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Some Comments on the Qadesh Battle [avec 1 planche].

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# SOME COMMENTS ON THE QADESH BATTLE

Ahmed KADRY

The high importance of Qadesh battle, as a turning point to a new political situation in the Near East, and a peak of the military art in the 12th century B.C., is worthy devoting some few pages, which may contribute to elucidate some points concerning its strategic significance.

It is noteworthy to mention that the achievements of Seti I's military activities in Syria had their direct effect on the eve of the battle of Qadesh, as the king of Amurru, north of Syria, preferred to join the Egyptian troops in the fighting which took place in the neighbourhood of Qadesh, in the Orontes-valley, in year 5 of Ramesses II's reign <sup>(1)</sup>.

The size of the troops gathered by the two parties on the battle field in the Orontes-valley gives us the impression that some sort of a national mobilization was carried out in both sides. At least twenty Hittite vassals from Asia Minor and as so far as the Ionian coast <sup>(2)</sup>, fought in Qadesh with Muwatallis. Egyptian sources estimated the first wave of attack, launched by Hittite chariots across the Orontes, was carried out by 2500 and the second wave by 1000 chariots <sup>(3)</sup>. J. Sturm considers that the Hittite infantry was composed of troops ranging from about 16000 to 18000 soldiers <sup>(4)</sup>, and 3500 vehicles for the chariotry, while A.H. Gardiner gives the number of 37000 for infantry <sup>(5)</sup>. The Egyptian divisions, named after the four main deities of Egypt, comprised 20000 warriors, as minimum, if we reckon with 5000 soldiers in every division, according to the generally accepted estimation for these divisions, as military units, in the Ramesside period <sup>(6)</sup>. If we put into consideration the special elite troops, which were stationed in the land of Amurru, who approached the Orontes-valley from the neighbourhood of Tripoli, along

<sup>(1)</sup> W. Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (ÄA 5), Wiesbaden 1961, p. 204 (further on *Beziehungen*...).

<sup>(2)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs. An Introduction*. Oxford 1961, p. 262.

<sup>(3)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., pp. 215 ff.

<sup>(4)</sup> J. Sturm, « Der Hettiterkrieg Ramses II »,

(WZKM, Beiheft 4), Wien 1939, p. 51.

<sup>(5)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *The Qadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II*, Oxford 1960, sections R 43 - R 44, pp. 41 f.

<sup>(6)</sup> L.A. Christophe, « L'organisation de l'armée égyptienne à l'époque Ramesside », *Rev. du Caire*, XXXI, Vol. 207 (1957), p. 394.

the road crossed by the Eleutheros river <sup>(1)</sup>, together with the units which were necessarily stationed in different Egyptian military centres in Palestine and Syria, as Beisan <sup>(2)</sup>, and necessary to protect the rear of the Egyptian troops against any nomades uproars during their strategic to Qadesh, the total number must have been higher than 20000 given by L.A. Christophe and J.H. Breasted for the Egyptian troops <sup>(3)</sup>.

The unusually extensive representations and accompanying versions of one individual battle in the Egyptian sources reflects the great importance which was laid upon its strategic targets <sup>(4)</sup>. This major problem of the revival of the Egyptian domination in Asia, involuntarily postponed since the Amarna crisis, had according to the opinion of the military rulers to be settled down, and the Egyptian national capacities were put on the strategic offensive. That the objective was the elimination of the Hittite power in a sudden attack in order to affirm the control over Qadesh, the strategic center near the exit from the valley of Biga' between Lebanon and Antilebanon, is deduced from the fact that the Egyptian troops reached the commanding hills overlooking Qadesh, only one month after they had crossed Egypt's own frontiers at Sile <sup>(5)</sup>.

In my opinion, the Egyptian strategic plans were generally accurate, in their broad lines, even according to modern military thought. No other alternative was available for the strategic approach to the battle-field since the army had to pass along the valley of Biga' to avoid the narrow coastal route, intersected by river-mouthes, along the Phoenician coast <sup>(6)</sup>. The idea proposed by J. Sturm and R.O. Faulkner that the Orontes-valley was approached by the troops through an ancient road crossing Lebanon along the coast line, avoiding Litani's valley <sup>(7)</sup>, does not coincide with the positions of the Egyptian divisions on the eve of the battle, suggested by E. Edel and generally accepted <sup>(8)</sup> in its broad lines, by Egyptologists. If J. Sturm's idea holds true, the detaching of the special elited troops at Amurru's coast, most probably by sea, in the form of an amphibious operation <sup>(9)</sup>, would be devoided of any rational strategic objective. Likewise, this approach would have subjected the Egyptian right flanks to any probably attacks from the hostile local nomades, unless his flanks were protected by the forests of

<sup>(1)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 263; R.O. Faulkner, in : *CAH* II/2 (1975<sup>3</sup>), p. 226.

<sup>(2)</sup> J. Sturm, *Der Hettiterkrieg*, p. 63.

<sup>(3)</sup> J.H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* III, Chicago 1906-1907, p. 127.

<sup>(4)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, pp. 260 ff.; J.H. Breasted, *Ancient Records* III, pp. 298 ff.

<sup>(5)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 260.

<sup>(6)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 208.

<sup>(7)</sup> J. Sturm, *Der Hettiterkrieg*, pp. 65 ff.

<sup>(8)</sup> E. Edel, « Zur historischen Geographie der Gegend von Kadeš », *ZÄ* 50 (1953), pp. 253 ff.

<sup>(9)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 215.

*la-bi-wi*, which extend to *ša-b-tu-na*, some 10 km south of Qadesh <sup>(1)</sup>. The approach to the Orontes through the Litani-valley was confirmed by H. Wilson <sup>(2)</sup>.

Muwatallis's strategic manœuvre of pushing his troops to the south as far as Qadesh and to occupy the land of Amurru <sup>(3)</sup>, deprived Ramesses II from a friendly land in his rear from the complete military help of his ally, Bentešina, the king of Amurru. The gathering of his main troops to the east of the hill of Nebimend, on which Qadesh is located <sup>(4)</sup>, and using Orontes river as a natural defensive line, gave the Hittite king the privilege to move, in due time, and according to the development of the operations on the battle field, either to the tactical defence or to the offensive. This elasticity of the tactics applied by Muwatallis was achieved by taking the initiative of imposing the location of the battle-ground, and of timings of the beginning of the tactical operations (Fig. 1).

The inability of the Egyptian reconnaissance and intelligence to locate the exact positions of the enemy was unforgiveable <sup>(5)</sup>, and can hardly be explained even in the light of the overconfidence which may be expected from the young Pharaoh. The information extorted from two Hittite scouts about the new positions of the Hittite troops and their confederates east to Qadesh, was only available after Amon's division, with Ramesses II at

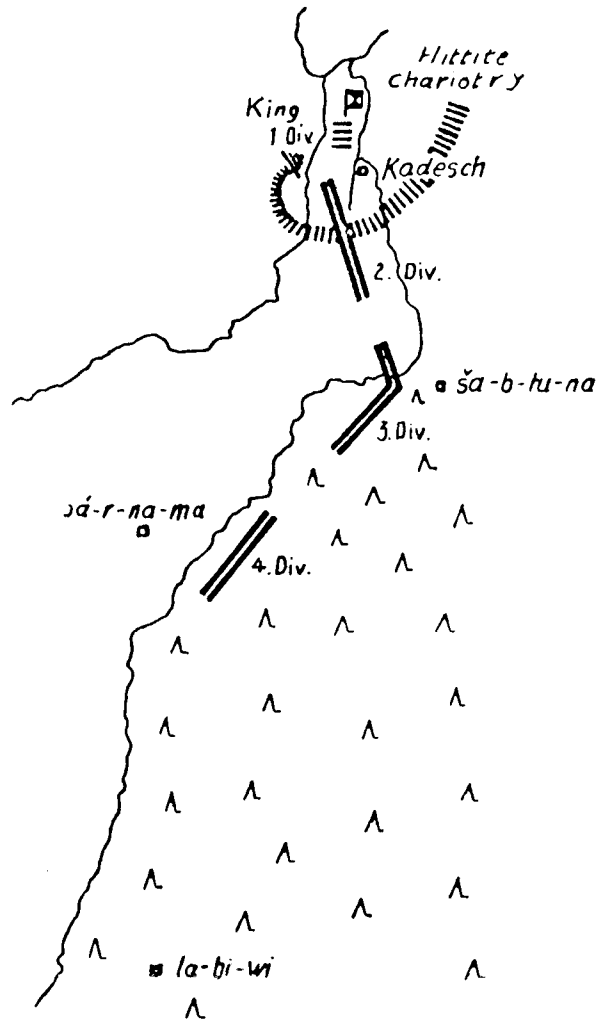


Fig. 1.

<sup>(1)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>(2)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>(3)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, pp. 208 ff.

<sup>(4)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>(5)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 261.

its head, had crossed the ford of Orontes and had camped some few kilometers to the North-West of Qadesh and the Hittite striking forces. It was too late, beyond all measure, for the Egyptians to exert any modification in the positions of their divisions. The vigorous first wave of the Hittite attack was launched southwards by chariotry <sup>(1)</sup> against the Re division on their march northwards and while crossing the river at *ša-b-tu-na* <sup>(2)</sup>. This serious unsuspected attack have ended into a catastrophe unless there had been still three factors which prevented the complete deterioration of the military situation. The first was of strategic character : the two divisions of Ptah and Seth, composing half of the striking bulk of the Egyptian forces, were still on their march approaching the stage of operations. Immediately after the confirmed information about the unexpected position of the Hittite forces was delivered to the Egyptian general headquarters, at the north-west of Qadesh, the vizier was despatched to the south to organize the interference of the above mentioned divisions in the fighting <sup>(3)</sup>. What seemed at the first glimpse as a tactical disadvantage, as a result of the absence of Ptah and Seth divisions from the battle field, proves later to be of a decisive strategic privilege. The crafty Hittite king recognized obviously that he was not in the situation to make full use of his striking power in the first wave of attack against the Re division along the Orontes.

Seeing the strategic situation of the Egyptian army and its huge threatening fresh reserves in the south, he could not afford to release all his chariotry and was obliged to keep his reserves outside the battle, which he had to use in his second attack, when the organized counter attack of Ramesses II, against the thin eastern wing of the surrounding hostile chariots along the river, began to yield considerable results <sup>(4)</sup>. After the releasing of all the Hittite reserves of chariotry in the actual combat and the arrival of the division of Ptah on the field on the same evening of the battle, it was obvious that Muwatallis lost his last opportunity to realize a decisive victory and his chariotry were driven and took refuge in the city of Qadesh <sup>(5)</sup>. The second military factor which unbalanced the Hittite tactical plans on the battle ground, was the arrival of the detached task force, transported probably by sea and landed on the coast of Amurru <sup>(6)</sup>. This *n'-ru-na* recruits, who approached the vicinity of Qadesh from the north through the Eleutheros-valley joined immediately in the Egyptian counter-attack lead by Ramesses II himself and prevented the Hittite chariots from using the temporal victory after their first attack on Re division.

<sup>(1)</sup> J.H. Breasted, *Geschichte Ägyptens*, Berlin 1911, pp. 336 ff.

<sup>(2)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 214.

<sup>(3)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>(4)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 215.

<sup>(5)</sup> J.H. Breasted, *Geschichte Ägyptens*, p. 331; W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 215.

<sup>(6)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 215.

No doubt that the appearance of this fresh troops contributed considerably to raise the morale of the Egyptian forces in general, and of the fugitives of Re and Amon divisions in particular, and facilitated for their officers the difficult function of reorganizing their defeated columns. This strategic situation can be rather compared, in a sense, with the position of the allied troops gathered at Waterloo, against Napoleon. After the French general attack had been launched, the fate of the whole struggle was decided by the arrival of the Prussian reserves with general Blücher on their head <sup>(1)</sup>.

It is noteworthy to mention that Thutmosis III had adopted the same strategic principal of detaching amphibious forces transported by sea, and landed at a point in the depth of the hostile territories. In the first campaign of Thutmosis III in Syria, as well as the campaign of year 33 of his reign, a special striking force was detached in front of Aleppo. The same military methods were applied by Ramesses II in Qadesh <sup>(2)</sup>.

The third factor which contributed to mitigate the tactical surprise of the Hittite attack was the way in which the Egyptian general staff and the Pharaoh reacted. The prodigious valour of Ramesses II and his household troops, together with the accurate decision of launching the counter-attack against the thin line of the eastern wing of the Hittite chariotry along the Orontes, instead of facing the heavily massed enemy on the west side, gave the Egyptian task force at the north and the Ptah division at the south enough time to interfere in the battle.

The success of the Egyptian counter-attack launched across Orontes' ford was mainly due, in my opinion, to the light armament of the Egyptian chariotry, in comparison with the heavy Hittite vehicles. The light Egyptian chariots, equipped only with two fighters each, while every Hittite vehicle had three warriors, were able to make quick tactical manoeuvres (Pl. XII).

The tactics implied were described by J.H. Breasted as follows : « ... and the plains of Syria, already at that remote epoch, witnessed notable examples of that supposedly modern science, which was brought to such perfection by Napoleon, — the science of winning the victory before the battle » <sup>(3)</sup>.

The great quantity of chariots used by the two sides in Qadesh, 3500 chariots were used by the Hittites alone, in comparison with the 1000 chariots sent into battle by Mitanni and by the Egyptians 200 years before in Meggido <sup>(4)</sup>, reflect a considerable development in the strategic and tactical use of chariotry, specially after its separation from the infantry as an independent branch in the army.

<sup>(1)</sup> R.O. Faulkner, in *CAH* II/2, p. 226.

<sup>(3)</sup> J.H. Breasted, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>(2)</sup> J.H. Breasted, *Geschichte Ägyptens*, p. 338.

<sup>(4)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 216.

The armistice, which according to the Egyptian sources had been asked by the Hittite side on the next day of the battle, may hold true on the light of the immediate general results of the combats <sup>(1)</sup>. The heavy losses on both sides, as well as the general situation of the troops might have convinced Muwatallis and Ramesses II that it was impossible to realize any decisive strategic ends. We are not obliged to accept the account derived from Boghazköy tablets concerning an Egyptian defeat <sup>(2)</sup>. The Egyptian sources refer also to the arrival of a letter, in which Muwatallis asked for peace <sup>(3)</sup>. The withdrawal of the Egyptian army took place only after the negotiations which followed the battle. At Aba, near Damascus, the Egyptian troops were reorganized before their march on their way back to Egypt <sup>(4)</sup>. The Egyptians failed to gain a victory, but the Hittites had to recognize that they had to face the aspiration, for a new Egyptian realm in Asia, and the ineffective policy of Amarna Period was completely converted into a policy of aggressive character.

In Palestine a considerable military effort was exerted, in year 6 or 7 of Ramesses II's reign, to deal with the revolts of many petty states against the Egyptian dominance, obviously as a result of the diplomatic intrigues of the Hittites <sup>(5)</sup>.

Few years later after Qadesh, the struggle was resumed in years 8 and 10 of Ramesses II's reign in the north of Byblos and Tripoli, and obviously the Hittite attacks, directed from Qadesh on Amurru, did not achieve any success <sup>(6)</sup>. In the same time the Egyptian counter-attacks against some towns in Naharina and Hatti <sup>(7)</sup>, may refer to an amphibious operation on the Syrian northern coast near Amurru <sup>(8)</sup>. Obviously Ramesses II has penetrated deeply into the Hittite defences, as he invaded Qatna and Qadesh in the north west <sup>(9)</sup>.

The great historical endeavour, however to restore the imperial glory of the first half of the 18th Dyn., which covered a span of approximately 35 years, during the reigns of Seti I and Ramesses II <sup>(10)</sup>, did not achieve decisive success.

The two great powers, had to realize that an end to their intermittent hostilities should be reached, and that a peaceful agreement should be concluded.

<sup>(1)</sup> R.O. Faulkner, in : *CAH* II/2, p. 228.

<sup>(2)</sup> A. Götze, « Zur Schlacht von Qadeš », *OLZ* 32 (1929), pp. 832 ff.

<sup>(3)</sup> Ch. Kuentz, *La bataille de Qadech (MIFAO* 55), Cairo 1928, p. 319.

<sup>(4)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* . . . , p. 217.

<sup>(5)</sup> R.O. Faulkner, in : *CAH* II/2, p. 223; W. Wreszinski, *Atlas zur altägyptischen Kulturgeschichte*, II, Leipzig 1935, Taf. 58.

<sup>(6)</sup> W. Wreszinski, *op. cit.*, Taf. 90/1; M. Noth, « Ramses II in Syrien », *ZDPV* 64 (1941), 52.

<sup>(7)</sup> W. Wreszinski, *op. cit.*, Taf. 72.

<sup>(8)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* . . . , p. 223.

<sup>(9)</sup> R.O. Faulkner, in : *CAH* II/2, pp. 228 f.; H. Klengel, *Geschichte Syriens*. Teil 2, Berlin (1969), pp. 310 f., p. 319 note 13 with literature.

<sup>(10)</sup> J. von Beckerath, *Abriss der Geschichte des Alten Ägypten*, München-Wien 1971, p. 42.

The tacit understanding on the division of the sovereignty of the two Empires and the reciprocal provisions of the treaty of year 21, depict the general strategic balance of the two parties. In this relationship the treaty differed qualitatively from traditional agreements which were concluded between the great powers of the age and other countries, i.e., between Egypt, under Thutmosis III, and Syrian cities, and between Hatti and petty states in Asia Minor or Syria <sup>(1)</sup>. The traditional egocentrism of the monarchs of the ancient world, usually expressed even in diplomatic language, was not stressed here. The articles of the treaty were considered to remain in force after the death of the contracting kings <sup>(2)</sup>.

The interchangeable tide of the Hittite and Egyptian zones of influence in Syria, before the conclusion of the treaty, had resulted into an unsettled state of affairs in the internal political life of the Syrian petty states and into the wavering loyalty of their vassals in their relations with the two dominating Empires. Accordingly the political refugees, whatever their social status was, were not treated as criminals, by force of the treaty, in case of extradition <sup>(3)</sup>.

The treaty was more than a mere non-aggression agreement, as the both sides were charged with obligations of mutual military assistance in case of any foreign assault <sup>(4)</sup>. The relations of Egypt with the petty states who joined Hatti in its struggle against Egypt, were consequently normalized after the treaty <sup>(5)</sup>. The two sides were keen, after the conclusion of the treaty, to develop a « psychological peace », as W. Helck points out <sup>(6)</sup>. While no concrete definition of the frontiers separating the zones of influences of the two Empires was recorded, the archeological sources show that Upe, in the neighbourhood of Damaskus, and the regions on the Syrian coast till Simyra, were kept by the Egyptians, and Qadesh was retained by the Hittites <sup>(7)</sup>.

There are indications of the existence of considerable commercial projects after the validity of the treaty, as Prince Ḫišmišarma, the Hittite king's son, who visited Egypt, was accompanied on his way back ships of corn exported to Hatti <sup>(8)</sup>.

The spirit of the treaty was deeply consolidated by the marriages which took place in year 34 of Ramesses II between the two royal families. The Egyptian documents give a detailed information of the events of this marriage of the Egyptian monarch with princess

<sup>(1)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* . . . , p. 225.

<sup>(2)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

<sup>(3)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 264;  
R.O. Faulkner, in : *CAH* II/2, p. 229.

<sup>(4)</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 264;

W. Helck, *Beziehungen* . . . , p. 225.

<sup>(5)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>(6)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, pp. 231 f.

<sup>(7)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>(8)</sup> W. Helck, *op. cit.*, p. 233.



Manefrure, the daughter of King Mattusilis <sup>(1)</sup>. Another marriage of Ramesses II with a second daughter of the Hittite king, which took place after year 34 <sup>(2)</sup>, confirms the increasing intimacy between the two Empires and their royal courts <sup>(3)</sup>.

Most probably the treaty of year 21 and the promotion of the friendly relations between the two main powers was a historical necessity, imposed as a result of the accumulation of the clouds of the future dangers of the Sea Peoples in the Near East's horizon. Hatti's final collapse, under the strokes of the Sea Peoples, took place, according to W. Helck, approximately at the end of Merenptah's reign <sup>(4)</sup>.

He rejects the idea, presented by A. Malamat, that this final decadence of the Hittite Empire took place under Ramesses III. Anyhow, the Sea Peoples appeared already in year 8 of Ramesses III on the Syrian frontiers, after having stromed Hatti and having settled down for some time in Amurru <sup>(5)</sup>. Most important, in this context, is that Merenptah ordered corn to be detached to Hatti, on the occasion of the economic troubles, which faced the Hittites at that time <sup>(6)</sup>. Moreover, it is probably that Merenptah had sent his troops to defend Ugarit against the Sea Peoples, as implementation of the provision of mutual defence included in the Egyptian Hittite treaty of year 21 of Ramesses II <sup>(7)</sup>. Evidently, the chain of fortifications erected by Ramesses II in the north-east corner of Delta and along the Mediterranean coast to the west, to protect Egypt against any invasion from the west, throws additional light on the growing threats in Egypt's western frontiers, which made it necessary to keep peace with the Hittites <sup>(8)</sup>.

The strategic concept of the alternating display of war and diplomacy was in connection with the new political situation in Asia. The overwhelming might of the Empire during the first half of the 18th Dyn., particularly under Thutmosis III did not necessitate a sophisticated implement of this principle. This strategy reached only under the critical internal and international circumstances following the religious crisis, wider use on the part of the military leaders highly experienced in both military and political missions. At Qadesh the developped strategic manoeuvres and the intensive use of chariotry,

<sup>(1)</sup> Ch. Kuentz, « La 'Stèle du mariage' de Ramsès II », *ASAE* 25 (1925), pp. 181 ff.; A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 265.

<sup>(2)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 233.

<sup>(3)</sup> E. Edel, *Ägyptische Ärzte und ägyptische Medizin am hethitischen Königshof. Neue Funde von Keilschriftbrüfen Ramses' II aus Boğazköy*, Göttingen 1976.

<sup>(4)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 234; *KUB*

XXVI, p. 33; H. Klengel, *Geschichte Syriens*, Teil 3. Historische, geographische und allgemeine Darstellungen, Berlin 1970, 241 ff.

<sup>(5)</sup> W. Helck, *Beziehungen* ..., p. 234.

<sup>(6)</sup> W. Helck, *loc. cit.*

<sup>(7)</sup> W. Helck, *loc. cit.*

<sup>(8)</sup> L. Habachi, « The Military Posts of Ramesses II on the Coastal Road and the Western Part of the Delta », *BIFAO* 80 (1980), pp. 13 ff.

demonstrate an advanced step in the military art. Likewise, the diplomatic manœuvres, reaching their peak with the treaty of year 21, had grown into a political pragmatism, hardly surpassed in ancient history. This remote pragmatism and its relatively ambiguous features, can be regarded in a sense, as an anticipation of the political analysis given by Machiavelli in his *II Principe*, and developped within the military field by Karl von Clausewitz with his work « Vom Krieg », converted since the last century by some European governments into doctrine <sup>(1)</sup>.

(1) O.J. Jalles, *On War*, 1943.

