



The Importance of Cities in War

Siege warfare from antiquity to the present day

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Why this strong military interest in cities? Colonel Franc shows that the answer is complex, has as much to do with conjunctural as with structural reasons, and evolves according to periods of history.

If Bouvines, in 1214, was one of the first battles in open country with major consequences, the whole period of feudalism, like many Roman campaigns - Alesia was not the least - was marked by siege warfare.

Why this strong military interest in cities? The answer is complex and has as much to do with cyclical as with structural reasons.

In the first place, in addition to the strong symbolic value held by the city, we must not lose sight of the fact that, until very late in the war, one of the aims of the war was the sacking of the cities. The example of Constantinople plundered and sacked by the Crusaders (!) remains emblematic in this respect. This sacking came eight hundred years after that of Rome, and if Lutetia was able to avoid such a fate on the part of the Vikings, the city owed it as much to Sainte-Geneviève as to the draught necessary for the drakkars, which the course of the Seine did not have.

Moreover, until the 18th century, the great European powers were all hereditary monarchies. War was not fought from people to people, but from prince to prince, from sovereign to sovereign, in order to establish, strengthen or reinforce or even recover dynastic rights. The purpose of war is therefore either the defence of the "meadow", the monarch's ancestral temporal asset, or the conquest of a city or province which, after annexation, can be used as a pledge in negotiations. It is generally not a question of destroying a nation, which would have risked upsetting the European balance.

In this context, cities play a dual role. They are a stake because they represent the commercial wealth of a province or a region: the markets of Troyes, Sens or Amiens, or

the ports of Bordeaux and Nantes rivalled those of the Hanseatic cities in the Middle Ages^[1]. In addition, they were also a defensive tool: on the steps of the country, a whole network of fortified towns marked the boundaries of the 'pré carré' in concrete terms on the ground. Vauban's "iron belt" enabled Louis XIV to retain his Flemish conquests when he lacked the fortune of arms during the War of the Spanish Succession. Such fortified towns as Arras, Landrecies, Longwy, the Three Bishoprics (Metz, Toul and Verdun), Neuf-Brisach, Besançon, Mont-Dauphin, Montlouis, Collioures, Blaye-Cussac, Saint-Martin de Ré, Camaret or Saint-Vaast La Hougue, encircled France, both its land borders and its maritime accesses. In addition to their defensive role - prohibiting a possible invasion route by beating it with their fires - these permanent fortifications also retained a logistical interest: they could hold stocks and supplies for the armies in the field and, thus, their alignment constituted the lines of communication of the said armies. This is how Denain, the saving victory of the campaign of Flanders in 1713, after a whole series of defeats, was able to take place by relying on this quincunx of fortified cities supporting each other. Vauban had thus saved the reign of Louis XIV. It was the same Vauban who coined the expression "pre-square", thus showing the role he gave to the fortified belt he designed for the kingdom.

However, since towns represent all these interests, it is normal and in the logic of things that they constitute military objectives of major importance. In order to protect themselves from armed aggression, from the time of their creation, feudal cities were protected by increasingly sophisticated fortification. Thus, in order to seize them, to plunder them and to pass the male population by the sword, the siege war, which had had its glory days in the Ancient times, from Agamemnon in Troy to the siege of Jerusalem, whose fall was the origin of the diaspora of the "chosen people".

How was the siege war characterized? The first thing that comes to mind is the breaches created in the defences through the use of all kinds of armaments and installations. But there was a plethora of other means: by establishing a total blockade by cutting off all supply lines - that's how Richelieu broke the Huguenot resistance in La Rochelle -; by acting through a double agent, often a traitor to the enemy; by using a double agent, often a traitor in the form of an agent of the French army. by digging tunnels that allowed access to the heart of the enemy's defence system (a method recently adopted, in the opposite direction, by the besieged Palestinians in Gaza).

But the appearance of fire and artillery turned the siege war upside down. The thickness of the stone walls had no effect in the face of a metal cannonball put in its path by black powder. It was then that the bastioned fortifications appeared, the walls being lowered while taking on an oblique shape, and being preceded by a ditch, often filled with water. From now on, as it became impossible for the attacker to attack head-on, the only possible approach left to him was the trench dug from a starting base unbeaten by the beleaguered's fire.

It was at this time that the idea of the dungeon was taken up again in the formation of a "reduced", which fatally led to the principle of staggering the defense in depth.

The last improvements in siege warfare will be brought by Vauban.

He codified the technique of approach by digging three successive parallel lines of trenches, linked together by communication hoses, in a broken line to avoid enfilade fire. At the same time, he had the idea of raising mounds of earth in front of the trench closest to the besieged line, usually allowing him to be in a dominant position in relation to the firing positions of the besieged.

This form of warfare was the rule in the days of heavy and inseparable armies until the 18th century; ^{it was} perfectly in keeping with the notion of "limited warfare". Before this period, except in exceptional cases such as the battle of Rocroi or the Turenne campaigns, manoeuvre was reduced to its simplest expression due to the indissociability of armies which always acted as a single mass and in a single direction: hence the success of the siege warfare in vogue at the time, involving slow maneuvers in narrow spaces.

Nevertheless, despite the appearance of the manoeuvre, brought to its peak by Napoleon, siege warfare was always going to continue, mainly because the cities always kept the tactical, even strategic interest that was theirs, even if the notion of looting and sacking had disappeared. The Emperor opened the 1809 campaign, concluded by Wagram, with the siege of Regensburg, which he attended in person. During the war of 1870-1871, the imperial army will shamefully capitulate after the siege of Metz, and the siege of Paris will not only starve the Parisians, but will convince the most warmongering members of the provisional government of the inanity of continuing the war. By paving the way for the Commune, this siege of the capital by the Germans will in fact have initiated another by the "Versaillais", the regular and legitimate army of power. These sieges, each as rigorous as the other, were in fact identified with a veritable blockade of the city, the only alternative left to the besieged remaining a hypothetical. This, in the case of the Commune, gave rise to particularly severe operations, as only a civil war can bring about.

The period that followed was not free of sieges either, the most famous being that of Beijing during the Boxer War in 1900, which lasted 55 days, the city being invested and besieged by the Boxers and defended by Western concessions.

If the static phase of the Great War took the form of a siege war on the Western front, it must be acknowledged that this is more an abuse of language to define the modes of action employed than a strict reality. There was indeed no distinction between besiegers and besieged. It was much more a question of an absolute supremacy of fire which prevented any recourse to dynamic manoeuvring.

On the other hand, as the interest of cities did not waver, a new form of siege warfare appeared with the development of the air weapon through the application of what was to become the Duchyist doctrine^[2] of air strikes on cities. As early as 1918, the British Flying Corps, the forerunner of the R.A.F., was formed. had designed a massive bombing operation on Nuremberg, an operation that was stopped dead in its tracks by the Allied Command (Foch) for both humanitarian and operational reasons. Shortly after the Great War, Douhet put forward a doctrine for the use of the air arm, uncoupled from land operations, favouring air operations in the depths of the theatre at the strategic level and no longer at the tactical level. By extension, this idea was applied to massive strikes on cities in order to reduce them, but above all to break any capacity for resistance among the population in order, as in the case of the siege of Paris by the Prussians in 1870, to force governments to resign ^[3].

^{3]} Thus, during the Spanish War, Guernica inaugurated a series of massive bombings, both German, Japanese and Allied, targeting Rotterdam, Coventry, London, Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden and Tokyo, to name only the most deadly. These martyred cities, as well as the main Normandy cities, experienced a new form of siege by massive bombardments (today known as air strikes). They were continued after the war on Hanoi, Belgrade and Baghdad and all had the same negative outcome. As during the war, these air strikes or cruise missile strikes had absolutely no effect on the morale of the populations concerned, and even, in the German, Japanese, British, Vietnamese or

Serbian cases, they only galvanised their spirit of resistance. This new siege war led to the symmetrically opposite result.

The reason for this is simple: as much as the burghers of Calais went away in robes, with a rope around their necks, handing over the keys of their besieged city to the English besieger, history provides no example of a siege a city that surrendered to a squadron of flying fortresses or B 52s, the case of Hiroshima or Nagasaki responding to a very particular paradigm, the nuclear strategy.

1) From the association of Northern European merchant cities around the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.

2) From General Giulio Douhet, an Italian thinker of the inter-war period, who established bombing to excess as a doctrine.

3) Acknowledgement of their fault, with the will to make amends.

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