

LINE AND COLUMN.

(From the N. Y. Nation.)

It was Prussia, through the great Fred'k which discovered and put into practice the principle which the genius of the great Napoleon afterwards turned to such wonderful account—that in war everything should be sacrificed to being strongest at the point of attack. It was Prussia, too, which introduced that apparently trifling but important improvement in firearms—the iron ramrod, which contributed so much to the rapidity and destructiveness of infantry fire. It was Prussia, too, which first brought to perfection the art of moving men in solid masses by means of minute and painstaking drill, thus enormously increasing the control of the officer over the rank and file, and diminishing the risk of confusion under fire or in retreat. She too, among European powers first put the breech-loader into the hands of the infantry soldier, in spite of the general belief of the military critics of other countries that it would prove too complicated for practical use, and was amply repaid for her confidence on the field of Sadowa. In the late campaign in France she made one other discovery, which she probably would have made in 1866 had the war lasted longer, and which she is now turning to practical account in training her forces—we mean the discovery that the introduction of breech-loaders has made henceforward impossible the use of those close formations, whether in line or column, in which it has been the custom of armies to attack each other ever since armies were first organized.

All the Continental nations have adhered till now to the custom of attacking in column—that is, of forming the attacking body with a narrow front and long files, and attempting to crush the enemy at the point of contact by mere momentum; while in the English service and in our own, the line two or three deep has been adhered to as giving freer play to the fire of musketry, and affording less mark to the enemy. Continental officers have never denied the superiority of the line to the column either for attack or defence, but they have said, and said truly, that in order to use it your men must possess either greater intelligence or greater steadiness and self-reliance than are usually to be found among Continental troops. It was useless, they said, to try to convert the Russian or German peasant into a soldier who, with only one man behind him and one on each side of him, would either wait resolutely the approach of a dense oblong mass ten men broad and two hundred men deep, or move boldly towards it, in the full confidence of dissipating it with the converging fire of the line. It was useless, too, the French officers said, to ask the French soldier, with his liability to panic, and to great demoralization after a reverse, to stand nearly alone, in moments of trial, as he would have to stand if the column were abandoned. General Trochu, in his late work on the French army, reproduces one of Marshal Bugeaud's interesting reminiscences of the Peninsular war, in which he describes the almost uniform failure of the French column when directed against the British line; but it appears from his story as if no other formation would have suited the French character. He recalls with emphasis the flutter and excitement which ran through the French ranks as they move against the long, thin "red wall"; the apprehension excited by the English silence and refusal to fire till the column was very close, and the demoralizing effects of the fire when it

came, and the dissolution of discipline produced by the English advance with the bayonet, which always followed two or three withering volleys. In the United States, also, the national temperament and the character of the social organization have made the line the favorite formation.

But both line and column are now to be numbered amongst the things that were. The "column of attack," indeed, which has played so famous a part in modern military history, may be said to belong to the past as completely as the Macedonian phalanx or the wooden line-of-battle ships. When the Prussian Guard in column attacked the French line at Mars-la-Tour, in August, 1870, and lost six thousand men in ten minutes, the days of close formation came to an end. It is now acknowledged, on all hands that it will not do to send men into action in any formation in which they touch elbows or present a continuous front to the enemy's fire. In other words, a total revolution is taking place in tactics which will inevitably greatly diminish the officer's control over the soldier during the progress of the engagement, and render necessary on the part of the latter an amount of intelligence, self-respect, and fidelity which the soldiers of no nation have, as a class, as yet displayed. The Prussians are now practising a system which opens an engagement by a heavy fire of artillery, and then attacks neither in line nor column, but with great clouds of skirmishers, to whom it is only possible to indicate their objective point, and who reach it as best they can—advancing across the country by twos, or threes, or singly, carefully avoiding any kind of formation, taking advantage of every hollow in the ground, tree, fence, house, or wall to conceal themselves; running here at the top of their speed, there crawling on their bellies and only firing when they can take steady aim. We believe a column, it is true, comes after them, but only as a sort of reserve to feed the skirmishing horde with fresh men, and hold its own conquests.

It can be readily seen that under this system the superintendence of the officer must at best be slight. He can never have the men "well in hand," to use a military phrase; he must trust during the greater part of the day to their own sense of honor, to their courage, and to the opinion of their comrades to prevent skulking; and it is only at the last moment, when the final rush has to be made, that he can, in the strict sense of the term, put himself at their head. In short, the tactics which carried Frederick through the Seven Years' War, and Wellington through the Peninsula and Waterloo, are vanishing from the camp, and in lieu of them comes, of all things in the world, the old Indian bushwhacking under which Braddock's files went down over a century ago at the fords of the Monongahela.

What is most interesting in all this to civilians is, that it furnishes a striking illustration of the steadiness with which mind in all fields of human activity retains the supremacy over either brute force or animal excitement, and of the certainty with which we may count on the over-cultivation of the art of destruction producing its own antidote. When new and more effective instruments of destruction are invented, we find that the whole population has to be raised in the mental and social scale in order to provide soldiers competent to use them; and more than this, we find that after the soldier has been trained to the utmost point, he is of little use to you unless you have kindled in

him a great deal of intelligence and self-respect. The degraded and stupid peasant who used to take us daily allowance of the stick or cat at the hands of the drill sergeant, was not a man whom there would be any use in sending out skirmishing with a breech-loader. He would get into a ditch as soon as the officer's eye was off him, and stay there. Moreover, the new discoveries are changing the military type of character all over the world. The soldier of the historian, as well as of the poet and novelist—the gay, dashing, restless youth, who danced with and made love to the women, and duelled and gobbled with men from post to post, and went under fire with an oath or a song on his lips, who used to be the ideal "militaire"—has vanished, or is vanishing from the earth. His successor is a grave gentleman with spectacles, whose uniform smells of the lamp, whose dreams are of strategy and tactics, and whose laborious days are passed, not on "boys, or lust, or wine," but over figures and diagrams, and among books, to whom the "pomp and pride and circumstance" of war are nothing, and its use as a naked, unadorned, savage, but potent instrument of the national will everything. It may seem that there are the seeds of tremendous evil in this entrance of educated ability into the service of destruction; but, if the experience of the past teaches us anything, it teaches us that we cannot press the mind even into the service of destruction without exalting it; and diffusing and deepening the popular reverence for it, and we cannot do this without helping to make war detestable. No one can sincerely respect the mental endowments or acquirements of a Moltke without feeling within him a growing sense of the absurdity and wastefulness and barbarism of the military mode of settling disputes.

The production of iron has doubled within the past sixteen years. In 1856 the total production was 7,000,000 tons; in 1872, 14,000,000 tons. In 1856 the average consumption of iron in the world was about seventeen pounds a head; in 1872 it was thirty pounds a head. In 1856, in Great Britain the consumption per head was 144 pounds; in the United States it was eighty-four pounds. In 1872 the consumption in Great Britain was 200 pounds per head. The consumption of iron has been considered by politico-scientists an indication of the social progress of a people. If this be so the United States is rapidly assuming the most advanced position socially of any nation on the globe.

FLEET OF ALABAMA FOR GERMANY.—The *Borsen Zeitung*, of Berlin, says that two corvettes on the "Alabama" principle, the "Ariadne" and the "Louisa," are now being built by the German Government, and that two more—the "Freya" and "Thunsealdä"—are to be begun immediately. In three years at the latest the German fleet will thus possess four "Alabamas," armed with heavy guns, and so swift that they would be capable of sustaining a conflict even against iron-clads covered with 8 inch plates. "It is stated," adds the writer, "that thirty such Alabamas would be more than sufficient to destroy the mercantile marine of England and to attack her navy with a good chance of success; and there would be no difficulty in adding this number of ships to the German navy, as all the materials are procurable from German manufacturers."