

FORUM & FEATURES



The Moral Dimension: The Thoughts of Ardant du Picq

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The first military analyst to pay close attention to human emotions and the "moral effect" they have on warfare was the 19th century French army officer, Charles Ardant du Picq. He was colonel of the 10th Regiment of the Line in 1870 when he was mortally wounded and died soon after the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War. Despite his wide popularity during and after World War I, his name is now hardly recognized by American soldiers, and his writings, therefore, are too often ignored. Yet the moral dimension in warfare is a subject of continuing importance.

Although only a colonel at the time of his death, Ardant du Picq has come to be regarded as a unique military analyst who spent a lifetime trying to understand why men react as they do under conditions of close combat. His intent, through studying ancient and modern battle at the individual point of confrontation, was to establish a doctrinal foundation upon which an army could base its tactics, strategy, weaponry, and plans for the successful application of military force. In this respect he can be closely compared to American Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall, whose group interview methods immediately following battles during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam sought to discover exactly

what Ardant du Picq pursued. Although separated by a century, these two men drew identical conclusions on many of the same points.

Ardant du Picq was born on 5 November 1821 at Perigueux, France, and at the age of 21 entered the French Military Academy at Saint-Cyr. He graduated two years later and was commissioned a sub-lieutenant in the 67th Regiment of the Line. For the next 26 years he served almost continuously in infantry battalions and regiments posted both in France and overseas.

His first combat experience came with the 9th Battalion of Foot Chasseurs during the Crimean War; he was captured in late 1855 while leading the French column in the final assault on the bastion of Sebastopol. Released in 1856, Ardant du Picq spent the next ten years campaigning in Syria, Algeria, Africa, and Sardinia, for which he received recognition for bravery from France and her allies. In February 1869 he took command of the 10th Regiment of Infantry of the Line, which was committed to combat against the Germans on 22 July 1870. Within a month, Colonel Ardant du Picq was mortally wounded by artillery fire from a German cavalry reconnaissance patrol.

Although his adult life was devoted to

studying individual and small unit combat, Ardant du Picq published very little. In fact, his only in-depth written effort, *Battle Studies*, is actually a compendium consisting of a previously published pamphlet, *Ancient Battle*, printed in 1868; memoirs and several written studies completed in 1865; a well-organized collection of notes on the subject of modern battle; and a final project entitled *Study on Combat*, which was published a decade after his death.

Interestingly enough, it may be that Ardant du Picq was the first military analyst to use questionnaires in trying to gather information on individual experiences. He sent out "circulars" to various officers who had undergone the rigors of combat and asked for their thoughts on a wide range of questions. (These form the basis of *Study on Combat*.)

As expressed in his writings, Ardant du Picq's interest was in the soldier's heart and mind, which he considered the dominant aspect of combat. "In all matters that pertain to an army, organization, discipline, and tactics," he said, "the human heart in the supreme moment of battle is the basic factor." He strongly believed that the psychology of soldiering had to be understood first, and from this could be developed "a method

of combat, sanely thought out in advance," that would permit "prescribed tactics conforming to the national character, which may serve to guide an ordinary officer without requiring him to have exceptional ability." In other words, from an understanding of man in combat, the principles of battle would become evident and the avenues to victory in war more apparent to the educated officer.

What makes Ardant du Picq so different from other analysts is that he was willing to venture into a realm that had no scientific basis in his attempt to explain the mechanics of human emotions and their overwhelming importance to the results of battle. For him, "material dynamics" and mathematics were of no consequence, despite what the then popular Henri Jomini had to say.

Instinctively, Ardant du Picq's predecessors had felt the things he sought to explain, and they had sometimes provided faint glimpses from experience, but their feelings and glimpses were unsupported by explanation: the often-quoted Napoleonic observation, for example, that in war "the moral element is to all others as three to one"; or Marshal de Saxe's statement that "the human heart is the starting point in all matters pertaining to war"; or Frederick the Great's comment that "three men behind the enemy are worth more than fifty in front of him, for moral effect."

Intuitively, soldiers know these observations to be correct, but only a few can explain their underlying meaning and the crucial importance they make on the field of battle. Ardant du Picq worked to analyze the cause and effect of human nature and, as a consequence, became one of the most lucid writers on the psychology of the soldier in battle.

In his works he presents a chain-like logic to explain the feelings and emotions men experience in battle and the advantages of understanding the human aspect. The starting point for this logic is a belief in the unchanging nature of mankind: Human nature today is fundamentally the way it has been for thousands of years and will be for thousands more. That being so, he reasons, the key to understanding past conflict is the same as for understanding present and future

battles; and that key is man—the only identifiable constant throughout the entire changing spectrum of warfare. Because man fights the battles and exists as the only constant in war, understanding the emotions and feelings of the soldier can explain how and why battles are won and lost.

From his studies of ancient and modern battle, and from personal experience, Ardant du Picq concludes that both winning and losing armies harbor certain traits and attitudes that can be either fostered or changed by leaders. It follows that if the mind can be prepared and conditioned for combat, the results can become more predictable, and an educated judgement is then possible in terms of battlefield success. The next step is to determine what factors or conditioners have influenced the minds of soldiers throughout history and have caused armies to succeed or fail.

CHARACTERISTICS

Ardant du Picq contends that victorious armies and the men in them have certain characteristics in common:

- Unity.
- Mutual support.
- Cohesion.
- Determination/resolution.
- Discipline.
- Trust.
- Perception.
- Tactics appropriate to the national character.

In combination, these characteristics produce the moral force of an army. Each one represents a feeling or an attitude that each soldier in the organization holds and that the group shares.

If these factors are properly developed within an army and are directed toward an objective in combat, they have a powerful moral effect on the enemy. When this is coordinated with the physical or material aspects of the army (weapons, number of troops, defenses, logistics, and the like), it begins a chain reaction in the minds of the enemy soldiers that leads to fear, then to terror, and ultimately to flight and destruction.

Although his thoughts are not expressed this way, Ardant du Picq's in-

tent seems to be to explain how to disrupt and then shatter the enemy's perception of his own situation. Each soldier on the battlefield, therefore, creates within himself (or each unit within itself) a "moral contract" of how things are now and of what they should be upon confronting the enemy. Everything one opponent does to another must focus on breaking the "moral contract" in the soldier's mind (or in the consciousness of the unit). This, of course, is why surprise, mobility, shock, envelopment, deep penetration, firepower, and speed are so crucial. Unfortunately, these tactics are often misapplied by those who don't really understand what is to be achieved from their use.

Ardant du Picq knew that moral ascendancy comes from the "heart" and represents feelings that spring from the perceptions of those in the ranks. Without it, the materiel of an army has little value, for the will and resolution to use it is lacking. As a consequence, a preponderance of men, weapons, supplies, defenses, and industry will never make up for a lack of moral force.

By explaining the psychology of men in battle, Ardant du Picq has made a real contribution to us—he has conveyed the meaning and importance of the "moral effect." I see no room to criticize his reasoning. It not only makes sense, it has the weight of military history behind it.

The nature of man will dominate the battlefield as long as conventional weapons prevail. Ardant du Picq's study of this human dimension of war is timeless in its application and, in a profession mesmerized by technology, is the essential ingredient battle leaders must ceaselessly study and strive to understand.



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