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General Tactical Review - The Battle

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It may seem curious to devote a delivery of this new tactical review to a subject as worn, outdated, and seemingly obsolete as battle. By this choice, we would like to refocus tactics on its specific field of study, that of the implementation of forces in combat and battle, to the detriment of the high-flying considerations of grand ideas and principles, glosses that had come to constitute almost all tactical thinking.

Indeed, general civilian and military use has gradually given tactics a general sense of strategy, stratagems, combinations and manoeuvres. This trend has been reinforced for more than twenty years by the exclusive influence on military thinking of operations marked by the extreme scarcity of means, the extreme immensity of space and the excessive importance of non-military problems to be solved. In these operations, minds have focused on political and strategic questions on the one hand and on logistical issues on the other. The level at which these operations are discussed has been invented, turned into doctrine and art, and tactics has become a dirty word, a sticky and unpleasant matter reserved for subordinate levels that are known to be needy.

Laziness, the natural tendency of any mind to avoid technical subjects requiring precise knowledge, has been made a reason for satisfaction: the true tactician would be above such trivial details. History shows that this is not the case, and that, on the contrary, there can be no strategist or valuable operative who has not mastered the trivial knowledge on which tactics are based. Behind Alexander's victories, we do not only find Aristotle, we also find the obscure captain who taught him how to group, instruct, move, feed, or deploy a troop. Behind a relevant operative intent, there is always a sound understanding of the time required for a committed infantry company to break contact by taking its equipment and wounded, to reach its vehicles, to call roll, to re-embark its people, and to report. It is our hope that an understanding of these long overlooked trivial factors, their

evolution and their tactical consequences, will be at the heart of the reflections in this review. That is why we begin with a digression about the battle. Because it delimits the field of tactics; because it is the place where, on the one hand, the most sacred dimension of politics and, on the other, tactical triviality meet; and because it is the framework in which this triviality is most obviously imposed.

The order of battle, the profession of the army chief and subject of tactics

According to classical conventions accepted since the 18th century, the theory of the art of warfare is divided into two main subjects: strategy, which refers to the art and science of warfare, from the determination of war aims by the sovereign to the command of the various armies in their marches and battles; Tactics, which refers to the art and manner of ordering the army and fighting the battle, and all the minor activities involved, movements, combats, engagements, etc., that are necessary to achieve the objectives of warfare.¹

Tactic comes from *taxis*, relating to the order, which itself derives from *taxis*, *taxis*, which in Greek designates the simple order² ordered to a concrete goal, for example the order in which the craftsman arranges his tools on the workbench. The eighteenth-century authors, inspired by the Greeks, used this word to describe the art of deploying the army and combining the action of three weapons³ in the battle. Like all words, its meaning is the result of usage, which in turn is the result of convention. To discuss this convention is of little interest. The subject of our review will be the tactics as understood here, despite all the theoretical contradictions that may be opposed to us.

Thus understood, tactics is the profession of the military leader, from the chief general to the captain, in the sense of the craftsman's profession. Its tools are men (manpower, instruction, recruitment, training, etc.), organizations (large and small units), equipment and armaments, resources, etc. The battlefield is his establishment. Its handbook deals with the deployment of the army and its constituent elements in preparation for battle and with the movements and fighting constituting the battle. As the raw material to be transformed is the enemy, an animated, reactive and hostile material, the result is both chaos as soon as the battle is started and the complexity of the decisions to be taken to put in order a cosmic order: Here begins the realm of complex orders and here begins strategy.⁴ The dialectic of wills using weapons to settle their conflict.

Tactics stores and implements the tools at its disposal in battle. Through the action of a multitude of factors, these tools have evolved enormously over the centuries, and the way in which they are stored and used has changed as well. To understand what the consequences of the appearance of a particular type of weapon or unit on the battlefield would be, and to imagine the new uses to which it could be put in order to oppose the use of such weapons and units in battle, we need to understand how they could be used in the future. tactics, and what changes in tactics would be needed to achieve this, was the puzzle of all strategists in all eras. As a cautionary reference to the Chevalier de Folard, we do not share his belief that war, and especially tactics, is "a science more speculative than experimental. On the contrary, it seems to us that tactics have always evolved through successive trial and error, consisting of trying out a new use, instructing the troops, putting it into practice in combat, and then drawing the consequences of the experiment. The rarity of battles⁵ The impossibility of isolating the adoption of this new use among the factors of success or failure, the constraints of all kinds imposed on

interpretations, all this contributed to slowing down developments and giving them an erratic character. The Romans, in the opinion of all speculators, became masters in the art of adopting by experience the weapons, tools and tactics that seemed to have given their opponents the advantage.

In many cases, these evolutions were initiated by the most humble actors, in a purely experimental approach that we could usefully call today reactive adaptation. This was notably the case throughout the Middle Ages, a period of immense evolution, as little known as it was misunderstood, no doubt because the written word was rare and speculation even more so. To cite just one example, according to the Queen Matilda Tapestry, in 1066 the Franconorman knights still practiced three spear escrimas⁶ indifferently: some still used it as a javelin, throwing it at the enemy in the ancient manner, most brandished it as a javelin, but to deliver the blow with a firm hand from top to bottom, and only a tiny minority used it to charge the enemy with the spear. The lance was already being charged with a stopped spear at belt level, a manner which would soon be imposed, it seems, by the ransom of experience and without any speculative writing having previously imagined it.

Drama or Tragedy: the Perpetuation of a Sacred Function

What is a battle? This word has long been used to describe the confrontation of two generals in chief and two entire armies, either because there is no side and no opponent or that it is the two armies deployed against each other in a particular theatre of war. According to the nomenclature given by Colin in his "Transformations of War", there are five levels: Engagement, which is the most basic action of war in which two small units, parties or detachments take each other to task; Combat, which refers to any engagement of large detachments but not involving the bulk of the two armies; Battle, in which both armiesThe campaign, a large-scale series of marches, battles and engagements, for high, often directly political, purposes.⁷ war, conducted by a combination and succession of campaigns, for exclusively political purposes.

Heir to ritualized confrontations in which two armies of modest size, two tribes or two cities, threw all their forces because they were playing for their political and often physical survival, the battle retains the character of a drama in which one of the two opponents must inevitably die. The bullfight or a tournament final between the XV of France and England are particularly effective symbolic models. Like tragedy, it assumes the unity of time, place and action, the stadium, the contests or the field. The modest scale, both in terms of numbers and duration, of ancient and medieval battles made it easy to identify the battlefield as well as the day of battle. The continuous growth in numbers and the subsequent increase in the duration of battles between the 18th and 20th centuries altered this evidence: Thus, if there is no doubt that the affair of June 18, 1815 was a battle, in which two armies fought against one, where was the battlefield located? At Waterloo? At La Belle Alliance? Between Hougomont and the Holy Hedge? And what about the Battle of the Marne in 1914, where several armies on both sides fought each other, where the divisions held, on a very close line of battle, a very strong position. The divisions held the role of the battalions of yesteryear on a very close line of battle, and almost no one was able to fight on the banks of the river of the same name? So this confrontation, like many others before it, had to be invented in some way and was only called a battle because it had to be fought: how to keep the public without putting on a play?

Like any dramatic work, the battle has its actors and director, and they are rarely forgotten. It also has its title. When it's missing, it has to be invented and sometimes its natural title is not good and a better one has to be found: Thus a battle started crookedly and at night by attacking a redoubt near a village called Shevardnoy, fought by two Russian armies on a position near another village named Borodino, remained at home under the name of a river with no connection to the battlefield, except that it supported, as its subtitle suggests, the idea of a great battle under the walls of Moscow, walls that were actually more than 100 kilometres apart.

Finally, like any play, the battle has its spectators, and perhaps exists only for them. There are those in the honorary lodge, the sovereign - when he is not the director himself - and his entourage. They can be present, as Louis XV in Fontenoy, or attend the play on a delayed basis, through the minutes :

"They'll be talking about us in the ladies' room," said Joinville. And there are those of the parterre, balconies and paradise. Except for the naturals of the place, more often victims than actual spectators, and apart from a few famous historical cases, the people only have the right to the deferred broadcast through the gazettes and press releases, which make up the actors, redesign the scenography, adapt sets and events to make the show pleasant. A good battle is about selling, starting with the television news ratings.

The battle begins according to a synopsis, the preconceived plan of the general-in-chief, but this plan is rarely respected beyond the first act, and often does not go any further: in this dramatic art, a good director is a good improviser. The drama is played out in a succession of acts and scenes, with entrances, exposures, adventures, and unravelling, as Napoleon himself notes: "A battle is a dramatic action, which has its beginning, its middle and its end. The order of battle taken by the two armies, the first movements to come to blows, are the exposition; the counter-movements made by the army attacked form the knot, forcing new dispositions and bringing about the crisis, from which the result or denouement is born.»

It will be observed that most of the scenes passed on to posterity owe their success more to their symbolic effectiveness than to their tactical effect: the three blows, struck by the legionnaires on their shields, or by the great battery bludgeoning the English line at Waterloo⁸; the great^{monologues} of Act 1 such as Joffre's agenda at the Marne or the harangue of William the Field Marshal at Lincoln⁹ ; the famous^{entrances} on stage such as the salute, perhaps invented, of the Comte d'Anterrockes at Fontenoy; the duets and arias which punctuate the play with heroic adventures often played (the trumpet-major of the chasseurs de la garde breaking his trumpet over Russian artillerymen in Austerlitz); the cascading, attested, invented or embellished, inexhaustible source of regimental currency ("Grenadiers of the 48th, what do you say about these people? - General, they're dead! " " "); the famous closing words ("All is lost, for the honor¹¹ " or that of Cambronne); the figure of the "villain" or the traitor, the dark side of the story (the Bourbon constable in Pavia or the famous captain of the carabinieri in Waterloo); and, to testify that the death of the hero and his burial in the twilight, such as that of the young Duke of Longueville at the Rhine Crossing, the Knight of Assas at Klosterkamp, or Caulaincourt at the Great Moskova Redoubt.

It should be noted that the director is also an actor, that he is one of the heroes of the play

par excellence, and that it is good that he dies from time to time to make a good story, like Gustave Adolphe in Lützen or Turenne in Salzbach. The sovereign, when he commands in person, holds this sacrificial role especially, either when he dies or when he tries to die (like Napoleon in Waterloo or William II in October 1918, who were prevented from going into battle to die in the middle of their army), or that he accepts to be taken: In our time, John II the Good and Francis I are severely judged for allowing themselves to be caught...¹² but everything we know about public opinion in their time is against our commentators. Charles V will be rightly reproached for having obeyed his father's order to leave the battle, while Philip will base on his disobedience and on his nickname of daring the power of the house of Burgundy which will soon deprive the Kingdom. "Tomorrow in battle, the King will bear the sin of his army."¹³ Every battle, happy or not, decisive or not, is fought to enter the Golden Book. If it cannot be won, at least it should be mentioned in the Legend of the Centuries or told at prime time. "One must be beautiful" said the lieutenant of Gironde when he shaved the day before his last fight. For opinion, today as in the past, is versatile and irrational, and votes for the beautiful gesture when it is not for the pretty boy.

The scenography, the rules governing the place and the play of the actors on the stage, the nuances of interpretation, the role of the choir (the big drums again ?), the role of the stagehands and the stagehands, the role of the prompter (the staff control cell?), all this constitutes the tactics. The stage is the position on which one of the two armies has decided to fight and where the other has accepted it. For the battle is a gift that one offers, that one gives, that one delivers. You can accept it or refuse it, as long as you have the freedom of action.

1 Already in the 18th century, notably through the pen of Pierre de Bourcet, an intermediate subject was introduced, logistics, or the part of the art consisting of moving and feeding the army before and after the battle. This part will tend to be counted alternately in tactics (the upper parts of tactics or Bonaparte's grand tactics) or in strategy and whose contemporary practice could logically make up the essential part of operations.

2 By distinction with μ , kosmos, the complex order, directly opposed to χ , chaos, which designates the absence of order, the original disorder of the world.

3 Only three weapons are then known: infantry, cavalry and artillery. And only the first two have an army staff.

4 In this sense, strategy and tactics do not represent two levels of command, but two essential and complementary activities of any warlord.

5 Jean Flori (La chevalerie, Gisserot, Paris, 1998, p. 54) observes that, statistically, few knights in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were able to take part in a major battle and none could have fought two. And we are talking about a period that we imagine to be extremely bellicose...

6 Jean Flori, *ibid.* pp. 4750.

7 The campaign is the level of what Guibert and Bonaparte call grand tactics and what Bourcet and then Jomini call logistics, the second not including supplies. It is obviously tempting to put this "level" in relation to the functions of our operational level.

8 Throughout the Empire, it was customary for the battle to be triggered by three shots fired by a Guards battery.

9 "To defend our worth, for ourselves, for those who love us, for our wives and children, for the defense of our lands, for the conquest of the highest honor, for the peace of the Church also, for the remission of our sins, let us bear the weight of arms well. You are the habitation of the country... See these in your hand. They are ours if we do not have the heart and the courage. If we die, God will put us in his paradise. If we defeat them, we will have gained lasting honor for ourselves and our lineage. They are excommunicated, and those who receive evil deeds will go to hell." Quoted by Georges Duby, *Guillaume le Maréchal or Le meilleur chevalier du monde*, Paris, Arthème Fayard, 1984.

10 Lent to Major General Richepanse in Hohenlinden, 1800.

11 Lent to Francis I in a letter to his mother and regent Louise of Savoy, after Pavia, 1525.

12 The first in Poitiers, or Nouaillé-Maupertuis, in 1356, the second in Pavia in 1525.

13 Alexandre Sanguinetti (*Histoire du soldat, de la violence et des pouvoirs*) quotes Shakespeare in Henri V's monologue on the eve of Azincourt. We retain the quotation in the sense in which he gives it, although it seems to be at fault in its letter as well as in its spirit. After a dialogue with soldiers in which the King, on the contrary, rejected this responsibility, Shakespeare had Henry V say at the beginning of his monologue: "On the King's account! Our lives, our souls, our debts, our tender wives, our children, and our sins, let us put everything on the King's account! - We must therefore be charged with everything." (Henry V, Act IV, scene 1.) "Tomorrow in battle" is taken from the apostrophe of the Duke of Clarence's ghost to Henry III on the eve of Bosworth (Henry III, Act V, scene 3): "Tomorrow in battle think of me and let your sword fall dull. 'It is his own crimes that Henry III carries into battle, not those of his soldiers."

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