

# Soldiers, cities and war

Confronted with the city in times of war, the soldier hesitates. If he accepts to besiege them, he is quite reluctant to fight inside towns. But large cities fascinate him. Conquering Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome or... Baghdad is more stirring than reaching a line drawn on a map. To get tasked to seize Moscow or Berlin, the German, Anglo-Saxon, and Soviet Generals hurried, intrigued, competed. “You are lucky!”<sup>1</sup>, de Gaulle said to Leclerc, on the eve of liberating Paris.

Soldiers’ hesitations towards built-up areas are from time immemorial : either the city is generally avoided during operations, or it is on the contrary placed at the core of the action.

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## Avoiding cities

For a long time, soldiers wanted to destroy the opposing army in open country. Considering the place of cities during wars was not the main point. Sun Zi<sup>2</sup> advised against attacking built-up areas, unless having a fifth column to put them down without any combat. In Antiquity, fighting was not carried out in cities. Besieging a town was considered as coward<sup>3</sup>. War rather took place at sea or at the foot of city walls, opposing phalanxes, launched in a frontal, fatal but limited combat.

In the Middle Ages, war was a succession of sieges; major battles in the fields of the same name were exceptional and bloody<sup>4</sup>. With the advent of States in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, safety was spreading, gradually cities were said to be “open”, i.e. not defended. Only towns along borders were still fortified. The important thing consisted in having an army controlling the countryside, which could not thus be committed riskily into cities. It was the opinion of Frederick II : “attacks in built-up areas are so costly in lives that I made a rule to avoid them”<sup>5</sup>. On his side, Guibert stigmatized the French tendency

consisting in granting too much attention to fortifications<sup>6</sup>. Except when it controls a passage, a city is a trouble. It is just good for troops’ winter quarters<sup>7</sup>.

If Bonaparte gained his stars while besieging Toulon, he much more preferred the countryside, convenient to apply tactic’s principles, on condition that soldiers facing a city ignore its inhabitants ! When the Emperor exhorted his Generals not to let themselves be impressed by the Spanish insurrection, he invited them to handle a city as a terrain quite similar to others : “downtown, we do not commit ourselves in the streets, we occupy the houses at the beginning of each street, and we set up good batteries... Inside cities, it is necessary to make generals responsible for isolated men... No small groups ! Soldiers should only walk in five-hundred-men columns”<sup>8</sup>.

During WWI, cities were ignored with very few exceptions : Maubeuge, invested from August 27. to September<sup>9</sup>, 1914, Paris that Gallieni planned “to defend house after house”, Paris and London bombarded by the “heavy Bertha”, the German “Taubes” or Zeppelins. Far from the frontline, cities are not very vulnerable, the adversary is not there and there is no fighting inside.

A similar situation was observed during the Second World War. Notwithstanding Stalingrad, Berlin, and Breslau... fighting inside cities and for them is always absolute sacrilege, even in defense. On June 10, 1940,

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Reynaud called Roosevelt for help : “ We will fight ahead of Paris, we will fight beyond the rears of Paris... ”, never inside! Leningrad was used by Hitler as a focal point ; von Leeb should not attack it. General Kesselring considered war for cities as uncertain ; he evacuated Roma, Sienna, and Florence without any combat ; Wiese, his alter ego in the South of France, did the same in 1944 with the cities of the Rhone valley. On March 31, 1945, Eisenhower warned Montgomery : he was not interested in Berlin ; his mission was to destroy the German army. Seven months earlier, this supreme commander let Leclerc seize Paris but he said, because the insurrection forced him to do so.

### A city as an “objective”

Even if Foch, Ardant du Picq, Bülow, Foch... and others often ignored cities during a war, such an attitude is not relevant. Clausewitz, a tactician, recorded them into enemy “unconscious resources”, to be taken into account in a second phase of the operations<sup>40</sup>. In cities, arsenals are operating, reserves gathering, railways converging. Sherman found in the Atlanta’s blaze a way of weakening the Confederates. A “get-through city” often shapes the maneuver, including logistics.

In June 1944, Bradley wanted Saint-Lo, an essential crossroads for his movements. As attacking the city “would cost him one division”<sup>41</sup>, he crushed it under bombs. Brest, Royan, Le Havre, Saint-Malo... Antwerp were destroyed to facilitate the Allies’ access to Atlantic ports. As a disciple of Douhet, an Italian, the US Air Force bombed the large German and Japanese cities in order to panic their inhabitants, to ruin war industries, and to discourage their governments. A waste of time and effort, except, in fine, when the vitrification of Hiroshima and Nagasaki prefigured the possible one of Tokyo !

Clausewitz was also a strategist for whom a city is sometimes this very “centre of gravity” which destruction or seizing means victory. In 1870, Helmuth von Moltke thought this way : “ Our objective - the enemy army - will most likely be achieved by moving to Paris ”. In 1914, Ludwig, his nephew, gave similar orders : “ Focusing most forces on Paris ! ”. But sick, isolated in his Luxembourg HQ, Ludwig von Moltke not longer held his Generals. These ones had a militarist vision of war. In order to better encircle the French Army, Von Kluck chose to present his flank to Paris...

Politicians consider cities with interest. When his Reich is at the top, Hitler had the swastika floating in eight European capitals. Stalin acted in order to seize Vienna, Prague, and Budapest again... and to be first in Berlin, against the will of Churchill. De Gaulle wanted Paris, that had become that “ free world’s magnet ”<sup>42</sup>, once the Allies landed in Normandy. He refused to evacuate Strasbourg, at least not “ without a major battle ”<sup>43</sup>.

Intra-muros engagements had strange consequences. In April 1943, the revolt of the Warsaw ghetto surprising the Wehrmacht settled the history to come for the Jewish nation. In 1968, the North-Vietnamese armies fail to seize Hue by force. It did not matter ! Hanoi had won. The pictures of GIs killed or wounded in street battles were about to impress the American people for a long time. Beirut or Sarajevo sieges were passionately followed on the screens of the whole world. Being spectacular, war inside cities questions public opinions.



## Conclusion

The city, as “center of gravity”, is actual. Kuwait City, Grozny, Baghdad are good illustrations of it. Today, and excepted the anachronism of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, war initially takes place on urbanized terrain. In the Balkans, all the names of battles were that of cities. Elsewhere, Brazzaville, Mogadishu, Monrovia, Freetown, Kabul, Jenine... illustrate this tendency. According to a recent report from the Rand Corporation, 237 out of the last 250 USMC commitments included actions in built-up areas. That would continue. For this, three reasons : a fast increase in urban populations, a quasi generalization of internal armed conflicts, and the fact that cities are the last terrain where courageous guerrillas can still face a modern army. As George Duhamel said, “the smell of world had changed”, that of war too. Armed forces must learn how to breathe differently !



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1 Charles of Gaulle, *Memories of war*, volume 2, *The Unit*, Paris, Plon 1956, p. 302.

2 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

3 The Greek historian Polybius (202-120) criticized the king of Macedonia, Philippe V, for having been mad enough to have avoided any close battle and to have attacked the towns of Thessaly, Victor David Hanson, *The Western model of war*, Paris, Beautiful Letters, 1990, p. 40.

4 Philippe Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, Paris, PUF 1994, p. 207.

5 Reflection noted by Allain Bernède, in “Cities in war, a tactical and, or, strategic objective”, in *Symbolic cities*, Peace World Center, Verdun, 2003, p. 17.

6 Guibert, *General essay on tactics*, 1772-1790, Paris, Copernic, 1976, pp. 212 and following.

7 The whole imagination and determination of one Turenne is needed, to leave cities in full winter, to surprise and finally defeat the Germans in Alsace, during the 1674-1675 Winter, J.-L. Dufour, *War, cities and soldiers*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2002, p. 68.

8 Letter of the Emperor to Berthier and Murat, dated April 3, 1808, quoted by Andre Castelot, *Napoleon*, Paris, Perrin Academic Bookshop, 1979, p. 235.

9 “... (Berlin) is nothing more for me than a geographical place and, as such, does not interest me. My intention is to destroy enemy forces.” in *Memories by Marshal Montgomery, Viscount of Alamein*, Paris, Plon, 1958, p. 335.

10 K. Clausewitz, *Summary of the training provided by the author to SAR the prince of Prussia in the years 1810*; issued in appendix of the French edition of *The War*, Paris, 1851, T. III, p. 322; also see Fuller, *The conduct of war, from 1789 to today*, Paris, Payot, 1990, pp 61 and following.

11 Omar Bradley, *History of a soldier*, Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1975, p. 287.

12 Charles of Gaulle, mentioned op., volume 2, p. 289.

13 Telegram from General de Gaulle to General de Lattre, January 3, 1945, Charles of Gaulle, mentioned op., volume 3, p. 481.