



The battle of intelligence in urban counter-guerrilla warfare: The example of the battle of Algiers

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 22/08/2018

Histoire & stratégie

At a time when the army is preparing to distribute a counter-rebellion manual, dealing in particular with the specificities of engagements in urban areas, it seems to be of great interest to the public. It seems interesting to question the relevance of certain modes of action developed by the French army during the fight against the FLN's politico-military apparatus[1] in Algiers in 1957.

Subject to many controversies, the search for intelligence was a global success in Algeria and deserves particular attention at a time when certain Western armies are already confronted with this type of operation, particularly in the Middle East (Iraq, Palestinian Territories...).

While the use of torture is unacceptable, it remains nevertheless certain that the methods of infiltration and destabilisation of the adversary networks, of collection, sharing and synthesis of intelligence implemented in Algeria could provide food for practical thought that could be developed in the future.

1] National Liberation Front

Background reminder

On January 7, 1957, after a wave of bloody attacks against the Algerian population, the Resident Minister Robert Lacoste summoned General Massu, commander of the 10th parachute division, on ^{his} return from the aborted operation on the Suez Canal, and assigned to him all the police powers normally attributed to the civil authority.

General Massu is now granted discretionary powers including the control of the movement of persons and goods, the establishment of restricted and prohibited zones, house arrest, with or without surveillance, and the authorization of house searches by day and night. French soldiers, mainly paratroopers and Zouaves, supported by police and

gendarmes, embarked on new missions, far removed from the methods of action applied in the rest of the territory against the FLN guerrilla. It should be noted from the outset that some officers will be extremely reticent about this commitment [1].

The control of the population of Algiers

To fulfil this mission, the French army established close control of the population via the Urban Protection Unit (DPU), set up by one of Massu's deputies, Lieutenant-Colonel Trinquier. Each house is numbered, one card is established per house, this card specifies the number and name of the occupants, their position (absent, present). "One person in charge per house must keep the card up to date and explain the absences. The block chiefs supervise this permanent census which wants to enclose the population in a gigantic net" [2]. When an inhabitant is absent or when a person not living in the block is present, the chief of block must report to the authorities. This measure was intended to control the movement of the Algerian population and to limit the accommodation and travel possibilities of FLN activists. In the Kasbah, the 10th parachute division has a company of the 9th ^{Zouaves} regiment, under the command of Captain Sirvent, an Algerian by birth, fluent in Arabic. "His men, on the other hand, are metropolitan conscripts, mostly rural people from the Northern departments. They quickly adapted to the mission, wandered around the Kasbah to discover its nooks and crannies, chatted with the traders and Moorish café owners, when they were not watching out for quarrels or protecting the searches carried out by the PJ. They are equipped with walkie-talkies linking them to their captain, who has organized an efficient radio network from Klein Palace, on the roof of which he has installed a lighthouse on a swivel that allows surveillance of the terraces" [3]. This company provides the intervention units with ambient intelligence and remains in a position to "give the pulse" of this key area of Algiers.

All of these actions are coordinated during daily meetings held at the prefecture, bringing together unit commanders, sector commanders and civilian officials involved in maintaining order: the judicial and urban police, general intelligence and the DST. General Massu will also obtain the detachment of police inspectors from the regimental intelligence officers. He proposes to have them wear battle dress, some of them will do so.

Captain Léger and the "bluuite"

At the same time, Lieutenant-Colonel Trinquier enlisted the services of a young captain, a former special services officer who had served in Indochina within the colonial parachute regiments and who was familiar with subversion and counter-guerrilla techniques, Captain Paul-Alain Léger.

He quickly understood that the exactions of the FLN could be used to turn people against him. "Among them men with cut noses, cut lips, among the widows of those who had their throats cut, there were many who were burning for revenge" [4]. 4] Léger was going to "work" the population by making the most of the information provided, by depriving the adversary of his means of information. He will turn against the FLN those who were victims, accomplices or agents.

Initially, he created the Intelligence Exploitation Group (GRE) and set up in the Casbah near Sirvent CP. The GRE is composed of 5 people, quickly reinforced by two former members of the FLN (including a former FLN activist imprisoned after being denounced by her husband). The GRE will carry out two missions:

- to fight against the groups that impose the rules of the FLN in Algiers (prohibition of games in the Moorish cafés, prohibition of alcohol and tobacco...). "In July 1957, the objective was achieved. The inhabitants of the Kasbah smoked, played dominoes, listened to the radio as in the past" [5],
- using defectors to identify among the population, by monitoring the exits from the Kasbah, members of the FLN's political-military apparatus in Algiers. The men of the GRE, in hiding, reported to Captain Sirvent's zouaves who intervened to arrest the rebels thus unmasked.

Gradually, Captain Léger, under the direction of Colonel Godard, was to overwhelm the organization of the Autonomous Zone of Algiers (ZAA), the name given to the FLN's politico-military structure in the capital, with the aim of bringing its leader down and then destroying it in order to put an end to the indiscriminate attacks. On 24 September 1957, the arrest of Yacef Saadi, leader of the FLN bombers in Algiers, marked the total success of the GRE's methods and a decisive victory for the French military in their fight against urban guerrilla warfare.

The GRE's actions will also be carried out outside Algiers. One of them deserves particular attention: the rebel zone of Wilaya III, in Kabylia, was to be intoxicated by what is still today called the "bluuite" [6].

Captured rebels from this wilaya were returned, manipulated and then sent back to their units to gather intelligence. Léger was so successful in infiltrating the command structure that he finally had one of his men at the head of Wilaya III! For six months, French officers controlled all FLN activities in Algiers. The rebel leaders will moreover ask themselves on many occasions why the number of attacks and attacks was so low.

At the end of 1958, Léger introduced a deadly virus, the "bluuite" virus. He explained to authentic maquis to what extent the maquis were infiltrated, used pseudo radio messages and then encouraged the escape of these "intoxicated" maquis. Manipulation will be reinforced by the abandonment of false French mission orders on the corpses of real maquisards. The leader of Wilaya III, Amirouche, convinced of the existence of traitors in the ranks of his Wilaya, will then embark on a blind purge that would have cost the FLN more than 2,000 fighters.

Teachings

Even if it is advisable to remain prudent and not to try to mechanically copy these modes of action, several lessons could be used in future counter-rebellion operations in urban areas.

- Intelligence is the first requirement for this type of engagement. The example of the battle of Algiers underlines the imperative need for intelligence coordination (collection, analysis, synthesis, dissemination) around the commander of the operation, whatever its origin (tactical, operational or strategic). Moreover, the support of specialists in the fight against crime in urban areas (police officers, gendarmes) is essential for organising the mapping of an urban area and the analysis of intelligence.

There is now a real willingness to overcome this difficulty, with the expected creation of a central database, the reorganisation of the network and the creation of a new database. The expected creation of a central database, the regular organisation of theatre intelligence committees (CRT) and the definition of "deconfliction" measures by the G2X

are all steps in this direction. However, a certain degree of watertightness must still be respected in order to ensure the security of operations.

- Control of the population, like Lieutenant-Colonel Trinquier's DPU, also seems indispensable. The establishment of identity documents can make it possible to take a census of the entire population and control its movements, the aim being to isolate rebels and terrorists, identify them and then neutralise them. The census could be carried out using a variety of pretexts (telephone, food, Internet, etc.). The action of psychological operations (psyops) could be decisive.

Nevertheless, a reflection could be initiated on the political and strategic constraints that could weigh on the force engaged in counter-rebellion with regard to respect for certain fundamental freedoms such as free movement, free expression, etc. The weight and role of the media cannot be concealed.

- The weight and role of the media cannot be concealed either. The effectiveness of the GRE and Captain Léger's "bleus de chauffe" shows that it is possible to "turn over" victims of the rebellion and use them either to understand the organisation of the rebel groups, their motivations, their modes of action, or to collect intelligence from the population. The force could use such auxiliaries to launch psychological action campaigns that respond exactly to the messages of the rebels and the expectations of the local population.

The officers "dealing" with this type of source would have to be trained in advance for this type of action.

In order to avoid potential abuses, these manipulations can only be carried out at the highest level (strategic and operational) and must be long-term, avoiding the discontinuities created by the changeovers.

- Finally, the use of local groups and units made up of local forces could be envisaged. They would make it possible to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers and to have "friendly" elements immersed in the neighbourhoods and to prepare for disengagement. In the light of the current example of Sunni tribes, armed and paid by the American army in Iraq, the problem of controlling these units, their financing, their possible collusion with rebel groups, and the political and strategic impact of their actions will have to be studied carefully.

Prior to the crisis or intervention, the identification of groups and leaders, together with possible cooperation or specific aid, could prepare the commitment in the urban area. Led by intelligence specialists, these actions would take three forms:

- assistance and advice (OMLT),
- support of maquis of opponents (Northern Alliance in Afghanistan),
- constitution of rally commandos (Algeria with the Georges commando).

Conclusion

The lessons that can be drawn from the Battle of Algiers can therefore feed a reflection on the particularities of the fight against rebellion in urban areas.

These lessons must be tempered by the permanence of the French presence in the main city of Algeria. The intelligence networks, the knowledge of the environment, the relative

heterogeneity of the local population (population of large European origin) facilitated the action of the French forces.

Such operations today would therefore presuppose having the necessary time to achieve lasting results, sometimes in contrast to the need for rapid results induced in current operations.

However, is it really possible to defeat an urban guerrilla war and stabilise a large conurbation in a time of need?

1) Colonel Godard, chief of staff of the 10th DP, declared to General Massu, as early as January 7, "this is not a mission for us" and will follow the first battle of Algiers from afar. He was opposed to the use of physical abuse and gave unfailing support to the activities of Captain Sirvent commanding the company of zouaves, deployed in the Kasbah.

2) "The Battle of Algiers", Jean Delmas, Editions Larousse, page 117.

3) Jean Delmas, op. cit. pages 40-41.

4) Algiers - Summer 1957, a Victory over Terrorism, General Maurice Schmitt, L'harmattan Editions, page 64.

5) General Maurice Schmitt, op. cit., page 65.

6) This expression comes from the uniform worn by the men of the GRE, the overalls.

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Release date 09/08/2018
