

Purpose and Means in War

The preceding chapter showed that the nature of war is complex and changeable. I now propose to inquire how its nature influences its purpose and its means.

If for a start we inquire into the objective of any particular war, which must guide military action if the political purpose is to be properly served, we find that the object of any war can vary just as much as its political purpose and its actual circumstances.

If for the moment we consider the pure concept of war, we should have to say that the political purpose of war had no connection with war itself: for if war is an act of violence meant to force the enemy to do our will its aim would have *always* and *solely* to be to overcome the enemy and disarm him. That aim is derived from the theoretical concept of war; but since many wars do actually come very close to fulfilling it, let us examine this kind of war first of all.

Later, when we are dealing with the subject of war plans, we shall investigate in greater detail what is meant by *disarming* a country. But we should at once distinguish between three things, three broad objectives, which between them cover everything: the *armed forces*, the *country*, and the *enemy's will*.

The fighting forces must be *destroyed*: that is, they must be *put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight*. Whenever we use the phrase "destruction of the enemy's forces" this alone is what we mean.

The country must be occupied; otherwise the enemy could raise fresh military forces.

Yet both these things may be done and the war, that is the animosity and the reciprocal effects of hostile elements, cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy's *will* has not been broken: in other words, so long as the enemy government and its allies have not been driven to ask for peace, or the population made to submit.

We may occupy a country completely, but hostilities can be renewed again in the interior, or perhaps with allied help. This of course can also happen *after* the peace treaty, but this only shows that not every war necessarily leads to a final decision and settlement. But even if hostilities should occur again, a peace treaty will always extinguish a mass of sparks that might have gone on quietly smoldering. Further, tensions are slackened, for lovers of peace (and they abound among every people under all circumstances) will then abandon any thought of further action. Be that as it may, we must

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always consider that with the conclusion of peace the purpose of the war has been achieved and its business is at an end.

Since of the three objectives named, it is the fighting forces that assure the safety of the country, the natural sequence would be to destroy them first, and then subdue the country. Having achieved these two goals and exploiting our own position of strength, we can bring the enemy to the peace table. As a rule, destroying the enemy's forces tends to be a gradual process, as does the ensuing subjugation of the country. Normally the one reacts on the other, in that loss of territory weakens the fighting forces: but that particular sequence of events is not essential and therefore does not always take place. Before they suffer seriously, the enemy's forces may retire to remote areas, or even withdraw to other countries. In that event, of course, most or all of the country will be occupied.

But the aim of *disarming the enemy* (the object of war in the abstract, the ultimate means of accomplishing the war's political purpose, which should incorporate all the rest) is in fact not always encountered in reality, and need not be fully achieved as a condition of peace. On no account should theory raise it to the level of a law. Many treaties have been concluded before one of the antagonists could be called powerless—even before the balance of power had been seriously altered. What is more, a review of actual cases shows a whole category of wars in which the very idea of *defeating the enemy* is unreal: those in which the enemy is substantially the stronger power.

The reason why the object of war that emerges in theory is sometimes inappropriate to actual conflict is that war can be of two very different kinds, a point we discussed in the first chapter. If war were what pure theory postulates, a war between states of markedly unequal strength would be absurd, and so impossible. At most, material disparity could not go beyond the amount that moral factors could replace; and social conditions being what they are in Europe today, moral forces would not go far. But wars have in fact been fought between states of *very unequal strength*, for *actual war is often far removed from the pure concept postulated by theory*. Inability to carry on the struggle can, in practice, be replaced by two other grounds for making peace: the first is the improbability of victory; the second is its unacceptable cost.

As we saw in the first chapter, war, if taken as a whole, is bound to move from the strict law of inherent necessity toward probabilities. The more the circumstances that gave rise to the conflict cause it to do so, the slighter will be its motives and the tensions which it occasions. And this makes it understandable how an analysis of probabilities may lead to peace itself. Not every war need be fought until one side collapses. When the motives and tensions of war are slight we can imagine that the very faintest prospect of defeat might be enough to cause one side to yield. If from the very start the other side feels that this is probable, it will obviously concentrate on bringing about *this probability* rather than take the long way round and totally defeat the enemy.

Of even greater influence on the decision to make peace is the consciousness of all the effort that has already been made and of the efforts yet to come. Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.

We see then that if one side cannot completely disarm the other, the desire for peace on either side will rise and fall with the probability of further successes and the amount of effort these would require. If such incentives were of equal strength on both sides, the two would resolve their political disputes by meeting half way. If the incentive grows on one side, it should diminish on the other. Peace will result so long as their sum total is sufficient—though the side that feels the lesser urge for peace will naturally get the better bargain.

One point is purposely ignored for the moment—the difference that the *positive* or *negative* character of the political ends is bound to produce in practice. As we shall see, the difference is important, but at this stage we must take a broader view because the original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and may finally change entirely *since they are influenced by events and their probable consequences*.

The question now arises how success can be made more likely. One way, of course, is to choose objectives that will incidentally bring about the enemy's collapse—the *destruction of his armed forces and the conquest of his territory*; but neither is quite what it would be if our real object were the total defeat of the enemy. When we attack the enemy, it is one thing if we mean our first operation to be followed by others until all resistance has been broken; it is quite another if our aim is only to obtain a single victory, in order to make the enemy insecure, to impress our greater strength upon him, and to give him doubts about his future. If that is the extent of our aim, we will employ no more strength than is absolutely necessary. In the same way, conquest of territory is a different matter if the enemy's collapse is not the object. If we wish to gain total victory, then the destruction of his armed forces is the most appropriate action and the occupation of his territory only a consequence. To occupy land before his armies are defeated should be considered at best a necessary evil. If on the other hand we do not aim at destroying the opposing army, and if we are convinced that the enemy does not seek a brutal decision, but rather *fears* it, then the seizure of a lightly held or undefended province is *an advantage in itself*; and should this advantage be enough to make the enemy fear for the final outcome, it can be considered as a short cut on the road to peace.

But there is another way. It is possible to increase the likelihood of success without defeating the enemy's forces. I refer to operations that have *direct political repercussions*, that are designed in the first place to disrupt the opposing alliance, or to paralyze it, that gain us new allies, favorably affect the political scene, etc. If such operations are possible it is obvious

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that they can greatly improve our prospects and that they can form a much shorter route to the goal than the destruction of the opposing armies.

The second question is how to influence the enemy's expenditure of effort: in other words, how to make the war more costly to him.

The enemy's expenditure of effort consists in the *wastage of his forces*—our *destruction* of them; and in his *loss of territory*—our *conquest*.

Closer study will make it obvious that both of these factors can vary in their significance with the variation in objectives. As a rule the differences will be slight, but that should not mislead us, for in practice, when strong motives are not present, the slightest nuances often decide between the different uses of force. For the moment all that matters is to show that, given certain conditions, different ways of reaching the objective are *possible* and that they are neither *inconsistent*, *absurd*, nor even *mistaken*.

In addition, there are three other methods directly aimed at increasing the enemy's expenditure of effort. The first of these is *invasion*, that is *the seizure of enemy territory; not with the object of retaining it* but in order to exact financial contributions, or even to lay it waste. The immediate object here is neither to conquer the enemy country nor to destroy its army, but simply *to cause general damage*. The second method is to give priority to operations that will increase the enemy's suffering. It is easy to imagine two alternatives: one operation is far more advantageous if the purpose is to defeat the enemy; the other is more profitable if that cannot be done. The first tends to be described as the more military, the second the more political alternative. From the highest point of view, however, one is as military as the other, and neither is appropriate unless it suits the particular conditions. The third, and far the most important method, judging from the frequency of its use, is *to wear down the enemy*. That expression is more than a label; it describes the process precisely, and is not so metaphorical as it may seem at first. Wearing down the enemy in a conflict means using *the duration of the war to bring about a gradual exhaustion of his physical and moral resistance*.

If we intend to hold out longer than our opponent we must be content with the smallest possible objects, for obviously a major object requires more effort than a minor one. The minimum object is *pure self-defense*; in other words, fighting without a positive purpose. With such a policy our relative strength will be at its height, and thus the prospects for a favorable outcome will be greatest. But how far can this negativity be pushed? Obviously not to the point of absolute passivity, for sheer endurance would not be fighting at all. But resistance is a form of action, aimed at destroying enough of the enemy's power to force him to renounce his intentions. Every single act of our resistance is directed to that act alone, and that is what makes our policy negative.

Undoubtedly a single action, assuming it succeeds, would do less for a negative aim than it would for a positive one. But that is just the difference: the former is more likely to succeed and so to give you more security. What it lacks in immediate effectiveness it must make up for in its use of time,

that is by prolonging the war. Thus the negative aim, which lies at the heart of pure resistance, is also the natural formula for outlasting the enemy, for wearing him down.

Here lies the origin of the distinction that dominates the whole of war: the difference between *attack* and *defense*. We shall not pursue the matter now, but let us just say this: that from the negative purpose derive all the advantages, all the more effective forms, of fighting, and that in it is expressed the dynamic relationship between the magnitude and the likelihood of success. All this will be gone into later.

If a negative aim—that is, the use of every means available for pure resistance—gives an advantage in war, the advantage need only be enough to *balance* any superiority the opponent may possess: in the end his political object will not seem worth the effort it costs. He must then renounce his policy. It is evident that this method, wearing down the enemy, applies to the great number of cases where the weak endeavor to resist the strong.

Frederick the Great would never have been able to defeat Austria in the Seven Years War: and had he tried to fight in the manner of Charles XII he would unfailingly have been destroyed himself. But for seven years he skillfully husbanded his strength and finally convinced the allies that far greater efforts were needed than they had foreseen. Consequently they made peace.

We can now see that in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat. They range from *the destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion, to projects with an immediate political purpose, and finally to passively awaiting the enemy's attacks*. Any one of these may be used to overcome the enemy's will: the choice depends on circumstances. One further kind of action, of shortcuts to the goal, needs mention: one could call them arguments *ad hominem*. Is there a field of human affairs where personal relations do not count, where the sparks they strike do not leap across all practical considerations? The personalities of statesmen and soldiers are such important factors that in war above all it is vital not to underrate them. It is enough to mention this point: it would be pedantic to attempt a systematic classification. It can be said, however, that these questions of personality and personal relations raise the number of possible ways of achieving the goal of policy to infinity.

To think of these shortcuts as rare exceptions, or to minimize the difference they can make to the conduct of war, would be to underrate them. To avoid that error we need only bear in mind how wide a range of political interests can lead to war, or think for a moment of the gulf that separates a war of annihilation, a struggle for political existence, from a war reluctantly declared in consequence of political pressure or of an alliance that no longer seems to reflect the state's true interests. Between these two extremes lie numerous gradations. If we reject a single one of them on theoretical grounds, we may as well reject them all, and lose contact with the real world.

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So much then for the ends to be pursued in war; let us now turn to the means.

There is only one: *combat*. However many forms combat takes, however far it may be removed from the brute discharge of hatred and enmity of a physical encounter, however many forces may intrude which themselves are not part of fighting, it is inherent in the very concept of war that everything that occurs *must originally derive from combat*.

It is easy to show that this is always so, however many forms reality takes. Everything that occurs in war results from the existence of armed forces; *but whenever armed forces, that is armed individuals*, are used, the idea of combat must be present.

Warfare comprises everything related to the fighting forces—everything to do with their creation, maintenance, and use.

Creation and maintenance are obviously only means; their use constitutes the end.

Combat in war is not a contest between individuals. It is a whole made up of many parts, and in that whole two elements may be distinguished, one determined by the subject, the other by the objective. The mass of combatants in an army endlessly forms fresh elements, which themselves are parts of a greater structure. The fighting activity of each of these parts constitutes a more or less clearly defined element. Moreover, combat itself is made an element of war by its very purpose, by its *objective*.

Each of these elements which become distinct in the course of fighting is named an *engagement*.

If the idea of fighting underlies every use of the fighting forces, then their employment means simply the planning and organizing of a series of engagements.

The whole of military activity must therefore relate directly or indirectly to the engagement. The end for which a soldier is recruited, clothed, armed, and trained, the whole object of his sleeping, eating, drinking, and marching is *simply that he should fight at the right place and the right time*.

If all threads of military activity lead to the engagement, then if we control the engagement, we comprehend them all. Their results are produced by our orders and by the execution of these orders, never directly by other conditions. Since in the engagement everything is concentrated on the destruction of the enemy, or rather of *his armed forces*, which is inherent in its very concept, it follows that the destruction of the enemy's forces is always the means by which the purpose of the engagement is achieved.

The purpose in question may be the destruction of the enemy's forces, but not necessarily so; it may be quite different. As we have shown, the destruction of the enemy is not the only means of attaining the political object, when there are other objectives for which the war is waged. It follows that those other objectives can also become the purpose of particular military operations, and thus also the purpose of engagements.

Even when subordinate engagements are directly intended to destroy the

opposing forces, that destruction still need not be their first, immediate concern.

Bearing in mind the elaborate structure of an army, and the numerous factors that determine its employment, one can see that the fighting activity of such a force is also subject to complex organization, division of functions, and combinations. The separate units obviously must often be assigned tasks that are not in themselves concerned with the destruction of the enemy's forces, which may indeed increase their losses but do so only indirectly. If a battalion is ordered to drive the enemy from a hill, a bridge, etc., the true purpose is normally to occupy that point. Destruction of the enemy's force is only a means to an end, a secondary matter. If a mere demonstration is enough to cause the enemy to abandon his position, the objective has been achieved; but as a rule the hill or bridge is captured only so that even more damage can be inflicted on the enemy. If this is the case on the battlefield, it will be even more so in the theater of operations, where it is not merely two armies that are facing each other, but two states, two peoples, two nations. The range of possible circumstances, and therefore of options, is greatly increased, as is the variety of dispositions; and the gradation of objects at various levels of command will further separate the first means from the ultimate purpose.

Thus there are many reasons why the purpose of an engagement may not be the destruction of the enemy's forces, the forces immediately confronting us. Destruction may be merely a means to some other end. In such a case, total destruction has ceased to be the point; the engagement is nothing but a *trial of strength*. In itself it is of no value; its significance lies in the outcome of the trial.

When one force is a great deal stronger than the other, an estimate may be enough. There will be no fighting: the weaker side will yield at once.

The fact that engagements do not always aim at the destruction of the opposing forces, that their objectives can often be attained without any fighting at all but merely by an evaluation of the situation, explains why entire campaigns can be conducted with great energy even though actual fighting plays an unimportant part in them.

This is demonstrated by hundreds of examples in the history of war. Here we are only concerned to show that it is *possible*; we need not ask how often it was appropriate, in other words *consistent with the overall purpose*, to avoid the test of battle, or whether all the reputations made in such campaigns would stand the test of critical examination.

There is only one means in war: combat. But the multiplicity of forms that combat assumes leads us in as many different directions as are created by the multiplicity of aims, so that our analysis does not seem to have made any progress. But that is not so: the fact that only one means exists constitutes a strand that runs through the entire web of military activity and really holds it together.

We have shown that the destruction of the enemy's forces is one of the many objects that can be pursued in war, and we have left aside the ques-

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tion of its importance relative to other purposes. In any given case the answer will depend on circumstances; its importance to war in general remains to be clarified. We shall now go into this question, and we shall see what value must necessarily be attributed to this object of destruction.

Combat is the only effective force in war; its aim is to destroy the enemy's forces as a means to a further end. That holds good even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting, the enemy would be destroyed. It follows that the destruction of the enemy's force underlies all military actions; all plans are ultimately based on it, resting on it like an arch on its abutment. Consequently, all action is undertaken in the belief that if the ultimate test of arms should actually occur, the outcome would be *favorable*. The decision by arms is for all major and minor operations in war what cash payment is in commerce. Regardless how complex the relationship between the two parties, regardless how rarely settlements actually occur, they can never be entirely absent.

If a decision by fighting is the basis of all plans and operations, it follows that the enemy *can frustrate everything through a successful battle*. This occurs not only when the encounter affects an essential factor in our plans, but when any victory that is won is of sufficient scope. For every important victory—that is, destruction of opposing forces—reacts on all other possibilities. Like liquid, they will settle at a new level.

Thus it is evident that destruction of the enemy forces is always the superior, more effective means, with which others cannot compete.

But of course, we can only say destruction of the enemy is more effective if we can assume that all other conditions are equal. It would be a great mistake to deduce from this argument that a headlong rush must always triumph over skillful caution. Blind aggressiveness would destroy the attack itself, not the defense, and this is not what we are talking about. Greater effectiveness relates not to the *means* but to the *end*; we are simply comparing the effect of different outcomes.

When we speak of destroying the enemy's forces we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces: the moral element must also be considered. The two interact throughout: they are inseparable. We have just mentioned the effect that a great destructive act—a major victory—inevitably exerts on all other actions, and it is exactly at such times that the moral factor is, so to speak, the most fluid element of all, and therefore spreads most easily to affect everything else. The advantage that the destruction of the enemy possesses over all other means is balanced by its cost and danger; and it is only in order to avoid these risks that other policies are employed.

That the method of destruction cannot fail to be expensive is understandable; other things being equal, the more intent we are on destroying the enemy's forces, the greater our own efforts must be.

The danger of this method is that the greater the success we seek, the greater will be the damage if we fail.

Other methods, therefore, are less costly if they succeed and less damag-

ing if they fail, though this holds true only if both sides act identically, if the enemy pursues the same course as we do. If he were to seek the decision through a major battle, *his choice would force us against our will to do likewise*. Then the outcome of the battle would be decisive; but it is clear—other things again being equal—that we would be at an overall disadvantage, since our plans and resources had been in part intended to achieve other goals, whereas the enemy's were not. Two objectives, neither of which is part of the other, are mutually exclusive: one force cannot simultaneously be used for both. If, therefore, one of the two commanders is resolved to seek a decision through major battles, he will have an excellent chance of success if he is certain that his opponent is pursuing a different policy. Conversely, the commander who wishes to adopt different means can reasonably do so only if he assumes his opponent to be equally unwilling to resort to major battles.

What has been said about plans and forces being directed to other uses refers only to the *positive* purposes, other than the destruction of enemy forces, that can be pursued in war. It pertains *in no way to pure resistance*, which seeks to wear down the opponent's strength. Pure resistance has no *positive* intention; we can use our forces only to frustrate the enemy's intentions, and not divert them to other objectives.

Here we must consider the negative side of destroying the enemy's forces—that is, the preservation of our own. These two efforts always go together; they interact. They are integral parts of a single purpose, and we only need to consider the result if one or the other dominates. The effort to destroy the enemy's forces has a positive purpose and leads to positive results, whose final aim is the enemy's collapse. Preserving our own forces has a negative purpose; it frustrates the enemy's intentions—that is, it amounts to pure resistance, whose ultimate aim can only be to prolong the war until the enemy is exhausted.

The policy with a positive purpose calls the act of destruction into being; the policy with a negative purpose waits for it.

How far such a waiting attitude may or should be maintained is a question we shall study in connection with the theory of attack and defense, whose basic element is here involved. For the moment we need only say that a policy of waiting must never become passive endurance, that any action involved in it may just as well seek the destruction of the opposing forces as any other objective. It would be a fundamental error to imagine that a negative aim implies a preference for a bloodless decision over the destruction of the enemy. A preponderantly negative effort may of course lead to such a choice, but always at the risk that it is not the appropriate course: that depends on factors that are determined not by us but by the opponent. Avoidance of bloodshed, then, should not be taken as an act of policy if our main concern is to preserve our forces. On the contrary, if such a policy did not suit the particular situation it would lead our forces to disaster. A great many generals have failed through this mistaken assumption.

The one certain effect a preponderantly negative policy will have is to

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retard the decision: in other words, action is transposed into waiting for the decisive moment. This usually means that *action is postponed* in time and space to the extent that space is relevant and circumstances permit. If the time arrives when further waiting would bring excessive disadvantages, then the benefit of the negative policy has been exhausted. The destruction of the enemy—an aim that has until then been postponed but not displaced by another consideration—now reemerges.

Our discussion has shown that while in war many different roads can lead to the goal, to the attainment of the political object, fighting is the only possible means. Everything is governed by a supreme law, the *decision by force of arms*. If the opponent does seek battle, this recourse can never be denied him. A commander who prefers another strategy must first be sure that his opponent either will not appeal to that supreme tribunal—force—or that he will lose the verdict if he does. To sum up: of all the possible aims in war, the destruction of the enemy's armed forces always appears as the highest.

At a later stage and by degrees we shall see what other kinds of strategies can achieve in war. All we need to do for the moment is to admit the general *possibility of their existence*, the possibility of deviating from the basic concept of war under the pressure of special circumstances. But even at this point we must not fail to emphasize that the *violent resolution of the crisis*, the wish to annihilate the enemy's forces, is the first-born son of war. If the political aims are small, the motives slight and tensions low, a prudent general may look for any way to avoid major crises and decisive actions, exploit any weaknesses in the opponent's military and political strategy, and finally reach a peaceful settlement. If his assumptions are sound and promise success we are not entitled to criticize him. But he must never forget that he is moving on devious paths where the god of war may catch him unawares. He must always keep an eye on his opponent so that he does not, if the latter has taken up a sharp sword, approach him armed only with an ornamental rapier.

These conclusions concerning the nature of war and the function of its purposes and means; the manner in which war in practice deviates in varying degrees from its basic, rigorous concept, taking this form or that, but always remaining subject to that basic concept, as to a supreme law; all these points must be kept in mind in our subsequent analyses if we are to perceive the real connections between all aspects of war, and the true significance of each; and if we wish to avoid constantly falling into the wildest inconsistencies with reality and even with our own arguments.