

UNDRESS BONIFACIO: The Supremo As Military Leader

By Xiao Chua

We are celebrating the 148th birthday of the Father of the Filipino “Sambayanan” Andres Bonifacio. In two years, we will be celebrating the Bonifacio sesquicentennial and it must be worth looking forward to as a country as much as we celebrated Rizal’s. In many ways, the common man can better identify with Bonifacio more than Rizal.

But the “Supremo” of the Revolutionary Katipunan is still shrouded with myths, which should be undressed to see the real man. One is the insinuation that Bonifacio was not an able military leader. In fact, this was one of the main issue why he was ousted in Cavite as leader of the revolution. In the onset of the revolution Cavite were winning. The Battle of Binakayan was their biggest victory with 600 dead, mostly Spanish soldiers. General Emilio Aguinaldo was hailed as a brilliant military tactician and became president on his 28th birthday.

Cavite’s admired trenches were made by Edilberto Evangelista, a Belgium-trained engineer. Since many of the Spanish soldiers were in Mindanao during the first months of the revolution, Cavite towns won against the colonizers, but when these troops were recalled and became reinforcements to Cavite, one by one the towns fell.

Historian Zeus Salazar believed that Cavite fell for the simple reason that trenches were of a western kind of warfare that the Spaniards really knew of and mastered. It was also impractical for Filipinos for it was costly, so it was hard to leave them. It became easy for the Spaniards to surround trenches and when they did, they were able to use them against the Filipinos themselves. And Evangelista’s trenches were so good that the Americans were also able to use them later on during the Philippine-American War!

Salazar continued that Bonifacio’s strategy which was followed by Katipunan generals in many places came from the indigenous war strategy of retreating to the mountains. Before the coming of the Spaniards, Many bayans chose a higher ground or natural cover called “ilihan” where they can retreat in times of calamities and attacks. This also became the strategy of early leaders of uprisings such as Tamblot, Bankaw, Sumuroy, Tapar, Dagohoy, Hermano Pule among others.

Bonifacio these camps “Real” and established them in Mt. Tapusi (Montalban, Rizal), Balara at Krus na Ligas, Masuyod (Marikina), Kakaron de Sile, Puray, Kamansi, Minuyan, Makiling, and Banahaw. They spread in the mountains of Tayabas, Morong, Bulacan, Pampanga, and Nueva Ecija. These communities near the towns are located in forests, rocks, caves and mountains. They were using natural formations so they were not so costly, it’s easy to leave and go back to them, and in the mountains and caves there could be many escape routes. Spaniards were also unfamiliar to this kind of warfare.

That’s why even if Bonifacio forces were defeated in Pinaglabanan, the Spaniards were not able to totally eradicate his forces. A chat with Historian Ambeth Ocampo made me learn that the Spaniards didn’t even bother to get Bonifacio and focused on Cavite. My belief is that the “real” strategy has something to do with this. Just probably, they can’t do anything much about it.

When the Cavite trenches fell, Aguinaldo sought refuge in the “reales” established by Bonifacio, until he reached Montalban and later Biak-na-Bato, where, at a position of advantage he was able to negotiate peace with the Spaniards.

Therefore, Bonifacio did have a military strategy, which is actually still being effectively used by insurgents around the country. As Historian Milagros Guerrero said, with the Supremo as chief strategist, by command responsibility, all victories and defeats during his term must be attributed to him, “The claim by some historians that ‘Bonifacio lost all his battles’ is RIDICULOUS.”

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