



Counterinsurgency in the West (1793 - 1801)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

Counterinsurgency is in fashion. Iraq and Afghanistan have revived the study of strategies and tactics developed during the wars of decolonization. However, in this regard, some lessons could already be drawn from a somewhat older history. The insurrectional uprisings that took place in Western France during the revolutionary period are a good example, even if they took place in the specific context of a civil war.

Indeed, the study of counter-insurgency methods against the Vendéans and the Chouans already shows the ineffectiveness of bloody repression and the permanent necessity of negotiation with the adversary.

The counterinsurgency in the West, at the time of the Revolution, was not the subject of a constant and coherent strategy. On the contrary, it evolved according to the political vagaries of the moment, the modes of action employed by the insurgents or the personalities of the men responsible for implementing it.

To illustrate our point, we will recall what the Vendée War and the Chouannerie, two insurrections with similar roots but distinct manifestations, consisted of. The reactions of the republican state, made up of political intransigence and terror, were not only ineffective but also reinforced the insurrection. Finally, pacification, in the absence of real victory, could only be achieved through a policy of compromise combined with tactical innovations.

The Vendée War and the Chouannerie War: two insurrections with similar roots but distinct manifestations.

In 1793, tensions had been simmering for three years over religious freedom and the condition of peasants: Civil constitution of the clergy adopted in July 1790, prohibition of the congregations, deportation of the refractory priests, increase in the number of the

priests who were not allowed to be priests, the increase in the number of the priests who were not allowed to be priests. In addition, the rivalry between town and country, already old, was growing under the effect of Jacobin hyper-centralism.

It is the mass lifting, decreed by the Convention in February 1793, which sets fire to the powder keg. A large part of the West rose up (but also Lyon, the Rhone Valley, Alsace, Toulon, Nîmes...). Everywhere the troops defeat the riots, except in the Vendée, where the insurgents organize themselves, under the impulse of local leaders, nobles [1] or commoners [2], in a "Catholic and Royal Army". Large-scale military operations were conducted, with attacks on towns and pitched battles. From March to June 1793, the Whites flew from victory to victory, with in particular the spectacular capture of Saumur and Angers. After the failure of the capture of Nantes, 80,000 Vendéans [3] crossed the Loire to coordinate their efforts with Brittany and Maine and support a British landing on the English Channel at Granville, which never came. After several successes, this "Galerne trip" ended with the rout of Savenay. The bloody repression that then fell on the Vendée changed the profile of the struggle into a half-centralised guerrilla warfare that Hoche would only manage to overcome at the end of 1796.

To the north of the Loire, the Republican troops at first prevailed over the insurgents. But the hardness of the methods used provoked the resumption of the conflict at the end of 1793, in the form of a multitude of local resistances in Brittany, Maine and Normandy. The Chouannerie will always keep this aspect of decentralized guerrilla warfare, with a few exceptions (landing of Quiberon in June 1795), even if the action of great leaders [4] gradually gives an overall coherence to the action. This mode of action explains why the Chouanne insurrection lasted until 1801, with even a few resurgences in 1815 and 1830.

Faced with these insurrections, the reaction of the republican power will take two distinct forms.

Political intransigence and terror: ineffective and counter-productive measures

This "hard" counterinsurgency most often coincides with the control of Parisian power by extremist revolutionaries (Montagnards, Hebertists...). These sought to eliminate the problem by means of populicide [5] as the repression of Nantes dramatically illustrated: at the end of 1793, Carrier, envoy of the Convention, implemented a policy of terror never before seen. Thousands of prisoners were crammed into the prisons of Nantes, in inhuman conditions. Many die of epidemics. Executions followed one after the other (2,600 people were shot between December and February), but the pace was not enough and new extermination techniques were introduced: gas, mines and, above all, mass drowning in the Loire. Carrier thus exterminated nearly 10,000 men, women and children. To frighten the population, he exposes the decapitated heads of the chiefs on spikes.

On the tactical level, some Republican generals showed real ferocity. Thus, Westermann, after the battle of Savenay, boasts of having exterminated all the prisoners, women and children included [6]. 6] The "infernal columns", for their part, aim to cut off the insurrection from its supporters in the rear. The "infernal columns", for their part, aim to cut off the insurrection of its supporters in the back of the country by setting fire to villages and massacring their inhabitants, blue and white alike; Turreau, the inventor and mastermind of this plan, is estimated to be between 50 and 50.000 to 200,000 dead between February and June 1794.

The use of "faux-chouans" in Brittany is more anecdotal, but just as revealing: soldards wearing the Sacred Heart, they terrorize the population to discredit the action of the

Chouans. But these early psychological operations do not deceive the inhabitants for long.

Far from making the revolt disappear, these bloodthirsty methods exacerbate to the highest degree the resentment of the population, a growing part of which, including "patriots", will swell the ranks of the rebellion.

Pacification through political compromise and tactical innovations

In July 1794, the fall of Robespierre allowed the return of the "moderate" patriots who wished for peace: Hoche negotiated the peace of La Jaunaye with the Vendéens in February 1795 and the peace of La Mabilais in April 1795 with the Chouans. They allowed for a temporary appeasement of the population through a policy of clemency (freedom of worship, amnesty for insurgents who laid down their arms...).

At the same time, Republican military operations resumed. Hoche, who was then responsible for the whole of the west, resumed the plan devised by Kleber in 1793, criss-crossing the region with fortified camps, a system that he completed with mobile columns of 50 to 60 horsemen that he made march at night. In addition, he made an effort to capture the charismatic leaders, the real living centres of gravity of the insurrection: Stofflet was captured and shot in February 1796, Charette in March. Finally, he disciplined his troops in order to avoid excesses towards the population and allowed the Catholic cult to reestablish itself durably. This strategy paid off. On 15 July 1796, the Directoire was able to announce that "the troubles in the West had subsided".

After the Jacobin coup d'état^[7] of Fructidor (September 1797), religious persecution resumed, provoking the "third Chouannerie" in Brittany. It will only subside under the action of Bonaparte (after 18 Brumaire) who, inspired by Hoche, implements a policy combining firmness and tolerance and above all agrees to sign the Concordat in July 1801. This religious peace finally obtained satisfied a majority of peasants in the west, who disarmed definitively and returned home.

This period of our history has left deep traces in the collective memory of the departments of Western France, even if it has long been the subject of an unequivocal reading in history textbooks [8]. However, a dispassionate rereading of the facts proves to be rich in military lessons if they are placed in a strategic and tactical perspective. From a human perspective, not all the lessons have been learned either, as the turbulent history of Europe in the 20th century underlines.

The lessons of this counter-insurgency war were only partially assimilated by the Great Army. For although it was able to confront the rebels in Tyrol led by Andreas Hofer or the insurgents in Naples, its bogging down from 1808 to 1813 in the Iberian Peninsula in the face of Spanish guerrillas was one of the major causes of Napoleon's downfall.

^[1] Bonchamps, La Rochejacquelein, Charette, Lescure...

^[2] Cathelineau, Stofflet...

^[3] 30,000 fighters accompanied by 50,000 civilians, mainly their families.

[4] Puisaye, Cadoudal, Guillemot, Tinténiac, Boishardy...

5] This term was coined by Gracchus Babeuf, author in 1794 of "... the first book on the subject of the massacres in the Vendée...". From the depopulation system or The Life and Crimes of Carrier». Some contemporary authors, such as Reynald Secher, Pierre Chaunu or Jean Tulard, even speak of a real genocide.

6] "There is no more Vendée, republican citizens, she died under our free sword with her wives and children. [...]. Following the orders you gave me, I crushed the children under the horses' feet, massacred the women who, at least for those women, will no longer give birth to brigands. I don't have a prisoner to blame. I exterminated everything".

7] Coup d'état motivated by the victory of the monarchists in the elections of April 1797.

8] Reynald Secher speaks of "memoricide" to describe the deliberate historical concealment of the massacres perpetrated in the Vendée.

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