

The importance of military history in the development of a new model of army

Reflection circle G2S - n°22

Général (2S) Olivier PAULUS

Published on 05/09/2018

Valeurs de l'Armée de Terre

In the summer of 2015, as soon as he took office as CEMAT, Army General Jean-Pierre BOSSER wanted a major transformation of the Army. Known as the "army in contact", the army is now in a phase of consolidation.

In a world of perpetual change, where changes are increasingly rapid, we cannot rest on our laurels. We need to take the next step now and think about what the next model might look like.

August 24, 1998? on the occasion of the 21st International Congress of Archives in PARIS, President CHIRAC declared: "Those who exercise responsibility are well aware that one does not define orientations in ignorance of the past". This universal reflection applies perfectly to the process we must follow to define the army of tomorrow. The military historian has a place in this process.

This knowledge of the past is accessible to us through the Service historique de la défense (SHD), heir to the "war depot" created by Minister COLBERT by royal decision in 1637, today the sole holder of the army archives. In addition to its "notarial" role as an archivist, the SHD's mission is precisely to make available to the high authorities military authorities with analyses and studies that contribute to the development of major changes in the military tool, such as the development of an army model.

What does military history teach us and what could the SHD contribute significantly to a reflection on the evolution of the army model? This short article cannot, of course, fully answer this question, but let us take two examples to illustrate the type of contributions that could be made.

The first lesson learned from our elders is that an army, and consequently a nation, is never definitively victorious, nor is it ever totally defeated. Very often victory follows defeat and vice versa. Today, at a time when the notion of war is changing, we would rather speak of success or failure, but the essence of the problem remains the same: under no circumstances should we prepare for the war that has just ended!

In fact, past successes make us fragile. Any military leader who is not capable of questioning the certainties acquired will be surprised by the next engagement.

Let us take two examples of this shortcoming.

At the end of the Second World War, the United States Army was the largest of the Western armies. It remains so at the beginning of the 21st century and can be considered the world's leading military power. In 1945 it had made possible by its capacities, means and mass the liberation of Europe and the Japanese surrender. However, it is this same American army which was to experience thirty years later, in Vietnam, a bitter media failure immortalized by the evacuation by helicopters of the American embassy in SAIGON.

Traumatized by this fiasco, she rebuilt herself by questioning herself^[1] The project will be implemented by the project team, drawing all the necessary lessons from the feedback. It was thus able to win, with brilliance and ease, the following war in the Gulf in 1991. However, this success was not a foregone conclusion in the face of the Iraqi army, which at the time was considered to be the fourth largest in the world.

Let us now return to our French army in 1919. The victory of the previous year, and the treaties that followed, made the French army the first army in the world. It had become the army of reference, copied by many countries, starting with the United States of America. We know the rest: The defeat of June 1940, following the failure of the Battle of France, forever stigmatized by the historian Jacques BENOIST-MÉCHIN through his reference work published in 1956 "Sixty Days that shook the West". It was followed by our abandonment of Indochina in 1954 after the lost battle of DIEN BIEN PHU.

Our elders knew how to draw the consequences and prepare for the revolutionary wars to come. Thus, it was from the major operations of 1958 and 1959, led by Air Force General Maurice CHALLE, Commander in Chief in Algeria, that we resumed military victory.

The French army's return to combat, after a long period of waiting in the face of the Soviet bloc, within the framework of what we now call the "operations of the war", was a major step forward. The French army's return to combat, after a long period of waiting in the face of the Soviet bloc, within the framework of what we now call "external operations", from the end of the 1970s until the very recent operations of SERVAL and BARKHANE, was a succession of successes.

What can we learn from these illustrative examples of what military history can teach us? The answer can be summed up in two words, "vigilance and discernment". In other words, let us be vigilant because repeated successes lead to overconfidence, the starting point for future failures and even tragic setbacks.

Let us not over-interpret the importance of events such as the Drakkar tragedy on 23 October 1983 in BEIRUT, Lebanon, or the UZBIN ambush on 18 August 2008 in Afghanistan. Admittedly, the scale of these dramas in combat must be seen in relation to the volume of forces engaged in operations today, which rarely exceed a thousand men, compared with the hundreds of thousands in previous conflicts. However, these losses must not force us to act in such a way as to please a public opinion that has been sold the concept of zero casualties.

The second example is the Army's response to the unfavourable context it has been experiencing for several decades. Thus, following the professionalization decided in 1996,

our armies in general ? and the Army in particular ? have been subjected to the same restrictions, reductions and challenges to their structures and organizations, making it difficult for them to carry out their missions.

To meet these constraints without breaking the tool, the Army relied on the durability of the basic structure, whose excellence and relevance had been tested for a long time: the regiment. This was regularly recalled by the CEMATs, which succeeded one another, in particular on the occasion of the major annual reports of the Army. It is moreover on this regimental structure that the army was able to rely on to quickly regain its strength following the attacks of 2015. At a time when some were aiming to weaken it, the regiment was thus demonstrating its relevance and effectiveness within the framework of a modern and evolving organization.

What the senior military hierarchy was probably less aware of was that the same observation had already been made, as early as 1938, by the General of the United States. Général d'armée Maxime WEYGAND, when he wrote and published his very beautiful work "L'histoire de l'armée française" (The History of the French Army). Thus, eighty years apart, the same observation had already been made. Any historical study in support of the design of a new model of army would return the same invariant, it is indeed the regiment which has always been the basic brick, the stabilizing structure from which one can reflect the army.

These two types of examples, historical approaches, underline all the interest of military history as a tool for studies and analysis, but also as a contributor and actor in the overall reflection mandated by the high command.

This is what the Command Doctrine and Training Centre (CDEC) is working on, among other things, and regularly publishes "RETEX Papers" available on its Internet site^[2]. As an example, the one about the rezzou in the region of TOMBOUCTOU between 1890 and 1920 deserves to be known by any executive involved in BARKHANE, the sociological context having, in the end, little evolved there.

This capacity for reflection is based in particular, and it should not be forgotten, on the retention within the Army of military historians officers of recognised competence. They are moreover eager to be called upon. Since the summer of 2015, the creation of the post of reference officer in military history, within the General Staff of the Armed Forces, has been in place. e de terre (EMAT), himself being placed for employment within the Délégation du patrimoine de l'armée de terre, offers us this opportunity.

Beyond these specialists, any officer who aims to be a complete military leader must, whatever his level of responsibility and throughout his career, cultivate his taste for military history and its teachings.

^[1] This is very well described by American Army General Norman Schwarzkopf, former commander of Operation Desert Storm, in his book entitled "Memoirs" published in October 1992.

^[2] www.cdec.terre.defense.gouv.fr

Author (s) : Général (2S) Olivier PAULUS

Release date 17/08/2018

[FIND OUT MORE](#)
