Military Geography

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LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR ROBERT BIDDULPH, K.C.M.G., C.B.,
Director-General of Military Education, in the Chair.

MILITARY GEOGRAPHY.

By Colonel J. F. MAURICE, C.B., p.s.c., Professor of Military Art and
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THE subject with which the Council of this Society has asked me to deal this afternoon is a large one. I fear a little lest, interesting and important as it is to all soldiers in itself, the mere sketch of its character which our time permits may make it dull for want of illustration. I shall endeavour to avoid that as far as I can, but after all a catalogue of the most interesting books in the world would be dreary reading to those who knew nothing of their contents. The one consolation, therefore, that I have in speaking to you is that I am sure that that is by no means the case. You wish me rather to be in the position of the man who, in merely naming Dickens' works, suggests the pleasures you have derived from the humour of the "Pickwick Papers" and the pathos of "Dombey;" in naming Thackeray brings before you a gallery of familiar faces. You wish me, in fact, rather to express facts familiar to us all than to introduce you to anything that is very new, and must be dreary if it does not receive illustration from your own knowledge and experience.

Military Geography, then, as I understand the term, deals with all those conditions of the surface of the world which affect armies, campaigns, and battles. I do not think that it is possible to separate off from it the minor features of the earth's surface, which we more especially associate with "topography." Our doing so is, I think, an accident of military education. We most of us, in fact, learn to take

in with the eye the features of land under our eyes by actually sketching them. The consequence is that we are very apt, in practice, to talk as if military geography was concerned only with the greater features of a country, its military frontiers, its great mountains and rivers, and so on, and as if the question of the character of a battlefield or the nature of a bridge were pure questions of "topography."

I am not very keen about definitions, and I am by no means sure that, as a matter of mere Greek derivation, this, my assumption, might not be shown to be wrong. What I do care about is the practical question of the effect of any separation of the two things upon the conduct and movement of armies. I had an experience in regard to this very early in my military career which strongly impressed me. Being, I am afraid, in those days, perhaps now, not altogether ready to accept without investigation an established dictum simply because I was told it was the correct thing, I was sorely puzzled by certain explanations which were offered of a particular movement of Napoleon's during the 1814 campaign. I could not understand why he moved as he did. I felt sure he had some very good reason for doing it, but on the ordinary maps the movement, with the details of which I need not trouble you, seemed to be wholly unaccountable. It upset my ideas of the principles on which he acted. The very worthy "crammer," if I may use the term without offence, to whom I went to study military history before going up for the Staff College, would not hear of my objections. Nevertheless, I was not satisfied, and continued my hunt for a cause; when at last, after much research, I, to my infinite joy, discovered, I think in Thiers, a careful description of the nature of the bridges over the Seine, the river towards which Napoleon was then moving. It showed that one particular bridge was a wide massive stone structure, practically indestructible by an army in the field; within the time Napoleon need give to his opponents. The others were slight narrow wooden structures, easily defensible, easily destructible. Instantly the meaning and the motive of Napoleon's disposition of his troops stood revealed. It depended not on some elegant strategic combination such as one might make on a sheet of paper, but upon what I shall venture to call the military geography of the theatre of war.

Perhaps, though it has only an incidental bearing on the subject, I may as well, as I have mentioned my "crammer," say how, from his point of view, the story ended. I sat down, a rather trembling Subaltern, to open my military history paper, with the name upon it, as examiner, of a man long since dead, whom I already knew as a very brilliant soldier, of whom I had the most profound awe. The first two questions that met my eye were: 1st, a request to account for this particular movement of Napoleon's; 2nd, a request for a description of the bridges over the Seine. Instantly I felt that we understood one another. You will, perhaps, forgive me if I thus give point to this particular personal illustration, because I practically have always dated from that moment one of the most valued friendships of my life, and certainly I look upon it as

the starting point of any confidence that I have since then acquired in dealing with the study of military history.

The point, then, that I wish to make is, that military geography, in all its branches, whether it deals with the larger or the smaller features of the earth's surface, is the essential handmaid of military history, past, present, and future. I hardly think that the two subjects can ever be studied with much profit apart from one another. It is, to my mind, a most dreary thing to study, either in the present day or the past, for instance, the military frontiers of the different Powers of the world, unless you connect that study with the historical circumstances which have affected them and been affected by them, and with the opportunities which they present to each of the Powers for either defensive or offensive action. Similarly, I never could myself take much interest in the mere enumeration of the fortresses of a country or description of its main lines of road or other means of movement, except in connection with the history of past campaigns or as part of an analysis of the best mode of attacking or defending it at the present time.

Now, it so happens that all the greatest Continental soldiers of the last twenty years have been at the pains to give all those who care to study their work, practical lessons of this kind in regard to military geography which are quite invaluable. I have often said that if one could have desired to invent, for the purposes of military study, a series of imaginary frontiers with kingdoms behind them, each so varied from the other that in no two should there be a sameness in the lesson, one could not have devised a series so instructive in their variety as the European military frontiers and kingdoms of to-day.

Each of them is based on a well-thought-out principle, in the carrying out of which great military nations, whose whole energy and capacity is concentrated on readiness for war, have each of them expended millions of money. I could not, of course, discuss these this afternoon with sufficient detail to make them intelligible to those who know nothing about them. But consider how varied they are.

France has her great frontier girdle of fortresses; her *forts d'arrêt*, closing every road except at the two gaps which she has designedly left open to admit an enemy, in order that she may there have him at her mercy; her great scheme of entrenched camps giving her both the means of concentrating the powers of the south to strike against an invader moving on Paris and a means of aggression from her old "gap of Belfort," now become sally-port of Belfort. All these are based on the most careful consideration of the geography, and, if I must make the distinction, topography, of the country. Behind them all—Paris the greatest fortress of the world.

Look across the border, what a contrast! Germany now possesses, as her advanced frontier, the old French mountain barrier of the Vosges, and she defends it, how?

Study the condition of her military map, and it will tell you her strategic secrets. But if you are to read them aright, you must not ignore, as questions vital to military geography, the nature of the bridges over her great second military line, the Rhine, nor fail to

watch at the railway stations the vast accumulation of what we in England should call sidings and platforms. She does not require, actually, sidings and platforms as we do, because her carriages give facilities for descent between the rails for men, horses, and guns. But the accumulation of debarking places is enormous.

See, too, on the map, how many minor fortresses have disappeared from it since 1870. Practically all, within the Reichsland, are either dismantled or ignored, except Strasbourg and Metz. Those, indeed, have grown prodigiously—have become enormous entrenched camps. Her meaning is on the surface. Active and rapid accumulation of troops by rail, pivoting on two great fortresses, a river in rear of them, the possession and passage of which she guards by very numerous fortified bridges, both for railways, carriages, and foot passengers. In rear of the great river a few great fortresses, almost all of them fortified camps, placed at her favourite point, the meeting of two great rivers, so that an enemy who attempts to attack them is divided into three separate sections.

Look to the other side of Germany, at her system against Russia.

In principle it is, no doubt, the same, viz., the complete development of the facility of movement by road and railway—specially by railway—a few fortresses, very powerful, and giving command of great bridges, important lines of communication, or the only easy line of march for armies. But how different is the country to which it is applied, and how interesting it is to see how she has dealt with the new geographical considerations! On this side of Europe we are no longer, as in Elsass-Lothringen, or, shall I say, Alsace-Lorraine, in a land of mountains, but in the great plains of the north-east. It is a land of lake and marsh, of dust and mud. Here the one great river, which at different parts of its course is held by Austria, Russia, and Germany, by great fortresses, is the Vistula. It is, in fact, the one grand topographical feature of the country. Thorn and Dantzig, with two other bridge heads, give Germany command of her part of the river. She has developed, as on the other side, her railways, behind and across the Vistula, into East Prussia, and between the lakes which form the southern borderland of that outstretched arm of Germany she has constructed sufficient forts to protect the gathering of her armies and to give her command of the roadway. Her frontier towards Russia, on the western border of Poland, is a land of marsh, guarded by great fortresses, which close the only advance of an army that would not be slow and difficult. To gain time for active strategic movement, to keep an already slower enemy hampered by endless delays: these are the advantages which she seeks to gather from such geographical conditions.

Russia, on her side, presents, as I think, a somewhat deceptive character in what is suggested by the first look at her map. If military geography were represented simply by the outlines of maps, then it would seem as if Russia directly threatened the capital of Germany, which, unlike that of France, is an entirely unguarded town. But there are many conditions properly belonging to military geography which are admirably illustrated by the contrast

which reality presents to this appearance. Russia can only, for the purposes of a direct invasion of Germany across her west Polish border, make use of two lines of railway, one of which runs into the great German fortress of Thorn, beyond the north-west corner of Poland, while the other runs completely away to the southward point of the western border, thus largely fixing for her the possible direction of the advance of her armies. She has not, as Germany has, railways running directly towards the common frontier of Poland and Germany. Further, I should claim that it is a necessary part of the duty of military geography to take account on the surface of the earth, not only of the actual mountains, rivers, railways, fortresses, &c., but of the conditions of the "insect man" upon that surface, in so far as these affect the movements of armies. Under that aspect the condition of the western portion of Russia is peculiarly interesting. The Russian railways have all had their direction determined by autocratic power for strategic purposes. The curious result is that those black lines on the map, which indicate for you the direction in which the railways run, represent in fact two entirely different things on the opposite sides of the frontier. Germany, like Russia, has been anxious to secure facilities of movement for her troops by the organization and working of her railways. But she has done this with a careful solicitude for the needs of commerce, which enables her to work her railways with a large staff, and a reasonable profit to the State. The consequence is that the daily working of the railways kept up by her for the ordinary purpose of commerce and traffic are far more effective means of military transport than those which have been constructed by the Czars solely for the purpose of military advantage, altogether regardless of commerce. I think, perhaps, it would hardly be fitting that I should here, and to you, speak fully of those conditions of the population of Poland and of the neighbouring provinces, which will undoubtedly, in the event of war, very largely affect the movements of the opposing armies. But I want to note in passing that, as such conditions as these must be taken into account in any strategical examination of the theatre of war for the purpose of determining beforehand what operations are to be carried on in it, they are for our purposes an essential part of military geography, though no doubt the scientific people might object that these were properly ethnographical considerations.

The great system of fortresses by which Russia holds Poland presents characteristics essentially determined by the conditions of the military geography of the region, which are entirely unlike those of either France or Germany. There is a certain space of ground held by the fortresses of Ivangorod, Warsaw, and Novo-Georgiewsk, which has always, from the nature of the passages over the rivers which it secures, given to its possessor command of the muddy plains of Poland. The great fortress which stands back from these—Brest Litewsk—is necessary to keep up the connection with the great mass of Russian territory. The enormous marshes which separate Russia from the Polish region present so great a difficulty for the movement

of her troops, that it is essential to have a great fortress at the point where the one railway, across the marsh eastwards into the heart of Russia, meets the various communications which run in towards Poland from the regions to the north and south of the marsh. Behind this frontier region the vast distances, the slender modes of communication which the map of Russia represents determine now, as they have determined in former days, at least in a very important degree, the strength and weakness of Russia.

The geographical characteristics of Austria are again in many respects very distinct from any of these that I have sketched hitherto. It is essentially her geographical position which is at once her danger and her strength. The formidable mountain region of Transylvania, where the Hungarians in 1848 fought so magnificent a series of battles, gives now to the dual Monarchy, as in the days of the Crimea, the complete command of the approach of Russia upon Constantinople. If she stood alone there can be no doubt of the dangers which this powerful weapon of offence would entail upon her. It makes her the chief obstacle to all advance towards Constantinople.

The northern frontier of Austria as towards Russia presents the peculiarity that the border province of Galicia lies between the Vistula and the Carpathians, while a series of rivers of some importance, notably the San, the Wysloka, and the Donajec, run down from the mountains into the Vistula. No country has in former years elaborated a system of fortresses for the possession of a kingdom more complete than that which Austria carried out in Lombardo-Venetia. Along her Galician frontier, on the contrary, it is only of late years that she has taken to constructing very solid works of permanent fortification. It will show, perhaps, the intimate connection between military history and the military map of a country of which I have spoken, if I note that the fact that for many years Austria had relied upon the friendship of Russia, together with the embarrassed state of her own finances, induced her in Galicia to avoid committing herself to the expense of permanent fortifications. When she provoked Russia in 1854, it became necessary to construct vast temporary field works. This had been her resource, in fact, whenever an emergency pressed upon her. Now works of field fortifications, relatively economical and effective for the moment as they are, have the disadvantage that they do not remain effective for very long. Hence practically, during the present period of European politics, when Austria found herself face to face with a bitterly hostile Russia, and when her ally Germany required that she should set her house in order, so that the alliance might be effective without throwing an undue strain upon Germany, Austria found herself with practically the whole work of making a fortified frontier in Galicia to be begun with a clear field. She appears to have fortified the Carpathians with certain works tending to at least delay the movements of an army by the only passes which are available; to have secured the command of the most important part of the Vistula within her region by making a first-class fortress and entrenched camp at Cracow, and by securing as a second pivot

for the movement of her armies powerful works at Przemyśl and Lemberg. These works, together with that necessary accompaniment of any modern system of national defence, namely, a great development of her railway system for military purposes, have been the changes in her military map; in the study, that is, of her military geography, which her present political situation has entailed upon Austria. There can be no doubt that the broad outlines of what she designs in view of future war, may in her case, as in others, be traced in what she has done.

Of the opportunities presented to her for offensive war, carried out in alliance with Germany, I have, I think, indicated as much as space will permit me in what I have said already of the frontiers of Russia and Germany. Had she to defend Galicia, there can be little doubt that she would not fall back by the Carpathians, but, employing merely a retaining force within the passes, would take up as successive lines the San, the Wysloka, and the Donajec, threatening a flank attack upon any Russian army that should attempt to cross the Carpathians ignoring the force in Galicia. Thus this frontier presents peculiarities both in its military geography and in the strategical methods which are determined by it, essentially different from any of those we have had to consider elsewhere.

I might enlarge, if time permitted me, upon the contrast presented by the territorial frontier of the fifth great Continental Power—Italy. She, like Germany, to the west has as her land frontier a great mountain barrier. But the snow-clad Alps are a mountain frontier of a very different character from the Vosges. Even here the student of military geography will find a new example worthy of altogether independent study in point of principle from any of the rest. It has been treated, moreover, with that freshness and originality which one might expect from the soldiers of a young country, full of national enthusiasm, and unhampered by the traditions of the past. But the frontier of Italy presents another feature far more interesting to us as Englishmen. Italy possesses a seaboard of such an enormous extent in proportion to her territory, that for her the important frontier is less her great mountain barrier than her coast. All her statesmen and her soldiers, at least as much as her sailors, feel that it is the seaboard of Italy which it is all-important to defend. Hence the relatively great development of the Italian Fleet, hence the anxious desire to maintain those cordial relations with a great naval Power which happily do not depend only upon mere considerations of mutual interest as between England and Italy, but upon those much despised, but all-important, factors of so-called sentiment; upon the hearty sympathy with which from the first England has watched the development of the youngest and oldest nation in Europe, and the complete recognition of that sympathy by Italy.

There can be no doubt that for us, the rise of the Italian Power more than any other event of our times has changed the centre of interest of the military geography of the world for Englishmen. The sea-washed shores of the outer world must always be our closest points of contact with it. The enormous development of our

Colonial Empire, due mainly to our dominion over the sea, naturally caused during many years of the present century the attention of Englishmen, and therefore of English soldiers, to be directed towards our own parts of the world almost to the exclusion of Europe. But two events, of which the rise of Italy is the first, and the approach of a great European Power towards the frontier of India is the second, have changed all that for those who have carefully studied the present signs of the times. I hardly venture, towards the close of my lecture, to touch upon all the problems which are involved in the military geography of our great Asiatic Empire. But I think it will be sufficient to say, first, that Russia is now so near to us in India that we can hardly any longer regard ourselves as having the sea as our sole important frontier, at least as long as we consider, as most Englishmen do, that the defence of the Indian frontier is an essential part of the defence of England; secondly, that she is still so distant from our Indian Empire that it is extremely difficult for us, without great military risk and without handing over to her many of the advantages which the geographical situation at present possesses for us, to forbid her approach in a most dangerous manner step by step towards our frontier. Therefore it is that it becomes exceedingly important to us to inquire whether there may not be geographical conditions in Europe which tend to redress the balance in Asia. I certainly think that there are. The rise of the Italian kingdom with its great seaboard frontier is only one of them. The fact that Italy is an essential constituent of an alliance in which two Powers great as military States, and relatively inferior as naval ones, bear the most important parts, make the means by which alone Italy can be made an effective military member of the alliance as important to them as to her. But even more important to them is the essentially seaboard frontier of Denmark, and the extent to which in all movements of troops between Russia and Germany the whole advantage rests with the Power that commands the Baltic.

The full consideration of all these questions is a matter of the actual study of military geography. They could not be dealt with in a single lecture in which it has been my object rather to take the subject which the Council has assigned me: to show the scope, the variety, and the importance of its interest, and to urge its careful study upon all soldiers, statesmen, or other Englishmen who may have to deal with the problems of the future as they concern our country. For the reasons which I explained in the beginning of this lecture, I have preferred to take the method of illustration rather than that of an abstract setting forth of the principles of the study of military geography. Even for that purpose of illustration, I might have adopted a different method. I might have taken any one or more of our modern campaigns, or of the greater contests in Europe or America, and have shown how a military analysis of the geography of the country was an essential element in determining the conduct of each of them. But on the whole it seemed to me that at the present moment the particular illustrations that I have chosen would be the more interesting, and I can only hope that they will have

fulfilled what I take it was the purpose of the Council, that of drawing attention to the vital importance of this most interesting study.

Dr. MAGUIRE: It appears to me that it would be a pity there should be no discussion following upon such a very interesting lecture; and, accordingly, though a young member of this Institution, I trust you will allow me to say a few words, not by way of criticism, but rather by way of supplement to Colonel Maurice's lecture. I can scarcely imagine any more interesting situations to the theoretical student of history, or to the practical student of the art of war, than those which Colonel Maurice has so ably brought before us. My wonder is that such a large proportion of young English Officers and gentlemen are allowed by their teachers and others to come to somewhat mature age without having some better knowledge of geography, which appears to me to be the basis of the knowledge of history, and, indeed, with so very little knowledge of history itself. I hope, however, that when gentlemen like Colonel Maurice make such remarks as those that appear at the end of his lecture, the attention of the authorities will be forcibly directed to taking steps to secure that English education of the future will not be so defective in these material matters as it now is. I cannot imagine any more interesting way in which a young man even for amusement, not to speak of profit, can spend his time than by taking up a good map and on it following some striking campaign. Unfortunately, one of the maps exhibited to-day is difficult to see from this distance. It is a very valuable map carefully constructed, I believe, by the eminent geographers in the employment of Mr. Stanford, and it shows at a glance the great lines of invasion, not merely that exist now, but that have existed in all ages. I was watching that map the other day when reading some ancient history, and it was astonishing to see that the very routes indicated by Colonel Maurice were the routes taken, as far as tradition teaches us, by the terrible invasions that destroyed the Roman Empire. The map is an exceedingly good one, and if it could be made twenty times larger, it would become invaluable for lectures on military history. Looking at it, one will see that on starting from Russia, as Colonel Maurice indicated, and trying to get to ancient Gaul or Italy, or into the countries around these old objects of barbaric greed, the invading hordes were hampered by the same kind of obstacles that would now hamper invading armies. When they got round the Carpathians to the south or the north, and then had to get down into Italy, they found great rivers and the mighty masses of the Alps blocking their way. Transylvania and the Banat and the Valley of the Drave were to the strategists who had to defend Rome and Byzantium what they now are to Turks and Austrians and modern Italy. The lecturer said he would illustrate these matters from current history, and could equally display them by reference to the past. It would be particularly interesting to see that in past history all the great military movements, backward and forward, surged along the Valley of the Danube towards the Rhine, or, taking a side direction, got involved in the Valley of the Po. For instance, Napoleonic times, taking the campaign of 1796, from the Main to Bohemia, and the Middle Rhine to the Isar, and the Riviera on to the Drave; and again, in 1800, Moreau from the Rhine between the Lake of Constance, and Napoleon across the Alps and across the Po; and, again, the campaign of 1805, when Napoleon started from the Main and the Rhine, and at the same time Massena was moving to the Italian Quadrilateral. In 1809 and 1814 also, it is particularly interesting to see how the operations in the river valleys, eastward and westward respectively, were linked by the gaps in the mountains: for example, by the passes in the Tyrol and by the violation of Switzerland's neutrality. These are suggestions that merely came into my mind whilst listening to the admirable address of Colonel Maurice. Many other suggestions might be given if one had time, but I think I have said enough to show that we are grateful to the Colonel for stirring up memories of the past as well as for his views about the problems of the future. I would further ask the lecturer what he means by stating, with regard to Italy, that the example quoted "has been treated moreover with that freshness of originality which one might expect from the soldiers of a young country full of national enthusiasm and unhampered by

the traditions of the past." I should like to know if Colonel Maurice refers to the most instructive treatise on Strategic Geography by Colonel Sironi.

Colonel MAURICE: I did not refer to any one author. I was thinking of several. It always seems to me one of the most interesting facts we have to do with in connection with the Italian Army that they have entered into these questions unhampered by those traditions of the past which, to a certain extent, tie us all—that the Italians, coming in with a brand new army, naturally deal with these questions with a perfectly unbiassed mind, and that all that has been done in that line seems to have been thought out by themselves and not taken from the mere forms of France, Germany, and Russia, or from things as they are.

The CHAIRMAN: If no one is anxious to ask any further questions of Colonel Maurice I will only venture to say, on my own behalf, how much gratified I have been to hear the lecture. I feel that it is a subject which cannot be too prominently brought to notice. The study of Military Geography is one that has this advantage, that it continues from all ages; the student of Military Geography is not like the man who, having learned the art of using the bow and arrow, finds that he has lost all his previous training when he has to learn the art of making gunpowder. The same considerations which were alluded to by Dr. Maguire prevailed in the invasions of these countries a thousand years ago as they do now. Therefore it is a study which has a continuity about it which is very advantageous to the student. It was not very long ago that a suggestion was made to me in the Department over which I preside at the War Office, that instead of teaching soldiers, or requiring them to learn history and geography at the Army Schools, we should teach them Military History and Military Geography. I felt bound to say that I thought that it would be difficult to study Military History and Military Geography without having some acquaintance with general history and general geography in the first place, and I think we may say that that applies very specially to geography, because Military Geography is really the application of the geography of the country in so far as it concerns the exigencies of campaigning. I am afraid it is a subject which is somewhat neglected not only in the Army, but in all classes. I may refer to what was written for us the other day in the "United Service Magazine" by a gentleman who has had experience in training candidates for the Army, in which he gives several somewhat ludicrous instances of the ideas which some of his pupils had of history and of geography. I think that their failure to understand properly the several points was due more to defects in their general education, than in any training they may have had for the Army; because the mistakes they made would have been as regrettable in a young merchant or a young lawyer as in a young soldier. I need not say more, except to ask you to allow me to offer to Colonel Maurice on your behalf the thanks of the Institution for his interesting lecture.