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THE SUBVERSIVE WAR DEALS WITH THE PORTUGUESE STRATEGIC SCHOOL AND THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE IN THE AFRICAN COLONIAL WARS

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Abstract

Subversive war has returned to have increased importance in different international scenarios in which major Western powers are involved. These complex scenarios, in some cases even insurgency and counter-insurgency phenomena, were joined by a very different phenomenon: terrorism. Therefore, and given the conceptual confusion and baneful practical consequences of a misvaluation of what a subversive war and concomitant strategies mean, it is imperative to revisit through the doctrine of the Portuguese School of Strategy and the Portuguese experience in the field, as they configure, even today, judicious axes to understand the nature of the typology of the conflict in question.

Keywords

Strategy; War; Subversion; Counter-subversion; Portugal

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THE SUBVERSIVE WAR DEALS WITH THE PORTUGUESE STRATEGIC SCHOOL AND THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE IN THE AFRICAN COLONIAL WARS¹

António Horta Fernandes

Reflection on subversive war already has a tradition based in Portugal dating back to the colonial war period, in the sixties of the twentieth century (Fernandes, 2004). After the wars of emancipation of the former European colonies in Africa and Asia, the typology of the subversive wars slept until it was reborn in force in some military campaigns post-11 September 2001. However, its rebirth seems to have been accompanied by a certain, if not a conceptual, confusion. There has been talk of hybrid wars (Kilcullen, 2009), wars of chaos (Telo and Pires, 2013), multi-generational wars (Kaldor, 2012 – a new edition where he responds to his critics) and subversive with terrorism (Reis, 2016a).² And in all these cases, somehow, the doctrine already grounded decades ago had been forgot. It would be normal for many non-Portuguese authors to disregard the conceptualisation of polemologists and strategists of a small power. It is no longer customary that some recent Portuguese authors do not use this Portuguese doctrine as a reference, not for any kind of tardy nationalism, but simply because this doctrine, along with the old French doctrine, is still what has evolved to understand the phenomenon of war of subversion and concomitant actions of counter-subversion, or insurrectionary wars, avoiding any serious conceptual setbacks. The greatest of these is the importance attached to the military in combating insurgents and the separation of military operations from counter-forces and from stabilisation as opposed to reconstruction operations, as if they were two completely different phases of the war, operating with strategies that as well are heterogeneous; the first military, the second predominantly civil, yet performed in a conflict environment. Behind such a misunderstanding of the subversive war seems to be a old-fashioned vision, according to which strategy is something like the military ram of a political actor's power with collective expression, or as a method of organisation and application of power, implying nowadays other valences besides the military, but that lately is affected by the putative capacity of the use of military force. Thus, post-stabilisation phases of conflicts would be in some way post-conflict phases or residual conflict and, in a way, post-strategic (Fernandes, 2014).

However, rationalists of this sort are unaware of the nature of contemporary strategy and warfare, a test of non-military force, manifestations of hostile conflict that are not yet war (neither cold nor hot war), the prevalence of strategy in all azimuths and all time.

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² António Horta Fernandes refuted (2016) an article by Bruno Cardoso Reis, who then replied (Reis, 2016b). In turn, António Horta Fernandes responded (Fernandes, 2017). For a critical perspective on the relationship between war and strategy and terrorism, see (Fernandes, 2010).



The result has not always been the best, increasing, rather than decreasing, the entropy of the international scene, as shown by the cases of Iraq or Afghanistan. It is then necessary, once again, to focus on the essence of the meaning of subversive warfare.

1. The Nature of Subversive War

First, and since the article will focus on subversive war and the concomitant strategy of subversion and counter-subversion, it becomes necessary to know the phenomenon of subversive warfare. Subversive warfare can be defined as:

*The struggle within a given territory, by a part of its inhabitants, assisted and reinforced or not from abroad, against established or de facto authorities with the aim of withdrawing control of that territory or, at least, of paralysing its action (O Exército na Guerra Subversiva, 1966: Chap. I, p. 1).*³

In addition to the definition, it is still important to point out that, as a form of internal war, in theory supported or not abroad (a practice that has always been supported from the outside), subversive war evolved into a generic typology of war, a result of the strategic avatars of the Cold War. That is to say, in view of the impossibility of the global superpowers to use armed force against each other, because of the risk of a cataclysmic nuclear war, they had to develop alternative forms of warfare, which were in fact already *in nuce*. This development was essential for the creation of subversive war, since in it the fulcrum of the action does not become armed struggle.

In fact, we are talking about the creation of subversive war because the so-called small wars, irregular wars, popular wars and the struggles of different resistances during the Second World War were nothing but prolegomena to subversive war itself. On the other hand, so-called guerrilla warfare is only a combat method, based on small groups, ambushes, counter-ambushes, scourging and quick withdrawals, in short, intermittent contact, which was and is used in different types of war, including conventional warfare. What happens is that the subversive movements, in initial stages, had no armed capacity to do anything but guerrilla warfare; and of course, counter-subversion, if intelligent, which is confronted with the need to respond in the same measure.

The subversive fulcrum is not in armed struggle, it does not consist of defeating the military forces of subversion or counter-subversion; although, as war generated from an internal movement, its trigger must always be armed struggle, under penalty of subversives soon to be arrested, dominated by police forces and subject to the legal-constitutional framework in force for common times. Thus, both subversion and counter-subversion seek to win over the hearts and minds of the majority of the population where the revolt occurred. If it is possible, convince the direct military adversaries that the struggle does not make sense, incidentally but firmly, leading to the adverse forces being militarily comprised. In addition, it is essential to the diplomatic manoeuvring on the international stage, psycho-social, sanitation, developmental support, that is a set of

³ There are in Portuguese strategic doctrine small differences between subversive war and insurrectionary war, which, for the purposes of this article, will be left aside.



manoeuvres corresponding to general economic, communicational, psychological and cultural strategies that supports the military efforts. This comprehensive approach cannot be posterior to military combat, offensive and defensive operations, or subsequent stabilisation operations. The effort is a continuum where from the beginning, what we could designate as state-building responds to the yearnings and complaints that generated the revolt, is the main objective.

Through this theoretical framework one can better perceive what distinguishes subversive war from its historical embryos. What historically characterised the earlier proto-subversive actions, not least because war had not detached itself from the almost exclusive monopoly of armed struggle and military strategy, was the predominance of military vectors. The aim of these actions was to defeat or paralyse government military manoeuvres by means of an armed uprising of a fringe of a population, generally using irregular warfare. As one can see, this is not the aim of a subversive war. Take, the Second World War, for example, where the aim was not to win over the population through competing forces, but rather to resist the Germans through irregular operations, in order to inflict physical and moral damage on the occupants. In this way, it seeks to supplement the decisive, conventional axis of the manoeuvre carried out by the allied forces.

At heart, subversive war takes advantage of the elements thrown by total war, which extends the concept of war to other spheres other than the military.⁴ In practice, however, during the period of total war between the end of the Great War and the end of World War II, there was in fact a general but almost exclusive mobilisation in support of the military apparatus, which was the cause of this mobilisation. Only the duress of the atomic age and a greater acquaintance with the other modalities of war and strategy allowed the development of a war in all azimuths, including a war in which the central axis was not to defeat the adversary militarily.

However, caution must be exercised in this war on all azimuths. Because subversive war, although it has often descended into a kind of total war, a priori makes a reading of reality opposed to that of total war. Let us remember that total war is the utilisation, with maximum intensity, without temperance and simultaneously, of all the instruments at the disposal of a political actor. Total war reverses the strategic pyramid and virtually reduces the overall political objectives of a political entity to those related to hostility, those that fall under the purview of strategy (for example, the goal of unconditional surrender of the allied powers in the Second War). The post-war environment is very different: strategy regains its subordinate position in relation to politics, and from then on, it does not go back on the possibility of using all means. It is important to use these means in a balanced way, in accordance with the overall political objectives and not only with strictly strategic objectives, if not only according to the strategic objectives of the theatre at a given moment.

⁴ The concept of total war was introduced by the French politician and journalist Léon Daudet in 1918 and then was substantially developed and popularised by the German general Erich Ludendorff in 1935 in the work *The Total War* (*Der Totale Krieg*). Daudet defines total war as the "extension of the struggle in its most acute and chronic phases to political, economic, commercial, industrial, intellectual, legal and financial domains. It is not only the armies that clash, but traditions, customs, codes, spirits and especially the banks" (Daudet, 1918: 8). Ludendorff, on the other hand, refers to total warfare against the total and omnipresent reality of the relationship between states, concerning the struggle for the preservation of life (of a whole, of course) of a people (Ludendorff 1937: 22 et seq.).



It is necessary, however, to summarise the reasons why subversive war tends, during the Cold War (and continues to be), to descend into a total war; although this did not happen in the Portuguese colonial wars, and in particular for the Portuguese forces. The fact is that for a subversive strategy there were no fronts or rear lines and space had been greatly distended; on the limit, it could reach immense portions of the whole globe. Bringing war to the heart of the enemy was now to cause it to break, not by bombardment, but by highly subtle ways that would hardly allow the courage of the desperation that characterised the reaction to the bombing of cities during the Second World War. It was to lead the enemy to conclude that even the closest, including neighbours, friends and relatives, could not be with the enemy. But to simply depart was not easy either, since subversive war was equally played on the international scene, in international public opinion, and it might appear that under certain particularly negative conditions those who were not subversive in the distance were by no means judged with favour by new communities where they were trying to settle.

"With the designs of large-scale global subversion, one can understand the power of attraction, but also of repulsion and psychotic behaviour that such objectives and behaviours can originate" (Fernandes, 2007: 34).

The quotation reflects the historical association of subversive war to revolutionary war during the Cold War, but only subversive war itself was capable of originating such pathologies in the psycho-social domain. One cannot forget that subversive war tends to be a long-term war of saturation, because subversion cannot altogether defy counter-subversion in a classic confrontation in the initial stages of the conflict, and the population does not win in a flash.⁵

The great manoeuvre of the lassitude of subversion propitiates, which indeed has come to occur many times, is, as we have said, an extension of hostilities that surreptitiously introduces the vices of total war. If we note the duration that the war lasts, and if we read the conflict as a long-lasting snapshot, a perfectly legitimate reading of the inertial haemorrhage that counter-lassitude failed to stave off, or could only cut through, without breaking all structural ties and various temporal sequences, we are faced with simultaneous action of all forms of coercion, of all the general strategies available through integral strategy with maximum intensity. It is that the internal logic of the conflict itself, if it continues, must also be read in this way. The lassitude and the drag of time only materialise in success precisely in the condition of a unit of time.

⁵ The five stages or phases of the evolution of subversive action generally pointed out by the doctrine are as follows: 1st phase – subversion preparation; 2nd phase – creation of the subversive environment, a phase of agitation; 3rd phase – preparation and consolidation of subversive organisation, corresponding to the phase of surprise attacks, attacks and other guerrilla actions; 4th phase – creation of bases and pseudo-regular forces, a phase where there are areas that subversion controls by setting up a parallel state; 5th phase – general uprising, the final phase of a classic clash between forces (as happened in 1975 in Vietnam). Obviously, it will be easier for counter-subversion to combat subversion by containing it at its earliest stages (*O Exército na Guerra Subversiva*, 1966: chap. I, p. 12).



2. The Portuguese case – a brief summary

In the Portuguese case, during the years of colonial wars in Africa (1961-1975), Portugal seems to have had an exemplary strategy of counter-subversion, not only from the point of view of its conceptual framework – the manual, *O Exército na Guerra Subversiva (The Army in Subversive War)*, is probably the doctrinal document we know best done about subversive warfare and the best way to fight it – as well as on the ground. Subversive warfare operations in eastern Angola between 1967-1968 and 1973 are likely to use the differences between subversive movements (FBL-UPA, MPLA, UNITA) for their own benefit, manoeuvring to dictate the complex chess game, including the geopolitics of neighbouring states (use of Catangueses) and Zambians), which are the most modest ever implemented in the context of counter-subversion. Of course, there were limitations, such as an over-commitment of military forces in the so-called grid – a territorial coverage consisting of its division into zones of action and responsibility assigned to military units to control the terrain and populations – to security, replenishment, transport and maintenance of controlled areas, as well as (predominantly) carrying out psycho-social support actions, leaving little scope for effective action against insurgent forces (taking the creation of a reserve of intervention units released from that burden). However, the grid was essential to ensure the success of the struggle, being not the military defeat of the insurgents, but the conquest of the population, which would deny it the necessary logistical support and sources of recruitment. To dry and not necessarily to eliminate the enemy by means of its isolation was a fundamental, and much more effective, and with less destructive effects (collateral damage), as in Vietnam, so that the doctrine itself foresaw that even for the military forces the priority objective was the population, not the enemy itself (*O Exército na Guerra Subversiva*, 1966: chap. II, 4-5).⁶ In this way, not only did the populations win, but, dialectically, subversion lost strength, faster than being only or mostly devastated by counter-guerrilla operations, if not by more far-reaching operations, since counter-guerrilla operations, although of counter-lassitude, are also wear-and-tear operations that require a long time; by their very nature the results are hardly structurally and strategically concentrated. Nonetheless, more men could have been mobilised for combat operations if there were enough civilian to replace them in some of the basic security or promotion activities within the territory. Unfortunately, this was not the case, because the greatest investment in the African

⁶ Where it is said that the military forces should represent only a small part of the means to be employed. In this field, the Portuguese military forces have always had to supply in excess the recurrent lack of civilian technicians. However, the manual also adds that in a strictly military context the armed forces should not be restricted to actions against the fighting forces of the population, but should collaborate in the struggle in other fields, even in the more advanced phrases of subversion. Moreover, when the military counter-subversion missions are detailed, the drafters of the manual conclude that missions whose effect is to conserve or regain the support of populations, that is psycho-social actions, may be of greater importance. They recognise that when a phase of implementation and consolidation of armed struggle is reached, the most important task of the armed forces is to combat the rebel forces. Nevertheless, they conclude by saying that "experience always demonstrates that the most effective measure to combat armed and guerrilla bands is to deny them the support of the people (information, food, medicines, recruitment, moral support, etc.), without which they cannot subsist" (*O Exército na Guerra Subversiva*, 1966: chap. II, p.24). Therefore, before even fighting, first and foremost carrying the population itself is at the heart of action and not fighting insurgents on its own. Or put another way: fighting insurgents is strategically instrumental and depends on the conquest of the population; combat is useful insofar as it dialectically protects the population and makes them fall in good graces. While in other types of conflict the fight against the enemy, the armed adversary, is an end in itself in terms of the military strategy and one of the interactive aims of the integral strategy to be used by the superior political synthesis.



colonies comes precisely from the outbreak of colonial war and in response to emancipation movements. Once again, following in perfection is the doctrinal framework.

It seems that up until now we have only devalued military action, since if it is not the reason for subversive struggle, it is undeniable that without armed action the capacity for intimidation and seduction (subversive war articulates coercive actions, with actions of constraint and even of seduction and acceptance) of the population through subversion and the concomitant effort of counter-subversion would not progress. This is evident. However, what is at stake is that in subversive war strategy is more subtle and the use of military forces in combat actions, although indispensable, must be well considered, globally contained, taking into account the military strategy as a whole as well as different strategies, but at the same time resolute and steady when justified; otherwise, it is not only not remuneratory, but can also lead to the loss of the integral strategic effort and top political manoeuvres. Portuguese strategic action was generally very successful, as independent historians prove, like American historian John Cann (1998). The combination of operational strategy and structural and declaratory strategies was judicious, despite the relative international isolation of the country, which made a declaratory strategy proficient with different governments and international public opinion difficult.⁷

Nevertheless, in the end, Portugal would lose the war on several fronts: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea. This includes the most successful theatre of war, that of Angola, and that of intermediate success, that of Mozambique, as well as relative failure, that of Guinea. It is difficult, in the international context of that time, that Portugal could succeed, given the winds of history and the *Zeitgeist*. In any case, in addition to that, a policy that was not at the level of the strategy implemented contributed much to defeat. The particular blindness of the Portuguese political authorities did not allow integration of the strategic objectives that were being achieved in the basic political synthesis, which should have been dynamic and non-dogmatic, capable of accommodating strategic feedbacks. Portuguese policy should have better evaluated the evolution of opinion both of its own population and of the external board, knowing how to understand the *Zeitgeist*, to be able to give autonomy to the colonies in a stronger negotiating position, more favourable to the European populations in the territory, who had to be repatriated, and capable of starting a set of relations with the new states without complexes of guilt or distrust. This would have been useful not only for Portugal's material interests but also for its prestige and symbolic position in the world and in the future community of Portuguese-speaking countries.

However, we did not want to end without taking a global, and not only Portuguese, assessment of the subversive and revolutionary wars that occurred during the Cold War, almost always associated with decolonisation processes, including, therefore, a mark of self-determination inherent in a more or less incipient nationalism in African, which was more robust in Asian cases.

From a technical point of view, the long duration of a subversive war, which is essential to subversion if it is to succeed, as we alluded to and developed in other places, tends to

⁷ The four levels or forms of strategy, in the gap between integral strategy (termed the great strategy in Anglo-Saxon media, with little rigor) and the general strategies are the following, namely: operational strategy, which concerns the conduct and operation of means; genetic strategy, concerning the generation and creation of means; structural strategy, responding to the organisation and the articulation of means; declaratory strategy, having to do with the rhetorical effects of illocutionary acts of an expressive nature in their relation to the means, naturally in the face of the other, as in a demonstration of forces or to show the flag.



call itself the vices of total war and even to approach absolute war. The price to be paid for this intensity, which is often insidious, of violence, and long term, can be (and has been) very high. War, as a singular phenomenon, and insofar as it lasts, tends to brutalise societies due to the habitual absorption of violence. In subversive warfare, the intensity of material violence is not so obvious, but the usury of time associated with a psycho-social struggle is; without fronts or rears, institutes of common life are masked by war and war is hidden in peace, which does not fail to bring about a relative incapacity to build peace, showing much later the same psychotic behaviours. Moreover, in most cases we are talking about societies being founded if not created, materially fragile, institutionally fragile, still fragile in the ties that bind people, especially since we tried to divide and unite; and in each gesture of community service there seems to have always been a second intention, although not declared as such. It is clear that the same applies, albeit in a much less intense way to the social fabric where counter-subversion forces are based. But it seems clear to us that in this typology of war, frank success can only happen if counter-subversion immediately stifles subversion, or if, by luck or miracle, the authorities on the ground find it hard to give up right at the beginning. All else is a limited success.

Indeed, in the long run, the domain of international relations continued to reside in the great powers. Its ascendant was never structurally called into question by these small subversive and revolutionary powers, even when they succeeded and were a stimulus to others. Faced with the sophistication of insidious war they were developing, they responded to technologically advanced societies with more sophistication, keeping ascendant on the international stage, even in the face of recent clamorous defeats such as Iraq or Afghanistan. The depletion of human and material resources, which was very significant in the long term, only allowed short Pyrrhus' victories, leaving societies that embodied this subversion on the verge of exhaustion and in a precarious situation.⁸

In addition to the incipient results in comparative terms with respect to the powers with which the subversive movements were beaten, and which had as a consequence the maintenance of the ascendant more than a clear control of the international scene on the part of these same powers, all these subversive wars end up affecting the international balance, the prestige of the great powers and, consequently, their relative dominance. That is to say, we should check, regardless of the eventual victories of subversive forces in the immediate, or of their much more limited success in the medium and long term, if these struggles have brought substantive changes to the international scene and the balance of power, though different to what their protagonists thought they had achieved. I mean, did subversive wars help change the world, yes or no?

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⁸ This seems to be the lack of correspondence between the expansion of members of the UN General Assembly, with decolonisations, as well as their relevance. As decolonisations marked the high moment of the UN, they also marked their inflection point and downward direction (Mazower, 2017: 305) – we handled the Portuguese edition particularly clumsy regarding the translation and revision.



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