Military Action and Military Reflection:
Some Thoughts on Frederick’s “Eléments de castramétrie et de tactique” of 1770

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Military Action and Military Reflection: Some Thoughts on Frederick's "Eléments de castramétrie et de tactique" of 1770

Abstract


In 1770 king Frederick the Great of Prussia wrote a memorandum entitled "Éléments de castramétrie et de tactique". It was composed for the benefit of the Prussian generals and published in French in 1770, and in German, under the title of "Grundsätze der Lager-Kunst und Tactic", in 1771. The paper was the very last of the king's writings on military tactics. It succeeded his "Principes généraux de la guerre", written in 1746, and his "Testament militaire" from 1768.

The memorandum expressed the king's insights into the changing art of warfare, based on his experiences gained during the Seven Years' War. The foreword of the paper is particularly important. It reveals Frederick's hindsight, and shows that he had learned from his enemies, above all from the Austrian field marshal Leopold v. Daun, a man the king had made fun of during the Seven Years' War. Thus, I will focus on this foreword in my paper.

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1 Lecture given at the German History Society Annual Conference 2016, 8 to 10 September 2016 at Newcastle University, UK. Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand, XXX vols., supplementes by a Table chronologique générale des ouvrages de Frédéric le Grand et Catalogue raisonné des écrits, qui lui sont attribués, edited by Johann David Erdmann Preuß, Berlin 1846-1857, vol. XXIX, II: Frederick's original work "un grand in-quarto, portant au frontispice une vignette gravée par Schleuen; il se compose d'un Avant-propos de six pages, d'une Table des matières de même étendue, que nous donnons telle que le Roi l'a faite,a et de quatre-vingt-six pages de texte, avec trente-sept plans qui tous présentent des notes explicatives, en partie très-détaillées. On lit à la fin de l'article XXXVIII et dernier: Sans-Souci, ce 12 novembre 1770, et plus bas la signature: Federic". The German version is entitled: Grundsätze der Lager-Kunst und Tactic (sans lieu d'impression), 1771, quatre-vingt-quatorze pages grand in-quarto, avec la vignette de Schleuen et trente-sept plans. L'ouvrage est daté: Sans-Souci, den 12. November 1770, et signé Friderich.

In May 1759, for example, six months after Daun and the Austrians had defeated Frederick and his army at Hochkirch, the king wrote a, "Letter from the Pope to Field Marshal Daun", in which the Pope allegedly honoured Daun with a holy hat and sword. The letter was followed by supposed "Congratulations from the Prince de Soubise to Field Marshal Daun on the sword received from the Pope". Therein Frederick wrote: "What would become of us if one day we had to wage war against you and simultaneously resist both your skills and your sacred sword?" In public, Frederick mocked the Austrian field marshal but in reality he had been more impressed by "Daun's never-failing ability to choose strong defensive positions" than he cared to admit. The foreword of the "Éléments de castramétrie et de tactique" was particularly important in this respect.

The memorandum also reveals that Frederick's style of warfare, which involved seeking battle come what may, was outdated and had in fact been so from the outset of the Seven Years' War. Frederick did not admit this explicitly, but by taking a closer look one can find that he conceded this fact between the lines.

"Before the last war", Frederick wrote at the beginning of the foreword (following the translation of Jay Luvaas), "I had given my general officers an Instruction which at the time seemed to me sufficient, but the enemy, who was conscious of the disadvantage that he had laboured under in fighting us during the first campaigns, has since perfected his castrametation, his tactics, and his artillery. Consequently war has become more refined, more difficult, and more hazardous, for we no longer have only men to fight, but rather the prudence that tactic teaches, the strong posts, and artillery, all together. The fact alone should compel us to study these aspects of war if we are to save our former reputation and acquire new fame."

Four points mentioned by the Prussian king in this passage seem to be particularly significant: The first one is that Frederick refers to "an instruction I had given to my general officers". This clearly referred to the king's school textbook, "Les principes généraux de la guerre, appliqués a la tactique et a la discipline des troupes prussiennes" or "Die General-Principia vom Kriege, applicirt auf die Tactique und auf die Disziplin, derer Preussischen Trouppen". It was written from 1746 to 1748 – Frederick finished his work before 2nd April 1748 – and published under its German title in 1753 for the education of his general officers as it says

4 See Dennis E. Showalter: The Wars of Frederick the Great, Harlow 1996, 177.
6 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 276.
7 Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand (Fn. 1), vol. XXVIII, III and VII.
in German: "Hatte ... ich meinen Generals einen Unterricht in der Kriegs-Kunst gegeben". These "Military Instructions to his Generals" had been an ambitious opus. It reflected Frederick's experience gained during the First and Second Silesian war and his thoughts and considerations arising from this. In a letter to his brother August Wilhelm from 19th June 1748 Frederick stated: "My very dear brother, finally I send you a work which I promised a long time ago; it is the fruit of our campaigns and of my reflections."11

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The work was meant to put Frederick alongside the famous theorists of war like the Roman Vegetius, the Frenchmen Feuquières, Puységur and Quincy, the Spaniard Santa Cruz y Marchenado, the Italian Montecuccoli and the German Maurice de Saxe, just to name a few writers.12 We know this from Frederick's letter to his brother: "I have dealt with all major aspects of war, there is no aspect which I have omitted and, in terms of the smaller details, I have these laid down in my instructions, which are in the hands of all our officers." More than this, the "Military Instructions" were meant to carry the eternal military truth so that Frederick and his ideas would reach everlasting fame: "I can boldly claim that in no other book are things so precisely described."14

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But, and this seems to be the second important point arising from the above quoted passage, the Seven Years' War had unfortunately proved "Les principes généraux" to be insufficient. Frederick had to recognise that he had not considered everything that was possible in waging war at his time and that he had not foreseen new military developments, especially in tactics and weaponry,15 but most of all he had missed the developments in field fortifications.

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Frederick— and that is the third point – could not easily concede that he had not anticipated these developments. For that reason he asserted at the very beginning of his preface that "the enemy, who was conscious of the disadvantage that he had laboured under in fighting us during the first campaigns, has since

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9 See Volz: Die Werke Friedrichs des Großen (Fn. 3), vol. VI, 127. The German translation lacks three chapters: "Des projets de campagne", "Des talents qu'il faut à un general" and "De l'attaque et de la défense des places".
10 Palmer: Frederick the Great, (Fn. 2), 96.
11 Taysen: Friedrich der Große (Fn. 8), IV.
12 Frederick definitely knew the works of the above mentioned military writers. All those books were in almost all different editions part of his libraries. See Bogdan Krieger: Lektüre und Bibliotheken Friedrichs des Großen, in: Hohenzollern-Jahrbuch, vol. XV, 1911, 168-216, 209 and 213; Bogdan Krieger: Lektüre und Bibliotheken Friedrichs des Großen, in: Hohenzollern-Jahrbuch, vol. XVII, 1913, 105-155, 144 and 147.
13 Taysen: Friedrich der Große (Fn. 8), IV.
14 Taysen: Friedrich der Große (Fn. 8), IV.
15 See Palmer: Frederick the Great (Fn. 2), 95.
perfected his castrametation, his tactics, and his artillery." The statement implied that his "Military Instructions" had been wise and of great advantage for the Prussians at the beginning of the war. However, the statement was also supposed to distract attention from the fact that he had not given proper attention to entrenchments, the tactics associated with them, and the artillery. Neither entrenchments in strategically important positions, nor the selection of such places, nor the fortification of those places with artillery played a prominent role in Frederick's considerations. It was all unnecessary for his kind of warfare. His idea of warfare had been to give battle and go for a knockout blow, because, in the words of the Chevalier de Quincy, "battles are the making of a conqueror, and more than any other deed they endow him with the reputation of being a great captain."17

But Field Marshal Daun disabused the king. It was only after the bloody and costly battle at Torgau in 1760 that Frederick accepted that his military credo had no future. At this battle, his well-drilled army was destroyed. Because of its tactics Frederick lost most of the remaining veteran officers and men, and the Prussian army was able to win only thanks to the maneuvers of general Zieten and his corps.18 And this is the fourth point that emanates from the first passage of the memorandum: The king conceded that from now on it was not pitched battles that decided a campaign or the outcome of a war but rather occupying and holding a carefully chosen, strong and impregnable position, which could be easily supplied. If one studied these aspects of war successfully one would not only "save our former reputation", but "acquire new fame".19 Thus, Frederick accentuated something that he had not valued so far: the precise knowledge and assessment of terrain.

"The study of terrain and how its advantages and defects can be utilized constitutes one of the principal subjects to which a general officer should apply himself; for all his manoeuvres in war depend upon the posts that he should occupy with advantage, those that he should attack with minimum losses, the terrain where he should fight, ... and on this science which imparts a knowledge of using troops appropriately in each situation and according to the rules that experience has taught us."20

Surprisingly, Frederick's principes généraux did not contain detailed word on a general's need of precise knowledge of terrain – only words about the use of terrain in general. Frederic let us know that a commanding officer should have maps and should be able to remember the names of the villages, rivers.

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16 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 276.
19 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 276.
20 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 276.
heights – the grounds at large. And the king wrote about the importance of visual judgement. But one can not find any practical example derived from his own experience.

After the First and Second Silesian Wars the king had apparently attached little value to studying "terrain and how its advantages and defects can be utilized". His attitude only changed after the bitter experiences of the Seven Years' War: first and foremost after the defeats at Kolin (1757), Hochkirch (1758), and Kunersdorf (1759), and after his narrow victory at Torgau in 1760.

This can be seen, for instance, in the following sentences:

"Those who are persuaded that valour alone suffices for the general officer deceive themselves greatly. It is an essential quality, beyond doubt, but it must be supplemented with much other knowledge. A general who maintains order and discipline in his command is certainly praiseworthy, but that is not enough in war either. He must exercise judgement in everything."

In retrospect Frederick re-evaluated the meaning of valour and knowledge of terrain. In his principes généraux a general officer had to keep in mind that "battles decide the fate of a nation" – and only battles, and that "in war it is absolutely necessary to come to decisive actions either to get out of the distress of war or to place the enemy in that position, or even to settle a quarrel which otherwise perhaps would never be finished." To follow this maxim, valour was absolutely necessary and essential for a general. But more than twenty years later valour as virtue of a general had lost its predominance in Frederick's eyes. In the passage cited, Frederick conceded his errors in observation and judgement at Zorndorf, Hochkirch, Kunersdorf, and Torgau. In none of these battles had he listened to the insight and the advice of his generals.

However, maintaining order and discipline was not enough: waging war successfully now and in the future meant, according to Frederick's conclusion, that:

"We must study castrametation, tactics, and the science of the artillery, and the way to use artillery

21 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 276.
22 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 276-277.
23 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 139.
24 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 139.
25 See Luh: Der Große (Fn. 18), 69 and 225ff.
This meant: from now on both a general and the king himself, should study the "terrain and how its advantages and defects can be utilized" in the first place. The study of the science of artillery come a close second. In the course of the Seven Years' War, the immense impact of cannons and howitzers gradually turned the artillery into the dominating force on the battlefield. For example: In 1756, the three Prussian corps in Saxony, Silesia, and East Prussia disposed of 240 field pieces (three-pounders), sixty 12-pound pieces, twenty-six 24 pound battery pieces, and twenty 10-pound howitzers, altogether 336 guns. By 1762, even without the heavy battery pieces stationed in fortresses like Schweidnitz/Svidnica, Glogau or Neisse, the number of all Prussian field guns had doubled to a total of 662.

This, in turn, had far-reaching implications for tactics. An exchange of letters between Frederick and Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick, commander of the Allied Army during the Seven Years' War, for instance, reveals that both commanders, from 1758 onwards, not only intended to employ as many guns as possible, but also that the artillery moved into the centre of their battle plans. In a moment of euphoria, Frederick even believed that he could decide the outcome of a battle with artillery alone. "If your Highness keep your troops together as well as possible", he wrote to the duke one month before the battle of Minden, "and concentrate all your efforts on one point where you assemble your entire artillery and can employ it with success, you will inevitably find that despite any existing superiority you will defeat" the French.

This was undoubtedly an optimistic opinion. In retrospect, however, Frederick was proved right. At Minden, the massed allied guns played a crucial role in the victory of the Allied troops over the French army. Later it was said that the 67 heavy guns won "the most brilliant success over the French". The battery fire

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26 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 277.
27 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 276.
decimated the French infantry battalions, making it impossible for the French to advance against the allied wings. On the other hand, the bitter defeat at Hochkirch taught Frederick what kind of devastation Daun’s superior artillery was able to cause among the Prussian troops.

The king learnt his lesson: one by one, he had the three-pound guns serving with the regiments replaced by six-pounders and used heavy guns, twelve- or twenty-four-pounders, whenever possible to gain the upper hand over the enemy’s artillery. According to his own words of 1759, "to attack the enemy without superior fire is like fighting against firearms with sticks. One will have to involve as much artillery as possible, as unpractical and difficult this may seem. ... It will make up for the shortcomings of our infantry."  

The respect induced by the improved efficiency of the artillery, and this closes the circle, made fortified camps in strategically crucial places increasing important. Not even Frederick, whom even his contemporaries said was always seeking battle, dared to attack such well-chosen and positions defended by artillery, "because all disadvantages are on the side of the attacker". As a result, "Frederician war became increasingly a war of position, the war of complex maneuver and subtle accumulation of small gains; leisurely and slow in its main outlines, and quite different from the short sharp warfare recommended in 1746."  

First and foremost, this was what the king wanted his commanding general officers to know. On this account he stressed his new approach again and again:

"It is therefore necessary to impress firmly on the mind that henceforth we shall have only a war of artillery to wage, and fortified positions to assault. This necessitates an extensive study of terrain and of the art of competently using it to every possible advantage both in the attack and in the defence."  

In 1778, during the War of the Bavarian Succession, Frederick acted in his campaign in Bohemia according to his 1770 memorandum – but with very limited success. At first, he made a long-meditated reconnaissance in force. Then he manoeuvred very carefully, but the Austrians held such strong positions beyond the Elbe

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34 Frederick the Great, Testament militaire, in: Volz: Die Werke Friedrich des Großen (Fn. 3), vol. VI, 222-261, 248.
35 Palmer: Frederick the Great (Fn. 2), 103.
36 Luvaas: Frederick the Great (Fn. 5), 277.
that the king despite all precautions did not dare to attack.37

This might have been due to the fact that he missed out on yet another crucial development of late 18th century warfare: the deployment of light troops, which became more and more pivotal and eventually a decisive force during the French Revolutionary Wars. Frederick had been sceptical about light troops and distrusted their success under Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick on the western theatre of war.38 After the end of the Seven Years' War, the king either had the soldiers of his light troops enrolled in the regular regiments or dismissed them from the army, even though his brother Prince Henry had proved that one could fight very successfully with light troops. Frederick himself had derived all his thoughts only from the campaigns against the Russian and Austrian armies, but this was not quite enough. The king did not foresee that light troops would become indispensable in war at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. So, unfortunately for Frederick's pretension and fame, his "Éléments de castramétie et de tactique" were not made for eternity either.

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