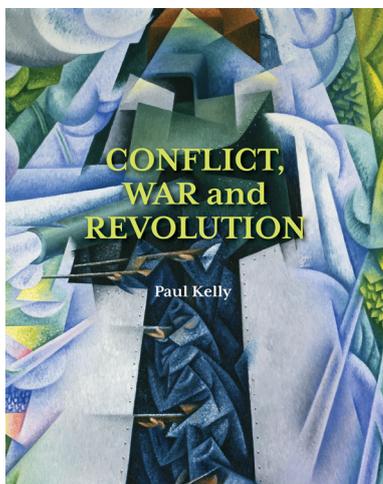


# Clausewitz – The professionalisation of war

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## Chapter 8 from



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## CHAPTER 8

# Clausewitz

## The professionalisation of war

In histories of political thought, Clausewitz is a rare and unfamiliar figure. When he is discussed, it is mostly as a footnote to discussions of the state, or as a marginal figure who is chiefly of interest to a small professional readership concerned with strategy and military affairs. Instead, I bring Clausewitz into the foreground of international political thought by arguing that his great work *On War* is as much a work of political theory as any of the other texts discussed here. Clausewitz played a central part in the climate of state and military theory that grew up in 19th-century Prussia in response to the French Revolution, the idea of the rights of man and the citizen, and the subsequent wars for national liberation by the French republic, which transformed into the long-lasting Napoleonic War. The methodology of Clausewitz's military theory was a development of a new policy science. His account of the concept of war and the place of *genius* and *friction* align with a Romantic critique of crude Enlightenment rationalism. His concept of the 'paradoxical trinity' covers the interplay between the people, the army and the government. Critics have asked whether there is actually one trinity or two different 'trinities' at play in Clausewitz's work. Either way, the 'trinity' illustrates the deep interplay of (historic or popular) hatreds, chance, and reason or considered policy as the dynamic forces that explain war and drive international relations. Clausewitz also analysed the priority of offence and defence in the conduct of military operations. Finally, I discuss Clausewitz's influence in an age that followed him, characterised by increased violence and scale of war.

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[I]t is clear that war should never be thought of as something autonomous. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 88)

The modern discipline of international relations grew out of the traumatic experiences of World Wars I and II. From the middle years of the 1914–1918 conflict there was an upsurge of interest in plans for perpetual peace and a desire to seek a modern version in the post-war settlement, implemented via the League of Nations. These plans to arbitrate between interstate disputes failed to address the chaos that led up to World War II in 1939. Finding a better solution preoccupied key figures in international relations' refounding as a discipline focused on better understanding the actual conduct of interstate politics and mitigating its consequences (Carr [1939] 2016). The first founding can be seen as a key source of idealism and normative international relations, and the second as the founding of realist international relations, given the failure of naïve idealism. At the heart of both approaches is the problem of war and how it can be contained.

The disciplinary conflict between idealism and realism reflected the extraordinary manifestation of war as an historical activity in the 20th and into the 21st centuries. In just over a century the rapid technological advancement of military means and capabilities transformed the 19th-century experience of war. The century began dominated by a traditional technology of bayonet charges, rifles and artillery. By 1918 the means of war had expanded to include poison gas, motorised artillery, tanks, machine guns and aircraft. Aeroplanes engaged in traditional duels in the sky in dogfights, whilst giant airships brought war to domestic populations with the aerial bombing of towns and cities. By the end of the 1939–1945 war the expansion and development of technology included jet propulsion, rockets and nuclear explosives. These developments appeared to have rendered the practice of traditional warfare redundant, because nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons upset the point of war as an assertion of state power through the idea of 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD). Yet, whilst the Cold War appeared to have replaced the idea of a 'hot' or direct conflict between the ideological adversaries of the liberal democratic west and Communist east, more conventional wars continued to be waged, by the great powers in Korea and by proxies almost everywhere else. The collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War in 1989 did not see a move towards peace but only a resurgence of war as a tool of global pacification in the two Gulf Wars (1991 and 2003) and the 'War against Terror' following 9/11. War remains prevalent in the early 21st century, as it was in all previous periods. Despite many attempts to displace the preoccupation with war in political and international theory, the central significance of interstate and guerrilla conflicts has not reduced there either.

The obsession with war in international theory is a legacy of the dominance of realism as an approach in international relations and the idea of state sovereignty in political theory and philosophy. War remains a problem that

different styles of political thought try to manage, contain and eradicate or limit. For Hobbes, the state is the bulwark against the ever-present threat of war. For Locke, a properly constituted state defends against the challenge of unrestrained absolutism (which often fuels wars). For Rousseau, war is a consequence of the international system. War is also a central part of the moralist tendency of much political theory, where the interesting questions are about how it should be disciplined and used within a moral and ethical context. It is no coincidence that just war theories prioritise the concept of justice over war.

Despite the best efforts of Machiavelli, political theory and international theory still presuppose that wars need to be specially justified before the tribunal of justice or interest. This can obscure an important set of questions about what war is and how one should actually theorise it as a recurring feature of human experience, and not an aberration that arises solely from the failure of politics.

When philosophers and political theorists write about war, it is usually as a distraction from something more important, whereas soldiers, especially generals, tend to write about their own direct experience. Soldiers tend to be practical individuals (until very recently always men), a welcome trait because when they get things wrong people literally get hurt. Yet, that also means military thinkers rarely achieve a sufficiently disengaged experience to generalise usefully about war, over and above a reflection on a particular strategy or set of tactics. They tend to alternate between an historical perspective, on the one hand, and a practical manual on the other, and so they speak to narrow audiences.

The genius of Clausewitz is that he theorises about war in the context of practical military experience, but without collapsing into the perspective of an historian. Whilst high-level strategic thinking is part of his great 1832 book *On War*, his genius is to say something general about the activity of war, the profession of arms, and the place of wars and military conflicts in the conduct of states and the relations between them. More importantly, in so doing Clausewitz introduces a style of political thinking that should be characterised as the technology of the state – the application of science to a practical policy problem. This technocratic approach to politics first appeared in the late 18th century under the heading of ‘police’ or what would now be considered public policy, and went on to have an impact on political thinkers as diverse as Jeremy Bentham and George Friedrich Hegel. The approach expanded rapidly in the 19th century, when the state claimed many new competences in spheres of policy that were almost unheard of before, like welfare and mass education. Policy-relevant thinking developed first and most extensively out of the work of military thinkers. Clausewitz recognised war as perhaps the oldest and most distinctive activity of political communities, and yet also placed it in the broadest contemporary context. He saw modern war is an activity only made possible by the new bureaucratic states and the system of relations that they entail. This is what makes Clausewitz’s great work not just an adjunct to regular political thought, or one amongst the many founders of modern military strategy. It

is instead a significant contribution to understanding the effective pursuit of politically set policy, albeit by other means.

### Life and career

Clausewitz's is an intriguing figure because he was an academic soldier in a military culture where even staff officers were mostly involved in practical teaching and conducting field rides for the youth of the Prussian aristocracy, from whom the senior officer class were drawn. His interests were broad and philosophical, as well as practical and historical, and his model of science as a systematic ordering of knowledge was comprehensive. Like his philosophical contemporary Hegel (who died in the cholera pandemic that swept through Berlin in 1831 and probably also killed Clausewitz), he sought to comprehend an activity and mode of practical experience, rather than deduce campaign success from a series of empirical premises derived from military history and local geography. Yet, Clausewitz was also a practical soldier. Throughout his life and career he sought a general command in the field and not just a post in the lecture room of the staff college.

Carl was born in 1780 into the relatively modest middle-class Clausewitz family, which had some military and academic connections. His father had been commissioned as a junior officer in the Prussian Army as a result of Frederick the Great's relaxation of the barriers on entering the Prussian officer corps during the Seven Years War (1756–1763). However, he was retired out of the army at the end of the war as Frederick sought to reassert the social exclusivity of the Prussian officer corps to the landed nobility or *Junkers*. Clausewitz followed his father's profession and obtained a commission into the 34th Infantry Regiment at the age of 12. Yet, he was already pursuing wide and disciplined reading that was to form the basis of his writings later in life. He first saw military service at the early age of 13, during the Prussian Army's 1793 role in containing and forcing back the new French army of the First Republic.

With the end of that period of active campaigning along the Rhine and in the Vosges, the next five years of his early career were spent in garrison duty in a small town, a posting made bearable for him by access to the library of Prince Henry, brother of Frederick the Great. Clausewitz made good use of this time with systematic study that brought him to the attention of his superiors, and in 1801 he entered the *Kriegsakademie*, or War College. At the time this was led by General Gerhard von Scharnhorst, an enterprising and important military thinker and reformer. Unlike most of the senior Prussian officers, Scharnhorst was an artilleryman, rather than an infantry or cavalry soldier. He was also a Hanoverian, rather than Prussian, yet his authority was derived from success in the field. Clausewitz soon became a protégé, and his intellectual and practical ambition made him an ally in the reform of Prussian military culture and the organisation of the Prussian state, within which the military class was so

central. The challenge Scharnhorst wrestled with was the rise and success of the new French Revolutionary armies. On the face of it these defied aristocratic conventional wisdom about military organisation, command structures and the class of officers. Many of the leading French generals had risen from nowhere. In addition, French modes of organising supply, administration and planning were radically different, yet French armies achieved considerable success.

However, the most important factor that attracted Scharnhorst's attention was the transformative role played by the revolutionary ideology or national 'spirit' of the French troops. Their Revolution had unleashed a powerful ideological factor that motivated these armies in a struggle for liberation against the established power of the old order. The place of war and the role of the state and nation in the new order unleashed by the French Revolution were to form the backdrop of Clausewitz's own thinking about war.

Clausewitz graduated in 1803 (top of his class) and became adjutant to the son of his regiment's colonel in chief. He also met Marie von Brühl, who became his wife after an extended courtship. Marie played an important part in his life as an intellectual companion. (It was under her direction that Clausewitz's extensive writings were edited and published as *On War* in 1832, not long after his death.) Clausewitz's new commission was to be tested when Prussia went to war with France in 1806. He served in the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt and was captured following defeat. Captivity for senior officers was a relatively benign affair at this time, and the most senior were often effectively returned following a ransom. Clausewitz remained in captivity until 1808 and acquired a lifelong hostility to the French that was to inform his subsequent career. After his return from captivity, Clausewitz rejoined Scharnhorst, who was now based in Königsberg reorganising the Prussian Army, and continued to serve as his loyal reforming ally.

Yet, when Prussia concluded an alliance with France in 1812, Clausewitz took the extraordinary step of resigning his commission and joining other Prussian officers now in the service of the Russian emperor, Alexander I, just as Napoleon was commencing his campaign in Russia. In this capacity, Clausewitz took part in the great Battle of Borodino in 1812. Although Napoleon's armies won a technical victory over General Kutusov here, and went on to occupy Moscow, the battle marked the high point of the French armies' Russian campaign. The Russian forces survived to harry and destroy their enemies in their long winter retreat back to the western borders. Clausewitz was also the intermediary in organising the capitulation of the Prussian forces serving with France and their going over to the Russians. This important act began the alliance of Russia, Prussia and Britain that led to Napoleon's eventual defeat in 1815 at Waterloo.

Despite this new alliance, Frederick William III did not readmit Clausewitz into the Prussian Army until 1814, and always denied him a major field command. He returned to Berlin as director of the War College, but was not given any role in the further reform of the military or Prussian state. It was during this period that he began drafting *On War* and his studies of the Napoleonic

campaigns. In 1830 he was assigned to an artillery command in Breslau following fears of a new war after uprisings in Paris and Poland. But the war never came and instead Clausewitz's last enemy was the cholera epidemic. He was charged with organising a *cordon sanitaire* to prevent the Berlin epidemic spreading out into Germany, but instead he fell victim to the disease and died in 1831.

Although the subsequent reputation of the book later grew to be considerable, for some time after its publication it had only a limited impact and Clausewitz was overshadowed by others. When his reputation first began to be recovered, it actually was due to a misreading of Clausewitz as the philosopher of Prussian militarism, a creed that was to reach its reputational nadir during World War I. In fact, Clausewitz was anything but a caricature unthinking Prussian militarist, but neither was he a liberal democrat. He was a technocratic soldier with an understanding not only of the art of war but more importantly its place in the new bureaucratic state that emerged in Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the defeat of Napoleon. His recognition of war as the fundamental technology of the modern state makes him especially relevant in our own time, as new conceptions of the site of politics emerge.

### Prussia and political theory: *On War* in context

Clausewitz's dual identities as a patriotic Prussian and a soldier were to become inextricably connected in European history in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some later critics have accused Clausewitz of being the theorist of 'Prussianism', a militaristic and authoritarian ideology of politics that was linked to Kaiser Wilhelm II's brutal policy in World War I, and was later seen as enabling the worst excesses of Nazism during World War II. But the main culprits behind 'Prussianism' are not exclusively military figures. The great German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (who taught at Berlin University in the latter years of Clausewitz's life) was also criticised by L.T. Hobhouse and Karl Popper for justifying the same culture of militarism and politics of authoritarian nationalism, with its prioritisation of reason of state over morality and ethics (Hobhouse 1918; Popper 2011). The Prussian ideology was one of the targets against which the modern liberal democratic view of the state developed in 20th-century Anglo-American thought. The convergence of the character of the Prussian state, and its link to one of the high points of German philosophical culture, forms the central context for understanding Clausewitz's work.

Clausewitz was born in the last years of the rule of Frederick II, or Frederick the Great, who consolidated the territory and the power of Prussia in his 46-year reign through a series of wars, which left his kingdom a major European power and a site for the emergence of a resurgent German political culture. The Hohenzollern kingdom emerged from a small Baltic duchy with its capital at Königsberg. It was characterised by a distinctive administrative

culture and taxation system that allowed the state to sustain a standing army that was disproportionate to its size and those of its neighbours. The large size of the military and its officer class integrated the landed nobility into a distinctive military culture that was also reflected in the personal character of Frederick the Great's predecessors. Frederick's father applied military-style discipline to the education and sometimes brutal upbringing of his son. Owing to the size of its military, and the dynastic opportunism of its royal family, Prussia was heavily involved in the European wars of the 18th century that saw the slow eclipse of Poland–Lithuania as a major central European power – squeezed between Russia, Austria and the rise of Prussia. Frederick the Great's own career was dominated by his success in the Silesian wars of the 1740s and 1750s against Austria that absorbed parts of contested Polish territory into the Prussian kingdom. The latter part of these conflicts was an extension of the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War. The demands of the Seven Years War relaxed the rigid class basis of the Prussian officer class (thus enabling the rise of Clausewitz's own father, noted above). However, this process was temporary and subsequently reversed: Prussia remained a rigidly stratified and ultra-conservative political culture.

However, Frederick the Great was not merely a militaristic monarch. He was also a patron of the arts and philosophy and encouraged the growth of an intellectual culture that challenged the dominance of France as the leading exemplar of European Enlightenment. He invited the French philosopher Voltaire to live with him at his palace at Sanssouci near Potsdam, and Frederick was as famous for his intellectual salons and dinners as he was for his exploits on the battlefield. He surrounded himself with a male court and, though married, he was almost certainly homosexual and died childless. He was succeeded by his nephew, who inherited a powerful central European state that through dynastic connections was consolidating many of the German principalities into a single political unit, and a vibrant philosophical culture that would lead European thought in the reaction against the legacy of the French Enlightenment in the wars of the French Revolution.

This late flowering of German Enlightenment thought began with Immanuel Kant in the East Prussian city of Königsberg, and continued in Berlin with his successors and Clausewitz's contemporaries, J.G. Fichte and G.W.F. Hegel. These thinkers, in turn, provided the inspiration for the Romantic movement, as a reaction against the abstract individualism of Kant's ethical theory or the French 'rights of man and the citizen' that became the battle slogan of the French Revolutionary armies. This Romantic movement contributed a new interest in subjective experience, creativity and the ideal of genius. It also directed attention to the contexts in which genius and creativity take place, such as our relationship to nature, and to the languages and cultures within which identities are formed and through which artistic creativity is expressed. This attention to culture and language prompted the development of theories of nationality and national identity, which in turn inspired the political

ideology of nationalism that developed as reaction to the universalism of the rights of man.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was undoubtedly one of the greatest philosophers of any age. Beginning with the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), his critical philosophy transformed subsequent western philosophy. In this work Kant set out to establish a Copernican Revolution in philosophy that changed the way in which the basic questions of metaphysics and epistemology were understood. His predecessors had sought to derive a secure basis for knowledge through a priori deductions from reason (Descartes), or through sense experience (Locke and Hume), which resulted in a stand-off between rationalism and empiricism. Kant sought to overcome this opposition by a transcendental argument that presupposed the possibility of knowledge, and sought the conditions of that knowledge in an account of the rules of understanding that order our experience. This process sidestepped the traditional problem of scepticism, which denied the possibility of certain knowledge, by arguing that scepticism is not genuine but simply a consequence of misleading philosophical theories. Kant's solution to the problem of knowledge was to show how the human mind orders experience through the application of rules of understanding to sensible intuitions, so that we can have certain knowledge about the world. This shift of attention to the structure of understanding of the knowing subject entailed a distinction between the world as experienced (the phenomenal world) and the world of things in themselves (the noumenal world), about which we can have no direct experience. The 'two worlds' view and the primacy of the subject (or knower) was to transform subsequent philosophy as his successors challenged or developed these views. With its possibility of an unconditioned subject beyond the world of experience and knowledge, the two worlds view also opened up Kant's account of moral philosophy – because it rendered possible an account of freedom (and therefore moral responsibility) in a world of causation and necessity that had otherwise seemed to threaten the possibility of free agency. Kant's moral philosophy of unconditional duties has also been a perennial starting point for all subsequent non-naturalistic theories of morality. His theory of moral agency is related to but does not prescribe his account of political philosophy, which was his third major contribution.

Where his moral theory is an account of internal freedom and the moral agent's ability to engage in free moral judgement and action, Kant's political philosophy posits a world of free individuals. Their agency and claims to freedom and property (that follows from that agency) presuppose the idea of an omni-lateral power (one that applies to and includes all individuals within its scope) that determines the extent of those claims of subjective rights as public rights. Kant's political theory argues that the claim of freedom and equality that is central to previous social contract theories presupposes the necessity of a state, as the omni-lateral power that determines individual rights claims. This idea, that the state was the presupposition of freedom and equality and

that political obligation was a precondition of free agency, was the beginning of a tradition of state theory that was closely associated with Prussia. It was also attractive to the official conservative political culture of the Prussian kingdom, because it overthrew the idea of a fundamental confrontation between the claims of the state and the rights of man. Although Kant's philosophy was revolutionary, his politics certainly was not.

That said, it did transform the philosophical landscape of his successors, J.G. Fichte and Hegel, both of whom continued and extended the idea of the state as the solution to the problem of individual rights and political obligation. Fichte's philosophy developed as a reaction against Kant's dualism between the phenomenal and the noumenal. Fichte replaced it with an idealist philosophy of consciousness that rejects the need for an account of the noumenal world as a grounding of consciousness. This rejection of the grounding of consciousness was taken up by Hegel in his philosophical logic. For both Fichte and Hegel, the idea of the phenomenal world arises from the activity of self-consciousness itself. Similarly, the idea of the moral self as a free agent is something that emerges within consciousness from the confrontation with another conscious mind or self, against which it must define itself through a process of recognition.

Fichte and Hegel also agreed on seeing the emergence of the idea of the self-conscious agent as an inherently social phenomenon. This shifts the focus of philosophical thinking from the isolated subject as an individual to the importance of the communitarian conditions for identity and self-hood. Once again, the shift in perspective is from self-conscious individuals in a state of nature, seeking to explain and create social relations such as the state, to the new idea of subject or individual as a social creation emerging in a context, with others. Fichte's metaphysics of morals is obscured by his relationship with Kant and his contemporary Hegel. But his importance in political thought is illustrated in his lectures, *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), in which he defends the importance of German national identity in the face of the universalism of the rights of man, and because of his theory of state. On the nation and nationalism, Fichte is interested in the idea of language and culture that is central to the ideas of J.G. Herder, another contemporary of Kant, who found his way to Berlin and who developed theories of language and culture as the vehicles through which identity and thought is constituted.

Fichte's concern is to encourage a literature and culture through which the spirit of a people could be articulated in its distinctiveness and peculiar genius. The emphasis on culture and language was to inspire a turn to history and to the folk culture of a people. Two of the vehicles through which that culture is defended are the education system and the civic and political rights of the state. The state that emerges in Fichte's writings is different from Kant's ideas. It is not solely focused on providing a constitutional context for secure individual freedom. Fichte is more concerned with the justification for the state to limit personal freedom through paternalism or state actions so as to

improve the condition of its subjects, rather than just protecting them from each other and external international threats. In particular, he emphasises the police function of the state, which is confined not to internal security but to what we would now consider the remit of social and public policy – indeed, it is the root from which the word ‘policy’ is developed by later thinkers. Policy, and police, is also the category into which Clausewitz links his theory of war as a policy instrument.

The communitarian or contextualist account of the emergence of human subjectivity also played a central part in Hegel’s thought. G.W.F. Hegel is second only to Kant in the pantheon of great German philosophers and political theorists. His political philosophy is to be found in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), where he argues that the historical process of the emergence and development of freedom culminates in the idea of the state. For Hegel, the state is both a set of bureaucratic institutions of government and law, which in turn regulate and direct powers such as the military and the police powers of the sort favoured by Fichte. However, Hegel also saw the state as the culmination of an ethical story, and the entity through which our situated freedom is actualised or made possible in the world. He goes beyond Kant’s idea that the state gives determinacy to right by arguing that the state brings together natural relationships and sources of obligation (such as the family) with those of civil society in a new synthesis, which alone makes a full ethical life possible. Once again, freedom and moral agency are only made feasible by our duty to submit ourselves to the state and its constitutive power. History and reason are integrally linked in the development of the state and its institutions.

Much of the subsequent debate around Hegel’s theory of the state concerns what he meant by describing it as the culmination of the teleology (or purpose) of history – the ‘state is the end of history’. Did this mean that all subsequent historical experience was included within the idea of the state as the mode of public experience? Alternatively, as Hegel’s progressive followers and critics suggested, was the state the current stage of historical progress that will only be transcended in a direction that remains obscure, possibly towards a post-state cosmopolitan order? Since the 19th century, progressive and conservative liberals have differed in their interpretations of Hegel’s implications for the ideal of freedom and agency. The solution to this debate takes us beyond Clausewitz’s context, yet one essential element of Hegel’s story brings us back to Clausewitz and his specific teaching. Hegel’s theory of international relations and international law provides an account of war as part of the rationale of the state system. War is not an unfortunate consequence of the state system that needs to be overcome by plans for perpetual peace or cosmopolitan order but a necessary requirement for the internal order of the particular state, ensuring the reality of the identity-creating factors of the ethical life made possible in the modern state system. War becomes the highest goal of the modern state and the medium through which it reproduces itself and asserts its claim to recognition in the world.

The political and intellectual contexts in which Clausewitz's thought was formed, and in which he began to write his masterpiece, combined Prussian military experience and culture with ideas refined through the highest development of late Enlightenment German philosophy, and where war is transformed from a recurring problem into the ethically sanctioned highest goal of the modern state system. Once great philosophers such as Hegel had secured the place of war in the ethical and political reason of the state, it remained for Clausewitz to provide the scientific analysis and account of the phenomena of war to fit that high intellectual challenge. War needed to be understood in its totality and that is the task of *On War*: it is also why Clausewitz's book could not be a manual of practice or a series of reflections on recent battles. His genius was to see the challenge of thinking about war in this new way.

### The problem of Clausewitz's *On War*

*On War* is a long and complex book on a relatively new subject. However, the book is made more complex because Clausewitz worked on it for a long time and it remained incomplete at the time of his death. He had discussed the plan for the work extensively with his wife, Maria, and she saw it to publication. Although he began work on the material for the book in 1816, he wrote an important note in 1827, suggesting a significant reworking of the conception of the book. Only Book I was complete to his satisfaction and for Book VIII in particular he emphasised the importance of his insight into the relationship between war and politics or policy. The 1827 note, the large body of material and the obvious questions about consistency make the book difficult to comprehend and have raised serious questions about how it should be interpreted. Because the book sets a template for a new way of thinking about military affairs, it cannot simply be set in a context of other similar-type works to settle these fundamental questions of interpretation. Successors write in Clausewitz's shadow in a similar way to philosophers writing after Plato or historians after Thucydides. These great texts provide a point of reference and a key to style and method, even when the task of a successor is to differentiate their view from and to criticise the great texts. Clausewitz sets out to provide a comprehensive theory of war and, in so doing, to offer more than reflections of past military history. His theory of war is intended to be comprehensive, and not one merely specific to a particular time and place. In this way it aspires to be scientific. In order to understand that claim, and to distinguish it from interpretations that could distort what Clausewitz is saying, it is necessary to reflect on his methodology or philosophical presuppositions before turning directly to the object of enquiry.

In setting out his comprehensive scientific theory of war, Clausewitz draws on his experience in the field, his wide reading of military history and his understanding of late Enlightenment philosophy and science. He was also addressing

a challenge posed by contemporary military thinkers such as H. Dietrich von Bulow, author of *The Spirit of the Modern System of War* (London, 1806) and Antoine Henri de Jomini in *The Summary of the Art of War* (New York, 1854). Both writers developed a mechanical or 'geometrical' conception of the science of war in their reflections on the experience of the late 18th century and French Revolutionary wars. Central to the geometrical approach was a familiar dichotomy between science and art that was deployed in policy discussions by many late Enlightenment thinkers. At around this time, the English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was drawing a distinction between the science and art of political economy. The former concerned the principles of a mechanical explanation of behaviour, drawn from the rational modelling of human experience. The aim of this science was to determine the causal relations of properties such as supply and demand. The art of political science was to translate this scientific explanation into distinct policies, such as whether to regulate the maximum level of interest that the law allowed to be charged, or the levels at which tariffs should be set.

In the case of military science, von Bulow and de Jomini also sought to explain the nature of action in war and reduce it to a series of principles from which practical inferences could be drawn by commanders. The aim of this science was to comprehend the possibilities of war and provide commanders with manuals for action that were derived from these basic principles. In particular, von Bulow developed the idea of the line operation and the conduct of war as an account of possible manoeuvres around that line. As the technology of war had developed, armies were constrained by logistical problems of lines of supply. In order to advance, armies required that bases of supply, or depots, be established, and these in turn dictated the direction of attack against an adversary. Using 'geometric' reasoning, von Bulow argued that the army must confront its adversary at an angle of 90 degrees from the line. Geometry became a model of scientific explanation for these thinkers because it was formal and deductive. It had also been the science of spatial relations from the time of the ancient Greeks and so captured their view of the essence of military affairs as the movement and deployment of forces in space. The main challenge for opponents was to attack the adversary's line of supply and depots using skirmishing and therefore reduce the need for direct confrontations. The consequence of this 'geometric' science was to result in a mechanical approach to the order of battle, and (according to von Bulow) a reduction in the need for direct confrontation and instead a preference for skirmishing tactics. An enlightened science of war would be one that reduced the occasions and amount of violence to the minimum necessary to achieve one's end, with the possibility that the effective deployment of force could in principle serve as a checkmate, as if war were a giant game of chess.

This 'geometric' approach was developed further by de Jomini, who was to be Clausewitz's chief rival as the leading strategic thinker for the remainder of

the 19th century. De Jomini expanded on von Bulow's approach with a more sophisticated account of the war of manoeuvre. He deployed ideas such as 'interior lines,' which allowed for shorter and quicker logistical supply within an enclosed area than was possible outside it, making the area easier to defend. De Jomini's work is full of illustrations representing how various configurations of interior lines might be deployed. In the context of Napoleon's campaigns, he sought to show that this kind of strategy allowed a smaller force to concentrate and defeat larger armies by dividing them. These 'geometrical' approaches were enormously popular because they seemed to uncover the universal laws of military conflict. Especially with de Jomini, they appeared to show, firstly, how these laws explained the success of Napoleon's campaigns and later how his strategy might be defeated. The 'geometric' approach laid out a science of war in terms of a set of universal laws that all conflict followed, and which could be the basis of manuals for the conduct of war and the training of officers who would be adept at applying these lessons. It was precisely this conception of military science that Clausewitz sought to expose and replace. He challenged not only the substance of von Bulow's and de Jomini's laws of war but their very conception of a science of war that was simple, mechanical or geometric and reducible to an easily taught art. He writes:

If one has never personally experienced war, one cannot understand in what the difficulties constantly mentioned really consist, nor why a commander should need any brilliance and exceptional ability. Everything looks simple; the knowledge required does not look remarkable, the strategic options are so obvious that by comparison the simplest problem of higher mathematics has an impressive scientific dignity. Once war has actually been seen the difficulties become clear; but it is still extremely hard to describe the unseen, all-pervading element that brings about this change of perspective. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 119)

By contrast, Clausewitz had indeed seen war and knew why it was never so simple or reducible to a mechanical science. Such a mechanical or geometrical way of thinking ignored the two concepts that Clausewitz saw as essential to comprehending the reality of war and therefore any attempt to claim knowledge about it; these were the ideas of friction and of genius. He confronts his predecessors with the paradoxical claim that:

[e]verything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 119)

The attempt to abstract principles of manoeuvre from the messy reality of the human experience of war left the impression of armies moving in a vacuum

without any resistance. Yet, for Clausewitz, the more one considered the reality of war, the more one saw every single moving part of a complex military engagement being beset by countervailing forces and obstacles.

The concept of friction is not given a simple definition or a single illustration, but it reappears in numerous examples throughout the work. Weather can be source of friction, with rain slowing the movement of infantry columns, baggage and supply trains, or creating muddy conditions preventing the deployment of cavalry. At the individual level, rain can frustrate the effective use of muskets or artillery, while fog and battle smoke simply deny a commander sight of his troops and their deployment. Real war is beset with opportunities for friction to frustrate the plans of 'paper wars'. Acknowledging the impact of friction is not a counsel of despair or a denial of initiative, because the task of the commander and his forces is to confront and overcome the constraints that friction imposes. Friction is a reality of war but the challenge is to recognise it in strategy and tactics. A true account of war cannot simply abstract a pure science from this messy world of experience without at the same time denying the reality of the experience of which one is seeking knowledge. Such a science is a distortion of the object of experience and therefore cannot be a basis for knowledge. The science of war thus cannot be reducible to a few simple rules and principles in a manual that commanders can learn and consult.

This loss of simplicity is not only an acknowledgement of the complexity of human experience; it also has implications for humans acquiring knowledge of war, which introduces the second major concept at the heart of Clausewitz's theory: the role of genius. Against the tendency of Enlightenment thinking to emphasise rule-following and the application of knowledge, the character of the genius played an important part in the Romantic reaction. It was peculiarly appropriate for an age of military thinking that was shaped by Frederick the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte, two epic figures who appeared to embody historical transformation and who fascinated Clausewitz and his contemporaries. Genius, and its character, was an issue of the age, fascinating political philosophers such as Hegel and Fichte, or great artists such as Goethe and Beethoven. The genius was not a rule-follower but an agent who through his originality (it was always a he) transformed knowledge, experience and the world. The genius is a central figure in the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), a work that Clausewitz would have been familiar with (Echevarria 2007, pp. 108–111).

For Kant, what is distinctive about the genius is that he brings a new 'rule to art' to a problem or situation, and thus transforms the way in which it is seen and in which it is subsequently practised. In music, for instance, Beethoven established new ways of going on with received forms such as the symphony, quartet and sonata. This is the act of giving a new rule to art: a way of setting out a new way of doing things but within a practice, activity or body of knowledge that was already in existence. Genius presupposes the activity or practice of an

art or knowledge, but is not dominated and limited by that practice in the way that a virtuoso concert performer, or someone who is excellent in applying the rules, might be. This idea of the creative artist who goes beyond the rules was an important cultural trope, especially in the hands of philosophers and artists.

Yet, in the context of military affairs and conduct, such a view can be problematic. For some of Clausewitz's contemporaries, military geniuses such as Frederick the Great or Napoleon are almost incomprehensible to military science and need to be passed over as magical or semi-miraculous figures. Whilst not diminishing their extraordinary achievements, however, Clausewitz seeks to understand the character of the military genius:

'genius' refers to a very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation ... What we must do is to survey all those gifts of mind and temperament that in combination bear on military activity. These, taken together, constitute *the essence of military genius*. We have said *in combination*, since it is precisely the essence of military genius that it does not consist in a single appropriate gift – courage, for example – while other qualities of mind or temperament are wanting or are not suited to war. Genius consists *in a harmonious combination of elements*, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 100)

The discussion of military genius involves a review of both intellectual virtues and virtues of character (such as courage or confidence). In combination, all are essential to the military genius, but the appropriate combination of these qualities is also relative to the role of the individual, whether a field officer leading a small group or the commander-in-chief conducting whole armies in a major campaign. Having moved from mechanical and abstract conceptions of the science and art of war, Clausewitz seeks a deep and nuanced account of psychology of the military genius, and not just an account of the things that the soldier, general or commander-in-chief should know. He is concerned with moving beyond the idea that the military genius combines courage with knowledge, and instead offers an account of the character of mind of the military genius.

He begins with a discussion of courage and analyses its sources. With respect to the intellect, Clausewitz distinguishes between two essential features or qualities: *coup d'oeil* and determination. The former is an account of that capacity to retain the 'light of truth' in circumstances where quick and confident analysis and decision is required. He likens the capacity to an 'inward eye' that sees a pattern or relationship with aspects of knowledge and experience that are needed for 'rapid and accurate decisions' in circumstances where knowledge and the truth matter but where time and circumstances deny the possibility of considered deliberation. This confident ability to 'see and understand' circumstances, opportunities and risks enables the military genius to respond to

chance: it takes previously learned experience but assimilates it into the new circumstances with confident judgement and decision. As such, *coup d'oeil* is more than just knowledge or intelligence, but it is also more than just reckless decision and quick judgement. The risk of being wrong or failing to appreciate the challenge of circumstances also requires an aspect of intellectual courage that Clausewitz describes as determination. This is the intellectual courage to take responsibility for difficult decisions and hold to them. A virtue of the intellect is also the possession of stable emotions and firmness of character so as to suppress doubt and fear of being wrong. Clausewitz remarks that junior officers who show this virtue of mind and character often lose it when promoted to more senior positions, out of fear of being proved wrong.

Other aspects of the character of the military genius that Clausewitz relates to the danger, uncertainty, exertion and chance or war are energy, firmness, staunchness, emotional balance and strength of character. Each of these is given an extended discussion in Book I, Chapter 3. Yet, it is not the details of the examples that matter but the way in which Clausewitz explores the interrelationship of these elements of character in his account of the circumstance of war. The issue of genius is discussed throughout the book, but the relevant chapter in which the concept is introduced concludes with a clear attempt to bring the idea down from the near-miraculous character attributed to Napoleon or Frederick by their followers, to a conception that is appropriate to the seriousness of the task of military leadership.

If we then ask what sort of mind is likeliest to display the qualities of military genius, experience and observation will both tell us that it is the inquiring rather than the creative mind, the comprehensive rather than the specialised approach, the calm rather than the excitable head to which in war we would choose to entrust the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honour of our country. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 112)

What Clausewitz's theory of war is seeking is not a set of rules or principles that can be applied, or a simple character profile that could be used for assigning rank and promotion, but an account of the interrelationship and ordering of the elements of experience that are required in the intense circumstances of war. Clausewitz is not seeking to replace geometry with another master science (such as psychology) in his account of war. Instead, his ambition is to bring all the elements appropriate to understanding the experience of war into a coherent and ordered body of knowledge. He sought to emulate the great Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant, who had not sought to enumerate all that we can know, or (following the sceptical tradition) list all that we do not know. Instead, he sought to save metaphysics and epistemology (the theory of knowledge) by providing an account of how that experience must be ordered so as to count as knowledge. Similarly, with Clausewitz the task is to provide an account of

ordering the totality of experience that makes up our knowledge of the phenomenon of war in its most complete form. In order to understand the method and point of *On War*, we should see it as akin to the approach in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and his *Critique of Judgement* applied to the phenomena of war.

### The object of enquiry – what is war?

To ask what the object of enquiry of a theory of war is might seem an odd question. Surely, everyone knows what war is. Yet, whilst history and experience might seem to render that question redundant, the history of political and military thinking brings it back to the fore and explains why it is such an important question for Clausewitz to answer in his new theory of war. Writing on war was not a phenomenon unique to the European Enlightenment. The Greeks and Romans, as well as Renaissance writers, had written histories of wars and conflicts. And political thinkers such as Machiavelli wrote on the theory of war itself. However, much of this writing was concerned with the organisation of armies and was self-consciously backward-looking, drawing on the history of Roman warfare: something that was of particular interest to Machiavelli. Even with the development of new technology, early modern military writings were effectively drill manuals, or focused on specialist 'sciences' such as siege warfare or fortification.

Early modern political theorists such as Hobbes were no better in their conceptualisation of war as generalised individual violence. The natural condition might have been 'a war of all against all' but this left the nature of war general, vague and ultimately unhelpful for the modern scholar of war, although it at least acknowledged the essential place of violence. As modernity and technology advanced, so the understanding of war began to shift from a problem of the organisation of armies into the new science of operations, to which Clausewitz's opponents, von Bulow and de Jomini, contributed so much. The focus on operations inspired a preoccupation with movement, logistics and lines of supply, and the organisation and utilisation of space – to the extent that this, in turn, was transformed into a science of movement that displaced the fundamental fact of war. It was this fundamental fact, the one that we are most familiar with, that Clausewitz sought to return to the centre of attention in his definition of the object of enquiry.

War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale. Countless duels go to make up war, but a picture of it as a whole can be formed by imagining a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will; his *immediate* aim is to *throw* his opponent in order to make him incapable of further resistance.

*War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.*

Force, to counter opposing force, equips itself with the inventions of art and science. Attached to force are certain self-imposed, imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning, known as international law and custom, but they scarcely weaken it. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 75 italics in original)

He continues:

Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed:

... It would be futile – even wrong – to try and shut one's eyes to what war really is from sheer distress at its brutality. (Clausewitz 1984, pp. 75–76)

These two passages reinforce Clausewitz's primary insight that war is about violent conflict between opponents. Whilst in exceptional circumstances manoeuvre alone might compel an enemy to do as we want, it is violent force applied to the bending of the will of another that makes war distinctive. Violence and the risk of violence are of the essence of war and are what military action is for – everything else is contingent upon these. The advancement of military science is not concerned with the reduction of violence in the exercise of force, and it is a great error to consider the goal of military science as the eradication of brutality and suffering, or with disguising it and masking its necessity. Attempts to conduct conflict with the limitation of force are invitations to failure, not marks of civilisation and superiority over barbarians or the savage past. Reliance on war as a tool of policy requires this direct confrontation with its reality as concentrated violence directed at forcing the will of an opponent. As a soldier, Clausewitz is not afraid to advocate or exercise violence, but he is concerned that those who command violent conflict do it without deceiving themselves about the possibility of humanising the suffering and brutality that war results in.

Alongside the emphasis on violence, and even the prospect of concentrated and massive violence, the main message of this definition is the link of war with the idea of the duel. Clausewitz conceives of war as an aggregation of individual duels between opponents, with the idea of a duel as the central act of war. The duel is a particular type of violent act or combat, but it contains important elements that can be lost in the image. Indeed, it is interesting that Clausewitz uses the wrestlers as his illustration. The wrestlers are opponents in a structured combat – indeed, in the sport of wrestling, that structure is taken to the point of an art – but even outside the sport of wrestling there are important elements not to lose sight of. The wrestlers engage each other in the most basic form of combat, where the only weapon is the use of one's body against an opponent.

There is a form of equal recognition that is central to the struggle as the opponents have the same capacity to harm. A duel between a wrestler and an opponent with a sword, spear or gun would not be a duel. In the formal world of 18th-century duelling, one of the opponents would choose weapons, but they must both use the same weapon. So, combat is different from Hobbes's world of the 'war of all against all', where by definition one can confront a stick with a sword, or a sword with a gun, or kill one's opponent by stealth whilst they are sleeping.

The image of the duel is of structured combat where the opponents have accepted conflict and confront each other; this simple point reveals an essential feature of war and of the duel as an act between two opponents to seek to defend their honour. A war arises when an opponent is recognised as an opponent and confronted as such. Combatants are central to the idea of war and it is from this basic idea that we can distinguish non-combatants when discriminating amongst those who may be attacked. Whilst the modern progress of war has extended the idea beyond the duel to include those who sustain a war effort, the justification for attack requires the linking of an activity to supporting an attack. Attack and defence are interconnected in a single struggle. If an opposing state marches its army into a neighbour, but the neighbour chooses to acquiesce, then there is no attack and no defence. Consequently, whatever the political motive behind the act, it is not war, in the same way that an insult that goes unmarked is not a combat, nor is a unilateral blow to a bystander. Not just any violence will do to initiate or constitute a combat.

Central to the formalised rules and rituals of 18th-century duelling is the historically ancient and basic act of giving violence in a mutual combat where the parties accept each other and deploy equal violence as the means of seeking satisfaction. There are many ways in which disputes can be resolved and satisfaction sought and given, but combat is an ancient and perhaps primordial form. The duel is not just interpersonal combat; it also involves the re-establishment of honour, and that is also a feature of why it is a ritualised act of violence between opponents. For Clausewitz, wars are the ways in which kings, nations, people and individual armies seek to preserve their honour, with combat as the test. The rituals that shape and govern this modern practice of war are shaped by international law and custom, but, as Clausewitz emphasises, these are 'imperceptible' and weak when set against the primary feature of war, namely its violence. Once again, Clausewitz packs a lot into this short mention of international law and its limitations.

The right of war is a right of states or political communities and not something that is conferred by a higher legal authority. So the relevant laws or rules or norms are those mutually recognised by the rival parties as part of the honour code of militaries. Just as, in the wrestling bout, there are minimal rules that exclude weapons or deceit, so in wars there are mutually binding rules of conduct that militaries accept and place upon their own behaviour. The laws of war concern the conduct of war by respective militaries, or what are

called by just war theorists the rules of *jus in bello*. These are principles that are policed by respective militaries themselves, and not by an external or overarching power. The treatment of combatants, the wounded, prisoners of war and the observance of surrenders and armistices, and the distinction between combatants and non-combatants are all part of the scarcely observable laws and customs that shape war. Breaches are a matter of honour and are therefore enforced by the respective armies and not by international courts or tribunals. Most militaries remain jealous of these privileges to this day, with their own courts martial having primary responsibility for any breaches of the laws of war. Clausewitz does not acknowledge a higher law of war that might cover the justice of going to war or *jus ad bellum*. The right of war is effectively a state right and therefore not a moral duty on states: states can refuse combat or assert neutrality. War is an instrument of state policy to ensure a state interest, and as such it is for a state and it alone to go to war, by accepting combat in the case of invasion and attack, or initiating combat and attack itself, for whatever the relevant policy reason might be. Just as modern war is a more formalised version of the primordial combat of a duel, so modern war brings into play the institutions that exercise this role – states and armies.

War is, then, an act of force to coerce the will of an opponent. Of its nature, war inherently employs violence, although in rare circumstances its effects can be achieved with minimal violence. However, even in this case the threat of recourse to violence is the central task of war. Clausewitz was dismissive of what he described as wars of observation, where armies skirt each other but seek to avoid a conflict or confrontation. Such acts are only wars by analogy since the possibility of conflict remains but it is not exercised. In the new world of war by mass armies unleashed by Napoleon, a planned war of observation is exceedingly unwise as a policy. These elements of combat and violence come together most forcefully in Clausewitz's account of a successful struggle. In the case of the wrestlers that he uses as the example of a duel, the winner manages to throw and dominate his opponent. In the case of war, the victory is more complex and must aspire to be more permanent,

for if war is an act of violence meant to force the enemy to do our will its aim would have *always* and *solely* to be to overcome the enemy and disarm him.

... The fighting forces must be *destroyed*: that is, they must be *put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight*. Whenever we use the phrase 'destruction of the enemy's forces' this alone is what we mean. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 90)

Clausewitz warns that war is never final, in that an enemy (state or people) is never wholly annihilated such that it cannot arise in the future as an adversary. Yet, in confronting an enemy, the task is indeed to destroy an enemy army's

ability to pose a threat. In this way, Clausewitz brings out what is essential to the nature of war. One can only compel an enemy to do one's will when that enemy's army cannot offer further resistance. When we read this phrase as a mandate in light of 20th-century history and alongside Clausewitz's reference to the necessary brutality of war, this can appear callous and morally problematic. But we must be careful that Clausewitz is referring to the destruction of an enemy's fighting forces as a potent threat and opponent, and not the individual destruction of each member of the enemy's armed forces. Clausewitz is not counselling mass slaughter. There will be other ways in which armies are destroyed as fighting forces and through which they are actually or effectively disarmed. It remains for a commander to judge how his tactics or strategy achieve that goal of destroying an enemy's forces. This will often depend on the context and, as Clausewitz argues in Book VIII, the policy that is behind the war in the first instance. That said, Clausewitz does not ultimately balk at the necessity of destroying an opponent's army through the act of killing their soldiers in combat; this is ultimately what war is all about.

The use of concentrated violence to disarm and destroy one's opponent raises a further issue that is central to Clausewitz's account of war and which has raised confusion about the typology of war especially in the final Book VIII of *On War*. At the beginning of Book I, Clausewitz writes:

The maximum use of force is not incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect. If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the first will gain the upper hand. That side will force the other to follow suit; each will drive its opponent towards extremes, and the only limiting factors are the counterpoises inherent in war.

This is how the matter must be seen. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 75–76)

From this brief passage, the discussion of different types of war emerges. In Book VIII, the discussion begins with a distinction between 'absolute' and 'real' wars and in Books VI and VII Clausewitz suggests (although he does not use the term) that there are limited wars. When this is coupled with his idea of 'wars of observation', it appears that there are a number of types of war and thus no single object of enquiry. That fact is problematic because Clausewitz makes clear that he is offering a universal and general theory of war that fits the variety of historical experiences. Underlying military history there is a single object of study that links what happens in different historical epochs from the Greeks to the present. There are things that can be said, about all wars, but which do not reduce the idea of war to a mechanistic account of deployment of forces. The consistency of the theory is a major issue and was one of the concerns that Clausewitz claimed motivated his reconsideration of his theory in the note of 1827 that was appended to the publication of *On War* by his wife. But the issue

of consistency is not the only concern, as the terminology of 'absolute' versus limited war has been central to the understanding of the book in light of the experience of war in the early 20th century. 'Absolute' war can appear to open the way to the totalitarian conceptions of total war mobilisation by a society, and so it needs to be understood appropriately.

In fact, Clausewitz uses the idea of 'absolute' war as a philosophical term of art and not as an instruction for the deployment of unrestricted force and violence. The term implies a complete and unconditional understanding of the concept of war and this unconditionality is illustrated in the logic of escalation that he identifies in the passage above. As the task of war is to apply enough force to destroy an enemy, there is a clear logic of escalation. The amount of force needed is whatever is the quantity necessary to overpower an enemy and to which they cannot respond. When translated into historical or contemporary political experience, this can seem deeply unnerving. Clausewitz's point is that there is no limit to the amount of force that needs to be deployed to defeat an enemy, other than that amount which is totally overwhelming. This idea brings with it images of mass waves of attack, relentless barrages of artillery and of course, in our own day, the overwhelming response to nuclear attack in the idea of MAD.

Critics of the murderous wave assaults in the trench battles of World War I or of the logic of nuclear deterrence see the source of their problems in Clausewitz's idea of 'absolute' war. The logic of escalation is built into the conception of war as the deployment of concentrated violence to destroy an enemy. However, as I have mentioned, this is a logical or conceptual point not a moral or practical one: we must remember that Clausewitz wants to educate his military readers, but not offer them a manual for campaigns and actions.

Thus, when he appears to distinguish limited wars or engagements in the extended development of the argument, he is not falling into a contradiction. What is the limitation of the logic of escalation and how is that consistent with his clear statement about the concentration of massive force? Clausewitz answers this question with his distinction between 'absolute' and 'real' wars in Book VIII. He is not, in fact, offering an account of different types of war, but qualifying the application of escalation logic in the context of a real world of conflict characterised by friction. Committing enough force to overthrow an enemy remains a central conceptual insight of war as a violent conflict, but the reality of translating that idea into concrete actions in 'real' wars of the kind that had been fought against Napoleon recognises the constraints and limits on escalation created by the forces of friction.

It is not always possible to escalate, or even to bring to the field, the planned resources for an engagement, because of logistical constraints. The reality of war is that mess of friction that he had referred to in rejecting the mechanistic and geometric approach to war. Friction is not the only feature that constrains the logic of escalation. Equally important is a new dimension with which Clausewitz has become most closely associated, namely policy or the political

purpose for which a war is being fought. Central to the final Book VIII of *On War* is Clausewitz's insight that:

War is merely the continuation of policy by other means ... The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 87)

To make sense of particular wars, we do not need a typology of different wars. Instead, we must understand the interplay of the fundamental forces that shape all wars and their applications of violence. This brings us to the heart of Clausewitz's theory, namely the 'paradoxical trinity'.

### The two versions of the trinity?

The image of the trinity is one of the most important in Clausewitz's work. It forms the centrepiece of his theory of war, as opposed to his definition of the object of enquiry. Trinitarian thinking is deeply rooted in western political thought because of its echo of the fundamental basis of Christian theology (which distinguished three personalities of one god – God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit). Even with the retreat of explicitly Christian thinking as the only language of political philosophy, the idea of the trinity remained central, not least in the dialectical logic of Clausewitz's most famous contemporary amongst philosophers in Berlin in the 1820s, namely G.W.F. Hegel. Clausewitz would have been aware of Hegel's work, even if he did not directly draw on it. The image of the trinity is, therefore, central to the understanding of Clausewitz's thought but also fraught with difficulty because of its resonances from philosophy and theology.

Contemporary scholars and critics of Clausewitz have also struggled with the idea of the trinity and its implications for understanding the place of war in political ideas and most importantly in making sense of his famous claim that 'war is merely the continuation of policy by other means' (Clausewitz 1984, p. 87). The reason for this controversy is that the preliminary account of the 'paradoxical trinity' has two distinct faces:

War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy which makes it subject to reason alone.

The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government.

The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends upon the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone. (Clausewitz 1984, p. 89)

In the first statement, Clausewitz draws on motives, virtues or passions and presents the trinity as an interplay of psychological forces whether understood as elements of the individual psyche or as collective psychological forces of a people. The second statement links these to distinct institutions or bodies, such as the institutions of the state and government, the army, and a body such as the people, conceived of as a collective entity. Clausewitz does not specify the precise relationship between these two faces of the trinity or explain whether they are in fact two distinct trinities, but, in debates about the relevance of his thought for contemporary politics and military affairs, a distinction and prioritisation of one over the other is often emphasised as crucial to understanding his true meaning (Fleming 2016, pp. 49–78). For some commentators, the psychological elements have priority and are only illustrated by their contingent institutional manifestation – whereas for others the interplay of the institutional manifestations is precisely what makes Clausewitz interesting to political theorists as well as students of military affairs and strategy (Howard 2002).

The emphasis on psychology, passion and motive is precisely what allows one to liberate Clausewitz from being an historically conditioned theorist of 19th- and early 20th-century war, and no more than an historical curiosity when viewed from the present. Because Clausewitz aspired to provide a universal theory of war, and not merely one for his own age, there is much to recommend the emphasis on the first face of the trinity. That said, there is also good reason to see the two faces as interconnected and inseparable. In this way, Clausewitz's argument echoes Plato's division of the soul and the state in his *Republic*, where the tripartite division of the soul or psyche is reflected in, or illustrated by, the functional differentiation of classes in the polis. The larger object is used to illustrate and illuminate the smaller, namely the individual soul.

That this analogy helps us illuminate Clausewitz should be unsurprising, because it is reworked in different forms throughout the history of philosophy and political theory, and is certainly partly echoed in Hegel's political thought. The one crucial difference from Plato, and similarity to Hegel, is that Clausewitz follows the latter in seeing a dialectical interplay between the elements, as opposed to a hierarchical ordering of the sort that would be found in Plato and would have been appreciated by some of Clausewitz's more authoritarian Prussian audience. For Plato, the task of the philosopher-king is seeking the right ordering of the state to reflect the right ordering of the soul, with reason dominating over the passions and desires, and rule thus confined to the class or strata of society who are wisest. For Clausewitz, on the other hand, the inter-relationship is dynamic and (unlike Hegel) also non-teleological. There is no

final pattern of relationship between these elements that is being sanctioned or chosen by the logic of history.

### *Hatred, enmity and the people*

Clausewitz has already emphasised the importance of force and violence to the concept of war, but in the trinity he emphasises that this is not simply a strategic choice. Rather, it has its roots in fundamental enmity and that is most associated with the idea of the people. The idea of the people is usually overlooked or downplayed in traditional military thought. The people are clearly essential as a source of recruits and of supply, but beyond that they are at best ambiguous and at worst a threat. No army can survive without manpower and a supply of new blood, just as no large modern army can be sustained in the field without provisions, which in turn depends on a population producing a surplus of food and resources. The genius of the Prussian state was that its social structure supported its military through its tax structure and its culture of military service amongst a largely agricultural population, with a semi-feudal notion of service. Yet, whilst the people are essential to a military, they are also a problem. Frederick the Great's wars had faced population shortages and the (strictly temporary) relaxation of the social status needed to enter the officer class noted above. The effort to re-establish the social hierarchy of the Prussian military, by once again confining staff positions within the nobility, reflected the ambiguous status of the people. They were necessary but also a risk.

The spread of the French Revolution and its culture of the rights of man was a further illustration of the problem of the people. In Prussian thinking, egalitarianism was not consistent with the necessity of order and hierarchy, upon which a military culture depended, and the spread of egalitarian ideas was also a challenge to domestic political order. The military was not only for fighting extra territorial wars but also the primary institution through which the power of the state was projected onto its subjects, who were ruled. The people were potentially an unruly body that threatened political rule and the institutions through which it was exercised as much as it sustained them. In Clausewitz's day, the primary police function of a state was exercised by the military. His own death, following the establishment of a *cordon sanitaire* to contain cholera epidemic in 1831, illustrated the breadth of that police function, which was not confined to simply suppressing domestic violence.

The place of the people is important in Clausewitz's account of the trinity for another reason, inspired by his great mentor. Scharnhorst had seen the importance of national cohesion and identity in transforming a republican people that the Prussians considered unruly into a revolutionary fighting force under Napoleon and his generals, one that quickly threatened the entire political order of Europe. Where conservative politicians and thinkers saw the end threat, Scharnhorst and Clausewitz perceived the new force that could transform an unruly rabble into a people that could be motivated to fight en masse

with such success. The reaction against the 'rights of man and the citizen' was not just a reactionary return to the *ancien regime* but a recognition of the power of national culture and spirit as a unifying force of a people. Clausewitz was familiar with Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1806), which were influential in inspiring a German nationalism that contradicted the universalist and cosmopolitan claims of the French Revolution. Indeed, he corresponded with Fichte, who argued for a revitalised educational culture that focused on national literature, the German language and history. These were all ideas that chimed with the growing Romantic cultural reaction against the late Enlightenment that was associated with the French encyclopaedists and Rousseau.

The place of national culture is important for Clausewitz, but he does not simply refer to it as a source of unification or collective motivation. Instead, he sees it as a source of opposition, enmity and conflict. The ideology of the 'rights of man and the citizen' was responsible for an enormous amount of violence and conflict, but at its heart it expressed a fundamentally cosmopolitan idea of universal community, one in which conflict and war were an exception. For Clausewitz, conflict, opposition and hatred were natural features of group differentiation, whether that was explained in terms of nation, tribe, clan or family. Hatred and enmity are fundamental features of human experience that manifest themselves in group opposition and hostility. Differing groups stand in opposition to one another and from that emerges the conflict that causes war. The idea of the nation is only the most recent historical manifestation of this idea of differentiation and enmity at the heart of conflict and war. Throughout history humans have opposed each other in groups and consequently fought each other.

The important theoretical claim that Clausewitz is making here in stressing the idea of the people and of enmity within the trinity is that conflict is not simply a tool of reason, or a strategy deployed to achieve national interests that are created and shaped by the circumstances of the state system. At the heart of human experience is something more fundamental and visceral than a clash of interests, and that is enmity and hatred, which lead to violence and killing. Without this enmity, war would not exist as a persistent feature of human experience. It is the failure of political theories, particularly social contract and natural law theories, to recognise this that results in their denial of war and their attempts to discipline it out of existence with state power and theories of perpetual peace. The emphasis on enmity and hatred can also be contrasted with Hegel's attempt to sanitise war within the dialectical logic of history. For Hegel, the rationale of war is that it binds an ethical community together in confrontation of an enemy, and it is the mechanism through which political communities or peoples gain recognition as states by other states. Whilst this is perfectly consistent with Clausewitz's argument, it is important that he does not seek to redeem violence and hatred with any such higher teleological purpose. War is essentially an expression of violence.

*Chance, probability and creativity: the general*

If the people provide the motive for military action and the resources in terms of personnel and supply, the army and the person of the commanding general provide the will behind an army's actions. In this aspect of the trinity Clausewitz focuses attention on chance, probability and freedom as the defining features of military experience, thereby turning the discussion of genius and of friction in the direction of the army itself. The limitless sources and combinations of factors that cause friction, deny the possibility of any mechanical and formal science of military affairs, and render useless any attempt to construct a manual of advice for the conduct of war. Risk and uncertainty are ineradicable features of war and the permanent challenge of military command. In explaining the history of wars and campaigns, the factors of chance and probability play an important part in accounting for the outcomes, whether success or failure. Hatred and hostility are insufficient to account for the act of war or its conduct and outcomes. Yet, Clausewitz is not merely alluding to the messiness of historical experience, as his careful choice of the concepts of chance, probability and freedom suggests.

The concept of chance is a reminder that the world is complex and unpredictable. Although science delivers laws that govern the movement of objects, it is rarely so specific that it can guide the conduct of an engagement or campaign. It is only in very specific tasks, such as siege warfare or the detailed use of artillery, that mathematical precision is relevant. In most cases, the number of constituent elements of an action are so great as to introduce the prevalence of chance as opposed to certainty. Clausewitz's account of military genius holds that the ability to see or intuit patterns and opportunities is the best that can be hoped for, not a deductive science.

That said, the allusion to probability is both a contrast with deductive certainty and yet also a recognition that chance can be quantified and understood. It is not the case that all is chaos and uncertainty so that no one is ultimately responsible for conduct and action. The military genius needs judgement and the ability to weigh probabilities and chance in directing action. Judgement can be improved and honed through study, experience and the relevant application of skills and techniques, as long as one understands that these are tools for fixing problems and not ways of unlocking the fundamental structure of reality. Clausewitz also emphasises the role of creativity and freedom and in so doing he is making space in his account of war for the special role of the military and its generals in the conduct of war, operating between the pressures of a people with its popular hostility and the rational policy of a government or state.

Armies take on the institutional exercise of violence on behalf of a people against external enemies, and occasionally against internal factions. The army has a peculiar role in exercising this power of consolidated violence and therefore in the conduct of war. The army and the general have the skill

and competence to exercise this judgement about how to act, but they must also have the freedom to challenge an opponent. Most importantly, in going to war, the army and its general must be able to respond to an attack in the appropriate way. War cannot be conducted by a committee of experts remote from the field, precisely because of the influence of chance, uncertainty and friction. The field general must have the freedom and discretion to apply battle plans, and to vary them, according to the disposition of the terrain and opposing forces, but also according to the element of friction. This requirement that the army is freed from the impatient hostility of a people, or the concerns of a government, is an important part of strategy. It does not mean that the army is totally independent of external factors – the whole point of the trinity is to emphasise the ineradicable interconnection of the three parts. And Clausewitz says nothing that would support later ideas of total war, or the subordination of all aspects of social and political life to the claims of the military and its conduct of war, popularised by Erich Ludendorff following the German defeat in World War I.

The military is always connected to the other dimensions of the trinity, yet it is essential that the military has sufficient autonomy and freedom to act and to adjust strategy in the response to circumstances. When this freedom and agency is curtailed, armies are defeated and war plans fail. The challenge, especially for a state or government, is how much freedom and autonomy can be given and ought to be given. In learning from the past and planning for the future, a military leadership will always be seeking maximum freedom to accommodate to circumstances, but also seeking to limit the freedom and opportunities of opponents. The accommodation of freedom and agency on behalf of an army, with the claims of the wider interests and concerns of a people and state brings us to Clausewitz's third dimension.

### *Reason, policy and the state*

The claim of reason or its embodiment in government or the state as policy is the final key element of the trinity. Chapter III of Book VIII provides an historical outline of the evolution of war in the context of state and government power, culminating in the emergence of the state in the early modern period and its approach to war and the organisation of the military. Translations of Clausewitz sometimes differ over the question of whether the key term should be 'politics' or 'policy'. I use them interchangeably, but acknowledge that Clausewitz is primarily concerned with that aspect of politics which occurs within government agencies or bureaucracies, and which we refer to when discussing public policymaking. This executive focus can be opposed to a broader conception of politics that might involve popular deliberation and tend towards democracy. Clausewitz was not a democrat. That said, he does acknowledge the popular political forces unleashed by the French Revolution

and their impact, and therefore the ambiguity in how he uses politics or policy does capture an important part of his discussion.

The issue of politics or policy was always involved in some respects in the history of war. But its centrality is most striking in the modern period following the European wars of religion, where the visceral hatreds that motivated whole populations gave way in the 18th century to a more constrained or aristocratic view of military action, captured in the following quotation:

War thus became solely the concern of government to the extent that governments parted company with their peoples and behaved as if they were themselves the state. The means of waging war came to consist of the money in their coffers and of such idle vagabonds as they could lay their hands on either at home or abroad [to serve as soldiery]

... The enemy's cash resources, his treasury and his credit, were all approximately known; so was the size of his fighting forces. No great expansion was feasible at the outbreak of war. Knowing the limits of the enemy's strength, men knew they were reasonably safe from total ruin; and being aware of their own limitations, they were compelled to restrict their own aims in turn. Safe from the threat of extremes, it was no longer necessary to go to extremes. (Clausewitz 1984, pp. 589–590)

Policymaking in the modern state is increasingly a matter for an administrative or bureaucratic elite that, whilst working for the monarch, tends towards an interest of its own. This technical interest begins as a way of protecting the interests of the monarch, but in practice it becomes a distinct political interest of the state different from the person of the prince. Consequently, motives such as honour and pride give way to calculations of interest and judgements of relative risks. In terms of strategy, the impact of politics turns war into a limited game that is not consumed by absolute gains such as the conquest, assimilation and destruction of enemies. Especially in the 18th century, war involved limited objectives that were sufficient to support the other tools of policy, such as diplomacy, and in this way limited war emerged. Limited war is only limited in terms of its contribution to policy – the actual engagements through which it is carried out retain the fundamental logic of escalating force to defeat the enemy, and its brutal violence. The limitation is that the task is to take a piece of territory, destroy a fortress, or attack a city in order to leverage a political and diplomatic result, rather than to destroy an army or defeat an enemy state so that it can no longer pose a threat.

The government recognises the ongoing nature of conflicts and disputes within the external state system and, therefore, needs to ensure the supply of military forces, economic power and diplomatic support to sustain its position. Armies take time to rebuild and to train, and their total destruction in a defeat not only limits the power of a prince or monarch but puts the legitimacy of the

government at risk. In this way, the bureaucratic class and its interests in the long-term administration of the state place a constraint on the escalation of military action and force, thus limiting the idea of absolute war. Clausewitz does not pass judgement on this change in history, or mourn the loss of a more heroic age when armies served the honour of monarchs or peoples. His only concern is to understand the changing historical circumstances of war and the increasingly important place of policy in shaping war and conduct. Although he does not make the connection, it is clear that Clausewitz's idea of the task of military theory is one further consideration alongside other policy sciences such as economics. Sustaining a war requires a productive population with an economic surplus and sufficient population surplus to engage in war. But, as Adam Smith is quick to point out in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), political economy is just as likely to encourage conflict as provide the resources and capacity to engage in conflict. The development of the modern state system has transformed the nature of war by turning the conduct of war into a policy science of using the limited state resources available to gain maximum advantage or to defer conflict, until such a time as the relative balance of forces are rendered equal by circumstances, such as territory gains or diplomatic alliances.

Whilst the logic of war entails the escalation of force, the policy context restrains that escalation, and this brings a new requirement to the thought of the military leader. Policy is not merely external to the general's thinking – one of the factors outside the conduct of war. Instead, it must now become central to the context in which strategy, war planning and the conduct of operations are shaped. It is in this context that Clausewitz emphasises the continuity of war and policy when he asserts that 'war is merely the continuation of policy by other means.' War is one of the policy tools of the modern state and its exercise should be seen as the extension of that policy agenda in circumstances where other policy tools are no longer appropriate or sufficient. In making this claim, Clausewitz is asserting the case for the permanent importance of war in a world where theories of perpetual peace, or arguments about the demands of political economy, constantly confront the state and its policymakers. War and the capacity to wage it effectively must remain a power of the state. Yet, they involve interests and motives that will often conflict with other policy goals and thus require careful political engagement on behalf of the military to ensure that its power and capacities are protected.

This raises the question of the relationship between the military and the other constitutive powers of the state. When monarchs ruled and wars were small and vicious but a continuation of sovereign will, the prince was the commander-in-chief, and the state and the military were one. However, with the development of modern states and government bureaucracy, the military is removed from the direct will of sovereign action. This raises the constitutional question of the place of the military in relation to sovereign power and the development and pursuit of policy. The relation between civilian and military power in government

is as fundamental to the modern state as the relationship between civilian and ecclesiastical power in early modern politics, but with consequences that are far more proximate and urgent. The issue had been masked by monarchs exercising supreme military command, sometimes successfully, as in the case of Frederick the Great. Yet, even in Clausewitz's day the U.S. Constitution's subjection of the military to ultimate civilian control, or the rise of a figure such as Napoleon who subordinated civilian authority to the military and eventually assumed the former as emperor, made the question of the relation of political and military power a very real issue.

Clausewitz's proposed solution is to incorporate the commander-in-chief into the cabinet, the central decision-making body of executive government. He says:

If war is to be fully consonant with political objectives, and policy suited to the means available for war, then unless the statesman and soldier are combined in one person, the only sound expedient is to make the commander-in-chief a member of the cabinet, so that the cabinet can share in the major aspects of his activities. But that, in turn, is only feasible if the cabinet – that is, the government – is near the theatre of operations, so that decisions can be taken without serious loss of time.

... What is highly dangerous is to let any soldier but the commander-in-chief exert an influence in cabinet. It very seldom leads to sound vigorous action. (Clausewitz 1984, pp. 608–609)

The commander-in-chief is therefore essential for the successful articulation and implementation of policy, but he should not dominate. The commander-in-chief will be just as prone as a regular general to escalate sufficient force to defeat an enemy. But in the domain of politics that impulse needs to be tempered by the objective, as well as the resources that are available for all aspects of state policy. There is a fine balance between asserting the legitimate interests of the military in the conduct of policy by other means, ensuring the effective conduct of war, and ensuring the long-term stability and security of the state. It is this concern that underlies Clausewitz's hostility to any soldier but the commander-in-chief being involved in policy or the cabinet.

In the light of subsequent history, and the charge of 'Prussianism' made against both Clausewitz and the German military in World Wars I and II, it is worth acknowledging his important subordination of the military to the broader interests of the state. This idea is central to the place of the military in modern liberal democratic societies. But one should note that this subordination is not peculiar to liberal democracies and is equally familiar in party states. Perhaps the most egregious example was the later oath of allegiance that the German officer corps made to Hitler as the personification of the racial state. Clausewitz is aware that simple constitutional provisions mask

the complex way in which this alignment of policy and military interest is best achieved, and there is no final balance of the elements of the trinity in a single institutional structure.

The emphasis on policy in Book VIII explains the emerging importance of conflicting pressures on strategy and action in the context of the modern state system, which for Clausewitz explains the prevalence of ‘real’ and limited war over ‘absolute’ war. But Clausewitz did not think that absolute war was only a logical possibility that was increasingly never revealed in historical experience because of cost and competition with other policy agendas. The experience of the French Revolution and of Napoleon had broken the political confines of the late 18th-century state system:

War, untrammelled by any conventional restraints, had broken loose in all its elemental fury. This was due to the peoples’ new share in these great affairs of state; and their participation, in turn, resulted partly from the impact that the Revolution had on the internal conditions of every state and partly from the danger France posed to everyone.

Will this always be the case in future? From now on will every war in Europe be waged with the full resources of the state, and therefore have to be fought only over major issues that affect the people? (Clausewitz 1984, p. 593)

Of course, Clausewitz does not answer this question, nor could he. But the recognition of the persistent possibility of absolute ‘people’s wars’ in a world where the political power of the masses or people is unleashed on an unprecedented scale remains one of the central challenges of war ever since. In light of the 20th-century experience of mass war in Europe and beyond, this looks a particularly prescient observation. However, one should not lose sight of the primary lesson of the Clausewitzian trinity, namely that the complex interplay of hostility, chance and policy can adapt to new circumstances and challenges. His brief and prescient history of conceptions of war leading up to Napoleon is not meant to suggest a teleology of history. The state system has its logic, but there is no claim that the state system and the idea of interstate war is the only form of war in future. The trinity explains the forces that shape modern war, and the elements of the trinity support concerns about the dangerous tendency of the forces unleashed by the French Revolution. But Clausewitz is not a crude reactionary, or a fatalist who saw mass society as eradicating the state-based order.

### **The means – the practical conduct of war**

For all the theoretical sophistication of Clausewitz’s conception of war, he was also a practical man and an experienced soldier, and this is reflected in his comprehensive discussion of the conduct of war. He had marched through the

Rhineland and the Vosges as a young soldier and his writings retain the detailed observation of landscape and territory and its influence on the deployment and ordering of troops. The vast majority of *On War* is devoted to expanding on his primary ideas in considerable detail and from all relevant perspectives. Although military technology has transformed the task of war-fighting, the fundamental ideas about the orientation to troops in a landscape (with its opportunities and constraints) remain as insightful as when it was first written.

Clausewitz's observations about crossing a marsh or swamp using planks are no doubt outdated, because modern troops have more technological fixes to those challenges. But his appreciation of the way in which features of landscape impact on the fundamental objective of the engagement is not simply an artefact of the limit of technology. Marshes and swamps, forests, rivers, mountains and fortresses all feature as specific problems and opportunities in defence or attack. There is also considerable discussion of supply, billeting, guarding and moving troops. Clausewitz was a continental soldier, and for him war was conducted by armies on land, engaged in taking and holding territory as a means of destabilising and destroying an enemy. There is nothing in his book on naval warfare or operations, or about amphibious operations such as invasions – a source of engagement that is as old as Greek warfare. We can only speculate whether Clausewitz thought naval warfare fell within or outside the broad categories of his military theory, namely the engagement viewed from the perspective of offence and defence. That said, the notion of the engagement, the concentration of force and the centre of gravity, as well as the priority of defence over attack, have as much relevance to naval warfare as land warfare, although the details about applying these ideas in such a context are lacking.

The organising categories of the detailed discussion of particular issues reinforce the methodological point that strategy, tactics and the conduct of war cannot be reduced to a mechanical or geometrical science or a set of universal principles, as de Jomini claimed. The interplay of hostility, chance and policy impacts on all wars, but in different ways. Yet, whilst there are no universal principles, the emphasis on conflict is central, especially in the overriding preoccupation with the 'Engagement' as the centrepiece of discussion. Clausewitz says, 'Fighting is the central military act: all other activities merely support it ... Engagements mean fighting' (Clausewitz 1984, p. 227). Although war tends to be seen in terms of a single great engagement, the reality of war, according to Clausewitz, comprises a large number of engagements. The task of the strategist is to link these large and small engagements into a single coherent major engagement that relates all action towards the fundamental task of defeating the enemy. From the perspective of policy, the enemy is defeated when they are no longer able to sustain conflict, whether in terms of pursuing its initial attack or, if in a defensive war, its inability to withstand the force of the attacker.

Because the task of defeating an enemy involves putting him 'at such a disadvantage that he cannot continue fighting' (Clausewitz 1984, p. 231), the general must find the point at which maximum force can be concentrated on the

enemy's 'centre of gravity'. The 'centre of gravity' is an extension of the metaphor portraying the engagement as a duel between wrestlers. The concentration of force and the centre of gravity are important once one ceases to believe that there is an underlying mechanism that rules out the impact of chance and circumstances. If the outcome were always decided by the relative number of forces, then most wars would either not take place or would involve little actual conflict and violence. Where those numbers are deployed and concentrated is important for equalising a conflict in which the opponents are not exact equals. Yet, the 'centre of gravity' can itself become a mechanical device (contrary to Clausewitz's intention) if one fails to recognise that it is ultimately a metaphor, or at best the subject of a difficult and uncertain judgement. It is also something that cannot be predicted with accuracy or a certain high probability without recognising the constraints and opportunities that terrain, supply and personnel provide or the consequences of friction.

The importance of the engagement and the search for an opponent's 'centre of gravity' can also support a common military prejudice in favour of attack or offence over defensive war. By contrast, Clausewitz seeks to divert attention from the priority of offence over defence, although he discusses the considerations relating to both at considerable length. Indeed, Clausewitz gives good reason for considering defensive war the priority. Offence might well seem the most important form of conflict, because it involves bringing concentrated force to bear on what is perceived to be an enemy's centre of gravity, whereas defence appears to be passive. Yet, this prejudice is just that, for a proper defence also requires bringing concentrated force to the weak point or centre of gravity of an attacker. This weak point may only appear once an attacker's supply lines are extended to their limits, as happened in the Russian campaign against Napoleon. Here the defenders' strategic retreat and use of the vast battle space of the Russian interior overextended Napoleon's supply, and consequently reduced the force of his attack to the point where it was not able to do more than technically defeat the Russians at Borodino, and therefore did not achieve a decisive outcome. In the new context, and against an opponent that was only willing to give battle on its own terms, the strategy and tactics that had proved so successful previously for Napoleon and his armies were undermined.

The example shows that, for Clausewitz, the defending power has a priority, in that it must give war by returning conflict. Whilst this decision is rarely as stark as in the Russian campaign, it remains for the defending power to decide when to deploy its force. If it is appropriately constituted, the defenders can do that by absorbing the attacker's strikes until such a point that its force is exhausted. At its most extreme, this can result in battles of attrition, where the goal is to run down the forces and materiel of the opponent, until a time when they are no longer able to continue the campaign. Whilst effective defence requires distinct strategies to exhaust an opponent's attack, the fundamental logic of attack and defence remains the same; that is, destroying the forces of the enemy and rendering them unable to continue hostilities.

The capacious logic here, combined with the encyclopaedic detail, is what makes *On War* such a rich and enduring work for soldiers and scholars alike. The book's fundamental insight about the centrality of violence and force to the modern state system, and to the task of politics and policy, is also something that is overlooked by modern political theorists who concentrate only on reaching agreement between states via deliberation. Most importantly in an era that continues to seek the Enlightenment ambition of a world without war and conflict, and with effective institutions for perpetual peace, Clausewitz provides an essential corrective. He also provides a recognition of the limitation of reason in human affairs, but also the requirement of reason in acting on passion and sentiment. In this respect he is amongst the most important political thinkers of the international order.

### The legacy of *On War*

Clausewitz gains from being one of those thinkers about whose thought a little is widely known but who suffers from most of those people not having much idea of his complex arguments or actually having read his book. This has an unfortunate impact on any account of his reception and influence, because much scholarship here tends to quickly collapse into counterclaims that he did not really say many or most of the things that he has either been accused of or credited with (Bassford 1994). In short, there is no substitute for careful reading. That said, even the less-than-accurate readings and interpretations of his work have an important impact on the way in which modern war and the state are understood. Most interesting discussions of the problem of war are still framed by the theory of Clausewitz.

The immediate reception of Clausewitz's *On War* was muted. The book was initially overshadowed by the work of his rival as the leading post-Napoleonic War strategist, Antoine Henri de Jomini (1779–1869). A Swiss-born soldier in Napoleon's army, his *The Art of War* was required reading amongst the officer class in Europe and in the United States during the 19th century. It was read by the young officers at West Point who were to face each other in the U.S. Civil War, perhaps the first modern industrial war. However, Clausewitz's reputation later rose significantly as a consequence of its association with Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891), who reformed the strategy and organisation of the Prussian Army, and then the Grand Army after German unification. Von Moltke was one of the outstanding military leaders of the mid-19th century and played a significant role in the war over Schleswig-Holstein with Denmark in 1864, and the Austrian-Prussian War in 1866, before his signal triumph in the Franco-Prussian war. Von Moltke was a strategic genius in his own right but had been a student at the War College when Clausewitz was director, and he was seen as a disciple of Clausewitz. In particular, he was taken to exemplify a rejection of the formalistic approach to a war of manoeuvre that was associated

with de Jomini in favour of Clausewitz's strategic flexibility. It was through this association with German success that Clausewitz's ideas attracted the attention of Von Moltke's disciples and the strategic thinkers and staff colleges, which produced not only a wider audience for the book but translations of into French and English. The rapid success and challenge of Prussian strategy became a focus for opponents and allies alike. So began the legend of Clausewitz as the theorist of Prussianism and a Prussian way of war, a legend that was to become controversial following the next major European war in 1914–1918.

One consequence of the experience of World War I on British intellectual life was a reaction against the philosophical idealism prominent in late 19th- and early 20th-century politics. This had much to do with the reputation of Hegel and Fichte and their influence on British idealists such as F.H. Bradley (1846–1924) and Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923), especially the claim that their philosophies subordinated the individual to the state. The idealists viewed the state as an ethical community in which personal and group identity is revealed, and so it was easy to caricature German idealism as a source of Prussian militarism and aggression that had 'caused' the Great War. Clausewitz has almost nothing to do with this debate, but it was possible to read his trinity of state, army and people as vindicating the kind of state worship that was attacked by critics of idealism and all things Prussian. For instance, the liberal thinker L.T. Hobhouse opens his book on *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* with the following claim, having watched a Zeppelin raid on central London from his home in Hampstead Heath:

As I went back to my Hegel my first mood was one of self-satire. Was this a time for theorizing or destroying theories, when the world was tumbling about our ears? My second thought ran otherwise. To each man the tools and weapons that he can best use. In the bombing of London I had just witnessed the visible and tangible outcome of a false and wicked doctrine, the foundations of which lay, as I believe in the book before me. To combat this doctrine effectively is to take such a part in the fight as the physical disabilities of middle age allow. Hegel himself carried the proof-sheets of his first work to the printer through streets crowded with fugitives from the [battle]field of Jena. With that work began the most penetrating and subtle of all the influences which have sapped the rational humanitarianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in the Hegelian theory of the god state all that I had witnessed lay implicit. (Hobhouse 1918, p. 6)

For those interested in challenging the philosophical presuppositions of the model of politics that had resulted in the Great War, it was easy to see the alignment of the state and army over the people, or Zeppelin raids on civilian populations, as an example of absolute war, as perfectly illustrating the legacy of Hegel and Fichte, translated into a doctrine for the Prussian military by Clausewitz.

Yet, there are elements in this example that do connect with Clausewitz's view of absolute war or a people's war. The German air raid on London was on a civilian target and therefore broke the taboo that war is a professional affair between uniformed combatants. As with other developments in the Great War, the aerial attack that triggered Hobhouse's anger indicated a shift between the elements of the trinity from the armies to the peoples. This hostile interpretation of Clausewitz was not, however, confined to the philosophers and political theorists, who are generally not well disposed to war. It also manifested itself through selective interpretation, in a criticism of the impact of Clausewitz's ideas on both the Axis and Allied military leaderships. Here a different facet of Clausewitz's theory was the chief target.

Clausewitz was claimed as a key source for the strategy of bringing massive concentrations of force to bear in single engagements that led to the failed military tactics and strategy of the trench warfare of the Western Front, with its stalemate, limited impact and mass slaughter. This line of criticism was deployed by the British strategic thinker Basil Liddell Hart, who experienced combat in the Battle of the Somme and who rejected what he considered to be the failed frontal assault strategy of the British and French in favour of his own indirect strategy. The failed strategy concentrated massive force at supposed points of weakness with the view to breaking the enemy in a decisive engagement. In the context of the static war of the Western Front, it was claimed that this would result in a breakthrough. However, the great battles, such as that of the Somme, failed to achieve this goal and resulted only in the mass slaughter of troops for little military benefit. Liddell Hart argued that the considerable improvement of military technology (especially artillery, machine guns and poison gas) had rendered this so-called Clausewitzian strategy redundant. In this new context he ridiculed Clausewitz as the 'Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre' (Liddell Hart 1933, p. 120).

In place of this direct mass assault, Liddell Hart advocated an indirect approach, which avoided confrontation at the point of the enemy's forces but instead focused on the periphery as the way to the centre. He also urged reliance on small-scale deployments and confrontations. In the context of a European war, this should result in Britain avoiding a major land campaign with the kind of mass mobilisation and frontal assaults that led to the Battle of the Somme and instead relying on its naval power, with interventions and campaigns at points of weakness and at times of advantage to knock out the allies of Britain's adversaries, such as the ill-fated Dardanelles campaign against Turkey. In the years following the Treaty of Versailles, Liddell Hart's ideas were taken up by those who feared that another mass land campaign would be politically unacceptable and equally ineffective, as well as those who advocated new transformative technologies such as air and tank warfare.

For a time, Liddell Hart had a significant impact on British strategy and his ideas were favoured by Neville Chamberlain in the interwar period. Yet, by the time World War II started in 1939, his approach had been repudiated

by the strategy of a land campaign with France in support of Poland. Liddell Hart was always a controversial figure amongst strategists and he was especially protective of his own reputation – to the extent of taking credit for the strategic achievements of others. In particular, he claimed credit for new thinking on armoured and tank warfare that was said to have inspired the German blitzkrieg, which avoided concentrated frontal assault in favour of rapid mobility. Liddell Hart dressed up his own strategic opposition to the 1914–1918 legacy in terms of an opposition to Clausewitz. But, in reality, the contrast is superficial because Clausewitz was a far more nuanced thinker and less rigid or even ‘Prussian’ than Liddell Hart claimed. Yet in the end the dispute was not really about the interpretation of Clausewitz’s theory but more a claim that the nature of war had radically changed and so Clausewitz’s theory was no longer appropriate to a new kind of technologically advanced warfare begun in World War I and brought to completion in World War II, with the development of air power, rockets and nuclear weapons.

With the extension of military technology apparently rendering armed confrontation on a battlefield irrelevant, the post-1945 world posed a significant challenge to those who claimed that Clausewitz’s message had continued relevance. In a world where the belligerents were grouped under the nuclear umbrellas of the United States and the USSR, which guaranteed MAD and the impossibility of surviving let alone winning a nuclear confrontation, the fundamental Clausewitzian insight of war as an instrument of state policy no longer seemed plausible.

However, the invention of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons did not lead to the abandonment of war and the consequent necessity for states to have sound military strategy. The Cold War stand-off between the west and the Communist bloc did not eradicate war or war planning. The Korean War of 1950–1953 was a major but traditional military confrontation, albeit partly conducted through proxies. The North Koreans relied on Soviet airpower and Chinese forces after the initial success of the multilateral United Nations forces led by the USA in containing and rolling back the invasion. The Korean confrontation was contained within a traditional interstate war format, although the United States was content to act as the dominant leader of a multinational coalition. More importantly, despite the ill-advised urgings of General Douglas MacArthur (and others) for a nuclear attack on China, it was a war that did not escalate into nuclear exchanges, especially as President Truman removed MacArthur from command. The Korean conflict ended in an armistice and the final resolution of the war is still an issue today in international politics.

What this illustrated was that conventional war was not irrelevant, whether conducted under the guise of multinational alliances or using other proxies. It required the continuation of a state-centric model of strategy and war. War plans for conventional confrontations between Soviet and NATO forces on the European continent continued to be made throughout the next four decades.

Yet, more interestingly even in the field of nuclear conflict, the idea of war being a policy that might be pursued even with the devastating power of nuclear weapons continued to preoccupy some strategic thinkers. Not everyone was sceptical of the idea that a nuclear war might be winnable. In the early 1950s, some intellectuals, such as the game theorist John von Neuman and the physicist Edward Teller, advocated a pre-emptive American attack on Stalin's Russia, before it could build up nuclear forces. Later, others (such as the physicist Herman Kahn), argued that there could be some political gain from engaging in a nuclear war.

A question will always remain whether the strategy of fighting a nuclear war was offered in good faith or whether it was only intended to support the idea of deterrence – where the ultimate goal is not to have to exercise the deterrent power and therefore never put to the test the premise that there is a winnable nuclear war. Many advocates of the idea of tactical nuclear war (deploying only smaller battlefield nukes) were, no doubt, following the strategy of deterrence and MAD, even if their personal views were that the devastation of all-out nuclear war was unthinkable. If there is still any conceivable world in which nuclear war-fighting is a genuine policy option for a state, then there is scope for Clausewitz to inform that thinking.

Alongside the strategists who argued for a winnable nuclear war, others saw Clausewitz informing strategy where nuclear technology made outright conflict unviable. Of particular interest here is the French liberal-realist Raymond Aron (1905–1983), who recognised Clausewitz's injunction to see war as an element of policy, and to also recommend other options when that policy tool is unviable. He closes his study of Clausewitz and his lessons for modern strategy with a recognition that, alongside the complex ways in which Clausewitzian war remains viable, there is also the need to look at other state policy options, short of direct conflict that are necessitated by nuclear technology. Writing in the 1970s, these ideas included strategic limitations on nuclear forces and diplomatic controls over the proliferation and acquisition of nuclear weapons by new powers (Aron 1970). The diplomatic contests over strategic arms limitation agreements became a new form of policy confrontation that resulted in policy as 'war by other means', where actual conflict would have been self-defeating. For Aron there was no reason to regard this as a betrayal or denial of Clausewitz's wisdom, as opposed to its sensible extension beyond the battlefield arena. What Aron did not live to see was a series of developments that led to a major transformation of strategic thinking that extended beyond the problem of accelerating technology.

Whilst the Cold War limited direct interstate conflict, and obscured it behind multistate ideological alliances, it remained the case that the USA and USSR were the main protagonists in a major ideological and military confrontation. States, militaries and peoples remained essential elements of thinking about strategy whether in the context of war as a policy or through strategic

diplomacy, as Aron had suggested. Yet, what we now know as the final phase of the Cold War, and the eventual collapse of the USSR, brought to the fore a transformation in military strategy that became known as the revolution in military affairs. These authors explicitly rejected what they claimed are the fundamental building blocks of the Clausewitzian view. Central to this approach is the work of Martin van Creveld (Van Creveld 1991) and Mary Kaldor (Kaldor 2012).

It is important to appreciate the complex events that led to this new thinking. The 1980s began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, inaugurating the last phase of proxy conflict between the USA and USSR. However, it also coincided with the revolution in Iran and the overthrow of the shah, who was a U.S. ally, in favour of the Islamic Republic in Iran. The early stages of the revolution involved the humiliation of the United States with a siege of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and a failed rescue attempt by special forces. This debacle in turn contributed to the fall of President Carter and his replacement by President Reagan. He began a new period of hawkish foreign policy against the traditional threat of Communism, but also a new cultural struggle against the Islamic Republic. What began as a Cold War confrontation unleashed forces that transcended the simple world of ideological power-block confrontations. In time, they led to a proliferation of proxy conflicts from central America to the Soviet border in central Asia, as well as the new civilisational conflicts predicted by Samuel Huntington (Huntington 1996). President Reagan accelerated a nuclear arms build-up that had begun under President Carter, but he also pursued conflicts against 'the forces of communism' in central America by funding and supplying military uprisings against left-leaning popular regimes such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and directly against the Soviets in Afghanistan through supporting guerrilla warfare by the Islamic mujahideen militias.

At this time, war was being outsourced to private and non-state actors who were also not strictly national liberation movements. The war in Afghanistan became a guerrilla war of attrition that sapped Soviet morale and was seen by many as a Russian 'Vietnam'. However, when the Soviets withdrew their troops, the power vacuum was filled by a tribal and confessional civil war. It was only stabilised in turn with the rise of the Taliban regime of Islamist ultra-conservatives and warlords, who nonetheless provided a safe haven for the radicals of Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda were the Islamist terror group responsible for the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC, in 2001. It was itself an outgrowth of the radical jihadist fighters who had learned their trade alongside the special forces and security force militias that had supported the Afghan war against the Soviets and been directed by the American CIA or Pakistani intelligence.

The USSR's 1988–1989 retreat from Afghanistan was quickly followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 into its component republics (still dominated by Russia), after the reform movement

led by President Gorbachev failed to hold the multinational state together. With the implosion of the USSR and the collapse of the security block built around Soviet power, the international regime appeared to have fundamentally changed. Borders were redrawn (mostly peacefully) in the former Soviet space. Other national and religious conflicts grew in apparent fulfilment of Huntington's predictions of a new confrontation between Islam and the west. The USA's overwhelming military power in the new global situation also seemed to endorse Francis Fukuyama's claims about 'the end of history'.

Many military thinkers and strategists claimed that the challenge of this new world 'disorder' would not create a peace dividend through disarmament. Instead, it ushered in an increasingly chaotic and violent world where military power appeared more relevant than ever, and in ways that did not fit the decades of traditional war planning or even the planning for counter-insurgency wars against national liberation groups. It was in this context that Martin van Creveld's *The Transformation of War* (van Creveld 1991) appeared. Van Creveld is an eminent military historian who set about rethinking war in the new contexts that he argues Clausewitz failed to capture. His wide-ranging book does not simply argue that we are in new circumstances, because he acknowledges that the conventions of traditional war associated with Clausewitz had been under siege for some time and that the phenomenon of war had always defied systematisation. The central theme of his book is to demolish the central components of the trinity by undermining and problematising the ideas of the state, the army and the people as the central nexus of thinking about war. Each of these were shown to be unstable and transforming as a result of the impact of new conflicts, powers and opportunities. 'Who fought whom, how, and for what?' could no longer be seen in terms of the interplay of the fundamental elements of Clausewitz's trinity. Furthermore, trinitarian thinking was in danger of obscuring the challenges that military planners and strategists actually needed to address the problem of conflicts in the future.

Van Creveld's wide-ranging reflections are supplemented in the 'new war' literature by Mary Kaldor's *New and Old Wars* (Kaldor 2012). A British social theorist, as opposed to a military historian or strategist, Kaldor came to the subject following her involvement in the politics of the European peace movement. At the centre of her key book is an extended case study of the conflict in Bosnia–Herzegovina following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. She argues in considerable detail that the motivations, actors and context of this conflict overturn the central elements of the trinity. The conflict involved identity groups and irregular militias that often had as much to do with organised crime as they did with the former Yugoslav army. The conflicts took place in a contested space that was also part-regulated by international organisations, such as the UN peacekeepers and NATO forces acting under a UN mandate. It also operated in the shadow of Russia as the traditional guarantors of Serbia and Orthodox Christians in the Balkans.

This intense local conflict also took place within a globalising world economy, with an apparently emerging cosmopolitan order that was replacing the bipolar world of the Cold War.

Her case study is supplemented by consideration of the 'War on Terror' and the ill-fated 'traditional' wars that were fought by the U.S. military and allies in Afghanistan and in Iraq as a result of 9/11. The conflict between the violent groups in Bosnia–Herzegovina, those in the tribal and warlord struggles in sub-Saharan Africa, or with the global Islamic terror groups Al-Qaeda and later ISIS, all required a cosmopolitan order in which traditional war between states and state armies was replaced by a vision of international collaboration in peace-building and enforcement – in which major national armies would deploy troops in conflicts that were remote from their immediate national interest. This radical approach to new wars was aligned with movements for preventive wars, and the coercive 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) populations against violence from their own state. It was also associated with significant alternative approaches to cosmopolitan regulation of a globalised economy, attempting to eradicate some of the sources of international conflicts, such as significant coerced population movements or the global drugs trade.

In the eyes of the new war theorists, the Clausewitzian trinity failed because it assumed that the state, the military and the people were stable and given objects of enquiry, rather than contingent and fluid entities that were rapidly disappearing in a new world of disorder. States were always controversial actors in the context of an unequal global order, but they were facing new challenges. These could be benign, as with the pooling of sovereignty in a supranational unions such as the European Union in reaction to economic globalisation. Similarly, international partnerships to regulate trade such as the WTO were claimed to produce benefits for all their signatory states. However, new challenges could also be malign in terms of the impact of identity politics attacking the national coherence of traditional nation states, and with the fall of the USSR, the rightsizing of borders and the reassignment of populations. Militaries were just as problematic, because of the rise of heavily armed militias, deploying weapons that had traditionally only been available to national armed forces. As the proliferation of high-calibre weapons continued, the idea that the national army was able to assert the state's monopoly of violence within a territory could also collapse. This was especially acute in regions where natural resources or narcotics meant that private groups could finance armed forces to equal the quality of states.

Yet, even with respect to military power the challenge was not simple disaggregation. Political alliances and sovereign unions meant that collaboration between national armies continues, either through peacekeeping or war-fighting such as in the first and second Gulf Wars. The third pillar of the people was always the most precarious. The identity of a people was a perennial issue for political thinkers, and it was also one of the issues that Clausewitz was

most concerned with. Nations, ethnicities, cultures and religions have always been sources of identity and unity, or fragmentation and diversity. For the new war theorists, a new wave of diversity and fragmentation (made possible by cosmopolitanism) has complicated the interests that underpin policy and the identities of the peoples that engage in conflict. The world of globalisation has accelerated these tensions in ways that require a different conceptualisation if we are to make sense of and manage the conflicts of the future.

As with all revolutions in thought or intellectual disciplines, this intervention also spurred a reaction. In this case, a resurgence of interest in Clausewitz occurred, seeing him either as a thinker whose fundamental ideas are distorted by interpreting him as advocating a rigorous structural trinity in his theorising of war or as someone who has a much richer and nuanced view of war that captures precisely many of the challenges that the new world disorder poses (Strachan 2007; Fleming 2013). At the same time, the world order fails to follow the desired pattern of human predictions. The second Gulf War may have been a poor response to a global terror group, but the defeat of Saddam Hussein's Iraq showed that there remain some fundamentals of interstate conflict and the deployment of mass force. Similarly, the long post-crash period, from 2008, has also reinvigorated nationalist populisms that have challenged the institutions of the international order in favour of national self-assertion, especially amongst the larger military powers such as the USA, China and Russia. The current era may well have new and perhaps ever more complex sources of military conflict. But there are also familiar elements that link the exercise and deployment of concentrated violence to political agendas by states and by groups that claim political legitimacy. Whilst Clausewitz does not provide a prescriptive policy science to deal with all such future developments, and indeed warns against such a narrowly rationalist view of war, his work remains an important challenge to other aspirant accounts of the deployment of violence for political and policy ends and one from which we continue to learn.

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*Suggestions for finding open access versions of Clausewitz's texts*

The Clausewitz Homepage is edited by Dr Christopher Bassford

<https://www.clausewitz.com>

Also archived via Marxists Internet Archive

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In addition, *On War* is available at:

<https://antilogicalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/on-war.pdf>