



Clausewitz and People's War

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ARTICLE



Review Roundtable on Christopher Daase and James W. Davis, Eds. *Clausewitz on Small War* Clausewitz and People's War

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Just as Thucydides hoped that his *History* would be a 'possession for all time,' Carl von Clausewitz aimed 'to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years' and that would 'bring about a revolution in the theory of war.'¹ *On War* did revolutionize the study of war, and it is widely regarded, along with Thucydides' *History*, as one of the most important books ever written about war. Clausewitz will forever be remembered for his statements that 'War is ... an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will' and that war is a 'continuation of policy with other means' and for his concepts of the 'trinity,' absolute war, the decisive battle of annihilation, and the fog of war.² What has been forgotten by many, particularly in the English-speaking world, are Clausewitz's writings on small war, most of which have never been translated.³ This neglect has contributed to a failure to understand the overall coherence of Clausewitz's writings on war, to misinterpretations of *On War*, and to arguments that Clausewitz is irrelevant in the contemporary era, in which the great power and interstate wars of the past have been superseded by guerrilla wars, insurgencies, and terrorism.⁴

In this context, Christopher Daase and James Davis have done a great service to the field by translating into English some of Clausewitz's most important writings on small war. *Clausewitz on Small War* includes: 'My

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¹Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by Richard Crawley and ed. by Robert B. Strassler, in *The Landmark Thucydides* (New York: Free Press, 1996), Bk 1.22, 16. Carl von Clausewitz, 'Author's Comment' and 'Note of 10 July 1827,' in Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton UP 1976 [1832]), 63,69–70.

²Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk. I, Ch. 1, 75, 89.

³Most of Clausewitz's work is available in Werner Hahlweg, *Carl von Clausewitz: Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1966) 2 Vols.

⁴For claims of Clausewitz's irrelevance in the contemporary era, see Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press 1991); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford University Press 1999), Ch. 2; John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf 1993).

Lectures on Small War, held at the War College in 1810 and 1811'; the 'Testimonial' (*Bekennnisdenkschrift*) of 1812; 'On the political advantages and disadvantages of the Prussian institution of the *Landwehr*' (1819); and 'The arming of the people' (*Volksbewaffnung*) (1832), which is a new translation of Book VI, Ch. 26 of *On War*.⁵ These translations will facilitate new lines of research on Clausewitz's theory of small war, a more integrated treatment of Clausewitz's larger corpus of work, and more informed analyses of Clausewitz's relevance for the contemporary world. In this essay, I highlight Clausewitz's distinction between two types of small war and then focus on his views on people's war, its relationship to the regular army, the role of the strategic defensive, and the connection to the trinity.

Clausewitz's writings on small war did not emerge in a theoretical or historical vacuum. Clausewitz noted that 'There are many more authors writing about Small War than Large War,' and explicitly referenced earlier theoretical work on the '*petite guerre*' or '*Kleinkrieg*.'⁶ He also referred to aspects of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, including the *levee en masse* (1793), the counterrevolutionary insurrection in the Vendee (1793–96), the Spanish guerrilla war against Napoleon (beginning 1808), and the Tyrolean Rebellion (1809). In 1812, he witnessed Russian partisan warfare against Napoleon's *Grande Armee*. Scholars frequently say that the Napoleonic Wars were the defining context for Clausewitz's writings. Hew Strachan, for example, writes that 'Without Napoleon, *On War* could never have been written.'⁷ That is true, but the Napoleonic experience went beyond decisive battles between large great power armies seeking to annihilate their enemies. Small wars also played an important role in the resistance to Napoleonic armies.

Clausewitz distinguished two kinds of small war. In his 'Lectures' he followed eighteenth-century theory and practice and defined small war narrowly as 'the use of small units in the field.'⁸ This use of irregular units to support the regular army through gathering intelligence and harassing the enemy was referred to at the time as 'partisan warfare.'⁹ In his 'Testimonial,' Clausewitz examined the new concept of people's war, with the explicit purpose of advocating a national insurrection or general uprising against Napoleonic France and outlining a plan for its implementation. He continued his discussion of the 'arming of the people' and of people's war nearly two decades later in *On War*.¹⁰

⁵Christopher Daase and James W. Davis (eds.), *Clausewitz on Small War* (Oxford UK: Oxford UP 2015). Subsequent references to these four works are to the Daase and Davis translations.

⁶Clausewitz, 'Lectures', 52, 167.

⁷Hew Strachan, 'Clausewitz and the Dialectics of War', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2007), 17.

⁸Clausewitz, 'Lectures', 21.

⁹Beatrice Heuser, 'Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz: The Watershed Between Partisan War and People's War', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33/1 (2010), 139–62.

¹⁰Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk. VI, Ch. 26. On the evolution of Clausewitz's thinking on small wars see Christopher Daase, 'Clausewitz and Small Wars', in H. Strachan and A. Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, 192.

One important difference between Clausewitz's 'Lectures' and his later writings is the neglect of the role of moral and emotional factors in the 'Lectures' but not in his subsequent work. In his 'Testimonial,' Clausewitz writes that 'the most forceful war can be waged with little money; but only with a great deal of courage and good will,' and that 'fighting for the fatherland' is the greatest motivation for the soldier.¹¹ In 'The arming of the people,' he argues that the 'fire of the people's war' and 'courage and passion' decide many outcomes.¹² In *On War* Clausewitz emphasizes the importance of moral factors and asserts that 'The most powerful springs of action in men lie in his emotions.'¹³ This line of argument leads Michael Howard to argue that Clausewitz was the first major thinker to emphasize the importance of the 'social dimension' of military strategy.¹⁴

This emphasis on emotion is also clear in the first element of Clausewitz's trinity: 'primordial violence, hatred, and enmity.'¹⁵ In this context, it is puzzling that some critics argue that Clausewitz is a strict rationalist and for that reason has little to say about contemporary insurgency, guerrilla war, and terrorism.¹⁶ Clausewitz's theory of war clearly includes a strong rational component, as suggested by the third element of the 'trinity,' the conception of war as an 'instrument of policy,' subordinate to politics, and 'subject to reason alone.'¹⁷ Yet, psychological factors are also clearly present. The tension, or dialectical relationship, between these rationalist and non-rationalist elements is a central theme of *On War* and of much of Clausewitz's other work.

Another important difference between the two types of small wars is that whereas small detached units act almost entirely in support of regular forces in the 'Lectures,' they play a more prominent role in Clausewitz's later writings. In the 'Testimonial,' Clausewitz defines the *Landsturm* as the 'general arming of the entire population for the immediate defense of a country' and gives it a critical role in his plan for driving the French out of Prussia.¹⁸ In 'The arming of the people,' he argues that people's war 'destroys the foundations of the enemy army like smoldering embers,' giving 'those who resort to people's war ... relative dominance over those who scorn it.'¹⁹ This is not to say, however, that people's war can be fully independent of regular forces. Clausewitz emphasizes that 'one must conceive of people's war in combination with war waged by a standing army and both united through

¹¹Clausewitz, 'Testimonial', 189.

¹²Clausewitz, 'The arming of the people', 224.

¹³Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk I, Ch. 3, 112; Bk III, Ch. 3, 184–85.

¹⁴Michael Howard, 'The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy', *Foreign Affairs* 57/5 (1979), 977.

¹⁵Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk. I, Ch. 1, 89.

¹⁶Martin van Creveld, for example, argues that for Clausewitz the people 'were not expected to hate [or] cheer...,' in *The Transformation of War*, 39.

¹⁷Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk. I, Ch. 1, 89. The trinity also includes 'chance and probability.'

¹⁸Clausewitz, 'Testimonial', 196.

¹⁹Clausewitz, 'The arming of the people', 222.

an all-encompassing plan.²⁰ The *Landwehr*, which Clausewitz argued would provide 'an outward resistance that cannot be achieved through a standing army,' was institutionally integrated into the Prussian army.²¹

Clausewitz envisioned people's war as part of the strategic defensive. It is not coincidental that Clausewitz's discussion of 'The arming of the people' in *On War* takes place in Book Six, entitled 'Defense.' Much of Clausewitz's general analysis of defense in *On War* – including his arguments that 'defense is the stronger form of war' and that defense must be integrated with the attack²² – build on some of the ideas developed in his earlier writings on small war. In his 'Lectures,' Clausewitz discussed the advantages of defense in small wars, which include gaining time, knowing the area, and having the support of the locality. He emphasized, however, that passive defense is 'complete nonsense' and that one can 'act ... offensively in order to achieve the purpose of defense.'²³ He makes similar arguments in the 'Testimonial,' emphasizing 'active defense' and the superiority of the defense over the offense.²⁴

Active defense includes a variety of strategies. Clausewitz wrote that 'In Small Wars ... it is more important to impede the enemy's advance than to preclude it,'²⁵ allowing guerrilla tactics to further weaken the enemy. Relatedly, he argued that the fate of states is not dependent on a single battle. If necessary, the army can 'retreat ... into the heartland of the country.'²⁶ The concept of the retreat into the interior – which Clausewitz illustrated with the Russian response to Napoleon's approach to Moscow in 1812 – had a profound influence on later theorists of revolutionary and guerrilla war. In arguing that when outnumbered 'the best means of defense is to retreat into the interior of the country,' Lenin explicitly referred to Clausewitz.²⁷ Mao also reflected Clausewitzian ideas in writing about luring the enemy into the interior of the country and about people's wars being decided not by a single battle but by a long war of resistance.²⁸

Marxist-Leninists and other theorists of guerrilla warfare have also been influenced by Clausewitz's fundamental argument that war is a 'continuation of policy.'²⁹ That argument is explicit in *On War* and in the short 'Note

²⁰Ibid., 222–23.

²¹Clausewitz, 'The Prussian institution of the *Landwehr*', 217.

²²Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk. VI, Ch. 1, 358.

²³Clausewitz, 'Lectures', 63–65.

²⁴Clausewitz, 'Testimonial', 211–14.

²⁵Clausewitz, 'Lectures', 26.

²⁶Clausewitz, 'Testimonial', 226.

²⁷Quoted in V. Kubáľková and A. A. Cruickshank, *Marxism-Leninism and theory of international relations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1980), 107.

²⁸Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico 2002), 139–40.

²⁹Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 494–514. Clausewitz's term '*Politik*' is sometimes translated as 'policy' (in the Howard and Paret edition, for example) and sometimes as 'politics.' On the debate about the different substantive implications of these

of 1827.³⁰ It is also implicit in Clausewitz's writings on small war – in his treatment of small war as an auxiliary of state armies in his 'Lectures,' in his plea in the 'Testimonial' for a people's war to drive the French out of Prussia, in his arguments about the contributions of the Prussian institution of the *Landwehr* to resistance against foreign invasion, and in his emphasis on the military utility of combining people's war with regular state military forces.³¹

Some interpret Clausewitz as arguing that war involves the use of state armies as an instrument of state policy and conclude that Clausewitz has little to say about insurgencies, guerrilla war, and other forms of violence by non-state actors. Van Creveld, for example, defines Clausewitz's trinity as 'the people, the army, and the government' and concludes that Clausewitz cannot explain insurgencies or other forms of 'nontrinitarian' warfare.³² Similarly, Mary Kaldor claims that 'war, in the Clausewitzian definition, is war between states for a definable political end, i.e., state interest,' and concludes that Clausewitz can explain 'old wars' but not 'new wars.'³³

This interpretation of Clausewitz in strictly statist terms is quite misleading. Although Clausewitz refers to the people, the army, and the government, he does so only after first identifying the 'dominant tendencies' of war in the form of the 'remarkable trinity' of primordial violence, chance, and the subordination of war to policy.³⁴ This trinity is eternal and unchanging across time and space. The people, army, and government to which van Creveld refers are manifestations of that trinity in a particular historical era.³⁵ Clausewitz believed that the kinds of actors involved in war, their aims and strategies, and the political circumstances under which war occurs are constantly changing. This is clear in his statement 'The semibarbarous Tartars, the republics of antiquity, the feudal lords and trading cities of the Middle Ages, eighteenth-century kings, and the rulers and peoples of the nineteenth century – all conducted war in their own particular way, using different methods and pursuing different aims.'³⁶ Clausewitz attempted to develop a general theory of war, one not bound by time and place, but one

translations see Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), Ch. 4; Christopher Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought', 74–90, Jan Willem Honig, 'Clausewitz's *On War*: Problems of Text and Translation', in H. Strachan and A. Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, 74–90, 69–72; and James W. Davis, 'Introduction to Clausewitz on Small War', in C. Daase and J.W. Davis, *Clausewitz on Small War*, 4–6.

³⁰Clausewitz, *On War* and 'Note of 1827.'

³¹Daase and Davis, *Clausewitz*.

³²Van Creveld, *Transformation of War*, 40.

³³Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 15. For a useful critique of these arguments see Davis, 'Introduction,' 8–11.

³⁴Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk. I, Ch. 1, 89.

³⁵Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, Ch. 4.

³⁶Clausewitz, *On War*, Bk. VIII, Ch. 3B, 586. For an analysis of the coevolution of war with changing political and military organization, threat environment, political economy, and weaponry over the last eight millennia, see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *The Arc of War: Origins, Escalation, and Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011).

that could be usefully applied to the variety of conflicts in different historical eras.³⁷

Those who dismiss the relevance of Clausewitz for understanding the low-intensity conflicts of the contemporary era make the mistake of neglecting Clausewitz's enduring trinity of forces (primordial violence, chance, and politics) and focusing instead on his analysis of the actors (people, army, and government) interacting with those forces in one period of time.³⁸ In other periods, wars have centered around other kinds of political communities and organizations. It is hardly a surprise that Marxist–Leninists and theorists of insurgency and revolution view war in Clausewitzian terms as a continuation of the class struggle or the anti-imperialist struggle.

Clausewitz's relevance for low-intensity war is one of many questions that scholars have debated but that need to be considered anew with the Daase/Davis translation of some of Clausewitz's most important works on small war. Other questions include: whether Clausewitz's writings on small war amount to a theory of guerrilla war; whether Clausewitz's writings as a whole constitute an integrated and consistent theory of war; and whether small war and big war can be subsumed within a single theory. By shedding light on old debates about Clausewitz and by facilitating new lines of research, *Clausewitz on Small War* makes an enormously important contribution to strategic studies and to the history of military thought.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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³⁷I view Clausewitz as providing a conceptual framework for thinking about war rather than either an explanatory theory with testable propositions or a prescriptive theory with mechanistic rules.

³⁸Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity', *Parameters* 25/3 (1995), 15

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