

Kandyan Resistance: Weapons, Tactics, Strategy

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The over-all policy objective of the Portuguese was to effect the subjugation of the whole island and thereby to complete its temporal and consequently its spiritual conquest. By 1593 only Kandy remained to be conquered. The near half-century from then till 1638 saw the Portuguese making persistent attempts to overpower Kandy and achieve its object, everyone of which Kandy successfully foiled.

This paper is a study using Portuguese and Sinhalese sources of the fighting that ensued during these turbulent times. It first compares the fighting forces, the weaponry, the leadership and the adaptability to the terrain of each combatant. It is argued that though there was a broad parity as regards numbers and fighting spirit of the forces on either side, the Portuguese had the edge in training and experience. In weaponry too it is shown there was nothing to choose between the two. In leadership while the Portuguese commanders were all professional soldiers and some, like Azevedo and de Saa, generals of distinction, on the Kandyan side it varied in quality. As regards adaptability to the terrain, it is demonstrated that while the Kandyans were at home in it, the Portuguese were at a disadvantage.

It is against this background that the military strategy and tactics adopted by each side is next surveyed. The Portuguese strategy varied according to prevailing circumstances or the views of the policy makers. It shifted from launching massive invasions into the hills, to defensive measures to forestall a Kandyan backlash, to targeting the Kandyan villages in an economic warfare.

The Kandyan strategy to counter these large scale invasions – formulated obviously by Wimaladharmasuriya and meticulously followed in every invasion thereafter – was to avoid meeting the enemy in combat until the time and conditions suited them. The creation and engineering of these conditions were the function of the tactics adopted by the Kandyans. These tactics were to lure the invader deeper into the hills, to sever his supply lines, to induce the enemy's lascorins to cross over and to create diversionary attacks. A parallel is drawn between the Kandyan strategy of avoiding battle and the theories of both Sun Tzu and Basil Liddell Hart's "indirect approach". In conclusion the deficiencies in the strategies of each combatant are discussed.

Key Words: Kandyan Resistance; Weapons; Tactics; Strategy; Portuguese

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