



## Peoples and populations in the conduct of war, a historical-military approach 2/4

Population and people, two different military realities - Revue militaire générale n°55

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**The term population is a descriptive concept, which aggregates human groups according to selected criteria of coherence; it is thus referred to as urban, mountain or rural population. This approach, which was brought back to war, leads the staffs to map the population in a monograph logic according to the constraints or advantages that it may represent in relation to the conduct of operations.**

Cohabitation with civilians has led the military to conceptualise the notion of a comprehensive approach and to create appropriate interfaces capable of conducting civil-military operations. In particular, during the stabilisation phase, the aim is to "live better" in order to defuse resentment by giving the population a taste of the pleasure of a return to security and minimum living conditions. The restoration of essential vital functions is then a prerequisite for stability.

However, a continuous presence among the population quickly requires armies to assume general security responsibilities, especially when peaks of violence resurface. Commitment in the Balkans in the 1990s forced the French army to acquire certain skills held until the end of the war. The engagement in the Balkans in the 1990s forced the French army to enrich itself with certain skills previously held by the internal security forces, through crowd control capabilities derived from the maintenance of law and order in France. The aim is to avoid the development of quasi-insurrectionary situations that could ruin the mission, especially when the border remains very ambiguous between civilians and professional agitators or militias, always ready to exploit a fragility.

In some cases, as in 2004 in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, the population can even be used as a weapon of war, using the human tide to submerge security lines, envelop soldiers and kill them with knives. This fearsome tactic, which is very difficult to counter, requires maintaining a security zone between the crowd and the forces at all times.

The notion of people is much more sensitive for armies. It is based on a historical dynamic, which transcends the notion of population. The people has a history; it draws its strength and coherence from its roots and identity; it is adapting its present in order to build a future for its descendants that allows them to live better and to pass on what it is. Peoples are nations. We cannot, of course, ignore the words of Ernest Renan who, in his famous 1882 lecture<sup>1</sup> stressed that a nation is a soul and a spiritual principle; two complementary things, one in the past, the other in the present. One being the common possession of a rich legacy of memories; the other being present consent, the desire to live together and the will to continue to build on the legacy received. It is a legacy that we want to defend and for which we are prepared to die. The commitment of an army in the midst of a people must integrate it, for the people is capable of being moved by a formidable collective intelligence, for which the sacrifice of one's life becomes acceptable if it serves the cause. This was the uprising of the Spanish people against the French occupiers during the Napoleonic Wars. It is also the networks of the French Resistance during the German occupation that made it possible to raise a real secret army, made up of volunteers, both civilian and military, many of whom were able to go as far as the supreme sacrifice.

While civil-military action is indispensable to accompany the action of an army acting within a population, it is not sufficient when it acts in the midst of a people. The political dimension is missing, as it is the only one capable of giving meaning to the action and shedding light on the future.

An army acting in the midst of a people, or even very often in the midst of several peoples fighting over territory, cannot find a way out of its commitment if it is not there to implement political decisions. Justifying its presence solely by restoring the minimum security conditions that would allow for the creation of favourable conditions for imagining long-term solutions is the germ of a utopia, fuelling the notion of "war without end". It is the presence of UNIFIL in Lebanon, deployed for more than two generations, that ensures the security of the place and not peace, since lasting peace is based on just conditions accepted by all parties.

If they lose the link with politics, the forces deployed find it very difficult not to be sometimes given the status of an army of occupation, since their presence is the result of a fixed balance of power at a given moment leading to a loss of collective or even individual freedom. Some may be able to live with it; others may not, thus generating legitimate resistance. Only the political level is in a position to take the structuring decisions that will be necessary to profoundly change the state of affairs and that the military will apply.

<sup>1</sup> What is a nation? Lecture delivered on 11 March 1882 at the Sorbonne.

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