



What if Napoleon had fought Daech?

Earth Thought Notebooks

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It is often recalled that military history can sometimes provide us with lessons or keys to understanding for contemporary campaigns. Admittedly, it is likely that, over time, certain modes of action or operational constructs have become anachronistic as a result of technical progress, changes in the threat or ethical limits. Nevertheless, the reflections of some illustrious thinkers or leaders may still be relevant to the way of conducting war today. In this highly original study, the author thus brings Napoleon and Daech face to face.

Based on the remarkable book by Bruno Colson: "Napoleon, from the war" an apocryphal work supposed to formalize the Emperor's military thought through various documents, we propose to reflect on what Napoleon's choices could have been to face Daech in Iraq and Syria. This group is today defined as a hybrid enemy, associating conventional equipment and actions with asymmetrical type attacks (guerrilla warfare, terrorism), but with an organised structure and modern, high-performance equipment. The Emperor had experiences close to the situation currently experienced in the Great Levant, namely in Egypt for the desert terrain and relations with the Muslim religion, or in Spain when faced with irregular combatants.

Faced with an adversary of rare violence, as can be seen in the media, Napoleon would have first tried to define his strategic vision of the war to be waged. His first concern would have been to harden his fellow citizens and to make an act of communication to fight against the temptation to wage "rose-water wars". This is probably his way of describing what we today call resilience. It is likely that he would have liked a rapid but well-resourced campaign from the outset, considering that "if you wage war, wage it swiftly and severely; this is the only way to make it shorter and therefore less deplorable for humanity". Then it is a question of building up rigorous planning with a greater capacity for anticipation and reversibility: "In war, nothing can be achieved by calculation. Anything that is not deeply meditated upon in its details produces no results (...) If I always seem

ready to answer to If I always seem to be ready to respond to everything, to face everything, it is because, before undertaking anything, I have meditated for a long time, I have foreseen what could happen".

Faithful to his very pyramidal vision of leadership, he would have counted on his own qualities to achieve victory, because "(...) it is will, character, application and daring that made me what I am", and on his genius. Beyond his personal role, it is likely that intelligence would have become one of his priorities in the face of an enemy of rare adaptability, for, as he often says, "this is the mania of gentlemen tacticians; they assume that the enemy will always do what he should do!>. He would choose, as usual, to rely on reconnaissance but also on other forms of information to better understand the enemy's device or the evolution of the environment: "I would set up my headquarters at a fork in the road, on a road, and question everyone who passed by. That's real espionage: firstly, interrogating prisoners and deserters is the best way. They know the strength of their company, battalion, regiment in general, the name of the commanding general, even the major general, the places where they slept, the road they took. In this way, they get to know the enemy army; secondly, they get to know the peasants and travellers. We benefit. Travellers always pass by. Thirdly, the letters that are intercepted, especially if they are from a staff officer, then they are important...". Finally, he would establish the lines of his campaign so as not to be readable by his enemy and thus keep the initiative on him, by going outside the normal framework and remaining lucid about the issues and difficulties of the theatre of operations: "In war, the first principle of the general-in-chief is to hide what he is doing, to see if he has the means to overcome obstacles, and to do everything possible to overcome them when he is resolved".

In the implementation of action, in the contemporary context, even more than in his time, he would take into account his enemy and his mission. In the face of Daech, who made extensive use of new technologies and digital media considered in his Naji doctrine^[1] as an essential vector of his influence, Napoleon would probably seek to preserve good communication both towards civilians and towards his army: "Everything is opinion in war, opinion about the enemy, opinion about his soldiers (...) you, general citizen, will please take steps to ensure that no gazette tending to carry the dieyou, general citizen, will please take measures to ensure that no gazette tending to bring discouragement into the army, to excite soldiers to desertion and to diminish energy for the cause of freedom, is introduced into the army". He would then take care to maneuver in order to defeat by successive assaults an opponent with a volume of 25 to 30. He would then take care to manoeuvre in order to defeat by successive assaults an opponent with a volume of 25 to 30 men spread out along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers or in certain large cities, seeking each time to have numerical superiority, which is "in tactics as well as in strategy".. when with the least forces I was in the presence of a great army, quickly grouping mine together, I fell like lightning on one of its wings and toppled it over. I then took advantage of the disorder that this maneuver never failed to make in the enemy army, to attack it in another part, always with all my forces. I thus beat it in detail; and the victory which was the result was always, as you can see, the triumph of the many over the few". Also, understanding that Daech refuses frontal combat in favour of interlocking, as usual he could also sprinkle his tactics of surprise, cunning and seizing opportunities. It would be a matter of combining space and time on a rhythm difficult to keep for the opposing fighters: "I have always had a system contrary to the other captains: I have never tried to envelop the enemy army. On the contrary, I was often overwhelmed and always occupied less space than the enemy, having my reserves in my hand ready to deliver the decisive blow". His action would tend to strike at the centre of gravity of the jihadists that he would have determined, to cut their lines of communication and operations (logistical axes

between Syria and the Iraq for example), to defend the wet cuts "by making them beat them with cannon fire" and to attack according to the two maxims of Turenne to which he remained faithful: "Don't attack head-on the positions you can get by turning them around, don't do what the enemy wants, just because he wants to do it. Do not do what the enemy wants for the sole reason that he wishes; avoid the battlefield which he has recognised, studied, and even more carefully the one he has fortified and where he has entrenched himself". He would be convinced that he would have to seize cities and consume a great potential in men and materials and then reconcile with the local populations as in Egypt where, on the eve of landing, he addressed his men: "The peoples with whom we are going to live are Mohammedans; their first article of faith is this: there is no God but God and Mohammed is his prophet. Do not contradict them; act with them as we did with the Jews, with the Italians; have regard for their muftis and imams, as you did for the rabbis and the bishops. Have the same tolerance for the ceremonies prescribed by the Alcoran, for the mosques, as you had for the convents or synagogues".

In synthesis, the Emperor would have first defined the modes of action of his enemy both irregular and very structured. He would have integrated the field of perceptions to preserve his forces and public opinion, emphasizing intelligence before striking with substantial forces. The latter would have implemented a tactic combining lightning speed, audacity and mobility to split the opposing forces and destroy them successively by relying on key points on the ground. In a campaign that Daech would have wanted to be rapid and not very clear-cut, he would have envisaged from the outset the stabilisation phase and the cultural factor specific to the region. In the end, this uchronicity has only the virtue of going back over the main principles of Napoleon's military thinking and provoking reflection or debate on the operations of the moment, the outcome of which we will see in the future.

[1] A certain Abu Bakr Naji, an Egyptian killed in the Pakistani tribal areas in 2008 and a member of the Al Qaeda network, published a book on the Internet in 2004, in Arabic, entitled "... the first time that a book on the subject of the "Qaeda" has been published in Arabic. The Wilderness management: the most critical step the Ummah will take". Daech's strategic principles seem to be based on this doctrine by striking Western countries on important values and a certain perception of violence.

A Saint-cyrien of the promotion "Commander Morin" (94-97), Lieutenant-Colonel JOURDAN served as a lieutenant and unit commander in the 54th regiment of artillery regiment and twice at the Schools of Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan as head of section and as deputy officer of the director of student training (DFE) in charge of traditions. After the War School, he joined the CSEM as a teaching-studies officer more particularly in charge of military history and tactics before joining the 40th artillery regiment ^{as head of} the operations and training office. Currently, he is head of the G35 world section of the Land Operational Staff (EMOT) in Paris.

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