



Have the lessons of the military defeat of 1940 been learned?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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As Marc BLOCH reminds us at the end of the disastrous French campaign of 1940, "our leaders did not know how to think about this war" [1]. 1] By this scathing observation, he attributed the responsibility for the military defeat, among others, to the French command at the time. 70 years after his uncompromising analysis of our failures, we may wonder whether all the lessons of this brutal military collapse have really been learned. Looking back, events show that mentalities, methods and, above all, the training of future leaders have undergone a salutary evolution.

1] Marc BLOCH, "The Strange Defeat".

Évolving context and mentalities

First of all, it must be said that the Army's state of mind has undergone a real metamorphosis. In this area, the development of warrior myths has played a major role in the creation of the collective identity of the units, a far cry from the soft bands and the Adrian helmet of 1940. Likewise, the army was characterized by the routine of detailed reviews and by the hassles of internal discipline that did not prepare men for command. Conversely, our era is marked by multiple commitments that confront our officers with their responsibilities, sometimes in internal or external projection, sometimes in operations, during which they acquire irreplaceable command experience.

With regard to the coherence of the operations undertaken, the pre-war legal and normative vacuum resulting from the rejection of the League of Nations must be contrasted with the context of current operations, which are based on the legitimacy of international security organisations. At the same time, pre-war France had allowed its ties with its British ally to be weakened by Anglophobia or negligence. A true alliance requires effective and reciprocal ties. This is the shortcoming that the massive integration of French officers into NATO structures is intended to correct today.

In 1940, when the methods of the German army had been known since the Polish campaign, we were unable to adapt our methods of action, which were too deeply rooted in the doctrine of continuous fronts. Since then, the armies have considerably developed the "feedback" function. The lessons learned from current conflicts are thus systematically studied by the Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces (CDEF). In the same vein, military education now makes extensive use of Tactical and Historical Studies (THS), which it approaches from the perspective of the principles of warfare, changing situations and the necessary adaptation to circumstances[1].

Evolution in Methods

It is undeniable that the French decision-makers of 1940 were not educated in a spirit of realism, decision-making and initiative. To convince themselves of the efforts made to arm themselves against surprise, one can cite the primordial place given today to manoeuvre plans that cover the greatest number of eventualities. The establishment of a tactical and strategic reserve to deal with unforeseen events has also become a principle from which there is no longer any room for deviation. Moreover, whereas land and air assets were not capable of coordinated action[2], the armed forces have now set up joint command and control bodies for operations at the operational level.

Moreover, the pre-war French style of command sought neither prior confidence nor the support of subordinates. On the contrary, for several decades now, methods of teaching and participative command by objective have replaced counter-productive "training" and "training by pace". In the same vein, the post-war style has placed greater emphasis on the "spirit of the mission" through the notion of "training".major effect, or on the command of the front, inspired by the decisive spirit of the young leaders of the Free French, for example [3].

In the field of intelligence, notable efforts have been made in the area of research through "sensor manoeuvre" [4]. Similarly, the failed and insufficient study of orders of battle often leading to random interpretations of intentions, has been replaced by the method of hypotheses based on a solid knowledge of the doctrine and the opposing modes of action. These methods encourage the B2 to engage in enemy modes of action, rather than simply offering the command a wide range of conflicting indications.

Selection and Training of Future Leaders

Seventy years ago, the French command failed to adapt to the German manoeuvre. The slowness of our parade having been a serious handicap, the speed with which we have been able to integrate changes is today a quality sought-after by executives whose ability to adapt is a constant criterion of evaluation. What is more, in 1940, the rules of advancement gave us a "command of old men" who were resistant to anything new and unable to detach themselves from the experience of the First World War. It has to be said that the problem is no longer relevant with the management rules that favour the ascent of the youngest potentials identified.

Moreover, the high ranks of the staffs were populated before the war by former professors of the École Supérieure de Guerre and their best students. In this context of vassalage maintained by cooptation, contradiction and adaptation to the new was not possible. However, it was conformism and its teaching that led to the bad choices of the inter-war period, for example by neglecting the massive use of tanks grouped into large

units. Conversely, today, far from orthodoxy, freedom of speech and renewal of thought are encouraged among future leaders.

Last but not least, in 1940, decision-makers were not sufficiently trained to act with the help of their culture. Rejecting the cramming and the resulting pusillanimity of the elites, Marc BLOCH advocated the institution of competitions based on general culture, without which "every man of action will never be anything more than a foreman" [5]. It must be noted that nearly 70 years later, such a recruitment system has indeed been implemented in the framework of the competitive examination of the Collège Interarmées de Défense, calling more for reflection and argumentation than for knowledge for its own sake.

An examination of the progress made in the absolute field of our mistakes shows that the Army has profoundly changed its mentality and methods by being able to learn from the lessons of the past as well as from its more recent commitments.

This is why, faced with the painful acknowledgement of the failure of 1940, it is essential not to sink into eternal repentance, but rather to meditate on the aphorism of Marc BLOCH who had the courage to put his ideas into practice: "there is no salvation without a share of sacrifice".

1) Three ETH are being conducted today at the CSEM and one at the CID.

[2] As shown by the lack of reaction to the vulnerable German armoured columns breaking through the Ardennes.

3) The French army has also been influenced by the German method of command by objective promoting, as we know, the initiative of subordinates in the spirit of the mission received and the objectives to be achieved.

4) The failure in terms of research was obvious, as shown by the absence of a relaunch on 10 May 1940 to cross-check the aerial observation reporting German armoured traffic jams in the Ardennes.

5) On this point he agreed with General De Gaulle for whom "the true school of command is general culture".

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