THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ROMANIAN INFANTRY TACTICS DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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Abstract: *This article examines the main tactical characteristics of the Romanian infantry during the interwar period under the influence of the French principles, in the context in which the First World War proved the need to consider providing the units with a variety of technical equipment for a greater firepower on the battlefield. This article presents the basic forms of warfare according to the regulations of the time, defining the tactical rules of the battalion, presenting the new concepts that have emerged in the infantry tactics after the great world conflagration. It also presents aspects of subunit training, as well as the main technical characteristics of the infantry weaponry compared to that of the French army. On the other hand, it identifies the difficulties encountered in adapting the tactical principles of the French Regulations to the specificities of the Romanian infantry which had to take into account the physiognomy of a possible war, the troops available, but also the differences in army industry development.*

Keywords: tactics, infantry, French, interwar, First World War

1. Introduction

The “Queen of Battle”, as the infantry was called, is considered by the historians to be the oldest army branch with the oldest traditions in battle, with the highest numbers of troops and the bloodiest human sacrifices which appeared with the first armies. This fundamental army branch has constantly undergone radical changes that took place with the occurrence of important historic events, such as the revolutions of 1821, 1848, the Treaty of Paris of 1856, the Unification of Romanian Principates or the two world conflagrations.

The First World War proved the need to rethink endowing the infantry units with a varied and powerful weaponry, which by its technical characteristics can ensure a greater firepower on the battlefield. As a natural consequence, there was a need to introduce some changes in the organization

of infantry subunits, as well as to adopt new fighting procedures to allow the infantry to successfully fulfil its missions.

The lessons learned from the experience of the first world conflagration were further reflected, as regards the Romanian infantry, in the Regulations of 1920-1923, being laid down in the Provisional Regulations for Infantry manoeuvres, the 1923 edition, a translation of the 1920 French Regulation. According to this regulation, the infantry will continue to play an important role on the battlefield, which cannot be replaced by another army branch.

1.1 Research methodology

This article aims to perform an objective assessment of the tactical characteristics and regulations of the Romanian infantry during the interwar period. This research started from the following hypotheses: the emergence, after the first world

conflagration, of new concepts regarding the infantry tactics; as well as the existence of some inconsistencies in the adaptation of the tactical principles from the French regulations to the specificities of Romanian infantry.

This research was conducted by studying the military regulations from the interwar period, the documents found in the Pitesti National Military Archives, funds "The General Staff, Branch 5 Training, Inventory no. S 96/1972, no. 81, Documents relating to the Great Units Regulation", "Inventory no. R 1779 of 1981, 1925, crt. 426, 435" and the relevant literature.

2. Infantry tactics in the interwar period

Based on the Provisional Regulations for infantry manoeuvres of 1923, offense and defence continued to be the basic forms of infantry warfare, being considered components of the "battle". Only by offensive the enemy could suffer decisive defeats [1] with the aim of disorganize and then conquer the battle positions. The infantry had to be supported by the artillery and tanks, maintaining the mark of the First World War, of slow and methodical advance, at long ranges, from objective to objective, from position to position [2].

After the performance of the approach march, making contact was done by the security forces, who also would have engaged in battle, if necessary. Once they made contact with the enemy, the subunits were in position to set out to attack – the most favourable position was situated 400-500 m from the limit before the enemy defence from where they went to attack. The "Chief Tactical Unit" – the battalion had to lead completely and in full the infantry battle in a strip of land called the action area. The battalion fighting tactics was represented by the offensive of the rifle companies, two being placed in the first echelon and a company in reserve. Between the first echelon and the company in reserve there was a distance of 200-400 m, the front of attack being set at 300-400 m, sometimes reaching 800 m, depending on the land and the enemy [3].

Timely equipping the units with the necessary means, their appraisal of the facts, determination of the mission and the manoeuvre idea had been considered to be the most important points on which the future military regulations had to be based upon. In this context, during the interwar period, it came up the concept of operation decentralization, that left more room for initiative [4].

Extending the borders of Romania in relation to the army troops has forced the use of the same divisions both in the mountain and the lowland areas. The absence of a precise doctrine regarding the mountain warfare and the inadequacy of the troops to such operations was felt in the result of some battles. The military analysts felt the need to include aspects of mountain training in the new regulations [5]. In this regard, it was considered that it was best to organize the mountain troops on light brigades, each containing two groups, of two or at most 3 battalions [6]. The organization up to that time of the mountain troops on divisions with a howitzer regiment was too burdensome and not satisfying the decentralization of means imposed by the character of the war in the mountains. At the same time, in 1934 the General Staff proposed the introduction of mechanized elements in the infantry division in order to satisfy the defensive military policy of the country in the context of more and more agitated international situation [7]. Until the beginning of the Second World War in addition to newly created structural elements such as covert infantry brigades within the army corps, the Romanian infantry tried to endow its units with a variety of weapons, with too modest technical and tactical characteristics to deal with all challenges.

3. The difficulty of adapting the tactical principles in the regulation of great French units to the specificity of the Romanian infantry

The military forces which Romania had during the first years after the First World

War put in the position to defend themselves on 2-3 fronts couldn't deal with the challenge. Based on the assumption of front discontinuity, the physiognomy of a possible war was the mobile warfare, in which the manoeuvre and the rapidity of the execution were considered key factors in obtaining success [8]. The regulation of the great French units does not indicate in figures the length of the fronts of action in different tactical situations, the numbers being deducted from those of the tactical units, showing only the principles and methods of tactical lead from the moment of receiving the mission from the higher echelon, not specifying the principles and methods used to create a plan to use all the forces intended to operate on the same scenario [9]. The adoption of the French regulation and French army organization did not fully meet the needs of the Romanian army. The French army with a large number of troops and a developed weapon industry allowed battles to be fought on various fronts. French infantry fighting possibilities had been calculated taking into account the infantry battalion, which had proven its ability to attack a position on a 400-500 m front with the power to move inside of 1000-1200 m [10]. The same regulation stated that in order to defend a main resistance position, a battalion could be echeloned in depth up to 1 km on a front of minimum 500-600 m. In the case of Romania, the probable operation scenarios were the east front (a front of 600-650 km with a depth of 300-400 km), west (a front of 300 km, with a depth of 150 km) and south (a front of 500-550 and 150 km depth) [11]. In the case of Romanian army, on the defensive, when a portion of land had to be defended at any cost, a division consisting of 3 infantry regiments equipped with two batteries could defend according to tactical rules a front of 7-8 km [12]. If, instead, the division was organised in 4 regiments having the same artillery equipment, the

defensive front could cover up to 10 km. In this particular situation, a battalion had a defensive front of 1400 m which is not much in the context in which in the offensive, in the mobile warfare the front was of 800 m.

Another contradictory aspect refers to the offensive, the French regulation dealing first with the offensive against an enemy in position. This aspect did not correspond with the requirements of the Romanian army which wanted an offensive battle based on manoeuvre, especially the wing one and the firing [13].

4. The principles of the Provisional Regulation for infantry technical training – 1925

As a result of testing the regulations from the period 1920-1923, but also out of a desire for synchronization with the principles of the French infantry regulation, the Technical Infantry Inspectorate decided to draw up another project, *The provisional regulation for Infantry training, Part I. Infantry Technical Training – 1925*.

This regulation reflected the changes brought to subunits by equipping them with new weapons, new infantry warfare procedures which attributed firing a higher importance, adopting the principle of specialization of fighters according to their military speciality, imposing at the same time the obligation that any infantryman to know how to use any type of weapon in the fight group, as well as the machine gun. The first article presents the purpose of training and namely the preparation for the war – the only purpose of troop training, because “*only the willingness to win ensures victory, stirring the hearts and stimulating the energies, this will give infantry a boost in its approach march, stiff resistance to attack and tenacity in defence*” [14].

The training of the units started at the end of the soldier's training and included all the knowledge about the technical training and the group, squad, company, battalion,

regiment and brigade fighting training which they needed to be well prepared in war. The purpose of this training was to prepare units to act, to march on any terrain, as well as to make good use of the land and weaponry in any tactical situation [15]. Regarding the fighting training, the Part II of the Regulation – The battle - is applicable.

5. The Principles of the provisional regulation for Infantry training part II – The Battle

This regulation represented a translation of the French Infantry Regulation part II, based on the approval of the General Staff no. 6361 from the 11.12.1925 without any changes brought to the text, which practically did not corresponded with the Romanian tactical rules, due to the much higher fronts and to the inferiority of the technical properties of the infantry weaponry [16].

The analysis of the main characteristics and the differences between some weapon categories of the two armies will show the following:

- The Romanian infantry was equipped with: the rifle (trajectory: maximum 600 m with a rate of fire of 8-10 shots per minute), carbine, light machine-gun, machine gun with a rate of fire of 400-500 shots per minute, being the most powerful weapon of the infantry (due to the importance of the machine-gun on the battlefield, the Infantry Technical Inspectorate issued in 1926 a provisional regulation on the machine-gun training, part I – technical training and part II – the use of machine-guns in battle), the pistol (rate of fire of 18 shots per minute), the revolver (rate of fire of 12 shots per minute), the cannon 37 mm (maximum shot of approx. 3300 m with a rate of fire of 4-5 shots per minute), hand grenade, mortar (indirect fire weapon capable to launch a projectile of 3,250 kg up to 2000 m);
- The French infantry was equipped with: the rifle, carbine, the pistol the revolver,

hand grenade, light machine-gun, machine gun being the most powerful weapon of the infantry.

- French light machine-gun had a rate of fire of 5 - 600 shots per minute unlike the one of Romanian infantry which had maximum 200 shots. On automatic fire, the French one fired a burst of 6-8 cartridges, and the Romanian one 3-5 cartridges [17];
- Romanian infantry didn't have optical weapon-sights like the French shooters.

Nevertheless, the innovation introduced by the regulation was the constitution of a base of fire on the offensive as standard procedure during the battalion fight, idea which was only mentioned in 1920.

As laid down in the Regulation, the battle consisted of the totality of simultaneous and successive fights executed by the infantry with the support of the other service branches, either in defensive or offensive. Units had to be able to switch rapidly between attack and defence and vice versa. Infantry was still considered to be a fundamental branch and the only complete branch capable of fighting through motion and fire, on any land, no matter the weather, day or night, having as main element the automatic weapon: the light machine-gun or the machine-gun [18].

Regarding the cooperation of the artillery with the infantry, the role of the former was to prepare the attack with the aim to destroy any obstacle that may stay in the way of the infantry advance, to provide direct support to the attack in order to allow the infantry to get close to the enemy [19].

With the beginning of the attack, direct support firings consisted of a dense and deep rolling barrage or bombing of the nearest targets. The rolling barrage provided a fire and smoke curtain which allowed the infantry to approach quickly, then to engage. Ensuring the connection between the two divisions was done by overlapping the control stations and by using the liaison detachment [20].

In terms of defence, all batteries were placed so that they could fire immediately

in front of the position of resistance, and part of the batteries had to support the outposts, firing on the departure areas of the enemy attacks (1500 - 2000 m). The artillery alone could not ensure the entire front of the infantry (for example a battery of 75 could only ensure an efficient barrage for a front of 150-200 m) [21].

The attack was defined as “the marching fire”, and the defence “the stopping fire”. All orders to attack or to defend were provided with a fire plan which envisaged all the firings intended to be executed. Heavy human casualties were regarded as necessary for the troop movement which had to respond with a stronger fire in order to advance towards the enemy. Aside from the firings specified in the fire plan, the attack itself included also the firings executed by the fire echelon, which represented an attack formation consisting of the first echelon platoons of the rifle companies. The attack started with this echelon ahead which had to advance by leaps, being preceded by the artillery fire and sometimes by the aviation [22].

On the defensive, fire was the main means of action by which the infantry succeeded to stop an attack. The focus was on the role of the machine-guns, which had to be placed in such a way as to reduce the risk to be taken out of the battle by natural camouflage, at the beginning by making light shelters and then, if the situation allowed, pillboxes, occupying larger fronts than in the offensive.

Food, material and ammunition supply was made according to Title IX of the Regulation, with the recommendation to be made during the night. The location of the supply centre was chosen by the battalion commander in order for him to have access to his command post. In offensive the commander had an obligation to move forward the supply centres, without indicate certain tactical rules.

The infantry was fulfilling its mission also due to the evolution of the transmission means being used: the telephone, the

telegraph, optical and acoustic signals, transmission agencies, pigeons and exceptionally dogs [23].

In 1928 another form of the 1923 regulation appeared under the name of the Directive on Infantry Fighting Training. According to this Directive, the regiment had an attack device on two echelons with 2-3 battalions in the first echelon. If the one with 3 battalions is adopted, the device was on 3 echelons, the battalions being arranged in a column [24]. Also, in 1930 it was edited a provisional regulation for infantry training as well as the provisional instructions on the tactical use of great units [25].

6. Conclusions

In this article, the hypotheses on which the research was based have been verified and confirmed. First of all, during the years that followed the First World War, the new principles that reflected the lessons learned during the war have been gradually introduced into the Romanian infantry tactics. One of these principles was the decentralization of operations, which allowed more initiative to the subunit and to the unit commanders. At the same time, changes have been made in the organisation of subunits regarding the timely endowment with fighting technique, focus on the field mission as well as on the establishment of the course of action and on the manoeuvre. Also, aspects regarding the mountain training have been introduced in the regulations; firing has been attributed a special importance by adopting the principle of fighters' specialization and the obligation that each infantryman knows how to use all categories of weapons within the infantry group. Regarding the tactics of the infantry battalion, starting with 1920 it was further developed the idea of base of fire in offensive as a regular procedure, placing an emphasis on the artillery cooperation with the infantry by increasing the numbers of the artillery.

Regarding the second hypothesis, there were obstacles in adapting the tactical

principles of the French regulations to the specificity of the Romanian infantry. The obstacle was represented by the fact that Romania, by its military forces after the First World War put in the position to defend themselves on 2-3 fronts, could not face the challenge. The French army had a large army and a weaponry industry much better developed. On the other hand, the French regulation carried out an analysis of the offensive against an enemy on position, unlike the Romanian army which

wanted a fight based on manoeuvre.

Taking into account the fact that some improvements have been brought to the infantry regulations, the endowment with weaponry based on the contracts concluded with the manufacturing companies from France and Czechoslovakia, the reorganization of military units, the tactical principles of the interwar period which reflected the lessons learned from the First World War were not fully relevant for the new battlefield requirements of the World War II.

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