

III. THEORY

The purpose of Clausewitz's theoretical writings was to develop not a new doctrine but a truer understanding of the phenomenon of war. Theory should show "how one thing is related to another, and keep the important and the unimportant separate. If concepts combine of their own accord to form that nucleus of truth we call a principle, if they spontaneously compose a pattern that becomes a rule, it is the task of the theorist to make this clear."¹ In contrast to principles—the nuclei of truths—scientific laws are difficult to establish in an activity such as wars, and laws for action can never exist; but theory does accommodate rules since there are exceptions to every rule.² To the theorist the past was as significant as the present. Tradition, the insights and feelings of generations of statesmen and soldiers, their sense of the ways in which policy and strategy interacted with fighting—all needed to be examined and placed in an analytic structure that would be sufficiently specific not to fade under changed conditions and sufficiently elastic to accommodate future advances of theory. Such an analysis was feasible, Clausewitz thought, only if the investigator approached the total phenomenon of war and its component parts as closely as possible, removing to the best of his ability whatever screens of custom and preconception stood between him and his object. The terminology of purpose, aim, and means that Clausewitz devised to differentiate the elements of grand strategy can also be applied to his analytic procedure: better understanding was the purpose, direct observation the aim; studying war from the points of view of experience, history, and logic were the means. The intellectual immediacy with his object to which Clausewitz attributed so much significance was, however, accompanied by a second, subsidiary relationship between himself and other military theorists. Criticism of Bulow and others stands at the beginning of his theoretical work, and he carries on debates with the past and present literature throughout his life. *On War* is an attempt to penetrate to the essence of its subject; but what I have elsewhere called the combative posture of the work is unmistakable.³

1. *On War*, book VIII, ch. 1 (p. 849).

2. *Ibid.*, book II, ch. 4 (pp. 203–205). These ideas are reiterated in different formulations throughout *On War*. See, for instance, the statement that the constant search for laws must lead to constant error, book II, ch. 3 (p. 201), or: "There are hundreds of cogent local and special conditions to which the abstract rule must yield." Book V, ch. 5 (p. 421).

3. "Clausewitz and the Nineteenth Century," in *The Theory and Practice of War*, ed. M. Howard, Lon-

Such authors as Lloyd and Jomini remained lifelong targets, not only because Clausewitz thought them wrong but also because they seemed to him to express a far too common tendency toward the doctrinaire and prescriptive. From youth on he had been skeptical of authority that laid down rules concerning military, political, and social relationships—the interaction of two opposing armies, of strategic planner and soldier in the field, of state and individual. He objected that their rules were ineffectual, and, far worse, falsified the reality of the relationships they tried to control. Not only the need for knowledge but also opposition to recognized authority stimulated and continued to inform his analyses. In *On War*, to give one example of the impact the author's antagonisms had on his writings, the importance of battle is emphasized more often than the theoretical argument demands because, as the context shows, Clausewitz felt that even after the Napoleonic experience, strategy continued to be influenced by the traditional preference for maneuver and position warfare.

Even as a young man, while the armies of the French Revolution and of Napoleon confronted him with enormous tangible challenges, he had begun to work his way toward the two prerequisites for a comprehensive interpretation of war: a firm view of the relationship between theory and reality, and the development and mastery of a logically sound method of analysis. By the end of the Napoleonic era he had reached both preliminary goals. The stages of his progress, and his conceptualization of aspects of reality into such analyzable components as friction and genius, have been discussed in earlier chapters and need not be retraced here. It may, however, be useful to recall the analytic method he had adopted by describing its characteristics from a new point of view.

What Clausewitz attempted to do might be called phenomenological in the modern, Husserlian sense of the term. Briefly and perhaps too simplistically, it may be said that the phenomenologist holds that it is possible to give a description of phenomena, which at the same time reveals their essential structure. He does this by distinguishing phenomenological abstraction from inductive generalization. The latter approach scans a number of separate phenomena, notes what they may have in common, and then generalizes that feature as the property all individuals have in common.

Jomini proceeded somewhat in this manner. A prominent feature in a category of phenomena—for instance, operating on interior lines in Napoleonic strategy—is turned into a universal or a prescriptive ideal, without much concern about either the structural function or true necessity of this feature. Such generalizations are, of course, only probable: it would go against logic to claim certainty for them. Phenomenological abstraction, on the other hand, is a method of discovery. "The Genesis of *On War*," in C. v. Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton, 1976.

the other hand—*Wissenschaft*, Husserl called it—seeks the essence of things, tries to establish the properties a thing must have to be that kind of a thing. It begins not with many phenomena but with the single phenomenon, and it need not investigate others, though it was the special strength of Clausewitz's approach that he combined intensive analysis of the structure of war itself with broad historical comparisons. Basically, however, he took a single phenomenon, varied it in imagination to see what properties were essential to it and what properties could be removed in thought without affecting its essence.

The opening chapter of *On War* reveals this process with special clarity. The social conditions of states, Clausewitz wrote, and "their relationships to one another . . . are the forces that give rise to war; the same forces circumscribe and moderate it. They themselves, however, are not part of war; they already exist before fighting starts. . . . War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force." After suggesting three dialectical relationships, or "interactions," between opponents that tend to lead to the extreme in violence, the argument returns to the initial proposition: "Thus in the field of abstract thought the inquiring mind can never rest until it reaches the extreme, for here it is dealing with an extreme: a clash of forces freely operating and obedient to no law but their own."⁴

Clausewitz insisted—sometimes with vehemence—that social and ethical reality could only dimly reflect absolute truth; but he nevertheless believed that to understand this reality it was essential to determine the logical extreme, the philosophic ideal, which alone could provide a reliable basis for measurement and analysis. As he was to argue in *On War*, after pointing to the countless occasions in the history of warfare when fighting had fallen far short of extreme effort and violence: "Theory must concede all this; but it has the duty to give priority to the absolute form of war and to make that form a general point of reference, so that he who wants to learn from theory becomes accustomed to keeping that point constantly in view, to measuring all his hopes and fears by it, and to approximating it *when he can or when he must*."⁵

In 1816, when he first set out to assemble his theoretical findings and develop them further, he wrote a separate study in which he tested once more his ideas on the relationship between theory and reality: "The Strategic Critique of the Campaign of 1814 in France."⁶ The very first sentences of the introduction reveal his use of the ideal to understand the real: "The campaign of 1814 in France, more than any other, is suited for use as a specific example to clarify strategic thought. First of all, the campaign

belongs to a period in which the element of war moved rapidly and with all its natural energy. Although the actions of the Allies are not free of diplomatic considerations, which resemble water slowing the blazing fire, the overall view of the essence of war and of its purpose is not dominated by diplomatic concerns as most recent wars were before the French Revolution. Each side is driven by a great motive, and neither resorts to those temporizing measures with which earlier generations sought to give the impression of respectable activity." The introduction continues by restating the theme of the limitation of theory that Clausewitz had stressed since his first disputes with other theorists: "No one needs to remind us that we find ourselves in a realm that is ill-suited to absolute truth. We are far from claiming absolute validity for our principles of war, nor for the conclusions drawn from the way the principles operated in this specific case."⁷ Both [propositions and conclusions] differ from ordinary speculation on such matters only in that they emerged from the striving for an absolute truth, that the conclusions are based directly on the propositions, and the propositions directly on the phenomena from which they have been abstracted."

Clausewitz ended the introductory chapter with a statement that offers the key to his attitude toward the study of war: "Not what we have thought seems to us to benefit theory, but the *manner* in which we have thought." He added: "Incidentally, we repeat again that here, as in all the practical arts, the function of theory is to educate the practical man, to train his judgment, rather than to assist him directly in the performance of his duties."⁸

The critique itself follows a methodical, formal approach that is unusual in a work by Clausewitz; yet it reads as smoothly as an extended essay. The first chapter proposes eight considerations that Clausewitz regards as basic to the Allies' plans: reasons for their offensive; how far the offensive can be pushed before the French, by withdrawing and concentrating, gain significant strength; purpose and goal of the strategic offensive within this range; etc. The second chapter lists the basic considerations for the defense: purpose, aim, and means of the defense; importance of gaining time; strategic options. In the third chapter the conclusions of the first and second chapters are compared with the actual plans of both sides in 1814. The second half of the study traces and analyzes the events themselves. The treatment is characterized by remarkable independence of judgment. It is, to say the least, startling to see Clausewitz employing one of the most successful offensives in the history of war to illustrate the potential strength of the defensive. As always, he feels no inhibition whatever in criticizing the actions of his own side, even decisions made by his friend Gneisenau in

4. *On War*, book I, ch. 1 (pp. 90–93). For Clausewitz's complete argument, see below, pp. 382–395.

5. *Ibid.*, book VIII, ch. 2 (p. 853).

6. "Strategische Kritik des Feldzugs von 1814 in Frankreich," *Werke*, vii, 357–470.

7. *Grundsätze der Kriegskunst* can hardly be translated other than "principles," but Clausewitz's point may emerge more clearly if "principles" is replaced by "propositions."

8. *Werke*, vii, 359–361.

Blücher's name, or in acknowledging the "natural, logical, realistic" generalship of Napoleon, which nevertheless could not overcome his political handicaps and psychological weaknesses. Although personalities are not emphasized, they form an element in every interpretation, and sometimes provide the basis for more general observations. The emperor's reluctance to yield territory, for instance, becomes the occasion for a two-page digression in which historical and psychological analyses are blended to contrast the schematic use of psychological terms in the military literature with the complexities of strengths and weaknesses that in real life make up such qualities as firmness in adversity or willingness to yield to circumstances.⁹ The whole text gives the impression of a writer who has acquired mastery over his material and his stylistic and analytic techniques, and consequently pursues his ideas with complete freedom.

In the "Critique of 1814," Clausewitz integrated history and theory with the aim of illustrating and testing theoretical propositions. Had all his writings been of this character, Delbrück would indeed have been justified in describing Clausewitz's point of view as that of a military critic rather than historian; but among his longer manuscripts it is unique. In the essays on strategy that he wrote during the same period, and that benefited from the critique, Clausewitz dealt exclusively with theory. The collection, which was never printed, has an introduction that quite inappropriately was included in the first edition of *On War* as the "Author's Preface," and has remained associated with the work. It describes the character and intent of the essays, which by combining "analysis and observation, theory and experience" seek to establish the essence of various strategic phenomena; they are not meant to form a comprehensive, "complete" system of the kind offered by rationalist theorists and their latter-day spiritual descendants. Clausewitz scoffs at the absurdities that result from compulsive but illogical detailing by quoting Lichtenberg's "Extract from a Fire Regulation," which begins: "If a house is on fire, one must above all seek to save the right wall of the house on the left, and on the other hand the left wall of the house on the right . . ." and proceeds from this opening platitude in one monstrous sentence through every option, possibility, and danger contained in the situation until the terms "left," "right," "house," and "fire" have lost all meaning. Instead, Clausewitz was content to analyze individual aspects of strategy, his selective approach resulting in "chapters that stand only in loose external relation to one another, but which, it is hoped, do not lack an inner connection."¹⁰ In a subsequent note on the project,

9. *Ibid.*, note on pp. 379-381.

10. "Vorrede des Verfassers," *On War* (pp. 82-84). Our knowledge of the development and revisions of *On War* derives to a considerable extent from four introductory notes by Clausewitz that are customarily included in editions of *On War*. The first, the "Author's Preface," was written between 1816 and 1818. The second, included in his wife's preface, deals with the original collection of essays and discusses the expansion of this scheme. The third, dated 10 July 1827, constitutes the first of two further

Clausewitz stated that he had planned to proceed in somewhat "the manner in which Montesquieu dealt with his subject . . ." I thought that such concise, aphoristic chapters, which at the outset I simply wanted to call kernels, would attract the intelligent reader by what they suggested as much as by what they expressed; in other words, I had an intelligent reader in mind, who was already familiar with the subject."¹¹

None of the essays of this earliest version of *On War* seems to have survived. But we possess at least one preliminary study out of which Clausewitz hoped to distill the concise, aphoristic chapters he was aiming for. It is an essay of some two thousand words, "On Progression and Pause in Military Activity," which was to provide the basis for chapter 16 of book III of *On War*, and contains ideas that are fully explored in various other chapters—for instance, chapter 3B of book VIII.¹² The essay is enlightening not only because it reveals Clausewitz's struggle to discover the form best suited to the presentation of his theories but also for the intermediary place it assumes between his earlier theoretical work and *On War*.

The essay opens with a psychological observation: a comparison of gambling and war. The reason a gambler hesitates to risk everything on one card, preferring instead to extend his game, is fear—besides pleasure in the game itself. In war, fear may similarly prolong the duration of the conflict. However, Napoleonic war, with its push for the decisive battle, seems to suggest that any interruption in violent activity goes against the nature of war. But can we analyze war—not the way men fight but the essence of war itself—in terms of mechanics, with mass, velocity, and time measured as absolutes? No, because war consists in a relationship of two opposing sides, whose perceptions, emotions, and judgment affect each other's actions and reactions. History makes that clear enough. But even if war is regarded unhistorically, as a phenomenon of mechanics, it contains elements that like "rather wheels, pendulums, or counterweights" act as retarding forces. One is the problem of cognition, the difficulty of evaluating one's own strength and that of the opponent, which is affected by emotions and can never be wholly accurate. Whatever its accuracy, however, an appreciation of the operational or strategic situation may induce one side or the other, or even both, to renounce the initiative. Another retarding force is the greater strength of the defensive. Beyond a certain point the offensive

introductions by Clausewitz, the so-called "Notes," and mentions the plan for a complete revision of books I to VI, and of the sketches and drafts of books VII and VIII. The second of the "Notes" was written subsequently, perhaps in 1830, and indicates that Clausewitz had not progressed very far with the revision.

11. Second introductory note, included in Marie v. Clausewitz's "Vorrede," *On War* (p. 73).

12. The essay "Über das Fortschreiten und den Stillstand der kriegerischen Begebenheiten" was first published by H. Delbrück in the *Zeitschrift für Pausische Geschichte und Landeskunde*, XV (1878), pp. 233-240. Another preliminary study, far less significant, may be the essay on army organization that is often included as an appendix to *On War*. Its essential points are incorporated into chapter 5 of book V.

slackens: action slows down and may even cease altogether. The attack requires more force than the defense. In this essay Clausewitz even suggests that the advantage of the defense may be as two to one, though obviously he intends to illustrate the dynamics of the process rather than propose a fixed ratio: "The addition that gives strength to the defensive form of war is not only deducted from the side that moves from the defensive to the offensive, it also accrues to the opponent, so that this addition in strength must be figured twice, just as the difference between $A + B$ and $A - B$ is the same as $2B$."¹³ It is true that since the rise of Napoleon, "the most daring of gamblers . . . all campaigns have gained such a comelike swiftness that a higher degree of military intensity is scarcely imaginable."¹⁴ But this need not always be the case. So, after all, there are two types of war, because in war one must consider not only mass, velocity, and time, which are conducive to continuity of violence, but also purpose, feelings, ability, and chance. A comparison between different wars, and the evaluation of specific wars, demands the methodical analysis of all of these elements.

The brief essay, with its highly compressed argumentation, is at once a summary and review of earlier ideas and themes, and a preliminary statement of their subsequent resolution in *On War*. It alludes to the possibility of two types of conflict, which Clausewitz first broached in 1804, though still without pursuing the theoretical and political implications of this insight.¹⁵ It emphasizes the difficulty of acquiring accurate knowledge and the power of friction to reduce the energy of military activity, thoughts familiar to us from his essay for the crown prince. Once again there is an insistence on the importance of psychological factors and of chance. Nor is the use of terms borrowed from mathematics and mechanics an innovation; but now they are given greater prominence. Together with the essay's evaluation of the reciprocal relationship between opponents and of the decisions to act and not to act that flow from it, these terms and their application suggest the approach taken by modern game theory. In an effort to save as much precision, quantification, and comparability for theory, without making theory unrealistic, Clausewitz sought to combine mathematical concepts with such imponderables as the psychological and intellectual qualities of the men engaged in conflict, and the historical condition and the social and political context in which they acted. But the essay's most significant contribution to the development of his ideas was the further short step it took toward explaining why and how the absolute violence that is the essence of war was modified in reality. The concept of friction was here expressed in the language of mechanics as being a rather wheel or counterweight, so that at least in a terminological sense friction became part of

a comprehensive theoretical system. But it must have been obvious to Clausewitz that this was more illustrative than a genuine integration of the factors of chance, emotions, politics, force, and time.

Clausewitz sent the manuscript to Gneisenau with a covering letter, the first part of which dealt with the essay while the remaining longer portion expressed his anguish and rage at the continuing refusal of the Prussian state to grant a pension to Scharnhorst's children. "I take the liberty," he wrote, "of sending Your Excellency a brief essay, whose subject needs to be clearly understood if we wish to illuminate and bring coherence to [the study of] strategy. When, as in this case, a discussion has become too lengthy, I incorporate only the compressed concise conclusions into my little work, and toss the preliminary draft like scraps and chips of wood into the fire. If I make an exception this time and dare send Your Excellency such a chip, it is because this piece will best indicate the structure of the wood from which the work is carved."¹⁶

As always, Gneisenau responded with praise and encouragement: "Don't throw the chips away, dear friend; I want to have them to enjoy and to keep. It is always good to know how a noble structure has been created; the French history on the building of the Neuilly bridge is as beautiful as the bridge itself, and more instructive. Your essay on progress and pause in military operations expresses my very feelings. You really do possess the ability to discover the sources and develop them. What I vaguely felt about this particular topic, you have now made clear to me."¹⁷

Gneisenau's suggestion to Boyen at this time that Clausewitz should be given the assignment of writing a treatise on strategy was presumably linked to Clausewitz's plan for his "little work," for which the essay was a study.¹⁸ Other friends reacted less favorably. Carl von der Groeben wrote to Leopold von Gerlach: "As far as it has been written—i.e., a few sheets—I am familiar with the work Gneisenau mentions. But in all honesty, I cannot fully agree with the judgment of our admirable Gneisenau. It [the work] is more critical than definitive, which is good; but the irritated, sickly mood in which it was written comes through, and that is bad."¹⁹ Clausewitz himself felt frustrated by the compressed, fragmented character of the essays, which could satisfy neither his intellectual nor his aesthetic demands. In the previously cited note that his wife included in her preface to *On War*, he wrote: "My nature, which always drives me to develop and systematize, at last asserted itself here as well. From the studies I wrote on various topics in order to gain a clear and complete understanding of them,

16. Clausewitz to Gneisenau, 4 March 1817, Pertz-Delbrück, v, 192.

17. Gneisenau to Clausewitz, 6 April 1817, *ibid.*, pp. 199–200.

18. See above, p. 270.

19. Groeben to Gerlach, 18 May 1817, Schoeps, p. 575.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 235. The illustration is repeated in *On War*, book III, ch. 16 (p. 307).

14. *Zeitschrift für Preussische Geschichte und Landeskunde*, XV, 237–238.

15. See above, pp. 90–91.

I managed for a time to lift only the most important conclusions and thus concentrate their essence in smaller compass. But eventually my tendency completely ran away with me; I elaborated as much as I could, and of course now had in mind a reader who was not yet acquainted with the subject.

"The more I wrote and surrendered to the spirit of analysis, the more I reverted to a 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 *lein ethnägliches Ganzes*, which would form a small volume in octavo. But here too, I wanted at all costs to avoid every commonplace, everything obvious that is stated a hundred times and is generally believed. It was my ambition to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject."²⁰

By discovering through trial and error that compression would not serve his purpose, Clausewitz came to recognize what appears obvious to us: the distillation of complex ideas not only made his treatment too abstract; he had to overcome too many preconceptions and develop too many ideas almost from scratch to follow Montesquieu's pattern comfortably. Once he had moved to Berlin he greatly expanded his original scheme. By 1827 he had written a manuscript of some one thousand pages, which, barring the revisions he undertook after he had recovered from his illness that year, was essentially *On War* as we know it today.

On War is divided into eight books: (I) "On the Nature of War," which defines the basic tendencies of war and the difference between absolute and real war, and discusses such topics as purpose and means in war, genius, and friction; (II) "On the Theory of War," which contains the major methodological analyses; (III) "On Strategy in General," which includes not only chapters on force, time, and space but also a detailed treatment of psychological elements; (IV) "The Engagement," which together with operational questions treats the interaction between moral and material factors; (V) "Military Forces," (VI) "Defense," and (VII) "The Attack"—the three most conventionally military books of the work; and (VIII) "War Plans," which expatiates on the relationship between absolute and real war, and analyzes the political character of war and the influence of politics on strategy.

The material is thus arranged in a relatively straightforward sequence, beginning with a survey of the whole in the first chapter, proceeding to the

20. Second introductory note, included in Marie v. Clausewitz's "Vorrede," *On War* (pp. 73-74).

nature of war and to the purpose and problems of theory. Books III through VII discuss strategy and the conduct of military operations. The work ends with an analysis of the most important functions of military and political leadership in war, and integrates war into social and political life. *On War* is, in short, an attempt both to penetrate to the essence of true war, to use Clausewitz's term—that is, ideal war—as well as to understand war in reality on the various levels of its existence: as a social and political phenomenon, and in its organizational, strategic, operational, and tactical aspects.²¹

On War contains little on the ethics of violence and barely refers to the possibilities of irrational political leadership, though passages point to the importance of these issues. Presumably it was Clausewitz's special sense of realism that prevented him from dealing with the former. He never questioned the right of political communities as living social organisms to defend themselves, and even to increase their strength if this could be achieved without seriously damaging the international environment. He could conceive of no ethical force that could effectively inhibit this process other than opinions held *within* each particular society—certainly not such supranational bodies as organized religion or great-power vehicles for international morality like the Holy Alliance. The question of rational, responsible political leadership pertained to the theory of politics, not of war, even if the delusions of a dictator or of an entire society led to insane and suicidal destruction.

Nor does the work treat the naval side of war, though it makes some interesting comparisons between land and sea tactics. Clausewitz lacked the expertise to discuss naval operations in detail, and he seemed to feel reluctant to extend his analysis of strategic planning and execution to naval warfare. His propositions on the nature of war, on the role of theory, and on the interaction between war and politics apply to the seas as much as to land, without this needing to be explicitly stated.

Within the eight books and 128 chapters and sections of *On War* dozens of major and minor themes are introduced, developed, compared, and combined. Arguments are repeated and tested in different contexts; two or more theses are brought into interaction; an idea is defined with extreme, one-sided clarity, to be varied chapters later and given a new dimension as it blends with other propositions and observations. Discussions of the nature of war in the abstract alternate with the application to real war of such analytic devices as the theory of purpose and means, of the major concepts of friction and genius, of propositions of lesser magnitude such as those concerning the relationship of attack to defense, and with detailed operational and tactical observations—all embedded in historical evi-

21. W. M. Schering, in *Die Kriegphilosophie von Clausewitz*, Hamburg, 1935, presents a complicated outline of the "systematic structure" of *On War*. Some of his comments are interesting, but in the main his analysis pretentiously underlines the obvious.

dence.²² The text is characterized by movement, cross-references, and allusions not only to other parts of the book but also to the experiences of the author and of his generation. Through the entire work, creating an internal unity surpassing that of its external design, run the two dialectical relationships between absolute and real war, and between reason, chance, and violence. It was more than vanity and self-consciousness that caused Clausewitz to doubt that many readers were capable of following his overarching argumentation, which demanded concentration on each detail with a simultaneous sense of its place in the whole.

The fluid, open form that Clausewitz had finally chosen suited his purpose perfectly. How much he gained by isolating particular arguments and pursuing them as far as possible, without concern for space or aphoristic formulation, can be seen by comparing chapter 16 of book III, "The Suspension of Action in War," with the essay of 1817, parts of which provided the basis for the chapter.²³ Chapter 16 is one of the steps in the process by which Clausewitz clarified the relationship between absolute and real war. He started with the thesis that once war broke out a suspension or diminution of violence could in theory not be justified: in a general sense both parties to the conflict are permanently in action, but at each particular moment one side acts while the other waits because circumstances rarely appear equally favorable to both at the same time. Even if circumstances are balanced, or seem to be, the political motives of the opponents continue to differ: one must necessarily be the aggressor. So even if we assume equal opportunity, one side will be under greater pressure to act. Consequently inactivity of both sides at the same time appears contradictory to the nature of war. But that does not mean that war is made up of constant activity: "No matter how savage the nature of war, it is chained by human weakness, and no one will be surprised at the contradiction that man seeks and creates the very danger that he fears."²⁴ History shows that pause is the rule and action the exception in war. On the other hand, recent experiences prove that we are correct in regarding war essentially as activity. What would be the point of all preparation and effort if they did not lead to action?

The general principle stands: in war both sides are in permanent activity and seek to destroy each other. Now we must consider the modification of the principle. There are three factors that inhibit constant action: human fear and indecisiveness, which are intensified in war; imperfect insight into

22. Clausewitz argues that historical *examples* (not history in general) have four functions in theory. An example may be used to interpret an idea, it may be used to discover how an idea can be applied in practice; it may provide proof that a phenomenon or effect is possible; and a tenet or proposition may be derived from the detailed, circumstantial treatment of a historical event. *On War*, book II, ch. 6 (p. 235).

23. "Über den Stillstand im kriegerischen Akt," *On War*, book III, ch. 16 (pp. 304-309).

24. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

reality, which leads to errors in judgment; and the greater strength of the defensive: "Thus in the midst of the conflict itself concern, prudence, and fear of excessive risks find reason to assert themselves and to tame the elemental fury of war."²⁵

But there are still other reasons for inactivity: weak political motives, which may be so feeble that they turn war into a fragmentary thing [*das sie den Krieg zu einem Halbdinge machen*]. Theory finds it difficult to deal with such wars; as the reasons for action and violence diminish, the random and incidental are given greater scope. Such wars, which invite artificial, insignificant actions, also tend to mislead people about the nature of war itself.²⁶ The chapter concludes: "All of these reasons explain why action in war is not continuous but spasmodic. Violent clashes are interrupted by periods of observation, during which both sides are on the defensive. But usually one side is more strongly motivated, which tends to affect its behavior: the offensive element will dominate, and will usually maintain its continuity of action."²⁷

In miniature, this chapter reflects the method and tone of the whole work. The dialectical argument progresses from thesis to antithesis, but without seeking a synthesis; rather, theory and reality are compared, and blend only to the extent that reality seems to permit. War and politics are seen as a continuum. History, psychology, and common sense are called on to guide and control logic; even an attack on the rationalist theorists of war, who misconstrue conflicts fought for insignificant motives as "the true war," is not lacking.

The theoretical explanation for the obvious fact that war does not consist in a single blow or in a group of simultaneous actions, but extends over time with activity and inactivity alternating, was combined by Clausewitz with discussions in other chapters to bring out as clearly as he could the modification that the concept of absolute, true war undergoes in reality. Absolute violence, though logically valid, was a fiction, an abstraction that served to unify all military phenomena and helped make their theoretical treatment possible. The power of friction reduced the abstract absolute to the modified forms it assumed in reality. The analytic power generated by this dialectical relationship between the absolute and the real, between philosophy and history, was enormous. But, as Clausewitz had already sensed when he wrote the essay "On Progression and Pause," the concept of absolute violence as the true war and of its inevitable modification and reduction in practice was too narrow. It needed to be developed further, a

25. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

26. Here Clausewitz makes three points, typically interdependent, which in different form recur throughout the book: A war with weak motivation presents difficulties to a theory based on the essential violence of war; it may confuse the judgment of the men engaged in it; and it may mislead theorists to see war as consisting essentially of maneuver and the occupation of key positions rather than of fighting. 27. *On War*, book III, ch. 16 (p. 309).

task he was not to engage in systematically until he began the last revisions of the manuscript in 1827 or later.

True war was absolute violence because organized mass violence was the only feature that distinguished war from all other human activities: "Essentially war is fighting [*Krieg in seiner eigentlichen Bedeutung ist Kampf*]; for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war."²⁸ Real war was both more and less than absolute. Less, because rarely if ever did it attain absolute violence, though in the extermination of one prehistoric tribe by another, or in the Napoleonic campaigns, reality had come close to the ideal. The various elements grouped under the concept of friction reduced the level of violence, which, on the other hand, tended to be increased by the process of escalation, by the likelihood that one antagonist would respond to the actions of the other by trying to outdo him.²⁹ Real war was more than pure violence because it was not an isolated phenomenon, but pertained both to the individual and to the social world.

Real war, Clausewitz declared, was a composite of three elements: violence and passion; the scope afforded by all human intercourse to chance and probability, but also to genius, intelligence, courage; and its subordination to politics, which, Clausewitz characteristically argued, made it subject to reason.³⁰ An adequate theoretical understanding of war—one that did not fly in the face of reality—must incorporate all three of these elements. Theories that dealt only with the military aspects of the second—how planning, leadership, and effort might succeed in the uncertain business of defeating the enemy army—were inadequate, as were theories that interpreted war primarily as a political or psychological phenomenon. By remaining suspended between the three magnets or energy fields of violence, of politics, and of chance and creativity, which to varying degree interacted in every war, theory gained the universality that allowed it to analyze all wars, past and present, as well as the flexibility that would enable its major propositions to accommodate whatever social and technological changes the future might bring. Permanence and change did not confuse theory, but became equally comprehensible. Indeed, each illuminated the other.

The tripartite definition of war alone made it possible for Clausewitz to advance from partial studies to a comprehensive and integrated analysis of war. But although he created what may be regarded as the archetype of any theory that seeks to proceed beyond the specialized and mechanical to a balanced interpretation of the nature, use, and techniques of violence, his personal condition and opinions naturally tilted his analysis. This is not so

much the case with specifics; Clausewitz's supposed preference for the major, decisive battle, in particular, is an erroneous assumption, based on the very inability to follow his dialectic that he had predicted.³¹ What I refer to is rather a general tendency of his work. Of the three elements that he identified as making up war, he associates the "blind natural forces" of violence primarily with society as a whole, with the people, the individual. The "scope that the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance" he relates primarily to the armed forces. The political element of war, the area he considers most subject to deliberate reasoning, is the business of government. Clausewitz explicitly does not set up discrete divisions; his argument employs relative terms and rejects exclusive affinities. As an example, he observes that all military activities, not only guerrilla warfare but even actions carried out by regulars, are influenced by hatred and aggressiveness, since the army is part of the people, made up of individuals with feelings of their own. Nevertheless, in *On War* his fundamental analytic distinctions coexist with some strongly subjective assumptions: the raw emotions that provide energy for all effective action rest in society. It is the task of the political leadership to abstract these energies without succumbing to their irrational power. Government transforms psychic energy into rational policy, which the army helps carry out. The view is that of the professional soldier, who regards himself as protector and servant of the political community, as well as that of the aristocrat who has come to terms with the centralized state, or who, as in the case of Clausewitz, is its product. It is true that Clausewitz insisted—more often after 1815 than before—that the state should not give the soldier impossible missions. "In its relation to policy," he wrote in 1827 to Muffling, then chief of staff, "the first duty and right of the art of war is to keep policy from demanding things that go against the nature of war, to prevent the possibility that out of ignorance of the way the instrument works, policy might misuse it."³² But he judged correctness of use by political standards: the sacrifice of an army is appropriate if it truly answers the political purpose, which in *On War*—though not in his political essays—Clausewitz assumes to be generally realistic and responsible: "Policy, of course, is nothing in itself, it is simply the trustee for all interests [of political society] against the outside world."³³ Certainly, governments constantly made

28. The opening sentence of book II, "On the Theory of War," *ibid.*, (p. 167).

29. For Clausewitz's development of the concept of escalation, see below, pp. 384–385.

30. For Clausewitz's complete description of the "remarkable trinity" of war, see below, pp. 394–395.

31. See, for instance, the italicized passage in *On War*, book I, ch. 2, "Purpose and Means in War" (p. 119): "We can now see that in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat. They range from the destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion, to projects with an immediate political purpose, and finally to assisting passively the enemy's attacks." Each may be the appropriate means for the particular purpose and circumstance.

32. Clausewitz to Muffling, [?] 1827, quoted in H. v. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Kriegslehren nach Clausewitz*, Berlin, 1908, p. 16.

33. *On War*, book VIII, ch. 6B (p. 89 I).

mistakes; but he could only assume that usually they tried to express the true concerns of the state, which they were more likely to recognize than the ill-informed and thoughtless populace, who could too easily be seduced by fashion or emotion.³⁴ Since the theory of war deals with the use of force against external enemies, Clausewitz was logically correct in not exploring the problems posed by irrational or mistaken political leadership—questions he left to political theory. Still, the structure of *On War* is sufficiently expansive not to have suffered from a discussion of these issues that went beyond his arguments for the need of close political and military interaction and of military subordination to the political leadership presented in book VIII.

And yet, whatever the pitfalls of his rigorous logic and of the view of the political and social world contained in *On War*, they did not prevent Clausewitz from developing an analytic scheme whose decisive characteristics are realism, balance, and comprehensiveness, and that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate opinions very different from those held by its originator—just as, it might be thought, Freud's cultural pessimism did not prevent him from inventing a theory of human feelings and behavior that expresses far more than his personal predilections.³⁵

Having postulated the tripartite nature of war, outlined its three primary elements, and indicated the properties that a genuine theory of war should possess, Clausewitz proceeds to explore and integrate these four major themes. As long as the dialectic, the constant merging and separation of his arguments is kept in mind, it is possible to identify groups of topics and levels of interpretation that more accurately reflect the approach taken in *On War* than does its formal organization: (1) The discussion of theory and methodology, based largely on Clausewitz's studies during the reform era, constitutes a distinct concern of the work. The principal agent of his methodology, the thesis of means and purpose, borrowed, as we know, from late-Enlightenment aesthetics, guides the analysis of war in reality. (2) What actually occurs when men fight is defined and rendered subject to analysis through the formulation of such concepts as friction and genius. (3) Other concepts refer more narrowly to the dynamic of

34. During the Third Reich, Clausewitz's emphasis on the rationality of political leadership embarrased some of his interpreters. In his book *Wohlfühlaphie*, Leipzig, 1939, the Clausewitz scholar W. M. Schering, who worked the meager vein of National Social Existentialism, argued that to understand Clausewitz the modern reader should substitute "will" for "purpose" (p. 91). He tried to qualify Clausewitz's assertion that theory could never offer a positive doctrine for action (pp. 249–250) and finally acknowledged that he could not agree with Clausewitz that reason determined policy. Rather, Schering claimed, decisions find their roots in the will, which has been forged and tempered in previous conflicts (p. 276).

35. Without suggesting true theoretical or functional similarities, I cannot refrain from pointing to the obvious parallel between the trinity of *Id*, *Ego*, and *Superego*, and Clausewitz's trinity of Violence, Creativity, and Reason—with the army, the expression of creative genius operating in the realm of the imperceptible, reconciling the demands of violence and of reason in war.

fighting—that of escalation, for example. (4) These analytic components are supplemented by a secondary category of propositions, which further identify and interpret both the elements of war and their place in its dynamic structure.

The distinction between true and real war had given Clausewitz one basis for developing his theory; another was provided by his differentiation between the physical and nonphysical aspects of war. When theory of any kind deals with the physical and concrete it faces no exceptional difficulties: "Architects and painters know precisely what they are about as long as they deal with material phenomena. Mechanical and optical structures are not in dispute."³⁶ But theory becomes vague as soon as it tries to explain perceptions and feelings. Clausewitz employs a highly suggestive analogy to make his point: "Medicine is usually concerned only with physical phenomena. It deals with the animal organism, which, however, is subject to constant change and thus is never exactly the same from one moment to the next. This renders the task of medicine very difficult, and makes the physician's judgment count for more than his knowledge. But how greatly is the difficulty increased when a mental factor is added, and how much more highly do we value the psychiatrist!"³⁷ Since war is a mixture of the physical and of the mental, moral, and emotional, a theory of war becomes very difficult. Certainly it is impossible to lay down valid rules for the conduct of war: "A positive doctrine is unattainable."³⁸

Two solutions exist for this dilemma: First, those aspects of war in which the physical predominates are more susceptible to theoretical treatment than those activities in which intelligence and emotions play major roles: organization and tactics pose far fewer difficulties to theory than do strategy and the political function of war. Secondly, theory need not be a guide for action. It can be an intelligent analysis that familiarizes the student with the subject and educates his judgment. Theory "is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield, just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man's intellectual development but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life."³⁹ If the theorist adopts Clausewitz's views of the proper role of the teacher, a realistic theory of war, combining logic, observation, and experience, becomes possible.

Knowledge, once gained, is still difficult to apply. Any action in war poses problems, which increase with responsibility. For the soldier, knowl-

36. *On War*, book II, ch. 2 (p. 182). This paragraph and the two following are based primarily on book I, ch. 2, and book II, chs. 1 and 2.

37. "... und wiewiel höher stellt man den Seelenarzt!" *Ibid.*, book II, ch. 2 (p. 182).

38. *Ibid.*, book II, ch. 2 (p. 187).

39. *Ibid.*, book II, ch. 2 (p. 189).

edge must turn into ability.⁴⁰ Ability is achieved when knowledge almost ceases to exist independently and is assimilated into the individual's attitudes and habits. As the physician in Clausewitz's analogy, so the soldier: his judgment, derived from study and experiences, replaces knowledge. He no longer goes by the book, but follows his "insight and tact of judgment." The dialectic between theory and practice, in which one affects and informs the other, is resolved—one of the rare syntheses in Clausewitz's arguments.

Theory must study the nature of means and purpose. We are already familiar with Clausewitz's use of these concepts in his histories. In theory as well as in history, the identical phenomenon may be either means or purpose, depending on the context and one's point of view. In tactics—the part of war related to the particular battle—the fighting forces are the means, victory is the purpose. In strategy—the part of war related to the use of battle for the purpose of the war—victory is the means to attain this purpose. War as a whole is the means to fulfill the political purpose. In actual fighting, the military aim—to defeat the enemy or to weaken him significantly—temporarily replaces the political purpose. But the military aim, and military considerations in general, must never conflict with the ultimate political goal. By analyzing each aspect of military planning and execution for its relationship to the military aim, and by extension to the war's political purpose, theory can assign each particular means to its proper place in the overall structure of war, and evaluate its effectiveness.⁴¹ Much of *On War* consists of such analyses; but before 1827 Clausewitz treated the political dimension less systematically than other areas of war. It was not until he formulated the thesis of the dual nature of war in his final revisions that he fully succeeded in fitting various levels of violence into the continuum of government policy.⁴²

The two major analytic devices, friction and genius, which Clausewitz developed in the years preceding and immediately following the War of 1806, reappear essentially unchanged in *On War*, though he greatly expands their treatment and places them in permanent interaction: "Friction is the only concept that more or less corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper. The military machine—the army and everything pertaining to it—is basically very simple, and therefore seems easy to manage. But we should bear in mind that none of its components is of one piece, each part is composed of individuals, every one of whom retains his potential of friction. . . . A battalion is made up of individuals, the least important of whom may chance to delay things or somehow make them go wrong. The dangers inseparable from war and the physical exertions war

demands can aggravate the problem to such an extent that they must be ranked among its principal causes. . . . This tremendous friction, which cannot, as in mechanics, be reduced to a few points, is everywhere in contact with chance, and brings about effects that cannot be measured, just because they are largely due to chance. . . . Action in war is like movement in a resistant element. . . . Moreover, every war is rich in unique episodes, each is an uncharted sea, full of reefs."⁴³ Not only the psychological element but friction and the singularity of events forbid general laws.

Under the "general concept" of friction are grouped friction in the narrow sense—the impediments to smooth action produced by the thousands of individuals who make up an army—but also danger, physical exertion, the difficulty of gaining accurate information, and other impersonal as well as psychological factors. A battle-hardened, experienced army may be compared to a lubricant that reduces the friction of the various human and organizational parts of the machine; but for the engine to operate efficiently more is required: intellectual and psychological forces, "moral qualities," genius.

These forces are, of course, themselves primary contributors to friction. Every aspect of war is suffused by psychological qualities in a negative as well as in a positive sense: "All war presupposes human weakness, and seeks to exploit it."⁴⁴ But it is the creative employment of intellectual and psychological strengths that alone can overcome friction, exploit chance, and turn the imponderable into an asset: Physical causes and effects are to moral factors "[l]ittle more than the wooden hilt [is to] the real weapon, the finely honed blade."⁴⁵

These factors, which Clausewitz termed *moralische Größen*—moral and psychological values—reside in the talents of the commander, the military virtues of the army, and the spirit of society as reflected in its soldiers, popular influences which Clausewitz enumerates as enthusiasm, fanatic energy, faith, political beliefs.⁴⁶ Theory must therefore analyze emotional forces of all kinds: the psychology of the individual and the psychology of the group. In the 1820's such an effort would necessarily fall far short of the firm conclusions he desired. Clausewitz himself complained of contempo-

43. *On War*, book I, ch. 7 (pp. 160–161). Cf. the passage from "The Campaign of 1812 in Russia," *Works*, VII, 177: "In war everything is simple, but the simplest thing is extremely difficult. The military instrument resembles an engine with enormous friction, which cannot, as in mechanics, be reduced to a few points, but is everywhere in contact with a host of imponderables. Besides, war is activity in a resistant element. A movement easily executed in the air becomes very difficult to do in water. Danger and effort are the elements in which the spirit operates in war, and these elements remain alien to the classroom and study. For these reasons one never does as much as one had intended; just to maintain an average level of achievement already calls for more than ordinary strength."

44. *On War*, book IV, ch. 10 (p. 363).

45. *Ibid.*, book III, ch. 3 (p. 255).

46. *Ibid.*, book III, ch. 4 (p. 257). This and the following three paragraphs are based primarily on book I, ch. 3, and book III, chs. 3–6.

40. "Das Wissen muss ein Können werden." *Ibid.*, book II, ch. 2, (p. 197).

41. *Ibid.*, book I, ch. 2, and book VIII.

42. See below, pp. 377–381.

rary psychology's inadequate understanding of human emotions, "this obscure field," into which we have no business to go farther "with our slight scientific knowledge [*Philosophie*]." 47 He was reduced to two partial solutions: to enumerate and differentiate psychological qualities and character traits that were significant in war; and to subsume a large part of his interpretation of these factors under the concept of genius.

His taxonomy follows conventional patterns. 48 He discusses moral and physical courage, different kinds of determination, energy, firmness, ambition, etc. These qualities are placed in different contexts to determine their specific meanings. Courage, for example, is influenced by the way men perceive reality, which in turn is affected by their position and responsibilities. Four basic personality types are outlined: men who are phlegmatic or indolent; vital but calm; lively and easily stimulated, but lacking in staying power; and those who have strong but deeply hidden emotions. All of these traits, Clausewitz suspects, are closely linked to physical characteristics. 49 Each type seems better suited to some duties than to others. The easily stimulated officer may prove useful in a subordinate position "simply because the action controlled by junior officers is of short duration. Often a single brave decision, a burst of emotional force will be enough. A daring assault is the work of a few minutes, while a hard-fought battle may last a day and a campaign an entire year." 50 Best suited to supreme command are the men who keep their strong feelings deeply buried—one of the frequent allusions to Scharnhorst throughout the book.

These and other categories differ from the standard typology of Clausewitz's day only in the attempt to test a given feature against a variety of concrete situations, and in the fact that no discernible philosophy of human behavior seems to underlie Clausewitz's descriptions.

Genius, as we know, had become Clausewitz's favorite device to conceptualize the various abilities and feelings that affected the behavior of or-

47. *Ibid.*, book I, ch. 3 (p. 140).

48. See above, pp. 158-159. It is not known how familiar Clausewitz was with the technical psychological literature of his time. The only writers mentioned in his works and correspondence who may be considered psychologists or pedagogues without being philosophers are Pestalozzi, Jean Paul, and Lichtenberg. Schelling, *Gait and Zeit*, p. xxix, suggests that Clausewitz derived his psychology from such French authors as Chamfort and Vaucanagues, but gives no evidence for this statement, which has in fact nothing to recommend it. The sections on psychology in *On War* reflect opinions that are very general and that were widely accepted at the time: free will exists, feelings are a positive force, enthusiasm and determination are praiseworthy, etc. Whether Clausewitz derived these beliefs directly or at second or third hand from the writings of Shaftesbury, Moses Mendelssohn, Kant, or such contemporary academics as Johann Georg Heinrich Feder, who developed a realistic psychology emphasizing the will, can no longer be determined and does not really matter. On the other hand, it is neither insignificant nor surprising that Clausewitz quoted Lichtenberg. The irony, earthiness, and supreme common sense of the man whom Max Dessoir has rightly called the most outstanding practical psychologist of the 18th century could hardly have failed to appeal to him.

49. *On War*, book I, ch. 3 (pp. 139-140).

50. *Ibid.*, book I, ch. 3 (pp. 140-141).

dinary men as well as that of the exceptional individual. In agreement with aesthetic theories of the late Enlightenment, he meant by genius the harmonious combination of qualities needed for supreme achievement in a particular area of activity. Individual creativity, the ability to overcome the impediments of spirit and matter, reaches its highest level in genius, and theory must try to follow it to those heights.

In one sense, the discussion of psychological elements construes the weakest part of *On War*. Clausewitz's speculations on the suitability of different psychological qualities for different tasks are marked by common sense, but different combinations and affinities are equally conceivable. Its insights and realism notwithstanding, his taxonomy is basically impressionistic. The vagueness of the treatment is compounded by the confusion introduced by the two overlapping analytic concepts of genius and of moral and psychological values. To interpret genius as the intensification and integration of universal qualities is satisfactory as a base for further investigation into this specialized condition; but Clausewitz's general analysis of psychological forces suffers because too often these are discussed only in the context of genius.

But if Clausewitz was precluded by the state of psychology in his time from incorporating a clinically and logically consistent theory of feelings and behavior into *On War*, the importance and originality of his attempt to do so is not diminished. Writers on war had always stressed the significance of emotions in battle, and psychological taxonomies of various kinds were not unusual in the literature. But earlier authors always treated feelings as essentially unfathomable; their importance was noted, and then ignored. Clausewitz, on the contrary, contends that psychological factors form a major element of war—at times he even regards them as the most important force—and that consequently theory must deal with them. He tried to fulfill this obligation by formulating the concepts of moral qualities and of genius, which in conjunction with the concept of friction at least enabled him to fit psychology and creativity into his analysis of the structure and processes of war.

Friction and creativity help determine the character and rate of progress of military operations. This progress itself, or the failure to progress, assumes a variety of specific forms. A group of concepts in *On War* separates the dynamic of violence into its constituent parts: the thesis of the reciprocal relationship of the two opponents; the thesis of the tendency of their efforts to escalate; the thesis of the interdependence of attack and defense; the thesis that for reasons of time, space, and energy the offensive gradually weakens until a "culminating point" is reached, after which the defense may gain superiority; the thesis that the defensive contains both resistance and counterattack, just as in the offensive attack, pause, and resistance interact. With these concepts we have reached the category of

secondary propositions. To varying degrees they are suggestive of factors that might obtain in all conflicts, but they reflect the specific conditions of the Napoleonic era far more directly than do Clausewitz's thoughts on the basic nature of war. They and the discussion of detailed topics that grow from them—retreat after a lost battle, defense of a mountain range, crossing a river, and so forth—constitute the immediate reality that provided much of the raw material for Clausewitz's theories. They also demonstrated to his satisfaction that while the higher reaches of war, where reason, emotion, and imponderables resolve the fate of states and peoples, might pose almost insuperable difficulties for theory, large if relatively subordinate areas of war were susceptible to analysis, and thus proved that a theory of war was in fact possible. As he wrote in the "Note" of 1830: "A whole range of propositions can be demonstrated without difficulty: that defense is the stronger form of fighting with the negative purpose, attack the weaker form with the positive purpose; that major successes help bring about minor ones, so that strategic results can be traced back to certain turning-points; that a demonstration is a weaker use of force than a real attack, and that it must therefore be clearly justified [appropriate use of means for the purpose]; that victory consists not only in the occupation of the battlefield but in the destruction of the enemy's physical and psychic forces . . . ; that success is always greatest at the point where the victory was gained, and that consequently changing from one line of operations, one direction, to another can at best be regarded as a necessary evil; that a turning movement can only be justified by general superiority or by having better lines of communication or retreat than the enemy's; that flank-positions, therefore, are governed by the same considerations; that every attack loses impetus as it progresses."⁵¹

These themes and approaches concerning the nature of theory, the interaction of theory and practice, the conceptualization of the more important aspects of war in real life, the definition of its dynamic processes, and the differentiation of the constituent parts of strategy, operations, and even tactics, are shaped by the three basic interpretive positions formulated in the tripartite description of war: War is essentially violence; war is the realm of chance in which only disciplined and creative psychological qualities—ability, talent, genius—can act effectively; war has political purposes and effects. Behind these realistic propositions, the thesis that true war is absolute violence stands as the regulative idea, the ultimate analytic authority.

51. *Ibid.*, "Note" (pp. 80–81). The proposition that the attack gradually weakens, stated in *On War*, book VII, ch. 4, is linked with the concept of the culminating point—the point beyond which the attacker can no longer effectively defend himself against a counterattack, *Ibid.*, book VII, ch. 5. In his essay "Umriss" Clausewitz used the term *Kulminationpunkt* to mark the beginning of the irrevocable decline of the power of the European nobility.

But was it actually true that the abstract ideal always suffered modification in real life? And, secondly, was it valid to deduce from the concept of the absolute, as Clausewitz did for many years, that all wars, whatever their cause and purpose, must be waged with supreme effort? In 1804 he had already distinguished between wars fought "to destroy one's opponent, to terminate his political existence," and wars waged to weaken the opponent sufficiently so that one could "impose conditions [on him] at the peace conference."⁵² Yet while drawing this distinction, he denied that limited aims justified a limitation of effort. In his notes for *Strategy* as well as in the essay for the crown prince some years later, he argued that even if no more were intended than compelling the opponent to agree to terms, his power and will to resist must be broken. For political and social as well as for military reasons, the preferred way of achieving victory was the shortest, most direct way, and that meant using all available force.⁵³ In this view, which cavalierly passed over the possibility that excessive mobilization could also have counterproductive effects, Clausewitz's personal experiences buttressed the demands of his logic: it was not difficult to believe that from the first campaign of the Revolution to the wars of 1806 and 1809 France emerged victorious because her opponents would not exert themselves to the utmost. And it was in part because contemporary reality seemed to confirm the view that every war was a modification of the absolute and that every war should be waged without restrictions being placed on the rational application of force that these arguments retained what might be called a formal supremacy in Clausewitz's writings even as he was coming to appreciate that they were one-sided.

His essay "On Progression and Pause" indicates that by 1817 he was no longer content to impute the modification of military activity wholly to the force of friction. Because war consisted in a series of interactions between opponents, it was proper not only in reality but also in logic that not every minute should pass at the highest pitch of effort and violence. Numerous hints in books I through VIII of *On War* point in the same direction. His historical research supported the logical hypothesis. By the middle of the 1820's Clausewitz was convinced that often in the past limited conflicts had occurred, not because the protagonists' means precluded greater effort or because their leadership or will had faltered but because their intentions were too restricted to justify anything more. A war fought for limited goals was not necessarily a modification or corruption of the theoretical principle of absolute war. Consequently, Clausewitz declared in his "Note" and in his last version of chapter I of book I, a second type of war

52. See above, pp. 90–91.

53. See above, pp. 195–196. This concept is analyzed in various contexts in *On War*. See, for example, book III, ch. 8 (p. 274), or book III, ch. 11 (p. 289), where the strategic benefits of overall strength are outlined.

existed that was as valid as absolute war, not only in the field but also philosophically. Limited wars might be a modification of the absolute, but need not be, if the purpose for which they were waged was also limited. Violence continued to be the essence, the regulative idea, even of limited wars fought for limited ends; but in such cases the essence did not require its fullest possible expression. The concept of absolute war had by no means become invalid and it continued to perform decisive analytic functions; but it was now joined by the concept of limited war.

The dual nature of war, as Clausewitz formulated it in the last years of his life, is expressed in two pairs of possible conflicts, each defined according to the purpose involved: war waged with the aim of completely defeating the enemy, in order (a) to destroy him as a political organism, or (b) to force him to accept any terms whatever; and wars waged to acquire territory, in order (a) to retain the conquest, or (b) to bargain with the occupied land in the peace negotiations. Other, defensive, combinations were also possible. With this redefinition the proposition that war is the continuation of politics by other means, or that war is the continuation of policy with an admixture of other means, becomes theoretically and empirically accurate.

In the "Note" of 1827 Clausewitz stated his intention of revising the entire text of *On War* to develop the different types of conflict systematically. But he went further. The revision would more firmly establish as a second major theme the political character of war, "that war is *nothing but the continuation of government policy with other means.*"⁵⁴ The distinction he drew between the two themes is puzzling since only a few sentences earlier the "Note" declares that political motives determine whether a conflict is limited or not. Clausewitz did not explain why he separated the dual nature of war and the political character of war in his programmatic statement, but Eberhard Kessel has suggested a reason based on arguments and observations that recur throughout Clausewitz's writings: war is influenced by objective and by subjective political factors. The objective factors comprise the specific characteristics and strengths of the state in question, and the general characteristics of the age—political, economic, technological, intellectual, and social. The subjective factors consist in the free will of the leadership, which should conform to the objective realities, but sometimes does not, or sometimes rises above them. Put differently, Clausewitz separated the political consequences of general conditions and those arising from individual intelligence, emotions, genius. He may have sought analytic clarity by linking his discussion of the objective political realities mainly to the concept of the dual nature of war, and the issues of leadership mainly to the concept of the political character of war.⁵⁵ But however

Clausewitz's statement is interpreted, the reader of *On War* will find himself in accord with its author if he gives the political motives and character of war more prominence than they receive in much of the text, and, further, if he amends the unrevised sections to the effect that limited wars need not be a modification, but that theoretically as well as in reality two equally valid types of war exist.

The practical point that emerged from the concept of the dual nature of war was not the commonplace that men fight for political reasons but that each specific conflict should be shaped and guided by the kind and intensity of its political motives. Violence should express the political purpose, not replace it. Men who readily acknowledged the political roots of war found it difficult to follow Clausewitz to this conclusion. Six months after he had outlined his plans for the revision of *On War*, his friend Roeder sent him two strategic exercises, which Mülling had set his subordinates on the general staff. What did Clausewitz think of the problems and of Roeder's solutions? The problems assumed that Austria, allied with Saxony, was about to attack Prussia; but while specifying in detail the military means of the opposing sides they offered no further information on the aims of the various governments and the international situation in general.⁵⁶

On 22 December Clausewitz answered Roeder that he could make little sense of the first problem. Two days later he dismissed the second in similar terms. As posed, they were too incomplete to permit a meaningful solution since they failed to state even the military aim of the two sides: "This aim is largely the result of mutual political relations of the two parties and of their relationship to other states that could participate in the [diplomatic and military] action. If these matters are not established, a [strategic] plan of this type becomes nothing more than a combination of a few factors of time and space, directed toward an arbitrary goal."⁵⁷ Any other combination might be equally valid. Clausewitz nevertheless outlined the strategic and operational alternatives in some detail; but he preceded his discussion with a declaration of basic principles:

"War is not an independent phenomenon but the continuation of politics by different means. Consequently the main lines of every major strategic plan are *largely political in nature*, and their political character increases the more the plan applies to the entire campaign and to the whole state. A war plan results directly from the political conditions of the two warring states, as well as from their relations to third powers. A plan of campaign results from the war plan, and frequently—if there is only one theater of operations—may even be identical with it. But the political element even

54. "Note," *On War* (p. 77).

55. Kessel, "Zur Genesis der modernen Kriegsgelahr," pp. 415-417. See also the same author's "Die doppelte Art des Krieges," *Ibid.*, IV (1954), No. 7.

56. The problems, Roeder's solutions, and Clausewitz's comments were published in 1937 under the title *Zwei Briefe der Generäle von Clausewitz: Gedanken zur Abwehr*, as a special issue of the *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau*.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

enters the separate components of a campaign; rarely will it be without influence on such major episodes of warfare as a battle, etc. According to this point of view, there can be no question of a *purely military* evaluation of a great strategic issue, or of a purely military scheme to solve it."⁵⁸

That was the reality. How could men be taught to understand it? Clausewitz thought that it was enormously difficult to construct a didactic problem with even a semblance of realism because reality consisted of a "mass of individual circumstances," ranging from details to "very important points [*leber große Hauptachen*], which until today have nevertheless almost always been ignored. For instance, Bonaparte and Frederick the Great are often compared, sometimes without keeping in mind that one had forty million subjects, the other five. But let me call attention to another, less noticeable but very significant distinction: Bonaparte was a usurper ... while Frederick the Great disposed of a true inheritance. Had nature given both men identical psychological qualities, would they have acted in the same manner? Certainly not, and that alone makes it impossible to measure them by the same standard."⁵⁹

The comparison between Frederick and Napoleon, which had occupied Clausewitz since his youth, undervalued the importance of the reciprocal relationship between the psychological qualities of the individual and his specific historical situation. What one man found possible and desirable was not so for the other. The special circumstances of his times almost always allowed Napoleon to seek the total destruction of his opponent's armies. That led people "to assume that the plans and actions that *emerged from these circumstances were universal norms*. But such a view would summarily condemn the entire history of war, which is absurd. If we wish to derive an art of war from the history of war—undoubtedly the only way an art of war can be established—we must not minimize the testimony of history. ... We must not allow ourselves to be misled into regarding war as a pure act of force and of destruction. ... We must recognize that war is a political act, which is not wholly independent, that it is a true political instrument, which does not act on its own but is controlled by something else: by the hand of politics."⁶⁰

The final correction of the regulative idea on which his theories of war were based—the theoretical acceptance of gradations of violence—is perhaps Clausewitz's most impressive intellectual and psychological achievement. His thought had been formed and continued to be strongly influenced by the philosophy of German idealism; but in his forties he liberated himself from its authority in the very manner advocated by idealist philosophy, not by destroying but by expanding it. Instead of a single absolute, he

now posited a pair of absolutes. Reality, the limitation of violence, need no longer be an imperfect version of the ideal; depending on the purpose of the particular war, and on the manner in which it was waged, reality might closely reflect the ideal—even more closely in a limited than in an absolute conflict.

Even after he had rewritten the first chapter of *On War* and revised other sections, Clausewitz recognized that his ideas needed to be developed further, and passages in the book and in the letters of his last years point to important additions to theory that he never worked out in detail.⁶¹ For instance, book VI of *On War* states that the dual nature of war applies to defensive as well as offensive war, but the definition in the opening chapter of the work refers only to the side that initiates the conflict. Again, his opening propositions assume that ultimately political and military goals were in accord, even though elsewhere he stated that the relationship between political purpose and military aims tended to be more complex, and that in the course of the conflict each might affect and change the other. Despite his remarkable invention of the concept of escalation, he never sufficiently explored the various ways in which two opponents influence each other. At least some of these problems would have been further resolved and some inconsistencies removed had he lived long enough to carry out the enormous task of revising the entire manuscript. As it was, he left behind what he thought could "only deserve to be called a shapeless mass of ideas. Being liable to endless misinterpretation it would be the target of much half-baked criticism. . . . Nonetheless, I believe an unprejudiced reader in search of truth and understanding will recognize the fact that the first six books, 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."⁶² With the last phrase he may have meant no more than to express his confidence that *On War* indicated what questions ought to be asked, and the kind of answers, combining specificity with universality, that should be sought.

61. The extent of Clausewitz's revisions after 1827 is uncertain. Besides the first chapter, he may also have revised chs. 2 and 3 of book I, and ch. 2 of book II, as well as parts of book VIII, without, however, considering these to be in final form.

62. "Note," *On War* (p. 79).

58. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

60. *Zwei Briefe des Generals von Clausewitz*, pp. 7-8.

ject, we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together.

2. Definition

I shall not begin by formulating a crude, journalistic definition of war, but go straight to the heart of the matter, to the duel. 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. Force—that is, physical force, for moral force has no existence save as expressed in the state and the law—is thus the means of war; to impose our will on the enemy is its object. To secure that object we must render the enemy powerless, and that, in theory, is the true aim of warfare. That aim takes the place of the object, discarding it as something not actually part of war itself.

3. The Maximum Use of Force

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: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst. The maximum use of force is in no way 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 toward extremes and the only limiting factors are the counterpoises inherent in war.

This is how the matter must be seen; it would be futile—even wrong—to try and shut one's eyes to what war really is from sheer distress at its brutality.

If wars between civilized nations are far less cruel and destructive than wars between savages, the reason lies in the social conditions of the states themselves and in their relationships to one another. These are the forces that give rise to war; the same forces circumscribe and moderate it. They themselves, however, are not part of war; they already exist before fighting starts. To introduce the principle of moderation into the theory of war itself would always lead to logical absurdity.

Two different motives make men fight one another: *hostile feelings* and *hostile intentions*. Our definition is based on the latter, since it is the universal element. Even the most savage, almost instinctive, passion of hatred cannot be conceived as existing without hostile intent; but hostile intentions are often unaccompanied by any sort of hostile feelings—at least by none that predominate. Savage peoples are ruled by passion, civilized peoples by the mind. The difference, however, lies not in the respective natures of savagery and civilization, but in their attendant circumstances, institutions, and so forth. The difference, therefore, does not operate

IV. "WHAT IS WAR?"

After the work of an innovative mind such as Clausewitz's has been analyzed, after the context and genesis of his writings have been discussed and their author's cultural and emotional roots suggested, the historian can do no better than let the work speak for itself. All history is reconstruction, but the history of ideas not in the same manner or to the same extent as the history of political, economic, or military activity. Much of the material that most concerns the historian of ideas has retained something close to its original condition; the historical substance of a manuscript by Clausewitz is different from that of a political or military act of Napoleon, regardless of how many memoranda, dispatches, and decrees surround the latter. The manuscript is an artifact, the decision at best a fossil. The historian of ideas is in the enviable position of dealing with material that is both past and present. I have quoted Clausewitz more frequently in discussing his histories and theories than in earlier chapters; any remaining screen of interpretation between reader and subject should now be removed altogether.

The opening chapter of *On War*, the text of which follows, is not characteristic of the work as a whole. No other chapter is as comprehensive, and few chapters are as formally structured; its numbered sections and paragraphs have greater affinity with German philosophic writing of the time and even with Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* than with the rest of *On War*. It is the only chapter that Clausewitz regarded as complete. But he also expressed the confidence that it would "at least serve the whole by indicating the direction I meant to follow everywhere."¹ In his eyes the opening chapter was the best introduction to his book, and thus it is also the best imaginable guide to his entire theoretical work.

WHAT IS WAR?

1. Introduction

I propose to consider first the various elements of the subject, next its various parts or sections, and finally the whole in its internal structure. In other words, I shall proceed from the simple to the complex. But in war more than in any other sub-

1. "Note," *On War* (p. 79).