



The French culture of counter-rebellion

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What would be part of a specifically French counter-rebellion culture is a complex whole based on a long history. Attempts at categorization, sometimes caricatural, make it possible to differentiate between several approaches¹⁰.

The British, for example, would aim, through a global strategy and by favouring a well-defined political goal, to enforce laws and destroy the subversive political organisation. Instead, they would rely on a loyal indigenous administration that is fairly close to the national model. The French would have a more tactical approach. They would seek to develop relations with the population, while relying on the existing elites to whom they would give subordinate access to the administration. They would establish relations of proximity quite easily, particularly through trade. However, it would be simplistic and dangerous to try to be satisfied with establishing standard ideals while forgetting, on the one hand, the diversity of the historical situations encountered and, on the other hand, the possibilities of evolution from one system to another. Experience shows that definitive schemes cannot be applied and need to be adapted to local conditions. The wars of decolonization will show that the general strategy must be evolutionary and, for example, that the political message of one era is not necessarily audible a few years later. However, it is easier to change doctrine than to spread a new culture.¹¹ In Afghanistan, for example, the United States has officially moved from a culture of massive use of force to a counter-insurgency doctrine heavily influenced by Frenchman Galula¹². The Army Field Manual FM3-24 refers strongly to this work, but with a certain tendency to want to draw lessons from it that can be directly transposed to American military culture, which gives the ambitions of "conquering hearts" a rather artificial character. The French experience is based on a breeding ground obviously made complex by the years, with nuances that are far from being anecdotal.¹³ Pragmatism clearly prevails. Thus, when Lyautey advocates 'the identity of military command and territorial command' ...¹⁴ he is not so much concerned about whether this role should be held by a civilian or a military, as long as it is the right person and he is concerned about the long term. The same is true of the

relationship with traditional local authorities. The French have become accustomed to relying on those who are in place and not imposing themselves against them. Customs are respected even when they give rise to cases of conscience.¹⁵

However, it is essential to point out that certain parts of the French experience of counter-rebellion are also examples to be banished. The ethical standards that are now rigorously applied explicitly prohibit the use of "techniques" that were considered effective at one time and which were aimed at terrorizing the population. The first is the brutality of repression. Similarly, the adoption by the French army of the raid initially practiced by the populations of North Africa is difficult to reconcile with a logic of reconciliation. The revolutionary war, as promoted during the Algerian war, also had its limits. Indeed, while it aimed to promote a counter-discourse against Arab nationalists and, above all, communists, it led to an uncontrolled politicization of the army. Political power finally had to intervene to put an end to the power of the fifth offices. This calling into question of the revolutionary war brought an unfortunate discredit, both on methods that were mostly acceptable and effective, and on the military's ability to assume strategic responsibility. Entire aspects of the French experience were deliberately overlooked for several decades.¹⁶ The question still remains as to how one can finally separate the enemy from the civilian population without brutalizing it, or counter enemy political discourse effectively without losing one's soul.

Allow a French style to flourish in contemporary operations

Published just after Operation Serval, the doctrine on the use of land forces in the Sahel-Saharan strip covers the many different scenarios. This doctrine¹⁷ was developed based on previous experience with both symmetrical and asymmetrical conflicts.

If there is one priority today, it is to revive the culture of risk. Indeed, the challenge of modern counter-insurgency operations is the emergence in the 1990s of a tenacious culture of "zero death". Of course, in order to deal with threats, it is essential to improve equipment, which is currently being done through the Scorpion programme.¹⁸ However, to date, the protection effort has tended to render the force inoperative, especially since it has focused mainly on the parking areas.

The air-land bases¹⁹ which are essential for the coherence of the systems, are today the subject of much criticism because they are largely responsible for static postures. In spite of the technological means that are deployed, the terrain around these rights-of-way is not held beyond the capacity of direct views. The accumulation of tactical and operational functions has led to gigantism and isolation. The Anglo-Saxon world even denounces certain psychological aspects, insisting on the lack of cohesion of a force divided between a troop that exposes itself and "fobbits" who live for long months in total disconnection from the terrain.²⁰ These bases do not resemble the small outposts that occupied the conquered land, helped organize the population and around which the reserve forces "nomadised".²¹

¹⁰ Hervé de Courrèges, Emmanuel Germain, Nicolas Le Nen, op.cit. or General Beaufre, op.cit.

¹¹ It has thus happened that, for reasons of hygiene enacted at the national level, the soldiers of certain countries have kept plastic gloves to shake hands with their local interlocutors. In doing so, they did not intend to insult their interlocutors.

12 David Galula: "Counterinsurgency: Theory and Practice", Economica, 2008. A rather heterodox thinker compared to the school of revolutionary warfare that dominated in France in the 1950s and 1960s, Galula strongly influenced the writing of the Army Field Manual FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency, dated December 2006.

13 For example, the notion of "oil stain", which is peculiar to French colonial history, marks a centripetal movement, based on the attraction of French-controlled territories. It is not a centrifugal movement of extension as it is now sometimes conceived of by wanting to follow lines of operation that segment activities.

14 Lyautéy: "Du rôle colonial de l'armée", Revue des Deux Mondes n° 157, 1900.

15 Captain Aymard: "Les Touaregs", 1911. Source gallica.bnf.fr / National Library of France. This is a clear description of the feelings of an officer who, initially revolted by the situation of the bellahs, slaves of the dominant Tuareg tribes, considered that abolition was necessary but also required a slow change of mentality.

16 Pierre Cyril Pahlavi, op. cit.

17 Doctrine for the Use of Land Forces in Desert and Semi-desert Zones, Centre for Doctrine and Use of Forces, Doctrine Division, 2013.

18 The rapidity of this development with regard to vehicles really needs to be put into perspective. It turns out that UN contributing nations, although much less wealthy, will benefit in 2018 from troop transport vehicles offering better protection for the crew and greater mobility, compared to French forces that pay the price in the case of IED attacks.

19 Philippe Kirscher: "The role of air-land bases in the fight against guerrilla warfare", Stratégique 2009/1 (N° 93-94-95-96), pp. 357-370. He describes precisely these bases which, from Afghanistan, are often referred to as "FOBs" (forward operating bases) in the everyday language of the military, but which cover very different realities. They are mainly designed as parking points, with more or less developed observation and fire support capabilities.

20 <https://angrystaffofficer.com/2015/11/03/how-forward-operating-bases-created-the-illusion-of-war-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/>

21 Etienne de Durand: "Francs-tireurs et Centurions - les ambiguïtés de l'héritage contreinsurrectionnel français", Focus stratégique, No. 29, March 2011.

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