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CLAUSEWITZ'S PARADOXICAL TRINITY AND THE FAILURE OF NAPOLEON IN PORTUGAL

Luís Falcão Escorega[1]

“Popular uprising should, in general, be considered as an outgrowth of the way in which the conventional barriers have been swept away in our lifetime by the elemental violence of war. It is, in fact, a broadening and intensification of the fermentation process known as war”. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Chapter 26, People in Arms)



In the general and strategic context of Napoleon's Continental Blockade against the United Kingdom, during 1806-14, Portugal became a decisive point in the strategies of both opponents. It was England's oldest continental ally and its refusal to adhere to the Continental Blockade attracted the “full power of Napoleon's baleful displeasure.”[2] For the French Emperor, the seizure of Portugal was strategically imperative, not only because it would allow the full effectiveness of the embargo, but also because it would serve as a useful and critical position in an eventual war against Spain. Consequently, Napoleon's troops invaded Portugal three times, in 1807, 1809 and 1810, and were repeatedly defeated each time.

Clausewitz's 'paradoxical trinity' – the primordial violence, hatred, and enmity (concerning the people); the play of chance and probability (concerning the military); and war as an instrument of policy (concerning the Government)[3] – provide an adequate paradigm for understanding the failure of Napoleon's troops in Portugal, during French invasions. In this brief essay are presented the main reasons for considering the original violence, hatred and animosity of Portuguese people as the magnet of Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity which most contributed to defeat Napoleon's troops in Portugal, during French Invasions (1807-1810).

In his book 'On War', Clausewitz perceives War as a rational instrument of State policy. In fact, the three concepts - rational, instrument, and State - are the key elements of his overall paradigm. For Clausewitz, the decision to make a war should be rational, based on costs, risk and profits; instrumental, in order to achieve an objective and not merely by itself; and should be related with State policy, in the sense that affects interests and efforts of the entire Nation[4]. He identifies a 'paradoxical trinity' of distinct variables to explain the phenomenon of War. The first one, mainly concerning the people, is the primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force. The second one, concerning the military, is the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam. The third variable, concerning the Government, relies in its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone[5]. During the three French invasions of Portugal, it is possible to identify the three magnets of Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity: the primordial violence, hatred, and enmity of Portuguese people; the play of chance and probability inherent to the actions of the Anglo-Portuguese Army; and war as an instrument of policy, since the major political objective of national independence was in stake.

During first invasion in 1807, the creation and subversive action of Portuguese Militias and Ordinances[6] were essential to create the conditions to defeat Marshal Junot and his troops. Napoleon's Marshal Junot and his troops crossed the Portuguese border on 20 November 1807 and, without significant resistance, reached Lisbon at the end of the month, on the 24th, arriving there one day after the Court had fled away to the colony of Brazil. Junot promoted himself as ruler of the country and took immediate measures: he extinguished the reigning House of Bragança, suppressed the Militias and Ordinances, and disbanded the Army, consequently turning clandestine thousands of men. Anger, violence, hatred, and enmity emerged among people and popular uprisings arose, supported by the rural gentry and instigated by the parish clergy. They attacked the French in unconventional ways, striking and running away, avoiding decisive engagements. The goal was to keep the occupant under constant pressure, undermining their moral capacity, exhausting their combat capability, and forcing them to withdraw[7]. Perceiving the general uprising of the country, Marshall Junot and his troops took refuge in Lisbon, maintaining only surveillance of the Atlantic, fearing the British. The popular uprisings in Portugal encouraged the latter to commit substantial forces and, therefore, an English force commanded by Arthur Wellesley (future Duke of Wellington) disembarked at Figueira da Foz on 1 August 1808 and quickly advanced on the French, defeating them at the Battles of Roliça and Vimeiro (17-21 August). Due to central action of the population, the goal was achieved: the French enemy was defeated and the national independence was restored.

In the second invasion, in 1809, the attacks of Militias and Ordinances in the North of Portugal, associated with the constraints of the terrain and the Anglo-Portuguese Army, led Marshal Soult to retreat from Portugal. After Napoleon's departure from Spain, in January 1809, he directed Marshall Soult to reoccupy Portugal, invading the country from the northern border, a region with mountainous terrain, narrow routes, and scarce food. In order to halt the French attacks, Portuguese governors ordered a *Levée en masse* based on irregular forces – the traditional Militias and Ordinances, easier to mobilize and with proven operational efficiency. These popular forces – citizen soldiers and farmers who worked the land during the week and trained regularly on Sundays and holidays[8] – were particularly efficient in this kind of terrain, by cutting the lines of communications and supplies of the attacker, making ambushes, attacking and disrupting the enemy's rear and slowing its progression, without decisive engagements. Along with an Anglo-Portuguese regular Army, led by General Beresford, the effects for the French were once again devastating. They were defeated in several battles and forced to retreat to Galicia, in north of Spain.

In the third and last invasion in 1810, General Wellesley effectively incorporated Portuguese irregular forces in his successfully territorial defense strategy, which led to the defeat of Marshall Massena and, finally, terminated Napoleon's ambitions in Portugal. Marshall Massena commanded the last Napoleonic campaign on Portuguese soil, and his overall intent was to attack along Eastern border of Portugal in the direction of Lisbon. General Wellesley's strategic plan to defeat Marshall Massena was clear[9]: defend far from Lisbon, maintain the vanguard of the attacker under constant pressure, exhaust him through delay actions, attack the enemy's rear, and deprive him of food sources through a scorched earth policy. The Anglo-Portuguese Army commanded by Wellesley was in fact the main instrument that ultimately defeated Massena in the major battles of Buçaco (27 September 1810) and Lines of Torres Vedras (October 1810). Nevertheless, the British commander incorporated the irregular forces in its strategy of territorial defense. Among other missions, he ordered them to guard the border, defend important places along the axis of advance of the enemy, and delay and disrupt the French advance, which proved vital in Portugal's defensive strategy[10]. Nonetheless, beside this active resistance, the Portuguese population organized itself to deny the French any resources and support, through a practice of devastation and abandonment of the lands.

In conclusion, during French invasions of Portugal, it is possible to identify the three magnets of Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity. The Portuguese people, suffering great privations, but with deep national pride; an Anglo-Portuguese Army successfully led by General Wellesley, mastering the chances and probabilities inherent to combats; and a Government, led at distance from Brazil by Prince Regent D. João, symbolizing the union of the Nation and reaffirming the political goal of national independence. However, the one that most contributed to defeat Napoleon's troops was the original violence, hatred and animosity of Portuguese people. These deep-rooted feelings provided the necessary moral and physical strength to the population, allowing the defeat of Napoleon's troops in 1807, 1809 and 1810. The people were undoubtedly the Portuguese center of gravity, the Clausewitz's concept of "hub of all power and movement, on which everything depend"[11].

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[1] Professor da Área de Ensino de Estratégia do IESM. Este texto é um breve ensaio de história militar que resulta da frequência do Command and General Staff Officers Course e do Master of Military Art and Science in Strategy nos EUA.

[2] David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon: The Mind and Method of History's Greatest Soldier* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1966), 596.

[3] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

[4] Anatole Rapoport, preface to Da Guerra (Lisboa: Perspectivas e Realidades, 1976), 8.

[5] Clausewitz, On War, 89.

[6] Sousa Pinto, "Guerrilha vs. Guerrilla na Guerra Peninsular," Revista Militar no. 2487 (April 2009), <http://www.revistamilitar.pt/modules/articles/article.php?id=468> (assessed May 01, 2011). The Militias and Ordinances were paramilitary organizations where Portuguese citizens fulfilled his compulsory military service. The main differences between the two were the training period and organization.

[7] Abílio Lousada, Guerra Peninsular: Prelúdio liberal do tecido político social e a transformação do aparelho militar português (Lisboa: Prefácio, 2010), 96.

[8] Abílio Lousada, Guerra Peninsular, 105.

[9] Abílio Lousada, Guerra Peninsular, 110.

[10] Abílio Lousada, Guerra Peninsular, 111.

[11] Clausewitz, On War, 595.

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João Nunes Vicente[1]

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João Pires Neves[1]

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João Pires Neves[1]

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João Pires Neves[1]

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Autor: João Pires Neves[1]

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