



Essential tactical subject and essential means of policy

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General Tactical Review - The Battle

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Tactique générale

It may seem curious to devote a delivery of this new tactical review to a subject as worn, outdated, and seemingly obsolete as battle.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-minded considerations of grand ideas and principles, glosses that had come to constitute almost all tactical thinking.

Preliminaries, the setting up of the scene and the actors, consist for one of the armies in ensuring a suitable position according to offensive or defensive intentions. An offensive position must allow the army to be assembled and lead in different directions, ensuring in all cases a line of communication. A defensive position must both force the enemy to take the offensive and allow him to receive his attack. Its extent must be proportional to the size of the army, its wings must be supported by obstacles which may discourage or prohibit circumvention, and it must shelter the line of communication from enemy enterprises. The order of battle refers to everything that is nowadays called the disposition (or formation for small units on the march), the organization (which units are affectedThe order of battle refers to all that is known today as the arrangement (or formation for small units on the march), the organisation (which units are assigned to the army) and the articulation (how the organisation is adapted to the mission, the position occupied, the manoeuvre envisaged).

The battle is the space-time framework in which tactical action produces all the political and strategic effects at once. Marches and counter-marches, manoeuvres and fights, therefore all tactical actions, are only the scenes of a drama and what we call phases or time are obviously the acts. This is why they are conceived as much for the purpose of communication as for tactical efficiency, the two being linked in the need for the leader to make himself understood and obey the actors. This is why, again, when the design did not give the fitters⁴ photogenic scenes that are easy enough to cut and edit, the film is cut again, changing the order of appearance of the actors, embellishing the role of one or

darkening that of another. That the chroniclers of yesteryear rewrote history in this way should not overtake and even less shock our contemporaries: it was never anything but STRATCOM, and a STRATCOM apparently quite efficient, whose methods could usefully inspire us...

Finally, we must understand that the battle has always crystallized the sacred and religious dimension of war and politics in the broadest sense: it is the Judgement of God, the ordination par excellence, and therefore it crystallizes the expectations of both the politician and the people. Innumerable poets, philosophers and playwrights, in all traditions, explain their results through the intervention of the most diverse deities, those dedicated to war (Mars, Athena, Odin, etc.), those dedicated to the struggle for peace and the defence of the people. Anankè or Necessitas and their daughters the Fates, divinities of individual destinies; Tyche or Fortuna, divinity of the destiny of the city and of chance, represented blindfolded and holding the wheel of destiny and the horn of plenty. Battle is the place where one takes all the risks to lose or win everything. The Ancients understood that luck (Fortuna) was more important than human, technical or tactical qualities, which is why battles are rare.

The battle is a liturgy in which Good and Evil necessarily clash. It always begins with solemn excommunications and sacrifices (the Bouvines Sunday Mass) by which each side intends to win the favor of the gods. This has hardly changed since antiquity: our modern spokesmen keep repeating at length on the television news that the enemies are only terrorists, excommunicating them from the community of nations as well as from the community of respectable people. There is no point in fighting if one is not in the right, for "the men of arms will fight, [but only] God will give victory...."¹⁵ ». It is not certain that such behaviour is made necessary solely by the democratic nature of our societies. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that they are the result of individual and collective needs buried deep within the human soul, and that they will continue to be used in the wars of the future, whatever their techno-logical forms and the way in which the nations concerned are organized.

This sacred dimension of the battle and its political importance are not without consequences for the tactical freedom to accept or reject the battle. Refusing to fight the battle brings dishonour - today it seems as if we are facing a drop in popularity or a drop in the polls - which sometimes has a political cost far greater than the possibility of defeat. The pressure of the barons and public opinion, ulcerated by the apparent royal inaction in the face of the English cavalcades of 1339 and 1345, is not for nothing in the haste in which Philip VI and his army will engage in Crecyen-Ponthieu a battle that they believed they could neither lose nor refuse. The same pressure from the big landowners and the people will lead in 1812 the Tsar to relieve Barclay de Tolly of his command, guilty of refusing the battle and retreating indefinitely by burning the country in front of the Great Army. His successor Kutuzov, however, continued the same method up to the position of Borodino.

Yesterday, today and tomorrow: persistence of the myth and evolution of forms

The ritual, religious, and political power of battle has led to myths such as that of the "decisive battle". The strongest was always tempted to rely on God's judgment to avoid the long inconveniences of war. But if we except the settlement of the "crisis" of the Cimbres and Teutons by Caius Marius, the strongest was always tempted to rely on the

Judgement of God to avoid the long unpleasantness of a war.¹⁶ There are very few battles that have been truly "decisive" on the scale of a conflict. La Turbie, Trasimeno and Cannes, as "decisive" as they were, did not allow Hannibal to defeat Rome. What was left to the English kings of the "decisive" results of Crécy, Poitiers and Azincourt? Austerlitz made it possible to obtain a very temporary truce in a conflict that ended ten years later where it had begun, in Belgium. History has bequeathed us with very few battles and almost none "decisive". Unless they were "decisive" only in so far as they lasted in the memories, therefore as tools of communication, of "meaning".

The reality is that the battle militarily gives only a "limited decision": it often concludes a campaign, almost never war. It changes the military or political balance of power for what follows. War almost never (and even less so today) takes the form of the shepherd's blow, checkmate in three moves for beginners.

Because we have become accustomed to imagining battles only in their ancient forms, it is difficult to understand what battles would be today and what they might be tomorrow. From the earliest antiquity to the present day, battles have often changed form and, above all, scale. While they have become more difficult to "isolate", their nature has remained the same. Originally, and until the middle of the 18th century, there were army battles between armies of modest size (between a few thousand and about thirty thousand men), but these battles were often fought by armies of different sizes (men) on battlefields not exceeding one compartment of land, and durations ranging from half an hour to a few hours.¹⁷ From the middle of the 18th century to 1914, there were battles of divisions, fought by much larger armies (up to 100,000 men), divided into relatively autonomous corps.¹⁸ On fronts barely exceeding ten kilometres, and with durations still limited to one day in most cases: it is then still very easy to identify battles, with their general-in-chief, their battlefield, their day of battle. The advent of industrial warfare and general mobility systems completely overturned this vision. The general and seemingly permanent confrontation of army groups comprising millions of men, lined up neck and neck on a continuous front of several hundred kilometres, the appalling losses caused by the repeated and costly failure of major offensives that were hoped for, and the lack of a clear vision of the future, made it difficult to identify battles with their general-in-chief, their battlefield, their day of battle. The appalling losses caused by the repeated and costly failure of great offensives which it was always hoped would bring the war to an end, all of which challenged the idea that a battle - as imagined until then - could be fought in the same way. The idea that a battle - as hitherto imagined, fairly narrowly circumscribed in numbers, space and time - could be decisive, or even that it could still be fought.¹⁹

It has become customary to theorize the solutions then adopted by the staffs to solve this problem and to distinguish between tactical solutions - read "retrograde" - and others that are operative or "operative". This understanding should be corrected: the practical solutions adopted by the various staffs are in fact very similar and differ only in the semantics adopted at the time and in interpretations elaborated afterwards. To take just one example, the method devised by Pétain in 1917 and 1918 to exhaust German reserves by successive blows given at different points on the front, is considered by the French as a new way of tactics and not as a new level of warfare. They persisted in calling battles the great successive army group actions (the battles of the Fère, the Tardenois, the Matz, etc.). The Russians, for their part, will call operations these successive great actions

led by fronts²⁰ which will lead them to imagine a particular level and an operative art.

What remains in both cases is the distinction of battles and the change of scale of these battles compared to those of the previous period: the battle is no longer physically a private match in a closed ring: from now on, a battle will be called a group action, following great maneuvers, fights, intoxicating actions, etc. The battle is no longer physically a private match in a closed ring: from now on, it will be called a general action, the result of major maneuvers, combats, intoxicating actions, etc., leading to a common goal identifiable to two great opposing leaders: Battle of France, Battle of Britain, Battle of the Atlantic convoys, etc. Some of these battles could just as well have been called campaigns, and it seems that the name battle was given to them only because of its moral resonance. This did not prevent the resurgence of more classic battles, comparable to those of the previous war: the battles of Gazala, El Alamein, Cassino, the Ardennes, etc.. In short, rather than a technical meaning in the hierarchy of military actions, the word battle remains attached to the sacred moment, at the moment of extreme violence, superhuman effort, the judgment of the gods ... and to the necessities of political communication.

Things don't seem to have changed that much in that regard, according to analysts, witnesses, press releases, and the modern-day columnists who are our journalists. What would the war in the Middle East consist of - or what could be said about it, which is more or less the same thing - without Afrin, Kobane, La Gouttah, Mosul or Palmyra? In the light of this and the daily promises of researchers, industrialists and geopolitical analysts, what will a battle be in the future? What new changes in form or scale should we expect? The answer depends, on the one hand, on the uncontrollable evolution of a multitude of factors (technical qualities and costs of equipment, changes in societies, changes in scarce resources, etc.) and, on the other hand, on the evolution of the geopolitical situation. The answer depends, on the one hand, on the uncontrollable evolution of a multitude of factors (technical qualities and costs of equipment, changes in companies, changes in scarce resources, etc.) and, on the other hand, on the choices to be made to adapt recruitment, organization, equipment and tactics to the requirements of the moment. However, these requirements will also depend on the goals set by the belligerents at a given moment. Let us sketch out two hypotheses.

The first is that of a battle of nano-divisions. Tomorrow's armies will be scarce and expensive because of the extreme increase in the cost of owning modern equipment. Their maneuverability could be renewed through collaborative and infocentric battle capabilities and increased protection capabilities. Conversely,

The multiplication of autonomous machines and drones, the ability to deliver long and very long-range killing shots with unprecedented powers of destruction (thermobaric ammunition, etc.), cyber threats, all this could, on the contrary, produce a tactical blockage comparable to that of the years 1914-1917.²⁴ and force to bury the troops, to disperse the modules, to reduce their volumes, to partition the networks as well as the devices. Faced with this hypothesis, a constant current of thought for nearly 50 years, starting from the network of Commander Brossolet, and continuing with the generation of a new generation of devices. Giuli and his vectorial maneuver, to the zonal devices of General Hubin, recommends the adoption of a tactic that we will call atactic.²⁵ Because tactics means to organize and organize the army, whereas this current proposes not to organize and organize the army at all (this is the extreme proposal of the vectorial maneuver) or at least to organize and organize it only partially. It is not an insult to these innovators to say that they or their followers have not yet come up with detailed answers. It is not an insult to these innovators to say that they or their followers have not yet provided detailed and convincing answers to the formidable questions posed by their

proposals in terms of support, command, coordination, morale, adaptation to the necessities of a war with major objectives.

The second hypothesis could be based on the observation of current battles and the idea that tomorrow's armies may well resemble those of 1918 and 1940: armies with large numbers of personnel in proportion to the objectives pursued in the conflict, combining numerous conventional forces in their equipment and organization, economical in terms of ownership costs, with "elite" units with a high level of security. The aim is to combine large numbers of conventional forces in terms of equipment and organisation, low cost of ownership, with "elite" units equipped with the full range of so-called "fourth generation" means, network-centric, geolocalised, cyber-capable, hyper-mobile support methods, etc. It goes without saying that the French army at the beginning of the Scorpio era may well de facto resemble this for the next thirty years and that the new tactics may well consist of manoeuvring forces with very different capabilities.

So there will always be battles, and when they are lacking, we will still have to invent them. Because the world does not seem any more orderly than it was yesterday, and war will always be remembered, because war will always, in one form or another, be fought through the implementation of a new tactic. Because war will always be fought, in one form or another, through the implementation of concrete means in moments of paroxysmal violence, and because politics will always demand chosen pieces to stage the war before the troops and the people, to make them adhere to the aims of the conflict and make them accept the costs and consequences. The battle will thus obviously remain as the good page par excellence and the battle history as a kind of anthology of "politics continued by other means".

14 They were called chroniclers. Today they are called communicators .

15 From Joan of Arc's reply to the prelates of Chinon who asked her why God would need people in arms if he wanted to liberate France.

16 Aix (- 102) and Vercelli (- 101). Perhaps the only example of a "military solution" to a conflict that history has bequeathed to us since sources say that even women knew about it after killing their children.

17 The battles that lasted more than a day are exceptional and well-known: Marignan (1515), Freiburg-Brigau (3, 5 and 9 August 1644) and a few others.

18 Initially the divisions of the Guibert system, then the army corps. The essential factor at the origin of the division of the army lies in the new capacity that a detachment has to fight in retreat because, in particular, the range and mobility of its artillery now allows it to engage the enemy at a sufficient distance to avoid a collision. Until the middle of the 18th century, two troops could only fight each other by being a few metres apart and therefore at the mercy of a collision, unable to retreat without risking an assault in an unfavourable formation. A detachment unable to fight backwards could not save time and risked being lost for nothing.

19 This may have begun in Siberia in 1905.

20 In the Russian vastness, the front was never continuous, even during the Second World War. Hence the name of the front given to the army group: the front has a real equivalent in our country only the group of armies attached to a particular theater, considered as isolated (like the command of the allied armies of the East for example).

21 In any case, this is what is observed in the Ukrainian conflict.

22 A neologism formed by reference to atonal music.

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