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Inside story

A farewell to armour

Their bulk has dominated 20th-century conflict, but recent reports reveal Britain is to phase out its main battle tanks as a practical instrument of modern warfare. Yet, says Patrick Wright, their symbolic power to terrify and quell rebellious citizens remains as potent as ever

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It is reported in the current issue of Jane's International Defence Review that the age of the tank is finally drawing to a close. The announcement, actually made some weeks ago by Britain's Master General of the Ordnance, Major General Peter Gilchrist, was that, by 2025, when the current models have run their time, the 70-ton main battle tank will have had its day.
These remarks echo announcements that have been coming out of the Pentagon for a number of years. The tank is dead not because war is over, as some fondly imagined after the iron curtain came down in 1989, but because the basis of warfare has been transformed. If the future belongs to lighter weapons systems, this is partly because war is less likely to be between massed armies, as was envisaged in the cold war scenarios.

Instead, the military is reorganising itself around an idea that the Americans call "force projection" - a kind of fly-swatting operation in which western powers can expect to pour in to some benighted place from a safe distance, deliver the necessary impact and then get out, preferably as fast as they came. You can't do that with a tank force like the one that went to Iraq in 1991 and was two months in transit.

The tank has been fighting off suggestions of redundancy ever since the first world war, when the first models were invented by the British to overcome the lethal stasis of trench warfare. The machine is, after all, a contradiction in terms. It is a platform that must combine three partially contradictory parameters: firepower, mobility and protection. The heavier a tank is, the less mobile it is likely to be, and vice versa.

Every nation that has designed a tank has its own "tank triangle", shaped according to the priorities placed on the respective parameters. Technological advances are now making that balancing act seem unnecessary. If you can fire off a whole battery of missiles instantaneously, why have a single gun that needs to be rotated and aimed each time? And why weigh yourself down with tons of armour when you can achieve protection by other means, perhaps by switching on a heavy magnetic field?

And yet there is another side to the history of this weapon, which may be more visible to civilians than to the spooky prophets of new age warfare. The tank may be a practical instrument of modern warfare, but in the eyes of the many people who have had to face it since 1916, it is more like a monster, a hideous throwback to the age of the dinosaurs, an expression of the most primitive kind of power. It is less a practical instrument with known capabilities than a phantasm, which can compel by its mere appearance.

In US military circles, this aspect of the tank is recognised as the "shock effect". But in the very early days of the tank it was known as the "moral effect" - the power of the machine to compel merely by appearing on the scene - as if the end of the world had arrived on a pair of groaning caterpillar tracks.

When the first tanks were shipped to the western front they were met with laughter. In London theatres, dancing girls were soon performing the "Tanko". The symbolic dimension of the tank was accepted as part of its military power. This fact was

recognised by the French and British during the first world war, and afterwards exploited in many, often colonial, locations.

The representative tank of the late 20th century was not actually the latest digitised machine equipped with "total situational awareness". It is more like the one that forms the closing image of Don Delillo's novel Mao II. This is a graffiti-ridden but still apocalyptic rattletrap, grinding along at the head of a wedding party carousing its way through the eerie ruins of Beirut - "an old T-34, some scarred and cruddy ancient, sold and stolen two dozen times, changing sides and systems and religions".

Hi-tech Abrams and Challengers were seen in action during Operation Desert Storm, but elsewhere the tank has remained a grinding, primitive thing, serving as a prop for murderous warlords like the late Serbian butcher Arkan, or a handy implement for the Taliban in Afghanistan, who use tanks to erase ancient Buddhas from their landscape, or for pushing over walls on to men found guilty of homosexuality.

And it is not just for the Taliban that the tank has continued to work as a primitive monster. It has long functioned as the embodiment of state power, lined up against its own civilians. And in this capacity, it has never been excessively reliant on technological sophistication. All that matters is that it scares the hell out of the unarmed onlooker.

This side of the tank's history does not consist of planned battles in which tanks advanced en masse, as at Cambrai or Amiens in the first world war, and later in Hitler's Blitzkrieg operations of the second world war, or in the massive clashes in which tank army met tank army, as at Kursk in 1943. Instead, it opens with events such as occurred in 1919: in Glasgow, where the British government used tanks to overawe socialist strikers; in Ireland, where British tanks were used repeatedly against the struggle for independence; or in Berlin, where captured British tanks were used to suppress the Spartacus uprising.

This version of "tank warfare" would later be practised in the Soviet bloc: in the East Berlin uprising of 1953, when tanks were confronted by protesting citizens; in Budapest in 1956; in Prague in 1968, and in Poland during martial law. Its history includes the events of July 1967, when American tanks were used against rioters on the near west side of Detroit, and of all too many coups. They were on the streets in Athens during the colonels' coup of 1967; when Pinochet launched his coup against Allende's elected Popular Unity government in Chile in 1973; and when President Marcos ordered them out in Manila in 1986, against nuns, priests and children who eventually overwhelmed them.

This civilian image of the tank, in which the excesses of diverse CIA-prompted coups are symbolically wedded to those of the unyielding communist state, was repeated most memorably in Tiananmen Square in 1989. PLA tanks crushed demonstrators, and the abiding image was created a day or two later when a single civilian stepped into a deserted boulevard and arrested a whole column of approaching tanks.

The fact that this apparently primitive imagery can overwhelm even the most sophisticated hardware is suggested by the case of Israel, which has designed its own tank, albeit using huge subventions of US money. The Merkava was designed in the 80s, after the Yom Kippur war of 1973, in which the over-confident Israeli Tank Corps suffered grievious losses as they came up against Egyptian soldiers equipped with hand held "Sagger" anti-tank missiles.

The Merkava was to be the ultimate tank. It has phenomenal powers and an innovative design whereby its whole mechanism, including the fuel, is wrapped around the crew as protection. But what is Israel doing with its tanks? Using them as primitive monsters to oppress more or less unarmed Palestinians, turning them against stone-throwing youths, or driving them into the concentration camp known as the Gaza Strip to crush Palestinian huts.

Tank symbolism can recoil on its users. The British stopped using tanks in Northern Ireland after Operation Motorman of July 1972, in which Centurions were used to break into "Free Derry" and other republican no-go areas. The image of tanks breaking into civilian streets played right into republican hands, proving the Soviet-like monstrosity of

the British state. Similarly, the Israelis are going to have to face down the photographs emerging from their tank operations in the Gaza Strip, including an already much-used one taken of a youth throwing a stone at a huge and overwhelming tank.

The symbolic power of the tank has proved irresistible in more ways than one. Hitler was passionate about them - wanting to mount them as monuments in parks and fantasising about vast 180-ton models. Margaret Thatcher proved her status as the "Iron Lady" by climbing into a Challenger in 1986. But Michael Portillo failed dismally: as John Major's defence minister, he once climbed out of the hatch of a British armoured vehicle in the Balkans, teetered and then nearly collapsed in front of the cameras.

The technicians and prophets of future warfare may see all this as primitive, theatrical stuff. But the symbolic force of the tank has been central to its effectiveness as a weapon, and it is by no means redundant. With the military now becoming more concerned with peacekeeping, or, in the suggestive American jargon, "operations other than war", this sort of symbolic warfare may, for better or worse, be entering a new phase. When the Americans took over the peacekeeping role in the Balkans, they took tanks with them, and planted them on ridges and bridges as a sign of their serious intentions. The principle was well known to Clough Williams Ellis, the architect of Portmeirion, who also served as a major with the Tank Corps during the first world war. As he wrote in 1919: "It is infinitely more humane to appal a rioter or a savage by showing him a tank than to shoot him down with an inoffensive-looking machine-gun."

• Tank: the Progress of a Monstrous War Machine, by Patrick Wright, is published by Faber and Faber, priced £25.

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