

A lesson the politicians want not to learn: what is fast now, means troubles later; speedy invasions as a root for guerrilla

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Politicians do not like long wars, because they fear the political price to be paid in terms of negative impact on the public opinion, that is to say in terms of ballots. They want short and victorious wars, with no casualties, resounding successes and the task reached in a very short time. Unfortunately, history tells us that this is a dream: no war can be won quickly, and when the victory seems fast, it is often only the root of a costly guerrilla, spreading out everywhere in the occupied land, a guerrilla often generated by the presence of not defeated and not surrendered units of the defeated army, who kept their weapons and their desire to fight.

The paper will provide a general introduction, showing how this political vision was born during World War I, and how it caused major troubles, and perhaps setbacks. Examples provided by XX century history demonstrate it: fast and victorious campaign as the Italian campaign in Ethiopia in 1935-36, or the Axis campaign in Yugoslavia in 1941 generated long-lasting and hard to defeat resistance movement. A compared analysis will underline that similar mistake affected the strategy imposed by politicians to the Armies invading Iraq, and/or Afghanistan.

Actually, the first quick invasion and quick victory providing an example is Prussia against France in 1870. The invasion caused the fall of the French II Empire, and Paris was encircled, but when the armistice was signed, things were already going not that well for the Germans due to the raising French guerrilla.

The next case occurred in South Africa in 1900. The British Army started the war in October 1899, occupied Pretoria in May 1900, and had to fight harshly against Boer guerrilla in the following 24 months, till the peace treaty in May 1902.

Both the French-Prussian War and the Boer War had no real impact on the public opinion in the winning nation, because they occurred when wars were perceived as not long. Things changed in World War I, when Governments found progressively harder to convince their electors. Public opinion was more and more damaged by the war, because of the loss of relatives and due to the increasing lack of goods rendering daily life harder and harder. Hence, politicians started to think of wars as something to be speedily made, no matter of what could happen later. A first case was that of the Italians in Ethiopia. Pressed by Mussolini's orders, given due to political propaganda needs, they started the war in October 1935 and entered Addis Ababa in early May 1936, but their fast advance cut off large portions of still armed Ethiopian Corps, and those Corps as soon as June 1936 started a guerrilla which lasted till the British invasion and the return of the Negus in late Spring 1941.

A similar case happened in Yugoslavia. On April 6th 1941 Axis Forces invaded Yugoslavia from the Reich, from Hungary and from Italy. On April 17th the Yugoslavian Army surrendered. Operations went so fast that some 300,000 men had been cut off. They escaped and quickly formed partisan units, and, as in Ethiopia in 1936, the real war was only beginning. The newly born partisan units, organized by Colonel Mihailovic, attacked the Axis and the Axis-allied Croatian government. Axis reacted and conducted numerous and successful counterinsurgency operations, but the situation did not change very much and ended only with the final Axis collapse in 1945: a victory obtained in 11 days was followed by a costly counterguerrilla lasting four years.

As everybody probably remember, in 2003 USA launched an attack against Iraq. Operation had been previously studied by a small group of experts, who reported to General Myers, who, on his own side, reported to the President and to the Secretary of War. But, due to political reasons and in spite of what the experts suggested, the US expeditionary force was lighter than needed. Also if it widened from the originally planned 70,000 men to 260,000, including seamen and airmen, it was far less than the 500,000 the experts had previously indicated as a minimum needed.

What occurred later is well known: a fast conquer with a very few casualties, which cut off large portions of still armed Iraqi troops, was followed by an eight years long guerrilla, causing no less than 13,200 dead and a bit less than 45,000 wounded, not to speak of what occurred later. This happened because of the pressure the political environment made in order to save money and to have the smallest possible impact on the public opinion.

Afghanistan saw a similar fate. We all remember how fast was the attack on Afghanistan in 2001, and how quickly victory was asserted by the US President. But, due to reasons similar to those dictating the military standards of the Iraqi operation, that victory was claimed too quickly, seen that, after 14 years NATO is still fighting in Afghanistan and the coalition, including Afghani troopers, at the half of May 2015 had lost 20,743 dead.

Now, given that the American experts before Iraqi operation provided a detailed and clear report, it seems that the politicians want not – or prefer not – to act according the lessons provided by history, hence they face the same bad results, a lot of casualties, a lot of money and the bad impact on the public opinion which they wanted to avoid.