

Introduction

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Clausewitz : A Very
Short
Oxford Intro.



Karl von Clausewitz, engraving c.1800. Hulton Archive.

About Karl von Clausewitz's study *On War* the American strategic thinker Bernard Brodie has made the bold statement 'His is not simply the greatest, but the only great book about war.' It is difficult to disagree. Anyone trying to put together a collection of texts on military theory comparable to anthologies on social, political, or economic thought will find it hard to match Clausewitz. Few if any other writers on war have succeeded as he did in transcending the limitations imposed on their insights by the political or the technological circumstances of their times. We can find many whose writings illustrate how successive generations have thought about war, but there are remarkably few who can help us to think about it; who have penetrated below the ephemeral phenomena of their own times and considered war, not just as a craft, but as a great socio-political activity, distinguished from all other activities by the reciprocal and legitimized use of purposeful violence to attain political objectives. There is certainly the magisterial study by Sun Tzu: *The Art of War*, probably written in the fourth century BC. There are a few chapters in the works of Clausewitz's contemporary Jomini; there are passages scattered among the works of Liddell Hart and his eccentric contemporary J. F. C. Fuller; and there are many interesting insights to be excavated from the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. Among earlier writers one can glean much bleak wisdom from the *obiter dicta* of Thucydides and Machiavelli. But there is no systematic study comparable to that of Clausewitz. Military analysts

are usually concerned rather to advise their own generations and their own societies than to distil lasting wisdom for posterity.

Clausewitz expressed the modest hope that his book would not be forgotten after two or three years, and 'might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject' (p. 63). But his main concern was to help his countrymen and his contemporaries. He was a member of the Prussian officer corps, loyal to the Hohenzollern dynasty though more conscious than most of the problems it faced in coming to terms with the political currents set in motion by the French Revolution. He believed that the menace of French aggression had been checked by the European powers in 1814–15 but by no means destroyed, and if he sought to understand war in the abstract it was only to ensure that in future Prussia and her allies would be able to wage it more swiftly and effectively against the hereditary foe. Above all he was a professional soldier writing for his professional colleagues, not an academic lecturing in a political science faculty. He quite deliberately limited his analysis to what was likely to be of immediate utility to a commander planning a campaign. He had the practical man's horror of abstractions that could not be directly related to the facts of the situation, of propositions that could not be illustrated by examples, of material that was not relevant to the problem in hand. Certainly as a thinker he sought to penetrate to the essence of his subject-matter. But he was always concerned to link theory to action, and he deliberately ignored all aspects of his subject that were not of immediate relevance to the conduct of the kind of war with which he himself was familiar.

The conduct of war [*he wrote*] has nothing to do with making guns and powder out of coal, sulphur, saltpetre, copper and tin; its given quantities are weapons that are ready for use and their effectiveness. Strategy uses maps without worrying about trigonometrical surveys; it does not enquire how a country should be organised and a people trained and ruled in order to produce the best military results. It takes these matters as it finds them in the European community of nations . . . (p. 144)



To that extent, therefore, Clausewitz deliberately sacrificed universality to pragmatism and simplicity. It may however be doubted whether he was conscious of quite how much he was sacrificing. It is easy enough, after two World Wars, to criticize a theory of war that excluded all consideration of the economic base that makes the fighting of war possible at all, but to do this is not just to evoke the wisdom of hindsight. It demanded a very narrow view of the nature of war to study the Napoleonic period so intensively as did Clausewitz without taking into account the part played in Napoleon's strategy, and perhaps in his downfall, by the Continental System – his attempt to use economic as well as military instruments to consolidate and extend his conquests. Clausewitz's ignorance of the whole maritime dimension of warfare is striking but not surprising. The oceans lay beyond his cultural horizons. It is more curious that a Prussian specialist on military questions, whose country had been established as a major military power as much through skill in economic management as by military victories, should virtually ignore a dimension of military affairs that had occupied the fore-front of the mind of every Prussian soldier, statesman and bourgeois since the days of Frederick William I. Perhaps this one-sidedness reflected the limitations of Clausewitz's own personality and interests. More probably it was the impact of the great Napoleonic campaigns that shaped his career and dominated his thinking – campaigns whose dramatic course and cataclysmic results overshadowed the humdrum concerns of military budgeting and administration that had so obsessed the old Prussian army. When it came to the point, it was the successful conduct of operations that mattered, and the events of Clausewitz's lifetime had made it clear that it was to this, and not to the deeper questions relating to military financing, budgeting, procurement, and administration, that attention had most urgently to be given.

Clausewitz's ignoring of the economic dimension of war was thus, at least in part, deliberate. His ignoring of another dimension, the technological, was unconscious, and more easily understandable. Like

Clausewitz

most of his intelligent contemporaries he realized very well that he had been born into a revolutionary era likely to transform, for better or worse, the entire political structure of European society. But no more than anyone else could he appreciate that he was living on the eve of a technological transformation of yet vaster scope. The conduct of war is determined above all by two factors: the nature of the weapons available and the modes of transportation. The first had remained stable for a hundred years, the second for a thousand. In Clausewitz's day as in Caesar's, logistics were determined by the speed and endurance of marching men and of draught animals. Tactics were determined, as they had been in the age of Marlborough, by firearms whose effective range was 50 yards and cannon with a range of 300; and although there had been significant incremental developments during the past century, developments whose significance Clausewitz analyses most interestingly in the course of *On War*, there was no reason to expect the transformation, both in transportation and in armaments, that began in the decade following Clausewitz's death in 1831 with the development of railways and the introduction of breech-loading rifled firearms.

Much of *On War* is therefore of interest only to military historians, dealing as it does with detailed questions of tactics and logistics that were to be out of date within a few decades of Clausewitz's death. What is remarkable, however, is how much of what Clausewitz had to say did outlast his time and remain relevant, not only under military circumstances transformed out of all recognition, but for a readership far broader than the officers of the Prussian Army whose education he primarily had in mind. Why this should be so it will be the purpose of this volume to explain.

Chapter 1

Clausewitz in his time

The active career of Karl von Clausewitz exactly spanned the course of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars between 1792 and 1815. He was born in 1780, the son of a half-pay lieutenant in the Prussian Army, and at the age of 12 obtained a commission in the 34th Infantry Regiment, which was at the time commanded by a distant relative. But his family was not a military, much less an aristocratic one. His father, whose own forebears had been bourgeois and academic, had been commissioned by Frederick the Great only during the crisis period of the Seven Years War when the exclusive barriers of the Prussian officer corps had been reluctantly lowered to admit members of the middle classes; and he had been retired after that war not, as he and his family gave out, as a result of wounds received on active service, but in consequence of Frederick's reduction of the officer corps to its original nucleus of well-born landed gentry (*Junkers*). Thus although Clausewitz passed his life as a member of that exclusive body, and was even to gain entry into the entourage of the royal family, he was temperamentally an outsider; and the way in which he was ultimately treated by Frederick William III and his court suggests that he was seen as such.

Clausewitz was always something of an introvert; solitary, bookish, shy, intellectually arrogant. An autodidact, he devoured literature on any available topic, not only military affairs but philosophy, politics, art, and education. He was a prolific, almost a compulsive writer on all these


matters; from the age of 20 until his death in 1831, his writing was only briefly interrupted by the demands of military campaigning, and no complete edition of his work has ever been compiled. But beneath the scholarly, withdrawn exterior there burned an ambition for military glory worthy of Stendhal's Julien Sorel: an ambition deeply repressed, given vent only in his letters to his wife; never to be fulfilled in the series of staff appointments for which his superiors considered, probably rightly, that his intellectual talents best fitted him; but one that gave a peculiar intensity to his analyses of the qualities demanded of a commander in the field, of the intense moral pressures that commanders must learn to withstand, and of the bloody drama of battle that was the natural, indeed the desirable, climax of all his endeavours. All Clausewitz's writings bear the stamp of a passionate temperament, as often at war with as in the service of a powerful analytic mind.

Clausewitz

Clausewitz was no desk soldier. He received his baptism of fire at the age of 13, when the Prussian Army, on the left wing of the forces of the First Coalition containing and driving back the armies of the First French Republic, was campaigning first on the Rhine, then in the Vosges. Advancing across that broad valley, trudging up and down those steep, wooded mountain tracks, he acquired that infantryman's familiarity with terrain that was to inspire so many of the pages of *On War*.

The campaign ended with the Treaty of Basel in 1795, and Prussia withdrew into a precarious and self-deluding state of 'non-alignment' from which she was to be cruelly aroused eleven years later. The first five years of this period was spent by Clausewitz on garrison duty in the small town of Neuruppin. Intelligent soldiers never waste the long periods of leisure that characterize peacetime service. Clausewitz made good use of the excellent library of Frederick the Great's brother Prince Henry, which was open to the officers of his regiment, and he acquired a deep practical interest in education: activities, it may be assumed, that did not engage the interests of his fellow subalterns quite so profoundly. It must nevertheless have come as something of a relief when in 1801 he

was transferred to Berlin to attend the newly opened War College under the direction of Gerd von Scharnhorst. It was now, at the age of 19, that his career really began.

Scharnhorst is rightly revered as one of the giants in the creation of Germany, a man as distinguished as a thinker and a statesman as he was as a soldier. A Hanoverian by birth and an artilleryman by training - two characteristics that set him apart from the *Junker* cavalry and infantry officers who dominated the Prussian Army - his brilliant performance in the War of the First Coalition gained for him universal respect, and his appointment as director of the first Prussian staff college was remarkably wise. From the beginning of the wars he had been puzzling over the performance of the French revolutionary armies. How was it that this rabble, untrained, undisciplined, under-officered, its generals as often as not jumped-up NCOs, with no adequate supply system let alone any serious administrative structure, how did it come about that these remarkable forces could not only hold their own against the professional soldiers of the European powers but actually defeat them? It was true that the French made ingenious use of the new flexible and dispersed infantry formations which the Royal Army had been developing before the revolution, and that in the *matériel*, the tactics, and the training of their artillery they were second to none. But the reasons for their military success lay deeper than that. The success of the French armies, Scharnhorst discerned, was closely connected with the transformation of the society that lay behind them, with the emergence of the idea of a French Nation. To learn how to defeat the French it was not enough just to study their military techniques, essential though this might be. One had to consider the political context as well, and the historical background against which these techniques had emerged. The syllabus of the Kriegsakademie was thus liberal as well as technical, and Scharnhorst supplemented it with a discussion group, the Militärische Gesellschaft.  There no limit was observed in considering the implications of the military revolution of the time.

Clausewitz in his time

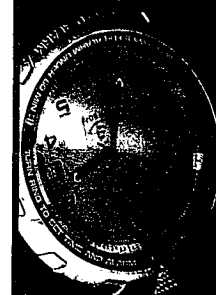
This was the setting in which the young Clausewitz now found himself, and he quickly attached himself to Scharnhorst as a deeply admiring disciple, his own ideas germinating and sprouting in the rays of that genial sun. Scharnhorst reciprocated with an equal affection for the brilliant and receptive young man. The foundation was laid for a partnership that was to end only with Scharnhorst's premature death in 1813 and was to bring Clausewitz into the heart of the group of military reformers - Grolman, Boyen, Gneisenau among others - who were to remould the Prussian army and work towards the remaking of the Prussian state. But the opportunity for this still lay in the future, and Clausewitz's immediate prospects, though glittering, were more orthodox. Graduating at the head of his class in 1803, he was appointed adjutant to Prince August, the son of his regiment's colonel-in-chief Prince Ferdinand, and at the end of the year, in the house of his patron, he met and fell in love with Marie, daughter of the Count von Brühl, a lively and well-educated girl high in the favour of Queen Louise. The family's resistance to this unsuitable match and the demands of military service delayed the marriage for seven years, which made possible the long, passionate, self-revealing correspondence in which Clausewitz developed many of his ideas. Once married, Marie was to identify herself wholeheartedly with her husband's work, act as his amanuensis and after his death as his editor, and preside over what still remains the most complete edition of his works which she published in 1832-4.

During the next two years, 1803-5, Clausewitz wrote prolifically, developing ideas that were to receive their final form twenty years later when he came to write *On War*. Then in 1806 came the war with France that the cautious King Frederick William III had done his best to avoid, but to which Clausewitz, like most other patriotic young officers, looked forward with impatient enthusiasm. His master Prince August was given command of a battalion, and Clausewitz accompanied him to the battlefield of Auerstadt. There he participated in his first great Napoleonic battle and in the catastrophic retreat that followed; an experience so shatteringly different from the tedious marches and

manœuvres of his boyhood that it was hard for him to comprehend them both as belonging to the single activity, war. He and Prince August were eventually cut off and taken prisoner. While Scharnhorst and his colleagues were retrieving the reputation of the Prussian Army in the Eylau campaign the following year, Clausewitz languished in bitter if not uncomfortable exile with his royal master in France, until they were repatriated after the Peace of Tilsit in 1808. It was a humiliating experience that stoked the fires of Clausewitz's patriotic zeal and gave him a lifelong dislike for all things French.

Released from captivity, Clausewitz rejoined Scharnhorst, who was now in Königsberg, remote from the French-dominated capital of Berlin, working to reorganize the Prussian Army. For the next four years he helped with the task of reshaping the structure of Prussian military institutions, simultaneously writing on every conceivable aspect of his subject, from the details of minor tactics to the problems of political loyalty. The latter became insoluble for him when in the spring of 1812 the king whose uniform he wore and whose claims on his loyalty he had never questioned concluded an alliance with the French enemy Clausewitz so detested. It was too much. In company with some thirty other officers Clausewitz resigned his commission, parted again from his wife, and took service with Emperor Alexander I of Russia, just as the French and their satellite armies were invading that Empire.

Although Clausewitz spoke no Russian, employment was found for him in various advisory positions on the staff. He took part in his second great battle at Borodino. He witnessed the disastrous crossing of the Beresina by the retreating French army and wrote a horrifying account of it. Finally he acted as an intermediary when in December 1812 the commander of the Prussian corps serving under Napoleon's command, Yorck von Wartenberg, took his historic decision to capitulate at Tauroggen and go over with his forces to the side of the Russians. When Yorck established a centre of Prussian national resistance at Königsberg Clausewitz organized the arming of the population; and when in the



spring of 1813 the King of Prussia himself at last abandoned Napoleon Clausewitz returned to Berlin, rejoined Scharnhorst, and again helped him to raise new armies, channelling the enthusiasm and self-sacrifice of the subjects of the Hohenzollerns who were beginning to think of themselves as Germans.

When the campaign of 1813 opened Clausewitz accompanied the army to the field. But he was still denied the position of command he wanted so badly. The King had still not forgiven him for what he saw as his disloyal conduct, and a further year passed before he readmitted Clausewitz to his service. So it was wearing the uniform of a Russian officer that Clausewitz served as adviser to the Prussian Army commander, Marshal Blücher, during the Leipzig campaign. When in 1814 he was at last readmitted to the Prussian Army, he was given command only of a nondescript force, 'the German Legion' serving in north Germany, far from the main battlefields in France. Not until 1815 was he readmitted to the Prussian General Staff and appointed chief of staff to General von Thielmann's III Army Corps. This formation served on the extreme left wing of the Allied forces in Belgium and fought a stubborn defensive action against a force double its size under Marshal Grouchy while Napoleon was trying so unsuccessfully to break through the Allied centre before Waterloo. In its unspectacular role III Corps contributed as much to the Allied victory as any of the troops engaged under Wellington or Blücher, but Clausewitz again felt cheated. He took no part in the pursuit of the defeated French, and his hopes of winning glory on the battlefield faded for good.

Scharnhorst was now dead, but his place both as leader of the reforming wing of the Prussian Army and as Clausewitz's principal patron had been taken by August von Gneisenau, another non-Prussian (he was born in Saxony) in the royal service. Gneisenau was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Prussian forces in the West, and Clausewitz became his chief of staff. Their headquarters at Mainz acquired in Berlin a reputation for nationalism, if not radicalism, certainly for dangerous

independence of thought. First Gneisenau, then in 1813 Clausewitz, were recalled to Berlin, where they could be kept more closely under the royal eye. For Clausewitz a place was found as Director of the War College, the Allgemeine Kriegsschule, but his opportunities there of influencing the political or even the military thinking of the Prussian officer corps were slight. His duties were purely administrative, and after his initial proposals for reform had been rebuffed he made no effort to develop them.

For twelve years he remained undisturbed, writing studies of the Napoleonic campaigns and drafts for the comprehensive study *On War* that he projected as early as 1816. These drafts were still incomplete when, in 1830, Clausewitz was posted, first to the command of a major artillery formation in Breslau, then, when the simultaneous risings in Paris and in Poland made a new war seem probable, as chief of staff to his old chief Gneisenau, now in command of the Prussian Army. The danger of war passed, to be succeeded by one yet more frightening: cholera, spreading from the east. The last task assigned to Clausewitz was to organize a *cordon sanitaire* to check the advance of the epidemic into Germany, but it was a problem his strategic insights could not solve. He himself caught the disease and died within twenty-four hours at Breslau, on 16 November 1831, at the age of 51.

Although he never obtained the independent command for which he longed, Clausewitz enjoyed, like so many officers of his generation, an experience of warfare almost unprecedented in its variety. The army which he joined in 1792 was the small homogeneous professional force of Frederick the Great. That in which he served from 1813 to 1815 (and which he had done so much to create) was a great national army based on compulsory service, powerfully backed up by territorial units of volunteers and by an angry, self-conscious nation. His early experience had been in eighteenth-century campaigns of manoeuvre and siege warfare. Before he was 40 he had taken part in some of the greatest battles in the history of warfare and seen the armies of Napoleon storm



their way across Europe to Moscow, only to be driven back again with little expectation of permanence. All this had been the result of military operations, but it was clear to Clausewitz as a very young man that the explanation for the success or failure of these operations was not to be sought on the battlefield alone. Military analysis, if it was to be of any practical value to posterity, had to be carried to a deeper level than ever before.

Why cannot war study be rationalized??
The intellectual background

There had been no lack of effort before Clausewitz's time in applying scientific principles to the conduct of war. Throughout the eighteenth century there was a widespread impatience that, in an age when the universe was yielding more and more of its secrets to scientific enquiry and when reason was replacing custom and superstition as the criterion of human judgement, the conduct of war should still be such a clumsy, wasteful, and uncertain business. 'Every science has principles and rules,' wrote the great eighteenth-century general, Prince Maurice of Saxony, 'only that of War has none.' It was a lack widely lamented among professional soldiers for reasons that I shall consider in a moment, but 'enlightened' civilian thinkers lamented that war should survive at all as a relic of a barbarous past. This opinion was widespread throughout Europe but, for two reasons, it was particularly strong in Prussia.

In the first place the experiences of the Seven Years War (1756-63), when Prussian territory had been repeatedly fought over and the resources of both State and people had been almost exhausted, had created throughout the Prussian intelligentsia a profound aversion to war, not unlike that in France and Britain after the First World War, and one that Frederick the Great did nothing to discourage. He himself had had enough fighting to last him a lifetime. In the second place Frederick deliberately reverted to the military policy of his forebears and eliminated the middle classes from both the officer corps and the ranks

of his army, leaving them free to make the money which the Prussian state, so barren of natural resources, so badly needed to maintain its position in Europe. As a result there developed in the Prussian middle classes the impression that the king's wars were nothing to do with them; and from that it was a small step to the belief that, if it were not for the king and the nobility who fought his wars, those wars need never happen at all. Immanuel Kant was only one of the many Prussian writers who from 1780 onwards were arguing that if only the affairs of States were in the hands of rational, humane men, the world might enjoy perpetual peace. It was a view dominant in Prussian university and intellectual circles until the catastrophe of Jena shocked them into political awareness and set on foot the new nationalist movement that was to have such momentous consequences.

rational world = non-violent world
Professional military writers naturally did not share these opinions. Nevertheless the belief was becoming widespread that war in the hands of experts could be carried on with such skill and moderation as to be virtually bloodless. Military thinkers sought for rational principles based on hard, quantifiable data that might reduce the conduct of war to a branch of the natural sciences, a rational activity from which the play of chance and uncertainty had been entirely eliminated. For some this data was provided by topographical and geographical measurements, for some by calculations of supply needs and march-tables, for some by the geometrical relationship of supply lines to fighting fronts or of armies to their bases. All believed that, in the words of the Welsh soldier of fortune, Henry Lloyd (1720-83), 'whoever understands these things is in a position to initiate military operations with mathematical precision and to keep on waging war without ever being under the necessity of striking a blow'.

But this search for scientific certainty in military affairs was taking place at a time when thinkers concerned with other areas of human activity were beginning to question the whole idea of scientific certainty, a Newtonian universe whose objective reality was governed by forces and

principles quite external to man. The idea of the British philosophers Berkeley and Hume that man did not passively observe and absorb knowledge, but rather by the process of observation created it and moulded the world through his own consciousness, had taken deep hold in Germany. Clausewitz did not need to read the works of his contemporary Kant (and there is no evidence that he did) to become familiar with these ideas which formed the basis of Kant's philosophy. He had also absorbed those that had re-entered philosophical thought with the revival of Hellenism and were so powerfully to influence the work of the young Hegel: the Socratic distinctions between the ideal and its manifestations, between the absolute, unattainable concept and the imperfect approaches to it in the real world. The young Clausewitz would have encountered such ideas as these wherever he turned: in his reading at Neuruppin in the 1790s, at the War College where Kant's pupil Kiesewetter was expounding Kantian philosophy, and in the intellectual circles in which he moved in Berlin. His interest in education brought him in touch with the view of such writers as Pestalozzi that education was not a matter of imparting knowledge but of using knowledge to develop the human personality towards its perfect fulfilment. His studies in aesthetic theory taught him that the artist did not succeed simply by learning and applying a given set of rules, but rather that those rules had significance only as indications of what great artists had actually done, and had to be modified as the innovations and perceptions of new generations enriched the comprehension of their subject. All art, all thought (for as Clausewitz himself expressed it, all thought is art), was a creative activity, not an imitative or derivative one. And the same applied with particular force to the conduct of war.

But in no way
 intellectually Clausewitz was very much a child of his time. For him war was not an activity governed by scientific laws but a clash of wills, or moral forces. The successful commander was not the one who knew the rules of the game, but the one who through his genius created them. The uncertainties and hazards that made war so unpredictable and uncontrollable were not barriers to be eliminated but opportunities to

be grasped and exploited. The circumstances of the time might have reduced warfare to a matter of absurd, rococo formality, but in its essence war was something very different. Napoleon had made this clear for all to see; Clausewitz set himself to explain it.

The military background

The army that Clausewitz joined as a boy had been moulded by Frederick the Great, and until its destruction in 1806 none of its leaders saw any reason to change the mould. It was perfectly adapted to the ritual of eighteenth-century warfare – a ritual that was itself determined by the nature of the armies taking part. These were distinguished by two characteristics in particular. In the first place, they were organizations designed to deliver, on the battlefield, the greatest possible concentration of *fire*. Cavalry was now almost an ancillary, if still an indispensable arm. Infantry won battles by its disciplined fire power, increasingly helped by artillery, which of course remained the primary arm in siege warfare. The need for a constant supply of ammunition would thus have tied armies to their supply lines even if they had been self-sufficient in food and in fodder for their horses; and although armies could requisition sufficient supplies from the countryside so long as they kept on the move, as soon as they were halted for any length of time they were driven back on their own resources. There was anyhow little disposition on the part of their officers to let troops forage for themselves. Consisting as they did of conscripted peasants or press-ganged 'volunteers', they were likely to use such liberty to desert altogether.

The movement of armies was thus tied to the small number of roads capable of carrying the huge convoys of their supply wagons, and most of those roads were guarded by fortresses that had to be besieged and reduced before further advance was possible. The need for fodder for draught animals and cavalry virtually constricted campaigning to the six months from May to October. In battle the need to develop maximum



fire power produced linear tactics – the deployment of troops in long, thin lines blazing away at each other at point-blank range – which turned battles into murderous set-pieces that commanders of expensive regular forces avoided if they possibly could. It is not surprising that the ideal campaign should have been seen by military theorists as a war of manoeuvre, preferably conducted on the territory of the enemy, in which one lived off the resources of his countryside and gradually wore him down.

This was the doctrine that Clausewitz set himself to demolish. One of his earliest published works was a critique of the contemporary theorist Heinrich von Bülow, who had in his works *Der Geist des neuen Kriegssystem* (The Spirit of the New System of War, 1799) and *Reine und angewandete Strategie* (Pure and Applied Strategy, 1804) elaborated a strategic doctrine based entirely on the requirements of the supply system and troop movements resulting from them. Bülow actually defined strategy as 'the science of military movements beyond the range of cannon-shot of either side'; as opposed to tactics, which was 'the science of military movements in the presence of the enemy'. Skilful strategy, maintained Bülow, reduced the need for tactical skills and might eliminate battle altogether. This the young Clausewitz dismissed as absurd. 'Strategy is *nothing* without fighting,' he wrote, 'for fighting is the material it uses, the means it employs.' The object of war, as of all creative activity, was 'the employment of the available means for the predetermined end'. Strategy Clausewitz therefore defined as 'the linking together (*Verbindung*) of separate battle engagements into a single whole, for the final object of the war'. Already at the age of 25 Clausewitz had laid down two principles of which his predecessors had lost sight. Military manoeuvre was pointless unless it was designed to culminate in battle; and battle was pointless unless it was designed to serve the ultimate purpose of the war.

Clausewitz

The political background

Expensive Clausewitz
lecture for seminar

What the ultimate purpose of any campaign should be was a political question: a point that Clausewitz made in his first recorded reflections on strategy, written in 1804. Here, in a direct and uncomplicated fashion that contrasted starkly with the refined subtleties of his later writings, Clausewitz wrote simply 'The political object of war can be of two kinds; either to totally destroy the adversary, to eliminate his existence as a State, or else to prescribe peace terms to him.'

When he wrote these words Clausewitz had yet to experience the full fury of the campaign by which, two years later, Napoleon did come close to eliminating Prussia's existence as a State. But he had already lived through twelve years during which the whole tempo of warfare had been transformed; first by the French revolutionary armies that had overrun the Low Countries and threatened the Rhine between 1792 and 1795, then by Bonaparte's two lightning campaigns in Italy, in 1796–7 and 1799 – campaigns waged with an energy and for objectives far surpassing the limited means and petty purposes of warfare in earlier decades. As we have seen, it was not Clausewitz but his mentor Scharnhorst who first discerned how much of their military successes the French owed to their political transformation. As early as 1797, in an analysis of the causes of French successes and Allied failures, Scharnhorst had written that 'the succession of misfortunes that the Allied forces have encountered in the French revolutionary wars are closely interwoven with their domestic conditions, and those of the French nation'. The French armies were able successfully to break all the military rules because the politicians discarded all the normal political and economic constraints. For manpower they depended not on highly trained and expensive regular troops but on patriotic volunteers and, later, conscripts in apparently unlimited quantities whose services were virtually free. The French troops foraged for themselves, and if they deserted there were plenty more to take their place. Insufficiently trained for linear tactics in battle, they substituted a combination of

Clausewitz in his time

free-firing skirmishers and dense columns of attack: first to wear down and then to overwhelm a defence that was in any case likely to be badly outnumbered. And to these hordes of self-sacrificing infantry Bonaparte was to add artillery in ever increasing proportions, and cavalry trained in merciless pursuit.

This was the terrible instrument with which Napoleon conquered Europe, but it was one available only to a government that was prepared to pour out men and money without stint, supported by a people who identified themselves with its objectives and submitted uncomplainingly to the sacrifices it demanded. There had in fact to be a nation; and was it possible to create a nation except, as the French had done, by the overthrow of monarchical institutions and the creation of a plebiscitary dictatorship ruling by terror? If not, the remedy was worse than the disease.

★

Clausewitz

This was the problem that haunted Clausewitz throughout his active career, and it was as much a personal and moral as an abstract one. In 1806 the question which he had debated in the abstract at the Militärische Gesellschaft became a terrible reality. The catastrophe of Jena revealed not only that the Prussian Army was no match for the French, but that the people ruled by the Hohenzollern monarchy regarded the whole affair as no concern of theirs and observed the defeat of the royal troops with indifference. In internment in France, Clausewitz brooded on the contemptible lethargy of his own people. 'With whips would I stir the lazy animal', he wrote to his betrothed, 'and teach it to burst the chains with which out of cowardice and fear it permitted itself to be bound. I would spread an attitude throughout Germany which like an antidote would eliminate with destructive force the plague that is threatening to decay the spirit of the nation.' The problem that faced Prussia was one not just of military or even of political reform but one of moral renewal.

But was such moral renewal compatible with the retention of the old

When they come about state, they
absolute monarchy, and of a dynasty that regarded all such liberal ideals with deep suspicion? For his part Clausewitz never doubted it: ^{care} his loyalty to the dynasty remained unshakeable. But the dynasty, ^{as} ~~as~~ ^{we} have seen, doubted him, and those who thought like him. The solution to which he and his colleagues looked forward, for the ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{one} dynasty to set itself at the head of popular nationalist sentiment and to be carried onward instead of being swept aside by them, was ^{one} ~~one~~ achieved briefly between 1813 and 1815. But thereafter popular and monarchical sentiments again diverged and a regime was reimposed more repressive of nationalist sentiment than ever before. The political problem in Germany remained unsolved, and so did the military.

If the Revolutionary Wars could be regarded as a unique phenomenon, this did not greatly matter, but no one in his senses could believe that they were anything of the kind. Clausewitz certainly did not.

War [he wrote, probably towards the end of the 1820s], untrammelled by any conventional restraints, had broken loose in all its elemental fury. This was due to the people's 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 that France posed to everyone.

Will this always be the case in the 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? Or shall we again see a gradual separation taking place between government and people? Such questions are difficult to answer, and we are the last to dare to do so. But the reader will agree with us when we say that *once barriers - which in a sense consist only in man's ignorance of the possible - are torn down, they are not easily set up again*. At least when major interests are at stake, mutual hostility will express itself in the same manner as it has in our own day. (p. 593; emphasis added)

Clausewitz in his time

Napoleonic warfare, Clausewitz discerned, was thus more likely than not to be the model for the future, and armies unready to fight it would once again be destroyed as completely as the Austrians had been at Austerlitz and the Prussians at Jena. And if a political transformation was needed to make successful participation in such a war possible, this was a price that any self-respecting people, he indicated, must be prepared to pay.

The writing of *On War*

When he accepted the Directorship of the War College in 1818 Clausewitz was still only 38 years old, but he had behind him twenty-five years of experience, as extensive as it was varied, and he had at his disposal hundreds of pages of his own writings on every aspect of war. He had already begun to put these together in the hope that he could distil from them some fairly pithy observations about strategy intended for the expert reader. But, as he confessed,

my nature, which always drives me to develop and systematize, eventually asserted itself. The more I wrote and surrendered to the spirit of analysis, the more I reverted to a more systematic approach, and so one chapter after another was added. In the end I intended to revise it all again, strengthen the causal connections in the earlier essays, perhaps in the later ones draw together several analyses into a single conclusion, and thus produce a reasonable whole . . . (p. 63)

He never did so. Twelve years later, on leaving the college, he wrote 'the manuscript on the conduct of major operations that will be found after my death can in its present state be regarded as nothing but a collection of materials from which a theory of war *was to have been distilled*' (p. 70; emphasis added). The twelve years had been taken up with revising, redrafting, and the collection of new material, including the writing of original studies of most of the Napoleonic campaigns. In about 1827, when he had drafted six of his projected eight books, he

thought he had found the connecting thread that would bind all his ideas together. It was not any new idea. He had expounded it in his first essay nearly a quarter of a century earlier, when he emphasized the primacy of policy in determining the object of the war and explained the double nature of war, as potentially both limited and total, that resulted from this.

Determined to make this the main theme of this work Clausewitz began to redraft the whole work again, and completed the first chapter to his satisfaction. But even as he redrafted yet another idea came to him: that of war as a 'remarkable trinity', in which the directing policy of the government, the professional qualities of the army, and the attitude of the population all played an equally significant part. His mind was so fertile in ideas and analogies, his quest for precision so exacting that, even if he had been able to complete his revision, it is unlikely that he would ever have been satisfied with it. However long he lived he would probably have bequeathed to posterity only 'a collection of materials from which a theory of war was to have been distilled'. But he could still with reason claim that

an unprejudiced reader in search of truth and understanding will recognise the fact that [the contents] for all their imperfection of form, contain the fruit of years of reflection on war and diligent study of it. He may even find they contain the basic ideas that might bring about a revolution in the theory of war. (p. 70)

It is these ideas that we shall examine in the following pages.

