

Carl von Clausewitz's Military Theory
An Examination

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I

Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) stands out from other writers of military classics because rather than looking at war as purely a matter of mathematical theory of probability and calculation, he instead examines it critically seeing war also as a political instrument. To do this he, broke war down into its fundamental parts and recognized them all as necessary aspects to his theory. This is unlike many other military theorists such as Antoine Henri Jomini (1779-1869) who placed no emphasis on political goals. Clausewitz's work was highly influenced by the Enlightenment and sought to examine warfare as a rational tool for political policy. Concerned with the political and military aspect, like Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), Clausewitz was addressing the concept of war as pertaining to a nation state or a political entity. Because of his grounding in Enlightenment values, Clausewitz examines war as a rational option in politics and not just a random act of human emotion. Thus his *On War*, though written in the early nineteenth century, continues to influence political and military leaders today because it remains an applicable study of the application of force between political entities, taking into account not just mathematical studies, but elements of human nature and the primacy of aligning political and military goals in war.

II

Secondary sources not only help in the understanding of the primary source material but also demonstrate how the topic has been treated by other historians, going so far as allowing a researcher to see how views on the topic may have changed over the years. *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography*¹, *Clausewitz: A Biography*², and *Clausewitz and the State*³, are quite

¹ Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007).

² Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1971).

³ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

obviously most interested in the life and development of Carl von Clausewitz. These three books contain their own analysis of his best known work *On War* but also use many of his other works and letters to his wife and friends to develop not only his theories but him as a person as well. The development of Clausewitz and his theories are closely tied in Parkinson's *Clausewitz: A Biography* and Paret's *Clausewitz and the State*. Both of these focus on the man and the specific events and trials that lead him to the theories of politics and war he is now best known for. Hew Strachan takes *Clausewitz's on War: A Biography* in a slightly different direction. Strachan first details Clausewitz's development then transitions into a discussion and analysis of his work.

Paret and Parkinson do disagree on some aspects of Clausewitz's life. The discrepancy between them is only on the matter of the Clausewitz family's ties to nobility and the reason for the discharge of Clausewitz's father. Despite this these biographies confirm some other much more important factors in his life. They give valuable insight into the education that Clausewitz received early in his military career as well as demonstrating his military background. The other important aspect that they agree on are his mentors and the authors that he had read, building a strong argument basing his education heavily in Enlightenment.

The other four monographs whose subject is Clausewitz, while having biographical sections, focus on the political or military implications of his theory on the world. *Philosophers of Peace and War* by W. B. Gallie⁴ and *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* by Richard Ned Lebow⁵ place *On War*, in a social context. While Clausewitz and his

⁴ Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵ Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

theory of war and politics are examined by both of these books his work is not their focus, rather it is part of their examination of historical political influences.

Philosophers of Peace and War is an examination five authors who wrote on peace and war that Gallie felt had the longest lasting impact on our modern perceptions of these two subjects. His desire was to create interest in knowledge of works of Kant, Clausewitz, Marx and Engle, and Tolstoy in the hope that students would delve back into these authors. Gallie openly admits to seeking only the “meta-narrative” of these works. *Philosophers of Peace and War* is a very short book and only give a brief overview and look at any of these authors. This is however Gallie’s primary goal. He only wished to give a bit of what each author was about and for this analysis and comparison to examine their overarching views on peace and or war. Gallie found that Clausewitz had removed himself from the more traditional analytical scope of the military, one that focuses on the technical aspects, and tackled it from a societal standpoint.

Lebow in *Tragic Vision of Politics* is using Clausewitz as part of an examination of the Cold War world. He uses writers who have influence the western views of politics and war as a means by which to base interaction between states and the direction of politics following the Second World War. What Lebow is writing specifically to is American hegemony and its imperialistic drives. He cautions draws interpretations form different time periods but the lesson he seeks to impress upon his readers form Clausewitz is the folly of allowing there to become a gulf between political and military policy.

The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct in the Two World Wars by Jehuda L. Wallach⁶ and *On*

⁶ Jehuda L. Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of the Two World Wars* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986).

Clausewitz: A Study of Military and Political Ideas by Hugh Smith⁷ are more militarily oriented works. As a result both these monographs focus much more on Carl von Clausewitz than the previous two discussed. Wallach as most would suspect when studying Clausewitz is looking to establish relations between the military and politics. He is however looking specifically at the effects that Clausewitz's ideas had on the German State in both World Wars. On the other hand Hugh Smith systematically breaks down the development and concept of Clausewitzian theory in an effort to establish the viability of *On War* into the present day. Both men arrive at the conclusion, much like Lebow and Gallie, which is that Clausewitz is more often than naught misinterpreted by his readers as they look at only *On War* and none of his other works which would aid in an interpretation of his theories. Wallach concludes that the Germans misinterpreted Clausewitz's theories and it was Schlieffen's ideas that predominantly shape the German war machine from 1914 to 1945. Smith's conclusion is that in present times Clausewitz's warning of maintaining the political object as the military object is more important than ever.

All four of these sources use both secondary and primary sources. Again, they all claim that the best way to interpret Clausewitzian theory is by having his other works and letters available. Unfortunately they are relatively inaccessible as many continue to be only in the original German. They share many secondary sources, of which *Clausewitz and the State* stands out as a cornerstone in background on Clausewitz. What can be learned from all of these sources is that there is a general consensus among English speaking scholars that earlier interpretations of *On War*, largely in French, do not utilize many of the other texts written by Clausewitz to aid

⁷ Hugh Smith, *On Clausewitz: A Study of Military and Political Ideas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

in the interpretation. Additionally these sources help to identify the intellectual background for Clausewitz's work *On War*.

III

To better understand his thoughts it is necessary to look at Carl von Clausewitz's early history and not just the time period in which he lived. Clausewitz was born on 1 June 1780. His father, Friedrich Gabriel, began the tradition of military service in the Clausewitz family. His suffered from having only tenuous claims to nobility as the *von* had been dropped by distant ancestors who wanted to enter into the clergy and teaching professions. However, when he entered the service, Friedrich began to use *von* once again. He served in the Seven Years' War as a Lieutenant in the Prussian Army. He was discharged due to an injury that crippled his right hand and he was given a civilian post of Royal tax collector in the town of Burg. Due to his father's military ties Clausewitz from a very early age was exposed to military affairs. Where his ancestors had pursued academic vocations and enjoyed a great deal of education, Clausewitz's education at the local school was meager. Friedrich enjoyed the company of soldiers and was often visited by his old comrades many of whom were still in the service of the Prussian Army. Clausewitz enlisted into the Prussian Army, following the path of his older brothers took, at the age of twelve. Because of his ties to nobility, no matter how feeble, Clausewitz was accepted into the service as a *Fahnenjunker*⁸, a flag officer, a position presented to anyone qualified and belonging to any noble family.

War opened the same year of his enlisting between France and Prussia as the French Revolution threatened to spill across the Rhine. After only a few months Clausewitz was promoted to Ensign, a full officer, and by the age of fifteen he was promoted to Second-

⁸ A *Fahnenjunker* is a cadet or officer-candidate the rank of which is equivalent to a corporal the lowest non-commissioned officer rank and who was responsible for bearing the regimental colors while on the march.

Lieutenant while serving in Prussia's Rhine Campaigns against the French during their revolution. He had received his second promotion by the time King Friedrich Wilhelm signed the Peace of Basle with France. Following his enrollment at the Military Academy in Berlin Clausewitz was assigned to Prince August, son of crown Prince Ferdinand heir to King Friedrich, as his adjutant. Shortly thereafter, in 1806, Prussia was at war again with the French, this time as Napoleon sought to bring the French Revolution to the rest of Europe. The Prussian military suffered two defeats at the battles of Jena and Auerstadt. Clausewitz was present at Auerstadt and captured by the French at Prenzlau when his unit surrendered which only served to reinforce in him the need for Prussian military reform. Until 1809 he would remain Prince August's Aid at which time Scharnhorst brought Clausewitz on to his staff. After their crushing defeat at the hands of the French, King Friedrich Wilhelm III appointed Heinrich Friedrich Karl Freiherr von Stein (1757-1831), a Prussian minister, to revamp the Prussian state. Additionally, the king appointed Clausewitz's old mentor Scharnhorst as president of his military reorganization commission. Clausewitz served on this commission eventually running Scharnhorst's office until 1810.⁹ Clausewitz was then reassigned to be the tutor for Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm IV and a professor at the Allgemeine Military Academy. Following this France and Russia would go to war and Clausewitz would not stand idle by while Prussia allowed itself to be occupied by France. He resigned from Prussian service and commissioned into the Russian Army from 1812 until in 1814 he was reaccepted back into Prussian service. Clausewitz went back to his native country's service when it assembled an army and, having formed an alliance with Austria and Russia, counter attacked back into France. By 1815 Carl von Clausewitz was promoted to Major-General and served as Chief-of-Staff for troops stationed at Koblenz. He was

⁹Strachen, *Clausewitz's On War*, 48.

reassigned in 1818 to the Allgemeines Militäres Institut again but only in an administrative capacity. Clausewitz's final post with a line unit was in 1830 when he went to serve as Chief of Staff for a force deployed to the Polish border before returning home in 1831 shortly before passing away.

During his service Clausewitz would not be assigned to any command capacity following the Rhine Campaigns against France. It was however, during his early experiences campaigning in France following the Rhine Campaigns that led him to the development of the importance of political goals for military action. The Rhine Campaigns ended after six months of the Prussian army wandering aimless and vulnerable in French territory following the fall of Mainz. Clausewitz watched as the army lost moral and a sense of direction, what started as an exciting and unimpeded invasion of France ended as a bedraggled and disenchanted army fearful of French reprisal withdrew to the east bank of the Rhine. Even though after this he would not receive a battlefield command does not say that he was unable to serve with distinction. Clausewitz came to be known as an excellent staff officer which resulted in his numerous administrative appointments. His experiences in the field as a staff officer not only exposed him to danger but also placed him in a position to deal with the larger scale supply, command, and administrative issues armies on campaign face regularly.

Clausewitz's long term experience with the folly of an old and traditionally stiff Prussian practices drove him to aid Scharnhorst with the reform of the Prussian military. The reforms that Scharnhorst and he desired to implement needed coinciding civil reform. Help came in the form of Heinrich Friedrich Karl Freiherr von Stein assigned to constitutional reform and a friend of Clausewitz. Military reform would not happen until the French occupation of Prussia following 1806 and the new political reforms Stein began to implement in Prussia. "A change to open

order battle tactics meant nothing less than a modification of the whole Prussian social system...”¹⁰ The theory Clausewitz wrote of came about as a result of his experience both on the field of war and politics.

Following the Peace of Basle Carl von Clausewitz was forced to further his education. Because there were at that time no more battles by which he could prove his ability a better education would be the best chance for him to receive any sort of advancement.¹¹ Following the treaty Clausewitz sought additional education on his own at first in the town of Neu-Rupin where his regiment was stationed for peacetime garrison. Here, amidst constant drilling, he would endeavor to educate himself as best he could and had also enrolled in a local school to improve upon his command of mathematics, history, and French. The education Clausewitz managed to get from his self motivated studies and what was offered at the school was lacking. To remedy his situation he enrolled in the Institution for the Young Officers in Berlin. Though he managed to meet the minimum standards on the entry exam Clausewitz would not have been able to attend the school if not for the patronage of Gerhard von Scharnhorst.¹² Clausewitz’s reassignment to the Military Academy was when he took the time to look back on his experiences and begin work on his book *On War*.¹³

Scharnhorst was at the time of Clausewitz’s arrival assigned to be the superintendent of the artillery department of the military academe. Here not only was Carl von Clausewitz introduced to a more formal military education in tactics and military history but was able to

¹⁰Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, 38-39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹² Gerhard von Scharnhorst (1755-1813) was a Hanoverian who transferred into the Prussian military and became a mentor and father figure to Carl von Clausewitz. He created an exclusive military society which promoted critical discussions on military tactics and technology of which Prince August was a member. Scharnhorst would eventually be called to help update the Prussian War machine.

¹³ Strachan, *Clausewitz’s On War*, 67.

attend philosophical lectures as well under Professor Kiesewttter at the College of Medicine whose lectures focused on the work of Immanuel Kant. Additionally, while studying at the academy Clausewitz took up reading the political philosophies of Dupan, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Machiavelli.¹⁴ He also read the works of the German poets Schiller, Goethe, Holderlin. With exception of Machiavelli, Clausewitz's education was dominated by the works of noted Enlightenment authors.¹⁵

IV

To understand Clausewitz's intellectual development it is important to not only understand his life and experiences but his times and the movement that is known as the Enlightenment as well. The Enlightenment was a Eurocentric intellectual movement the definition of which is difficult to define with certainty but most often what can be related to a few core values that would shape European thought. What can be said about the Enlightenment, with any certainty is that it was most concerned with the human condition as regulated by rationality. It was a movement away from the constraints of tradition, religion, and superstition where science, and not blind faith, was increasingly used to explain the world and its processes. This development of thought challenged not only the relation between people and the church but all social orders and affected all social and political strata of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ This resulted in the foundation of the United States on a constitution and rule by the people as well as

¹⁴ In both Roger Parkinson's *Clausewitz: A Biography* and Peter Paret's *Clausewitz and the State*, Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) is attributed to having had the greatest impact on Clausewitz's theories relating military ventures to political goals. Machiavelli is known for his works *The Prince* and *The Art of War*. In his writings, though not of the Enlightenment movement, advocated for logical and decisive decisions on the part of national leaders at the expense of all. He wrote that the key to being a successful leader being the maintenance of power both from internal and external forces. Clausewitz shared with Machiavelli only the aspects of the interplays of human nature, politics, and war and not the latter's views on war having timeless principles or the scholarship of ancient warfare. See Smith, *On Clausewitz*, 60.

¹⁵ For biographical information see Hew Strachan, Peter Paret, and Roger Parkinson.

¹⁶ Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

the French Revolution. However, its effects can also be seen in what became known as Enlightened Absolutism. In the case of Eastern Europe; Prussia, Austria, and Russia this developed in the monarch a sense of the need to modernize and assimilate new technologies even to allow greater freedoms in their social systems. These changes were made as a matter of pragmatism, in the hope that a modern state with citizens who enjoyed some amount of freedom would in the end prove to be a stronger more prosperous nations thereby ensuring their positions as benevolent monarchs. A profound change in Prussia especially is the adoption of accepting non-nobility or those who had questionable claims to nobility into the officer corps and in higher government on the basis of ability and talent rather than purely by birth.¹⁷ This was an early modification, and what truly allowed first Clausewitz's father then himself to become officers. It had become obvious that there was a need for more talent within the Prussian bureaucracy and military and as a result restrictions had become increasingly lax until the reforms that were instituted after 1806.

V

Written between campaigns in the later years of his life, Clausewitz would die of cholera on the Polish border, in conjunction with the reforms sweeping both the Prussian military and state. It was a consolidation, or would have been had he lived to see it to completion, of the lessons Clausewitz had learned from a life time of war as reflected in the Enlightenment values that he had grown up with. "*On War* seeks to reconcile the theoretical rigor demanded by the Enlightenment with the intractability of war claimed by the Counter-Enlightenment."¹⁸ Or, rather, Clausewitz was not only satisfied with pure theory but in exploring the limits of that theory with regard to the reality of the world in which all activity truly takes place. *On War* was

¹⁷Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, 15.

¹⁸ Smith, *On Clausewitz*, 68.

published in 1832 so it is important to remember that his work was published after his death. The result of this is that it is unrefined, at times choppy or repetitive and in other areas contradicts its self.

This section introduces and explores the fundamental concepts of Clausewitz's theory of war. The insight of *On War* is not just for the military minded it was written for "the Statesman and General" not two different people but what Clausewitz saw as a single person.¹⁹

War is an instrument of policy; it must necessarily bear its character, it must measure with its scale: the conduct of War, in its great features, is therefore policy itself, which takes up the sword in place of the pen, but does not on that account cease to think according to its own laws.²⁰

War then is also defined by the many political and social aspects of a state which reside outside of the activity of combat. Though it would seem an understatement in the present day Clausewitz put more emphasis on the importance of a political goal for war. Jomini is noted as summing up the political influence on war as no more important than that the civilian leader should chose his most able commander to lead the war.²¹ It is in essence a societal function the terms of which are determined by the people who prosecute it. As can be seen from the afore mentioned quote Clausewitz dealing with the dual nature of war which is to what he writes his work. There is both the General's desire to be victorious and defeat the enemy but also the Politician who has a political goal he seeks in the endeavor. One must be submissive to the other and in the case of Clausewitz; he believed it to be the military aim directed by the political.

Clausewitz felt that to write on war he needed to not only define the concept but elaborate on all of it's aspects as they influence and relate to one another. Without establishing this, his readers would have no starting point from which to reference his viewpoints. Book I "On the

¹⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Anatol Rapoport (London: Penguin Group, 1982), 121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

²¹ Colonel John Osgood (Retired), *Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini and Military Strategy*, <http://www.lexixa.com/mil/w12.htm>.

Nature of War” is a lengthy discussion that gives war a finite definition, examines a number of abstract military concepts, and acknowledges that war will have to face from an academic standpoint. In this first “book” he looks at the underlying currents of war, both in how it is waged and when it is waged. All successive books in *On War* are based on how war and its nature are defined and relate back to book I.

War, the act itself, is defined by Clausewitz as essentially a contest of strength. He opens with the view of it being little more than a duel on a grand scale. The endpoint of war being that through force one side will overcome the other and be able to impress its desires or “will” on the other. The victor then is the side that is able to dictate terms to the other. Clausewitz continues to whittle down this concept until he arrives at the simple statement of “War therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil [sic] our will.”²² Here also at his definition of war Clausewitz emphasizes that the means of war is physical forces and the object of war the object being the submission of the opponent.

It is in the sections following his definition of war that introduces concepts where Clausewitz contradicts himself albeit with good reason. When writing *On War* Clausewitz developed two different ways of considering war, and not from the aspect of fighting a war such as limited and total war. In translation these two ideas are best described as war in the abstract, also termed absolute war, and war in the real world. His development of these two ideas is simple. The absolute to Clausewitz represents war in its perfect form, unrestricted by the realities of existence.

Abstract war allows for what he calls the utmost use of force and exertion of powers, discussed later. Real war is the conduct of war as constrained by various factors as simple as

²² Ibid., 101.

reality or constraining “human” elements. The conflict between the abstract logical war and the reality of war is a recurring theme in the opening sections of *On War*. This ends up being much of his discussion on theory as, theoretical concepts work wonderfully in an abstract world but that reality has too many variables in it to be place in a simplified system. An absolute war is one where the involved parties have not context to one another social or political, there is no ambition or aggressiveness on either’s part and both lacking any concern for the past or present. It is what Hugh Smith calls “Pure War” which encapsulates the war as “a violent collision pure and simple” it is war without policy.²³

VI

One issue that Carl von Clausewitz covers in the nature of war is the concept he calls reciprocal actions. In his definition of war there are three of these reciprocal actions that escalate the hostilities between states at war with one another. These reciprocal actions arise from different aspects of Clausewitz’s nature of war. The first reciprocal action corresponds with the use of force, the second reciprocal action is dictated by the goal of war, and the third reciprocal action is the escalation of resources devoted to the war effort. All three of these reciprocal actions imply from the aspect of the absolute war that the conflict will escalate continuously until one side achieves victory over the other.

The first reciprocal action looks at the “utmost use of force” best described as the scale of force used in aggression. Force in this case is the means by which either side seeks to make the other capitulate. This is taking into account the methods of the military not resources committed to the conflict. Here Clausewitz is referring to the actions taken rather than units or equipment

²³ Smith, *On Clausewitz*, 112;

involved. “We therefore repeat our proposition, that War is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds; as one side dictates the law to the other, there arises a sort of reciprocal action, which logically must lead to an extreme.”²⁴ The greatest use of force would be the total destruction of an enemy’s ability to wage war such as attacking civilians, destroying infrastructure, or giving no quarter to surrendering soldiers. There is no grantee that moral and ethical compunction will limit this at all.²⁵ However there is some ground given by Clausewitz regarding moral limits to warfare, “...for in such dangerous things as War, the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst...” and in the same section “If the Wars of civilized people are less cruel and destructive than those of savages, the difference arises from the social condition of both States and in their relations to each other.”²⁶ This first reciprocal action then is that one state will use some amount of force to impose it’s will on its opponent who will in return respond with a greater use of force ore suffer defeat.

The second reciprocal action is in regard to the primary goal in war. As the goal of a war is, as in wrestling, to impose one’s will on another the goal in war is to eliminate the others ability to resist. War then can only end, again in the absolute sense, when one side has disarmed the other. So long as this is the case war will continue until victory has been assured and there enemy no longer poses any threat of violence. “As long as the enemy is not defeated, he may defeat me; then I shall be no longer my own master; he will dictate the law to me as I did to him.”²⁷ The second reciprocal action is based in fear of retaliation for actions previously taken during the course of the war.

²⁴ von Clausewitz, *On War*, 103.

²⁵ Smith, *On Clausewitz*, 88.

²⁶ von Clausewitz, *On War*, 102.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

The final reciprocal action is the fullest exertion of powers. Powers here refers more to the resources such as people and materials that contribute to the war effort. The third reciprocal action then is that as one side increases the resources it is devoting to the war effort it will gain and advantage which its opponent will seek to overcome. There are two sources of power one being physical in the sense of resources available and the other in the drive of a nation to continue in its efforts. “This is expressed by the product of two factors which cannot be separated, namely, the sum of available means and the strength of the Will.”²⁸ The concept developing from this reciprocal action will have varying interpretations in succeeding years.²⁹ The “Will” returns later in the discussion as an important aspect of success against an opponent.

The need for reciprocal actions stems from Clausewitz’s logical approach. Clausewitz reasons his way through the theory by way of dialectic. He forms the argument and defends it in as if in conversation to help show the line of thought. As he does so it becomes more apparent that there is a need for a system in which two political entities would continue on the path to war.³⁰ This scientific approach of hypothesis, observations, analysis stems from the Enlightenment’s emphasis on a scientific methodology. As in any other science Clausewitz was looking for an explanation for the currents moving states to war and then driving them forward to extremes.

When looking at war Clausewitz has to contend with again reality and theory. This is in many cases considered to be his greatest effort and contribution to military scholarship. There are three factors that he attributes to causing variables in war forcing it out of the realm of the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ This can be seen as either “total war” or attacking not only the enemy’s troops but the land itself in an effort to reduce their resource base or to destroy their will. The other interpretation can be that of “totalitarian war” or all the aspects of the state; economic, industrial, political, to supply the war effort. See Hew Strachan, 19-20.

³⁰ Strachan, *Clausewitz’s On War*, 84.

absolute. He uses these three factors to show that the reality of war is not only both a play on chance and a logical endeavor that can be calculated but also possesses the addition of the random unpredictable nature of the peoples involved. The factors are developed as the people, the military, and the government all of which contribute to every aspect of how when and why a war is fought. Ultimately these things and the clash between them create the unpredictability of war.³¹ The contemplation of unpredictable factors of the human element was one of the things that set Clausewitz apart from his most well known contemporary Antoine-Henri Jomini.³² Of war Clausewitz writes:

War is... a wonderful trinity, composed of the original violence of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct; of the play of probabilities and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul; and of the subordinate nature of a political instrument, by which it belongs purely to the reason.³³

Each part of this trinity is interconnected to Clausewitz. They represent the all elements of war that must be accounted for. Unlike Jomini, Clausewitz felt that it was necessary to develop not necessarily a strategic theory for war but to look at the fundamental and unchanging aspects of war and develop an understanding of their relation to develop a flexible theory of war.³⁴ Given a background in a reorganizing military having fought an entrenched dogma of military principles to achieve reform, Clausewitz chose to focus on a theory that would transcend the restriction technology and tactics.

People, the participants who carry out the actions involved in the given situation, are a constant variable in any event war or otherwise. Where previously military theorists had focused

³¹ Ibid., 179.

³² Antoine-Henri Jomini was a French officer during the French Revolution and much of the succeeding Napoleonic Wars though in 1813 he left French service for Russia after incurring feelings of unjust treatment. Jomini was the most well known military author at the time as he wrote in French and focused on scientific breakdowns of strategy leaving out philosophical discussions making his work more accessible to military readers.

³³ von Clausewitz, *On War*, 106.

³⁴ Osgood, *Military Strategy*.

on the mathematical probabilities involved it was always done so while leaving out the human element.³⁵ Until Clausewitz attempted to tackle the problems created by these immeasurable factors military theorists simply left them out of their equations and focused on the calculable elements of war. These previous conclusions were falsified; Clausewitz's contemporaries and forerunners on military writing had simply assumed unpredictable elements to be even between the involved parties.³⁶ The incalculable did not fit well into the scientific methodology that was so desirable to the enlightened thinker.

"People" stands for the population of nations as a whole and what Clausewitz was concerned about with them was their support of the effort of war. He considers this aspect of war to be "blind instinct". The people are most prone to being swayed by emotions. Therefore, their ferocity in combat, if they are soldiers, or their willingness to sacrifice for the war effort, in civilians, is dependant on culture. This is considered the irrational portion of war. It includes the sentiments and feelings involved in the conflict.

The general and his army are given to the realm of probability. The human aspect is taken from the army in this factor as the motivations of the people who make up the army are tied to the previous factor. Clausewitz sees the military's part in war is one of probabilities and calculations of strength both inherent strength of arms, technology, and numbers or by position on the field. These are the things that the General is most concerned with at the moment of battle and make war for him a deadly game of chance.

The government is the logical element in Clausewitz's trinity of war. Because he has defined war as being a tool of policy it is then the responsibility of the government body to set a

³⁵ Wallach, *The Dogma*, 5.

³⁶ Clifford J. Rogers, "Clausewitz, Genius, and the Rules," *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 4 (2002): 1170.

logical or military goal that will reasonably achieve its political goal. For Clausewitz this is the only pure place of logic and reason as government bodies must ensure that the military goal and political goal are aligned or else the war loses all meaning.

With regard to disarming the enemy there is another trinity in Clausewitz's thinking. To disarm a nation he says there are three things to keep in mind with regard to the enemy; military power, the country, and the will. To achieve victory then enemy has to be disarmed and therefore their military power must be eliminated and their country conquered so that another force cannot be raised. Clausewitz adds that these two things can occur but in the end so long as the enemy possesses the will to fight the previous achievements mean nothing. He writes that to break the will of the enemy what must happen for there to be a victor is that one of the opponents must find that the odds are no in their favor and that it is not worth while to continue the conflict.

So then as the primary goal in a war is to disarm the enemy the best way to achieve this is to convince the enemy that war is not a feasible to continue, or even start. "As War is no act of blind passion, but is dominated by the political object, therefore the value of that object determines the measure of the sacrifice by which it is to be purchased."³⁷ Simply put when a war is conducted it is done so at the consideration what is expected to be gained from the conflict as well as what is accepted as a reasonable cost to buy that gain. This is a concept that was driven home during his first campaign, while yet a boy he recognized that his unit's aimless wandering in the French country side was a pointless endeavor that was in all a wasteful risk as there was no guiding objective for the regiment.³⁸ On the other hand this also represents the amount of force a state would be willing to apply to the enemy. It is not only advocating for frugal use of resources but of moderating what actions are acceptable in an army's conduct of

³⁷ von Clausewitz, *On War*, 125.

³⁸ Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, 27.

war. Victory then comes when one side can convince the other that this is no longer a point to continue hostilities. Rather, when one the will of one side can be overcome. Outside of this the threat of continued conflict still looms.

Carl von Clausewitz's theory relies upon what he outlines as the nature of war as previously described. On the whole then the key factors to his theory are that: First, war is an instrument of policy, second, as war is a tool of policy the political object will determine then forces and resources necessary to achieve success, and third, states arrive at war and continue conflict based on reciprocal actions which will ever push each other to an extreme. Essentially all other aspects of *On War* return to these three principles in some manner.

Final extraneous elements to Clausewitz's theory that do not necessarily return to one of the parts of the nature of war are the genius for war and the value of studying history. Both of these points appear in his book and demonstrate values of the Enlightenment but do not specifically return to his binding of military and political ideas in his theory so much as the combination of rationality and realism. Genius is focused on the part of the general who commands the army, but can also be likened to commander in chief of the military. History is important of the grounding in reality it brings to the theory of war, in this case his theory. Study of the past is important for the statesman and general for it helps them to recognize the instability of theories that ignore the context of society.

We know very well that this word is used in many significations which are very different both in extent and nature, and that with many of these significations it is a very difficult task to define the essence of Genius; but as we neither profess to be philosopher nor grammarian, we must be allowed to keep to the meaning usual in ordinary language, and to understand by 'genius' a very high mental capacity for certain employments.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid., 138.

As can be seen from the selection, genius simply denotes someone with an outstanding mental aptitude for military applications. This is in converse to Jomini who rather than emphasizing flexibility and genius instead focuses on concepts of geometrical military theory.⁴⁰ This concept of genius, or aptitude, is all encompassing in *On War* and is not simply limited to a commander's capacity for the tactical and strategic with regard to the conduct of one in war. It carries over into the individuals fighting as well. In this section the additional ramifications of genius are that of courage and individual imitative, or the will to act of one's own accord in the conduct of a battle. This has multiple applications as one of the reforms that Clausewitz, along with Scharnhorst pushed for in the Prussian military was that of increasing the use of skirmishers in the infantry.⁴¹

Though that is not to say that genius has no place in the mind of the leadership involved where "Good generalship requires effective responses to rapidly changing political, strategic and tactical circumstances. Assessing all these factors is a 'colossal task,' and beyond the powers of the normal person."⁴² On the part of the leadership in combat there are a multitude of stressful factors that demand their attention. To this Clausewitz writes "resolution is indebted to a special direction of the mind for its existence, a direction which belongs to a strong head rather than to a brilliant one."⁴³ He is referring here to the stresses of battle, that while under the pressure of combat it is not simply enough to be intelligent, even to the point of being termed brilliant. Rather, it is of greatest importance that one retains their mental capacity to continue to forward toward the objective. The scope of this can be limited to another trio, where first the leader can apply the rules, of war, to a military situation, second they can maintain the presence of mind in

⁴⁰ Osgood, *Military Strategy*.

⁴¹ Parkinson, Clausewitz, xx.

⁴² Richard, *Tragic Vision*, 196.

⁴³ von Clausewitz, *On War*, 143.

combat to make a decision and finally have internalized a logical process by which to analyze the data quickly.⁴⁴ He was writing of a talented individual. He did not in any way reference class or nobility. As was reflected in the currents of the Prussian Officer Corps, leadership and ranks, with exception of the royal line, was not a justifying reason for command.⁴⁵

History took a special importance to Clausewitz. They were a means by which to study war and the influence of social and political factors in combat. History, in effect, offered case studies for him to lend cultural contexts to battle. Clausewitz notes that there are many things in military theory that can be calculated. As has been discussed this is how many of his contemporaries and predecessors developed their concepts, purely on the basis of calculation and logic leaving out irritating irregularities. As Clausewitz had already developed a sense that variable elements must also be included in theory the best way to acknowledge these was to examine their effects in engagements.

That iron ball to which powder has given a velocity of 1,000 feet in a second, smashes every living thing which it touches in its course is intelligible in itself; experience is not required to tell us that the Physical is not the only effect which we have to study, it is the moral which we are in search of, and that can only be ascertained by experience; and there is no other way of learning and appreciating it but by experience.⁴⁶

While Clausewitz endorses the use of history to find the moral truths of war, he also cautions about verifying the historical truth in the account. Because he noted that the viability of the history studied would decrease the further into the historical record a source came from, he studied much more the wars of the seventeenth century where many of his contemporaries

⁴⁴ Rogers, "Genius", 1175.

⁴⁵ Often members of the Royal Line were brought up in the military society of Prussia and were assigned as Commanders in Chief to various regiments, however most often these positions were honorary and leadership of the unit was nominal. Command usually fell to a second in command who was a career professional.

⁴⁶ von Clausewitz, *On War*, 232.

focused on classical studies.⁴⁷ Clausewitz was even critical of Machiavelli whose political ideas he admired very much. His criticism of the Renaissance writer's military strategy was the same that he found fault with in his peers, that of being entirely too focused on classical military literature.⁴⁸ Clausewitz did not believe there was an undeniable truth to war and that the battles of antiquity were too dated to help on the modern battlefield.

VII

The study of Clausewitz tends toward the development of him and his work as a product of the Enlightenment. The secondary sources gathered for this examination of Clausewitz tend toward either biographical sources or political analysis of his work. As expected in the monographs their authors develop extensive biographical detail regarding Clausewitz to form a base by which they can examine his work. Outside the general consensus of all these sources of Clausewitz's background they also seem to defend him as being simply misunderstood and treated unfairly. Though no disparaging text was found for this examination this is likely to one of the key reasons why *On War* itself was slow to produce a following.

Carl von Clausewitz's work was largely inaccessible to the rest of the world. Because of its posthumous publishing *On War* was, and continues to be, difficult to read. It did not gather many readers even in Germany for some time after its publishing. It was considered too difficult to read and as it tended towards a philosophical discussion of war. This was in a time when the preferred understanding of military theory was scientific it was slow to attract the attention of its assumed military audience, especially when other contemporary works were more in line with the standard scientific approach and had been published in more than just German. *Clausewitz's on War: A Biography* takes the most interest in *On War's* various translations and development.

⁴⁷ Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War*, 99-100.

⁴⁸ Azar Gat, "Machiavelli and the Decline of the Classical Notion of the Lessons of History in the Study of War," *Military Affairs* 52, no. 4 (1988): 204.

The first English translation was not published until 1873 and the book itself became popular in France before it ever did in the nations of its mother tongue.

Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* continues to appear on the reading lists of war colleges all over the world. He arrived at a concept for military strategy that tried to overcome the dogma of his age in the use of a scientific theory that he believed to be too rigid to appropriately explain war and its relationship to the state. Through personal experience in a lifetime of war and study Clausewitz arrived at a conclusion that the military arm of a state needed to be given a political aim if utilized. Without this kind of direction, as he witnessed as a young lieutenant, an army is likely to wander aimlessly and at its own peril. In effect it becomes a waste of resources and runs the risk of destruction with no benefit to the nation. He relates the practical and theoretical and advocates for the study of war to demonstrate the incalculable in war.

In the context of the Enlightenment in Germany the military reform that Clausewitz advocated for and that are reflected in *On War* shows a trend in changing thought regarding warfare in Prussia. Clausewitz's ideas were arrived at through a combination of his personal education and experiences fighting in the Napoleonic Wars. Through his influences both martial and domestic Clausewitz drafted a military theory that reflected the need for flexibility and change that could be seen not just in the Prussian state. As he had to break from the scientific method, held in the highest esteem during the Enlightenment, it can be said of Clausewitz that he wrote to the Counter-Enlightenment. However, his meticulous breakdown of war into its fundamental parts and the sharp examination of those parts is a result of his Enlightenment background.

Of Prussia and its culture much can be learned from studying *On War*. When writing this book Clausewitz was part of a movement to reform the Prussian army to be more effective. As

stated above, this could not happen without also a change in the social system of Prussia, it would have been impractical, as well as dangerous for the monarchy, to reform the military without seeing first to its own domestic structures. This also shows how very close the civilian state and the military machine were interwoven in Prussia.

On War itself falls in an ambiguous place in academics. It is in essence military theory; however strategy and tactics are of less concern than the fundamental nature of war and its reflection on society. It had been read by statesmen, academics, and military professionals. All have found some lesson to take away from it, either in appropriately directing military operations or simply learning new insights into a militarized society. *On War* is more than purely military theory, it has a place as an item of intellectual history and social history as well.

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