



## HISTORY OF TACTICS, FROM GUIBERT TO OUR DAYS – Part 4/6

The period between 1870 and 1914 was a fertile time for tactical thinking.

Colonel Claude FRANC - CDEC / division Doctrine

Published on 09/01/2019

Histoire & stratégie

Char Saint-Chamond

**the French army practiced during the conquest of Algeria and then West Africa the war of columns and settlement in "bordjs". Forced to adapt to a form of guerrilla warfare both in Algeria and later in Mexico, the French army excelled there (creation and development of the "Bordjs" units)s de Turcos ) but, with the help of the peacetime routine, neglected to adapt to the new forms of warfare brought to light both during the Civil War and the Austro-Prussian conflict of 1866.**

The awakening is brutal: after four weeks of campaigning, on September 1, 1870, out of 84 cavalry regiments that the French army had lined up a month earlier, only 3 remained! The sacrifice of some units proved useless: planning, railways, fire showed their supremacy.

The period between 1870 and 1914 was fertile in tactical thinking. Inspired in part by the Prussian example, the newly created War College participated in this renewal of tactical thinking.e military thinking by referring both to the campaigns of the Empire and the recent Franco-German war, but also to those of the Transvaal and Manchuria. Beyond the principles, which are perennial in essence, the tactical doctrine seeks to find "recipes", while minimizing too much the consequences of the evolution of armament which, by its multiplied violence, gives fire an unquestionable supremacy.

The parallel existence of "two armies", one colonial, accustomed to opera, is often cited as an explanation for this hiatus.the other, a metropolitan army, confined to an academic apprenticeship in the field of theThe point is undoubtedly simplistic, but by being dogmatic and disregarding the lessons of the most recent conflicts, French tactical thinking is misguided to the point of "over-attacking". 9.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that this doctrinal "offensive return" is due in

large part to the refutation of the defensive attitude observed by Bazaine during the fighting under Metz in mid-August 1870, which caused him to miss every opportunity of success, particularly at Rezonville on the 16th; and that it was an idea widely shared by all the great European nations before 1914, as evidenced by the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and British employment regulations. <sup>10</sup>

The observer cannot but note that all European armies consider the offensive as the alpha and omega of their doctrine. However, this offensive return of French military thought never reached the caricatured level that was later attributed to it, insofar as it is always inseparable from the notion of security. The misunderstanding of Colonel de Grandmaison's oratorical excesses may have impressed the young officers; they probably did not reach the same proportions in a large part of the high command.

Joffre had the first motor and logistical manoeuvres carried out and Foch insisted on the question of safety. Starting with the example of Nachod, a prelude to the 1809 campaign, and the counter-example of Beaumont's surprise on 30 August 1870, the premise of the Sedan disaster, he shows how a leader acts in safety. It shows how a leader acts in security when he has at his disposal avant-gardes whose function is to inform him, but above all, by making contact with the enemy, to force him to unveil his device.

French military thought could hardly be opposed to this general and particular context. The punishment for this was the enormous losses of August 1914. <sup>11</sup> The Great War was thus marked from the very first weeks by the failure of all strategic plans and by a total tactical deadlock: fire made its tyranny felt, the myth of the "breakthrough" never came true. But beyond this all-too-familiar image, Colonel Goya <sup>12</sup> shows how this conflict has also become tactically established as the first modern conflict: the mounted cavalry no longer had its place on the battlefield, where it was irremediably supplanted by the "fighting engine"; the infantry found suitable structures that still exist today: the smallest combat cell became organically the combat group, commanded by an NCO. <sup>13</sup> and revolved around an automatic weapon.

Despite many differences between supported by powerful artillery dominates overall minds. On the other hand, the use of tanks independently at Berry au Bac on 16 April 1917 was not a convincing success. <sup>14</sup> The doctrine on the use of armoured vehicles was very quickly limited to infantry support. In spite of the many writings of innovative officers who, from the 1920s onwards, behind General Estienne, advocated the mass self-employment of tanks, this recollection would prove dramatic twenty years later.

France still only designs the use of its tanks to the rhythm of the infantry formations they are supposed to support, and these tanks, soon to be ageing, will use an armament with a range limited to that of a field compartment beaten by an infantry battalion. With regard to the air arm, the Great War saw the appearance of the air division (DAé), capable of supporting on the ground the large units that manoeuvred there, but also capable of conducting bombing actions in depth independently.

This dilemma between direct air support of ground troops and strategic actions on the enemy's rear defended by Douhet polluted the die. This dilemma between direct air support by ground troops and strategic actions on the enemy's rear defended by Douhet

pollutes the debate on the use of the air arm during the inter-war period and is complicated by political opposition following the creation of the Ministry of Air: in order to perpetuate the new Air Force, one should avoid anything resembling a subordination to the Army and give priority to what the Air Force alone can do .

In the end, the Air Force had neither adequate means nor a coherent doctrine of employment in 1939. Finally, the Great War was the first conflict in which logistical issues were of great importance. If we can distinguish between production logistics (marked by the prior constitution of stocks) and consumption logistics (organisation of flows during the battle to supply the resource or evacuate personnel or equipment), both proved to be particularly constraining.

The first, which does not fall within the tactical domain, is a real obstacle to the conduct of operations, particularly in the field of artillery. The second, at least on the Western Front, has gradually been overcome thanks to the ever-increasing network of rail and road infrastructures provided by the confinement of the theatre of operations in the north and north-east of the territory.

On the other hand, on the Eastern Front, while the most regular possible maritime flows from the mainland have made it possible to ensure permanent inter-theatre communications, the lack of a network of railways and roads has made it possible to overcome the problem. On the other hand, on the Eastern Front, although the most regular possible maritime flows from the mainland make it possible to ensure permanent inter-theatre communications, these are heavily penalised at intra-theatre level by the scarcity of communication channels, often of limited capacity and damaged or destroyed during operations.

Having had to suffer between the two wars from a blue horizon magisterium, the inevitable counterpart of victory and a significant rejuvenation of the high command. <sup>15</sup> In 1918, the French army also had to overcome all the moral and psychological difficulties of society as a whole in relation to the war, the crisis of the lower classes and the crisis of public finances.

In spite of a late recovery in a final phase, it thus approaches the Second World War with a tactical doctrine that is neither in phase with the potential of its armament (tanks and planes in particular), nor above all coherent with that of the enemy: It could be said that if it was the French who invented the tanks, simultaneously with the British, it was the Germans who gave them their doctrine of use with the Blitzkrieg. <sup>16</sup> : trinomial airplane tank and radio set <sup>17</sup>.

By focusing on the effects of fire, French tactical doctrine lost sight of the advantage of mobility. The General Instruction on Large Units of 1936 was quite significant because of the ambiguities it contained in this area. Before suffering the greatest disaster it had known since Azincourt, the French army resumed between the two wars with the irregular warfare in Syria and Morocco which had seen the formation of mobile groups.

The Rif war in Morocco gave rise to a doctrinal conflict between the two marshals

Lyautey and Pétain : Faithful to his principle of pacification by "oil stain" by gradually rallying the population, which made it possible both to be satisfied with limited numbers of troops and to guarantee their security, Lyautey intended not to deviate from this principle to reduce the Rif insurrection.

On the other hand, Marshal Pétain, dispatched on the spot by the cartel government, recommended recourse to the methods of action of a conventional war, without worrying about the inevitable collateral damage, which presupposed a considerable increase in the volume of military resources committed. The government chose the latter option: it would be "the army of 100,000 men", "the club to crush a fly". This 'quarrel' between supporters of the only military option and followers of a broader solution of pacification will be found in similar terms in Indochina and Algeria after the Second World War, and for similar reasons (not least of which is the chronic weakness of the numbers of expeditionary forces in Indochina in relation to the needs on the ground).

-----  
9 Not without some opposition. The common sense aphorisms of Pétain ("Fire kills") or the ironic aphorisms of Lanrezac ("Let's attack, let's attack... like the moon!") are well known.

10 We will usefully refer, for enlightening comparisons, to the various issues of the Revue Militaire des Armées Étrangères, a publication of the French General Staff which analyzes all the evolutions of the main neighboring armies.

11 / 300,000 killed from August to December 1914, the bloodiest month of the whole war.

12 Michel Goya, La chair et l'acier, Tallandier, Paris, 2004. 13 This is the first time that junior NCOs, by being given effective command in the field, have been given a tactical role.

14 Although Commander Bossut's group managed to overtake the German third line. However, his accompanying infantry, the 151st IR, was unable to follow, and was forced to withdraw at the cost of enormous losses.

15 In 1918, the average age of generals commanding armies was barely over 50. Pétain was vice-president of the High Council of War until 1931 and then exercised real moral power over the army. Gouraud would be a member of the CSG until his retirement in 1937 and Degoutte until 1935! Debeney, Major General of the armies in 1918 will command the War School, then the CHEM before being Chief of Staff of the army until 1930.

16 Without entering here into the debate surrounding Frieser's theses, it is clear that the French army needs time to complete its modernisation and rise to power, while Germany must win quickly.

17 The German generals have both "High" and "Low" radio networks in their command vehicles, while the French remain faithful to wire links.

---

**Title :** Colonel Claude FRANC - CDEC / division Doctrine

**Author (s) :** Colonel Claude FRANC - CDEC / division Doctrine

**Release date** 04/05/2018

FIND OUT MORE

DOWNLOAD DOCUMENT

---



General Jules Lewal (1823–1908) presided over the creation and commanded the École supérieure de guerre from 1877 to 1880.



The surrender of Abdelkrim, founder of the Federated Republic of the Rif, in May 1926