
The 2010 George C. Marshall Lecture in Military History
Clausewitz and the First World War*



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Abstract

English-language authors have blamed Clausewitz twice over for his part in the First World War. Liddell Hart attributed to him a doctrine of “absolute war,” embraced by European general staffs and emulated by the British. More recent scholars have seen the war as lacking a political rationale and so contradicting what is today the best-known of the nostrums of *On War*. But that was not the case before 1914, when Clausewitz’s text was interpreted in different but equally valid lights. This article analyses how *On War* was read by the principal belligerents both during the war and in its immediate aftermath.

The British chief of the imperial general staff between 1941 and 1945, Alan Brooke, said of George C. Marshall that he was “a great gentleman and a great organizer, but definitely not a strategist.”¹ Brooke was not alone among British staff officers in holding that view, nor was it an opinion driven simply by differences over

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1. Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War diaries 1939–1945*, ed. Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), 249; see also Andrew Roberts, *Masters and commanders: how four titans won the war in the west, 1941–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 33, 137, 427.

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the timing and location of the second front in Europe. At one level Brooke was simply wrong: as a practitioner of strategy Marshall was a colossus of the twentieth century. At another he was right. Marshall did not spend much time reflecting on strategy: he was not a strategic thinker. Although an aide de camp to General John J. Pershing and thus close to the big issues surrounding the employment of the American Expeditionary Forces in 1917–18, he wrote an account of the First World War that is almost devoid of reflection and analysis.² Moreover, there is no reference to Clausewitz in Marshall's published papers, a revelation that presumably would not have surprised Brooke, even if it ought to surprise us.³ For Marshall, war was a pragmatic business. Unlike Clausewitz, he took no interest in the dialogue between theory and experience, on which strategic thought is crucially dependent.

So yoking together Clausewitz and the First World War in order to pull the cart that is the George C. Marshall lecture smacks at best of naïvety. In the eyes of many Americans today, the exercise is also counterintuitive. They (like most Britons, it must be said) tend to conclude, somewhat facilely, that there is not much to be learned about strategy from the First World War. The words that are regularly used to describe the war, such as “waste” and “futility,” are at odds with the logic implicit in the study of strategy, that war has utility. But they are words that are both hackneyed and banal: hackneyed because they are clichés, and banal because they trip off the tongue far too lightly given the scale of loss and suffering that lies behind them.

If this was a war that was indeed wasteful and futile, then it was also useless. Today Clausewitz's most quoted aphorism is that war is a continuation of policy by other means. A utilitarian description of war, it implies that war has a purpose. If the First World War had no purpose, the argument might run, Clausewitz is doubly irrelevant to our understanding of it. First, to suggest that he might help us interpret the war is chronologically absurd, given that he died seventy-three years before its outbreak. Second, Clausewitz is irrelevant because his key theoretical insight carries no interpretive force in relationship to the war. In *A history of warfare*, a book designed among other things to topple Clausewitz from his pedestal, following this logic, John Keegan averred that, “Politics played no part in the conduct of the First World War worth mentioning. The First World War was, on the contrary, an extraordinary, a monstrous cultural aberration.”⁴ Unsurprisingly, five years later, when Keegan produced a book dedicated solely to the First World War itself, he could only conclude, somewhat feebly, that, “The First World War is a mystery. Its origins are mysterious. So is its course.”⁵

2. George C. Marshall, *Memoirs of my services in the world war 1917–1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

3. Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: the reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 259; a point confirmed by Mark Stoler.

4. John Keegan, *A history of warfare* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), 21.

5. John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), 456.

The mystery may be of Keegan's own making but he is in good company. David Stevenson's history of the war, published in 2004, used Clausewitz to frame its analysis of the war. He began, in terms which echo Keegan's, "No one was in overall control, in Clausewitz's basic sense that neither side could dictate the responses of the other and both played wild cards."⁶ Stevenson is too good a historian not to acknowledge, 600 pages later, that "the governments seem more purposive, the armed forces more adaptive, and the ordinary soldiers and civilians more witting and informed participants than once was thought," but he nonetheless concludes with what he calls "the deeper insight," "that the war was still a tragedy, a vast avoidable waste."⁷

If the application of the Clausewitzian paradigm to the First World War throws up no more profound conclusions than these—that the war was a mystery and a tragedy—then, we might cynically ask, why bother? Are not all wars in some senses mysteries, in that humanity ought to find less destructive ways of resolving its differences? And, by the same token, are not all wars tragedies? Furthermore, why should sticking the name of Clausewitz in front of an interpretation add to or detract from its legitimacy when it probably does little more than beef up the confidence of the historian who so appropriates the great man's name? There are two sets of responses to these questions, the first being relevant to those interested in the theory of war, and the second applicable more specifically to military history.

For those in the first group, the need to pursue Clausewitz's relevance to our understanding of the First World War rests precisely on Clausewitz's ambition for his own work. *On War* aspired to produce an interpretation of war which stretched beyond Clausewitz's own experience, and his success in that endeavour is proven by the fact that to this day even those least scientific of scientists, that is to say political scientists, continue to read and cite the book. Put bluntly, if *On War* cannot help us to comprehend a war as central to the modern understanding of war as the First World War, then Clausewitz failed.

Clausewitz before 1914

For military historians, the relevance of Clausewitz to our interpretation of the First World War rests precisely on the fact that by 1914 his work was more widely read and appreciated than at any stage since the first publication of *Vom Kriege* in 1832–34. In Germany, a fresh edition, the fifth, had been published in 1905, with a foreword by the chief of the Prussian general staff, Alfred von Schlieffen.⁸ Both sides to the controversy on the conduct of war in Germany before 1914, prompted by Sigismund von Schlichting and sustained by Colmar von der Goltz, Hugo von Freytag-Loringhoven, Wilhelm Scherff, and Albrecht von Boguslawski, were wont

6. David Stevenson, *1914–1918* (London: Allen Lane, 2004; U.S. title, *Cataclysm*), 598; see also xx.

7. *Ibid.*, 600.

8. Ulrich Marwedel, *Carl von Clausewitz. Persönlichkeit und Wirkungsgeschichte seines Werkes bis 1918* (Boppard am Rhein: Boldt, 1978), 257.

to cite Clausewitz in their support.⁹ In France a new translation of *On War* by Lieutenant-Colonel Marc Bourdon de Vatry had appeared between 1886 and 1889, and most of Clausewitz's historical works were published in French in the 1890s or early 1900s. As in Germany, his thinking permeated the writings on strategy and tactics of the principal military theorists of the day, including Georges Gilbert, Jules Lewal, and especially Ferdinand Foch. In 1911 Colonel Hubert Camon brought out a study, called simply *Clausewitz*, and in 1912 P. Rocques followed suit with *Le Général von Clausewitz. Sa vie, sa théorie de la guerre*.¹⁰

The appearance of the fifth German edition prompted T. Miller Maguire, the author of texts for military crammers, to put his daughter to work on an abridged translation of *On War* for a series of articles published in the *United Service Magazine* between 1907 and 1909. The complexity of the task prompted one German officer to whom they turned for aid to comment that, "he would prefer three months of manoeuvre in winter without any cantonments, or even a residence in Holloway [prison] for six weeks along with logistic suffragettes."¹¹ By the time the book version appeared, it had been trumped by a relaunching of J. J. Graham's translation, which was first published in 1873 and had enjoyed sales figures even more dismal than the first German edition. The 1908 re-issue carried a foreword by Colonel F. N. Maude, who wrote:

[Clausewitz's] work has been the ultimate foundation on which every drill regulation in Europe, except our own [Britain's], has been reared. It is this ceaseless repetition of his fundamental ideas to which one-half of the male population of every Continental Nation has been subjected for two to three years of their lives, which has tuned their minds to vibrate in harmony with his precepts.¹²

However much Maude veered more to the mystical than to the rational in his writings, here, it would seem, is the justification for linking Clausewitz to the First World War. Nonetheless, the "fundamental ideas" to which compulsory military service had attuned the adult male population of military age in Europe did not often include the one idea with which many commentators associate Clausewitz, that of the relationship between war and policy.

Before 1914 armies did not read Clausewitz as John Keegan or David Stevenson have read him. Their attention was devoted less to the relationship between strategy and policy, about which Clausewitz in fact said remarkably little (and most

9. Antulio Echevarria II, "Borrowing from the master: uses of Clausewitz in German military literature before the Great War," *War in History* 3 (1996): 274–92; Echevarria, *After Clausewitz: German military thinkers before the Great War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

10. Benoît Durieux, *Clausewitz en France: deux siècles de réflexion sur la guerre 1807–2007* (Paris: Economica, 2008), 87–341.

11. T. Miller Maguire, *General Carl von Clausewitz on War*, trans. Miss [A. M. E.] Maguire (London: William Clowes, 1909), 98.

12. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham, ed. F. N. Maude, 3 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1908), 1:viii.

of that was confined to books I and VIII of *On War*), and more to the relationship between strategy and tactics, the relationship which is central to all the intervening books of *On War*, and the one with which soldiers were naturally more engaged. Schlieffen's foreword to the 1905 German edition said nothing at all about the relationship between war and policy. Before 1914 the key controversies surrounding Clausewitz involved what is today called the "operational level of war," although neither Clausewitz nor the general staffs of 1914 used that title.¹³ Clausewitz did not define strategy as the use of the war for the purposes of policy but as the use of the battle for the purposes of the war.¹⁴ The editions published between the two world wars of the war games and staff rides conducted under Schlieffen's tutelage by the Prussian general staff were called "die taktisch-strategischen Aufgaben"—or tactical-strategic problems. In other words tactics, or what happened on the battlefield, shaped strategic outcomes, and strategy fulfilled its purposes by exploiting the result of fighting through the pursuit and destruction of the enemy.

The biggest professional controversy surrounding Clausewitz before 1914 concerned the idea of strategic envelopment. In his greatest triumphs Napoleon had divided his forces into subordinate but self-contained elements, corps and divisions, which could then manoeuvre with greater independence and flexibility, but concentrate on the battlefield, very often converging on the enemy from different directions, so cutting him off from his line of communications and forcing a climactic battle. This too was what, in the orthodoxy of the day, the elder Moltke had achieved in the wars of German unification in 1866 and 1870: short campaigns had culminated in decisive battles at Königgrätz and Sedan. But Clausewitz stressed the need for concentration ahead of meeting the enemy on the battlefield, and so opposed the division of forces which strategic envelopment required.¹⁵ French military scholars, who in the two decades before the First World War began to unlock the secrets of Napoleonic warfare, argued that Clausewitz had not understood the essence of Napoleon's achievement, even if he had been—literally—on its receiving end. For Napoleon, strategy was the means to enable a tactical decision on the battlefield; for Clausewitz, the battle was the tactical means to enable the strategic decision. The war plans of 1914 and the initial manoeuvres in the early months of the First World War embraced the Napoleonic view of strategy—the need to manoeuvre to achieve a decisive battle, and both the Marne on the western front and Tannenberg on the eastern seemed to suggest that Napoleon had been right.

13. The 1976 translation of *On War* by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, which suggests he did, glosses the original German, which spurns words like "operativ" or "operation": see Hew Strachan, "Clausewitz en anglais: la césure de 1976," in *De la guerre? Clausewitz et la pensée stratégique contemporaine*, ed. Laure Bardiès and Martin Motte (Paris: Economica, 2008), 112–14.

14. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), book III, chapter 2, 177; see also book III, chapter 10, 202; and book VI, chapter 30, 509.

15. *Ibid.*, book V, chapter 6, 299–300; book V, chapter 7, 304; book V, chapter 16, 346–47; book VI, chapter 4, 367–68; book VI, chapter 24, 460–66; book VI, chapter 28, 492–94; book VII, chapter 7, 530; book VII, chapter 22, 568.

So most military pundits before 1914 deemed Clausewitz's rejection of strategic envelopment an aberration. Instead they called him in evidence to support three generally accepted propositions: that battle lay at the heart of war, that moral forces were central to war, and that dogma could get in the way of understanding the character of each individual war.

In his 1905 foreword to *On War*, Schlieffen wrote that the principal lesson to be drawn from Clausewitz was that the overriding aim in war was the destruction of the enemy's armed forces, and that the highest rule in war was the decision by force of arms. Schlieffen was not wrong: Clausewitz wrote in direct and bloody terms about fighting, and stressed its centrality to the concept of war. Clausewitz spoke of annihilation (*Vernichtung*) but he did so as much in relation to the pursuit after battle, in which the enemy's order and discipline were broken, as in relation to the physical obliteration through battle itself. For Schlieffen, however, the battle, not the pursuit, was the pay-off. By late 1914, when the tactical conditions of trench warfare had trumped strategic manoeuvre, fighting was increasingly the end as well as the means of warfare. Generals struggled to resuscitate what today's armies would call operational thought when big ideas were bounded both by barbed wire and field fortifications, and by their apparent solutions, artillery preparation and its careful timetabling in order to coordinate it with the infantry attack.

Clausewitz was not the first theorist of war to address the importance of morale in understanding war, but he was much readier than his predecessors to engage directly with the need to integrate it in any general theory of war. This was the second reason for his appeal to soldiers before 1914. Moral forces mattered to Clausewitz for two reasons. First, he was Prussian. The state to which he belonged was so massively inferior to France, in terms of population, land mass, and economy, that morale—the belief that Prussia could win when every key indicator suggested it could not—became a substitute for quantitative measures of capability. The searing experience of the defeat at Jena in 1806 only increased the need to embrace self-belief. Second, Clausewitz's interest in war focused particularly on the challenges of command. Therefore, his interest in morale lay more in the moral courage of the commander than in that of his troops. However, in 1914 the resolve of the latter seemed likely to be much more suspect than that of the former. Generals were professionals, used to the rigours of warfare. Conscription had put into uniform civilians who were urbanised, decadent, and even socialist, and who would be required to confront battlefields potentially even more terrifying than those faced by Clausewitz at Borodino in 1812 or in the war of German liberation in 1813–15.

The third lesson from Clausewitz was the let-out clause which all those who refer to Clausewitz use: that he was not dogmatic. He recognised that the character of each war was shaped by the conditions of its own times, and especially by social and political change. The principal point made by Schlieffen in his foreword to the 1905 edition was that Clausewitz stressed the need to judge each war according to its own character, and that the soldier should not be so bound by abstract theory as to fail to recognise the evidence of his own eyes. Any body of theory which rested on this sort of truism, however much it expressed itself in terms which suggested universal truths

valid across time (and there are plenty of those in *On War*), clearly provided some sort of intellectual armour plating against change in war, even changes in the technology of war as profound as those experienced in the First World War.

Clausewitz in 1914–15

Given the attention bestowed on Clausewitz before 1914, what is remarkable is how little he was cited after the war broke out. An easy and probably reasonable explanation for this can be found in the operational successes and failures of August–September 1914. Strategic envelopment seemed to have led to tactical outcomes, exactly as Clausewitz’s critics had argued it would. For the Germans on the eastern front, strategic manoeuvre produced a decisive victory at Tannenberg in East Prussia. For the Germans on the western front, the reverse applied: strategic manoeuvre culminated in defeat on the Marne, perhaps precisely because the Prussian general staff allowed its strategic or operational concerns to swamp its need for tactical decisiveness. Then, as the expectations vested in the outcomes of battle were not fulfilled, so commentators turned to Clausewitz for other, more abstract insights. After the battle of the Marne, Herman Stegemann, a Swiss journalist at OHL (Oberste Heeresleitung, the German supreme military command), who had used Clausewitz to analyse the relationship between the attack and the defence in the battles of the frontiers in August 1914, increasingly employed Clausewitz to focus not on the interface between strategy and tactics, but on the role of luck in war.¹⁶

Particularly striking is the absence of Clausewitz from the rhetoric of allied propaganda directed against Germany in 1914–15. F. N. Maude, in his 1908 introduction to *On War*, had urged his readers to study Clausewitz precisely because he seemed to be the embodiment of German militarism:

The Germans interpret their new national colours—black, red, and white—by the saying, “Durch Nacht und Blut zur Licht” (“Through night and blood to light”), and no work yet written conveys to the thinker a clearer conception of all that the red streak in their flag stands for than this deep and philosophical analysis of “war” by Clausewitz.

Maude compared Clausewitz with Charles Darwin, “for both have proved the existence of the same law in each case, viz., ‘the survival of the fittest.’” In Maude’s view, neither was concerned with ethics or morality. As a result,

the gradual dissemination of the principles taught by Clausewitz has created a condition of molecular tension in the minds of the Nations they [the statesmen of Europe] govern analogous to the “critical temperature of water heated above boiling point under pressure,” which may at any moment bring about an explosion which they will be powerless to control.¹⁷

16. Hermann Stegemann, *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben und aus meiner Zeit* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1930), 231, 248, 361, 414.

17. Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Graham and ed. Maude, 1:vi–vii.

In 1909 Major Stewart Murray wrote an introduction to *On War*, which used similar terms. He deemed every German statesman to be so much a disciple of Clausewitz that “he will regard war as the means by which some day his nation shall impose its will upon another nation,” letting loose “war in its most absolute and ruthless character,” and “determined to achieve its political object and compel submission to its will by force.”¹⁸

The foreword to Murray’s book was written by Spenser Wilkinson, who had just been appointed the first holder of the Oxford chair of military history. Wilkinson was a Clausewitz enthusiast, but one who shunned the hyperbole of Maude and Murray. Reflecting and amplifying comments he had made in his inaugural lecture, delivered on 27 November 1909¹⁹, he described *On War* as “from beginning to end . . . nothing but common sense applied to the subject.” Its value, he went on,

consists in the influence which it cannot but have upon the way in which a man thinks about war, about public affairs, and about human character. I venture to say that no officer will read with any attention the work of Clausewitz without shortly finding that he has become a new man, seeing the world with fresh eyes and facing its problems with a judgment and a confidence before unknown to him.²⁰

The Oxford History Faculty, of which Wilkinson was a member, then effectively doubled as a politics department. On the outbreak of the war, it produced a series of pamphlets (eighty-six were published between August 1914 and early 1915) designed to show the underlying causes of the conflict, several of them written by Wilkinson. On 19 June 1914, just over five weeks before the outbreak of the First World War and only days before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo, Wilkinson had delivered another panegyric to Clausewitz’s understanding of war.²¹ But within two months, in an Oxford pamphlet entitled *Great Britain and Germany*, Wilkinson took as the representative of the German army, of what he called the “gospel of force,” not Clausewitz, but Friedrich von Bernhardi. Bernhardi had published two books in 1912, *Vom heutigen Kriege* (On war of to-day), which was specifically designed to bring Clausewitz up to date, and *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg* (Germany and the next war). It was this last book in particular which ensured that Bernhardi, not Clausewitz, was the symbol of German militarism for allied propaganda in 1914–15. Bracketed with Fichte, Treitschke, and Nietszsche, Bernhardi became the symbol of the idea that for Germany might was right.

In 1914–15 Clausewitz simply disappeared from commentaries on the war in Britain and France. He was not once mentioned in the eighty-six Oxford

18. Murray, *The reality of war*, 8–9.

19. “The study of war,” reprinted in Spenser Wilkinson, *Government and the war* (London: Constable, 1918), 16–17.

20. Stewart L. Murray, *The reality of war: an introduction to “Clausewitz”* (London: Hugh Rees, 1909), x–xi.

21. “What is war?” in Wilkinson, *Government and the war*.

pamphlets. The mood in the allied countries made it hard to say nice things about any German, even of those of whom one might approve, like Kant or Beethoven. Clausewitz may not have been mentioned precisely because, for at least some of his readers, he came in the same category as those two luminaries. Although he was a Prussian, he was still a representative of the “good,” not the “bad,” Germany.

Presumably that was Spenser Wilkinson's view; it also seems to have been John Buchan's. The novelist, politician, and future Governor General of Canada devoted two chapters of the second volume of *Nelson's History of the War*, published in early 1915, to the German occupation of Belgium and to German methods and aims, the key themes of allied propaganda. Buchan broke the silence on Clausewitz by referring to him twice, and both times in the context of common sense. Like Wilkinson, he accepted Clausewitz's argument, “that war should be waged whole-heartedly, for the more whole-hearted it is the quicker it will be ended.” And he went on to say that Clausewitz had “long ago warned his countrymen that it was ‘inexpedient’ to do anything to outrage the general moral sense of other peoples.”²²

In 1921, after the war was over, Buchan distilled the twenty-four volumes of *Nelson's History* into four volumes entitled *A history of the Great War*. Now he was much more open in his praise of Clausewitz, likening *On War* to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, because it “explored the foundations of statecraft, and showed the intimate connection between principles and facts, a manual alike for politician and soldier.”²³ Buchan had not deemed it prudent to commit such opinions to print while the war still raged, not least because by 1917 he was the *de facto* head of government propaganda. Although Buchan believed that propaganda should rest on truth, he also—presumably—realised that positive remarks about a Prussian would have been politically naïve in the fervid atmosphere generated by the populist press.

Clausewitz in 1917–18

Nonetheless, by the later stages of the war, Clausewitz was creeping back into public debate in the Anglophone world. On 25 June 1918 the satirical British magazine, *Punch*, dubbed Spenser Wilkinson “the British Clausewitz,” intending that as praise not opprobrium. Much of Buchan's propaganda was directed at the United States, and in 1917 Robert M. Johnston published the first American volume ever devoted to *On War, Clausewitz to date*. Reflecting in part articles published in the *Military Historian and Economist*, of which Johnston was co-editor, the book was printed in a handy format designed to be taken into the trenches.²⁴

22. John Buchan, *Nelson's History of the War*, 24 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson, 1915–19), 2:215, 217.

23. John Buchan, *A History of the Great War*, 4 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson, 1921), 1:23; see also 85.

24. Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 116–21. I have not managed to see Johnston's now scarce book, which Hans Rothfels characterised as “falling back in a way upon the small, highly trained armies of the eighteenth century type”: H. Rothfels, “Clausewitz,” in *Makers of modern strategy: military thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1943), 94.

In Britain, Major-General T. D. Pilcher, who had commanded a division and had been wounded in the war, brought out *War according to Clausewitz* in March 1918. Pilcher's book embraced only the first of the three volumes of the original edition of *On War* (and of Graham's translation), that is to say books I to IV. Pilcher argued that "the principles governing the subjects dealt with in the first volume have, on the whole, altered less during the hundred years intervening since they were written than have those treated in the second and third."²⁵

War according to Clausewitz therefore followed a progression from the most theoretical and abstract books of *On War*, book I on the nature of war and book II on the theory of war, through a discussion of strategy (book III) to combat (book IV). So, in Pilcher's text, battle was the pay-off, tactics the conclusion. And that was exactly Pilcher's message. He did not overlook that "war is only a continuation of policy by other means," but he stressed that

the art of war in general and the commander himself in particular have a right to demand the object aimed at by policy shall not be incompatible with the means at disposal, and that in a war which is from the first recognised as being a life-or-death fight to a finish, the whole resources of the nation must at once be mobilised, that there must be no fear about hitting too hard, and that the only war-rantable fear is one of not being able to hit hard enough.²⁶

Pilcher went on to highlight what Clausewitz said of combat:

The decision of a great battle is the sum of the decisions of the many small fights of which a great battle is composed. He also says that a great general action is more often fought *on its own account* than in any other description of battle, and that its object is even more the destruction of the enemy's moral than of his physical forces . . . Moreover, the effect of a defeat in a great general action is, as a rule, felt even more in the Government of the country to which the defeated army belongs than it is in the army itself.

Clausewitz further very much emphasises, what is known to every soldier, namely, that during a battle there is not, as a rule, much difference between the losses sustained by the victor and those suffered by the vanquished, and that a vigorous pursuit is absolutely essential in order to reap the harvest of victory.²⁷

Pilcher stressed how the tactical conditions of battle had been changed since Clausewitz's day, but he began to recognize, in a way that most commentators on the First World War who have used Clausewitz as a critical guide have not, that the value of Clausewitz's insights about the First World War derive in the first place from what he has to say about tactics and their effect on strategy, and only then on policy, rather than on the normative notion so pervasive in our own age, that

25. T. D. Pilcher, *War according to Clausewitz* (London: Cassell, 1918), vi.

26. *Ibid.*, 253; cf. 14–15.

27. *Ibid.*, 256–57.

war ought to be subordinate to policy.²⁸ For example, in commenting on book II, chapter 5 of *On War*, Pilcher remarked on the readiness of both Napoleon and the Austrians to sign a peace at Campo Formio in 1797: “This applies especially to our times, for the drain on the resources in a war between well-matched antagonists, which is fought to a finish, is so great that unless the stake at issue be of absolutely vital importance a compromise is usually arrived at.”²⁹

Clausewitz’s Analysis of a War of Exhaustion

In other words the character of the war can determine the policy to be pursued. Clausewitz’s observation, that the greatest task faced at the outset of a war is to identify correctly the character of the war, takes any historian of the First World War to the point in *On War* with which Pilcher ended: book IV, that on combat, which lies at the heart of Clausewitz’s argument and physically at the centre point of the text.

“What usually happens in a major battle today?” Clausewitz had asked. His answer rested on two assumptions, both as applicable to the First World War as to his own day. The first was that the opposing armies were, in modern jargon, “symmetrical,” because they were so comparable in organisation that they effectively cancelled each other out at the tactical level. The second was that war was pursued for great national interests and followed “its natural course”; in other words policy proved less likely to constrain war’s escalation than to enable it.

Battles which followed from such circumstances, Clausewitz said, were characterised by a prolonged firefight,

Interrupted by minor blows—charges, bayonet assaults, and cavalry attacks—which cause the fighting to sway to some extent to and fro. Gradually, the units are burned out, and when nothing is left but cinders, they are withdrawn and others will take their place.

So the battle smolders away, like damp gunpowder. Darkness brings it to a halt: no one can see, and no one cares to trust himself to chance. The time has now come to reckon up how much in the way of serviceable troops is left on either side—troops, that is, which are not burned out like dead volcanoes.³⁰

According to Clausewitz, the outcome of such a battle was not determined by tactical combinations; instead it was based on three “constituent signs.” The first was its psychological effect, particularly on the commander’s judgement. The second was “the wasting away of one’s own troops,” which could be accurately calculated because “the tempo of the battle is deliberate and seldom very tumultuous.” The third was the loss of ground. In book VI, that on defence, chapter 27, Clausewitz discussed the relationship between the loss of men and the loss of ground. Because the loss of men would lead to the loss of ground, but the loss of ground did

28. *Ibid.*, 28–9, 67, 160, 209–10, 254, 256.

29. *Ibid.*, 74.

30. Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Howard and Paret, book IV, chapter 2, 226.

not necessarily mean the loss of men, “it follows that it is always more important to preserve or, as the case may be, destroy [*Vernichtung* in the German] armed forces than to hold on to territory.”³¹ Here was the classic dilemma for the generals of the First World War, manifested in the debate on whether to save lives by pulling back to a better position, or to hold ground and risk greater losses. Clausewitz provided an account of an attritional battle in terms which are extraordinarily evocative for historians of the First World War.

That description can be reinforced by Clausewitz’s comments about trenches, to be found elsewhere in book VI and also by what he had to say in book VII, that on the offensive. As Clausewitz put it in book VII, “a well-prepared, well-manned, and well-defended entrenchment *must generally be considered an impregnable point*.”³² He warned that those on the offensive should attack such a position only in exceptional circumstances. The defender, as he had already pointed out in book VI, enjoys some great advantages:

The defender waits for the attack in position, having chosen a suitable area and prepared it; which means he has carefully reconnoitered it, erected solid defenses at some of the most important points, established and opened communications, sited his batteries, fortified some villages, selected covered areas, and so forth. The strength of his front, access to which is barred by one or more parallel trenches or other obstacles or by dominant strong points, makes it possible for him, while the forces at the points of actual contact are destroying each other, *to inflict heavy losses on the enemy at low cost to himself* as the attack passes through the successive stages of resistance until it reaches the heart of the position. The points of support on which his flanks rest secure him against sudden attacks from several directions. The covered ground on which the defender has taken up his position will make the attacker wary, even timid. It will enable the defender to slow down the general retrograde movement by means of small successful counterattacks as the area of action steadily narrows. In this way the defender can confidently survey the battle as it smolders before his eyes.³³

In Clausewitz’s view the only tactical vulnerability from which the defender suffered in such circumstances lay on his flanks. He assumed, as did the generals of 1914, that such defensive positions could be turned. But in strategic terms, as opposed to tactical, the defence could, he acknowledged, frequently rest on flanks which provide “absolute security,” “where the line of defense may run from sea to sea or from one neutral country to another.” That was of course exactly the situation which prevailed on the western front by the end of 1914.

Clausewitz here began to consider the conundrum confronted by the generals of the First World War: given the tactical tyrannies of the war, how could battle

31. *Ibid.*, book VI, chapter 27, 485.

32. *Ibid.*, book VII, chapter 10, 536.

33. *Ibid.*, book VI, chapter 9, 390–91.

be used to strategic (or, as modern commanders would say, operational) effect? Clausewitz acknowledged that, where the strategic defence rested on secure flanks, “there can be no convergent attack; freedom of choice is limited. It is even more awkwardly limited where the attack *has* to be convergent.” And he then went on to an insight directly relevant to the First World War: “Russia and France cannot attack Germany in any other way than by convergent movements; they can never attack with united forces.”³⁴

So Clausewitz caught clearly enough Germany’s strategic advantage in the First World War, that of being able to operate on interior lines. The challenge that confronted OHL was the need to produce a positive outcome when its strengths resided in the defensive—in what Clausewitz had called the negative form of warfare. Clausewitz had tackled this problem in book I, chapter 2, where he acknowledged that simple self-defence, fighting only for the purpose of resistance rather than for any greater objective, conferred the greatest relative advantage in war. Seen in these terms, the defender with a purely negative aim could outlast an enemy, but by the same token could only achieve a limited outcome:

If a negative aim—that is, the use of every means available for pure resistance—gives an advantage in war, the advantage need only be enough to *balance* any superiority the opponent may possess: in the end his political object will not seem worth the effort it costs. He must then renounce his policy.³⁵

For Germany the logical conclusion to the First World War, given the sorts of argument produced by Clausewitz, was that it should seek a negotiated peace. In other words Germany had to pursue a policy that was congruent with the character of the war; it had to adapt the end to the means. But, as ever with Clausewitz, nothing was quite so neat or unequivocal; to most propositions he produced a counter, and in this case it is to be found in book VIII, chapter 8, when he addressed the limited aim in a defensive war:

No doubt that end could in theory be pursued by wearing the enemy down. He has the positive aim, and any successful operation, even though it only costs the forces that take part in it, has the same effect as a retreat. But the defender’s loss is not incurred in vain: he has held his ground, which is all he meant to do. For the defender then, it might be said, his positive aim is to hold what he has. That might be sound if it were sure that a certain number of attacks would actually wear the enemy down and make him desist. But this is not necessarily so. If we consider the relative exhaustion of forces on both sides, the defender is at a *disadvantage*. The attack may weaken, but only in the sense that a turning point may occur. Once that possibility is gone, the defender weakens more than the attacker, for two reasons. For one thing, he is weaker anyway, and if losses are the same on both sides, it is he who is harder hit. Second,

34. *Ibid.*, book VI, chapter 4, 367; see also book VIII, chapter 9, 618.

35. *Ibid.*, book I, chapter 2, 93–94.

the enemy will undoubtedly deprive him of part of his territory and resources. In all this we can find no reason for the attacker to desist. We are left with the conclusion that if the attacker sustains his efforts while his opponent does nothing but ward them off, the latter can do nothing to neutralize the danger that sooner or later an offensive thrust will succeed.

Certainly the exhaustion or, to be accurate, the fatigue of the stronger has often brought about peace. The reason can be found in the half-hearted manner [*Halbheit*] in which wars are usually waged. It cannot be taken in any scientific sense as the ultimate, universal objective of all defense.³⁶

Clausewitz's conclusion was both stark and, for Germany in 1914–18, upbeat:

A major victory can only be obtained by positive measures aimed at a *decision*, never by simply waiting on events. In short, even in the defense, a major stake alone can bring a major gain.³⁷

German Strategy and Clausewitz

So the key question for Germany during the First World War was how far its political aspirations should be brought into conformity with the character of the war. If the war was attritional and if technology and tactics favoured the defensive, Germany, it seemed, must modify its war aims. It would have to align its policy with tactical reality. However, if the defensive was simply a phase through which a weaker belligerent had to pass, then Germany had no reason not to hope that it was simply the preliminary to the achievement of greater objectives. In that case the core issue was time, given the limited resources of the state.

Before the war it had become increasingly fashionable in Germany to see Clausewitz as a philosopher: it was not only a way of accounting for his lack of dogma and for his complexity, but it also made sense of his use of dialectic as a way to promote understanding. In 1911, Paul Creuzinger, who had written a three-part work on war between 1903 and 1911, *Die Probleme des Krieges*, the first volume of which was devoted to tactics and included a lengthy discussion of Clausewitz's discussion of the subject, also published a study of Hegel's influence on Clausewitz. In 1915 he produced a fresh edition of *Vom Kriege*, to which he contributed a foreword. As well as reprinting Schlieffen's introduction of 1905, the text of the new edition was preceded by endorsements from eleven generals then exercising active commands, including the conqueror of Poland and Serbia, August von Mackensen; the commanders of both the 1st and 2nd armies in the battle of the Marne, Alexander von Kluck and Karl von Bülow; the Prussian war minister, Adolf Wild von Hohenborn; and the chief of the Austro-Hungarian general staff, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorff. Creuzinger's foreword put the dilemma faced by Germany in exactly the terms used

36. *Ibid.*, book VIII, chapter 8, 613; see also book III, chapter 12, 205.

37. *Ibid.*, book VIII, chapter 8, 616.

above. The world war meant that Germans needed a clearer conceptual framework for tactics, and a better understanding of the strategic consequences of those tactics. It was pointless being informed about German war aims, Creuzinger declared, if one did not know the circumstances and conditions of the war, and the way they might shape the outcome. Creuzinger's foreword was a plea to base policy in the war on the character of the war, so that the political aims should be consonant with the means available.³⁸ As Clausewitz had put it himself: "It is only when policy promises itself a wrong effect from certain military means and measures, an effect opposed to their nature, that it can exercise a harmful effect on war by the course it prescribes."³⁹

In 1915, the same year as that in which Creuzinger produced his edition of *On War*, Hauptmann Dr. Arthur Schurig, the author of books on Mozart and Beethoven, published a pocket-sized introduction to Clausewitz, *Grundgedanken über Krieg und Kriegführung*. Schurig collected Clausewitz's aphorisms into nine chapters. The first of these, "*Wesen und Ziel des Krieges*," began: "War is nothing other than the continuation of state policy with other means."⁴⁰ But Schurig was not reflecting the norm of the early twenty-first century, that is to say the unquestioning acceptance of the supremacy of policy over the conduct of war. His final remark at the end of the book was that policy was only to be questioned when the policy itself was wrong.⁴¹ In this he reflected the point made by Clausewitz in book VIII, chapter 6B of *On War*: "When people talk, as they often do, about harmful political influence on the management of war, they are not really saying what they mean. Their quarrel should be with the policy itself, not with its influence."⁴² Policy, in other words, should only demand things of war which are in accord with war's nature.

Much of the intervening content of Schurig's book was therefore devoted to the nature of war, and Schurig stressed the need to pay attention to book VI of *On War*, that on the defence. However, Schurig emphasised that the defensive was only a phase, reflective of the need to wait and exhaust the attack before going over to the offensive. What then followed was that, although much of the activity in war, and particularly in the conduct of the defence, was tactical, its exploitation was strategic.⁴³

Schurig prepared an abridged version of the whole text of *On War*, the introduction to which he signed on the Somme on 9 November 1916. It identified nine key principles to be derived from Clausewitz. The first was indeed that war was the continuation of policy, or specifically of "state" policy, by other means. The next three concerned Clausewitz's emphasis on fighting as the only means of war, its conduct being shaped by the need to destroy the enemy's armed forces, with the result that war was an act of force to which there was no limit. Schurig's fifth and

38. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. P. Creuzinger, 11th ed. (Berlin: B. Behr, 1915), xvii.

39. Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. O. J. Matthijs Jolles (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1950), book VIII, chapter 6B, 599.

40. Arthur Schurig, *Grundgedanken über Krieg und Kriegführung* (Dresden: Insel-Verlag, 1915), 6.

41. *Ibid.*, 84.

42. Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Howard and Paret, book VIII, chapter 6B, 608.

43. Schurig, *Grundgedanken*, 83.

sixth points concerned the relationship between attack and defence, the latter being the stronger means but with the negative aim. Schurig concluded that as soon as one side was strong enough it could move over to the offensive, and so war naturally began with defence but ended with attack. The seventh principle identified the main battle (the *Hauptschlacht*) as “concentrated war,” the *Schwerpunkt* of the whole war, and led logically to the eighth, that there was only one success that mattered, the final victory. Schurig’s ninth point brought him (as it had brought Clausewitz) back to the first, that of war’s relationship to policy: war was of two sorts, either a war to make the enemy defenceless and to destroy him politically, or a war designed to seize territory which concluded in negotiation.

Schurig was critical of *Ermattungsstrategie*, a wearing-out strategy of the sort which the founding father of modern military history, Hans Delbrück, had argued that Frederick the Great had adopted in the Seven Years War. Before 1914 Delbrück’s claim had led to a celebrated controversy with the Prussian general staff.⁴⁴ Delbrück had argued that Frederick had exhausted his enemies by manoeuvre and by avoiding battle. But by November 1916, with the battles of Verdun and the Somme uppermost in German minds, *Ermattungsstrategie* was associated not with the avoidance of battle as a means to exhaust the enemy but with the pursuit of battle in order to kill more men. Germany, Schurig argued, had been forced into a war of exhaustion by its need to fight the British empire. However, such a strategy could only work to Britain’s advantage: a long war would postpone the decision, and its effects would bear down more heavily on the weaker power. Schurig cited the evidence of the Punic wars (as many other Germans did at this point in the war, if only to see the First World War as the first of two such wars). For Schurig the 2nd Punic War was the salutary example: “A war of exhaustion [*Ermattungskrieg*] is a way of conducting war best suited to the economically and politically superior nation fighting against a militarily stronger enemy.”⁴⁵ Germany’s problem was that, in playing to the strength of the defensive, it was losing time, and time worked to the economic strengths of the British. Germany could only use the defensive as a preliminary to the offensive, and its aim should not be to exhaust the enemy but to defeat him. Schurig declared that for Clausewitz *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, a strategy of overthrow, not *Ermattungsstrategie*, was the intellectual foundation of all great command.

The Relevance of Clausewitz’s Life and Times

Schurig did more with *On War* than relate its precepts to Germany’s strategic predicament. He also placed it in its historical context and made that of continuing relevance to Germany in the First World War.

44. Sven Lange, *Hans Delbrück and der “Strategiestreit”: Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879–1914* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1995); see also Arden Bucholz, *Hans Delbrück and the German military establishment: war images in conflict* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985).

45. Karl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege. Um veraltetes gekürzte Ausgabe*, ed. Arthur Schurig (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1917), lxxiv.

When the war had broken out, many Germans had been struck by the parallels with the war of liberation of 1813–15: the myth of unity between crown and people, the identification of the Prussian state with the German nation, the need to fight a seemingly superior enemy, and hope for victory despite the seeming probability of defeat. The war of liberation therefore fed German hopes a century later. Victory in 1815 had been an unexpected reward. Napoleon, “the god of war,” had been defeated, and so in 1914 too Germany might aspire to defeat a British-led coalition. On the outbreak of the First World War, academics at Berlin University, like those in Oxford, delivered a series of lectures on the war’s underlying purposes, which were in due course published as pamphlets. They often cited Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, published in 1808 in the aftermath of the catastrophe of Jena. Fichte, with his summons to elevate the nation over the needs of the individual, a call to which he had given personal meaning by his own readiness to don the uniform of the *Landwehr* in 1813, was as profoundly francophobe as Clausewitz. But none of the lectures published as *Deutsche Reden in der schwerer Zeit* in 1914–15, and including that by Hans Delbrück, referred to Clausewitz.

For Germans in 1914, the context within which *On War* had been written was irrelevant; what mattered was its content. But by 1916–17, the context, and its relevance for the German nation and its will to survive, began to matter. Schurig’s introduction to his abridged edition of *On War* referred to one of the three impassioned memoranda written by Clausewitz as he resigned from the Prussian army in February 1812 in protest at the king’s compliance with Napoleon’s demand that Prussia supply a military contingent for the invasion of Russia. Schurig stressed the relevance of Clausewitz’s manifesto, a statement of political insubordination by a serving soldier, motivated by a hatred of France and love of the fatherland, to the German nation’s “battle of the giants” (*Riesenkampf*) in 1916. He called the First World War an even greater “war of liberation.”⁴⁶

This Clausewitz was not the theorist of war, who had so interested soldiers before 1914, but the historical Clausewitz, whose life story was to take hold of both political and academic circles in Germany in the later stages of the First World War, and was to shape the interpretation of *On War* in the Weimar republic. Its principal academic exponent, Hans Rothfels, was a twenty-three-year-old student at Heidelberg University when the war broke out in 1914. However fashionable it may be today to discount the idea of war enthusiasm, Rothfels celebrated both the intensity of the moment and the excitement he felt as he subordinated his own individuality in the collective identity of the nation.⁴⁷ He enlisted as a volunteer in the army, and was severely wounded near Soissons in November 1914, losing a leg. Invalided out of the army, he returned to Heidelberg and began his thesis, which he submitted in 1918 and published in 1920. *Carl von Clausewitz. Politik und Krieg* was a biography of Clausewitz up until 1815, and it therefore put the evolution of

46. *Ibid.*, xxliii, lxxix.

47. Jan Eckel, *Hans Rothfels. Eine intellektuelle Biographie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005), 78–79.

his ideas in the context of his experience. It remains a study of fundamental importance to Clausewitz scholars, but it too is a book of its times, shaped by Rothfels's own experience of war.

Rothfels identified with the tension in Clausewitz, between his academic and reflective temperament and his desire for action and military glory. After the war, he told his supervisor, Friedrich Meinecke, that during a war every task had to be undertaken for patriotic purposes; for Rothfels that task had been his work on Clausewitz. Its message was that war was a political opportunity, and so Germany's task was to make military victory productive.⁴⁸ Rothfels was no better prepared for the psychological blow of defeat in November 1918 than most other Germans, whatever their political opinions. Stunned by the outcome of the war, he turned to Clausewitz for meaning, and he found it, not in 1815 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars, but in 1806 and the defeat of Prussia at Jena. Against all expectation, Prussia's ignominious collapse had inaugurated rebirth and ultimate triumph, and in comparatively short order. In 1922 Rothfels published an edition of Clausewitz's political writings and letters, and he began it by saying that Clausewitz's 1812 memoranda, to which Schurig had drawn attention, were "a warning bell" for the "fate of our day."⁴⁹ The most important of the three manifestos had ended in ringing terms: even "the destruction of liberty, after a bloody and honorable struggle assures the nation's rebirth." Clausewitz had written: "It is the seed of life, which one day will bring forth a new, securely rooted tree."⁵⁰

In other words it was better to fight and die than not fight at all. Intriguingly this Clausewitz had appealed to T. Miller Maguire in 1909. He had capitalised the text of book VI, chapter 26 that best reflected Clausewitz's feelings in 1812, concluding "IT IS ALWAYS TOO SOON TO PERISH."⁵¹ Maguire addressed Clausewitz's words to a Liberal secretary of state for war, Richard Burdon Haldane, but after the First World War they would appeal to the Nazis. When Hitler cited Clausewitz in *Mein Kampf*, he quoted the 1812 memoranda, not *On War*. In due course Clausewitz would be co-opted into the Nazi pantheon. By then Rothfels was an exile in the United States: although he had converted to Lutheranism in 1910, he had been born a Jew. In 1943 he wrote a scintillating chapter on Clausewitz for Edward Mead Earle's *Makers of Modern Strategy* and, together with Herbert Rosinski, he put Clausewitz studies in the United States on firm foundations.

48. *Ibid.*, 81, 84.

49. *Ibid.*, 87; see also Jan Eckel, "Geschichte als Gegenwartswissenschaft. Eine Skizze zur intellektuellen Biographie von Hans Rothfels," in *Hans Rothfels und die deutsche Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Johannes Hürter and Hans Woller (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2005), 18–19.

50. Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and political writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 290; there is no full English translation of all three manifestos, which are to be found in Carl von Clausewitz, *Schriften-Aufsätze-Studien-Briefe*, ed. Werner Hahlweg, 2 vols. in 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966–90), 1:678–751.

51. Maguire, *Clausewitz on War*, 71.

Clausewitz, War, and Policy: The Legacy of 1914–18

So for Germans after the First World War, the central argument to be derived from Clausewitz was not that on which Germans had focused before the war. Now the issue was no longer the relationship between strategy and tactics, but that between war and policy, the argument that war was a continuation of policy by other means. Otto von Moser complained in 1931 that, before the war, German diplomats had not read *On War*, and so did not appreciate the mechanisms which articulated the relationship between policy and strategy. Soldiers had done little better, re-interpreting Clausewitz to serve their own ends. Carried away by the triumphs of the wars of German unification, they had decided that the balance had swung from the former to the latter, from policy to strategy, so that policy should conform to the needs of strategy.⁵²

In September 1916, when Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff had taken over at OHL, they had rapidly moved into the political space left by the constitutional and personal weakness of the German chancellor, both before and particularly after the resignation from the post of Theodor von Bethmann Holweg in July 1917. Ludendorff's wartime critics used Clausewitz to argue that politicians should set policy and that OHL should stick to its core business, the conduct of operations;⁵³ his supporters, notably Hindenburg in 1920, responded that Clausewitz had warned against "the encroachment of politics on the conduct of operations."⁵⁴ In 1922 Ludendorff himself entered the fray, and did so by revisiting the prewar controversy between the general staff and Delbrück in a book called *Kriegführung und Politik*. The choice of title was deliberately provocative. Ludendorff argued that, as Helmuth von Moltke the elder had said, strategy was "a system of expedients." The choice confronted by Frederick the Great, waging the Seven Years War in a period before strategy had even been conceptualised and certainly before it was a word with any currency, was whether to wage the war offensively or defensively. This was a matter not of strategy, but of *Kriegführung*, or the conduct of war. *Kriegführung*, a German military dictionary of 1936 would say, "signifies the handling of warlike activity, which has developed over the course of time as the result of the evolution of the means of war and of very different weaponry."⁵⁵ For Ludendorff the soldier, the question which Delbrück the historian had put

52. Otto von Moser, *Dies obersten Gewalten im Weltkrieg. Das Werk der Staatsmänner, Heerführer, Parlaments-, Presse- und Volksführer bei der Entente und bei den Mittelmächten* (Stuttgart: Chr. Belser, 1931), 10.

53. Rupprecht von Bayern, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, ed. Eugen von Frauenholz, 3 vols. (Munich: Deutscher National Verlag, 1929), 2:258 (diary, 5 September 1917); 3:117 (document, 2 January 1917); Max von Baden, *The memoirs of Max von Baden*, trans. W. M. Calder and C. W. H. Sutton, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1928), 1:72.

54. Paul von Hindenburg, *Out of my life*, trans. F. A. Holt (London: Cassell, 1920), 111–12.

55. Friedrich Stuhlmann, *Wehr-Lexikon. Was jeder Deutsche von der Wehr wissen muss* (Berlin: Mittler, 1936), 185.

to the general staff before 1914 was counterfactual: Frederick the Great did not weigh up the pros and cons of *Ermattungsstrategie* and Schlieffen's preference, *Vernichtungsstrategie* (a strategy of annihilation). Ludendorff said that both he and Hindenburg had been pursuing a strategy of annihilation at Tannenberg in 1914, but by the time that they had arrived at OHL in September 1916, they faced the same options as those which had faced Frederick: those of defence or attack. Given the circumstances in which it found itself, OHL had to strip itself of the intellectual pretensions of strategy, and to recognise that the real world revolved around *Kriegführung*. Ludendorff's central conclusion from the First World War was that "the conduct of war rested alongside policy and policy rested alongside the conduct of war." Clausewitz's nostrum on the relationship between war and policy therefore had to be revised to read, "complete policy [*Gesamtpolitik*, by which Ludendorff meant both domestic and foreign policy] must serve the war."⁵⁶

Ludendorff's intervention was part of the debate on the so-called "stab in the back," the argument that the German army had not been defeated in the field but had been betrayed by collapse at home. What was remarkable about this controversy was the failure to refer to Clausewitz's passage on the "trinity" at the end of book I, chapter 1 of *On War*, where he addressed the reciprocal and constantly changing relationship between the people, the army, and the government in a nation at war.⁵⁷ Rothfels did not mention the "trinity" in his chapter on Clausewitz for Earle's *Makers of Modern Strategy*, and nor, more immediately, was it referred to in the deliberations of the Reichstag committee of inquiry into the causes of the German collapse, which was set up in 1919 and completed its voluminous report in 1928.

Nonetheless, Clausewitz was a central figure in the "stab in the back" debate. The Reichstag inquiry provided a platform for Ludendorff's most vociferous critics (as well as his supporters), and *Kriegführung und Politik* was regularly cited in its proceedings. So too were Clausewitz's observations on the relationship between war and policy in *On War*. "The fundamental idea," which guided a report written by the secretary to the inquiry in response to Ludendorff, was "Clausewitz's idea that in war policy must exercise the primacy over the conduct of war."⁵⁸ Hans Delbrück, a member of the committee and himself a former Reichstag deputy, as well as the author of a stinging attack on Ludendorff's memoirs, led the charge, citing book VIII, chapter 6B in particular in support. His criticism of the conduct of the German offensives of 1918 rested on the need to link their military application, the outcome of *Kriegführung*, to the recognition that a decisive defeat of the enemy was a "phantom," and that therefore the offensives ought to have been undertaken

56. Erich Ludendorff, *Kriegführung und Politik* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1922), 1–20.

57. Kurt Hesse, *Der Feldherr Psychologos. Ein Suchen nach dem Führer der deutschen Zukunft* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1922), 104–5, does discuss the "trinity" at some length, but does not put it specifically in the context of the "stab in the back."

58. Ralph Haswell Lutz, ed., *The causes of the German collapse in 1918: sections of the officially authorized report of the Commission of the German Constituent Assembly and of the German Reichstag, 1919–1928, the selection and the translation officially approved by the commission* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1934), 200.

in pursuit of Germany's need for a negotiated peace: "No strategic conception, to revert once again to Clausewitz's fundamental proposition," he declared in written evidence presented in 1925, "can reach a conclusion without that political aim."⁵⁹

The lesson the inquiry drew from Clausewitz was the need for military subordination to political control. Its members presumed that policy would serve to limit and contain war, a construct sustained by a number of German veterans of 1914–18. One of them, Gerhard Ritter, fortified by Germany's experience of the Second World War, made it the central theme of his four-volume magnum opus on German militarism in the First World War, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk. Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1954–56; translated as *The sword and sceptre*). Much may have divided Ritter from his protagonist, Fritz Fischer, but this united them, and it was an idea also shared by Fischer's direct contemporary (both were born in 1908), Heinz Kraft. Kraft's study of Erich von Falkenhayn's clash with Hindenburg and Ludendorff, *Staatsraison und Kriegführung im kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1916* (Göttingen: Muster-Schmidt, 1980), used Clausewitz as its template on the relationship between war and policy. However, the line that propelled Clausewitz from being the honorary liberal in the early years of Weimar government to democratic role model in the *Bundesrepublik* (and in the United States) was most certainly not a direct one.

Before the First World War Hans Delbrück himself had celebrated Clausewitz not as the apostle of military subordination to political control but as the advocate of united control in the hands of a single authority. In 1914 Delbrück concluded that Germany's principal advantage over France rested in the supreme power enjoyed by the Kaiser.⁶⁰ Those who extrapolated from this reading of *On War* to Germany's defeat in 1918 concluded, not that the Reichstag should have asserted its control over OHL, but that Wilhelm II had failed to do so. The relevance of the defeat in 1806 for Alfred von Tirpitz, writing in 1926, lay in its evidence of the pernicious and divisive effects of the Prussian system of cabinet government. Set up to give personal advice to the monarch, the king's cabinet had, according to Clausewitz's account of the Jena campaign, given contradictory and competing counsel, which had played to the indecision of Friedrich Wilhelm III, just as the military and naval cabinets had fed the vacillations of Wilhelm II in the First World War.⁶¹ The model to which this school turned as a result of their reading of *On War* was that of the Franco-Prussian war: in 1870–71 Otto von Bismarck and the elder Moltke may have clashed but Wilhelm I was strong enough to ensure ultimate coordination through military subordination to political objectives.⁶² What

59. *Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der Deutschen Verfassungsgebenden Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages 1919–1926*, ed. Albrecht Philipp, *Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, 4th series, vol. 3:243, 253, 309; see also 1:210, 343; 3:223–24, 250, 307–9.

60. Hans Delbrück, *Delbrück's modern military history*, ed. Arden Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 111; see also 67.

61. Alfred von Tirpitz, *Deutsche Ohnmachtspolitik im Weltkrieg* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1926), 355.

62. Alfred Niemann, *Kaiser und Heer. Das Wesen der Kommandogewalt und ihre Ausübung durch Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1929), 156; Moser, *Die obersten Gewalten im Weltkrieg*, 10–15.

Germany had needed, as the future head of the historical section of the Reichsarchiv and therefore of Germany's official history of the war, Wolfgang Förster, argued in 1921, was a *Feldherr*, a true supreme commander.⁶³

The hope that Germany could spawn its own *Feldherr* to lead it in war drew on Clausewitz for its inspiration, and not just for its fusion of war and policy in one man's hands. It also depended on Clausewitz's identification of genius as the most important quality in a great commander—the insight which enabled the *Feldherr* to cut through the trammels and friction of war, and which gave him the moral courage to follow his own instinct. Psychology, Kurt Hesse argued in *Der Feldherr Psychologos*, published in 1922 and subtitled "a quest for the leader of the German future," could weld the ideas of *On War* into an overarching system. Hesse believed that:

man's nature is to bring his being, knowledge and will into unity with the demands of existence, [to create] a community in a modern nation united by statehood, policy and economics, above all in the circumstances of war.⁶⁴

"This," Hesse went on, "is what Clausewitz brings to us." In *On War*, Hesse argued, Clausewitz identified the military genius as possessing a particular will, which is able to counteract the will of the masses, and so enable them to achieve more than they believe themselves capable of. The genius's character is such that the more danger there is, the more the leader thrives, increasingly confident in his own insights and decisions. Hesse referred specifically to the inspiration his own work had derived from Rothfels's interpretation of Clausewitz's experiences. Rothfels had led him to read the discussion of the nation in arms in book VI, chapter 26 of *On War* in the context not only of Prussia's resistance to Napoleon but also of warfare in the twentieth century. Because such wars require the entire population, men, women, and children, to make sacrifices on behalf of the nation, they need "a man, a leader, a genius, and Clausewitz understood that that should be for us the crown of his work, 'On War.'"⁶⁵

So the *Feldherr* was a military genius who, because he was distinguished by more than his "will, brains, understanding, self-confidence, by something still higher than a longing for fame and honour," became a statesman.⁶⁶ For Hesse, the role model was Frederick the Great. The challenge of the 1920s, after the Kaiser's abdication not least because of his failure to fulfil that role, was how to meet its demands in future. The German army had failed to understand Clausewitz before 1914 because it had read him in a narrowly military way, focusing on battle, not on

63. Wolfgang Förster, *Graf Schlieffen und der Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Mittler, 1921), part III, 61; see also the evidence of Bernhard Schwertfeger, in Philipp, ed., *Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs*, 2:25.

64. Hesse, *Der Feldherr Psychologos*, 93–94.

65. *Ibid.*, 126.

66. *Ibid.*, 128; see also William Mulligan, *The creation of the modern German army: General Walther Reinhardt and the Weimar republic, 1914–1930* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 199–202.

war as a whole. Because Clausewitz saw war as a continuation of policy by other means, he also understood war, according to Adolf Leinveber, writing in 1926, as “an organic whole, from which the individual parts are not separable.” Leinveber accepted that politicians had to give unity to war through policy and through the war plans that flowed from that policy. But what therefore followed—not only for Leinveber but also for many others—was that war required “a magnificent distinguished head, a strong character.” The *Feldherr* would unite the conduct of war and policy, so that he became a statesman without at the same time giving up the capacity to conduct war: “he embraces with a glance on the one hand all state issues, while on the other he is sufficiently confident in his knowledge of what the means which lie in his control can do.”⁶⁷

Leinveber told his readers that the First World War had revealed the depth and wisdom of Clausewitz: he is “a leader to freedom.”⁶⁸ And so Germany’s recognition of the importance of Clausewitz’s precepts led many, at least in the short term, to believe that the answer to the problems of strategic direction lay in the concentration of powers in a supreme leader. On 12 February 1934 Walter Elze, who was a member of the Nazi party and had been appointed professor of military history at Berlin in 1933, delivered a lecture to the officers of the Potsdam garrison in which he described Clausewitz as a “father of the fatherland” and “the sentry of the nation’s warlike qualities.” He quoted Clausewitz, as Leinveber had done, as saying that, “the conduct of war and policy thus converge, and from the general [*Feldherr*] will emerge the statesman.”⁶⁹

Germany was not the only state to revisit Clausewitz’s discussion of the relationship between war and policy as a result of its experience in the First World War. Famously, thanks to Lenin and Trotsky, so did the Soviet Union.⁷⁰ So too did France, and here the story was more one of continuity than of change.

In 1912, Commandant Henri Mordacq, then teaching at the *École Supérieure de Guerre*, had taken Clausewitz’s aphorism, “war is an instrument of policy, and it derives from it its character and dimensions,” as the departure point for a radical and broad-ranging study of policy and strategy in a democracy.⁷¹ Mordacq insisted that Clausewitz was thinking as much of domestic as foreign policy, since a government’s structure affects the way it formulates and directs strategy. However, Clausewitz’s mental framework had been bounded by the unitary direction potentially provided by a monarchy. For the French republic, as for the United States (Mordacq’s other principal historical example), the challenges to civil-military relations generated by the need to bring policy and strategy into alignment were different.

67. [Adolf] Leinveber, *Mit Clausewitz durch die Rätsel und Fragen, Irrungen und Wirrungen des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: B. Behr Verlag, 1926), 31, 77, 141.

68. *Ibid.*, 19.

69. Walter Elze, *Clausewitz* (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1934), 7, 18.

70. Bernard Semmel, *Marxism and the science of war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 67–70; Leon Trotsky, “Unified military doctrine,” 1 November 1921, in Trotsky, *Military Writings* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001), 29.

71. [Henri] Mordacq, *Politique et stratégie dans une démocratie* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1912), i.

Mordacq rejected the notion that a democracy was inherently weaker in times of war than more autocratic forms of government. What a democracy needed was reciprocal trust between the government and the armed forces. The former should be ready to appoint a supreme operational commander, a “generalissimo” as Mordacq put it, and to create a permanent general staff charged with the business of national defence (to include the navy as well as the army). The government should put aside all fears of a coup, and the armed forces should respond to its trust by showing loyalty and professionalism.

By the end of the war much of this had come to pass. Indeed its very outcome could be seen as a vindication of Mordacq’s basic point, that democracies might be better at what came to be called “grand” strategy than were authoritarian governments. By then too Mordacq’s reputation, as well as profound practical familiarity with that of which he had spoken, were in the ascendant. As the principal military advisor to the prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, in 1917–18, he had been a direct participant in the major decisions leading to victory. In 1921, his publishers reissued another book he had brought out in 1912, *La stratégie: historique évolution*. Mordacq said that he had not changed the text in the light of the lessons of the First World War, which were “eminently strategic,” as he preferred to leave the reader to decide what had been confirmed and what invalidated. As a result, part three of the book, which addressed the elements which had influenced the evolution of strategy, reiterated the points about Clausewitz’s attention to the domestic as well as international aspects of the relationship between policy and strategy, and their applicability in a democracy.⁷² By the same token in 1921, another French general, Palat (the nom de plume of Pierre Lehautcourt), author of fifteen volumes on the Franco-Prussian war and fourteen on the First World War on the western front, brought out a summary of the text of *On War*. It had been written in 1913, but Palat declared that he saw no reason to change his text in the light of what had happened since. *La philosophie de la guerre d’après Clausewitz* meets contemporary expectations in its attention to the relationship between war and policy. In his introduction, Palat highlighted how the experience of 1812 had shaped Clausewitz’s thinking, although his focus was more on its strategic dimension, the Russian campaign, than on the civil-military ramifications of Clausewitz’s decision to renounce his commission in the Prussian army and join that of Russia.

For Palat, as for so many other commentators on Clausewitz in Europe at the same time, *On War* had emerged from the First World War “triumphant.”⁷³ Increasingly British students of war took a different view, progressively shaped by the fulminations of Basil Liddell Hart. Like Rothfels and Ritter, Liddell Hart had served at the front as a young officer, but he became a military commentator rather than a professional academic. His very popular and successful history of the First World War, published in 1930, shaped Anglophone conceptions of the war well

72. Henri Mordacq, *La stratégie: historique évolution*, 3d ed. (Paris: Fournier, 1921), 2, 173–74.

73. Général Palat, *La philosophie de la guerre d’après Clausewitz* (Paris, 1921; repr. Economica, 1998), 12.

into the 1970s, and even beyond. His view of Clausewitz's influence on the conduct of the war was the exact opposite of that of the Reichstag committee of inquiry: the problem was not that it had been too small, but too great. In his biography of Ferdinand Foch, the man who—in fulfilment of Mordacq's hope—had been appointed the allied generalissimo in 1918, Liddell Hart summarised Clausewitz as follows;

Clausewitz had proclaimed the sovereign virtues of the will to conquer, the unique value of the offensive carried out with unlimited violence by a nation in arms and the power of the military action to override everything else.⁷⁴

In Liddell Hart's construct not only Foch but also Schlieffen had assimilated this message from Clausewitz. He believed that Schlieffen had transmitted this idea to his successors in the Prussian general staff, and—even worse—that the British army had absorbed it through its exposure to continental European influences. In damning the generals of the First World War, and those of Britain in particular, Liddell Hart set in train a debate from which all subsequent English-language writing has struggled vainly to escape. John Keegan and David Stevenson are but the latest in a line of succession from Liddell Hart in their portrayal of the war in terms of waste, futility, and meaninglessness. The irony is that, although Keegan and Stevenson have this view in common with Liddell Hart, they base it on a diametrically opposed interpretation of Clausewitz. Liddell Hart appeared oblivious to the fact that Clausewitz ever even mentioned the relationship between war and policy. Too many recent historians seem to be unaware that he ever wrote about anything else.

74. Basil Liddell Hart, *Foch: the man of Orleans* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931), 22; see also 75.

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At the conclusion of World War I, Clausewitz's theory of real war began to gain ground. Though often confused with absolute war, and even used interchangeably, real war is war as it exists in the real world. War, in its ideal form, cannot be waged in a limited way, though in reality a war without limits would be neither possible nor preferable. First, though Clausewitz could not have foreseen the possibility of nuclear weapons whilst living in the 19th century, with the advent of nuclear bombs and the like, his theory of absolute war could, in fact become a reality in the 21st century. However, in the present day, an opponent cannot feasibly disarm a nuclear-armed superpower, as mutually assured destruction (MAD) ensures this.