



Georges VALOIS (1878-1945)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

An anarchist at twenty, a monarchist of French Action at thirty, a fascist at fifty, then a non-conformist republican, resistant and deported to Bergen-Belsen where he died of typhus at sixty-seven, Georges Valois had a most original trajectory. In turn clerk in Singapore, tutor in Moscow and publisher in Paris, he knew the common people as well as the high aristocracy.

A reader of Proudhon, Sorel and Nietzsche, he was, from 1906 to 1924, the disciple of Maurras with whom he then quarrelled, then the friend of Déat as well as of Mendès-France. At the heart of this hectic life was a central experience: the Great War and Verdun. Needless to say, Valois was not a man to be seen in the limelight: he was soon at the head of one of these corps francs, more often at the outposts or in the enemy lines than in the shelters. It was therefore an " officer of the war, whose military education was made during the war, and whose spirit was free from any school prejudice", in his own words, who published "Le cheval de Troie - The Trojan Horse -" at the beginning of 1918. Essay on Philosophy and the Conduct of War» [1]. The bulk of the work was written between the spring and autumn of 1917, at a time when the French army was recovering little from the war. the disaster of the Chemin des Dames and the mutinies that followed it, and at a time when the Central Empires were accumulating successes on the Italian and Russian fronts. The time approaches when the Germans will be able to launch their supreme offensive against Paris. Remotivate the French to enable them to parry the blow, define the means of a victorious counter-offensive, such are the ambitions of Valois. But, as his subtitle indicates, he is working as a philosopher, and that is why The Trojan Horse goes far beyond its context. Through the particular case of total war, we find a real grammar of strategy, that is, a reflection on the interdependence of political goals and military means.

At the origins of the total war

The expression "total war" was popularised by Léon Daudet in *L'Action française* of 11 March 1916, then in a book published in 1918 and edited by none other than Valois. In it, Daudet defined total war as the mobilisation of all civilian means for the benefit of the military effort and attributed its authorship to German megalomania [2]. Valois was no more tender with Germany, which he called "the enemy of the human race". But whatever Berlin's immediate responsibilities for the outbreak and then radicalization of the conflict, our strategist and philosopher sees total war as the logical outcome of much older, much deeper and much more general tendencies: "Rousseau and Kant are at the philosophical origins of the system of ideas that led Europe to compulsory military service", which led to the Great War. This thesis had already been defended by Maurras[3], but Valois gives a particularly convincing demonstration of it.

Under the Ancien Régime, he recalls, wars were fought by professional armies. Their cadres were provided by the aristocracy, who paid the blood tax on which their privileges were based; as for their soldiers, they were volunteers hired for payment. The cost of such armies limited their size, especially since the financial means of the State were themselves limited by the tax exemptions enjoyed by the nobility and the clergy. The kings had to limit their ambitions: they only fought "moderate wars in which one killed oneself as little as possible" and which did not result in the elimination of one of the protagonists, but at most in the annexation of a province. To this very real advantage, Rousseau, Kant, and their emulators opposed an idealistic system aimed at "achieving equality, imposing on all the law of duty, making it impossible to establish privileges. They found it unacceptable that the nobility should monopolize command of the troops and that the troops should be composed of poor families with no other means of subsistence. It was therefore necessary for the blood tax to become a universal obligation, the counterpart of the equality of rights which the last generations of the Enlightenment expected for the happiness of humanity.

Valois understands that these ideas appealed to the "good people". But he intends to judge them by their concrete results. From peacetime onwards, first of all, universal military service has been an unbearable burden for the peoples of Europe. It was at the same time a financial constraint, since the free provision of human resources could not make us forget the exorbitant cost of equipment and maintenance, an economic constraint, since conscripts were removed from civilian activity, and finally a psychological constraint, since over-armament maintained a dangerous climate of nervousness in the chancelleries and public opinion. In short, "the system of national armies was pushing all nations, and civilization itself, into an impasse" from which Germany thought it could escape by a sudden offensive.

Not content to have been one of the causes of the Great War, conscription gave it its apocalyptic character. "This system, in which the recruitment of man is free, is infinitely more expensive for a nation than expensive recruitment. It makes everyone, whether civilian or military leaders, lose sight of the material cost of a man's life; it leaves him feeling only the moral cost of that existence. Let us be under no illusions: that sense is far less effective than interest. When leaders, when the State knows that the recruitment of a soldier imposes a high cost on them, a state of mind is created which leads civil and military leaders to be sparing of men's lives. With free recruitment, no one is animated by this spirit, and the national army devours the citizens of a nation". Moreover, the carnage is similar to a self-sustaining movement, because it excites so much hatred between the belligerents that any idea of negotiated peace disappears: the only conceivable outcome is the annihilation of the enemy. The beautiful abstractions of the eighteenth century thus led to the horrible killings of the twentieth century. The "wars of princes" conducted with reasonable, i.e. limited, goals in mind, were followed by the "wars of princes" conducted with reasonable, i.e. limited, goals in mind. which bring humanity back to "the

worst barbarism", to the times of the "great invasions".

Ideology put to the test of facts

In addition to its disastrous human consequences, the idealism of the Enlightenment proved to be completely inadequate to the realities of the war it engendered, so the army of 1917 is no longer anything like the army of 1914. In accordance with the principle of equality, the army of 1917 was a homogenous mass, the vast majority of soldiers being infantrymen trained in the use of a single weapon, the rifle. Only a short war was envisaged at the time, with all movement and fighting in the open country. It was a failure to see that the enormous numbers of troops involved - another consequence of conscription - would lead to the formation of a continuous front and, consequently, to the transition to an interminable war of positions. The latter required a diversification of functions: diggers were needed to dig the trenches, carpenters to shore them up, machine gunners to defend them, more and more artillerymen and mortars to destroy enemy dugouts, etc... The staggering consumption of ammunition required by this type of warfare also exceeded the stocks planned for a short campaign: a large number of workers, initially mobilized as infantrymen, had to be assigned to the armament factories. Thus, "since the end of 1914, the French army is no longer a strictly national army where blood tax is also paid by all able-bodied citizens". It split into a front-line army, which became a real "professional army" by the acquired, and a rear army, devoted to other tasks than combat.

Such specialization is in itself a good thing, because it conforms to the fundamental realities of unequal ability on the one hand, and the division of labour in any developed society on the other. But the consequences of the egalitarian dogma are still being felt. Indeed, the mobilization of the army had led to a haphazard mix of professional skills, which could not be rationally exploited when the evolution of the war made it necessary to diversify tasks: teachers found themselves as earth-movers, tradesmen as carpenters, lawyers as supervisors, etc. The same was true of the division of labour in the wartime period, when the war was still going on. Teachers found themselves as diggers, shopkeepers, carpenters, lawyers, construction managers, etc. This led to a prodigious waste of time, sweat and money, aggravated by the fact that the work and materials were free of charge. In this respect, "the principle guiding the organisation of the army is that of communist socialism". How else can one name a system in which the hierarchy assigns soldiers to this or that task without regard to their abilities, where "everything is for everyone", and where everyone receives his or her subsistence from the state regardless of the quantity or quality of services rendered? There is nothing more costly than this organization where no one has a material interest in the proper performance of the work; where no one can be warned, by his personal interest, by the loss of his own property or gain, that his work is poorly organized...". where everyone loses the notion of the price of things, of the price of time, of the price of men, and where everyone feels their will to do better, their spirit of initiative, their zeal for work, dissolve, because there is almost nothing to be gained by manifesting them".

Under these conditions, the only way to achieve anything in spite of everything is hyper-control, which is also characteristic of the communist system: There has to be a lot of supervision and a flurry of circulars to limit waste, to punish the shirkers and to prevent everyone from abusing the free gift by taking more than their share of food or material. But the cure is no better than the evil, for this cohort of supervisors and bureaucrats is itself a ruinous waste of human resources. Moreover, who controls the overseers? These pre-written nomenklaturists are in the best position to wallow in the abuses they are

mandated to repress. Valois thus notes that a third of the construction materials intended for the trenches are taken from behind, that the sheep arriving in the cantonments have no legs, that the trouper's wine is cut off from the water, etc... This was a far cry from the virtuous soldier-citizen dreamed of by the Enlightenment, entirely driven by a sense of duty and constantly ready to sacrifice himself for the community. "Since everyone has a little more love for himself than for his neighbour, the system does not hold, and this egalitarian army has become, by the force of circumstance, the place where the most solid privileges are constituted. And we see the paradox that the one who should have the most advantages, the Fighter, is precisely the one who has the least".

Now "these miserable questions of cooking, housing, maintenance, are connected to the highest strategy, because if they are not resolved in a satisfactory manner, the value of the troops falls significantly". It is of course the mutinies of the spring of 1917 that Valois is thinking of here. He notes, moreover, that the reforms initiated since then - increased concern for the men on the front, adoption of labour standards inspired by civilian enterprises for those in the rear - have begun to improve things. But we need to go further, to make a genuine reversal of principles, to get rid of "pure Kantism" in a word: "It is absolutely necessary to profoundly change the condition of the combatants who, called up in the name of the principles of the national army, find themselves subject to the regime of the professional combatant army, without having the advantages of it. Military service performed in the name of selfless duty was a chimera. It must be stated in principle that the combatant acquires a special moral and material right, which the nation must recognize. It is a question of substituting Honour, Interest and Differentiation, which are the only effective ones, for Conscience, Duty and Equality, false principles that have become inapplicable and unintelligible.

What are the aims of war?

Improving the daily life of the troop is certainly a condition for success, but not the only one: it is still necessary to propose war aims that are in conformity with the troop's expectations. Here again, however, the ideology of the Enlightenment played very bad tricks on France. Before 1914, the country lived on the myth that humanity was heading for perpetual peace, which was certainly not the best way to prepare for war. Then, in spite of the scathing denials inflicted by events, "official France let people believe that we were waging war on the war and not on Germany": it was, to hear it, to throw down the imperial and militaristic regime of William II, the ultimate obstacle to the rule of law, democracy and civilization. "One could form a small army of volunteers for one of these ideas," Valois objected, "but an army of citizen-soldiers is insensitive to these marvellous abstractions. Indeed, however necessary the defence of civilization may be, it only motivates the soldier during his permissions, when he has time to listen to his reason. On the contrary, in the first line, it is passions that predominate. They have nothing to do with the grandiloquent heroism of which official propaganda speaks: "Contrary to what has been said too much in the rear, soldiers are not impatient to go into battle". What sustains them is, first and foremost, a sense of honour, which requires them not to give in to their comrades. Then it was "disgust, hatred of the German" which, in attacking France, tore them away from their families, their villages and their jobs, to plunge them into the hell of the trenches. It is finally the firm desire to pay for themselves on defeated Germany.

Of course, the Kantian ideology of pure duty cannot accept these motivations: as it sees it, the citizen-soldier is absolutely disinterested and dreams of setting himself on fire for democracy. Nothing is more dangerous than these ideas, Judge Valois. First, because

their idealism inhibits the instinct for war: "Official speeches, press commentaries, have helped to give soldiers a kind of reverse military ideal, this absurd ideal expressed in the Chant des Girondins [4] where death is exalted for the fatherland more than victory. This passive love of the Law has led us too much to find more greatness in our sacrifices than in our successes. Let us remember that the task of the soldier is not to die, but to brave death, to give it and to conquer". Secondly, the exaltation of democracy is dangerous in times of war, because it can turn against military discipline: we have just seen this with the Russian Revolution, a real blessing for Germany. Last but not least, the universal democracy dreamed of by Kant's followers would be a League of Nations open to all, including the defeated. But that would rule out making Germany pay. " The soldier is disarmed; he no longer sees any way of charging the aggressor with the costs of the war.

This is the crux of the matter: To re-motivate the trooper, he must be offered "a war aim that satisfies his private interests", ensure "another payment than the Croix de Guerre or the Croix de Bois", in a word, guarantee him "the reimbursement of his individual or family losses", as Maurras demands in his famous manifesto "La part du Combattant" (The Fighter's Share). It is a matter of strict justice, everyone agrees on this from now on. However, the idealists who do not want to make Germany pay have no other recourse than to propose that the French government compensate the soldiers: "This means that we would have to pay our own compensation in the form of taxes", Valois objects! In short, any objective other than a total victory delivering enemy territory to the Allies would necessarily be to Germany's advantage. Moreover, Germany was financing certain extreme left-wing organisations which were spreading the idea of a negotiated peace. But Germany would approach these negotiations from a favourable position, strengthened by the immense spaces it had conquered over Russia, and in this way it would win the war.

What tactics?

Since no political compromise is possible, the conduct of the war must aim at a purely military objective, namely the "annihilation of the enemy's organized forces". But no one knows how to achieve this. Since 1915, in fact, all the offensives launched on the Western Front have proved powerless to defeat the networks of barbed wire and trenches defended by ever denser fire. Faced with this challenge, " short-sighted soldiers, journalists in a hurry and narrow-minded sociologists thought they could discern the overthrow of the laws of war. They proclaimed the advent of a new type of confrontation, the war of positions or " scientific warfare", whose "new laws" could be summed up in three articles: Fortified fronts are inviolable; fire henceforth takes precedence over maneuver, whether or not the "military retarded by Napoleon's ideas" likes it; the decision can only be reached by wearing down the enemy's potential.

Valois rejected all these assertions. They are, in his eyes, characteristic of the dominant philosophy, of revolutionary origin, according to which the world is governed by the Law of Becoming. Professing the realistic metaphysics of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, Valois believes that Being overdetermines Becoming; in other words, that apparent transformations of things do not alter their substantial reality. This is the case with war: its processes may change under the effect of technical, political and social developments, but its principles remain immutable. Consequently, the task of military thought is not to discover new principles, but to define the right articulation between today's processes and the principles of the past.

5] Seen in this light, trench warfare does not have the novelty attributed to it: it is only the

modern form taken by siege warfare. It has, on the other hand, its own procedures, but not its own laws: "The principles of combat on the ground in the trenches are exactly those of the battle of movement. A system of trenches is approached, dug in, surrounded according to the methods (concentration, preparation, approach, assault) which are valid in the war of movement". Therefore, it is better to admit that basically "trench warfare does not exist" and that there is rather a war against the trenches or a war in spite of the trenches. The battle of artillery, invoked by the so-called innovators, is also a myth, because "artillery upsets defences, but no matter how powerful it is, it can decimate troops, it does not destroy them". Even at Verdun, where the Germans nevertheless carried out extremely violent bombardments, the decision was made by the infantry. As for the idea of achieving victory through a war of attrition, it was absurd since the Allies would wear themselves out as much as Germany.

Thus, "the Terrible Face has not changed, and it pronounces the same commands as before. In front of the barbed-wire networks as at the foot of the ramparts of Troy, intelligence must find the means to carry terror and death to the other side of the walls that defend the enemy". In a word, it is a matter of relaunching the war of movement, "the only one that can be decisive" and, to do so, of cancelling or overcoming the entrenchment. To cancel the entrenchment is the goal assigned to the tank, to which Valois devoted some notes as early as 1915; at the end of 1917, this new Trojan horse begins to At the end of 1917, this new Trojan horse began to satisfy the tactical plan but, to achieve strategic success, "much more powerful, non-vulnerable machines capable of carrying infantry groups in their flanks would be needed". Overcoming the entrenchment with air power would require the air force to be able to strike enemy cities and land troops behind the front line; this is still a long way off. On the other hand, "rear-front warfare" could already be practised. It consists in financing subversive elements which, under the guise of pacifism, will foment revolution in the enemy. This other Trojan horse is a very effective weapon against conscript armies, because they are constantly in the grip of doubt and can only hold out if they know they are backed from the rear. The Germans have used subversion successfully in Russia: the Allies should give them their money back in the Mitteleuropa.

However, no single procedure will be effective enough to bring about a return to movement warfare, warns Valois. The decision can only come from "the general liaison of these means, perfectly proportioned, combined with several simultaneous frontal attacks where surprise will play thanks to the internal manoeuvre". The entry of the United States should soon give the Allies the numerical superiority to allow these simultaneous offensives. But at this point, we must remember the advice of Ulysses before Troy: "The command of many is not good: that there be one leader..."

Conclusion

Resumption of the movement, recourse to tanks, development of aviation, American engagement, multiple offensives, appointment of an allied generalissimo in the person of Foch, subversive action finally, leading to the dislocation of Austria-Hungary and the German revolution: the means which gave victory to the Allies in November 1918 were those which Valois had indicated a year earlier. The French soldier still had to hold out until the very late arrival of the American troops. His motivations are known today through the analysis of private correspondence. On a specific point, they lead us to qualify Valois' description: the notion of duty instilled by the Republican school is omnipresent in the writings of the combatants. They are no less consistent with Valois's portrait, because the duty they invoke is first and foremost towards their comrades, their families, their villages,

carnal France. Not only did references to abstract notions, such as law or democracy, only come second, but they became very rare when the fighting intensified, the family remaining the only reality for which the soldier agreed to risk his life. Moreover, the hatred of the German was constant: it was only between the wars that veterans converted to pacifism and to the ideals of the League of Nations. There was also the constant idea that, having started the war, Germany would have to pay for it out of its own pocket, hence the popularity of the campaign launched by the Action Française for the "part of the Fighter".

Today, historians agree in condemning this idea. They argue that Germany was not solely responsible for the conflict; it did not have the means to repair all the after-effects of it and, by claiming to force it to do so, preparations were made for Hitler's coming to power. These remarks are correct in a sense, but they are anachronistic. At the time Valois wrote, the problem was dramatically simple: if the soldier was told that he would not be compensated, morale collapsed; if morale collapsed, France lost the war. Similarly, it is hard to see how its post-war rulers could have abandoned the idea of making Germany pay when the 1.4 million French fallen had left 600,000 widows and 760,000 orphans at the charge of the State, to which were added - which was not the case across the Rhine - ten departments ransacked to the detriment of the country. It must therefore be admitted that the demand for reparations was fatal, even if it would also fatally prepare the conditions for a second world war.

The great merit of the "Trojan Horse" is to go back to the principle of these fatalities, i.e., to the intimate link between the national idea in its revolutionary version (Valois obviously claiming another conception of the nation), the conscription army and total war. In this respect, the Valois analyses confirm the famous first chapter of the "Vom Kriege" in which Clausewitz shows that the violence of a conflict tends to be proportional to the involvement of the population. This involvement is at its highest when we adopt the equation citizen = soldier: nothing can stop the killing and the runaway passion, except the unconditional surrender of one of the protagonists. The professional army, on the other hand, is designed to wage limited and dispassionate wars, in which combat action is limited to preparing for future negotiations. In this sense, a backward reading of the "Trojan horse" helps to understand the grammar of the conflicts in which Western armies are engaged today.

1] Paris, Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1918; republished in 1924 in its collection Histoire et Philosophie sociales, same publisher, p. 429-544.

2] Léon Daudet, "Léon Daudet, "The Total War" Paris, New National Bookstore, 1918.

3] See Georges-Henri Soutou and Martin Motte (eds.), "Between old Europe and France alone - Charles Maurras, foreign policy and national defence" Paris, Economica, 2009.

4] A song whose chorus says: "To die for the Fatherland is the most beautiful fate, the most worthy of envy".

5] This philosophical background is only implicit in "...". The Trojan Horse Valois explains it later in "L'Être et le Devenir", preface to [5] This philosophical background is only implicit in [6]. Social History and Philosophy».

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