

Clausewitz, Carl Von. *On War*
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Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret

Book VI
Chapter Twenty-Six

The People in Arms

In the civilized parts of Europe, war by means of popular uprisings is a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. It has its advocates and its opponents. The latter object to it either on political grounds, considering it as a means of revolution, a state of legalized anarchy that is as much of a threat to the social order at home as it is to the enemy; or else on military grounds, because they feel that the results are not commensurate with the energies that have been expected.

The first objection does not concern us at all: here we consider a general insurrection as simply another means of war – in its relation, therefore, to the enemy. The second objection, on the other hand, lead us to remark that a popular uprising should, in general, be considered as an outgrowth of the way in which the conventional barriers have been swept away in our lifetime by the elemental violence of war. It is, in fact, a broadening and intensification of the fermentation process known as war. The system of requisitioning, and the enormous growth of armies resulting from it and from universal conscription, the employment of militia – all of these run in the same direction when viewed from the standpoint of the older, narrower military system, and that also leads to the calling of the home guard and arming people.

The innovations first mentioned were the natural, inevitable consequences of the breaking down of barriers. They added so immensely to the strength of the side that first employed them that the opponent was carried along and had to follow suit. That will also hold true of the people's war. Any nation that uses it intelligently will, as a rule, gain some superiority over those who disdain its use. If this is so, the question only remains whether mankind at large will gain by this further expansion of the element of war; a question to which the answer should be the same as to the question of war itself. We shall leave both to the philosophers. But it can be argued that the resources expended in an insurrection might be put to better use in other kinds of warfare. No lengthy investigation is needed, however, to uncover the fact that these resources are, for the most part, not otherwise available and cannot be disposed of at will. Indeed, a significant part of them, the psychological element, is called into being only by this type of usage.

When a whole nation renders armed resistance, the question then is no longer, 'Of what value is this to the people', but 'what is its potential value, what are the conditions that requires, and how is it to be utilized.'

By its very nature, such scattered resistance will not lend itself to major actions, closely compressed in time and space. Its effects is like that of the process of evaporation: it depends on how much surface os exposed. The greater the surface and the area of contact between it and the enemy forces, the thinner the latter have to be spread, the greater the effect of the general uprising. Like smoldering embers, it consumes the basic foundations of the enemy forces. Since it needs time to be

effective, a state of tension will develop while the two elements interact. This tension will either gradually relax, if the insurgency is suppressed in some places and slowly burns itself out in others, or else it will build up to a crisis: a general conflagration closes in on the enemy, driving him out of the country before he is faced with total destruction. For an uprising by itself to produce such crisis presupposes an occupied area of as size that, in Europe, does not exist outside Russia, or a disproportion between the invading army and the size of the country that would never occur in practice. To be realistic, one must therefore think of a general insurrection within the framework of a war conducted by the regular army, and coordinated in one all-encompassing plan.

The following are the only conditions under which a general uprising can be effective.

1. The war must be fought in the interior of the country.
2. It must not be decided by a single stroke.
3. The theater of operations must be fairly large
4. The national character must be suited to that type of war.
5. The country must be rough and inaccessible, because of mountains, or forests, or marshes, or the local methods of cultivation.

The relative density of the population does not play a decisive part; rarely are there not enough people for the purpose. Nor does it make much difference whether the population is rich or poor – at least it should not be a major consideration, although one must remember poor men, used to hard, strenuous work and privation, are generally more vigorous and more warlike.

One peculiarity of the countryside that greatly enhances the effectiveness of an insurrection is the scattered distribution of houses and farms, which, for instance, can be found in many parts of Germany. Under such conditions the country will be more cut up and thickly wooded, the roads poorer if more numerous; the billeting of troops will prove infinitely more difficult, and, above all, the most characteristic feature of insurgency in general will be constantly repeated in miniature: the element of resistance will exist everywhere and nowhere. Where the population is concentrated in villages, the most restless communities can be garrisoned, or even looted and burned down as punishment; but that could scarcely be done in, say, a Westphalian farming area.

Militia and bands of armed civilians cannot and should not be employed against the main enemy force – or indeed against any sizable enemy forces. They are not supposed to pulverize the core but to nibble at the shell and around the edges. They are meant to operate in areas just outside the theater of war – where the invader will not appear in strength – in order to deny him these areas altogether. Thunder clouds of this type should build up all around the invader the farther he advances. The people who have not yet been conquered by the enemy will be the most eager to arm against him; they will set an example that will gradually be followed by their neighbors. The flames will spread like a bush fire, until they reach the area on which the enemy is based, threatening his lines of communication and his very existence. One need not hold an exaggerated faith in the power of a general uprising, nor consider it as an inexhaustible, unconquerable force, which an army cannot hope to stop any more than man can command the wind or the rain – in short, one need not base one's judgement on patriotic broadsides in order to admit that peasants in arms will not let themselves be swept along like a herd of cattle and generally follow their noses, without requiring a special plan. This explains the highly dangerous character that a march through mountains, forests, or other types of difficult country can assume for a small detachment: at any moment the march may

turn into a fight. An area may have long since been cleared of enemy troops, but a band of peasants that was long since driven off by the head of a column may at any moment reappear at its tail. When it comes to making roads unusable and blocking narrow passes, the means available to outposts or military raiding parties and those of an insurgent peasantry have about as much in common as the movements of an automaton have with those of a man. The enemy's only answer to militia actions is the sending out of frequent escorts as protection for his convoys, and as guards on all his stopping places, bridges, defiles, and the rest. The early efforts of the militia may be fairly weak, and so will these first detachments, because of the danger of dispersal. But the flames of insurrection will be fanned by these small detachments, which will on occasion be overpowered by sheer numbers; courage and the appetite for fighting will rise, and so will the tension, until it reaches the climax that decides the outcome.

A general uprising as we see it, should be nebulous and elusive; its resistance should never materialize as a concrete body, otherwise the enemy can direct sufficient force as its core, crush it, and take many prisoners. When that happens, the people will lose heart and, believing that the issue has been decided and further efforts would be useless, drop their weapons. On the other hand, there must be some concentration at certain points: the fog must thicken and form a dark and menacing cloud out of which a bolt of lightning may strike at any time. These points of concentration will, as we have said, lie mainly on the flanks of the enemy's theater of operations. That is where insurgents should build up large units, better organized, with parties of regulars that will make them look like a proper army and enable them to tackle larger operations. From these areas the strength of the insurgency must increase as it nears the enemy's rear, where he is vulnerable to its strongest blows. The larger groups are intended to harass the more considerable units that the enemy sends back; they will also arouse uneasiness and fear, and deepen the psychological effect of the insurrection as a whole. Without them the impression would not be sufficiently great, nor would the general situation give the enemy enough cause for alarm.

A commander can more easily shape and direct the popular insurrection by supporting the insurgents with small units of regular army. Without these regular troops to provide encouragement, the local inhabitants will usually lack confidence and initiative to take to arms. The stronger the units detailed for the task, the greater their power of attraction and the bigger the ultimate avalanche. But there are limiting factors. For one thing, it could be fatal to the army to be frittered away on secondary objectives of that kind – to be dissolved, so to speak, in the insurgency – merely to form a long and tenuous defensive line, which is a sure way of destroying army and insurgents alike. For another, experience tends to show that too many regulars in an area are liable to decimate the vigor and effectiveness of a popular uprising by attracting too many enemy troops; also, the inhabitants will place too much reliance upon the regulars; and finally, the presence of considerable numbers of troops taxes the local resources in other ways, such as billets, transportation, requisitions, and so forth.

Another means of avoiding an effective enemy reaction] to a popular uprising is, at the same time, one of the basic principles of insurrection: it is the principle of seldom, or never, allowing this important strategic means of defense to turn in tactical defense. *Insurgent actions* are similar in character to all others fought by second-rate troops: they start out full of vigor and enthusiasm, but there is little level-headedness and tenacity in the long run. Moreover, not much is lost if a body of insurgents is defeated and dispersed – that is what it is for. But it should not be allowed to go to pieces through too many men being killed, wounded or taken prisoner: such defeats would soon dampen its ardor. Both these characteristics are entirely alien to the nature of a tactical defense. A

defensive action ought to be a slow, persistent, calculated business, entailing a definite risk; mere attempts that can be broken off at will can never lead to a successful defense. So if the defense of a sector is entrusted to the home guard, one must avoid getting involved in a major defensive battle, or else they will perish no matter how favorable the circumstances. They may and should defend the points of access to a mountain area or the dikes across a marsh or points at which a river can be crossed for as long as possible; but once these are breached, they had better scatter and continue their resistance by means of surprise attacks, rather than huddle together in a narrow redoubt, locked into a regular defensive position from which there is no escape. No matter how brave a people is, how warlike its traditions, how great its hatred for the enemy, how favorable the ground on which it fights: the fact remains that a national uprising cannot maintain itself where the atmosphere is too full of danger. Therefore, if its fuel is to be fanned into a major conflagration, it must be at some distance, where there is enough air, and the uprising cannot be smothered by a single stroke.

This discussion has been less an objective analysis than a groping for the truth. The reason is that this sort of warfare is not yet very common; those who have been able to observe it for any length of time have not reported enough about it. We merely wish to add that strategic plans for defense can provide for a general insurrection in one of two ways: either as a last resort after a defeat or as a natural auxiliary before a decisive battle. The latter use presupposes a withdrawal to the interior and the form of indirect defense described in Chapter Eight and Twenty-Four of this book. Therefore, we shall add only a few words concerning the calling out of the home guard after a battle has been lost.

A government must never assume that its country's fate, its whole existence, hangs on the outcome of a single battle, no matter how decisive. Even after a defeat, there is always the possibility that a turn of fortune can be brought about by developing new sources of internal strength or through the natural decimation all offensives suffer in the long run or by means of help from abroad. There will always be time enough to die; like a drowning man who will clutch instinctively at a straw, it is the natural law of the moral world that a nation finds itself on the brink of an abyss will try to save itself by any means.

No matter how small and weak a state be in comparison with its enemy, it must not forgo these last efforts, or one would conclude that its soul is dead. The possibility of avoiding total ruin by paying a high price for peace should not be ruled out, but even this intention will not, in turn, eliminate the usefulness of new measures of defense. They will not make the peace more difficult and onerous, but easier and better. They are even more desirable where help can be expected from other states that have an interest in our survival. A government that after having lost a major battle, is only interested in letting its people go back to sleep in peace as soon as possible, and overwhelmed by feelings of failure and disappointment, lacks the courage and desire to put forth a final effort, is, because of its weakness, involved in a major inconsistency in any case. It shows that it did not deserve to win, and possibly for that very reason is unable to.

With the retreat of the army into the interior – no matter how complete the defeat of a state – the potential of fortresses and general insurrections must be evoked. In this respect, it will be advantageous if the flank of the main theater of operations bordered by mountains or other difficult terrain, which will then emerge as bastions, raking the invader with their strategic enfilade.

Once the victor is engaged in sieges, once he has left strong garrisons all along the way to form his line of communication, or has even sent out detachments to secure his freedom of movement and

keep adjoining provinces from giving him trouble; once he has been weakened by a variety of losses in men and matériel, the time has come for the defending army to take the field again. Then a well-placed blow on the attacker in his difficult situation will be enough to shake him.