

Presentations

Land Warfare, c 1900-2000

Brian Bond

I am a military historian and make no apology for approaching the vast subject of land warfare from a historical perspective. Through a number of vignettes or 'snapshots' I shall try to establish the main developments since 1900 and thereby set the scene for the discussion of contemporary issues at the beginning of the 21st century.

Land warfare circa 1900 still retained many Napoleonic aspects. The strategic aim was to defeat the enemy's land forces in battle in order to occupy his territory and especially his capital city. The Prussians had done this very successfully against France in 1870-1 and the British had the same objectives against the Boer republics in 1899-1900. Recent European wars encouraged the hope that future conflicts would be short and decisive.

Somewhat at odds with this hope, European armies put great stress on numbers of soldiers serving with the colours, supported by echelons of reservists. Most Continental armies depended on conscription and counted their full, mobilized strength in millions. Soldiers were often referred to impersonally as 'bayonets'.

The weight and accuracy of fire-power had been transformed in the late 19th century. Reliable machine-guns, recoil-less, quick-firing field guns and long-range siege guns were widely in use, but the industrial revolution had by no means made its full impact upon war-making societies - Britain's official policy of 'business as usual' in 1914 makes the point.

By 1900 the spread of railways was clearly having a dramatic effect on pre-war planning, especially for the initial strategic deployment. But beyond the railheads at the frontiers enormous problems loomed. These vast, cumbersome armies would be reliant almost entirely on horse transport and marching men. Motor transport was in its infancy and there were as yet no aircraft. The Polish businessman and amateur military analyst, Ivan Bloch, made himself unpopular with the general staffs by predicting that the next great war would degenerate into stalemate, trench deadlock and attrition. There would be no decisive

BOND

Napoleonic victory: a prolonged struggle would end in collapse on the home fronts and revolution.

In broad terms Bloch was proved correct by the war of 1914-1918. All the belligerents managed to raise -and maintain -larger armies than ever before, while their societies (now called 'home fronts') stoically endured the gruesome butcher's bill. Naval power, though important, could not decide the outcome, and land warfare had failed tragically to deliver the expected results. Some theorists now began to stress technical innovation and superior quality in weapons and manpower, while others questioned whether land warfare could ever again be considered an effective instrument of state policy.

The industrial revolution had, by 1916-1918, affected both land warfare and its basis in civil society, but the operational effects were uneven and patchy. Fore example, wireless and the telephone had not yet made a significant impact on the battlefield. The most obvious imbalance was between offensive and defensive capabilities. Vast armies could now be kept up to strength in the field and supplied with food, ammunition and much-improved medical services. But the superiority of fire-power and field works over the means of mobility greatly favoured the defenders. On the Western Front deep defences stretched from the Channel coast to Switzerland: there were no open flanks. With rare exceptions, conditions made it impossible to make rapid or deep advances; or indeed to hold even limited gains against counter-attacks. Very few lorries or armoured cars, were available in 1914 and they were only just becoming plentiful when the war ended. Tanks were first used in battle in September 1916 but even in 1918 they remained slow, unreliable and vulnerable. They were certainly not yet a potential war-winning weapon capable of restoring rapid movement and victory in land operations. By 1918 too, tactical air power was playing a significant role in close support of land warfare, but its contribution was not yet vital. Even in the victorious 'One hundred days' on the Western Front the Allied advance averaged less than one mile per day.

In summing up the state of land warfare c 1918 we should not evade the fact that, however ponderous and costly the operations, they had eventually played the main role in bringing about the defeat of Germany and her allies. Victory on land (or, at least, avoidance of defeat) was understood to be of vital importance among victors and losers.

By the time of the Second World War the quantity of available trained military manpower was still significant (especially for the Soviet Union), but quality was now seen to be more important, in terms of weapons and equipment, training, leadership, doctrine and intelligence. Moreover, this generation of military leaders, who had mostly served as junior officers in the First World War, were anxious to restore mobility and decisive results to land warfare at a more acceptable cost. The Wehrmacht, already profoundly affected by Nazism, proved to be a superb military instrument, conquering most of Western and Central Europe between 1939 and 1941 by superior offensive power in land warfare, though receiving valuable support from the Luftwaffe. Close air support was certainly an important shock element in blitzkrieg, but land forces played the dominant role.

Italy and Germany were eventually conquered and occupied by slow and costly land operations in which the Allies' overwhelming material superiority at last overcame the Germans' superior operational -and especially -tactical skills. The Wehrmacht was gradually worn down by the attritional land warfare on the Eastern Front. Similarly, Japan's remarkable run of victories in land warfare was eventually countered by Allied advantages in numbers, equipment and, not least important, logistics. The ability of Allied land forces to invade and occupy the Japanese home islands was, fortunately, not put to the test.

There is no need in this brief survey to elaborate on all the innovations which influenced land warfare between 1939 and 1945. Suffice it to say that there were impressive developments in the main weapons systems, such as artillery and tanks, but equally important was the transformation of logistics in comparison with the First World War. Just contemplate the amazing achievements on both sides in the North African campaigns of 1940-1943, where armies were kept in action over more than one thousand miles of desert. The British advance through the jungles and mountains of Burma in 1944 and 1945 was equally impressive. The Allied (mainly American) ability to maintain the advance from Normandy to the Baltic in the same years was a remarkable logistic achievement, not least because the armies were supplied from the Normandy ports until near the end of the war.

It is a truism to remark that the Second World War more closely approached the extreme of 'totality' than any previous conflict in both the

BOND

psychological and material spheres. Yet for all the revolutionary developments in air and sea power and the ever-greater repercussions of war on the home fronts, land warfare -in recognisably traditional form - remained the central feature in most theatres. In short, campaigns were still fought to occupy territories with important mineral and food resources, production capacity, and populations which were made to work for the conqueror. By its ruthless exploitation policies Nazi Germany came close to making its conquests pay, particularly as regards Western Europe. By the last years of the war its production was heavily dependent on slave labour. Despite their enhanced roles, especially in the Pacific war, navies and air forces (with the notable exception of the use of the atomic bomb) could not bring campaigns to an end. Like Napoleon, Hitler expected victory to ensue from the occupation of Moscow in 1941, and also narrowly failed. It still proved necessary for the Allies to occupy Rome, Vienna, Prague, Budapest and, in culmination, Berlin in order to bring the European war to an end. The meeting of Allied and Soviet armies on the river Elbe in May 1945 ensured that - unlike 1918 - Germany was seen to have been defeated. So, in an obvious sense, we may conclude that, in the mid-twentieth century, land warfare was still to be seen as the decisive element, but by now with the enormous proviso that naval support was usually, and air support almost invariably, of crucial importance.

It is very difficult to generalize concisely and accurately about the huge number of low intensity conflicts and larger, more conventional wars that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. While most of the traditional components of land warfare remained relevant, wider questions now had to be asked. Although, for example, the role of the 'poor bloody infantry' was as vital as ever, the Second World War had already demonstrated that soldiers had to be highly trained and given specialist skills. Far more personnel were now employed in the administrative 'tail' to support a diminishing proportion of 'teeth' in the form of front line infantry. By 1944, for example, a British infantry division contained about seventeen thousand men but only about four thousand carried a rifle and bayonet. The Second World War reinforced the lesson that optimum use must be made of manpower and, increasingly, of woman power. Reliance upon unskilled 'bayonets' or 'cannon fodder' was now widely viewed not simply as militarily ineffective but also as criminally wasteful. Other

important components of land warfare which took on increased significance included the following: reliable productive power for the most up-to-date weapons and equipment in view of the fact that even 'second rate' opponents might be relatively well-equipped. Secondly, ability to 'project' land forces to distant theatres became even more difficult and costly than in the past. Britain, for example, had superior professional soldiers to Argentina's conscripts in 1982, but it was a close run thing to transport them eight thousand miles to the Falklands and maintain them there in a hostile environment within range of enemy air power. Thirdly, there was a growing awareness of the need to control vital resources, including communications and intelligence, and deny them to the enemy.

The late twentieth century witnessed innumerable low intensity conflicts and 'small wars' which were often horrific in terms of battle casualties, massacres and devastation. We need only instance the civil wars in Cambodia, Sudan, Congo and Rwanda. Large-scale, protracted wars between sovereign states, such as that between Iran and Iraq in the 1980-'s were exceptional; indeed this conflict bore many resemblances to that of 1914-1918. Clear-cut and even spectacular victories could still be won by superior technological and military skills in land operations (as by the Israelis in 1967 and the British in 1982), but it has become harder to translate these successes into enduring political gains or enhanced security. This is most obviously the case with Israel's series of brilliant victories, but also true of the Gulf War, the Indo-Pakistan rivalry over Kashmir and even of Britain's triumph in the conflict with Argentina. These examples, and many more long-running conflicts like that in Sri Lanka, must raise serious questions about the purpose and long-term effectiveness of land warfare in the early twenty first century. What are the main considerations?

Most of the 'developed nations' now rely on relatively small all-volunteer professional forces. Women are being recruited in increasing numbers and beginning to occupy significant posts. Governments are reluctant to accept heavy casualties (ie., losses numbered in hundreds, let alone thousands may not be tolerated), and ideally would, seek to conduct operations without any losses at all to their own forces. At the peak of its commitment in Vietnam in 1969 United States forces there totalled half a million. In all some 55,000 Americans were killed. Hence the United States' heavy reliance on remote air power in the

BOND

Kosovo conflict and, currently, over Afghanistan. It is possible that the Western media has made too much of this self-imposed handicap but it is still strongly in evidence. It should be added that, although Western television tends to highlight its own forces errors, targeting is now remarkably accurate compared to the recent past.

Another consideration is even that 'third world armies or militias may possess quite sophisticated weapons, depending on their sponsors. Although these systems may be hard to maintain or replace) their very existence greatly complicates assessment of enemy power and endurance -a truism which was illustrated in the Gulf War in 1991 and is contributing to the conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan at the present time.

The contemporary influence of global television is clearly of critical importance and deserving of special consideration by those with more expertise than myself. Whether or not the United States lost the Vietnam war mainly due to the malign influence of its own domestic television is still disputed, but it was already clear then that 'open societies' conduct wars at a great disadvantage against authoritarian opponents. Saddam Hussein's land forces were decisively defeated in Kuwait in 1991, but the advantage was not pressed home, due in part to American revulsion at the massacre of fleeing Iraqi troops. Consequently Saddam was able to convert a military defeat into a propaganda victory which is widely accepted as the truth in the Arab world. Israel lost some of the 'high moral ground' it had enjoyed since its foundation in 1948, after its intervention in the Lebanon, and is now frequently portrayed in much of the Western media as the chief obstacle to a lasting peace settlement with the Palestinians. Comparable problems have quickly appeared in Western television coverage of military action against the Taliban. This is a precious liberty in open societies and there is not a strong argument for censorship. Nevertheless it is a disturbing consideration that operations in land warfare are more than ever liable to be undermined, distorted or obscured by the way they are depicted on television.

Perhaps the foregoing point is only one aspect of a larger issue; namely that it has become harder in practice to get the defeated party to accept the verdict of battle, and even harder where other interested parties are concerned. I have elaborated the reasons behind this trend in my book *The Pursuit of Victory*. This development may be viewed as beneficial in so far as it discourages states

from resorting to war 'as an instrument of policy' , but depressing in that it tends to make existing conflicts harder to conclude by a compromise agreement between the belligerents.

This brief survey has tried to suggest that land warfare has changed drastically over the last century both in its physical components and conduct and also in its political context and meaning. As regards operations, for example, it is no longer realistic -except in very localised conflicts -to discuss land warfare independently of air power. In the wider context, the vast military power built up during the Cold war has proved ineffectual (indeed a handicap), against materially weaker but ideologically committed opponents such as the Vietcong, Afghans, and Chechens. It may be suggested that the leading powers are now adapting their forces for the new era with more emphasis on smaller, highly trained and highly mobile units designed for rapid reaction from their home bases.

The practical effectiveness of these specialist forces will depend partly on the readiness of the more industrially developed and more democratic powers to risk the lives of professional soldiers; against less well-trained and equipped but more fanatical enemies prepared to face death (even to welcome it) for what they regard as a righteous and un-negotiable cause.

As long ago as 1976 in *The Face of Battle* Sir John Keegan concluded that, due to its increasing frightfulness, battle was becoming unthinkable. While true of some regions, such as North America and Western Europe, this prediction has sadly failed to be realised in many parts of the world. Historians, due both to personal inclinations and professional bias, tend to look backwards and shun predictions. But we find comfort in that fact that strategic analysts, with more incentive to look ahead, also have an indifferent record. I conclude that land warfare, despite all the complications mentioned, will remain the ultimate touchstone in all armed conflicts. The gap between rich and poor nations will widen as regards the use of force, the former relying increasingly on superior technology and intelligence, and employing small, high-quality professional forces. Their main aim will be to uphold the status quo and protect friendly or client states. Their opponents will exploit the advantages of terrain, ruthlessly controlled media, calculated acts of international terrorism and willingness to die for the cause. This is a depressing conclusion, particularly for optimists who

BOND

believed that the ending of the Cold War would result in the emergence of a less belligerent and more co-operative world. Alas, a new and more frightening conflict is emerging in which liberal democracies will be severely tested in their willingness to defend their peoples and their values.