



Napoleon's conception of mass

Foresight Letter

Pôle Etudes et Prospective (CDEC/PEP)

Published on 05/06/2020

Histoire & stratégie

Photo: The Battle of Eylau, 8 February 1807 at Preußisch Eylau (nowadays Bagrationovsk)

This insert evokes the notion of mass through the prism of Napoleon I's practical conception of it. If it is appropriate to discern what retains a lasting meaning, this retrospective study helps to identify some of the challenges facing the architects of the land forces.

In the eighteenth century, war must necessarily lead to the conquest of territories, and the best way to achieve this is not to destroy the adversary, but rather to convince him that negotiations are preferable to the continuation of the struggle. ¹³. We then talk about geographical strategies, or wear and tear, which are implemented by Frederick II and his contemporaries. Napoleon I revolutionized military art with a focus on annihilation strategies. The sovereign of the French lines up as strategists seeking, above all, the decisive battle to destroy the enemy forces. He is a follower of movement and mass.

The Revolution of 1789 will give him the means to carry out the manoeuvre he is maturing. Indeed, the creation of the national volunteer battalions (15 June 1791), followed by the raising of 300,000 men (23 August 1792) and the conscription of citizens aged 20 to 25 (5 February 1798), made it possible to bring together a human reservoir of nearly 750,000 men ¹⁴.

A letter from the Public Salvation Committee of October 8, 1792, dictates military policy: "it is time to strike decisive blows and for this purpose, we must act en masse ¹⁵ ». All the men of the Revolution are penetrated by this tactic of the masses, fast, audacious, impetuous, and all the leaders, even those who have long practised other methods, must be penetrated by it. Bonaparte is one of them.

In 1796, he took command of the Italian army (38,000 men). The latter was not in a brilliant situation. For the past two years, it has been trampling at the foot of the Alps, fighting useless battles. Facing the French general stand 63,000 Austrians and Piedmontese. Bonaparte first groups together a scattered cavalry, which he organizes into two divisions.

He applied one of his precepts according to which: "the greatest scattered means produce no results **16** ». Its purpose is to separate the Austrian army from the Piedmontese army, in order to attack them separately. His tactics are as follows: "The art of war is with an inferior army to always have more forces than its enemy at the point being attacked or the point being attacked. This art cannot be learned, either from books or by habit; it is a tact of conduct, which properly constitutes the genius of war. Thus, he compensates for his numerical inferiority and deceives the enemy: "one must always make the enemy believe that one has immense forces". In two weeks, he won six battles and broke the back of the Piedmontese army, which was under attack from all sides. He then moved towards the Austrians.

Having become Emperor, Napoleon surpassed the stage of armies from 35,000 to 60,000 men, with whom he performed prodigies in 1796 and 1800. Contrary to the practice during the Revolution, he did not organise several armies to operate in different theatres. He formed a single army of 200,000 men, which he himself led, guided by the political situation, to the theatre he considered as the main one. **17**. 200,000 men seem to him to be enough to crush any opponent with a single blow.

This is the strength of the Great Army type 1805-1806. He was then convinced that in order to win, it was not necessary to triumph over the whole development of the front. The surest and cheapest way to win is to produce in the opponent, thanks to a vigorous water hammer, a sufficiently powerful local disorganization. This water hammer is the decisive attack. It is a matter of unleashing a hurricane of iron and fire at one point, causing a gap, into which one can then rush. Thus, the need to create a breaking mass is born. He explains to St. Helena: "What made me win so many battles was that the day before, instead of giving orders to diverge, I would converge all my forces on the point I wanted to force and massage them into it. I turned over what was in front of me because, naturally, it was a weak point.

In addition to the maneuver itself, which allows him to obtain the mass, as in Italy, Napoleon associates the organization of his maneuver counters, some of which concentrate a mass of artillerymen, cavalrymen or infantrymen. Indeed, Napoleon assures: "the cannon, like all other weapons, must be assembled en masse if one wants to obtain an important result...". **18** ». He clarifies his thinking by explaining: "In a battle ... whoever has the skill to make a mass of artillery arrive unexpectedly and without the knowledge of the enemy, on one of these points, is sure to win.". Thus, when the main attack occurred, Napoleon always put himself in a position to bring together, thanks to the artillery of his Guard, a few other corps de réserve and batteries borrowed from the divisions neighbouring the point of attack, 80, 100, 150 pieces of artillery, to make a breach in the enemy front (Wagram, Hanau). It proceeds in the same way with the cavalry **19**. Part of the latter, the heavy cavalry, or large cavalry (mainly cuirassiers), is formed in "reserve". It is a kind of "living machine-gun" - steel cutting, striking, pointing - also intended to create a hole and an imbalance in the rank of the opponent (Austerlitz, Iena Eylau).

Finally, in the course of a battle, it constitutes an infantry reserve with the infantry of the Guard and the grenadiers together. **20**. It therefore has three distinct masses at its disposal at all times, which it makes use of as required. In order to develop the fullness of his masses, the sovereign of the French is working to give them more mobility. Thus, he develops the mounted artillery, at the same time as he militarizes the carriages of all the artillery. Not only can the cannon now gallop to the decisive point, but it is likely to accompany the cavalry in the pursuit of the defeated enemy.

Similarly, he is thinking of increasing the mobility of his infantry. In 1805, he had 4,000 men of the Guard and 13,000 horses transported from Spain on the Rhine to a post in eight days. A similar operation was carried out in 1809. The Guard made the journey from Bayonne to Ulm (Bavaria) in carts. ²¹ (25 leagues per day ²²).

These different masses constitute a moral force of great power for all the French troops involved, who feel supported in the face of an adversary who would be formidable, and at the same time play a not insignificant role in undermining the moral forces of the adversaries.

But, if in 1805 the Grande Armée was organised into seven army corps (the seven torrents), to which were added the Guard and the cavalry reserve, soon the hegemonic pretensions of the French sovereign created a vertigo of numbers. In 1812, the French army had seventeen army corps. ²³The mass then reveals a certain number of weaknesses.

By increasing the number of troops by bringing in foreign contingents, the Emperor diminished the intrinsic quality of the Great Army. Many countries are reluctant and the men provided are not all of good quality.

As early as 1808, for example, the Swiss defected at the Battle of Baylen (Spain). Given the extent of the geographical area, Napoleon was at the mercy of his subordinates, their jealousies, their susceptibilities, their moral strength and their capacity for anticipation. Already at Wagram (1809), the Emperor, crushed by fatigue, did not give any orders for pursuit. His lieutenants did not take the initiative.

During the campaign of 1812, it was Princes Jérôme and Eugène, both rather mediocre, who flanked the bulk of the army. In 1813, in Saxony, several battles are lost in an incomprehensible way: Oudinot at Grossbeeren, on August 23rd, Macdonald on the Katzbach, on August 26th and 27th, Vandamme at Kulm on August 30th. In 1814, the marshals abandoned the Rhine line and kept retreating, neglecting to hold on to natural obstacles: mountain ranges (Vosges passes) and rivers (the Saar, the Moselle) and what to think of Augereau's attitude? Moreover, the possession of the mass puts the chef's mind at rest; it ensures a comfort that becomes a brake on the economy of means.

In October 1806, Napoleon wrote to Soult: "with this immense superiority of forces together... I am determined not to chance anything, to attack the enemy wherever he wants, with double forces...".

The mass is wearing out. In 1812, Murat, placed at the vanguard of the army, demands forced marches from the horsemen and tires his cavalry quite unnecessarily from the first days of the campaign. The cavalrymen sometimes stayed thirty hours without unbridled their mounts. The King of Naples does not seem to care and persists in asking for new efforts. Any reconnaissance is carried out by a group of 1,500 horsemen! The cavalry melts away at a glance. Upon arrival in the Russian capital, Grouchy deplored "the total destruction of the cavalry reduced to nothing. ²⁴ ». Another problem lies in wait: underestimating the power of your opponent. Fire is neglected (Battle of Eylau, Battle of Moskowa).

"Despising the danger, the French closed ranks as the machine-guns took them away... and continued to advance with a firm step, weapon in hand, with a remarkable impassibility," General Bagration observed. ²⁵As a result, the depots are being emptied to make up the numbers. Training is no longer provided.

As early as 1808, Grouchy described the cavalry as pitiful. At the Battle of Essling (1809), the formations were unable to bend and depart under fire in an orderly manner. To defeat these masses, the coalition mobilized theirs. At the Battle of Leipzig (1813), 450,000 men were concentrated over a distance of 7 to 8 km. Any maneuver then becomes impossible. Moreover, the lack of training of the soldiers led the command to favour frontal attack, en masse, and therefore more deadly. 26.

In the First Empire, it was shown that mass coupled with agility, produces tactical, even strategic victory, while it provides unquestionable moral strength to the one who holds it, to the detriment of the one who suffers it. But, in the long run, the problems of logistics, doctrine of use and command have got the better of the imperial eagles, submerged by ... even larger masses.

13 See on this subject, Eugène Chalvardjan - impact de l'art de la guerre napoléonienne dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle - Paris, 2014.

14 Georges Lefebvre - The French Revolution - PUF, 1951/1957.

15 La Convention au général de division d'Avaines (corps Jourdan - armée du Nord).

16 All the quotations that follow are taken from Lieutenant Colonel Picard's work - Precepts and Judgments of Napoleon Collected and Classified - Berger-Levrault, Paris, Nancy, 1913.

17 See on this subject, Eugène Chalvardjan - impact de l'art de la guerre napoléonienne dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle - Paris, 2014. *

18 Georges Lefebvre - The French Revolution - PUF, 1951/1957.

19 The Convention to Major General d'Avaines (Corps Jourdan - Armée du Nord).

20 All the quotations that follow are taken from Lieutenant Colonel Picard's work - Precepts and Judgments of Napoleon Collected and Classified - Berger-Levrault, Paris, Nancy, 1913.

21 In the secondary theatres, he left only small corps of mediocre troops.

22 Correspondence from Napoleon to Eugène de Beauharnais, Schönbrunn, 16 June 1809.

23 During the Revolution, the division gathered, among others, cavalry and infantry. Napoleon clearly separated the two arms.

24 Louis Madelin - the catastrophe of Russia - Paris, Hachette, volume XII, 1949.

25 There is a lot of talk about the taxis of the Marne...

26 Which corresponds to 100 kilometres.

Title : Pôle Etudes et Prospective (CDEC/PEP)

Author (s) : Pôle Etudes et Prospective (CDEC/PEP)

Release date 03/06/2020

[DOWNLOAD DOCUMENT](#)
