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THE GREAT TRANSITION.

By MAJOR W. H. F. BASEVI.

"The transition from the defensive to the offensive is one of the most delicate operations in war."—(*Napoleon's Maxims.*)

"A wise choice of the place, and still more of the time, for the eventual assumption of the offensive demands very high qualities of skill and resolution in the commander."—(*Field Service Regulations.*)

THERE is a general consensus of opinion that a commander who adopts a defensive attitude at the beginning of a decisive battle puts himself in a very difficult position. Our regulations are strangely insistent on the point. Twice in the paragraph from which we have quoted and once again, later in the same chapter, they warn him of the trials he must face: Napoleon lends the weight of his authority in support; and history confirms the sentence of doctrine and personal experience.

With such weight of evidence behind it the fact must be admitted. Yet it is not self-evident. Had the task of the attacker been made the subject of special emphasis it would have seemed quite natural; but to assert that it is the defender whose position is the more embarrassing sounds very like a paradox.

The choice of time and place for putting his whole weight into the destruction of the enemy would appear, at first sight, to be far more difficult for the attacker. He is operating on strange ground: he has to move his troops under the eyes of an enemy motionless and concealed: he must tear aside the screen which surrounds his adversary before the disposition of even his advanced troops can be ascertained; and when this is done it is only by fighting that he can discover the enemy's main position and its flanks. Up to that point he is operating in a fog of perplexities and doubts.

The defender, on the other hand, knows not only the ground occupied by his own troops, but probably that over which the enemy must operate. He is therefore better able to guess at his opponent's movements. Moreover he has more time in which to make his dispositions, prepare stratagems, and organize a system of inter-communication.

Why then, with all these odds against him, is it easier for the attacker to fix the time and place for his decisive blow? Why should the defender's task alone demand such very high qualities of skill and resolution? Napoleon is silent: our regulations attempt no explanation; and history leaves us to draw our own conclusions from

recorded facts. Yet the answer to the riddle is of such importance that no clue should be neglected which may guide us to the answer.

One such clue, and one only, we find in our Field Service Regulations: a phrase of a dozen words buried in a long sentence. "Once battle is joined the liberty of manœuvre which the initiative has conferred on the assailant is limited to what he can do with his general reserve. The defender *should* be able to retain equal liberty of manœuvre, if he makes skilful dispositions, resists the temptation to subordinate his movements to those of the enemy, and strikes on the first favourable opportunity. It is in the difficulty of doing this that the chief objection to allowing the enemy to take the initiative lies."

Here we see that three conditions are essential to the free action of the defender. The first of these, namely, the need of skilful dispositions, we may put aside. For the purpose of this enquiry we may assume an equality of skill on the part of the commanders. If this is so the dispositions of the defender, who usually has more leisure in which to mature his plans, would presumably be the better, unless—and here we infringe on the vital question—unless he is subject to some special disturbing influence which clouds his judgment.

The last condition also we may leave out of consideration; for our regulations themselves are somewhat contradictory on the point. Here they say, "the *first* favourable opportunity": elsewhere, and in more detail, they lay down that "the most favourable moment is when the enemy has expended his reserves in endeavouring to storm the entrenchments, but it is by no means always advisable to wait for this."

There remains, then, the second: "if he resists the temptation to subordinate his movements to those of the enemy." This is the clue we seek. In this short phrase lies the crux of the whole matter. We are no longer concerned with skill and judgment, qualities which may be perfected by study and long experience, which also may be shared by each commander in equal measure; but we have now to deal with a problem in psychology: why, in given circumstances, is one commander more tempted than the other to subordinate his actions to those of his opponent?

In cases when the defender is considerably the weaker in *moral*, numbers, skill, organization, or training, the difficulties that beset him can easily be understood. But when the balance is approximately level some other factor must account for this strange phenomenon.

This other cause is not very far to seek. It lies in the fact that, as a rule, the commander takes upon his shoulders a double task when he adopts a defensive attitude with the intention of ultimately assuming the offensive. He undertakes the business of defence as well as the business of attack, and either of these duties alone is sufficient to tax the faculties of any man to the utmost.

Not only has he a double task to perform, but the mental attitude imposed by one is the opposite of that required for the other. In the one case he is concerned with warding off blows: in the other with delivering them. As a defender he must think of his defensive

position: it is the battle ground on which a part at least of the action will be decided, and it is a matter of high importance that his line should not be broken until he is ready to bring off his counterstroke. He must, therefore, be constantly informed of the progress of the action all along his front. These are matters pressing insistently on his attention, diverting and distracting his mind from the preparation of his forward movement. They involve other and equally disastrous consequences. When urgent appeals for help come from his hard pressed subordinates; when his line begins to waver; when important points are captured by the enemy before the time is ripe for his attack: then it becomes impossible for him to withstand the temptation to send a little, and again and again a little, of his striking force to help the defenders in their peril. Thus with a divided mind and a depleted reserve, is it strange that his counter attack so often fails?

How may a commander deliver himself from being obsessed by the anxieties of the defence? There is one way and one way only. It is that taken, deliberately or instinctively, by the great masters of war.

A man cannot concentrate his attention on two things at the same time. So a commander must decide whether, in the forthcoming battle, the defence or the attack is to be the major operation. He must devote himself entirely to that and hand over the other to a subordinate. If he is going to fight a delaying action the conduct of the defence holds the first place, and he must hold all the threads in his own hand. But if he proposes to destroy the enemy, if his line of defence is only ancillary to a greater purpose, then he must hand over the conduct of it to one or more of his subordinates.

Even this will not suffice alone. He must cast all thoughts of the defence from his mind, and this he can only do by separating himself from it physically. If there is one thing about the human mind more certain than anything else, it is that a man is more powerfully affected by events that are near than by those that are far off. The commander must therefore place himself as far as possible where he is free from the distractions of the defence so that he may concentrate his faculties upon the attack. His thoughts will then be centred upon the employment of his general reserve, which force he will no longer be tempted to regard as a reserve but as a distinct fighting unit with which he is about to deliver battle on his own account. The line of defence, in charge of another general, he will then be able to look upon in the same light as, in strategy, he would regard a fortress—something advantageous to himself and disadvantageous to the enemy. But the defence of it is another man's affair; and provided the other man holds out long enough, that is all he needs and all he asks.

A commander so placed is freed from many of the influences tempting him to subordinate his actions to those of the enemy. Spared the distraction of reports from all points of his defended line he can devote himself with singleness of purpose to the attack. To despairing calls for help, which in other circumstances are so difficult to

resist, he will turn a deaf ear. His attitude will be that of the Snark of whom we are told :—

“ At charity meetings he stands at the door
And collects—but never subscribes.”

Charity begins at home, and no general ever entered into a decisive action without an inward craving for at least a few more battalions. So, rather than give, he will snap up for his own needs any unconsidered trifle he can wrest from his protesting subordinates.

It was a knowledge of these truths, or at least an instinctive desire to isolate himself from the cares and anxieties of the defence, that induced Napoleon at Austerlitz to place himself away on the left where he could supervise his counter attack undisturbed. Had his position been more central he would have been concerned at the late arrival of some of his troops, anxious about his attenuated right flank, and perturbed by the early successes of the allies. How impossible would then have been that strange little talk with Soult just before the great attack was launched.

“ How long will your troops take to ascend the Pratzen plateau ?”

“ Twenty minutes at the most.”

“ In that case let us wait for a quarter of an hour.”

Equally impossible would have been the concentration of mind and singleness of purpose with which he carried through the attack and the subsequent annihilation of the enemy.

Similarly at Salamanca Wellington placed himself on the top of the English Arapiles whence, except for the troops actually holding that advanced post, his nearest forces were a mile distant. Here, to some extent isolated from the distractions of the defence, he “observed the enemy’s movements for some time with a stern contentment. Their left wing was entirely separated from the centre, the fault was flagrant, and he fixed it with the stroke of a thunderbolt.” Had he been in the centre of the line which extended westwards from the Arapiles village he must have been disturbed when “Thomière’s division brought up their left shoulders as if to envelop Wellington’s position and embrace it with fire,” while Bonet’s troops “carried the village of Arapiles and although soon driven from the greatest part of it again maintained a fierce struggle.”

In striking contrast with the methods of these two leaders is the action of General Kuropatkin who, in spite of habitually placing a large portion of his force in reserve, never succeeded in bringing off a decisive counter attack. Yet no one will deny his great ability; and the reason of his failure is made manifest in the following extract from Colonel Ross’s book on the Russo-Japanese War :—

“ Let us consider the vast task which he had set himself to accomplish. He was at this period, so far as we know, issuing orders direct to each army corps in his army, with the exception that General Zarnbaiev was in command of the IInd and IVth Corps in Liao-yang. He was also, apparently, issuing orders direct to each of his numerous flank detachments. He was also, as we know, communicating with

the Viceroy at Mukden, and with the Czar and Minister of War in Russia. He was attempting to fight a one-man battle seeking to manœuvre each body of troops himself, to keep himself acquainted with the detailed situation on every part of the battlefield, and, at the critical moment, to strike a crushing blow. . . . When did he find time to eat and sleep? Let us leave him for the moment, merely recognizing that here must have been an overworked man with a vast weight of responsibility on his shoulders, a man mentally and physically fagged. . . . Victory depends as much on the powers of endurance of the Commander-in-chief as on those of the rank and file. It depends, therefore, on his ability to husband his powers of endurance by delegating his authority to subordinates."

It is not strange that Kuropatkin failed: Napoleon himself would have staggered under such a burden. And he knew it, or at least he felt it, so he spared himself for the effort of attack by delegating the defence to others and isolating himself from its anxieties.

It is not suggested for a moment that the personal isolation of the commander and the delegation to subordinates of the onus of defence are sufficient in themselves to overcome the difficulty of transition from the defensive to the offensive. But this at least is true: they are methods which have been employed with success by great leaders when anxious to concentrate themselves upon the destruction of the enemy. And if such masters of war as Napoleon and Wellington found them necessary, lesser men cannot neglect them with impunity. Human nature has not changed; and the way that great commanders have won battles in the past is the way that they are won to-day.

"We tell these tales, which are strictest true,
Just by way of convincing you
How very little since things were made
Anything changes in anyone's trade."

A Hindu proverb tells us that "A temple mouse fears not the gods," but it is not without hesitation and some diffidence that a soldier may bring himself to criticize our Field Service Regulations. However, unlike the laws of the Medes and Persians, they can be altered—and they have been, when amendment was desirable. In this case it is not a question of the regulations being wrong, but inadequate. They lay great stress upon the difficulties that beset a commander who commences a decisive action by adopting a defensive form. But they do not explain the reason nor suggest a remedy, and it seems desirable that these deficiencies should be made good.

At present our regulations are somewhat averse from the defensive-offensive form of battle, though they do not prohibit its adoption. Nor, indeed, would it be of any avail if they did. It is a form of fighting bred in our bones, inherited from the days of the long bow, or even earlier. It comes as naturally to the British race as the crescent impi to the Zulu, the concealed stockade to the Burman, sniping and the ghazi charge to the wild Pathan, or the dense, thrusting advance by hordes to the modern German. The last of these is

clearly inherited from their ancestors, who issued from the same forests and swept over Italy, France, and Spain, bearing down all opposition by the ruthlessness of their advance and by the weight of overwhelming numbers which made them reckless of loss.

It is vain to resist the force of heredity, which, in spite of teaching, may gain the upper hand in time of stress and tension; and we must remember that for us the impulse to advance afterwards is as strong as the tendency to begin by awaiting the attack. It is only for the commander that special difficulties make the transition a matter requiring high qualities of skill and resolution. We have seen why this is so, and how the difficulties may, to some extent, be overcome. Surely these are matters worthy of recognition.

Finally, in order to avoid the effect that mere words have upon the mind, it would be well to use some other term than "general reserve." The word reserve has associations that are liable to mislead; also it is inappropriate. The moiety of a force withheld for the ultimate assumption of the offensive is no more a reserve than an army in the field is a reserve to the troops that garrison the fortresses.

The above proposals involve very slight changes in the regulations as they now stand, and perhaps these would suffice, though it is open to question whether the whole of the seventh chapter would not bear reconstruction with advantage. "But this," as Rudyard Kipling says, "is another story."

