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The Battle of Malmaison, doctrinal turning point for the French Army.

The Battle of Malmaison was not a large battle by the standards of the First World War; however, it was of crucial importance in the development of French military thought during the war and it was a significant moment in the process of restoring morale within the French army.

With the replacement of the French commander in chief Robert Nivelle by Philippe Pétain in May 1917, a wholesale examination of the operational and tactical methods of the French army was set in place by the latter. Much of Pétain's initial work was taken up with improving the conditions of the front-line troops to diffuse the serious drop in morale that the Nivelle Offensive's failure had engendered in the army. He also began a rearmament programme that would see a significant increase in the numbers of tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft available to the French Army in the coming year. Although these measures were to prove very effective over time, there was also an urgent need to modify the way military operations were conducted, primarily to restore confidence in GQG within the army. It was also clear in mid-1917 that Pétain's rearmament programme would not see fruition before the spring of 1918 and therefore it was considered prudent to maintain military activity in the interim. Pétain thus began to issue a series of operational and tactical instructions, starting with Directive No.1 on **19 May 1917**:

Directive No.1:

« L'équilibre des forces adverses en présence sur le front du Nord et du Nord-Est ne permet pas d'envisager, pour le moment, la rupture du front suivie de l'exploitation stratégique. C'est donc à user l'adversaire avec le minimum de pertes qu'il importe actuellement d'appliquer son effort. »

"The balance of power between our forces and that of the enemy on the Northern and North-Eastern fronts will not allow for a decisive breakthrough nor its strategical exploitation. Therefore, we shall concentrate our efforts on wearing down the enemy with minimal losses."

"Point n'est besoin pour obtenir cette usure de monter de grosses attaques en profondeur, à objectifs éloignés. Ces attaques ne donnent pas le bénéfice de la surprise, car, par les travaux multiples qu'elles exigent, elles s'inscrivent longtemps à l'avance sur le terrain. Elles sont coûteuses, car l'assaillant s'y use généralement plus que le défenseur. Elles sont aléatoires, car, consistant à étendre la préparation initiale d'artillerie à toute la profondeur de la zone organisée, elles risquent, par un tir ainsi dilué, d'obtenir dans l'ensemble des effets insignifiants et d'exposer l'attaque à se briser contre la première position imparfaitement détruite."

"To obtain this effect, there is no need for large, in-depth operations aimed at distant objectives. Such attacks do not grant the benefit of surprise because of their complexity and length of plannification required. They are costly to the attacker who will usually suffer more losses than the defender. Their outcome is random, because preparations must be made for the entire area of operation and thus induce the risk, through dilution of our artillery firepower and resulting insufficient destruction, of exposing our troops to incompletely neutralized forward defenses, which break our assaults."

"Aux attaques profondes il convient de préférer les attaques à objectifs limités, déchaînées brusquement sur un front aussi étendu que le permettent le nombre et les propriétés des divers matériels d'artillerie existants."

Pour que cette conception puisse se réaliser, les attaques doivent :

- _ 1) Être menées économiquement en infanterie et avec le maximum de moyens en artillerie;*
- _ 2) Procéder par surprise, ce qui donne des chances d'agir du fort au faible et d'obtenir des résultats importants. Il y a lieu de remarquer que la surprise ne sera obtenue que si le secteur d'attaque, préparé depuis longtemps, a été mis en sommeil plusieurs semaines ou même plusieurs mois avant l'exécution;*
- _ 3) S'appliquer successivement à différents secteurs du front, choisis parmi ceux que l'ennemi a des raisons majeures de ne pas évacuer librement;*
- _ 4) Se succéder le plus rapidement possible dans le temps, afin de fixer l'ennemi et de lui enlever sa liberté d'action."*

"Instead of such operations, it is advisable to prefer attacks with limited objectives, unleashed abruptly on a front as wide as the number and properties of currently available artillery equipments allow."

For this concept to work, the attacks must:

- _ **1) Be carried with an economy of manpower but a maximum of artillery support.**
- _ **2) Benefit from surprise, which gives a chance to the weaker party to act with great results.**
- _ **3) be applied successively to various sectors of the front, chosen among those that cannot be easily evacuated by the enemy.**
- 4) be carried out in rapid succession, to fix the enemy and deprive him of initiative."**

This was an important statement of Pétain's operational intentions; he conceded that it was not possible to envisage, 'for the moment,' a rupture of the front, followed by a strategic exploitation.

The solution was to be the undertaking of offensives with strictly limited objectives, the primary aim being to cause heavy enemy casualties while minimising those of the French. The opportunity would also be taken to readjust the French front line by eliminating those German positions that presented the most danger. These limited objective operations would thus leave the French in a better position to both defend against any German offensives and to launch their own in due course.

These results were expected to be mainly achieved by a change in artillery methods; rather than diluting the French artillery preparation by attacking the whole German position in depth, only the first German position would be hit but with devastating force. This approach had the advantage of allowing the French batteries to remain in situ throughout the operation, thus bypassing the considerable difficulties that moving artillery forward entailed.

Even more importantly, by reducing the artillery preparation, in duration if not intensity, an element of surprise could be returned to major operations, both because the enemy would expect a lengthy preparation and because the artillery and supplies needed for shorter preparations could be moved across the front more quickly.

These ideas needed to be tested in practice. A four corps attack using the new methodology on 20 August 1917 at Verdun was successful on a number of levels.

It helped to begin to restore faith in the troops that operations could be both successful and less costly than in previous battles, the French suffering fewer than fifteen thousand casualties over the five main days of the battle.

It also confirmed to Pétain that his tactical premises were correct, particularly in relation to Directive No.1. Another operation was necessary, both from the view of morale and to continue the tactical experimentation.

Preparation of the Battle:

The French were attacking German positions that were well thought-out and established according to the **defense-in-depth doctrine**: The German defence consisted of a first position, with three trench lines, two to three hundred metres

apart. The German trenches were three to four metres wide and were protected by belts of barbed wire up to ten metres in depth.

A second position was between one and two kilometres behind this and consisted of only two trench lines. These contained numerous shelters but with shallower barbed wire coverage than on the first position.

Between the first and second positions, there were numerous machine-gun nests and several sheltered areas for the housing of reserves. The majority of the German batteries were placed one or two kilometres behind the second position. Around the plateau were further German positions on the north banks of the Ailette River and the Oise-Aisne canal.

The French attack required the elimination of most of the German batteries able to fire across the plateau and the destruction of the extensive German defensive positions and trench lines. To achieve this, a short but very heavy artillery preparation was ordered.

It was not just artillery fire that the French poured onto the German defences; machine-guns were also extensively used in an indirect role along with infantry mortars and autocannons by the newly formed "Compagnie d'Accompagnement" (Support Company).

There were also aggressive trench raids made right up to the day of the offensive, primarily in order to keep field intelligence as up to date as possible. For example, 140 RI sent in a platoon-sized raid, in combination with 75 RI, on the morning of 22 October, capturing seven Germans and discovering that the elite German 13 Division had entered the line in front of them the previous day.

Of course, all this French activity gave notice to the Germans that an attack was imminent in the sector. From 15 September to 15 October, a further seven German infantry divisions were moved to the area along with 64 new artillery batteries, of which 40 were heavy artillery.

The French tank force, the *Artillerie Spéciale*, was to play a major role in the battle. On 25 July 1917, its commander, General Jean-Baptiste Estienne was instructed to send an officer to GAN to make plans for a tank attack on the front of VI Army. Considerable effort was made to ensure the tanks would avoid the difficulties moving around the battlefield that had been encountered during the Nivelle Offensive. Detailed plans from groupement to battery level were made in relation to the approach routes, once again in close liaison with the infantry officers.

In order to keep as fully informed as to the state of the battlefield as possible, VI Army's Intelligence Section (2e Bureau) passed to the AS commanders, on a daily basis, new aerial photographs of the battlefield.

It was also necessary for the attacking infantry regiments and battalions to have detailed training in conjunction with the tanks. To familiarise the infantry with the tanks, 14 infantry battalions undertook training with tanks at the AS base at Champlieu between 27 August and 5 October. They spent from five to seven days there, engaging in daily exercises with one or two batteries of tanks. This gave the infantry an insight into both the limitations and strengths of the tanks. In particular, the infantry learnt how to direct the tanks to fire on targets that were blocking them.

At midday on 22 October, Maistre set the attack for 05.45 the next day but new intelligence forced a change to his plan. A radio-intercept indicated that German 7 Army was already alerted that the French would launch an attack the next day and had ordered its artillery to launch a counter-preparation at 05.30. Maistre changed the jump-off time to 05.15, which had the disadvantage of increasing the amount of time that the troops would be fighting in darkness, as sunrise was not until 06.20.

The Battle:

On 23 October, the first wave of French infantry mostly set-off on time in the dark and thus missed the German artillery barrage, with the exception of 39 CA and 66 DI on the right flank that were severely hit. The infantry were supported by powerful artillery rolling barrage, as well as continuing French interdiction fire on the German positions.

German observation balloons were destroyed by the French air force, blinding the German guns that had not been silenced during the artillery duel that followed the launch of the offensive.

As established by Pétain's Directive, the forward defensive elements of the German lines were subjected to short, but focused high-explosive bombardment, with machine-gun nests, infantry barracks and observation outposts identified during reconnaissance specifically targeted.

Then the rear of the German lines were bombarded with gas and smoke shell to cut-off supplies, prevent the evacuation of wounded and forbid the intervention of Eingreif divisions.

For the most part, the French infantry were extremely successful and, for example, 38 DI had taken Malmaison fort by 06.30. One of its regiments (RICM) had captured 950 Germans while losing only 91 killed and 362 wounded. In another case, a chasseur battalion from 43 DI (1 BCP) captured seven officers and 700 men from three different German divisions as well as 18 cannons and 65 machine guns, its advance elements getting as far as Chavignon.

In some areas, the French infantry were unable to prevail against a spirited German defence, this happening to 129 DI, which was subjected to a fierce German counter-attack and pushed back to its jump-off position.

Most French troops, however, reached their first objective on schedule and by 09.15 were advancing on their second objective. This advance was almost completely successful, with only elements of 66 DI failing to reach their objective. The French tanks had great difficulty on the overturned ground, with many failing to get into action because they were stuck in shell-holes. Nonetheless, the battlefield was littered with German machine-gun positions that had not been destroyed by the French artillery and the tanks were an invaluable help to the French infantry in eliminating these, thereby considerably reducing losses.

It is also worth noting that many of the French infantry regiments that fought in the battle had been involved in serious disorder during the period of the mutinies and yet had performed well at Malmaison. By the time the operation was finally over on 26 October, the French had advanced in some places nearly six kilometres and had captured over eleven thousand Germans, along with significant amounts of material. This had been achieved with casualties of just fewer than

twelve thousand men, comparing favourably with the thirty thousand casualties suffered in this area during the Nivelle Offensive in April and May.

A widely circulated GQG report drew attention to the lower percentage of overall casualties suffered at Malmaison, when compared with those on the Aisne in April-May 1917 and at Verdun in August 1917; the losses at Malmaison being 8.45%, on the Aisne 17.7% and 18.4% at Verdun (the majority of these casualties being from the infantry).

The French gains forced the Germans to pull back to a more tenable position and, perhaps most importantly, re-established a measure of confidence in GQG within the French army. By 1 November 1917, the Germans had evacuated the whole of the Chemin- des-Dames position and retreated behind the Ailette.

The German divisions on the front line had all been badly mauled in the battle. Fourteenth ID lost the majority of its artillery and over eighteen hundred prisoners, leaving it with only fourteen hundred effectives by 26 October. Thirteenth ID lost a similar number of prisoners and it was reported that many of its units had 'surrendered en masse with their officers.'

Even divisions that had previously fought well, such as 2 Guard ID, were 'completely defeated' at Malmaison, although 5 Guard ID put up a credible fight and only left three hundred prisoners with the French.

The French captured in total around 11,500 prisoners, including 240 officers, 200 cannon, 220 trench mortars and over 700 machine guns.

Conclusion:

The artillery plan for the Malmaison operation had some important innovative elements, which made a significant difference to the effect of the artillery preparation than that of earlier offensives. The first three days of the artillery preparation had undertaken normal missions of destruction but after the third day, there was a shift away from this type of mission. A larger proportion of smoke and gas shells were used and more interdiction fires were made, with the primary aim of disrupting, rather than trying to destroy, the German artillery and infantry reserves moving into the area. An important lesson from this battle for GQG was that the neutralisation fires had just as badly affected German artillery fire as it had been by the fires of destruction, possibly more so. The success of this second phase of the preparation illustrated to GQG that, with sufficient air superiority, it was not necessary to physically destroy German positions, as they could just as effectively be neutralised instead.

The battles of Verdun (1917) and Malmaison gave GQG enough information to produce the key-stone document *L'instruction sur l'action offensive des grandes unités dans la bataille*, dated 31 October 1917. This encapsulated the lessons drawn by GQG and Pétain from the failure of the Nivelle Offensive and the successes at Malmaison and Verdun. The Instruction was to prove an important step towards the final iteration of Pétain's military thought, Directive No. 5 (12 July 1918), which would be the methodology used in the successful French offensives in the summer and autumn of 1918.

Thus, although the Battle of Malmaison was not a large battle by First World War standards, it was of crucial importance in the development of French military thought during the war and it was a significant moment in the process of restoring morale within the French army.

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↑ flobota **Great War Community Manager** 2 points · 10 months ago

↓ Do you know more about the evolution of the French doctrine throughout the war? we desperately want to make an episode about them.

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↑ **GeistHeller**  2 points · 10 months ago · *edited 10 months ago*

↓ I'm neither a Historian or Expert, simply an avid reader. I would gladly help with the subject if given directions, and time, to investigate and research, having access to French sources.

I could even procure myself with more if necessary because the topic of the French army and the lack of coverage on its evolution is a great source of grievance to me.

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↑ flobota **Great War Community Manager** 2 points · 10 months ago

↓ Well, it's not so much the lack of general sources, it's mostly the language barrier for us.

But your post definitely has the kind of quality we are looking for. can you drop me a pm here and we start from there?

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↑ Occams__lazer 1 point · 10 months ago

↓ This is absolutely wonderful. Thank you. I had no idea that the French were using effective combined arms offensives in 1917.

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↑ **GeistHeller**  2 points · 10 months ago

↓ it's a bit to early to talk about "effective" combined arms, that would rather be the 1918 period for the French army.

But the foundations for inter-branch cooperation were definitely established during the twin victories of Verdun 1917 and Malmaison for France.

One thing to keep in mind is that the disaster of Caporetto completely eclipsed the success of those two operations in the Entente's mind at the time.

Since the combined German-Austrian forces had managed to breakthrough and exploit, "obviously" the Entente should have been able to do the same right ? Because breaching Italian lines direly lacking in gas masks and led by terror was totally the same as cracking the German well-equipped and steadfast defense-in-depth of the Western Front.

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↑ Occams__lazer 1 point · 10 months ago

↓ You sir, are a gentleman and a scholar. I hope you take Flo up on that offer.

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