[s]he knew nothing about the art of war, and thought that abstaining from oaths and brothels was enough to earn victory for her soldiers."¹⁸ To provide rational explanations to Joan's success, Perroy attributes them to the simplicity of medieval warfare, good fortune, and the silent influences of her fellow officers.

Perroy states that "the art of war didn't matter too much, and thus courage, confidence, and boldness made up for it."¹⁹ Explaining her celebrated victory at Orléans that seemed so "improbable," Perroy believes was actually quite a winnable situation for the French. He explains that the English suffered terribly during the six-month siege through the winter. Supply difficulties had led to sickness and desertion.²⁰ This long deterioration left the English with less than 4,000 men, too few to affect a close blockade as well as adequately man the fortifications they had built.²¹ He also cites many examples of Joan's generals not receiving any credit for battles won. One instance is at the crushing French victory at the Battle of Patay. Perroy describes Charles acting as a "chivalrous prince" when he gives all the credit of the victory to Joan when she had not reached the actual engagement until the battle was already over.²² He also attributes the English surrenders at the cities of Auxere, Troyes, Chalons, and Reims to "skillful negotiations" from contacts of Charles, rather than Joan's holy intimidation and strong attack plans. In sum, Perroy emphasizes the original trial, and concludes that Joan in fact "did not lead them, she left that duty to the captains such as Denois, Alençon, and Richmond."²³

Perroy, however, was neither the only nor the originator of this interpretation of Joan's career. Those who came before him, like Frenchman Anatole France in his biography of Joan published in 1909, also had the same view of Joan as a naïve mascot with powerful people around her. France was one of the first historians to take a strong

stance on whether Joan was a military strategist or not. He refrained from using the explanation of "a miracle" and instead found rational excuses for Joan's success that belittle her down to a bold, but lucky, peasant girl.²⁴

Perroy and France's views on Joan's military abilities were based on their emphasis of the condemnation trial as opposed to the nullification trial. It is clear that as traditional historians, they were afraid of an overwhelming bias of the nullification trial. However, the scholarship they practice is equally as biased. Perroy and France are both traditional historians who focused primarily on male behavior, with little consideration of females.²⁵ Because of this, neither France nor Perroy put Joan as the subject, nor do they interpret history from her point of view. This is most obviously seen as Perroy only attributes one chapter to the military career of Joan in his book, *The Hundred Years War*.

However, over time the nullification trial has gained prominence as a source and has become the most cited source when considering Joan's military capabilities. At the end of the war, the English were forced to leave France forever and Charles VII appointed an investigation of Joan's trial and a formal appeal on November 17, 1455.²⁶ It was closed on July 7 1456, concluding Joan's innocence, and charging of Bishop Pierre Cauchon with heresy for convicting an innocent woman.²⁷ The condemnation trial was considered unjust under canon-law for four primary reasons. The first was that no person officially accused her of a crime, and there was no evidence provided her with a crime.²⁸ The second was that Bishop Cauchon was found guilty of instructing the tampering of the recording to make Joan appear guilty.²⁹ The third reason was that Joan was supposed to be housed in an ecclesiastical prison and guarded in prison by women. Instead she was treated as a prisoner of war and was chained and guarded by male soldiers.³⁰ The fourth and final violation was that as a minor, Joan was supposed to be represented by a guardian, but was not.³¹ Thus, the nullification trial was forever labeled as a politically corrupt injustice.

Viewing Joan as a martyr grew increasingly popular, causing more attention and scholarship towards Joan's "divine" story. This was most evidently demonstrated by her canonization as a Catholic saint on May 16, 1920. Her story grew and grew, making her one of the most popular Catholic saints. During World War II even The United States used Joan as a symbol of female patriotism, much like "Rosie the Riveter" during World War II. She is depicted on a World War II propaganda poster, urging U.S. female citizens to contribute to the war effort by buying war saving stamps.³² On the poster she is illustrated wearing shining metal armor with her sword raised as the poser boldly reads "Joan of Arc Saved France, Women of America save your Country, Buy War Savings Stamps."³³ Her story had now taken off, and was adopted as a source of inspiration on a world-wide scale. After her canonization, Joan faded as a uniquely bold peasant women, became the official National Heroine of France and an icon of the rise of feminism.

With the growing popularity of her story, the post -World War II era brought with it a surge of scholarship that idealized Joan as the true producer of French victories throughout her military career in the Hundred Years War. This interpretation began before World War II, spearheaded by Vita Sackville-West in her simply titled biography *Saint Joan of Arc*. Sackville-West believed that Joan was not necessarily a military genius, but "we must grant her genius of personality."³⁴ Joan excelled because

she was a leader led by her single-mindedness and ability to deal with situations as they arose.³⁵ She also believed that Joan was very much responsible for the majority of the military decisions. In reference to the French army during the battle of Orléans, that “[s]he [Joan] had them all under her control, as not even officially their leader.”³⁶ Sackville-West’s obliquely differing opinion from earlier traditional historians like Perroy and France is due to her use of the testimonies and opinions of Joan’s fellow generals in battle: The Bastard, Jean d’Aulon, Jean Paquerel, and Louis de Contes.³⁷ These testimonies were ignored by the traditional historians as too biased towards Joan.

It is important to point out that although Sackville-West is considered strictly as just a novelist, her novel is mentioned in many subsequent historians’ works. Historian Stephen W. Richey later introduced her biography “[a]lthough Sackville-West’s book is a popular biography, it is still an invaluable tool for a scholar of Joan.”³⁸ He further labels her work, writing that it has “yet to be surpassed in the English language for its completeness and depth of detail.”³⁹ Most other historians agree, like Nadia Margolis, who comments in her book *Joan of Arc in History, Literature, and Film* that Sackville-West’s biography is “considered the best English language biography of Joan,” calling it “balanced, well-researched, and carefully presented.”⁴⁰ This source can thus be recognized as a legitimately composed interpretation of Joan’s military career that coincidentally fits into the developing slope of interpretational change.

When fully entering post-World War II scholarship on Joan, the traditional historian’s interpretation of her as a mere mascot wanes as the nullification trial gains more prominence as a source, and the influence of Feminist scholarship grows. Medieval historian Régine Pernoud, who wrote extensively on Joan, fits right in this trend, as she aligns herself with Sackville-West. She, like Sackville-West, primarily uses the testimonies of those closest to Joan, her fellow generals. She also puts emphasis on the nullification trial over the condemnation trial.⁴¹ One example displayed her caution towards the condemnation trial was expressed by the dismissal of any chance for Joan to share any memories or additions to her relief of Orléans.⁴² She also agrees with the notion that Joan made many of the military decisions as she cites the Bastard’s testimony where she convinced all of the captains and lords of royal blood to march towards Reims for the Dauphin’s coronation, rather than march on to Normandy.⁴³ Along with this idea, Pernoud again aligned with Sackville-West, argues that Joan’s greatest asset or “mode of action” was her ability to inspire and lead.⁴⁴

However, Pernoud adds one more aspect of Joan’s military abilities that differs from Sackville-West, as well as draws Pernoud even further from the traditional historians view: Joan’s ability to make tactical decisions. This characteristic was not as well explored by Sackville-West, as she maintained that Joan’s intelligence was just her courage and determination. She cites an example at the battle of Tourelles, where the French isolated the bastide by collapsing one of the arches that supported the bridge.⁴⁵ According to the city’s account book, there was an exact amount paid to a fisherman Jean Poitevan to build a barge in order to burn an arch down.⁴⁶ Pernoud argues that this hints to Joan being responsible for the suggestion. As Pernoud’s interpretation draws closer to the view of many current modern historians, it is imperative to not only understand where she fits in the spectrum of the overall historiography of Joan’s military contributions, but also how she got there. The change in source emphasis

is clear - the early traditional historians use the condemnation trial, and the post-canonization historians use the nullification trial. It is also clear that the growth of Joan's popularity on a world scale was due to both her nullification trial and most especially her canonization. However, one of the most prominent factors lies specifically within the last two authors.

Pernoud and Sackville-West are fairly unique as historians due to their sex. They both were a part of the emergence of female scholarship within history, as members of the first wave of feminism. As reviewed in Norman J. Wilson's book *History in Crisis; Recent Directions in Historiography*, traditional historians focused almost entirely on male behavior, and gave little importance to female.⁴⁷ As a result, "early women's history challenged the male predominance by exploring the history of women who had previously been neglected in historical accounts."⁴⁸ Thus, feminism as a new field of history not only focused on the woman as a subject, but also portrayed her from her own perspective.⁴⁹ Simply put, feminism elevated women as the subject of study by stepping into their own shoes. Perroy and Sackville-West do this to some degree by representing Joan's side of the story, but the following modern historians really place an emphasis on the use of writing from Joan's own voice and experience.

Medieval military historian Kelly DeVries also writes through Joan's perspective, despite being a male. His book *Joan of Arc: A Military Leader*, was published in 1999 and is solely devoted to answering whether or not Joan was a military strategist. He states boldly in his introduction that he means to prove that "Joan of Arc was a soldier, plain and simple," further adding that "Joan put military aggressiveness into an army that had been put into a psychology of defeat."⁵⁰ His source use falls in correspondence to his predecessor Sackville-West when he cites French vernacular chronicles written twenty years after her death, and the nullification trial testimonies of her generals.⁵¹ However, he differs with the inclusion of the use of condemnation trial to prove his thesis, but he gives Joan a voice for her own military accomplishments.⁵²

DeVries first points out Joan's military success to her simple but challenging military agenda. DeVries quoted Joan predicating that first, the English will be defeated and driven out of Orléans. Second, the King shall be anointed in Reims, and third the city of Paris would return to the King's rule.⁵³ DeVries simply points out that Joan completed the first two of these daunting tasks, and blames the third task's failure on King Charles VII himself. In regards to the loss at Paris, DeVries claims Joan and her army not only fought the English, but also the apathy of their monarch.⁵⁴ He explains that Joan's strategy was "very diverse and well planned out," having built a bridge across the Seine allowing for attacks on multiple sections of the walls.⁵⁵ They knew it would take a while to work, but the plans "were not allowed to reach fruition," as DeVries put it.⁵⁶ Due to the Kings "impatience" and "propensity of bad council," the attack was halted.⁵⁷ So in essence, Joan's biggest failure, according to DeVries, was not hers at all.

Joan's involvement in the planning of attacks was proven in the battle of Troyes. After being put in charge of the siege, she quickly set up the French gunpowder against the walls, while ordering soldiers to make bundles of sticks in order to fill in the moat around the town.⁵⁸ This presents Joan as a quick thinker and knowledgeable of conducting siege assaults. DeVries also presents her growth of military understanding. Although Joan's attacks on Jargeau, Meung-sur-Loire, and Beaugency were impressive

victories, the mistakes she made at Jargeau were not repeated at all in Meung-sur-Loire or Bueaugency.⁵⁹ DeVries believes that this proves Joan was very intelligent and quickly learned the art of war.

Lastly, as a military historian, DeVries examines the French assaults after Joan's career ended in the French army. He concluded that French military leaders, whether or not they ever fought with her, started to adopt her tactics of engagement/frontal assault.⁶⁰ While this was a costly method, it proved to be the most effective way to fight off the English.⁶¹

In the end, DeVries portrays an intelligent, courageous, and knowledgeable woman in military assaults. With the use of her testimony, as well those of her co-commanders, he was able to portray her in this light. However, he also used a comparative method of her military success to future French military assaults in the Hundred Years War. He was effective in that regard as well, contributing more credibility to Joan's actually clever tactics.

The most recent scholarship on Joan that attests to the question of her military skill is entitled *Joan of Arc: The Warrior Saint*, and was published in 2003 by Stephen W. Richey. Although Richey is considered a free-lance researcher, this in no way should belittle his book on Joan. As a personal testament, Richey does an outstanding job not only using the essential primary sources, but also in collaborating with Joan's entire historiography. Every historian previously mentioned was thoroughly examined and accounted for in Richey's book. As seems fit, Richey ends the historiography in keeping with the general trend of increased idealization of Joan's military accomplishments. To Richey, Joan was simply a genius and was able to learn quickly and revolutionize French warfare. Richey does this in two unique fashions. He uses both a Feminist approach, as well as a Presentist's approach to examine her genius.

The first way he does this is also evident in DeVries, but not to the same degree. Richey immerses himself in the testimony of Joan of Arc, adopting a very Feminist approach by portraying her through her voice and experience. The most prominent examples demonstrate her remarkable intelligence as shown when being questioned during her trial. In the first example, Joan was asked a trick question by Bishop Cauchon. She was asked if the saints who appeared to her in her visions hated the English. By answering "yes" she would be saying that these Catholic saints would then hate their own Church's followers, since the English were Catholic.⁶² By answering "no" then she would destroy her credibility of making war on the English.⁶³ She cleverly answered back, "[t]hey love that which God loves and hate that which God hates."⁶⁴ A second similar and better known instance occurred with another trick question. She was asked if she was or was not in God's grace.⁶⁵ If she answered "yes" she would have sinned by presuming to know God's mind.⁶⁶ However, if she answered "no" she would be condemning herself.⁶⁷ She again answered with astonishing skill, "[if] I am not, God put me there, and if I am, God keeps me there."⁶⁸ Richey deduced that her quick thinking in the courtroom could explain her victories on the battlefield.

The second way he interprets Joan as a military genius is through the use of Presentism. Presentism is a modern historical way to interpret history by looking at it through the present. As described in Wilson's book "the past does not change but our understanding of it changes, so in effect the present determines the past."⁶⁹ This way of study emphasizes teleology, or the idea of a linear past. The development of

progression or decline over time is accounted when reading history. Richey does this through Joan's use of modern military tactics.

Having been a tank crewman and graduate of West Point Military Academy, Richey applies his modern knowledge of warfare in his analysis of Joan's military tactics. When he does so, he finds that Joan's tactics are actually very similar to his own. Richey argues that Joan uses many of the British and American modern principles of war still taught today. These principles are as follows: "objective," "offensive," "maneuver," "mass," "economy of force," "unity of command," "surprise," "security," and "simplicity."⁷⁰ Rather than explaining these pretty self-explanatory terms or reiterating each example used in Joan's career, the importance is that there were multiple examples for each of these principles of war used by Joan. By using this Presentist approach, Richey finds that Joan of Arc was a military tactician well ahead of her time.

In addition, Richey uses similar examples of scholarship as DeVries and the post-canonization historians. These examples were demonstrations of Joan's power over her men, her careful planning of sieges, and the praising testimonies of her co-commanders in the nullification trial. What makes Richey a modern historian is his use of these two modern concepts of historical interpretation, Feminism and Presentism.

The historiography of Joan's controversial military career, by standard or the sword, has undoubtedly developed through a consistent continuum of change. In the beginning, traditional historians did not practice history in a way that was conducive to analyzing of Joan as a military leader. They also avoid using the nullification evidence for fear that the real history had been tampered with by Joan enthusiasts. As the historiography progressed into the early Feminist movement, there was a rise in female scholarship that made Joan a historical subject. Along with this, the coronation of Joan into Catholic sainthood helped launch her story into world popularity, evoking many Joan enthusiasts. Finally, with the emergence of Feminism and Presentism as respected schools of interpretation, Joan's story was heard through her own testimony and experiences, as well as her comparison to our modern age. Although this historiography displays a uniquely consistent progression of interpretation, its grander proclamation is the display that history is never conclusive, and will forever be molded by the means of its practice.

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