

# Misreading Clausewitz: The Enduring Relevance of On War

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TIMOTHY VAN DER VENNE, FEB 4 2020

In 1996, Delbert Thiessen commented that ‘The Persian Gulf War was perhaps the last Clausewitzian war ever to be fought’ (cited in Shimko 2010, 22). Thiessen is not the only professor who foresaw an age of war in which Clausewitzian dicta held little relevance. Some of the most prominent writers in strategic and security studies have published analyses on the character of modern warfare which take the declining relevance of Clausewitzian theory as its starting point (Handel 2008; Schuurman 2010; Williams 2013; Strachan 2014; Lonsdale 2016). Martin van Creveld (1991), for example, sees the trend in global warfare toward irregularity and asymmetry as a sign of the obsolescence of Clausewitzian theory, claiming that ‘[if] low intensity conflict is indeed the wave of the future, then strategy in its classical sense will disappear’ (p. 207). In the same vein, Mary Kaldor dismisses Clausewitz with the assertion that states have lost their primacy in war and have instead been replaced by groups who identify on the basis of religion or ethnicity (Kaldor 2007; Schuurman 2010). Such criticism, however, is based on a fundamental misreading of Clausewitz’ theory of war and the philosophical framework in which it is set.

In reviewing the literature of those scholars eager to dismiss the writings of Clausewitz as inappropriate for modern war, it becomes apparent that their criticism misrepresents Clausewitz’ thinking in two fundamental ways: it presupposes (1) that Clausewitz’ theory of war is state-centric, and *only* state-centric, and (2) that changes in the modes of war are equal to changes in the nature of war (i.e. *warfare* as opposed to *war*). Both are false and are likely based on a misreading of Clausewitz’ *On War*, which is notoriously dense and contradictory. Therefore, in an attempt to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Clausewitz’ theory of war, the following text intends to examine how this criticism of Clausewitz can be offset by first looking at the distinction between the primary and secondary trinity, and second by interpreting *On War* as a primarily philosophical exercise on the nature of war as a broad social phenomenon.

## The Trinitarian Approach and the Illusion of State-Centrism

The view of the Clausewitzian trinity as being (1) the people, (2) the military, and (3) the government points one toward an inherently state-centric view of war – a view which has nestled itself in the highest echelons of military (and academic) thinking (Strachan 2014). This interpretation, however, is based upon the so-called *secondary trinity*, which Clausewitz used as a mere illustration of the functions of the more important, yet chronically overlooked, *primary trinity* (Clausewitz 1976; Handel 2008; Schuurman 2010; Strachan 2014, Lonsdale, 2016). The primary trinity attempts to capture the nature of war as a broad phenomenon in a paradoxical, but wholly interconnected spectrum. In Clausewitz’s (1976, p. 89) own words:

War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.

The elements of the primary trinity are thus (1) passion and violence, (2) chance and probability, and (3) rational

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purpose; non-material or non-tangible factors, each of which Clausewitz went on to associate with the people, the military, and the government, respectively. It is a distinction that is critically important, yet easily overlooked, since it only makes an appearance in the final paragraphs of the first chapter (Clausewitz 1976). Clausewitz' most vocal critics took his secondary trinity to be at the core of what must be an entirely state-centric theory of war. Martin van Creveld, most notably, identified Clausewitzian theory as being based completely upon the secondary trinity, and thus upon the state, dubbing the concept *trinitarian war* before denouncing it as being immaterial (Van Creveld 1991; Strachan 2014). But as Lonsdale (2016, 29) writes: 'these narrow interpretations do a disservice to Clausewitz, whose work is far more universal'. When taking the primary trinity as a framework, the type of actor – state, non-state, tribal – becomes an issue of secondary importance (Duyvesteyn & Angstrom 2005; Smith 2005), because as Schuurman (2010, 94) notes: 'Clausewitz' primary trinity implies nothing about the socio-political nature of the entity waging war'; fundamentally, all actors in war are subject to violence, chance, and rational purpose. Put differently, because Clausewitz' primary trinity focuses on essential, non-material aspects of war as a broad phenomenon, material considerations such as actor type do not affect the framework's applicability (Handel 2008; Schuurman 2010; Lonsdale 2016). Wars with non-state actors, which are tribal or sectarian in character, therefore still fall under the umbrella of Clausewitz' theory of war.

The most obvious example of this is the ongoing Syrian Civil War (2011–present). The vortex of political violence in the Middle East has done dubious justice to the conceptualisation of war as a 'true chameleon' since it has morphed and transformed to cover almost every typology of war (Clausewitz 1976, 94): the conflict involved a myriad of actor types, has taken place both within and without national borders, made use of wide-ranging strategic approaches per actor, and showcased shocking uses of violence (Hughes 2013; Price 2013; Byman 2014; Dalton 2018; Venkatesh, Podoshen, Wallin, Rabah, & Glass 2018; and Cottee 2019). All of this, however, still fits within the broad scope of Clausewitz' view on the nature of war as a paradoxical trinity.

Taking two non-state actors – the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) – as examples to avoid accusations of state-centrism, one can see that the Clausewitzian trinity is as present as ever. Both non-state actors have engaged in 'primordial violence, hatred, and enmity', constituting the first element of the trinity (Clausewitz 1976, 94). Indeed, the scope of sectarian animosity and the gruesome violence of the Syrian Civil War has sparked plenty of scholarly and popular attention which fall outside the scope of this paper, but which are a testament to war's inherently violent character (see Hughes 2013; Price 2013; Byman 2014). Examples of this can be found in the Syrian Democratic Forces' military offensive to liberate Raqqa in 2016-2017 (Tomson 2016; Dalton 2018) or the catalogue of savagely primal violence inflicted upon the region by IS (Venkatesh et al. 2018; Cottee 2019).

The second element, 'the play of chance and probability' is clearly present as well in the numerous military confrontations between both actors, like the battles for Raqqa and Manbij (Tomson 2016; Dalton 2018; Kelly 2019). It is within these battles that chance and probability are moulded and manipulated by 'the particular character and of the commander and the army' (Clausewitz 1976, 89). Within this framework, Clausewitz considers chance and probability to be a primary structural feature of war, while the military is viewed as the natural tool to influence that structure (Clausewitz 1976). Lastly – and most controversially – the element of reason, making violence an instrument of policy. Both actors have instrumentalized violence and the waging of war as a political tool. For IS, the rational goal motivating the violence was both political and religious in nature: (1) to establish an Islamic caliphate, and (2) to bring about a cataclysmic final battle, ushering in the end of the world (Kissinger 2014; Wood 2015). The political goal for the YPG within the context of its participation in the Syrian Democratic Forces is to establish secular democracy and some measure of autonomy in Northern Syria (Gilbert 2019).

So, in shifting the focus away from the secondary trinity towards the primary trinity, the attention simultaneously moves away from the alleged centrality of the state to create a more fluid and sweeping conceptualisation of war. In this conceptualisation, the socio-political character of an actor becomes irrelevant, and the nature of war remains untouched. Even when using the primary trinity to analyse a conflict between two non-state actors, the Clausewitzian approach retains its relevance.

## Warfare and the Nature of War

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Another point of criticism comes from the *new wars* school of thought, which posits that modern-day developments in military affairs 'reflect fundamental changes in the nature of warfare that constitute a break with the "old" Clausewitzian concept' (Schuurman 2010, 91). The post-Cold War world has seen a shift away from inter-state war toward intra-communal violence and irregular confrontations as well as immense technological progress (Schuurman 2010). The modes and modalities of war have therefore changed, and Western strategic thought must change with it – from conventional to irregular, from low-tech to high-tech. The problem is that *new wars* theorists have taken these shifts as proof that the fundamental nature of war must be changing as well, and that Clausewitz has therefore become irrelevant (Schuurman 2010). This is a misconception, once again borne out of a misreading of the ever-present Clausewitz.

First, regarding the shift towards irregularity and civil war, as seen in the previous section, the Clausewitzian parameters – being the primary trinity – encompass the entire spectrum of war, regardless of actor type or intensity levels (Duyvesteyn & Angstrom 2005; Smith 2005; Handel 2008; Schuurman 2010). Smith (2005) furthers this point by classifying guerrilla methods and low-intensity warfare as mere tactics *within* war, not as separate categories of war. Second, technological change does not impact the nature of war, as much as it does influence the context of war (Gray 2012; Handel 2008; Schuurman 2010). These two points of change, irregularity of conflict and technological progress, therefore, do not touch upon the *nature of war*, but rather on the eternally changing *character of warfare*. As Gray (2012, 67) writes: 'the authority of Clausewitz' theory of war is immune to the charge of an obsolescence borne of cumulatively massive alterations in technological, political or socio-cultural contexts'.

Clausewitz sought to create an overarching philosophical treatise on the nature of war as a broad social phenomenon, designed to educate and stimulate, not provide practical solutions (Clausewitz 1976; Gray 2012). Being focused mainly upon the philosophical nature of war rather than war's modalities, Clausewitzian parameters leave plenty of room for fluidity and contextual changes. Proponents of the *new wars* school of thought tend to confuse war with warfare: the latter is subject to constant change, the former is not (Clausewitz 1976; Gray 2005, 2012).

## Concluding Remarks

Clausewitz' theory of war has been charged with an increasing irrelevance in understanding contemporary forms of warfare such as civil war and non-state conflicts. Criticism of Clausewitz' theory of war, however, has been built upon two false presuppositions: (1) that Clausewitzian thought is inherently state-centric, and (2) that changes in the modes of war are equal to changes in the nature of war (i.e. warfare versus war). Both are based on a fundamental misreading of Clausewitz' *On War*. Critics have taken Clausewitz' secondary trinity (the people, the military, the government) as the core pillar of Clausewitzian theory, while neglecting the critically important primary trinity (passion, chance, reason). When using the primary trinity as an analytical framework, it becomes apparent that Clausewitz' theory of war is broad and fluid enough to encompass the entire spectrum of war, including irregular non-state conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War (2011–present).

Moreover, critics from the *new wars* school of thought have consistently confused the material aspects of war with the nature of war, claiming that modern developments in technology and tactics constitute a fundamental change in the nature of war (Schuurman 2010; Strachan 2014). This notion misreads the philosophical function of *On War*, with the primary trinity at its centre. Its fluidity makes Clausewitz' theory on the nature of war as a broad social phenomenon immune to contextual changes (Gray 2012; Lonsdale 2016). The non-material focus of Clausewitz' primary trinity, alongside its aim to provide an overarching philosophical framework to understand war in its broadest sense provide the Clausewitzian approach with a depth and flexibility that is often overlooked. These factors keep the old Prussian officer firmly at the forefront of strategic theory.

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