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Marxism

# Engels: theorist of war, theorist of revolution

- Features -

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**“It seems that we owe the great books on action to men of action whom fate deprived of their crowning achievement, men who arrived at a subtle blend of engagement and detachment which left them capable of recognising the constraints and shackles of the soldier or the politician and also capable of looking from outside, not indifferently but calmly, at the irony of fate and the unforeseeable play of forces that no will can control.”**

These lines, from the major work which Raymond Aron devoted to Clausewitz and his successors [1], could have been written, word for word, about Frederick Engels.

## The ‘General’

As a matter of fact, Karl Marx’s alter ego was in his youth, briefly but resolutely, a man of action in the military sphere. Given confidence by having spent a year (1841–1842) in the Prussian artillery at Berlin, where he devoted his leisure as a young private to following Schelling’s lectures on philosophy and associating with his Young Hegelian critics, the Bombardier (corporal) Engels enlisted to fight in the German Revolution of 1848–1849. First, in May 1849 in his home town of Elberfeld, from which he was rapidly expelled for fear that a ‘red’ such as he might rub off on the local Committee of Public Safety. Then, in June and July in the ranks of the insurrectionary army of Baden and the Palatinate, with the remnants of which he finally fled to Swiss territory in face of the Prussian offensive.

Engels went into action without any illusions as to what the fate of the insurgents would be and without any respect for the leadership of what he considered to be a caricature of a revolution. Nonetheless, he showed courage in action, anxious above all that there should be no charge of cowardice against the Communists, for whom he and Marx were already standard-bearers: ‘The party of the proletariat was quite strongly represented in the army of Baden and the Palatinate, especially in the volunteer corps, as for example in our own, in the refugee legion, etc., and it can safely challenge all the other parties to find even the slightest fault with any one of its members. The most resolute Communists made the most courageous soldiers.’ [2]

By taking part in the battle, Engels also intended to enrich his knowledge of military matters, having already acquired the status of a specialist on the question within the editorial team of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. It was in this newspaper that, as a revolutionary military critic, he had written on the main episodes of the ‘Springtime of the Peoples’ of 1848–1849. Wilhelm Liebknecht later reported that the articles Engels had devoted to Hungary were ‘attributed to a high ranking officer in the Hungarian army’, [3] just as ten years later his pamphlets published unsigned in Berlin, **Po and Rhine** (1859) and **Savoy, Nice and the Rhine** (1860), were to be attributed to some Prussian general who was anxious to preserve his anonymity. [4]

Frederick Engels’ interest in military questions was not a mere hobby. If he immersed himself so deeply in the study of every aspect of the subject, it was because he was driven by the same motive that impelled Marx to devour everything that had to do with political economy. It was the determination to serve the class they had chosen to identify with, the proletariat – Marx by preparing the weapons of the *Critique* [5], Engels by devoting himself to the critique of weapons.

As soon as he was established in Manchester in late 1850, Engels settled down to a systematic programme of reading which provided him with a real erudition in both strategy and military history. But he combined this intellectual

preparation with a constant concern to maintain his physical fitness, to resume action on the ground when the time came. At the age of 64, a year and a half after Marx's death, he still replied to one of his correspondents, who was worried about his health problems, by presenting an account of his fitness for horse riding and active military service. [6] 'If there had been another revolution in his lifetime we would have had in Engels our Carnot, the organiser of armies and victories, the military brain', declared Wilhelm Liebknecht [7] after the death of the man who had addressed the leaders of German socialism 'as representative, so to speak, of the party's great general staff'. [8]

Fate deprived Engels of this 'crowning achievement'. He was never able to put into practice the military plans he conceived – from that which he had constructed when still a novice in 1849 to that which, having become a recognised military expert, he was said to have drawn up 22 years later for the French republican government to defend Paris against the Prussian army. His military erudition was applied to the analysis of all the wars in a half century which saw a large number of them. And while unable to prove himself on the battlefield, Engels earned his rank as a 'General' – a title affectionately bestowed on him by Karl Marx's family – by commenting on the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 for the London Pall Mall Gazette with an insight that aroused the enthusiasm of both the general public and the experts. For the last quarter of a century of his life, he remained the 'General' for those in his circle.

## The military theorist

Frederick Engels' reputation as a theorist of warfare has been firmly established since the middle of the 20th century, above all among those interested in the art of war and its history. This reputation, however, was not always built on a sound basis. Some people have tried to see a continuity between Engels' thought and Soviet military doctrine, in accordance with the statements of faith with which the latter was often decorated. The fact remains that no serious work devoted to the development of strategic thought can ignore Marx's companion. From the classic work of Edward Mead Earle [9], where a chapter by Sigmund Neumann [10] is devoted to Marx and Engels (especially the latter), to the recent bulky anthology by Gérard Chalian, [11], by way of the book by Israeli colonel and professor Jehuda Wallach [12], Engels' contribution is acknowledged.

Jehuda Wallach makes a distinction between what he sees as Engels' theory of revolutionary war and his military writings of a more traditional form. Being doubly expert, Wallach draws up the following succinct assessment of the second category:

Engels' important military writings, which have hitherto not been studied in their entirety, deal ... with all aspects of the science of warfare. He wrote about questions of organisation and weaponry, about the evolution of the art of warfare during the industrial revolution, about military aspects of international politics, about strategy and tactics, as well as about questions of command and the quality of generals. He likewise formulated some prophetic forecasts about future warfare (which in fact correspond to the reality of the First World War). On many matters he was shrewder than the professional soldiers ...

In his anonymous writings on the military situation in western and south-western Europe Engels drew up a plan which, 45 years later, was given the name of Schlieffen. He showed why such a German plan would be condemned to failure in a war against France. He prophesied with great precision the duration of the coming world war, the scale of losses and the conditions in which it would come to a conclusion. [13]

That Engels was one of the great theorists of warfare in the 19th century is indisputable for anyone familiar with this

major section of the voluminous mass of his writings. It constitutes, without any doubt, an obligatory point of reference for the military history of his age. It is much less certain, however, that it is a point of reference for strategy in our own age whether we mean a doctrine of war in general or of revolutionary war in particular. Like Clausewitz, whom he esteemed, Engels did not seek to elaborate 'a complete system and a comprehensive doctrine' of war, but merely commented on wars and real situations in the concrete conditions of their development. [14]

How could he have been tempted by any kind of systematisation in military doctrine when he was constantly stressing the breakneck acceleration of the progress of military technology, producing weaponry which was sometimes 'out of date before it is launched'? [15]

The main interest in Engels' thinking about war is not to be found in his specifically military prescriptions, even in those about 'revolutionary war'. It is rather to be found in his treatment of the crucial problems for the workers' movement constituted by the question of the attitude to be taken to non-revolutionary wars, the articulation of war and revolution, and the possibility of a strategy for revolution which does not depend on war. In our period direct war between industrial powers is both 'unlikely', to adopt Raymond Aron's term, and undesirable in the highest degree. It is here that Engels, as a theorist of war and a strategist of socialist revolution, is most up to date. It is in this respect, as we shall try to show briefly, that his thought on war and revolution anticipated the questions of the 20th century, and will perhaps continue to maintain its relevance for a long time to come.

## The attitude to wars

Marx and Engels lived through a period of profound transformation in the world – the gestation period of modern industrial society, and its extension to continental Europe and to the lands which it was to subject to massive immigration. It was the period that produced a profound duality on the planet, one which continues to have such an effect on the age we live in. They were contemporaries of the ripening of the imperialist world system without really knowing the point at which it reached completion. According to this analysis, Engels has died in the middle of the critical phase of this historic transformation.

The two theorists of proletarian revolution thus knew an epoch which, for the most part, was still that of the final completion of bourgeois transformation in Europe, an epoch when the continent was still ridding itself of its long feudal and agrarian past. The wars they lived through were primarily the expression of this first transformation. Certainly these wars were also, wholly or in part, wars of conquest, prefiguring that final culmination of the war of brigandry which was to be the First World War. *The war of Bismarck's Germany against Louis-Napoleon's France in 1870 was the last great manifestation of the ambivalence of this period of historical transition.* On the German side it combined a war of defence and consolidation of German unity – an eminently progressive task in the eyes of Marx and Engels even though, to their great regret, it was carried out under the aegis of the Prussian monarchy – and a war of conquest which was to take the form of the annexation of Alsace and a large part of Lorraine. Marx and Engels thus modified their attitudes towards the real wars of their age on the basis of an analysis of their objective historical meaning. They could distinguish, for the same protagonist in one and the same war, between an emancipatory phase deserving passive if not active support, and an oppressive phase in which one should make common cause with the opposing side – *even if the politics which determined the course of the war had in no way changed in the process.*

In fact, and this forms an important characteristic of their shared conception, our two thinkers did not concern themselves with the famous formula of Clausewitz, which Lenin more than anyone else was to popularise. For them, the important thing was not what politics a particular war was the continuation of, but first and foremost what underlying historical movement it was the bearer of. For the founders of historical materialism, theoreticians of ideological false consciousness, a war could not be judged on the basis of the political ideas of those who were

waging it. Their judgement, from their standpoint as investigators of the socio-economic structure, was based on the objective effect of the war on the liberation of the productive forces from the social or political impediments to their development. [16] With the ever more rapid and impressive growth of the labour movement, above all in Germany, Marx and Engels prioritised as a criterion the effect of war on this movement, the bearer of final emancipation. *From this very specific point of view, the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by Germany constituted a major turning point in their joint evaluation of the relation between war and revolution in the heart of Europe.* This annexation, in fact, dug trenches between the two shock battalions of the European proletariat by stirring up chauvinism on both sides. It bore within it the possibility of a new war in which this time the rest of Europe could be engulfed and in which the workers of all lands would slaughter each other.

This was the meaning of the *Mene Tekel Upharsin*, which turned out to be the warning contained in the two **Addresses of the General Council** of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) on the Franco-Prussian War, drawn up by Marx and Engels in July and September 1870: 'If the German working class allows the present war to lose its strictly defensive character and to degenerate into a war against the French people, victory or defeat will prove alike disastrous.' [17] The address continued '... after some short respite, [Germany will have to] make again ready for another "defensive" war, not one of those new-fangled "localised" wars, but a war of races – a war with the combined Slavonian and Roman races'. [18]

Moreover, as long as war between European powers had not reached the technological stage which gave 'the trend to the extreme' and 'annihilation of the enemy' a much more literal and total meaning than Clausewitz could ever have imagined, it could be envisaged as an instance of violence acting as the 'midwife' of social progress, in the words of Marx's *Capital*, adopted by Engels in *Anti-Dühring*. With the crazy arms race unleashed by the outcome of the war of 1870, and the fearsome quantitative and qualitative growth of the means of destruction accumulated by the European powers, any generalised explosion at the heart of the world system became increasingly the potential bearer of disaster, rather than pregnant with revolutions. In other words, even if such a war were to lead, more or less in the long term, to a revolutionary transformation, it would have been the worst means of getting there. The price would be a terrible slaughter and a gigantic destruction of the productive forces.

## The prophet of world war

Engels was by no means the only political thinker of the period to be alarmed by these developments. But I would claim that no one else in his time envisaged as he did the totality of what we have come to call "total war". This statement was made by a pacifist, unlikely to have any inherent sympathies for Marxism. [19] And it is not excessive to claim, as did Wallach, that Engels 'prophesied' the outline of the First World War. Indeed, how can we describe, other than as prophetic, these lines of Engels written at the end of 1887:

And, finally, the only war left for Prussia-Germany to wage will be a world war, a world war, moreover, of an extent and violence hitherto unimagined. Eight to ten million soldiers will be at each other's throats and in the process they will strip Europe bareer than a swarm of locusts. The depredations of the Thirty Years' War compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent; famine, disease, the universal lapse into barbarism, both of the armies and the people, in the wake of acute misery; irretrievable dislocation of our artificial system of trade, industry and credit, ending in universal bankruptcy; collapse of the old states and their conventional political wisdom to the point where crowns will roll into the gutters by the dozen and no one will be around to pick them up; the absolute impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will emerge as victor from the battle. Only one consequence is absolutely certain: universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class. That is the prospect for the moment when the systematic development of mutual one-upmanship in armaments reaches its climax and finally brings forth its inevitable fruits. [\[20\]](#)

Everything is there, even the creation of the conditions for proletarian revolution, which would break out in Russia, Germany and Hungary, and would be defeated in the two latter countries. Engels foresaw that these conditions would be created in the camp of the losing side by the defeat of their armies. If for all that he did not want the war to take place, it was not only because he had little taste for a policy of letting things take the worst course. It was also and above all because the very fact of the outbreak of war would have been, in his eyes, infallible evidence of the failure of the socialist parties, and as a result would have augured badly for their future.

Their task was to oppose war resolutely, to the extent of making their governments afraid of it. If the latter were nonetheless to choose to embark on hostilities, it would be because they were confident that they could achieve national unity around themselves. Hence an anxious pessimism which appears in Engels' letters to his comrades, and which contrasts sharply with the revolutionary optimism still displayed in his public writings. *In the event of world war only barbarism would be certain, not the victory of socialism, he explained in 1886:*

In short, there will be chaos of which the only certain outcome will be wholesale slaughter on a hitherto unprecedented scale, the exhaustion of the whole of Europe to a hitherto unprecedented degree and, finally, the complete collapse of the old system ... Immediate victory for ourselves could only be produced by a revolution in France ... A revolution in Germany following a defeat would be of use only if it led to peace with France. Best of all would be a Russian revolution which, however, can only be expected after severe defeats have been inflicted on the Russian army ... This much is certain: a war would above all retard our movement all over Europe, completely disrupt it in many countries, stir up chauvinism and xenophobia, and leave us with the *certain* prospect, amongst many other uncertain ones, of having to begin all over again after the war, albeit on a basis far more favourable even than today. [21]

Engels' prognosis as to the consequences of war was even more clearly pessimistic, and therefore more accurately prophetic, in 1889:

On the question of war, it is the most terrible contingency to my mind. But for that, I would not care a straw for Mme la France's whims. But a war that will involve 10 to 15 million combatants, unparalleled devastation – merely to feed them – the compulsory and universal suppression of our movement, the recrudescence of chauvinism in every country and, in the end, an enfeeblement ten times worse than after 1815, a period of reaction based on the inanition of all the peoples bled white – all that against what slender hope there is that this ferocious war results in revolution – this is what horrifies me. Above all in relation to our movement in Germany, which would be overwhelmed, crushed, stamped out by violence, whereas peace holds out almost certain victory. [22]

These are the criteria and predictions which determined the positions taken up by Engels until his death. Engels' motivation was not German patriotism or prejudice against the people of the Balkans, but an anticipation of the real impact of any real or potential war on the future of the European labour movement, with an almost obsessive concern to avoid the catastrophe he saw taking shape on the horizon. This is what explains the reversal of the war-revolution equation in Engels after 1871, as Martin Berger has rightly shown: 'Thus Engels, who had formerly preached war as a stimulus to revolution, now praised revolution as a means of avoiding war'. [23]

## Preventing world war

Prevent world war, prepare for revolution. This was to become, as it were, Frederick Engels' motto:

We must co-operate in the work of setting the West European proletariat free and subordinate everything else to that goal. No matter how interesting the Balkan Slavs, etc. might be, the moment their desire for liberation clashes with the interests of the proletariat they can go hang for all I care. The Alsatians, too, are oppressed ... But if, on what is patently the very eve of a revolution, they were to try and provoke a war between France and Germany, once more goading on those two countries and thereby postponing the revolution, I should tell them: Hold hard! Surely you can have as much patience as the European proletariat. When they have liberated themselves, you will automatically be free; but till then, we shan't allow you to put a spoke in the wheel of the militant proletariat. The same applies to the Slavs. The victory of the proletariat will liberate them in reality and of necessity and not, like the Tsar, apparently and temporarily ... To stir up a general war for the sake of a few Herzegovinians, which would cost a thousand times more lives than there are inhabitants in Herzegovina, isn't my idea of proletarian politics. [24]

This too was the meaning of the well known text by Engels of 1891 on "Socialism in Germany". [25] Anxious at the prospect of a Franco-Russian war against Germany, which seemed very plausible at the time he was writing, the spiritual father of the German socialists warned his French comrades against any kind of support for a *revanchist* attack by their government in alliance with the Tsar. To show his fairness, he denounced the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, stated his preference for the French bourgeois republic over the German Empire, but nonetheless explained that in the event of an alliance with Russia, war against Germany could have only a reactionary content. German socialism would risk paying the price *in the event of a Russian victory*, being crushed by 'the enemy from without' or by the 'enemy within'. [26]

In the very specific hypothesis of such a victory, that is of a Franco-Russian *invasion* of Germany, Engels thus justified a German socialist 'defensism', but a 'defensism' of a very particular sort – a 'revolutionary defensism', since the model invoked was the very one which had inspired the Communards in 1871, namely the model of 1793. Having said this, he continued, 'No socialist, of whatever country, can desire victory by war, either by the present German government or by the French bourgeois republic; even less by the Tsar ... That is why socialists everywhere demand that peace be maintained.'

In 1914 German social democracy pretended to find in this article a justification for its 'patriotic defensism'. To this end it had to distort it profoundly and give little account to the overall approach within which Engels was working. [27] Engels had in fact written it reluctantly, as we can see from his correspondence, with the sole aim of arming the French socialists against the temptation of revanchism. It should not be forgotten that it was them he was addressing as he was writing in French! [28]

Prepare for revolution, prevent world war. If this was indeed the motto, then it obviously was not sufficient to translate it into reflections on hypothetical situations in which the former would be born of the latter, with only a slight possibility ('slender hope'). It was necessary to act urgently for the one as well as against the other, and hence to seek themes around which it would be possible to translate the motto into action. On both planes, the great tactician in the military and political spheres that Engels was looked for viable gangways towards the strategic objective.

In the struggle against world war and for peace he rejected as illusory the splendid plans for general strike and insubordination in the event of war proposed by Domela Nieuwenhuis (which was as splendid as the Second International resolution at the Basel Congress in 1912, threatening to transform the war into revolution – the fate which history held for it is well known). These 'resounding phrases' could not be adopted by socialists, when at the same time they were erasing much less radical objectives from their programmes for fear of laying themselves open

to repression. Nor could they be of any real effectiveness in the face of the inevitable logic of war. Engels therefore formulated his own proposal, with the concern of complying with both the demands of realism and the revolutionary goal. The solution he found is set out in the articles he wrote in 1893 for the Vorwärts newspaper and later collected in a pamphlet under the title *Can Europe Disarm?* The socialist military expert proposed the 'gradual reduction of the term of [military] service by international treaty' [29], with the declared aim of eventually transforming standing armies into 'a militia based on the universal arming of the people'.

He explained his approach as follows:

I attempt to prove that this transformation is possible right at this moment, even for the present governments and in the present political situation ... For the time being [I] propose only such means as could be adopted by any government of the day without jeopardising national security. I simply seek to establish that from a purely military point of view there is nothing whatever to prevent the gradual abolition of standing armies; and that, if these armies are nevertheless maintained, it is for political and not military reasons—that, in a word, the armies are intended to provide protection not so much against the external enemy as the internal one. [30]

Hence, starting from what would have been objectively possible if one were to take seriously the purely defensive intentions proclaimed by governments, Engels demonstrated, with all the abundance and self confidence of his military knowledge, that his proposal was perfectly compatible with the demands of national defence (his appeal was addressed to the Reichstag). Knowing that unilateral disarmament had no chance of being adopted in the Europe of his time, *Engels, out of a concern for realism, proposed to start a dynamic of disarmament by international treaties by pointing out that in terms of psychological or moral advantage Germany had an interest in outbidding its opponents in pacifism* – thus adding another dimension to the current relevance of his thoughts about war. Were his proposal to be adopted by governments it would have either put a brake on the arms race or launched a process of disarmament on the European level, thus warding off the danger of war. However, if it were rejected – naturally the more likely hypothesis – it would nonetheless have had the merit of exposing the real role of armies, thus contributing to the education of the masses against militarism and chauvinism, on condition, of course, that the socialist parties grasped the proposal for use in their agitation, which proved not to be the case. [31]

Engels had long advocated universal military service (for men only, within the sexist limitations of the age) and a process of evolving 'asymptotically' [32] towards the abolition of the standing army and its replacement by a system of popular militias. His first concern was to prepare the revolution and to prevent counter-revolution, as he explained in 1865 at the time of his first intervention in the name of the workers' party in the debate on the Prussian army: 'The more workers who are trained in the use of weapons the better. Universal conscription is the necessary and natural corollary of universal suffrage; it puts the voters in the position of being able to enforce their decisions gun in hand against any attempt at a *coup d'état*.' [33] He now added the duty to prevent a major war, so that Engels' two most important concerns converged on the same ground – that of the army, the *kingpin of the revolutionary strategy* which he had developed.

## Revolutionary strategy and the army

Ever since the bloody crushing of the Parisian workers by Cavaignac in June 1848, Engels had understood perfectly that a new chapter had opened in the history of revolutions. As he wrote in 1852, 'The invincibility of a popular insurrection in a large town had been proved to be a delusion ... The army again was the decisive power in the state ...' [34] It was this same historical lesson that he reiterated once more at the very end of his life, in the well known

1895 "Introduction" [35] to the republication of Marx's work on *The Class Struggles in France*, an "Introduction" which was mutilated in his lifetime and so often misrepresented in the course of the century which elapsed after his death.

Since 1848, then, Engels had acquired the conviction, reinforced in the course of the years, that the fate of the social revolution would be determined by its ability to neutralise the bourgeois army. Until 1871 he could envisage optimistically a scenario inspired by 1793, in which the army would have been weakened, if not defeated, in the course of a confrontation abroad, so that the revolutionaries could put themselves at the head of the 'homeland in danger'. For reasons already explained, *the Franco-Prussian War and the bloody crushing of the Commune in 1871 led Engels to feel apprehensive about the war-revolution model, which could have dramatic and unforeseeable consequences, and hence he much preferred the strategy of bursting the bourgeois army from within:*

Militarism dominates and is swallowing Europe. But this militarism also bears within itself the seed of its own destruction. Competition among the individual states forces them, on the one hand, to spend more money each year on the army and navy, artillery, etc, thus more and more hastening their financial collapse; and, on the other hand, to resort to universal compulsory military service more and more extensively, thus in the long run making the whole people familiar with the use of arms, and therefore enabling them at a given moment to make their will prevail against the warlords in command. And this moment will arrive as soon as the mass of the people – town and country workers and peasants – will have a will. At this point the armies of the princes become transformed into armies of the people; the machine refuses to work and militarism collapses by the dialectics of its own evolution ... And this will mean the bursting asunder from within of militarism and with it of all standing armies. [36]

Henceforward 'smashing' the bourgeois army was not only an obligatory task of the proletarian revolution, as the Commune had revealed. It was also, according to the strategic conception elaborated by Engels, the indispensable condition for the success of the revolution. Without it the revolution would miscarry amid a bloodbath. And finally, from then on it was a task which could be carried out by political means, inasmuch as public political action and legal organisation were opening up for the proletariat, while the interpenetration between the army and the population was increasing considerably with the generalisation of conscription. *This gave the influence of socialists in the army an importance which was quite crucial and decisive. And the more armies grew, the more it became imperative to assimilate this revolutionary concept which Engels kept on emphasising until he died and which was taken up after him by Lenin and the Communist International.* [37]

If we do not keep in mind this key idea in Engels' revolutionary strategic thought, we are bound to be mistaken about the meaning of the public texts he wrote in the last years of his life when he was obliged to express himself within obvious limits and often allusively. This was because he feared that the spectacular progress of the German labour movement might be destroyed by a reactionary coup d'état, or by a new anti-socialist law, [38] precisely because the socialists were as yet unprepared for confrontation, having not yet acquired sufficient influence within the army. It was also because in order to be published by these self same socialists he had to take into account their obsession with repression and their cult of legality, which he condemned so sharply when his 1895 Introduction was mutilated, despite all the stylistic care he had taken. [39]

If, moreover, Engels, an enthusiast for military history (and for history in general), liked to quote the famous words of the French at Fontenoy in 1745: 'You shoot first, English gentlemen', applying it to 'messieurs les bourgeois', it was because he considered that time and legality were working in favour of the socialists, and therefore he knew for a fact that, sooner or later, the bourgeoisie would react by violating its own laws. 'No doubt they will be the first ones to fire.' [40] Then they would reap what they had sown, namely the revolution. 'How many times have the bourgeois called on us to renounce the use of revolutionary means forever, to remain within the law ... Unfortunately we are not in a

position to oblige *messieurs les bourgeois*. Be that as it may, for the time being it is not we who are being destroyed by legality. It is working so well for us that we would be mad to spurn it as long as the situation lasts.' [41]

*For the time being* the proletariat must confine itself to a *war of position*, as Engels might have said, for the terms he used in 1895 seem to refer directly to the military metaphor which Antonio Gramsci, after others, was to adopt later. [42] It was necessary, he wrote, for the proletariat 'slowly to press forward from position to position in a hard tenacious struggle'. This was possible because 'the state institutions, in which the rule of the bourgeoisie is organised, offer the working class still further levers to fight these very state institutions': [43]

The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of masses lacking consciousness, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul ... But in order that the masses may understand what is to be done, long, persistent work is required ... Everywhere the German example of utilising the suffrage, of winning all posts accessible to us, has been imitated; everywhere the unprepared launching of an attack has been relegated to the background. To keep this growth going without interruption until it gets beyond the control of the prevailing governmental system of itself, not to fritter away these daily increasing shock troops in vanguard skirmishes, but to keep them intact until the decisive day, that is our main task. [44]

For in the event of a 'blood-letting' like that of 1871 in Paris, *the shock troops would, perhaps, not be available at the critical moment, the decisive combat would be delayed, protracted and attended by a heavier toll.*

Thus for Engels the 'war of position' was no more than a long and patient preparation of a better relation of forces, in view of the *critical moment* when the 'war of manoeuvre' would again become dominant for the *decisive struggle*.

## The art of insurrection

***Does that mean that in the future street fighting will no longer play any role? Certainly not. It only means that the conditions since 1848 have become far more unfavourable for civilian fighters and far more favourable for the military. In future street fighting can, therefore, be victorious only if this disadvantageous situation is compensated by other factors. Accordingly, it will occur more seldom at the beginning of a great revolution than at its later stages, and will have to be undertaken with greater forces.*** [45]

By 'other factors' which would make up for the inferiority of civilians in street fighting, Engels obviously meant the influence of socialists within the army as a result of their previous political activity. When in 1891 he described in French, with a greater freedom of expression, the spectacular progress of the electoral results made by his German comrades, he hastened to make it clear that *the votes of the electors are far from constituting the main strength of German socialism*. This, he explained, is constituted by the soldiers, by the fact that *the German army is becoming more and more infected with socialism*. [46]

Does this mean that Engels was proposing to play for time until the army had been won over by the socialists? Is there a major weakness in his revolutionary strategy on this point? This seems to be the opinion of Martin Berger, who, while grasping well the place of the army in Engels' strategy, labelled this the 'Theory of the Vanishing Army' and described it as being 'essentially a passive doctrine'. [47] According to Berger's interpretation, Engels' perspective consisted of waiting until, by a process 'that would occur naturally', there were 'the necessary number of socialists' in the army for it to 'disappear' of its own accord. [48]

The struggle to win the army over advocated by Lenin seems 'foreign to Engels' view', according to Berger. In fact, it is rather this interpretation which is foreign to Engels' view. Lenin, in 1906, in the article cited by Berger, Lessons of the Moscow Uprising, only stressed the idea, a conventional one when all is said and done, that the use of force by the insurgents and their determination can make the wavering troops come down on their side. [49] On this point Engels said nothing different in his 1895 Introduction:

Let us have no illusions about it; a real victory of insurrection over the military in street fighting, a victory as between two armies, is one of the rarest exceptions. And the insurgents counted on it just as rarely. For them it was solely a question of making the troops yield to moral influences ... If they succeed in this, the troops fail to respond, or the commanding officers lose their heads, and the insurrection wins. If they do not succeed in this, then, even where the military are in the minority, the superiority of better equipment and training, of uniform leadership, of the planned employment of the military forces and of discipline makes itself felt. The most that an insurrection can achieve in the way of actual tactical operations is the proficient construction and defence of a single barricade ... Hence passive resistance is the predominant form of struggle; an attack will be mounted here and there, by way of exception, in the form of occasional thrusts and assaults on the flanks; as a rule, however, it will be limited to the occupation of positions abandoned by retreating troops ...

Even in the classic time of street fighting, therefore, the barricade produced more of a moral than a material effect. It was a means of shaking the steadfastness of the military. If it held out until this was attained, victory was won; if not, the outcome was defeat. ***This is the main point which must be kept in view, also when examining the outlook for possible future street fighting*** . [50]

But in the future, when the forces of the revolution have succeeded in ensuring in advance the sympathy of a large proportion of the soldiers so as to make up for their military inferiority and they have to engage in street fighting, at the beginning of the revolution or as it unfolds they ***may then well prefer ... the open attack to passive barricade tactics*** ! [51]

Thus in old age Engels came back to the famous lines which he had written 43 years earlier on the *art of insurrection*, already grasping perfectly the military aspects of the new revolutionary period – the same lines on which Lenin based his strategy and which he was so fond of quoting. What better proof is there of the remarkable continuity of a strategic thought devoted entirely to the revolution, as was the whole life of these two bearded fellows whose spectre has not ceased to haunt the world?

Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences of your play. Insurrection is a calculus with very indefinite magnitudes, the value of which may change every day; ***the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organisation, discipline and habitual authority; unless you bring strong odds against them, you are defeated and ruined*** . Secondly, ***the insurrectionary career once entered upon, act with the greatest determination, and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed rising*** ; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies. *Surprise your antagonists while their forces are scattering; prepare new successes, however small but daily; keep up the moral ascendant which the first successful rising has given to you; rally thus those vacillating elements to your side which always follow the strongest impulse, and which always look out for the safer side; force your enemies to a retreat before they can collect their strength against you; in the words of Danton, the greatest master of revolutionary policy yet known: ***de l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace!**** [52]

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[1] R. Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War* (London 1983), quote from p. 12.

[2] F. Engels, [The Campaign for the German Imperial Constitution](#), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. X (London 1975), p. 226.

[3] W. Liebknecht, "Reminiscences of Engels (1897)", in W.A. Pelz (ed.), *Wilhelm Liebknecht and German Social Democracy* (Westport 1994), pp. 140–142.

[4] It was in the interests of their shared revolutionary cause that Engels, wholeheartedly supported by Marx, had decided to try to influence the Austrian and Prussian armed forces by refuting the principle of 'natural frontiers' from a military-political standpoint and from the point of view of German national interests. He showed that Germany had no need to encroach on Italian territory to defend itself, trying to establish a convergence of interests between the movements for national unification in both countries. He also demonstrated the reactionary and aggressive nature of Napoleon III's expansionist ambitions, and formulated some military reflections about a possible Franco-German war which were confirmed on two occasions in the 20th century.

[5] The subtitle of *Capital* is *A Critique of Political Economy*.

[6] F. Engels, "Letter to Becker, 15 October 1884", in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XLVII, p. 202.

[7] W. Liebknecht, op. cit., p. 141.

[8] F. Engels, ["Letter to Bebel, 12 December, 1884"](#), in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XLVII, p. 234.

[9] E. Meade Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, 1943).

[10] S. Neumann, "Engels and Marx: Military Concepts of the Social Revolutionaries", in E. Meade Earle, op. cit., pp. 155–171.

[11] G. Chaliand, *Anthologie mondiale de la stratégie* (Paris 1990). However, this work achieves the feat of making no less than three mistakes in 12 lines when introducing Engels (p. 937). It begins by describing him as a 'German Jew' (Engels had already experienced this in his lifetime – see [On Anti-Semitism](#), in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 52), situates him 'in London until 1870', and makes him a leading figure in the First International 'after the death of Marx'.

Translator's note: the English translation, G Chaliand, *The Art of War in World History* (Berkeley c1994), p. 770, maintains the description of Engels as a Jew, but corrects the other two errors.

[12] J. Wallach, *Kriegstheorien: Ihre Entwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt 1972). The same author had already devoted an entire book to Engels' military thought: *Die Kriegslehre von Friedrich Engels* (Frankfurt 1968).

[13] J. Wallach, op. cit., pp. 253–254. This assessment is developed in the author's previous work. In *Kriegstheorien* he is exclusively concerned with the 'concept of revolutionary war' in Engels.

[14] Such was the precept of the author of *On War*: ‘... in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned and the plant kept close to its proper soil – experience.’ C. von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton 1976), p. 61.

[15] F. Engels, [Anti-Dühring, part II, ch. III](#), in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XV, p. 152.

[16] This does not imply that the analysis made by Lenin from 1914 on did not fit Marxist criteria. Quite on the contrary, it was based essentially on an evaluation of the place and historical significance of the imperialist stage in the evolution of the capitalist mode of production. In order to back up his ‘revolutionary defeatist’ position, the Bolshevik leader studied not so much the diplomacy of the warring parties (the primary sense of politics in Clausewitz’s formulation, as Raymond Aron recognises in his discussion of Ludendorff – *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, pp. 265–267) as the structure and dynamic of their economies. He presented the war of 1914 as overdetermined, inexorable, whatever may have been the original intentions of the protagonists.

[17] K. Marx, [First Address of the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association on the Franco-Prussian War](#), in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XXII, p. 6.

[18] K. Marx, [Second Address of the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association on the Franco-Prussian War](#), in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XXII, p. 267. Original emphasis here and in other quotes, except when stated otherwise.

[19] W.B. Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 92. However, the author does not hide his sympathy for the person of Engels, who, thanks in particular to his late writings on war, he judges ‘will one day be rehabilitated [sic] by future historians of Marxism’ (p. 81).

[20] F. Engels, Introduction to Sigismund Borkheim’s pamphlet, *In Memory of the German Blood-and-Thunder Patriots 1806–1807*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XXVI, p. 451. ‘Friedrich Engels once said: “Capitalist society faces a dilemma, either an advance to Socialism or a reversion to barbarism” ... We have read and repeated these words thoughtlessly, without a conception of their terrible import. At this moment [1915] one glance about us will show us what a reversion to barbarism in capitalist society means ... we stand today, as Friedrich Engels prophesied more than a generation ago, before the awful proposition.’ R Luxemburg, [The Crisis in the German Social Democracy](#) (New York 1919), p. 18.

[21] F. Engels, “Letter to Bebel, 13–14 September 1886”, in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XLVII, p. 487. Engels himself emphasised the words only and certain. Some years earlier, in 1882, he had expressed his pessimism as to the attitude of German socialists in the event of war, in an even more categorical fashion: ‘Our party in Germany, temporarily overwhelmed by the tide of chauvinism, would be dispersed, while exactly the same would happen in France.’ (F. Engels, “Letter to Bebel, 22 December 1882”, in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XLVI, p. 415.)

[22] F. Engels, “Letter to Paul Lafargue, 25 March 1889”, in F. Engels, P. and L. Lafargue, *Correspondence*, vol. 2 (Moscow 1959–1963), p. 210.

[23] M. Berger, *Engels, Armies and Revolution* (Hamden 1977), p. 129. Martin Berger’s work is probably the best inventory of Engels’ views on the war-revolution relation. In this respect, however, its major defect is not to grasp adequately, or not to bring out, the theoretical coherence of Engels’ approach and of the evolution of his attitude with respect to the objective changes in the world situation. Thus, when he depicts Engels as wishing, for revolutionary ends, in the 1850s, a ‘terrible’ war or even a ‘holocaust’ (p. 99), he is using anachronistic terms which make it hard to understand the obsession of Marx’s companion during the last 24 years of his life.

[24] F. Engels, “Letter to Bernstein, 22 February 1882”, in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XLVI, p. 205. In prophetic tones Engels goes on in the same letter: ‘The Serbs are divided into three denominations ... Where these people are concerned, religion actually counts for more than nationality, and it is the aim of each denomination to predominate. So long as there’s no cultural advance such as would at any rate make toleration possible, a Greater Serbia would only spell civil war’ (in K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XLVI, p. 206.)

[25] K. Marx and F. Engels, op. cit., vol. XXVII, pp. 235–250.

[26] Engels was obviously thinking of the Paris Commune which was crushed by the Versailles forces while the German occupying forces looked on.

[27] The revolutionary internationalists of 1914 denounced the ‘social patriotic’ misappropriation of Engels’ article. For example Rosa Luxemburg,

in her famous 'Junius' pamphlet of 1915 *The Crisis in the German Social Democracy*, pp. 106–108), and Grigory Zinoviev, in his 1916 pamphlet *The Second International and the Problem of War* (republished in V. Lenin and G. Zinoviev, *Contre le courant* (Paris 1970), pp. 197–200). They restored the meaning of the article by Marx's comrade as it has been set out above, while also stressing that the imperialist transformation which took place after Engels' death invalidated any extrapolation of his 1891 analysis to apply to the war unleashed nearly a quarter of a century later.

[28] He would have liked the French themselves to undertake to explain why the possibility of a war by their government against Germany, in alliance with Russia, was to be opposed (F. Engels, "[Letter to Bebel, 29 September 1891](#)", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Correspondence 1846–1895* (London 1934), pp. 488–490). When publishing the article in German some months later, Engels took good care to defuse it by explaining at length that, as a result of the misfortunes of the Tsarist Empire, the Russian threat hanging over Germany was no longer significant – thus destroying the one and only justification for the 'revolutionary defensism' which he had considered necessary in such an event. In October 1892 he explained to the French socialist Charles Bonnier that it was self evident that in the event of a new war of conquest by the Kaiser against France, the roles of socialists in the two countries would be reversed (K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXXVIII, p. 498). And in June 1893 Engels criticised Paul Lafargue for presenting himself as a patriot: 'That word has a limited meaning – or else such a vague one, depending on circumstances – that for my part I should never dare to apply that title to myself. I have spoken to non-Germans as a German, in the same way as I speak to Germans as a pure International' (F. Engels, "Letter to Paul Lafargue, 27 June 1893", *Engels-Lafargue Correspondence*, vol. 3, p. 269).

[29] Engels proposed a maximum period of two years, adding that 'in a few years it may be possible to choose a much shorter period of time'. He advocated military service confined to essential and rational military training without unnecessary ceremonies and other 'idiocies' such as the goose step which he derided.

[30] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 371.

[31] Only Jean Jaurès, among the leading public figures of European socialism, was to campaign for Engels' views on the transformation of armies as a means of preventing war. His radical pacifism earned him the murderous hatred of French nationalists.

[32] F. Engels, "Letter to Marx, 16 January 1868", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XLII, p. 524.

[33] F. Engels, "[The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party](#)", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XX, p. 67.

[34] F. Engels, "[Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany](#)", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XI, pp. 51–52 (my emphasis).

[35] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, pp. 506–524.

[36] F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, part II, ch. III, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXV, p. 158.

[37] The fourth of the 21 conditions of admission to the Communist International laid down that 'the obligation to spread communist ideas includes the special obligation to carry on systematic and energetic propaganda in the army' – in J. Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919–1943*, vol. 1 (London 1971), p. 169.

[38] '[My Introduction] has suffered somewhat from the, as I think, exaggerated desires of our Berlin friends not to say anything which might be used as a means to assist in the passing of the *Umsturzvorlage* [draft law against subversive activities] in the Reichstag. Under the circumstances I had to give way' (F. Engels, "Letter to Laura Lafargue, 28 March 1895", *Engels-Lafargue Correspondence*, vol. 3, p. 368.)

[39] 'I cannot believe that you intend to devote yourself heart and soul to absolute legality, to legality whatever the conditions, legality even in face of laws which are violated by those who impose them, in short, a policy consisting of turning the left cheek when one is struck on the right cheek' – in F. Engels, "Letter to Fischer, 8 March 1895", K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXIX, p. 424.

[40] [Socialism in Germany](#), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 241.

[41] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, pp. 240–241. One of the censored phrases of the 1895 Introduction, to Engels's great anger, said, in words addressed to the German government, 'If, therefore, you break the constitution of the Reich, Social-Democracy is free, and can do as it pleases with regard to you. But it will hardly blurt out to you today what it is going to do then' (in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 523). Here and below, I have put in italics (or bold italics in long quotes) the passages from the Introduction which were censored by Engels' socialist publishers.

[42] For a critical analysis of Gramsci's thinking in his *Prison Notebooks* and a penetrating survey of the Marxist strategic debates subsequent to Engels, see the masterly study by P. Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci", in *New Left Review* 1:100, November–December 1976, pp. 5–78. However, neither Gramsci nor Anderson traces the argument back to Engels, despite the fact that he was at the origin of this way of considering the question.

[43] F. Engels, "Introduction to The Class Struggles in France", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, pp. 512, 516. The approach to parliamentarism contained in this text by Engels remains diametrically opposed to the 'parliamentary cretinism' which he and Marx always criticised scathingly. It has much more in common with what Lenin argued in *Left Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder* than with the position of the European social democrats, even before 1914. Moreover, when Engels describes further on, with satisfaction, the progress made by socialists in parliament in other European countries, he hastens to add, 'Of course, our foreign comrades do not in the least renounce their right to revolution. The right to revolution is, after all, the only real "historical right" on which all modern states rest without exception' (in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 521).

Far from revising the revolutionary commitment of his youth, Engels thus remained faithful to what he had written in his first statement of principles, in 1847: 'Will it be possible to bring about the abolition of private property by peaceful methods? It is to be desired that this could happen, and Communists would certainly be the last to resist it ... But they also see that the development of the proletariat is in nearly every civilised country forcibly suppressed, and that thus the opponents of the Communists are working with all their might towards a revolution' ("Principles of Communism", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. VI, p. 349).

[44] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVIII, pp. 520, 522, translates *Gewalthaufen* as 'shock force', here replaced by 'shock troops', a correction which is all the more justified since the former formulation has the connotations of a commando unit, whereas Engels was thinking of the considerable mass of the supporters of socialism in Germany, 'the decisive "shock troops" of the international proletarian army' (in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 521).

Engels shortly afterwards stressed the relative nature of this text which some later commentators have falsely presented as his 'political testament': 'Liebknecht has just played me a fine trick. He has taken from my introduction ... everything that could serve his purpose in support of peaceful and anti-violent tactics at any price, which he has chosen to preach for some time now, particularly at this juncture when coercive laws are being drawn up in Berlin. But I preach those tactics only for the Germany of today and even then with many reservations. For France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, such tactics could not be followed as a whole and, for Germany, they could become inapplicable tomorrow' (F. Engels, "Letter to Paul Lafargue, 3 April 1895", *Engels-Lafargue Correspondence*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 373).

After Liebknecht it was Eduard Bernstein who used this misrepresented document to support his 'revisionist' arguments, thus contributing to creating the myth of a sudden change of direction by Engels at the end of his life. Subsequently, numerous writers, from Karl Kautsky to Lucio Colletti, thought it necessary to contradict Engels by giving credence to this misrepresentation. Nonetheless, since the publication of the complete text of the 1895 Introduction by Riazanov in 1930, many commentators have taken pains to restore the original meaning, citing Engels' correspondence in their support.

[45] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 519.

[46] "Socialism in Germany", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 240 (my emphasis). 'And if we get the rural districts of the six eastern provinces of Prussia (where large landed property and large farming predominate), the German army is ours' (F. Engels, "Letter to Laura Lafargue, 17 August 1891", *Engels-Lafargue Correspondence*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 98).

As Ernst Wangermann explains in his brief but excellent introduction to the first English edition of Engels' text on *The Role of Force in History* (London 1968), p. 23, Engels 'advocated policies designed to undermine the spirit of absolute submissiveness of the rank and file of the Prussian regiments, which were still recruited largely from the oppressed masses of rural labourers'. There is no room here to explain how the agrarian programme advocated by Engels, and rejected by the German socialists, was tied up with his revolutionary strategy. It is likewise possible to show how Engels' programmatic method, in the agrarian sphere as well as in that of the army, prefigured that of the 'transitional demands' adopted by

the Communist International under Lenin.

In the light of Engels' scattered but harsh criticisms of the German socialists in particular, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Marx's companion was the first Marxist to have had a presentiment of the future development of social democracy (he would be followed by Rosa Luxemburg, whereas it needed the betrayal of 1914 for Lenin to become aware of it).

[47] M. Berger, *Engels, Armies and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 169.

[48] Berger has great difficulty in reconciling his interpretation with the testimony of the British socialist Ernest Belfort Bax on Engels: 'Though prepared to give due weight to the practical exigencies of the situation on all occasions, the old colleague and survivor of Marx till the last held to the view that the social revolution could not be inaugurated otherwise than by the methods of forcible insurrection – least of all in Germany. I have more than once heard him say that as soon as one man in three, i.e. one third, of the German army actually in service could be relied on by the party leaders, revolutionary action ought to be taken' – E. Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian* (London 1918), pp. 48–49.

[49] 'We have carried out work in the army and we will redouble our efforts in the future ideologically to "win over" the troops. But we shall prove to be miserable pedants, if we forget that at a time of uprising there must also be a physical struggle for the troops' – V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 11 (Moscow 1962), pp. 174–175.

[50] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, pp. 517–518.

[51] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XXVII, p. 519.

[52] "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany", in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., vol. XI, pp. 85–86 (my emphasis, except for Danton, quoted in French by Engels).