

Military affairs and the revolution

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All revolutions, at least all major ones, tend to involve new military tactics. It is well known that the victory of the demos over the aristocracy in the Greek polis is directly linked to the replacement of the knees by the phalanx. So were the medieval victories of the townsfolk of Western Europe and the peasants of Switzerland over the mounted knights — with gunpowder, fortified walls (replaced by mountains in Switzerland) and the same phalanx. The Hussites used wagon fortresses and field artillery against the knights. The peasants of Germany during the Reformation applied nothing new and were suppressed.

But the Dutch Revolution — the last echo of the Reformation — won, and won on the sea, where the Guises used the tactics of the English pirates against the Spaniards (at least they learned from the latter). The Americans won independence through scattered formation and marksmanship. The French Revolution radically changed the tactics of the infantry, replacing the square with columns or short lines and chains of huntsmen. The Great Russian Revolution gave birth to the tachanka. The Spanish revolution of 1936–1939 gave birth to nothing and was defeated, also because the war was fought “by the rules”.

The English bourgeois revolution, in which the revolutionaries’ striking fighting force was Cromwell’s “ironsides”, which copied the combat techniques of the noble army, seems to be out of all this. While the nobles were trained in the military from childhood, that could not be said about Cromwell’s soldiers. But here too it was not without novelty. Cromwell’s cavalrymen were not as dashing as the gentlemen’s, but disciplined. Therefore, though any of them would be hacked to pieces in a jiffy if they fought a nobleman, theirs was much more concerted and streamlined than the nobility’s, and therefore tended to win the latter. Furthermore, when defeating the king’s cavalry, Cromwell’s horsemen did not pursue but attacked the enemy’s infantry from behind, while the king’s cavalry was so keen to pursue a defeated enemy that they often dropped out of the fight themselves.

And the matter here is not only in novelty as such, but in replacement of the army of professionals, well-trained in military business and only or almost only engaged in it, with an armed people, for which warriors can be gathered from the common people, training them in a short time, and which at the same time is not inferior in its strength to well-trained professionals. Naturally, this was not possible in the era of chariot battles or knightly cavalry. A knight’s cavalry could not be created from bourgeois men. The fact that in the twentieth century the Kalashnikov

assault rifle, and not a ballistic missile or even a tank or an aeroplane, became the main weapon of insurgents and partisans, is also not by chance.

The end of the twentieth century was marked by the use of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, hand grenade launchers and hand-held anti-aircraft missiles. The use of mines, anti-tank rifles and even the first grenade launchers had been used before, but it was at this time that they proved to be very effective weapons, and a “popular” weapon due to their relative cheapness. The possibility of shooting down a tank with an RPG, or shooting down an aircraft with a Stinger, deprive the state of its military advantage based on expensive and powerful weapons.

The same time gave rise to the so-called swarm tactics, used in particular by the Indian Naxalites. The idea is that the guerrillas appear in small groups or even individually, which prevents the enemy from targeting them with one rocket, and get together in a large group only just before the “action” (be it a raid, ambush or simple diversion), after which they scatter again. With modern means of communication this does not make interaction much more difficult.

The wars of the 21st century, and the Russian-Ukrainian one in particular, have brought precision-guided weapons and drones to the forefront. The latter, given the right circumstances, could well become the people’s weapon: they are relatively inexpensive and easy to use. Of course, to operate them requires certain knowledge and skills, a peasant in the beginning of the last century with all his versatility is unlikely to manage with a drone, but the modern city dweller is quite able to. There was already a case of using a combat drone by a partisan group in Belarus, which I wrote about a year and a half ago.

But rocket launchers and aviation equipped with high-precision missiles and bombs remain the weapons of the upper classes, the lower classes cannot afford them. So it is unlikely that the people who have risen up will use them. But using them against them is quite possible. And I don’t know what could be used to counter them as a defence (and a defence that is cheap and simple and easily available) other than swarm tactics, which can mostly be used in guerrilla warfare. That doesn’t mean there’s nothing to counter them, it just means I don’t know it. Perhaps others do know it and they will counter it. But if they don’t, that’s unfortunate.

If a society cannot defend itself without special, elite means of war, be it a select army, which requires long training, or super-powerful weapons, which require huge money for their creation, such society is simply doomed to inequality, to the appearance of a selected layer of elite, which only can fight or pay for the war. Any society born of revolution will have to defend itself not only against an internal enemy, but against an external one as well. All successful revolutions show this, and many unsuccessful ones too.

So as not to go too far for examples, let me remind you that it was the Russian invasion first of Crimea and then of “mainland” Ukraine that was one of the reasons for this paucity of the Ukrainian revolution, which went no further than overthrowing one of the ruling clans and transforming the Ukrainian state from an oligarchic dictatorship into an oligarchic republic. I am even inclined to consider the Russian invasion as the main reason for this.

That is why the revolution I want, the revolution that will bring people social and economic equality, is simply impossible without a “people’s” battle tactic based on an army easily created from the people and easily trained, in fact replacing the army with an armed people, and with weapons easily available to the people.

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