On Revolution

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On Revolution

Also by Hannah Arendt

BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

THE HUMAN CONDITION

ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM

TO GERTRUD AND KARL JASPERS

In reverence—in friendship—in love

Acknowledgments

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HANNAH ARENDT

New York, September 1962

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Introduction

WAR AND REVOLUTION

WARS and revolutions—as though events had only hurried up to fulfill 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 center 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, insofar 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 justifications 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, defense 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 outbreaks 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 that 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.[1] *

It is important to remember that the idea of freedom was introduced into the debate of the war question only 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

* Numbered reference notes may be found following the text.

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 insofar 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 fulfill this basic function, until today the strategy of deterrence has openly changed the role of the military from that of a 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 in 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 World War I, 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 goals by a menace which is never put into execution, rather than by the act itself." [2] 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 pretense that the aim of an armament race is to guard 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 a 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 maneuver in peacetime,

involving in their exercise not the make-believe pair of enemies of ordinary troop maneuvers 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 reciprocation 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 defense 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 consequence of revolution, a kind of civil war raging all over the earth as even the Second World War was considered by a sizable 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 contrerévolution 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 witticism.[3]

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