

SHORT LOAN

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# *On Revolution*

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## INTRODUCTION

### *War and Revolution*

Wars and revolutions – as though events had only hurried up to fulfil Lenin's early prediction – have thus far determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century. And as distinguished from the nineteenth-century ideologies – such as nationalism and internationalism, capitalism and imperialism, socialism and communism, which, though still invoked by many as justifying causes, have lost contact with the major realities of our world – war and revolution still constitute its two central political issues. They have outlived all their ideological justifications. In a constellation that poses the threat of total annihilation through war against the hope for the emancipation of all mankind through revolution – leading one people after the other in swift succession 'to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them' – no cause is left but the most ancient of all, the one, in fact, that from the beginning of our history has determined the very existence of politics, the cause of freedom versus tyranny.

This in itself is surprising enough. Under the concerted assault of the modern debunking 'sciences', psychology and sociology, nothing indeed has seemed to be more safely buried than the concept of freedom. Even the revolutionists, whom one might have assumed to be safely and even inexorably anchored in a tradition that could hardly be told, let alone made sense of, without the notion of freedom, would much rather degrade freedom to the rank of a lower-middle-class prejudice than admit that the aim of revolution was, and always has been, freedom. Yet if it was amazing to see how the very word freedom could disappear from the revolutionary vocabulary, it has perhaps been

no less astounding to watch how in recent years the idea of freedom has intruded itself into the centre of the gravest of all present political debates, the discussion of war and of a justifiable use of violence. Historically, wars are among the oldest phenomena of the recorded past while revolutions, properly speaking, did not exist prior to the modern age; they are among the most recent of all major political data. In contrast to revolution, the aim of war was only in rare cases bound up with the notion of freedom; and while it is true that warlike uprisings against a foreign invader have frequently been felt to be sacred, they have never been recognized, either in theory or in practice, as the only just wars.

Justifications of wars, even on a theoretical level, are quite old, although, of course, not as old as organized warfare. Among their obvious prerequisites is the conviction that political relations in their normal course do not fall under the sway of violence, and this conviction we find for the first time in Greek antiquity, in so far as the Greek *polis*, the city-state, defined itself explicitly as a way of life that was based exclusively upon persuasion and not upon violence. (That these were no empty words, spoken in self-deception, is shown, among other things, by the Athenian custom of 'persuading' those who had been condemned to death to commit suicide by drinking the hemlock cup, thus sparing the Athenian citizen under all circumstances the indignity of physical violation.) However, since for the Greeks political life by definition did not extend beyond the walls of the *polis*, the use of violence seemed to them beyond the need for justification in the realm of what we today call foreign affairs or international relations, even though their foreign affairs, with the one exception of the Persian wars, which saw all Hellas united, concerned hardly more than relations between Greek cities. Outside the walls of the *polis*, that is, outside the realm of politics in the Greek sense of the word, 'the strong did what they could, and the weak suffered what they must' (Thucydides).

Hence we must turn to Roman antiquity to find the first justification of war, together with the first notion that there are just and unjust wars. Yet the Roman distinctions and justifications were not concerned with freedom and drew no line between

aggressive and defensive warfare. 'The war that is necessary is just,' said Livy, 'and hallowed are the arms where no hope exists but in them.' ('Iustum enim est bellum quibus necessarium, et pia arma ubi nulla nisi in armis spes est.') Necessity, since the time of Livy and through the centuries, has meant many things that we today would find quite sufficient to dub a war unjust rather than just. Conquest, expansion, defence of vested interests, conservation of power in view of the rise of new and threatening powers, or support of a given power equilibrium — all these well-known realities of power politics were not only actually the causes of the outbreak of most wars in history, they were also recognized as 'necessities', that is, as legitimate motives to invoke a decision by arms. The notion that aggression is a crime and that wars can be justified only if they ward off aggression or prevent it acquired its practical and even theoretical significance only after the First World War had demonstrated the horribly destructive potential of warfare under conditions of modern technology.

Perhaps it is because of this noticeable absence of the freedom argument from the traditional justifications of war as the last resort of international politics that we have this curiously jarring sentiment whenever we hear it introduced into the debate of the war question today. To sound off with a cheerful 'give me liberty or give me death' sort of argument in the face of the unprecedented and inconceivable potential of destruction in nuclear warfare is not even hollow; it is downright ridiculous. Indeed it seems so obvious that it is a very different thing to risk one's own life for the life and freedom of one's country and one's posterity from risking the very existence of the human species for the same purpose that it is difficult not to suspect the defenders of the 'better dead than red' or 'better death than slavery' slogans of bad faith. Which of course is not to say the reverse, 'better red than dead', has any more to recommend itself; when an old truth ceases to be applicable, it does not become any truer by being stood on its head. As a matter of fact, to the extent that the discussion of the war question today is conducted in these terms, it is easy to detect a mental reservation on both sides. Those who say 'better dead than red' actually think: The losses

may not be as great as some anticipate, our civilization will survive; while those who say 'better red than dead' actually think: Slavery will not be so bad, man will not change his nature, freedom will not vanish from the earth forever. In other words, the bad faith of the discussants lies in that both dodge the preposterous alternative they themselves have proposed; they are not serious.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that the idea of freedom was introduced into the debate of the war question after it had become quite obvious that we had reached a stage of technical development where the means of destruction were such as to exclude their rational use. In other words, freedom has appeared in this debate like a *deus ex machina* to justify what on rational grounds has become unjustifiable. Is it too much to read into the current rather hopeless confusion of issues and arguments a hopeful indication that a profound change in international relations may be about to occur, namely, the disappearance of war from the scene of politics even without a radical transformation of international relations and without an inner change of men's hearts and minds? Could it not be that our present perplexity in this matter indicates our lack of preparedness for a disappearance of war, our inability to think in terms of foreign policy without having in mind this 'continuation with other means' as its last resort?

Quite apart from the threat of total annihilation, which conceivably could be eliminated by new technical discoveries such as a 'clean' bomb or an anti-missile missile, there are a few signs pointing in this direction. There is first the fact that the seeds of total war developed as early as the First World War, when the distinction between soldiers and civilians was no longer respected because it was inconsistent with the new weapons then used. To be sure, this distinction itself had been a relatively modern achievement, and its practical abolition meant no more than the reversion of warfare to the days when the Romans wiped Carthage off the face of the earth. Under modern circumstances, however, this appearance or reappearance of total war has a very important political significance in so far as it contradicts the basic assumptions upon which the relationship between the

military and the civilian branches of government rests: it is the function of the army to protect and to defend the civilian population. In contrast, the history of warfare in our century could almost be told as the story of the growing incapacity of the army to fulfil this basic function, until today the strategy of deterrence has openly changed the role of the military from that of protector into that of a belated and essentially futile avenger.

Closely connected with this perversion in the relationship between state and army is second the little-noticed but quite noteworthy fact that since the end of the First World War we almost automatically expect that no government, and no state or form of government, will be strong enough to survive a defeat in war. This development could be traced back into the nineteenth century when the Franco-Prussian War was followed by the change from the Second Empire to the Third Republic of France; and the Russian Revolution of 1905, following upon defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, certainly was an ominous sign of what lay in store for governments in case of a military defeat. However that may be, a revolutionary change in government, either brought about by the people themselves, as after the First World War, or enforced from the outside by the victorious powers with the demand of unconditional surrender and the establishment of war trials, belongs today among the most certain consequences of defeat in war — short, of course, of total annihilation. In our context it is immaterial whether this state of affairs is due to a decisive weakening of government as such, to a loss of authority in the powers that be, or whether no state and no government, no matter how well established and trusted by its citizens, could withstand the unparalleled terror of violence unleashed by modern warfare upon the whole population. The truth is that even prior to the horror of nuclear warfare, wars had become politically, though not yet biologically, a matter of life and death. And this means that under conditions of modern warfare, that is since the First World War, all governments have lived on borrowed time.

The third fact seems to indicate a radical change in the very nature of war through the introduction of the deterrent as the guiding principle in the armament race. For it is indeed true

that the strategy of deterrence 'aims in effect at avoiding rather than winning the war it pretends to be preparing. It tends to achieve its goal by a menace which is never put into execution, rather than by the act itself.'<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the insight that peace is the end of war, and that therefore a war is the preparation for peace, is at least as old as Aristotle, and the pretence that the aim of an armament race is to safeguard the peace is even older, namely as old as the discovery of propaganda lies. But the point of the matter is that today the avoidance of war is not only the true or pretended goal of an over-all policy but has become the guiding principle of the military preparations themselves. In other words, the military are no longer preparing for a war which the statesmen hope will never break out; their own goal has become to develop weapons that will make war impossible.

Moreover, it is quite in line with these, as it were, paradoxical efforts that a possible serious substitution of 'cold' wars for 'hot' wars becomes clearly perceptible at the horizon of international politics. I do not wish to deny that the present and, let us hope, temporary resumption of atomic tests by the big powers aims primarily at new technical developments and discoveries; but it seems to me undeniable that these tests, unlike those that preceded them, are also instruments of policy, and as such they have the ominous aspect of a new kind of manoeuvre in peacetime, involving in their exercise not the make-believe pair of enemies of ordinary troop manoeuvres but the pair who, potentially at least, are the real enemies. It is as though the nuclear armament race has turned into some sort of tentative warfare in which the opponents demonstrate to each other the destructiveness of the weapons in their possession; and while it is always possible that this deadly game of ifs and whens may suddenly turn into the real thing, it is by no means inconceivable that one day victory and defeat may end a war that never exploded into reality.

Is this sheer fantasy? I think not. Potentially, at least, we were confronted with this kind of hypothetical warfare the very moment the atom bomb made its first appearance. Many people then thought, and still think, it would have been quite sufficient to demonstrate the new weapon to a select group of Japanese

scientists to force their government into unconditional surrender, for such a demonstration to those who knew would have constituted compelling evidence of an absolute superiority which no changing luck or any other factor could hope to alter. Seventeen years after Hiroshima, our technical mastery of the means of destruction is fast approaching the point where all non-technical factors in warfare, such as troop morale, strategy, general competence, and even sheer chance, are completely eliminated so that results can be calculated with perfect precision in advance. Once this point is reached, the results of mere tests and demonstrations could be as conclusive evidence to the experts for victory or defeat as the battlefield, the conquest of territory, the breakdown of communications, et cetera have formerly been to the military experts on either side.

There is *finally*, and in our context most importantly, the fact that the interrelationship of war and revolution, their reciprocity and mutual dependence, has steadily grown, and that the emphasis in the relationship has shifted more and more from war to revolution. To be sure, the interrelatedness of wars and revolutions as such is not a novel phenomenon; it is as old as the revolutions themselves, which either were preceded and accompanied by a war of liberation like the American Revolution, or led into wars of defence and aggression like the French Revolution. But in our own century there has arisen, in addition to such instances, an altogether different type of event in which it is as though even the fury of war was merely the prelude, a preparatory stage to the violence unleashed by revolution (such clearly was Pasternak's understanding of war and revolution in Russia in *Doctor Zhivago*), or where, on the contrary, a world war appears like the consequences of revolution, a kind of civil war raging all over the earth as even the Second World War was considered by a sizeable portion of public opinion and with considerable justification. Twenty years later, it has become almost a matter of course that the end of war is revolution, and that the only cause which possibly could justify it is the revolutionary cause of freedom. Hence, whatever the outcome of our present predicaments may be, if we don't perish altogether, it seems more than likely that revolution, in distinction to war, will stay

with us into the foreseeable future. Even if we should succeed in changing the physiognomy of this century to the point where it would no longer be a century of wars, it most certainly will remain a century of revolutions. In the contest that divides the world today and in which so much is at stake, those will probably win who understand revolution, while those who still put their faith in power politics in the traditional sense of the term and, therefore, in war as the last resort of all foreign policy may well discover in a not too distant future that they have become masters in a rather useless and obsolete trade. And such understanding of revolution can be neither countered nor replaced with an expertness in counter-revolution; for counter-revolution – the word having been coined by Condorcet in the course of the French Revolution – has always remained bound to revolution as reaction is bound to action. De Maistre's famous statement: 'La contre-révolution ne sera point une révolution contraire, mais le contraire de la révolution' ('The counter-revolution will not be a revolution in reverse but the opposite of revolution') has remained what it was when he pronounced it in 1796, an empty witicism.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, however needful it may be to distinguish in theory and practice between war and revolution despite their close interrelatedness, we must not fail to note that the mere fact that revolutions and wars are not even conceivable outside the domain of violence is enough to set them both apart from all other political phenomena. It would be difficult to deny that one of the reasons why wars have turned so easily into revolutions and why revolutions have shown this ominous inclination to unleash wars is that violence is a kind of common denominator for both. The magnitude of the violence let loose in the First World War might indeed have been enough to cause revolutions in its aftermath even without any revolutionary tradition and even if no revolution had ever occurred before.

To be sure, not even wars, let alone revolutions, are ever completely determined by violence. Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws – *les lois se taisent*, as the French Revolution phrased it – but everything and everybody must fall silent. It is

because of this silence that violence is a marginal phenomenon in the political realm; for man, to the extent that he is a political being, is endowed with the power of speech. The two famous definitions of man by Aristotle, that he is a political being and a being endowed with speech, supplement each other and both refer to the same experience in Greek *polis* life. The point here is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence. Because of this speechlessness political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence and must leave its discussion to the technicians. For political thought can only follow the articulations of the political phenomena themselves, it remains bound to what appears in the domain of human affairs; and these appearances, in contradistinction to physical matters, need speech and articulation, that is, something which transcends mere physical visibility as well as sheer audibility, in order to be manifest at all. A theory of war or a theory of revolution, therefore, can only deal with the justification of violence because this justification constitutes its political limitation; if, instead, it arrives at a glorification or justification of violence as such, it is no longer political but antipolitical.

In so far as violence plays a predominant role in wars and revolutions, both occur outside the political realm, strictly speaking, in spite of their enormous role in recorded history. This fact led the seventeenth century, which had its share of experience in wars and revolutions, to the assumption of a prepolitical state, called 'state of nature' which, of course, never was meant to be taken as a historical fact. Its relevance even today lies in the recognition that a political realm does not automatically come into being wherever men live together, and that there exist events which, though they may occur in a strictly historical context, are not really political and perhaps not even connected with politics. The notion of a state of nature alludes at least to a reality that cannot be comprehended by the nineteenth-century idea of development, no matter how we may conceive of it – whether in the form of cause and effect, or of potentiality and actuality, or of a dialectical movement, or even of simple coherence and sequence in occurrences. For the hypothesis of a state of nature

implies the existence of a beginning that is separated from everything following it as though by an unbridgeable chasm.

The relevance of the problem of beginning to the phenomenon of revolution is obvious. That such a beginning must be intimately connected with violence seems to be vouched for by the legendary beginnings of our history as both biblical and classical antiquity report it: Cain slew Abel, and Romulus slew Remus; violence was the beginning and, by the same token, no beginning could be made without using violence, without violating. The first recorded deeds in our biblical and our secular tradition, whether known to be legendary or believed in as historical fact, have travelled through the centuries with the force which human thought achieves in the rare instances when it produces cogent metaphors or universally applicable tales. The tale spoke clearly: whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origin in crime. The conviction, in the beginning was a crime – for which the phrase ‘state of nature’ is only a theoretically purified paraphrase – has carried through the centuries no less self-evident plausibility for the state of human affairs than the first sentence of St John, ‘In the beginning was the Word’, has possessed for the affairs of salvation.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Meaning of Revolution*

1

We are not concerned here with the war question. The metaphor I mentioned, and the theory of a state of nature which spelled and spun out this metaphor theoretically – though they have often served to justify war and its violence on the grounds of an original evil inherent in human affairs and manifest in the criminal beginning of human history – are of even greater relevance to the problem of revolution, because revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning. For revolutions, however we may be tempted to define them, are not mere changes. Modern revolutions have little in common with the *mutatio rerum* of Roman history or the *στάσις*, the civil strife which disturbed the Greek *polis*. We cannot equate them with Plato's *μεταβολή* the quasi-natural transformation of one form of government into another, or with Polybius's *πολιτικὴν ἀναστροφήν*, the appointed recurring cycle into which human affairs are bound by reason of their always being driven to extremes.<sup>1</sup> Antiquity was well acquainted with political change and the violence that went with change, but neither of them appeared to it to bring about something altogether new. Changes did not interrupt the course of what the modern age has called history, which, far from starting with a new beginning, was seen as falling back into a different stage of its cycle, prescribing a course which was preordained by the very nature of human affairs and which therefore itself was unchangeable.

There is, however, another aspect to modern revolutions for which it may be more promising to find precedents prior to the modern age. Who could deny the enormous role the social question has come to play in all revolutions, and who could fail