

Clausewitz as a Practical Philosopher

Edited by Andreas Herberg-Rothe

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Foreword

Clausewitz, still perhaps the most important and referenced theorist of war, was deeply influenced by the thought and philosophy of his own time. Although Clausewitz rejected an abstract philosophy of war, he emphasized that his approach was a philosophical attempt to understand war. His “wondrous trinity,” as well as his dialectics of defense and offense are essentially hybrid conceptualizations. By elaborating the philosophical foundations of Clausewitz’s theory, this special issue aims to contribute to a better understanding of the ongoing transformation of war and violent action in a world characterized by the rise of the other (i.e., the resurgence of the former colonized civilizations and newly industrialized nations who are no longer imitating, but challenging the Western world)¹ and liquid or hybrid globalization.²

For Clausewitz, the practical philosophy of war is the basis for the art of warfare. In one of his forewords to *On War*, he stressed the immense difficulties of developing “such a philosophical structure [*philosophischer Aufbau*] for the art of war.”³ He concedes that many people think that such a philosophical structure would be impossible to design “since it deals with matters that no permanent law can provide for.”⁴ Clausewitz says that he would agree with that view, if there were not quite a number of propositions which could be demonstrated without difficulty.⁵ It must be acknowledged that not all of these propositions match Clausewitz’s theoretical insights, with, however, the notable exception of the statement that defense is the stronger form of war with a negative purpose and attack the weaker form of war with a positive purpose. This proposition of Clausewitz implies a practical philosophy of war not dependent on static laws (i.e., which could be applied in all circumstances), but on the laws of movement and of transitions from one pole to the other. Clausewitz’s work should not be understood in linear categories but as a philosophical attempt to think in terms of wave-like categories. Consequently, in his trinity, at the end of Chapter One of *On War*, Clausewitz brings out his result for theory by using the term “dominant tendencies” in war,

¹ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York/London: W. W. Norton, 2008).

² Andreas Herberg-Rothe, Miriam Foerstle, “The dissolution of identities in liquid globalization and the emergence of violent uprisings,” *African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research* 1/1 (2020): 11-32.

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg, 19th edition (Bonn: Dümmler, 1991). As in so many other cases the English translation of *On War* by Michael Howard and Peter Paret is rather misleading. I will refer to the English translation only when it is in congruence with the German version edited by Werner Hahlweg. In the passage I am referring to, Clausewitz is using the term “*philosophischer Aufbau der Kriegskunst*” which is mistakenly translated by Paret and Howard as “scientific theory of the art of war.” See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 71. This is only one among many examples of an overly rationalistic translation (closer to a specific interpretation than to a proper translation) of *Vom Kriege*. Concerning the concept of philosophy in Clausewitz’s masterpiece, Paret and Howard translated almost all the occurrences of the word by “science,” “scientific,” “theory,” “theoretical” or just “concept.”

⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 183.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

which in my interpretation are in conflict with one another.⁶ The concept of tendencies in Clausewitz's trinity vividly conveys this dynamic character of war.

If we were to take Clausewitz's propositions as fixed laws, they would become catchall phrases or would lead to fundamental misunderstandings with terrible consequences. One striking example might be his notion of "absolute war," which led the German generals in World War I to conduct total warfare in the mistaken belief they were following Clausewitz.⁷ His dynamic understanding is also reflected in his famous dictum that war is merely the continuation of policy by other means. This seemingly unambiguous proposition in the heading of section 24 of the first chapter of *On War* is thrown into doubt when Clausewitz states in the same section that it is no small demand "that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means."⁸ Here Clausewitz acknowledges that policy as well as politics could conflict with the adopted means, a proposition which counters the notion that war is merely the continuation of policy by other means. Even more importantly, Clausewitz declares at the end of the previous section that policy will permeate all military operations "in so far as their violent nature will admit."⁹

Clausewitz highlights the practical use of philosophy in another of his forewords where he emphasizes that he did not avoid any philosophical conclusion, but whenever the thread became too thin, he preferred to break it off and go back to the relevant phenomena of experience. Nevertheless, he believed that analysis and observation, philosophy and experience must never disdain or exclude each other, but on the contrary lend each other mutual support.¹⁰

This combination of philosophy and experience, analysis and observation, makes Clausewitz's work a treatise of practical philosophy. The authors of this special issue share a common goal, namely, to revive Clausewitz's practical philosophy in order to understand the current transformation of war and violence in the 21st century.¹¹ It is worth noting however, as shown by the different contributions, that an interest in Clausewitz's practical philosophy does not necessarily amount to an endorsement of his political considerations.

My article focuses on the role played by philosophy and methodology in Clausewitz's works. I contend that *On War* must be understood as a philosophical *exposé* on the art of warfare (as highlighted by Clausewitz himself in one of his numerous forewords). I am further arguing that Clausewitz's methodology could be best described as an attempt to think in terms of categories of laws of movement quite similar to a sinus curve erected on an enhancing x-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 89. See also Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's puzzle. The political theory of war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ This is still the perspective of Azar Gat's interpretation of Clausewitz which he wrongly attributes to the philosophy in Clausewitz's times. See Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁰ Here I must point out yet another mistaken translation from Paret and Howard. Indeed, Clausewitz uses the term "*Philosophie*," which, for some reason, is translated as "theory" by Paret and Howard. Compare Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 184 to Clausewitz, *On War*, 61. What is more, the term "support" might be too weak to characterize the relation because Clausewitz is stating "*sie leisten einander gegenseitige Bürgschaft*," which I would translate as: they are giving each other mutual surety.

¹¹ For the sake of better understanding, the authors have translated quotes from Clausewitz, which are solely published in German, on their own. The reference to the German original is solely contained in the footnotes.

axis.¹² Dwelling on my comparative reading of the works of Hegel and Clausewitz, I also maintain that the latter provided the seeds of a new dialectics surpassing that of the former and which is of paramount importance in our era characterized by liquid and hybrid globalization.

Terence Holmes takes a quite new approach to Clausewitz's "strange" or wondrous trinity, arguing that it is "strange" because it is in constant flux and therefore totally unlike the familiar serene and immutable pattern of the Holy Trinity. He also shows that Chapter One of *On War* is often uneven and discontinuous, especially as it has two different endings—one of which says that war is an act of policy while the other says that war is made up of three conflicting tendencies and policy is only one of them, which implies that policy may often lose control of war. The article also challenges Alan Beyerchen's influential view that Clausewitz used the image of a randomly oscillating magnetic pendulum to illustrate the nature of war. Clausewitz actually used the image of an object stationary between three magnets to illustrate his point that the theory of war must remain stable and impartial amidst the endless struggle between the three tendencies of war. Holmes highlights the problems of the trinity in relation to the control of war by policy and rejects Beyerchen's position.

Especially dwelling on the correspondence and political writings of the author of *On War*, Andrée Türpe's article offers a minute analysis of Clausewitz's understanding of revolution, reform, monarchy, republic and the nation state. His conclusion is that Clausewitz was a proponent of monarchy, reform, and national patriotism. Türpe shows that Clausewitz's political ideas are not only sophisticated but also, to some degree, self-contradictory. He stresses that Clausewitz was an adherent of reform in order to avoid a revolution or, at least, to make it unnecessary. What is more, the Prussian military theorist was firmly opposed to Jacobinism and absolute republicanism. More specifically, Türpe highlights that Clausewitz was part of the reform wing of the Prussian monarchy. Rather than interpreting Clausewitz's political stances within the broader continuum of the history of ideas, the paper focuses on a careful reconstruction of Clausewitz's ideas in the political context of his time.

How do emotions impact the outbreak of war, the decision-making process in times of war? Further, how do emotions motivate or affect the decision-makers, the conductors, and the supporters of a given war? These questions are the focus of Bilgehan and Nihal Emeklier's contribution to this special issue. Admittedly, the core of war studies is frequently based on a rational paradigm meant to describe, interpret or explain the causality of war and the realities in times of war. However, to make sense of war without considering the role of emotions also amounts to leave aside pivotal features of the phenomenon at stake. In this regard, it is the authors' contention that Clausewitz gives a special relevance to the role of emotions within an actor-level analysis in his theory of war. Concepts such as the "trinity," the "fog of war," and "friction" encompass the interpenetration of reason and emotion by laying emphasis on their mutual construction in practice and theory. Characterized by fear, uncertainty, and unpredictability, the inter-constitutive relationships between those who decide to wage war, those who wage it, and those who support it are studied in detail by Clausewitz through their rational and emotional features. Clausewitz's epistemological and practical view of the emotionality-rationality equation in warfare offers a theoretical framework meant to evaluate contemporary wars and conflicts in which — due to the factors of unpredictability and complexity — emotions are endowed with a strong "catalyzer effect" concerning all the actors involved from near or far in war. Finally, the paper also aims to bridge the gap between Clausewitz's military theory (which takes into account the rationality-

¹² Another illuminating example might be the power and development of waves. On the one hand, without waves, the sea is meant to die. On the other hand, in instances like tsunamis, water might also become destructive in itself.

emotionality equation and the unity of moral and material forces) and the changing character of contemporary wars.

Clausewitz has had an enduring, meaningful impact on radical left theorizing from Lenin to Foucault. However, as the paper by Guilel Treiber shows, it is not so much Clausewitz as the reversal of the famous dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means. To reverse the dictum, Treiber contends, is not simply a play of words. The reversal shapes the possibility of those who practice it to theorize the relationship between war and politics in a profound way. It leads the plurality of the political world, its conflicts and agonisms to be reduced to a struggle for survival between two opposing forces. Hence, the “history of a mistake.” Indeed, the paper not only traces the influence and the moment of the reversal in the work of post-structuralist thinkers such as Deleuze & Guattari, Foucault, and Negri & Hardt, that is, the history, but also treats the reversal as a proper conceptual mistake. Rich as it is as a mistake, it seems that Clausewitz’s original formulation may have a higher conceptual strength than the reversal.

Maciej Witkowski analyzes Schmitt’s political philosophy as a reinterpretation and very own re-appropriation of Clausewitz’s idea of the political character of modern war. Both philosophers distinguish between war and politics and consider the former as an instrument of the latter. Enmity, a crucial category of Schmitt’s philosophy, has its place in Clausewitz’s system. It is an element of the “remarkable trinity.” However, the author of *On War* understands this enmity in a different way than Schmitt does. On the one hand, for Schmitt, enmity denotes the utmost degree of intensity of separation and is rooted in human nature. But on the other hand, friend-enemy relationships are also subject to political decisions. This second meaning of enmity, notices Witkowski, seems to be more important for Schmitt. For Clausewitz, enmity does not play such a pivotal role at a political level. Schmitt’s philosophy of war may be regarded as a radicalized version of Clausewitz’s theory. Schmitt was living in turbulent times and was critical of phenomena such as the birth of the League of Nations and the rise of U.S hegemony which occurred during the interwar period. He therefore created a political philosophy that would help him to fight these new trends and in which he introduced an alternative way of understanding the new reality of the first half of the 20th century. Although a complete re-appropriation of Schmitt’s philosophy is out of question, his vindication of a radicalized version of Clausewitz’s philosophy might still be of interest today. Witkowski argues that whereas Schmitt was focused on the element of enmity, we should nowadays focus more on the element of policy (which Clausewitz related to reason). He further contends that the current ethics-centered philosophies of war may be considered as a symptom of the liberal rationalization and moralization of politics. Even though Schmitt’s enmity-centered political philosophy is false, his warning that liberalism can only overshadow enmity between people, but not overcome it, is still relevant today. There is a need for a new philosophy of war inspired by Clausewitz that might be reason-centered, but also has to find some balance between the three components of the trinity, a balance that could help us understand the modern political reality and the attitude towards war it brings forth.

Olivia Garard highlights that it is well-known that war is a continuation of policy by other means, but it is not understood from where this conclusion derives. She asks what prompts Clausewitz to include *Politik*? According to her analysis one answer can be found in Clausewitz’s integration and analysis of allies and alliances. By exposing Clausewitz’s logic, we find that allies are a live and reactive means that operate within the dynamism of alliances. The conclusion is not surprising at the level of international politics, she argues, but it does challenge Clausewitz to integrate external actors into his account; all allies and alliances are initially outside the scope of his dual conception of war. Moreover, they challenge some of his fundamental premises: that the defense is the stronger form of warfare; that the status quo has inertia; and that war has duration. In the end, rather than undermining his theory,

Clausewitz expands his view to account for them. An analysis of his work on the Campaign of 1815 demonstrates how allies and alliances operate at the tactical, strategic, and political level, ultimately enabling the Seventh Coalition to defeat Napoleon for good. Appreciating what Clausewitz's theory provides for and demands of allies and alliances is in her view essential to a robust understanding of his theory and highly relevant for the evolving strategic competition between the world powers.¹³

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¹³ Andreas Herberg-Rothe, "100 years after the end of the first world war: Are we slipping again in a world war?" in *The Peninsula Foundation*, Chennai, India, March 6, 2022. <https://www.thepeninsula.org.in/2022/03/06/100-years-after-the-end-of-the-first-world-war-are-we-slipping-again-into-a-world-war/>