



The conception of urban combat by the French army from 1936 to 1996

military-Earth thinking notebook

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In the future, 80% of conflicts will take place in cities. Although the French Army was late in thinking about taking the urban environment into account in its doctrine, Mr. Ronan Hill considers that this point of view should be corrected. This reflection did indeed exist, first theoretically between 1955 and 1970, then physically in the decades 1980-1990.

For the 2040 horizon, the generally accepted forecast is that 80% of conflicts will take place in cities. Although the French Army was late in thinking about taking the urban environment into account in its doctrine, this interest nevertheless became concrete at the end of the 1990s with the design and creation of the Urban Area Training Centre, CENZUB. In this framework, any unit about to be deployed on operations must be trained and evaluated in the use of weapons in urban areas for two weeks. These lessons constitute nearly a third of the training required for projection. Although the acquisition and maintenance of this know-how is no longer justified today, it is interesting to study the way in which the French Army first became aware of the need to acculturate its units in this environment. For a long time, urban warfare was largely overshadowed, even with the presence of concrete national and international cases. When the terrain and new forms of conflict imposed this environment on the French army in the 1990s, it had to catch up considerably.

This article has a specific purpose: to rebalance the view, all too widespread in the army officer corps, that there was never any French doctrine on urban combat during the Cold War. However, this thinking did exist, first theoretically between 1955 and 1970, and then physically in the 1980s and 1990s.

The first post-war deliberate remarks and omissions: the emergence of the NUWA syndrome

The first historical reflection of a French Army officer on a modern urban conflict goes back to General Duval following the Spanish War, and more particularly the Battle of Madrid. In his book "Lesleçons de la guerre d'Espagne" he notes that " a troop, insurgent or regular, is lost if it allows itself to be locked up in a part of the city. ...] In a street a column of cannons, tanks, machine guns is at the mercy of a few dozen grenades thrown from the windows; there is no possible reply for it" [1]. It is in this pessimistic state of mind that the French army approaches the coming world conflict.

During the Second World War, armed confrontation in the city, in a symmetrical or insurrectional setting, took place in only two cases: either when it constitutes the strategic objective of a conventional army - this is the case of Stalingrad or Berlin, respectively in 1942-1943 and 1945 - or when it constitutes the strategic objective of a conventional army - this is the case of Stalingrad or Berlin, respectively in 1942-1943 and 1945 -or when the population rises up, creating a delicate insurrectional context for the occupying army - this is the case of Paris in 1944 or Warsaw in 1945. However, these conflicts sometimes challenge established notions of symmetrical and asymmetrical conflictuality. Indeed, does the liberation of Paris, involving French Forces of the Interior, Free French Forces and ordinary civilians, constitute a conventional conflict in the strict sense of the word? And what about the Battle of Berlin, with its German troops, 70% of whom were from the Volkssturm, civilians summarily dressed as soldiers, hastily trained and poorly equipped?[2]. This debate deserves to be opened.

Contextually, for the French army, from the Great War to the Liberation, the city constitutes a hazard in the maneuver and does not give rise to doctrinal reflections. The most representative example remains the reaction of President Paul Raynaud on 14 June 1940, declaring, after the bypassing of the Maginot Line, an "open city" any urban ensemble of more than 20,000 inhabitants [3]. In this continuum, when the territory was liberated from June 1944, the Allies carefully avoided urban areas. The last pockets of German resistance, La Rochelle, Lorient, Saint-Nazaire, etc., fell after Berlin, and surrendered on 9 May 1945.

Paradoxically, the rare urban battles of the Second World War shocked people with their violence. Over the same period, the war systematically caused more deaths in cities than in the countryside. The city was then considered by military decision-makers as the most stressful theatre for the combatant, where the majority of contacts took place in the city, where three-dimensional planimetry (floors, streets and subways...) dilutes the notion of the front line and facilitates circumvention, surprise and entrapment. As a result, the threat becomes multidirectional and the consumption of ammunition high. Finally, the echelons of command are reduced because of the distances of sight, but also because of the lower efficiency of radio communication systems. This sum of constraints makes the city a terrain which, after the battle of Berlin, is deliberately "forgotten" by the staffs. The war is a matter of large-scale maneuvers and units. Despite some post-war peculiarities in Asia, such as the French fighting in Hanoi (1946-1947) or the American fighting in Seoul (1950), the military conception of the urban operation remained marginalized.

It is the emergence of a form of incapacitating syndrome, which we call NUWA (NoUrban War Anymore), that freezes the doctrine of the use of forces in the urban environment until the years 1955-1960.

The years 1955-1970: an interest limited by the war context

With the emergence of the Soviet risk in the East, French military doctrine turned mainly

towards the management of large conscript groups in the context of a possible open conflict. For good reason, the Western European theatre is mainly composed of vast plains facilitating armoured combat and the use of long-range weapons. It is interspersed with wet cuts, requiring, among other things, heavy means of crossing deployed as part of real joint manoeuvres. Consequently, for France, the main focus of reflection is on these subjects.

However, this period saw the emergence of new urban battles, such as in Algiers in 1957 and Hué in 1968. These confrontations already invited certain circles of officers to question the use of violence and the management of populations in an urban counter-insurgency framework. 4] It is also on the basis of these confrontations that the École supérieure de guerre (ESG) is reflecting on the relevance of the city in conventional doctrine. It was the subject of the "Great Commission" of the ESG in 1966 under the name "Guerrilla and Counter-guerrilla in the Urban Environment" [5].

In conventional terms and in its defensive position, France considers the city useful only for the purposes of stopping or delaying manoeuvres. These consist, initially, in evacuating as many civilians as possible prior to the fighting, then by channelling them along some of the traffic routes of the first echelon of the Pact and concentrating them on specially constructed stopping lines. In order to do this, engineering units are first tasked with reducing the possibility of crossings through the controlled collapse of buildings or through mine plugs. Finally, the use of tactical nuclear weapons is envisaged. Nuclear firing would be preceded by a pre-blocking phase by small, competent and mobile units [6]. It should be noted that at the end of the 1960s, the Soviets became fully aware of the growing road network in Western Europe, where cities were the points of convergence. Consequently, the Pact knew that its imperatives of speed would oblige it to direct its axes of effort to a minimum in certain urban peripheries [7]. 7] From denial, the School of War gradually became convinced of the importance of mastering this environment.

Another hypothesis of conflictuality in urban areas for France concerns Berlin. From 1970 onwards, the seizure of the Western sector by the Pact constitutes the most probable risk of limited war. It would in fact keep the nuclear powers below the threshold of use of their weapons of mass destruction. The regiments pre-positioned in Berlin are therefore by nature dedicated to urban combat. The French also have at their disposal an improved fighting village. For the French sector, the study of Berlin's defense plans planned during the Cold War shows the evolution of behavior to adopt for units in garrison, namely the 46th infantry battalion [8] and the 11th^{fighter} regiment [9]. The conduct to be taken in case of attack is relatively passive. It only recommends defending points of interest in the neighborhood, i.e. regimental right-of-ways and crossroads. Support points, containing rocket launchers and machine guns, were set up around the perimeter of the regimental quarter, and mortar companies positioned themselves on the parade ground, the most open place in a regiment. A firing plan for the curved firearms is drawn up beforehand and the coordinates for pointing the guns to fire in the surrounding area are already calculated. The AMX 30 B2 tanks, for their part, remain curiously confined to the hangars.

This emergence of a concept of use in urban areas was to evolve towards the formalization of the notion of "action in urban areas" in the 1970s, particularly following foreign operations such as the Battle of Hué.

Encouraging and increasingly numerous theoretical reflections from the 1970s onwards

While growing urbanisation and operational examples gradually raised awareness that combat in the city was becoming compulsory, it was also from the 1970s onwards that some War College trainees began to reflect on the possibilities of taking the urban environment into account in doctrine and on the need to train forces for this type of combat. A few examples of speeches and work by the ESG have been chosen here to illustrate the point. At the same time, the diversification of the French Army's missions, mainly in Africa (including the evacuation of nationals, securing areas, humanitarian action, etc.), has led it to also take an interest in the urban environment.

In 1974, exceptionally, the ESG's "grand commission" marked for the first time a particular interest in urban combat in the central European theatre. In its introduction, the commission gave an impetus and a doctrinal orientation that has now been verified in practice: "Manoeuvring in the open country, by the year 2000, cannot be dissociated from manoeuvring in the urban environment" [10]. [10] These terms, which are obvious today, lead us to think that from 1974 onward, combat in the city is called upon to take a preponderant part in tactical reflections and, in the long run, to become part of the doctrine.

In 1977, following the conclusions of the 1974 commission, a real turning point was reached when Major General A. Laurier, commanding officer of the École supérieure de guerre, argued that "indeed, in this day and age, even in the nuclear age, it is not only reasonable but necessary to prepare our troops to face combat in localities. (...) Any confrontation between antagonistic armies in Europe will inevitably involve a large number of towns, villages and cities. It seems to me therefore desirable, if not indispensable, that an effort of instruction be made at the unit level, both in learning and in mastering the combat procedures relating to the attack and defence of localities. This training effort must also be carried out outside the framework of higher military education. The localities must be integrated into the themes of manoeuvre, both at the level of reflection and at the level of theoretical action in peacetime" [11]. This speech opens a series of works on the subject (about once every three years) by the GSS and the Armed Forces Staff, notably in 1977-1982 [12], in 1985 and 1987. In addition to these, there were a few large-scale, albeit exceptional, manoeuvres (DELLE 80[13]).

Finally, in 1980, the new version of the infantry notebook contains an enlightening passage on the best way to take these subjects into account: "Today we must complete the previous orientations by insisting on forms of combat that we only partially master and that we would no doubt have to fight during an armed conflict. ...] The stage of engagement in villages alone is over. The stage of engagement in villages alone is outdated. What needs to be prepared for is fighting in cities or their periphery, i.e. large areas with high building densities, geography and population density. What should be prepared is combat in cities or their periphery, i.e. large areas with high densities of buildings, generally favourable to defence, and in which the control of carefully determined key points remains an essential guarantee of success" [14].

It is interesting to note that these reflections are also made through studies and observation reports on urban interventions abroad, such as Operation Banner in Northern Ireland by the British Army in 1969. This feedback (RETEX) will be reinforced by others, notably in Beirut in 1982.

Operational scenarios forcing the army to become aware of the need for a more effective response to the situation

For France, the period between 1982 and 1996 is the most revealing period of interest in

the urban environment[15]. Initially, through Operation "Peace in Galilee" in southern Lebanon, where French UNIFIL forces followed Israeli tactical innovations and the adaptation of the use of weapons in the western part of the Lebanese capital (use of howitzers in strained fire, anti-aircraft guns, etc.) [16]. Then, fourteen years later, these observations are reinforced by the RETEX of the conflict in former Yugoslavia. The French army was then directly engaged in the city.

Conclusion

Urban combat has therefore been the subject of reflection in France since the previous world conflict. Although they were initially ignored by the armies because of the trauma they created in military consciousness, between the 1960s and 1980s they returned, albeit in the background, to military thinking through foreign and national operational "clues". The War College will gradually consider the urban fact as a subject of reflection in its own right. Theoretically at first, between 1974 and 1980, then from 1982 with the operation 'Peace in Galilee', which marked a materially identifiable turning point, in that the French army witnessed the actions of Tsahal in Beirut before finding itself in similarly complex situations in Sarajevo in 1993.

Sarajevo, but also Fallujah, Baghdad, Grosny, Bangui or Mogadishu, are all names of cities that are today the only acts of war to be preceded by the word "battle". The term is evocative, because it shows that fighting in urbanised areas remains chronologically delimitable and psychologically striking for both civilian and military minds. The city is that place that has changed military doctrines and the role of soldiers, to the extent that for forty years, winning peace has been synonymous with urban operations. It is in this context and with these lessons in mind that the French Army, aware of the phenomenon, began reflections and projects in its doctrinal process in the 2000s.

1] General A. Duval, "The lessons of the Spanish War" Plon, Paris, 1938.

[2] A. Beevor, "The fall of Berlin", Livre de Poche, Paris, 2004.

[3] J.-P. Guichard, "Paul Reynaud: a statesman in turmoil September 1939-June 1940" L'Harmattan, Paris, June 16, 2008.

4] Battalion Chief Delpit, Dossier Le phénomène urbain et la défense, Paris, 1967.

5] Great Commission of the ESG, Guerrilla and counter-guerrilla in urban areas, number 9, Paris, 1966.

6] Bulletin de documentation du génie, number 29, private collection General (2S) R. Ancelin, October 1964.

7] École interarmes du renseignement et des études linguistiques, L'ennemi attaque en zone urbanisée, private collection Général (2S) R. Ancelin, October 1987.

8] 46th infantry ^{battalion} from January 11, 1945 then, in 1965, 46th ^{infantry} regiment.

9] Box 3U 281 2 and 3, Defence and Central Warning Plan, Western Sector, Berlin, Historical Defence Service, 1950.

10] 86th class of the Ecole supérieure de guerre, Report of the great commission "combat in urban areas", Paris, 1974.

11] Television interview with Major General A. Laurier in July 1977 on the battle of Killstett in January 1945, 22 minutes.

12] Commandants COUSIN, GOURMENT and FIOLET, History course of the 91st class of the Ecole de guerre. La bataille et les combats de rues, Part II, Room N21, Ecole supérieure de guerre, Paris, 1977-1982.

13] Exercise DELLE 80 is an exercise of capital importance, it is the only physical exercise in an urban environment found throughout the Cold War. In the town of Delle, twenty kilometres south of Belfort, it brought together the 1st and 35th infantry regiments. The 1st IR was in charge of sealing off the town, then carrying out a multidirectional raid through all the main traffic routes, the 35th IR simultaneously ^{carried out} a vertical envelopment by helicopter of the points of importance of the town.

14] EMAT, Carnet d'infanterie sur le combat en zone urbanisée, Paris, 1980.

15] F. Chamaud and P. Santoni, "TheUltimate Battlefield: Fighting and Winning in the City", Pierre de Taillac, Paris, 2016.

16] Captain M. Raffray, CDEF/DREX, Le cèdre et le soldat, la présence militaire française au Liban entre 1978 et 1984, Cahiers de la réflexion doctrinale, Paris, 1984.

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