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French Military Strategy of the End of XIX – First Half of XX Centuries: between Descartes and Bergson?

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Was observed the issue of correlation of tradition of philosophic research in France on the end of the 19 century – first half of 20 century with particularities of elaboration and realization of national military doctrines, which were the basic plans of preparation for the both world wars. Were establishes parallels between intuitivism of Bergson, rationalism of Descartes and plans of the French supreme command, which failed during the world wars of the 20 century. Was concluded that given correlations do not have essential personal character; more fundamental influences on the strategic culture should be searched in the ways of cognition, which have been basic for philosophy during all her history, which is intended to be realized in discipline «strategic epistemology».

Keywords: strategic epistemology; H.Bergson; R.Descartes; war; war studies; strategic culture; intelligence

Французька воєнна стратегія кінця XIX – першої половини XX ст.: між Декартом та Бергсоном?

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Було розглянуто питання кореляції традиції філософських досліджень Франції наприкінці XIX ст. – першій половині XX ст. з особливостями створення та реалізації національних воєнних доктрин, які виступали основними планами підготовки Франції до обох світових воєн. Проведено паралелі між інтуїтивізмом Бергсона, раціоналізм Декарта та планами французького головного командування, які під час світових воєн XX століття зазнали поразки. Зроблено висновок про те, що дані кореляції не мають суттєвого персонального характеру; більш фундаментальні впливи на стратегічну культуру треба шукати в способах пізнання, які є основними для філософії за весь час її історії, що передбачається в дисципліні «стратегічна епістемологія».

Ключові слова: стратегічна епістемологія; А.Бергсон; Р.Декарт; війна; воєнні студії; стратегічна культура; розвідка

Французская военная стратегия конца XIX – первой половины XX вв: между Декартом и Бергсоном?

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Был рассмотрен вопрос о корреляции традиции философских исследований Франции в конце XIX в. – первой половины XX в. С особенностями создания и реализации национальных военных доктрин, которые являлись основными планами подготовки Франции к обеим мировым войнам. Были проведены параллели между интуитивизмом Бергсона, рационализмом Декарта и планами французского верховного командования, которые во время мировых войн XX в. потерпели поражение. Был сделан вывод о том, что данные корреляции не имеют существенного персонального характера; более фундаментальные влияния на стратегическую культуру надо искать в способах познания, которые являются основными для философии за все время ее истории, что предполагается в дисциплине «стратегическая эпистемология».

Ключевые слова: стратегическая эпистемология; А.Бергсон; Р.Декарт; война; военные студии; стратегическая культура; разведка

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American military historian Lee Kennett in his research on declassified documents of the «N» series of the French military archives, related to the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), came to conclusion about difference in worldviews of American and French officers during the First World War: «French observers never tired of analyzing the American military mind and its strange approach to problems: «If they often make rapid and important decisions, these decisions, insufficiently studied, are frequently and profoundly modified in the execution.» Or again: «The harmony of the plan originally proposed is destroyed. Such as it is, the action taken is an original one - an American one.» Such pragmatism seems perfectly comprehensible to us, even laudable in its flexibility. But, to the Cartesian minds that tried to understand it, it was alien and baffling. So it remained throughout the war» [30, p. 4]. Lee Kennett is not alone in such evaluation. Robert Allan Doughty, US brigadier general (retired), military historian, writes: «Hundreds of officers in key positions willingly supported the doctrine and never complained that the French concepts required further change. The doctrine they constructed was a masterpiece of Cartesian logic and bureaucratic compromise. Almost no one doubted the annihilating effects of firepower, and few questioned the necessity of the methodical battle for controlling the delivery of this firepower» [16, p. 187]. Eugenia Kiesling, professor of military history of American military academy at West-Point described argumentation of the French vice-admiral R.Castex in the following way: «The analysis of the word «strategy» is quite conventional in its outcome, but the lengthy discussion allows Castex to demonstrate his tedious penchants for odd metaphors and half-baked Cartesian philosophy» [31, p. 122; 33].

At the same time, the disadvantages of training of American servicemen were dubbed as «Cartesian» as well: «The US Army, arriving on the field of battle unprepared for large-scale war, followed the French military approach to education based on the philosophy of Rene Descartes. Descartes was a famous mathematician who broke down engineering problems in sequence, making it easier to teach formulas to engineering students. This approach was translated into French military training, where the French found it easy to break down military problem solving into processes (checklists) to educate their officers and their awaiting masses of citizen soldiers upon mobilization [...] The Cartesian approach allowed the French (and later the United States) to easily teach a common, fundamental doctrinal language to many who were new to the military. It significantly reduced the time it took to master basic military skills. The downfall of this approach is that it simplifies war (complex problems) into processes where the enemy is only a template, not a free-thinking adversary with a very important voice in determining how the plan might be executed. The Cartesian approach also slows down a decision cycle by turning the planners' focus inward on process instead of outward on the enemy. The problem with this approach is that it does not fit in with the problem at hand» [56, p. 145].

How to understand these assessments? Are they mere clichés, or they are attempts to find these who are guilty of the national strategic errors; or they are not the accidental metaphors, but adequate reflection of the essence of the French strategic culture of the end of XIX – the first half of the XX centuries? Is this issue limited by the name of R. Descartes only?

It seems possible to find the answers to these questions if:

- To analyze historical evidence of direct influence of dominating philosophic doctrines on the French professional military education of the mentioned period of time; to disclose personal adoption of particular philosophic views by the members of the French supreme command;

- To look for semantic correlations between methodologies of cognition of the most significant philosophic schools and peculiarities of elaboration of national military doctrines and strategic decision-making.

The end of XIX – first half of XX century in France is a time of active interaction of the French writers, philosophers, sociologists, jurists, historians, psychologists (or «clercs» – intellectuals (J.Benda [4, p. XXIX]), «hommes de lettres» - Émile Boutroux, Hannotaux, Lavisse, comte de Mun, Maurice Barrès, Henri Lavedan, Lévy-Bruhl, Joseph Bédier, Aulard, Victor Basch (R. Poincaré [47, p. 227])) with institutes of French professional military education and intellectual elite of the French armed forces. Journalist H.Bidou even linked the victory on Marne with embodiment of the French national spirit, by the analogy with Descartes «Meditations» and Pascal's «Pensées» [8, p. 230]. European history contains many names of civil intellectuals connected with friendship and professional liaisons with military officers, but according to historical evidence, just in France in the mentioned period this interaction became systematic and developed.

Thus, this situation was not entirely new in the intellectual history of France. According to Azar Gat, the historian of the Western military thought, it is possible to find traces of Cartesian rationalism in military theories of Enlightenment [23, p. 28]. Amongst other references, the following points could be noticed:

- bringing axiomatics into military theory [50, pp. 48, 146, 161; 41, pp. 63, 81, 96 etc];

- referring to Descartes as a founder of rationalistic scientific method in debates about scientific status of military theory [41, pp. XV, XVIII; 18, p. XXX-XXXI] etc. According to official documents, starting at least from the second half of the XIX century in the special military school Saint-Cyr the philosophic works of B.Pascal and R.Descartes were compulsory for study for the officers of the French army [34, p. 61]. General courses in philosophy were the part of the French higher military education [28, 29, 33].

Having this deep tradition of incorporation of philosophy into military theory and education, there is no surprise that in the pre-First World War time philosophy played significant role in the French intellectual fashion which, as it will be attempted to show further, could be considered as correlating or even possibly influential for

the French supreme command before the First World War, in war-time and interwar period.

Historians traditionally refer to Henri Bergson as a leader of the pre-war French intellectual fashion. Being opposed to positivism, Bergson declared priority of intuition in epistemology [11, p. 315] and «vital burst» as a central concept of his philosophy of life. These metaphysical features are usually linked with the French pre-war strategic doctrine: «The publication of Bergson's book *Creative Evolution* (1907) enhanced Bergson's popularity in France. In his theory of «Creative Evolution» a single spiritual force, the *élan vital* - vital impulse-constitutes ultimate reality. To grasp one's impulse pure intellect is left behind: «You must take things by storm; you must thrust intelligence outside itself by act of will.» Action, instinct, will, and force, all take precedence over reason. This concept of the *élan vital* appealed not only to intellectuals, students, and romantics like Peguy (who died in the first few weeks of World War I), but it also helped create a cult of the offensive in the French military and society. A member of the French Chamber of Deputies declared, «The idea of the offensive must penetrate the spirit of the nation.» Marshal Foch also spoke of «the decisive power of offensive action undertaken with resolute determination to march on the enemy, reach, and destroy him.» [55].

As a rule, historians operate the notion of philosophy as a source of ideas and doctrines, which can be more or less influential on political and military decision-makers: «By emphasizing *élan vital* (vital urge), intuition, and metaphysics, he was part of the European-wide rebellion against the narrow rationalism and materialism of nineteenth century positivism [...] Bergson's *élan vital* fit right into French military thinking, which stressed offensive tactics, as taught at the *École de Guerre* in the period before World War I. Such thinking held that colorful uniforms, martial music, and the «will to conquer» would overcome any materiel shortcomings» [26, p. 201]. The clarity and simplicity of the scheme «*élan vital* – French offensive doctrine» (another reason of emerging of this scheme were diplomatic missions of Bergson [2, 3, 6, 51]) remain quite tempting for historians: it allows to establish easily correlative/causal links between two phenomena – popular philosophy and military doctrine avoiding immersing to more deep analysis of more essential analysis of this relation: «Living in the shadow of that unfinished business, France, reviving in spirit and strength, grew weary of being eternally on guard, eternally exhorted by her leaders to defend herself. As the century turned, her spirit rebelled against thirty years of the defensive with its implied avowal of inferiority. France knew herself to be physically weaker than Germany. Her population was less, her birth rate lower. She needed some weapon that Germany lacked to give herself confidence in her survival. The «idea with a sword» fulfilled the need. Expressed by Bergson it was called *élan vital*, the all-conquering will. Belief in its power convinced France that the human spirit need not, after all, bow to the predestined forces of evolution which Schopenhauer and Hegel had declared to be irresistible. The spirit of

France would be the equalizing factor. Her will to win, her *élan*, would enable France to defeat her enemy. Her genius was in her spirit. The spirit of *la gloire*, of 1792, of the incomparable «Marseillaise», the spirit of General Margueritte's heroic cavalry charge before Sedan when even Wilhelm, watching the battle, could not forbear to cry, «Oh, les braves gens!» [53, p. 48].

It is hard to blame historians in this surface understanding of Bergson's role in the forming of pre-war intellectual trends of the French officers. Bergson in his lectures, which were attended by the French officers, in his open letters and articles conceptualized the general meaning of the war: «Writing in November 1914 in an article intended for front-line troops, Bergson defined the war as a conflict of diametrically opposed philosophical principles. On the one hand, Germany represented «mechanism», or the systematic divinisation of material power; on the other, the Entente powers represented the moral authority of civilized people who recognized that material force had to be governed by moral law. Bergson, arguing passionately that moral authority would outlast material might, attempted to reassure the troops of the French Army that their cause would prevail. To this end, he distinguished between the «force that exhausts itself» and the force that does not. Material force, however formidable in appearance, was nonrenewable; built upon finite resources, its dominion would likewise prove finite. But the force that comes from moral conviction and principle sustains itself; immaterial, it is also inexhaustible. He urged the French troops to take heart, for «while the force which nourishes itself only on its own brutality» would wear itself out in time, the force that sustained the French Army would «renew itself» over and over again.» [27, p. 189; see also 7, pp. 43-47].

Documental evidence of the interest of French generals in Bergson's philosophy is significant: Maurice Gamelin «was a flexible and thoughtful professional, a cultured man who had made a serious study of art, history and Bergsonian philosophy.» [1, p. 30; see also 19, pp. 283-284; 21, p. XVIII]; Charles de Gaulle «had read all the books of Bergson when he was writing his «*La France et son Armée*»» [12, p. 97; see also 14, p. 228; 15, p. 151; 35, pp. 237-245]; Joseph Joffre «had Bergsonian escort» [20, p. 223; 25, p. 294]. The notion of *élan vital* is traditionally linked with offensive strategy of France (Plan XVII [17, pp. 501-507]), rooted in military education and realized in concrete decisions during the First World War: «The doctrine of the offensive had its fount in the *Ecole Supérieure de la Guerre*, or War College, the ark of the army's intellectual elite, whose director, General Ferdinand Foch, was the molder of French military theory of his time. Foch's mind, like a heart, contained two values: one pumped spirit into strategy; the other circulated common sense. On the one hand Foch preached a mystique of will expressed in his famous aphorisms, «The will to conquer is the first condition of victory,» or more succinctly, «*Victoire c'est la volonté*,» and, «A battle won is a battle in which one will not confess oneself beaten.» In practice this was to become the famous order

at the Marne to attack when the situation called for retreat. His officers of those days remember him bellowing «Attack! Attack!» with furious, sweeping gestures while he dashed about in short rushes as if charged by an electric battery. Why, he was later asked, did he advance at the Marne when he was technically beaten? «Why? I don't know. Because of my men, because I had a will. And then - God was there.» [53, p. 49].

Abundance of documental evidence helped to leave behind chances to uncover deeper relations between Bergson's philosophy and contemporary French military theory. As well, the way to the oblivion of less surface historical inquiry was simplified by the common stereotype of philosophy as a source of ideas. Efficiency of methods (instead of ideas) of philosophic cognition, which can be more powerful and influential than any personal contacts or intellectual fashion is way worse subject of analysis: there is no chance to draw a plausible causal scheme. But, in more successful case, the fundamentality of results after wide debates could launch new discipline in war studies – strategic epistemology.

E.A.Cohen and J.Gooch articulated (or, to say more radically – invented, at least for contemporary readers) the statement, which looks obvious but, enigmatically, remains formally ignored: «Military organizations should inculcate in their members a relentless empiricism, a disdain for a priori theorizing if they are to succeed» [13, p. 236]. Debate that lasted for almost three centuries between rationalists and empiricists was solved by only one sentence in the research devoted to military failures. Amongst the contradictory, debatable, oversophisticated historical schemes about causality in military history the classical philosophic opposition «a posteriori – a priori may» look too arguable, as all the cornerstones.

If to use broad analogy, the empirical way of cognition can be compared with military intelligence, no matter to which level of planning it refers – to tactical, operational, or strategic level. In theory, military intelligence supposed to be characterized as doing scrupulous analysis of the facts, modest generalizations, and tough verifying every elementary hypothesis aimed to get the truth about real facts. These functions of intelligence service can be neglected buy a supreme command, which can essentially increase chances of defeat.

In the case of the French plan XVII and its failure, it is possible to conclude that it was not realistic at all. Systematic failure of the French strategic intelligence played essential role in the strategic blunders of the initial phase of war: «The real failure of 1914, however, was that of intelligence. French intelligence failed to predict the great sweep of the Schlieffen Plan. This was in part because the Germans had changed their codes just prior to the war, blinding the French at the very moment when they needed the information. However, unless the evidence presented by intelligence had been overwhelming, Joffre probably could not have been persuaded to abandon Plan XVII. French intelligence realized only belatedly that the Germans had placed reservists in the front lines in 1914, thus swelling the

numbers of troops available for the flanking maneuver through Belgium. Once the war had settled down into a trench deadlock, it became easier to anticipate enemy action. The massing of troops in advance of an offensive could be picked out by air reconnaissance and aerial photography. French cryptography and communications intelligence also improved. On the Somme in the summer of 1916, the liaison between the Deuxieme Bureau (intelligence) and the artillery was perfected to the point that some captured Germans believed that they had been betrayed.» In 1917, Petain placed intelligence and operations under the same chief so as to better coordinate them. The Deuxieme Bureau predicted the date and place of the German offensive of March 21, 1918, although they also believed Champagne to be menaced, causing Petain to hold back troops to defend that front. The greatest intelligence lapse of the trench war was the failure to predict the German offensive on the Chemin des Dames on May 27, 1918, an attack which almost broke the French front wide open. However, Foch's judicious use of intelligence allowed him to make more audacious attacks in the summer of 1918.» [48, p. 213]. Offensive character of the French strategy helped to disregard the data provide by intelligence service: «Although Joffre went to great pains in his memoirs to point out that Plan XVII contained an elaborate «Intelligence Plan» which demanded detailed information on German military movements on the outbreak of hostilities, there is no indication that he allowed German actions to interfere in any way with his scheme. After all, why should attacking generals worry overmuch about the intentions of an enemy condemned merely to parry the thrusts of an aggressive opponent?» [49, p. 63].

Bergson's idea of «élan vital» was not the sole point of correlation of the philosophic fashion and the French offensive strategy. His teaching about intuition as the fundamental way of cognition correlates with the non-realistic Plan XVII and the blunders of the French strategic intelligence in the pre-war period. H. Bergson received heavy criticism from J.Benda [5, 25, 43, 44] and J. de Pierrefeu («Before 1914 France possessed a General Staff worthy to be called Bergsonian. Its doctrine accepted the discredit of intelligence and favoured the cult of intuition. This is a statement which is stupefying and incredible: at first sight it is positively staggering. But after due examination it emerges as a perfectly truthful assertion. And this General Staff of ours forced its conviction to the ultimate limits. It went far beyond Bergson himself, who would never have dared to admit that intuition was possessed of a power marvelous enough to prepare a revenge for 1870: Bergson would at least have invited intelligence to collaborate in that difficult task. You would hardly believe it, but our Joffre, so comfortably established as a physical entity, and so completely attached, by good health and a good appetite, to the world of solid things which the Bergsonian professes to despise, identified himself with this theory, fit only for the somnambulist and the medium. He came to adhere to a doctrine which counted on intangible things as well as on regiments, and which

hoped to achieve a victory of the «unconscious» in battle by making use of the vital élan of the troops: which élan was to be produced by the deep-rooted instinct of success. The office table of The General Staff on which was drawn up Plan No. 17 was, if I may say so, the sort of table which is «turned» by the pseudo-spiritualist.» [46, p. 33-34]), and more polite, but ultimately devastating – from A. Einstein [10, p. 123]. Blaming Bergson in misleading French supreme command from the reality of war – new weapons, new tactics, adequate evaluation of the French and German forces, as it happened in the interwar period, successfully overshadowed the effectiveness of a priori approach in military planning which was not actually invented by H.Bergson. The tendency of usage of the method of seeking truth not in reality, but in the thoughts of a supreme command is surprisingly very popular way of thinking, no matter how tragic outcomes it was bringing. Thus, it is possible to reduce the favorite method of historians who look for documents, letters and information about personal contacts and to contend, that the French Plan XVII and the strategic decision making during the First World War reflects not the ideas of the exact person – H.Bergson – but a fundamental principle of a priori cognition, which seems to be safe in the medically clean philosophic laboratory of thought, but becomes inevitably deadly being realized on the battlefield.

Did France have any chances to adjust her strategy to reality after the First World War? To answer this question we have to turn to overview of the dominating philosophies in interwar period. As it is possible to conclude from the study of the sources of that time, French returned to philosophy of R.Descartes, as a traditionally reliable symbol of solid, precise science.

Even during the pre-war dominance of H.Bergson, French intellectuals kept referring to the founder of the French Modern tradition of thought [9]. In the interwar period the French military thought turns from Bergsonian intuitivism to the Cartesian methodism [22, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 45, 54].

Inspiration becomes opposed to method, which, according to Perrier De La Bâthie, is the only one way to victory: «Faut-il, quand il s'agit de guerre ou de combat, se fier uniquement à son bon sens? De grands capitaines l'ont dit. Napoléon lui-même l'a écrit. Mais peut-on considérer comme des articles de loi ces affirmations? Il semble bieu qu'elles aient emprunté toute leur valeur aux circonstances dans lesquelles elles ont été émises. Elles n'ont rien d'un axiome. Car il y a bon sens et bon sens. On dit d'un homme médiocre et effacé: il a du bon sens, comme on dit d'une jeune fille peu jolie et pas très intelligente: c'est une bonne fille. X ... est sérieux, sans grand relief; il parle peu et, par suite, dit peu de sottises; il ne travaille pas ... ; X ... a beaucoup de bon sens. «Le bon sens, a dit Descartes, est la chuse du monde la mieux partagée, car chacun pense en être si bien pourvu que ceux qui sont les plus difficiles à contenter en toute chose n'ont point caulum d'en désirer plus qu'ils en ont.» Les armées ne

manqueront donc jamais d'hommes de bon sens. Est-ce à dire que ce bon sens suffira à leurs chefs et leur donnera d'intuition la solution immédiate des problèmes complexes et variés que leur posera la guerre moderne? Il est permis d'en douter et de penser, encore avec Descartes, que «ce n'est pas assez d'avoir l'esprit bon, le principal est de l'appliquer bien». C'est-à-dire d'avoir une méthode.» [45, p. 29-30].

Could this «Cartesian turn» make French strategic culture more realistic? There were too little chances for that: Cartesian rationalism was opposed to empiricism as well. Descartes natural philosophy was outgrowth, but it caused no effect to his followers – Cartesianism became a national philosophy of France, uncritically inherited and, if it possible to say, realized in the French defensive plans of 1930ies – as non-realistic, as the Plan XVII was.

In the conclusion, the logic of narrative obliges to raise more questions than it supposed to happen in this brief overview. Why French allowed poets, writers, philosophers, journalists invade the professional military issues, like grand strategy, military planning, and building strategic doctrines? Why military professionals, being educated in Humanities, showed themselves unable to assess critically the extra-military factors, related to the domain of Humanities? Why military professionals, who must have empirical and realistic mindsets by the definition, represented the opposite qualities?

The case study of correlations between the French national philosophy and her strategic doctrines of the first part of the XX century can reveal some fundamental issues. The concept of «strategic culture», so fashionable at the military conferences and in the papers and monographs, still remains obscured. Still no concrete links between extra-military domains and the science of war were revealed. It is easy to hear that «war is a clash of ideas», but this point easily leads to personal relations of creator of ideas and decision-makers. There is still no essential scholarship about «war as a clash of methods», i.e. why empiricists have more chances to win, especially when they face rationalists, who try to find the truth not in reality, but in their minds.

Philosophic laboratory started its work nearly three thousand years ago, and the strong and weak sides of a posteriori and a priori cognition were showed more or less plausibly. But the surface preparation of military officers in philosophy and ignorance of applied professions of philosophers still creates a strange situation, when military strategists unconsciously realize one of these two mindsets, being hardly unaware of their internal errors and disadvantages, and philosophers, whose business is «to make thoughts clearer» find themselves unfamiliar with factual demand on their competence in applied sciences.

Thus, looking for correlations between philosophic methodology of cognition and peculiarities of elaboration of national strategic doctrines can actualize new interdisciplinary realm – strategic epistemology.

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