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## Clausewitz's Categories of War and the Supersession of 'Absolute War'<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This 'working paper,' which is under fairly constant revision based on feedback, examines a number of categories of war either explored by Clausewitz or incorrectly attributed to him by later writers and translators. It discusses the difficulties in categorizing warfare, the evolution of Clausewitz's approach to the problem, and a number of related translation issues. Its central argument is that by far the greatest source of confusion about Clausewitz's book *Vom Kriege*—other than some very serious infelicities in the English translations, especially the Howard/Paret version—is that the text eventually published after his death retained his discussion of "absolute war." This paper argues that Clausewitz had in fact long abandoned that term. "Absolute war" appears exclusively in the first half of the published Book VIII, which appears to have been written much earlier than the second half. Either he had not yet reedited the whole of Book VIII to reflect this fact or the updates had gotten lost in the confusing stack of paperwork he bequeathed to his wife and posthumous editor, Marie von Clausewitz. Scholars almost always conflate the "ideal war vice real war" approach presented in the latest of his manuscript revisions (i.e., the "Note of 1827," Book I, and the second half of Book VIII) with the earlier-written "absolute war" framework. That is, the ideal/real model is treated simply as a second set of terminology describing the same idea—the incompatibilities are merely written-off as confusing complexities in a single conceptual scheme. In fact, however, "ideal war" is a distinctly new and quite different departure. Book I thoroughly reassembles the earlier concept's underlying components into a much more powerful framework. Were we to delete the discussions of "absolute war" from *Vom Kriege*—which we cannot do, of course, since they are deeply entangled with important discussions of other ideas that Clausewitz retained—we would find the overall work to be much more clear, consistent, coherent, and useful.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the current version of a 'working paper' on this subject that I plan to nurture in a manner similar to "[Tip-Toe Through the Trinity: The Strange Persistence of Trinitarian Warfare](#)," which has been a useful learning tool for myself and has been reasonably influential on the subject of Clausewitz's trinity. A much earlier and much shorter version of the present paper has been published in *Future Wars: Storia della distopia militare*, ed. Virgilio Ilari [President, Società Italiana di Storia Militare] (Acies Edizioni Milano, 2016).

Here I must acknowledge a particular debt to Jon Sumida, with whom I have been engaged for many years in a pointed but amiable debate over many related issues. I am also indebted to Vanya Eftimova Bellinger for many sources and for her rich perspective, to Dennis Prange for his deeply informed assistance with Clausewitz's German, to Terence Holmes for yet another pointed but amiable discussion, and to Mgr. Sebastian P. Górká, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, for many useful observations. The errors that no doubt remain are, of course, my own.

## ESSAY STRUCTURE

- Introduction
- Synopsis
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**N**ot long after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003—but long enough for almost everyone except the Bush White House and the Department of Defense to recognize that the occupation of Iraq was not going as promised—I had an opportunity to receive an authoritative briefing on the progress of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. The first line of the briefing was "As you know, our objectives in Iraq have been quite limited."

It is difficult to recount this occurrence without lapsing into incredulous sarcasm. Yes, we will invade and occupy this alien state; thoroughly destroy its military forces (those not killed will be disarmed and thrown into the street with no jobs, pensions, or futures); exterminate the ruling dynasty; hunt down its other political leaders; remove the entire ruling political party from influence; displace the entire traditional ruling ethnic group; and radically change the state's political, legal, and economic systems. In the process, we will utterly alter the geo-political balance of power in the region. And then we will see an explosion of democracy throughout the Middle East.

In what universe, one might well ask, could such intentions constitute "limited objectives"?

I would not, however, bother to share this anecdote if it did not reflect my general experience whenever the concept of 'limited objectives'—and the entire panoply of Clausewitzian concepts with which it is connected—arises in our nation's ongoing strategic conversation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An excellent demonstration of this confusion is provided by Patrick Brady, "[An Unlimited Attack on Limited War Draws a Counterattack on Theory](#)," *RealClear Defense*, 20 June 2020. This is an ambivalent review—or, at least, one that cites a lot of criticisms on all sides without attempting to resolve the problem—of Donald Stoker's *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and U.S. Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). It critiques America's "limited wars" as if America was the only player involved. The only reference to North Vietnam's objectives describes them as driven by "seemingly irrational determination" and based on its reading of the Americans' "gradual escalation as a sign of infirm purpose, [so] it fought on." Evidently North Vietnam sought national independence only because the Americans were insufficiently bold. The North Koreans and Chinese evidently had no objectives at all.

There are various ways to explain the American national security community's widespread inability to grasp—or, more likely, simple lack of interest in—Carl von Clausewitz's strategic-analytical framework. In the American military tradition, the misleading term 'limited war' (a term neither coined nor used by Clausewitz, though it is usually attributed to him) is associated with the constraints placed on war-making during the Cold War by the ever-present fear that localized conflicts might escalate to war between the superpowers, likely leading to an 'all-out' nuclear exchange incinerating the planet. In that context, the term was first introduced into the broader American strategic discussion during the Korean War. Even then, the notion was little-understood and given a mixed reception at best. During the opening phases of the post-Cold War era, that nuclear threat had seemingly been removed, and with it, presumably, the need for a category of limited warfare.

Others conceive of a 'limited war' as a conflict limited to some particular geographic theater (as was the Korean War)—its opposite being global warfare, nuclear or not. In that case, perhaps the take-down of Saddam's state was seen as 'limited,' even though it was explicitly about regime change, because all of the fighting took place in one (foreign)<sup>3</sup> country.

In seminar discussions with my many military students, the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama is almost universally called a 'limited war,' simply because it was easy and cost so little. Given that the United States completely destroyed—by Clausewitz's definition—the Panamanian Defense Forces; occupied the entire state; seized, jailed, and replaced the state's political and military leader, the critical definitional issue must be the level of resources to be expended rather than the nature of the political and military objectives sought.

I have also long noted a persistent American inability or deep reluctance to distinguish political from military objectives. Apparently the thinking is that if war is "merely a continuation of policy" (another translation problem we must deal with) no such distinction is necessary.

Such considerations seem to underlie the logic in our thinking on the subject today. And that poses very serious problems. It does a lot to explain the general incomprehension of Clausewitz's terminology—and, just possibly, the pervasive American conceptual failures underlying our debacles in the Middle East and elsewhere. As Andrew Bacevich puts it, "In the War for the Greater

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<sup>3</sup> Presumably a similar fight on American territory would not be described in such terms.

Middle East, the United States chose neither to contain nor to crush, instead charting a course midway in between. In effect, it chose aggravation."<sup>4</sup>

Over the last thirty years or so, questions regarding *On War*'s strategic meaning have rather fallen by the wayside as scholarly specialists on Clausewitz have turned their attention to historical and biographical issues that many 'students of strategy' find arcane, to say the least. Some of that change in scholarly focus rests on the mistaken assumption that Clausewitz's strategic categories are well-understood and old hat. The principal reason, however, seems to be a deep frustration with the endless confusion and disagreement about them, reflecting our nearly two-century-long failure to resolve what appear to be fundamental contradictions in Clausewitz's arguments. Despite their seeming irrelevance for many self-styled 'practical' strategists, however, the historical and biographical studies are both interesting in their own right and important for shaping our strategic understanding. The present paper leans very heavily upon them. Nonetheless, Clausewitz's approach to strategic analysis has always provoked (or invoked) powerful though often seriously misleading strategic convictions among people who think they understand it. Getting an accurate grasp of Clausewitz's ideas and intentions, then, should remain a central focus of our efforts.

It is certainly true that much of the widespread confusion must be attributed to Clausewitz himself, though this statement is hardly intended as criticism. He was an eclectic, experimental thinker who ruthlessly tested his own evolving theories about war against history, reason, and experience. If they failed his tests, he revised them. As a result, his concepts and the terminology he used to describe them evolved powerfully over time. His most famous work, *Vom Kriege* (*On*

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<sup>4</sup> *On War*, H/P p. 598. Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (Random House, 2016), p. 367. "Containment" very much fits in with Clausewitz's idea of the limited objective, and "crush" seems a pretty reasonable synonym for Clausewitz's dialectical alternative to the limited objective, "rendering the opponent impotent."

War),<sup>5</sup> which is divided into eight 'Books,' was compiled posthumously from a set of sporadically revised manuscripts of varying and uncertain dates, written—most likely—between 1816 and 1830. Following his unexpected death in 1831, this mass of papers was edited and published by his brilliant but shocked and grieving wife without the benefit of his advice. As Dutch researcher Paul Donker recently put it, discussing the whole of Clausewitz's corpus of work, "As we don't know for sure when exactly Clausewitz wrote which text, it is very difficult to reconstruct his conceptual development."<sup>6</sup> The current conventional wisdom is that, while Chapter 1 of Book I was carefully revised late in his life and reflected his latest thinking,<sup>7</sup> he never had a chance to completely revise the rest of the book to match. In any case, the existing book preserves, in a rather

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<sup>5</sup> I will make a fetish of distinguishing between *Vom Kriege* and *On War* because, unfortunately, they are two very different books. Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), *Vom Kriege*, vols. I-III of *Hinterlassene Werke des Generals Carl von Clausewitz über Krieg und Kriegführung* (10 vols., Berlin: Dummlers Verlag, 1832-37); most German quotations in this paper are from the 19th edition edited by Werner Hahlweg; *On War*, eds./trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1976/84—note that the pagination is different in the Knopf edition). Most English quotations are from this Princeton edition of the Howard/Paret (H/P) translation, which is presently considered the standard, but serious readers are encouraged to consult the very often more accurate translation by Otto Jolle Matthijs Jolles (New York: Random House/The Modern Library, 1943; Washington, DC: Infantry Journal Press, 1950); reissued as part of *The Book of War: Sun-Tzu The Art of Warfare and Karl von Clausewitz On War* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), ISBN-13: 9780375754777. Pagination varies in the different productions of the Jolles translation, so interested readers must rely on Book/Chapter references. I will, however, note a number of places where substantial modifications must be made to quotations from either.

<sup>6</sup> This confusion is much greater than is generally realized, and the more scholars examine the evidence (or, rather, the lack of it) the more confusion is likely to be generated. The quotation is from Paul Donker, "Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung as the first version of Clausewitz's masterpiece: A textual comparison with *Vom Kriege*," 108 Research Paper, a publication (mostly in English) of the Faculty of Military Sciences, Netherlands Defence Academy, May 2016. Donker's paper discusses a list of 177 aphoristic statements published as Carl von Clausewitz, "Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung," *Zeitschrift für Kunst, Wissenschaft und Geschichte des Krieges*, Band 28, Viertes Heft 1833 to Band 35, Siebentes Heft, 1835. This set of aphorisms may be essentially a compilation (with some variations) from a near-final version of *Vom Kriege* or, as Donker suspects, may be from a much older manuscript. If the latter speculation proves to be the case, as I find probable, it may raise radical questions regarding Clausewitz's conceptual evolution. None of these aphorisms, however, have counterparts in Book VIII of the published *Vom Kriege*, which is central to this paper's subject.

<sup>7</sup> While Book I, Chapter 1, "What is War?" is widely discussed, very much less attention is paid to Chapter 2, "Purpose and Means in War" [[Zweck und Mittel im Kriege](#)]. The latter has equal or greater relevance to our subject here—the chapter title itself captures two issues absolutely crucial to strategic analysis. Our existing Chapters 1, 2, and 3 were evidently drafted at the same time, judging by the manuscripts found in Werner Hahlweg's archive and now held in the Wehrtechnische Studiensammlung in Koblenz. Andreas Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz famous last words: The original manuscript of his most important first chapter," unpublished manuscript received 12 April 2017.

disorderly way, various states of its author's evolutionary process.<sup>8</sup> While this may sometimes be frustrating to readers searching for fixed answers rather than a powerful thought process, it does not reflect any weakness in Clausewitz's approach. As Hew Strachan so eloquently puts it, "The fact that Clausewitz's thinking went through so many iterations is precisely what gives it strength and depth."<sup>9</sup>

While Clausewitz is often described as a 'strategic theorist,' the body of intriguing ideas he developed extended well beyond the confines of 'strategy.' Indeed, to many academic writers on Clausewitz issues of strategy are rather beside the point, and they make a good case. Clausewitz is interesting in multiple dimensions, many of which are reflected in parts of *On War* and in other of his writings to which military scholars have not typically paid much attention.<sup>10</sup> For many important subjects he dealt with in *Vom Kriege*, the fact that he died unexpectedly before finishing the book does not seem to pose much of a problem—e.g., his arguments concerning the nature and

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<sup>8</sup> We will deal more with the uncertain history of the manuscripts of *Vom Kriege* later. Clausewitz's prefatory notes might have helped sort out this history, but in practice the notes themselves and the debate over their correct dates are sources of much uncertainty. See for instance Azar Gat, "Clausewitz's Final Notes," *Militargeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, v.1 (1989), 45-50, and Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 213-14. Gat argued that the note of 1827 reflected a "crisis" for a "desperate" Clausewitz of nervous-breakdown proportions—from which he never recovered—driven by a sudden and jarring realization that war is an expression of politics. As just one of many examples of the persistence of Gat's argument, Paul Schuurman follows Gat in saying "This point of view, developed around 1827, finally gave the author an answer to the theoretical conundrum that he had formulated ten years earlier..." Paul Schuurman, "Clausewitz on Real War," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 26 (2014). Nonetheless, this view is entirely delusional. *Politik* appears prominently in much earlier writings. Aphorism #13 (which may date as early as 1817) says "The political purpose thus determines the goal of the warlike act, and the latter must be at least correspondingly high, occasionally even higher. Both rise and fall with each other, and so it explains how wars of all degrees of importance and energy can exist, from wars of annihilation to mere armed observation." [Donker, "Aphorismen."] And similar statements appear in Clausewitz's *Strategie aus dem Jahre 1804* (written in that year or shortly thereafter). But it is certainly true that the issues raised in the Note of 10 July 1827 appear to reflect the approach of Clausewitz's very latest writing, while the note "presumably written in 1830" seems in places to be of a much earlier date. See Sumida's discussion in *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (University Press of Kansas, 2008), pp. xviii-xix. Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (Atlantic Books, 2007)—a 'biography' of the book, not of Clausewitz himself—has a major discussion of these notes at the beginning of Chapter 2, "The Writing of *On War*." It is somewhat ambivalent on this issue. The excellent doctoral dissertation of one of Strachan's students, however, utterly and effectively rejects the notion that there was "a fundamental turning point in Clausewitz's ideas in 1827." See Anders Palmgren [LtCol, Sweden], "Visions of Strategy: Following Clausewitz's Train of Thought," doctoral dissertation, Helsinki: National Defense University (Finland), 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Beyond issues of military and political theory, Clausewitz was extremely well connected to Prussia's various military, political, intellectual, and artistic elites. His rather massive correspondence is of interest to writers on art and aesthetics, business, education, the law, and science, as well as the general intellectual, political, and military history of Prussia, Germany, and Europe in his era, on which he is an important commentator. Consider the range of subject matter included in the massive bibliographies at <https://clausewitzstudies.org/mobile/bibl.htm>.

proper use of military theory; his thinking about the nature of history (both as a process and as a discipline) and its implications for military education;<sup>11</sup> his ideas concerning the relationship between the strategic defense and offense, and the character of 'military genius.' These ideas seem fully developed. Clausewitz's treatment of many interrelated issues is convincing throughout *On War* because he was an acute observer of people and events, achieving coherence despite the fact that his observations were made through an ever-evolving conceptual and terminological lens. The confusion concerning most such issues can safely be blamed on the inattention or befuddlement of translators and their readers.<sup>12</sup>

At the very core of Clausewitz's work, however, lies a running and seemingly unresolved struggle to identify a fundamental structure underlying war's kaleidoscopic diversity. This was certainly not his overarching goal (and, in fact, I think it is nonsensical to imagine that Clausewitz had any such single principal aim), but rather a necessary means to the very general end of understanding war and warfare in a comprehensive fashion in hopes of improving its conduct. "The Diversity of Wars" is the title of Section 25 of Book I, Chapter 1 of *Vom Kriege*, and its position there—so close to the culminating discussion of the Trinity—gives some indication of its ranking amongst the fundamental issues with which theory must contend.<sup>13</sup>

Because of its ventures into extremes beyond our experience of war in the real world, many readers find Chapter 1, Book I's effort to determine the "nature of war" to be an abstract philo-

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<sup>11</sup> See especially Jon Sumida's important treatments of this historical-philosophy aspect and of the intrinsic superiority of the defensive form of war in his book *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (University Press of Kansas, 2008). In the present paper, I have found no need to address Clausewitz's controversial argument that the defense is inherently the stronger form of war. On that issue, see Sumida's work, which has truly been groundbreaking. However, we will have to discuss the relationship of defense and offense to Clausewitz's dialectical treatment of the objectives of wearing down the opponent vice disarming him.

<sup>12</sup> The general debate over just how 'finished' is *On War* is well described in the "Preface and Acknowledgements" to Sumida's *Decoding Clausewitz*. Sumida himself has chosen to consider the book essentially finished, which I would challenge, though our differences there are a matter of degree—in general, I find the book much more coherent as a whole than do many of the critics Sumida describes. He has also chosen to regard the Howard/Paret translation as essentially reliable, a contention I have increasingly found untenable. Sumida's assumptions are probably necessary for the prosecution of his own work and are not particularly problematic given his focus on Clausewitz's philosophy of history and educational arguments. We are in very substantive disagreement, however, regarding his solutions to the problems posed by the concept of absolute war.

<sup>13</sup> "25. Verschiedenartigkeit der Kriege."

sophical exercise of dubious value. It seems to generate far more confusion than light. But Clausewitz was an intensely practical soldier and his work had practical goals. In the search for a structural division between fundamentally distinct categories, Clausewitz was trying to establish a basis for high-level strategic analysis that identifies the interrelationships among our political and military objectives and those of our opponents. Without a general understanding of the drivers of war's diversity, it is not possible to understand the unique character and the correspondingly unique requirements of the specific war one faces in the real world, here and now. Thus, in the area of strategic analysis, which has been the focal point of many if not most references to Clausewitz,<sup>14</sup> the preservation of Clausewitz's evolutionary trail in *On War* has proven to be extremely problematic. If "the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive is to establish ... the *kind of war* on which [we] are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature,"<sup>15</sup> we need to understand what "kinds of war" Clausewitz expected us to choose among. Unfortunately, he left us with several different ways of categorizing or classifying wars, to which confused or creative readers, writers, and translators have added more.

Given the power, importance, and influence of Clausewitz's ideas, modern thinkers attempting to use Clausewitzian theory to understand real-world problems (past, present, or future) should

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<sup>14</sup> Beyond, that is, the ubiquitous references to Clausewitz's 'dictum' about war being a continuation of *Politik*, many of which make no attempt to deal with his specific arguments or even his actual wording.

<sup>15</sup> *On War*, Book I, H/P pp. 88–89. Ken Payne (King's College London) raises an interesting point about this comment by Clausewitz (<https://defenceindepth.co/tag/psychology/>, dated 23 March 2016 and accessed 14 April 2016): "I still don't understand [it]. Prediction in complex social systems is impossible—and any foresight more a matter of chance than genius." Payne is of course quite right (though he somewhat overstates the point), and Clausewitz makes it clear that he was equally aware of those facts. Clausewitz also said that "No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it." (Book VIII, H/P p. 579.) However, I don't think it is difficult to resolve any apparent contradiction between the inherent unpredictabilities of war and the need, nonetheless, to think realistically about what one is getting into and how one expects or intends to proceed.

seek to grasp his earlier concepts and terminology, but they should also move beyond them and use his most mature analytical structure. Or even seek to coherently improve upon it if they can.<sup>16</sup>

In this 'working paper,' therefore, I propose to examine a number of ways of categorizing war that have been attributed to Clausewitz (including at least two that he neither originated nor used) and to consider how and why his terminology regarding this specific problem evolved over time. Those categories include but are not limited to (in alphabetical order): Absolute War, Ideal War, Limited War, Real War, Total War, War to Disarm the Enemy, War of Limited Objectives, and War to Overthrow the Enemy. We will also look at two categories he did use, not of war but of objectives: the limited objective (i.e., political and/or military) and its dialectical counterpart or 'opposite,' the objective of leaving the opponent politically and/or militarily impotent. Hans Delbrück later labeled the *pursuit* of these objectives respectively '*Ermatungsstrategie*' and '*Niederwerfungsstrategie*,' usually translated as 'strategy of exhaustion' and 'strategy of annihilation.'<sup>17</sup> The latter translations may be acceptable as far as they go, but they evidently leave too much to readers' often fevered imaginations when it comes to what, exactly, is to be exhausted or annihilated.

The process of examining these categories may sound like a simple proposition—merely a matter of cataloguing definitions. Alas, the central challenge (finding a useful basis for understanding and analyzing wars' diversity) is massive; Clausewitz's solutions were a moving target; and our perception of those solutions is clouded by our differing cognitive predispositions, by significant translation problems and outright errors in all of the existing English texts, by differences in

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<sup>16</sup> I say that with some trepidation. I am not eager to encourage the academic world's ideologues to freely impose their own fantasies upon Clausewitz's profoundly important but (perhaps) insufficiently-explored strategic-analytical structure, treating their idiosyncratic results as "the inevitable trend of Clausewitz's mature thinking." In any case, good luck pursuing this ambition. During the writing of the US Marine Corps' top-level doctrinal publications in the late 1990s, the writing team (of which I was privileged to be a member) wrestled mightily with the subject of the present paper. Although I think we achieved something in terms of clarifying and illustrating Clausewitz's latest morphology of real-world war, I am still not sure whether we actually made any advance upon it. For a modestly evolved version of that exposition, see Chapter 3, "Warfighting Strategies," of Christopher Bassford, "[Policy, Politics, War, and Military Strategy](https://clauswitzstudies.org/readings/Bassford/StrategyDraft/index.htm)," at <https://clauswitzstudies.org/readings/Bassford/StrategyDraft/index.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Clausewitz was content to leave the various terms he used that have been translated as erosion (or exhaustion) and annihilation as objectives; he did not convert them into compound words with strategy (and it is not entirely clear that Delbrück fully understood the full range of Clausewitz's concept) or "war-types." Indeed, in *Vom Kriege* the word *Strategie* always occurs as a stand-alone word, never in compound with a type-descriptor.

the intellectual cultures of Germany and the English-speaking world, by a flawed interpretive tradition, and by the turbulent history that intervenes between his times and ours (including two world wars attributable to German aggression and the Holocaust). The subject is therefore an extraordinarily complex one that defies any attempt at organizing a straightforward discussion. That is, of course, what makes composing this extended and digressive essay such a fascinating task—and reading it just possibly a chore.

I do not propose to describe in detail either Clausewitz's broader intellectual evolution or the wildly varying uses made of his shifting categorizations of war in the wider military and strategic literature, nor to show how those shifting terms relate to all of Clausewitz's other propositions. I do not believe that the first can be done with any precision—the necessary evidence simply does not exist.<sup>18</sup> The best we can hope for is a schematic understanding. The second would require a multi-volume survey of the world's military literature over the last two centuries. The third would require a complete rehashing of the reception of *Vom Kriege*. That would be an impossible task given the multifaceted debate that for nearly two centuries has drawn a large and remarkably eclectic set of readers, commentators, interpreters, critics, evangelists, and quacks.

Little of what I have to say is necessarily original; some of it is no doubt in need of correction. My purpose is simply to focus readers' thoughts on the central issue to which I've pointed, which seems to have been obscured in most of the recent discussion and teaching about Clausewitz.<sup>19</sup> Writing intellectual history is notoriously similar to nailing Jello to the wall, and this may be especially the case with Clausewitz. Nonetheless, this topic—if not my particular conclusions about it—is important and there is some actual evidence to consider. In any case, the subject has significant ramifications both for the writing of political-military history and for the on-going policy and strategy debates, both of which constantly refer to Clausewitz's concepts (however well or poorly those may be grasped or acknowledged). Thus I believe that seeking clarity about it is worth the effort.

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<sup>18</sup> And, given Clausewitz's working methods, probably never did.

<sup>19</sup> An additional aim is to raise and explore various problems with the existing English translations of *Vom Kriege*. Addressing many of these translation issues is necessitated by our specific subject itself, but exploring them also serves to support my own growing conviction that a new translation—indeed, a new *kind* of translation—is needed.

## SYNOPSIS

Broadly, my argument is this: *Vom Kriege*, in the state in which Marie von Clausewitz published it in the early 1830s, is an incomplete record preserving various states in the evolution of Carl von Clausewitz's thinking over a rather long period.<sup>20</sup> The book nevertheless has tremendous coherence: the overall structure is sound and many aspects can be considered fully developed. That is not the case with regard to Clausewitz's quest to derive a conceptual structure for the high-level strategic analysis of wars—one that would survive historical change, both past and future. His view of the problem was initially biased by what appeared to be the success of the style of warfare ushered in by the French Revolution. His own formative experience was shaped by the conservative powers' struggle to cope with, match, and eventually exceed the energy and competence of warfare as it was waged by Napoleon Bonaparte. The contrast between the wars of the *Ancien Régime* and those of the Revolutionary era seemed to offer a fundamental bifurcation on which he could build a theoretical structure. Gradually, however, he was led by the study of history, reflection on his own experience, and contemplation of the future to recognize the vast range of variation manifested by warfare in the real world and to respect the choices made by competent governments and commanders who chose to wage war in different modes. Clausewitz therefore sought to better identify key factors inherent in human nature, politics, and warfare that underlay and drove that variation. He found those factors in the varying political context and the often asymmetrical political objectives of the powers at war, the differing military objectives that supported those political objectives, and the asymmetrical relationship between offense and defense. Along the way, he developed and then modified or discarded a number of relevant terms and concepts.

Perhaps the most confusing of the ideas with which he experimented is the notion of a type of war he called 'absolute war,' which is still widely discussed in the general literature about war.<sup>21</sup> The problem, however, is that the 'absolute war' framework represents an early or intermediate stage, not the final development, in *Vom Kriege*'s evolution—an intellectual cul-de-sac from which he later escaped. It appears almost entirely in the first half of Book VIII, "War Plans," but his

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<sup>20</sup> Much of that thinking took place in other writing, particularly Clausewitz's campaign studies. Much but hardly all of that material appears in the other seven volumes of his collected works, and little of it is available in English.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, I recently read an MS by Paul Schmelzer—an intriguing and capable "Clausewitzian biography" of U.S. Grant. It argued, not unreasonably (but, I maintain, wrongly), that the American Civil War was an "absolute war."

discussion of it there is experimental—probing and inconsistent. It arises in Chapter 2 and soars in Chapters 3.A and 3.B, but comes into serious question even in 3.B. It receives fundamental criticism in Chapter 6.B, and thereafter disappears from view. At that juncture, the limited aim—which he had previously in the same Book treated disdainfully under a different label—comes into serious consideration. The term ‘absolute war’ does not appear in Chapter 9, even though its topic is “The Plan of a War Designed to Lead to the Total Defeat of the Enemy.”<sup>22</sup> We must conclude that Clausewitz ultimately dropped the term ‘absolute war’ altogether: it does not appear in Book I, Clausewitz’s latest writing, where the pure abstraction of ‘ideal war’ is a very distinct departure.<sup>23</sup> While he continued to deal with the problems that ‘absolute war’ had been intended to solve, he modified the relevant conceptual elements so fundamentally that we must consider the notion rejected.

Absolute war is very often presented as Clausewitz's prescription for correct war-making (which is certainly the way it appears in the early parts of Book VIII); the opposite to 'limited war'; the equivalent of 'total war'; or a synonym for 'real,' 'true,' or 'ideal' war.<sup>24</sup> These depictions are mostly incorrect, but the nature of the error depends in large measure on which of the shifting versions of absolute war is being addressed. Clausewitz's most mature treatment of the problem of war's diversity, in Book I, more successfully confronts the same fundamental factors not resolved in Book VIII. But Book I offers no 'typology' or taxonomy of real-world wars, only an analytical basis for understanding the sources of such wars' range and diversity. The latter is based on the dialectical interactions among the opponents' political and military objectives. Unfortunately, that objectives-based analytical construct is badly obscured both by his own earlier<sup>25</sup> but abortive attempt to create a typology of war and by later translators' and other scholars' erroneous attribution to him of war-'types' like 'limited war' and 'total war.' Clausewitz himself did not use either of those terms, and he avoided them for reasons that are both good and understandable.

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<sup>22</sup> "Kriegsplan, wenn Niederwerfung des Feindes das Ziel ist.“ The translation given above is from H/P. Variations on the word ‘absolute’ appear five times in this chapter, but none of them refer to the concept of absolute war.

<sup>23</sup> This paper’s argument that Book VIII’s absolute war and Book I’s ideal war have been erroneously conflated is a central issue that I expect to be controversial. It is dealt with in detail further below.

<sup>24</sup> Certainly 'total war,' 'ideal war,' and 'absolute war' do sound rather alike. Equating them makes perfect sense to people who have not actually read the book. Unfortunately, that seems to include many people who write about it.

<sup>25</sup> That is, in Book VIII.

There seem to be two common major impediments to understanding Clausewitz's actual categorizations of war. The first is an inability or unwillingness to distinguish between military objectives and political objectives.<sup>26</sup> This leads to many errors—for example, to the incorrect assumption that efforts to completely defeat an adversary's military forces must reflect an intent to destroy that adversary as a political entity.

The second major impediment is many readers' confusion (and, in Book VIII, Clausewitz's own) between **a**) a taxonomic approach to defining war-types that characterizes the interactions of both protagonists taken together, and **b**) an analytical or dialectical approach that is based on the interactions among the differing unilateral objectives of the two opponents. The former approach leaves us with two varieties of war in which the opposing sides are usually treated as mirror images.<sup>27</sup> The two varieties are variously described as 'war of observation' and 'absolute war'—Clausewitz's own abortive construct in the first half of Book VIII—or 'limited war' and 'total war,' two misleading terms invented by translators and other commentators. Those two sets of terms are often mixed and matched in different combinations, with other variations sometimes thrown in.

The latter approach—i.e., that based on the opponents' interacting *objectives*—recognizes distinctions between the adversaries' objectives in two distinct dimensions: political and military. The military objectives bifurcate fairly neatly between 'limited aims' and the aim of leaving the opponent militarily defenseless, while the political objectives vary across a nearly infinite spectrum of rising intensity. However, that spectrum is also bifurcated when the political existence of one side is threatened (the meaning of which can vary a great deal). In principle this model could be depicted as a 2x2 matrix (and we will do that). Neatly squared to account for the interaction between

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<sup>26</sup> Jan-Willem Honig, "Clausewitz's *On War*: Problems of Text and Translation," in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 62, mentioned an idea to the effect that Clausewitz used the German word *Zweck* to refer to political goals and *Ziel* to refer to military goals. I quickly found some evidence to support that notion, but it broke down completely in a global search of [Vom Kriege](#). I e-mailed Honig in April 2016, asking how his own views had evolved. Our findings were quite similar. He said (e-mail, 28 April 2016) that, "although on a local level Clausewitz might on occasion be quite consistent, once you looked across chapters or works, with these particular terms he was not." In my own view, Clausewitz's inconsistencies in such matters (as with the multiple terms he uses for the military goal of disarming an opponent) are not accidental. He wishes to force the reader to continually re-recognize the underlying concepts rather than fall into a numbing use of dead metaphors and jargon. This approach works well for readers who truly engage with his work over time. It appears to be endlessly confusing, however, for the casual or one-time reader.

<sup>27</sup> The thoroughly abstract notion of 'ideal war' that Clausewitz describes in Book I also utilizes mirror-image opponents, but that is a conscious aspect of its intentional unrealism.

two opponents, that matrix would produce a large but finite number of configurations. But Clausewitz makes no effort to construct such a larger matrix or to use it to produce a fixed set of war-types (and neither will we). The construct is designed to be applied to specific cases of conflict between at least two (usually more) real-world political entities with unique characteristics. It permits—indeed, anticipates—dynamic change over the course of the opponents' violent interaction.

### **A CENTRAL PROBLEM: THE INFINITE VARIABILITY OF WAR IN THE REAL WORLD AND THE SEARCH FOR STRUCTURE**

Actually describing the strategic structure of any particular real-world war involves an infinite number of dimensions, some of which are linear and some of which aren't—e.g., the relative strength of the contestants (which itself has many dimensions), the competence, cohesion, stability, drives, and personal qualities of the competing societies and of their leadership, etc. We tend to assume that one side must be the attacker, one the defender, but the protagonists may in fact be mirror-image aggressors in a strategic meeting engagement, or both may genuinely believe that they are acting from purely defensive motives. The larger political and physical contexts also cannot be ignored or assumed away: they differ in fundamental ways that form patterns and contribute to our perception of categories—jungle warfare vice desert or maritime warfare; wars between feudatories vs. wars between democracies; wars between individual states vice wars between coalitions, civil wars vice interstate wars, etc. Clausewitz was well aware of this complexity:

Circumstances vary so enormously in war, and are so indefinable, that a vast array of factors has to be appreciated—mostly in the light of probabilities alone. The man responsible for evaluating the whole must bring to his task the quality of intuition that perceives the truth at every point. Otherwise a chaos of opinions and considerations would arise, and fatally entangle judgment. Bonaparte rightly said in this connection that many of the decisions faced by the commander-in-chief resemble mathematical problems worthy of the gifts of a *Newton* or an *Euler*.<sup>28</sup>

Clausewitz nonetheless seems to have started out with the assumption that war itself is, in principle, a single, unified phenomenon. Over time, he became ever more cognizant of the great

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<sup>28</sup> *On War*, Book 1, Chapter 3, "On Military Genius" (H/P p. 112).

range of variation in the wars of history and of his own extensive experience, but it long seemed natural to think that this variation was driven principally by fluctuations in the energy and competence with which warfare was pursued.

By the time Book VIII began to reach its present form, however, Clausewitz was well aware that this linear view was inadequate. He had come to perceive that wars—or, rather, the unilateral military aims of the contestants—naturally bifurcate into two fundamentally different forms in what he called the “dual nature of war.”<sup>29</sup> This dualism was rooted in the opponents' interacting political and military objectives. Of all the many factors in play, these seemed to offer the most structure and the greatest explanatory power. In Book VIII he struggled to reflect that duality, at first presenting one side of it as merely a superior replacement for the other. Looking for a label for the more intense end of the spectrum, he came up with the term 'absolute war.'

The word 'absolute' appears very frequently in *On War* (114 times in the original German, 122 times in H/P).<sup>30</sup> It is generally used in the philosophical sense of extreme perfection in some quality or condition (e.g., truth, superiority, uselessness, panic, security, resistance, flatness of the ground, etc.).<sup>31</sup> The formal term 'absolute war,' however, appears or is directly referred to only nineteen

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<sup>29</sup> References to Clausewitz's 'duality' or 'dualism' sometimes point to other aspects of *On War*, a natural result of his general dialectical method and his use of the phrase *doppelte Art* ('double nature') in other contexts.

<sup>30</sup> Counting the number of times a phrase appears in *On War* may not, however, offer much guidance as to either its importance in Clausewitz's thinking or its influence on his readers. Clausewitz's famous 'trinity,' for example, is mentioned only once (at the conclusion of Book I, Chapter 1, p. 89 in the Howard/Paret translation), and one struggles to find explicit references to it elsewhere. It nonetheless seems to powerfully capture Clausewitz's overall approach. (When examining Donker's work on the mysterious "Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung," it is interesting to find that the concept is present in what was probably an earlier draft of *Vom Kriege* (date unclear but probably c.1817) but the wording lacked the brilliantly descriptive imagery with which we are familiar. Aphorism #22, which corresponds to the first two paragraphs of Section 28, contains neither the chameleon metaphor nor the term *wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit*, "fascinating trinity.")

<sup>31</sup> 'Absolute' appears in other senses, of course, e.g., absolute numbers versus the actual relative power of two forces. Jan Willem Honig, "Clausewitz's *On War*: Problems of Text and Translation," p. 64, cites the etymology of the word absolute, which is largely identical in German and English, to say that "absolute indicates that this is war 'absolved', loosened, set free from reality ... and represents an ideal which can never be achieved in reality." That is how the word arrives at the meaning 'perfect.' However, Honig's discussion explicitly refers to Book I's fully abstract discussion of ideal war, conflating it with the absolute war of Book VIII. The latter appears completely real in many places. Even in cases in which it appears to be an abstraction, it is one not very far removed from the achievable.

times<sup>32</sup> in *On War*, only twice<sup>33</sup> outside of Book VIII (from which it disappears midway through). Its conspicuous total absence in Book I (and in the Note of 1827) obviously implies that Clausewitz found important reasons to drop it.<sup>34</sup>

We must be careful in what we mean by 'types' of war. Clausewitz constantly emphasizes the interactive nature of warfare; it takes two to tango. Logically therefore, to describe a 'type' of war should require a definition that characterizes the interaction of all the contending powers. Clausewitz, however, seldom actually discusses a type in that sense—it is translators and commentators who insist on turning his discussion of "the limited aim" into a discussion of "limited war." The latter term appears in the English of *On War* but does not appear in the German of *Vom Kriege*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Counting these accurately is difficult. "Absolute war" appears in that exact form six times, once outside Book VIII. Variations such as "the absolute form" [of war] appear an additional thirteen times (all but one of the latter in Book VIII). Some of these references are slightly ambiguous and at least one (H/P p. 582) appears only in the English (though that is probably a legitimate inference). There are additional references that may or may not refer specifically to the 'absolute war' construct, but identifying these with certainty can be tricky.

<sup>33</sup> Both of these two references to 'absolute war' outside of Book VIII occur in Book VI, "Defense." The first (H/P pp. 488–89) says "We shall, therefore, start by considering the kind of war that is completely governed and saturated by the urge for a decision—of true war, or absolute war, if we may call it that." Thus it appears that the term was novel at that point, which may reflect the moment when "absolute war" first occurred to Clausewitz as a term of art. The term "true war," with which the Clausewitzaphobe John Keegan was obsessed [see John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, Knopf, 1993)], appears in *On War* in this sense a grand total of twice, but both are artifacts of translation.

The second appearance of absolute war in Book VI occurs in its last chapter (H/P p. 501). That chapter concerns warfare in which neither side is necessarily seeking a decision—a circumstance that, he says, comprises the overwhelming majority of wars and forms one of "two poles." He refers to "the *absolute form* of war" (italics in the original) as the other pole but does not discuss it in any detail.

<sup>34</sup> The word 'absolute' appears 13 times in H/P's version of Book I; it appears 15 times in *Vom Kriege*'s first book. None of these occurrences, however, appears to refer to the notion of absolute war as it is used in Book VIII. Most clearly refer to some other matter and some appear in discussions rejecting absolutes, e.g., "From a pure concept of war you might try to deduce absolute terms for the objective you should aim at and for the means of achieving it; but if you did so the continuous interaction would land you in extremes that represented nothing but a play of the imagination issuing from an almost invisible sequence of logical subtleties." That phrase "pure concept" appears 4 times in Book I, but it refers back to the clearly abstract notion of 'ideal war,' not to the ambiguously real or near-real concept of 'absolute war,' a term that has not yet arisen in the published text. The phrase "pure concept of war" also occurs twice in Book VIII, where it probably refers back to absolute war. Its appearance there reflects the ambiguity of absolute war's relationship to reality and the fact that it is ancestral to Book I's ideal war.

<sup>35</sup> The term 'limited war' (emphasis added here) appears at least 15 times in the Howard/Paret volume containing *On War*, but 14 of these occurrences are in the editors' own contributions. The term's single appearance in the translated text (p.602), however, is a clear error—the German original is *beschränktes Ziel*, limited goal (p.986 in *Vom Kriege*, as edited by Hahlweg). Unsurprisingly, the more precise Jolles translation (p.593 in the 1943 edition) better reflects the original. A "war," of course, has no goal—only the individual contestants have objectives, and these are seldom symmetrical.

Similarly, in the Note of 1827 Clausewitz referred to the "dual nature of war" (*Diese doppelte Art des Kriege*s). H/P (p.69) clumsily renders this as "two kinds of war." But Clausewitz is actually referring to the differing unilateral objectives of leaving the opponent defenseless or of merely seeking to do or take something that will be useful in the peace negotiations. He was aware of that distinction, however, long before 1827.

Such English phrases as 'war of limited aim' and their opposite, 'unlimited war' (which don't appear at all even in the English translations but nonetheless occur frequently in the literature on Clausewitz), are confusing because politics and war are interactive while policy, strategy, and aims are unilateral, describing only one side's approach. While I may be seeking limited military objectives in pursuit of limited political objectives, my allies' and my enemies' objectives may not match that description, in which case it seems misguided—strategically misleading—to refer to the struggle as 'a limited war.' A similar confusion occurs when Clausewitz says that war is "an instrument of *Politik*." We need to distinguish clearly whether by 'instrument' he is referring to military force, which each side employs as a tool of its own unilateral policy, or to interactive war, which is an "instrument of [interactive] politics" in the very different sense in which a basketball court is an instrument of sports—i.e., a common stage via which all sides simultaneously pursue their objectives.<sup>36</sup> 'War to disarm our opponent' is not quite so confusing: it clearly refers to only one side's interests.

Sometimes Clausewitz's description of absolute war does seem to describe a bilateral, high-energy, powerfully motivated conflict that, in principle, should culminate in a distinct resolution

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<sup>36</sup> This is occasionally clear even in the English translations, despite their fervent bias towards 'policy': "war is not merely an act of policy [actually *ein politischer Akt*] but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means." (H/P p. 87.) War is thus an instrument of political intercourse in the same sense as a wrestling ring is an instrument for sport, not merely two separate hammers in the hands of either side. The latter imagery describes military force or violence, not 'war.'

of the issues between the opponents.<sup>37</sup> But this definition is problematic, in part for the same reason that any definition of absolute war is problematic: Clausewitz was changing his mind even as he wrote about it. In other places, absolute war is practiced unilaterally by Napoleon in his victories over the backward conservative powers, who are practicing the other form.

Perhaps most crucially, there is the question whether absolute war was supposed to describe war in the real world or was merely an abstraction. That has been a vexing problem for many readers—a problem substantially exacerbated if one considers Book I's discussion of ideal war to be just another rehash of the absolute war concept.<sup>38</sup> The problem appears already in Book VIII,

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<sup>37</sup> Clausewitz's thinking on the Russian campaign of 1812–13 is deeply embedded in *Vom Kriege* and the campaign is mentioned in Book VIII. However, his published *Der Feldzug von 1812 in Rußland*, which forms part of vol. 7 of his collected works (published in 1835) has a complicated and poorly understood textual history—it is a patchwork of material written at different times for different purposes, and the version in vol. 7 appears to have been heavily edited by an unknown hand, resulting in a partial and rather colorless bowdlerization of Clausewitz's own manuscript of 1823–25. That weakened version formed the basis for the English translation [The Campaign of 1812 in Russia](#) (London: John Murray, 1843) by Francis Egerton, later the First Earl of Ellesmere and an member of Wellington's intimate circle. See the insightful introduction and a partial translation of Clausewitz's original text in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, eds/trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 110–204.

One of Clausewitz's last and most sophisticated historical campaign studies, *Der Feldzug von 1815 in Frankreich* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmlers, 1835), was probably written in 1827. It described a real-world war to which the absolute-as-bilateral-real-war approach might reasonably have been applied. On the other hand, in translating it—the full study is embedded in Carl von Clausewitz and Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, [On Waterloo: Clausewitz, Wellington, and the Campaign of 1815](#), ed./trans. Christopher Bassford, Daniel Moran, and Gregory W. Pedlow (Clausewitz.com, 2010)—we found it extremely easy to interpret Clausewitz's treatment through the language on real war in Book I of *On War*. In fact, however, the study is written in completely pragmatic prose that emphasizes political issues but invokes no grand theoretical framework. Certainly the word 'absolute' does not appear. Being done so late in Clausewitz's life, this work was never incorporated into *Vom Kriege*, in which most references to the events of 1815 are casual allusions to well-known facts or incidents. There are only two extended discussions of the Waterloo campaign in *On War* (H/P p. 310 and pp. 328–29), a short one regarding Zieten's advanced corps at the opening of the campaign and a second on billeting. Wellington appears only twice and Wavre (Clausewitz's own battle in the Waterloo campaign), strangely not at all.

<sup>38</sup> My position is that none of the 13 uses of the word absolute in Book I (15 in the German version) refer to absolute war and that 'ideal war' is a pure abstraction descended from Book VIII's absolute war but entirely freed from the latter's deep roots in the real—principally Napoleonic—world. Hew Strachan, in contrast, says "the idea of absolute war permeates Book I, Chapter 1." *Carl von Clausewitz's On War*, p. 151. Jon Sumida's extensive discussion of the subject makes it clear that he regards Book I's discussion of ideal war to be a discussion of absolute war. See for example *Decoding Clausewitz*, pp. 123–24. Jan Willem Honig's discussion of absolute war clearly assumes that Clausewitz's "logical fantasy" of ideal war is about absolute war. See Honig, "Problems of Text and Translation," pp. 57–73; see p. 64 and especially p. 66. Consequently, most of the criteria Honig lists clearly cannot be met or even approached by any war in the real world, which would render moot Clausewitz's argument in Book VIII that commanders should strive to approximate absolute war whenever possible. Philosopher W.B. Gallie's influential article "Clausewitz Today," *European Journal of Sociology*, v.XIX (1978), pp. 143–167 [a review essay on H/P's *On War*; Paret's *Clausewitz and the State* (Oxford University Press, 1976) and Raymond Aron's *Penser la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976)] considers the discussion in Book I, Chapter 1, to be about absolute war. That confusion may be a key to understanding Gallie's contemptuous rejection of that chapter (see esp. p. 152) despite his deep admiration of the many "wonderful insights" Clausewitz has to offer.

where the relationship between absolute war and war in reality varies. Clausewitz says in one place (there are more such examples) that "with our own eyes we have seen warfare achieve this state of absolute perfection."<sup>39</sup> At several other points, however, it seems that Napoleon only very nearly approximated a Platonic ideal, an unachievable abstraction similar to (but far less stark than) Book I's "logical fantasy" of ideal war: "Since Bonaparte, then, war ... rather closely approached its true character, its absolute perfection.... [W]ar itself has undergone significant changes ... that have brought it closer to its absolute form."<sup>40</sup> In the probing, experimental writing of Book VIII, absolute war is the form the warfighter must strive to approximate "when he can or when he must."<sup>41</sup> In Book I, on the other hand, 'ideal war' is not only explicitly unachievable, but Clausewitz insists that it must be rejected as a model for real-world emulation. Therefore, while the concept of ideal war obviously descends from the notion of absolute war, we have to view ideal war as a new departure.

In the first half of Book VIII there still exists a linear spectrum of warfare, a low-energy/low-competence form at one end and a high-energy/high-competence form at the other. Clausewitz characterized the low end as 'wars of observation,' applying that lifeless imagery to all European

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<sup>39</sup> *On War* (Book VIII), H/P p. 580. It is possible, of course, that when Clausewitz presents absolute war as something he has actually seen occur, he is simply engaging in hyperbole and expects the reader to grasp that fact. Nonetheless, in Book VIII the gap between the "pure concept" and the actual accomplishments of Napoleon remains minimal. Seeking to clarify this confusion, Jon Sumida found it necessary to invent the term "(real) absolute war" to discuss real cases (particularly in terms of peoples' war) that seem to reflect violence pushed to ferocious extremes. See for example Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz*, p. 125.

<sup>40</sup> The two valid examples cited appear on H/P pp. 592–93 and p. 610. The most promising example (i.e., of absolute war being an unreachable abstraction) appears on H/P p. 582 (near the beginning of Book VIII, Chapter 3.A) and reads "as absolute war has never in fact been achieved." That is, unfortunately, a frustratingly inaccurate rendering of the original. (In fact, the whole five-paragraph section is incomprehensible in H/P and I had to turn to the Jolles version to get any sense out of it in English.) The German sentence reads: "*Je mehr das Element des Krieges ermäßigt ist, um so häufiger werden diese Fälle, aber so wenig wie je in einem Kriege die erste der Vorstellungsarten vollkommen wahr ist, ebensowenig gibt es Kriege, wo die letztere überall zutrifft und die erstere entbehrlich wäre.*" (p.957 in Hahlweg, ed.) The Jolles version is "The more the element of war is modified, the more common these cases become; but as little as the first of the views was ever completely realized in any war, just as little is there any war in which the last is true in all respects, and the first can be dispensed with." Thus the term 'absolute war' does not actually appear in that sentence (though it is reasonable to infer that that is what Clausewitz was referring to), but more importantly the line minimizes rather than eliminates the actual occurrence of absolute war in the real world. In any case, the overall discussion makes it clear that the full realization of absolute war is at best only slightly beyond the realm of the achievable.

<sup>41</sup> *On War* (Book VIII), H/P p. 581. This notion does not disappear in Book I. The aim of 'disarming' the opponent remains both the greatest danger to one's own side and the preferred option *when feasible*. It is the one aspect of the ideal war model that can actually be sought and achieved in reality.

warfare of the pre-revolutionary era, thus casting doubt on its legitimacy.<sup>42</sup> It was "something incoherent and incomplete"—in the German, literally a "half-thing."<sup>43</sup> At the opposite extreme were savage spasms of violence in which armies were smashed and states reduced to begging for peace. He recognized, however, that the extreme form was rare among civilized peoples, and understood very early in his evolution that politics was both the driving and the moderating force.<sup>44</sup>

The French Revolution had clearly injected a great deal of energy into this system, and Napoleon Bonaparte had injected a great deal of competence; both were gradually absorbed and finally mastered by his opponents.

The key aspects of absolute war include not merely its energy, violence, and competence, but also its 'decisiveness': it "is completely governed and saturated by the urge for a decision."<sup>45</sup> Now, 'decision' is a tricky word. To many military historians, a 'decisive battle' is simply a big battle that we can confidently describe as a win for one side or the other—or perhaps simply 'a battle interesting enough to justify your buying my book about it.' Clausewitz is looking for an event that

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<sup>42</sup> In Clausewitz's view in Book VIII, the conservative powers continued to wage such war until c.1809 or even later. Lumping together European warfare between 1648 and 1789 (or even 1809) under the label "wars of observation" is odd and clearly an unsatisfactory way to characterize many of the hard-fought struggles of that era. It ignores vast contextual differences (which Clausewitz understood very well) as well as the accomplishments of commanders like Marlborough and Frederick. For instance, the 1704 Battle of Blenheim—a coalition battle on both sides—resulted in an annihilative victory by Marlborough and Eugene that is strongly redolent of Jena or Waterloo. Nonetheless, Clausewitz's discussion of the motives underlying the limitations on war in the period c.1661–1792 in Book VIII, Chapter 3.B., once we filter out the disdainful tone, is remarkably insightful, and the analysis in Book I, Chapter 2, is rich. In any case, a conflict cannot be a war of observation if one side is aggressively pursuing the destruction of the other's capacity to wage war.

<sup>43</sup> *On War* (Book VIII), H/P p. 580; *Vom Kriege* (p.953 in Hahlweg ed.), "zu einem Halbdinge, zu einem Wesen ohne inneren Zusammenhang."

<sup>44</sup> Many modern commentators on *On War* focus on the apparently novel notion that war is an expression of politics (which has always seemed particularly astounding to Americans). That aspect of Clausewitz's thinking received very little attention in the 19th century, evidently because it was common knowledge. See, for example, the Duke of Wellington's reluctant praise for Clausewitz's grasp of the relationship between policy and strategy in his reply to *Der Feldzug von 1815* in Wellington's "[Memorandum on the Battle of Waterloo](https://clausewitzstudies.org/readings/1815/six.htm)," 24 September 1842, in *Supplementary Despatches, Correspondence, and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington*, edited by his son (London: John Murray, 1863), 10:530 (at <https://clausewitzstudies.org/readings/1815/six.htm>).

<sup>45</sup> *On War* (Book VI), H/P pp. 488–89—the only real discussion of absolute war outside of Book VIII. The one other reference (H/P p. 501) is uninformative.

actually decides something of great political importance: primarily the "decision to make peace."<sup>46</sup> A truly decisive battle or campaign leads directly to peace because it convinces one side that its own objectives are unachievable. (Such a battle does not necessarily involve the 'annihilation' of the loser—indeed, as in Pyrrhic victories, it may well be the tactical victor whose hopes of prevailing *strategically* are dashed.) The best alternative to continuing the war is to accept the opponent's minimum demands. This implies that the loser's convictions matter. In the clearer formulation of Book I (and especially of the Note of 1827), the objective of the more energetic form of war is to render the political opponent's decisions irrelevant. Having been 'disarmed,' he no longer possesses the military means to prevent the victor from simply imposing his own conditions. The fear of being disarmed may of course lead a prospective loser to make peace, assuming that his opponent's political objectives are not too extreme. No government gets 'tired' of existing, so a 'strategy of exhaustion' (or *Ermattungsstrategie*, as Hans Delbrück called it) is difficult to apply towards the accomplishment of 'regime change.'

Note, however, that Clausewitz seldom envisions regime change, the actual elimination of the political opponent. His wars typically end in peace treaties, and the victorious and vanquished governments move on from there. For all the 'absoluteness' of Napoleon's military victories, his political objectives—*vis-à-vis* the other Great Powers, at least—were quite restrained by later standards. Even Prussia, sharply reduced in scale and power after the disasters of 1806-7, occupied, and drafted into a French-dominated coalition, did not see its dynasty deposed.<sup>47</sup> Clausewitz suggests<sup>48</sup> that Napoleon's political objectives were modulated by his recognition that opponents like the Habsburg dynasty possessed so much strategic depth that pursuing their actual destruction would call forth latent energies beyond his powers to extinguish. His 'absolute' style of warfare

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<sup>46</sup> I believe he would also apply the term to other military decisions of very significant political importance, e.g., Blenheim in 1704. That battle certainly did not end the War of the Spanish Succession, but it knocked Bavaria out of the war, shut down one of the conflict's theaters of operation, and ensured that the war would not end in Austria's early collapse. Clausewitz's only reference to Blenheim, however, is a dismissive remark on the poor state of French military professionalism at the time (H/P p. 625).

<sup>47</sup> One might argue that Spain was an exception to this, though whether Spain qualifies as a 'Great Power' by that time is dubious. In any case, the internal politics of Spain were in such a state of dissolution that regime-change no doubt appeared easier than any other practical alternative. It nonetheless failed. The other great exceptions in the period were the Allies' determination to overthrow Napoleon personally in 1814 and 1815, but the French state itself emerged not merely intact but as a full member of the 'Concert of Europe,' with many aspects and even personnel of the Napoleonic regime still in place.

<sup>48</sup> *On War*, H/P p. 160.

was often the use of 'battles of annihilation' as a form of *Ermattungsstrategie* to achieve limited (though very substantial) political aims. The objectives of absolute war, then, are military objectives without direct reference to the kind or scale of political objectives they are intended to support. Indeed, throughout Clausewitz's evolution 'disarming' one's opponent always remains preferable—i.e., the default option, even given limited political aims—*if* it can be accomplished at a cost commensurate with the political goals. For example, the United States pursued limited political goals during the 1846-48 Mexican War and rendered Mexico's forces completely ineffective at an acceptably low cost. In the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, the North German Confederation had limited political objectives. Prussia simply wanted France to stay out of intra-German politics; the fall of Napoleon III's regime was an unpleasant and worrisome surprise; the also-limited objective of seizing parts of Alsace and Lorraine was tacked on post-victory. But accomplishing these aims required the complete incapacitation of Napoleon III's army. (It was captured largely intact, then loaned back to France's new provisional government to aid in crushing the Communards of Paris, thereby restoring a strong state in Germany's recent opponent.)

In the case of the American Civil War, the cost of annihilating Confederate military power as a step towards eradicating the Confederacy as a state was high indeed, but the Union judged those costs commensurate and modern opinion generally ratifies that judgment. However, the annihilative option is not always available. Some enemies are simply too powerful to be destroyed, regardless of how much one is willing to sacrifice, and attempting it unsuccessfully can be disastrous. In such cases the limited aim is the only one available and is achieved with surprising frequency even by the weaker player.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Many writers on Clausewitz have a tendency to confuse or conflate military objectives with political ones. These categories must be considered separately. Simply because we aim to decisively defeat a battlefield force, or even an opponent's entire military apparatus, does not necessarily imply that we also intend to destroy that adversary's political leadership. This aspect of Clausewitz's model is often misunderstood. See for instance an interesting Russian view recently expressed by Alexei Fenenko [PhD in History, RAS Institute of International Security Problems, RIAC expert] in "[War of the Future—How Do We See It?](https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/kakoy-budet-voyna-budushchego/)," Russian International Affairs Council, 6 May 2016 [<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/kakoy-budet-voyna-budushchego/>] "Back in the 1820s, the German military thinker Carl von Clausewitz distinguished two types of war—total war and limited war. They differ, according to Clausewitz, not in the number of dead and the scale of military actions, but in the model of victory. The aim of total war is to destroy the adversary as a political subject. The aim of limited war is to coerce the adversary into a desired compromise." It would be interesting to know if this is an accurate depiction of Fenenko's argument in the Russian original of his article and/or of the contents of the Russian translation of *Vom Kriege* that Fenenko cites (Moscow: Gosvoenizdat Publishing House, 1934). In the German original, certainly, this description is erroneous.

## ISSUES OF TRANSLATION AND TONE

Numerous significant translation issues are addressed elsewhere in this paper and in the notes. Our purpose at this point in the paper is to focus on Clausewitz's terminology for the high-intensity end of the spectrum of real war. However, this is just the tip of a much larger translational iceberg. The English translations (even Jolles') systematically distort Clausewitz's terminology. His *Politik* is routinely turned into the unilateral English 'policy' unless it appears in so blatantly interactive a context that it must—apparently with great reluctance—be rendered as 'politics.' It is necessary to use both terms, but one must have in mind some clear and valid criteria for choosing which word applies in a given case. Such criteria are virtually never discussed by the translators.<sup>50</sup> His many references to the state (*Staat*), its power, or its forces are commonly rendered as “national.”<sup>51</sup> His references to "the people" are often translated as "the Nation" regardless of whether he is referring to an ethnic nation in a cultural sense (for which he tended to use the word *Nation*) or simply to a state's population—say, that of Austria (i.e., the polyglot Habsburg empire). These are significant distortions rooted in a later nation-state ideology anachronistic to Clausewitz's own era and views (and increasingly anachronistic to our own). Clausewitz strongly identified with Prussia, a dynastic state within a multiple-state German geo-linguistic zone, and his undoubted German nationalism did not translate into a call for a unified German nation-state.<sup>52</sup> These errors play into distortions of his impact on later European wars and the spurious claims of recent "New Wars" writers that the validity of his ideas—if there is any at all—is limited to warfare between the uniformed armies of Weberian states (another anachronism).

The translation into English of Clausewitz's terminology regarding the high-intensity end of the spectrum of war is similarly problematic. Neither Book VIII's absolute war nor Book I's ideal war equate in any meaningful way to 'total war' as that term was used in the 20th century and by critics of Clausewitz like B.H. Liddell Hart, who routinely called him "the Apostle of Total War." In fact, other than an accidental reference to a theater of war as "the total war area" and a hypothetical case ("even if war were total war," with the clear implication that it is not), the phrase 'total

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Howard's thoughts on this issue are, however, addressed in two papers (Jan Willem Honig's and my own) included in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 70–73, 76, 83–86.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, H/P p. 579, "national affairs" for *Staatsleben*.

<sup>52</sup> See the final paragraph of *Vom Kriege* and *On War*.

war' does not appear at all in *On War*.<sup>53</sup> 'Total war' is not a well-defined term, but it is best seen as a prescription for the waging of war typified by the ideas of General Erich von Ludendorff, who had actually assumed control of the German war effort during World War I. It requires the total subordination of both politics and economics to the military effort—an idea that would have been anathema to Clausewitz. It makes the assumption that total military victory or defeat are the only options, even when one's political objectives are limited (as was the case for most of the Great Powers, most of the time, during the allegedly 'total war' of 1914-18). The concept of total war involves no suspension of the effects of time and space, as did Clausewitz's pure abstraction of 'ideal war.' (It does, however, like ideal war, ignore the realities of politics, which is why it proved so disastrous to its practitioners.) Ludendorff was fully aware that his arguments were inimical to those of *Vom Kriege*, saying "All theories of Clausewitz have to be thrown overboard!"<sup>54</sup>

Nor does Clausewitz's frequent emphasis on the "destruction"—*Vernichtung*—of the opposing force have anything to do with mass murder or genocide. Clausewitz's word (and various alternative terms that Clausewitz, ever reluctant to create a fixed jargon, used for the same purpose) is often translated as 'annihilation' or even 'extermination,' though it is sometimes less alarmingly translated simply as 'defeat' or 'completely defeat.' At no point, however, does Clausewitz call for any action beyond what is necessary to render the opposing force ineffective—"that is, [the opposing forces] must be *put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight*. Whenever we use the phrase 'destruction of the enemy's forces' [*Vernichtung der feindlichen Streitkraft*] this alone is what we mean."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *On War*, H/P pp.280 and 605. This disconnect is also discussed by Honig, "Problems of Text and Translation, pp. 64–65) to the same effect, except—as Honig correctly emphasizes—that 'total war' was meant to be a form of real war, not an abstraction or ideal.

<sup>54</sup> After the German failure at Verdun in 1916, Ludendorff and Hindenburg took over direction of the German war effort, with far more than merely military responsibilities. They essentially elbowed the Kaiser aside and are frequently described as *de facto* military dictators. See Ludendorff, *Der totale Krieg* (Ludendorffs Verlag, München 1935). The quotation is from Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* (Berlin, 1919), p.10, cited in Hans Speier, "Ludendorff: The German Concept of Total War," in Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), pp. 306–321.

<sup>55</sup> *On War* (Book I), H/P p. 90. Both H/P (p. 81) and the Jolles version (done, after all, during World War II) sometimes translated Clausewitz's German *Vernichtungskriege* as "war of extermination."

Scholars and moralizers sometimes get rather wrought up over this terminology in *Vom Kriege*. The normally detached and balanced Hew Strachan became quite accusative in saying that those

who seek to mitigate the implications of Clausewitz's choice of words can find no solace in his presentation of 'defeat' as an alternative. Further on in the chapter he defines what he means by defeat—'simply the destruction of his forces, whether by death, injury, or any other means'. The word that Clausewitz uses here for defeat, *Überwindung*, is admittedly comparatively free of the connotations of slaughter which his own definition implies, but elsewhere defeat is conjured up by more forceful words, such as *Untergang*, or 'downfall', and *Niederwerfung*, or 'prostration'.<sup>56</sup>

Strachan went on to complain in scandalized terms about Clausewitz's advocacy of an energetic pursuit after an opposing force is broken, the Prussian theorist reasoning (correctly) that it is mainly in such exploitations that disproportionate losses can be imposed.

I find this accusative tone puzzling. Clausewitz was a German writing in German, a language in which events with the anodyne English label 'battles' are called *Schlachten*—literally 'slaughters.' *Vernichten* literally means something like "to move something along the path to nonexistence," so annihilation is a reasonable rendering into English. It was indeed later used in a genocidal sense, as in '*Vernichtungslager*'—'extermination camp'—but connecting Clausewitz's language to the Holocaust is a grotesque anachronism. What Clausewitz requires us to annihilate is the enemy's capacity to fight, not the enemy himself—though we can of course toss in the latter if that is both desirable and affordable. At that point, however, we are no longer talking about a military objective but a political one. Before anyone claims to be morally repulsed by that idea or calls it archaic, consider President Obama's entirely laudable promise regarding ISIS: "to wipe this vile terror organization off the face of the earth."<sup>57</sup> One needs to ask oneself what, precisely, do the military forces of modern liberal democracies aim to do to the armed enemy force in front of them? Is

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<sup>56</sup> Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 135.

<sup>57</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Obama Reports Gains, and 'Momentum,' Against ISIS," *New York Times*, 13 April 2016.

emphasizing the pursuit a standard aspect of modern U.S. and British military doctrine?<sup>58</sup> Having answered those questions, we are left to wonder what sort of disingenuous euphemisms Clausewitz should have used. Accusing Clausewitz of advocating "slaughter" convicts him of nothing more than acknowledging that war involves large-scale lethal violence and of doing so in German.<sup>59</sup>

A similar issue occurs with another word that is treated in our English translations as essentially synonymous to *Vernichtung*. And, indeed, Clausewitz uses this term to describe essentially the same element of his schema, the aim of effectively incapacitating the opposing military force.

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<sup>58</sup> "**Pursuit.** The role of a pursuit is to catch or cut off a hostile force attempting to escape or an absconding individual, with the aim of defeating or perhaps destroying it or him. It should develop from a successful exploitation and commence when the target is demoralized and beginning to disintegrate under pressure. A pursuit may target an adversary seeking to escape from his own initiated ambush. In this case, rapidly following up into his depth in order to cut off his extraction would be vital." Army Doctrine Publication: *Operations*, Ministry of Defence, UK, NOV 2010, pp. 8–12.

<sup>59</sup> All of these issues relate to an important problem into which I do not wish to be drawn in this paper, but which nonetheless must be mentioned. British writers in particular have, ever since 1914, tended to blame Clausewitz for all of the Powers' to-our-eyes-insane pursuit of total military victory during World War I despite the enormous political risks and stupefying human costs that this entailed and the vague and transitory political objectives they sought. Liddell Hart launched and long sustained this accusation, which was carried forward by a long train of acolytes. His actual views were extremely complex and his public pronouncements disingenuous. John Keegan's continuation of Liddell Hart's policy on this matter was derisible. Hew Strachan's far more sophisticated and nuanced views must be taken far more seriously, but ultimately I think he is overly swayed both by this British tradition and by his deeply felt personal sorrow over the tragedies of the Great War.

My own position has long been that this accusation is delusional—a case of academics vastly overinflating the influence of a military intellectual. The actual sources of German persistence in this matter lay in domestic class politics (essentially Fritz Fischer's thesis). The steadfast and powerful public support long enjoyed by virtually all the belligerent governments was rooted in a widespread ideology we now label "social Darwinism" (a bias that absolutely must not be laid at the feet of Darwin). I have argued that the Great War would have transpired in much the same way had Clausewitz never written a word. And any sophisticated reading of *Vom Kriege* would have perceived a wiser mindset that, had it been applied by the leaders of 1914, would have led to far different actions. Throughout the war, Clausewitz's disciple Hans Delbrück fiercely criticized Germany's strategic conduct of it, and its chief conductor, Ludendorff, loudly proclaimed his freedom from Clausewitzian sensibilities. We certainly should not hold Clausewitz in any way responsible for the idiocies committed by European statesmen nearly a century after his death. To do so would be to argue that we should not write seriously about dangerous human foibles for fear of misinterpretation by sloppy readers.

Nonetheless, there probably is some causal connection—a twisted and baroque interweaving of intellectual skeins that is irritatingly difficult to untangle—between the clarity with which Clausewitz laid out the objective of disarming the opponent and the single-minded rigidity with which armies have pursued it ever since.

See John Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 1–5; Christopher Bassford, Chapter 15, "[J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart](#)," in *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815–1945* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 128–143; Christopher Bassford, "[John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz](#)," *War in History*, November 1994, pp. 319–336; Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967); *War of Illusions* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973); *World Power or Decline: The Controversy Over Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974).

*Niederwerfung* literally means the 'throwing-down' of the opponent.<sup>60</sup> Translating it as 'throw' (or 'take-down') might fit in well with Clausewitz's extended wrestling metaphor,<sup>61</sup> but otherwise wouldn't convey much. All of the English translators are prone to translate it as 'overthrow,' which might make some literal sense. Unfortunately, in English "overthrow" has a distinctly political connotation and is thus seriously misleading. In most relevant cases Clausewitz is explicitly discussing the *military* defeat of an enemy force without reference to the political use to be made of the victory.

Again discussing the vast diversity of war but this time explicitly in the political dimension, Clausewitz observes "the distance that separates a death-struggle for political existence from a war

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<sup>60</sup> *Niederwerfung* and variants are scattered around *Vom Kriege*, but about 25% of the occurrences are in the first two chapters of Book I and 50% are in Book VIII. Delbruck's *Niederwerfungsstrategie* is usually translated as 'strategy of annihilation.'

<sup>61</sup> In H/P, Clausewitz's long-running metaphor of a wrestling match is seemingly masked by his choice of the word *Zweikampf* (literally 'two-struggle'), which all of the English translations render as "duel." (H/P p. 75.) Alan Beyerchen ("Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, . . . , p. 74) raised this issue and suggested that *Zweikampf* might better be rendered as "wrestling match." That seemed to make sense, as Clausewitz's discussion immediately follows up with the image of two wrestlers in a wrestling ring. A duel with swords or pistols offers a metaphor very different from the one that Clausewitz appears to be presenting. Among other things, wrestling matches are seldom resolved in one blow and skill cannot entirely displace raw strength in our calculations. However, in September 2020 Terence Holmes emailed me with a very different understanding of this issue. He demonstrated that *Zweikampf* did indeed refer to an armed and deadly struggle between individual combatants, but also that the confused imagery has its roots in a flaw in H/P's translation. Here is my summary of Terence's observations on the issue:

The word *Zweikampf* is a relative newcomer to the German language, having been coined by linguistic purists in the 17th century to replace *Duell*, which they found objectionable since it was a foreign loan word. Like *Duell*, it denotes an armed combat between two men, usually a fight to the finish as in Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Der Zweikampf of 1811*.

Clausewitz begins his characterization of war with reference to its "Element," its basic component, which he identifies as "der Zweikampf"—deadly combat between two men. If you look around in the midst of a war, what you see is "die Unzahl der einzelnen Zweikämpfe, aus denen er besteht"—"the countless scenes of mortal combat of which war consists."

But then he abruptly changes to a different imagery that represents the real point of all that fighting: "Wollen wir uns die Unzahl der einzelnen Zweikämpfe ... als Einheit denken, so tun wir besser, uns zwei Ringende vorzustellen." In English: "If we want to think of the countless number of individual duels as a single whole, we would do better to imagine two wrestlers." [Emphasis added.]

Unfortunately, H/P leaves out the words "so tun wir besser." That is why the duel imagery seems to be simply a variation on the wrestling match metaphor. In addition to all the other implications of Clausewitz's extended wrestling metaphor, this analogy makes it clear that the aim of war is not to wipe out the enemy, but to render him defenseless so that he must do our will.

which a forced or tottering alliance makes a matter of disagreeable duty. Between the two, innumerable gradations occur in practice."<sup>62</sup> Here we are clearly discussing the range of political-motivational intensity rather than the distinction between militarily disarming the opponent and seeking the more limited military aim. Going after an opponent's "political existence" can mean a range of things, in Clausewitz's era most likely the dispossession of a dynasty rather than the extermination of a state, its ruling class, and/or its population. Nonetheless, any of the latter objectives would presumably require first disarming the political opponent via the destruction of his military capacity for self-defense.

It is clear throughout Clausewitz's discussion that one may seek to make one's enemy militarily defenseless in pursuit of quite limited political goals—i.e., disarm him, demand his autograph on a treaty, and then go home—leaving the political opponent alive, in charge, and able to pick up the pieces. A ready example is the combination of U.S. political and military objectives in the Mexican War (1846-48) cited above. But strategic annihilation in pursuit of limited political objectives, against a capable and determined opponent with significant resources for resistance, is generally a very expensive way to proceed. In many cases it would be an utterly unrealistic objective.

Clausewitz himself equates *Niederwerfung* with *Entwaffnen*, literally to disarm or 'dis-en-weapon.'<sup>63</sup> 'Disarm' is actually the most accurate way to translate the concept Clausewitz means to convey with all of the various terms he uses to describe the destruction of an opponent's capacity to militarily resist the imposition of our political aims. 'Disarm' appears ten times in H/P's *On War*. When we tried to use it as a military objective in U.S. Marine Corps doctrine, however, we

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<sup>62</sup> This is the Jolles version, from Book I, Chapter 2. Clausewitz's actual phrase (s. 222 in Hahlweg's 19th edition) is *einem Vernichtungskrieg um das politische Dasein*: "a war of annihilation concerning the political existence." He is not equating *Vernichtungskrieg* with such political objectives, but simply describing one particular combination of military and political objectives. His actual point in the paragraph is the infinite range of political motives for warfare. H/P, p. 94, unfortunately rephrases Clausewitz's line in a manner that appears to offer a fixed definition of "war of annihilation" [*Vernichtungskriege*] as "a struggle for political existence." The problem is, as usual, the translators' urge to identify a war-'type' rather than to peel apart the specific combination of military and political objectives in any particular case.

<sup>63</sup> "Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war." "*Nun könnten menschenfreundliche Seelen sich leicht denken, es gebe ein künstliches Entwaffnen oder Niederwerfen des Gegners, ohne zuviel Wunden zu verursachen, und das sei die wahre Tendenz der Kriegskunst.*" Book I, Chapter 1, section 3; H/P p. 75; Hahlweg ed., p. 192.

encountered determined opposition. It evidently sounded too much like 'arms control.' The Marines were much happier with 'annihilate' (though concerned about how it might look in the *Washington Post*).

Thus the English translation of each of these terms—*Vernichten* (118 occurrences), *Niederwerfen* (34), *Entwaffnen* (3), etc.—has varied more or less randomly between annihilate, exterminate, destroy, overthrow, defeat completely or overwhelmingly, and disarm. The actual military aim nonetheless remains what Clausewitz described—the opponent's forces "must be *put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight.*" Clausewitz makes it quite clear that this can be accomplished in any number of ways and does not necessarily involve decisive combat, but given that his subject is the conduct of military operations, not politics *per se*, non-military alternatives are not his focus.

### THE FAILURE OF ABSOLUTE WAR AS A CONSTRUCT

Let us return now to the issue of the diversity of warfare. Understanding that historical processes are not linear,<sup>64</sup> Clausewitz saw that the lesser form of war might well alternate with the form manifested in the recent Revolutionary wars:

Not every future war ... is likely to be of this type; on the contrary, one may predict that most wars will tend to revert to wars of observation. A theory, to be of any practical use, must allow for that likelihood.<sup>65</sup>

But it is no more likely that war will always be so monumental in character than that the ample scope it has come to enjoy will again be severely restricted.<sup>66</sup>

Clausewitz thus detected problems in his effort to paint absolute war as the linear perfection of a singular phenomenon of war. Such warfare remained historically rare, and even Napoleon's example of its achievable near-perfection did not appear likely to cause it to universally replace

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<sup>64</sup> This is an understanding that evidently eludes the authors of such contemporary categories as 'fourth-generation' and 'fifth-generation war,' as well as the 'New Wars' scholars, who mistake the wars of the late 20th and early 21st centuries for a 'type' rather than an accident of timing. The features of some selected wars may, of course, cluster around a common set of characteristics, and this may justify using some kind of collective label, but "New" certainly does not point to any such meaningful characteristic.

<sup>65</sup> *On War* (Book VI), pp .488–9.

<sup>66</sup> *On War* (Book VIII), p. 593.

the other form. Seeking to define absolute war and its opposite more clearly, Clausewitz began to recognize that each of the two forms could be appropriate, depending on circumstances. "Since both these concepts lead to results, theory cannot dispense with either."<sup>67</sup>

A theory, then, that dealt exclusively with absolute war would either have to ignore any case in which the nature of war had been deformed by outside influence, or else it would have to dismiss them all as misconstrued. That cannot be what theory is for. Its purpose is to demonstrate what war is in practice, not what its ideal nature ought to be.<sup>68</sup>

Thus the idea of the singular 'perfection' of the most violent form of real-world war lost its legitimacy, and with it the applicability of the word 'absolute.' It might be possible to approach perfection in either form. Consequently, the legitimization of non-absolute war, i.e., the pursuit of limited objectives, gains ground even in Book VIII and appears as a formal and respectable goal (which was not the case with the sneer-worthy "war of observation") in its concluding chapters. By Chapter 6.B., "*Der Krieg ist ein Instrument der Politik*,"<sup>69</sup> Clausewitz is beginning to sound pretty wary of the idea of absolute war: "when studying actual practice.... [w]e will then find that war does not advance relentlessly toward the absolute, as theory would demand," and the term 'absolute war' is entirely absent in the last three chapters (7–9, 44% of the Book by page count). He also recognized explicitly that the intensification of war in the more recent era had not been driven by any conscious decision on the part of more competent leadership: "these changes did not

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<sup>67</sup> *On War* (Book VIII), H/P p. 5 83.

<sup>68</sup> *On War* (Book VIII), H/P p. 593.

<sup>69</sup> H/P, p. 605, renders this chapter title as "War Is an Instrument of Policy" (Jolles and Graham as "War as an Instrument of Policy"—emphasis added). That might possibly make sense if the chapter emphasized the unilateral use of military force as a tool. The text of the chapter, however, is so emphatic on the interactive character of war that even H/P is forced to use phrases like "war is only a branch of political activity," "the only source of war is politics—the intercourse of governments and peoples," "war is simply a continuation of political intercourse," "war in itself does not suspend political intercourse," and "war cannot be divorced from political life" (all of which occur on the chapter's very first page). The explanation is seriously disturbing: "Sir Michael Howard reminded [the audience] that Peter Paret and he had great reservations about choosing the word 'politics', as they strongly believed that this word possessed a very negative connotation in English." Honig, "Problems of Text and Translation," p. 70. One might say the same thing about 'war' itself, of course—not to mention broccoli. But policy is not at all the same thing as politics, and policy is not what Clausewitz was talking about.

come about because the French government freed itself, so to speak, from the harness of policy;<sup>70</sup> they were caused by the new political conditions which the French Revolution created both in France and in Europe as a whole, conditions that set in motion new means and new forces, and have thus made possible a degree of energy in war that otherwise would have been inconceivable."

Clausewitz's working methods involved constant adjustments and reconciliations of the evolving pieces of his opus, in what must have been a very cumbersome and, in practice, erratic process. He certainly would have appreciated a word processor. Many proposed alterations, made in the margins throughout the existing manuscripts, were actually inserted in the next draft or posthumously. Thus it is unclear what these developments in the later sections of Book VIII signify. They may reflect the original path of his thought-process, leading to the rewrite of Book I, or the beginning of a later rewrite to harmonize it with Book I. Or some other history that we cannot now reconstruct. Whatever the exact sequence of thought and process of writing, elements of what I take to be Clausewitz's latest thinking appear in bits and pieces everywhere, as do seemingly atavistic bits. Large sections of Chapters 4-9 of Book VIII appear fully advanced and compatible with the Note of 1827, which fails to mention 'absolute war' at all and describes the "the double nature of [real] war" (not H/P's clumsy "two kinds of war") even more clearly and concisely than anything in Book I. It seems an illusion to think that any particular large section belongs to any particular era in Clausewitz's evolution—he was constantly revising in a fragmentary but more-or-less global manner. But even Book I, allegedly 'finished' in the view of many commentators, does not contain as resolutely clear a description of the latest concept as that of the Note of 1827. Since Clausewitz was rather frenetically engaged in other writing projects between 1827 and his departure for active

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<sup>70</sup> *On War*, Book VIII, H/P p. 610. This is yet another example (one of many) of the reflexive use of 'policy' in the English translations. Here Clausewitz is clearly referring to domestic politics (to which he returns in the very next clause, where the word 'political' simply cannot be avoided). The use of 'policy' here is nonsensical. This reluctance to acknowledge internal politics in Clausewitz's formulations is really very strange, especially given Paret's intense awareness of Clausewitz's frustrating practical experiences with the vagaries and contradictions of Prussia's internal politics throughout his adult life.

service in 1830, it is doubtful that he spent a great deal of that time working on *Vom Kriege*.<sup>71</sup> The disjuncture between the first half of Book VIII, on the one hand, and Book VIII's second half and

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<sup>71</sup> Sumida, however, suggests that Clausewitz used the period 1827–1830 to "bring the book to near completion, if not completion." Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz*, p. xix. If by "completion" he means (as he appears to) that Clausewitz left the manuscript satisfied that it needed no more than a last check-over for spelling errors, there are many powerful reasons to doubt this. There are too many loose ends, major and minor contradictions, references to missing chapters, etc., to think he was actually near-done with his project. Post-1827, Clausewitz appears to have revised only three chapters (1, 2, and 3) of Book I and three chapters (1, 2, and 6) of Book II. Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Paul Donker have found, in Werner Hahlweg's archive, manuscripts of Book I that appear to contain the final text of Chapter 1 in Clausewitz's hand (with annotations and edits by Marie). These appear to have been "written between 1828 [and] 1829," perhaps as early as Summer 1828. There is, however, some ambiguity to that dating, which is based on (fairly convincing) circumstantial evidence. (Herberg-Rothe, draft manuscript "Clausewitz's famous last words: the original manuscript of his most important first chapter," received 12 April 2017.) Simultaneously, Clausewitz was busy on other projects, the contents of which do not appear to have been taken into account in the final version of *Vom Kriege*. *Der Feldzug von 1815* was evidently written in 1827 (and presented to the Crown Prince in 1828); *Der Feldzug von 1796 in Italien* was in Gneisenau's hands by October 1828; *Die Feldzüge von 1799 in Italien und der Schweiz* was hastily concluded in April 1830; and in the meantime Clausewitz's attention and writing efforts were further diverted by concerns like the instabilities leading to the Revolution of 1830 in France, the Polish Crisis, the upheaval in Belgium, and what appeared to be an impending new war with France. There is, however, no evidence of either the 1796, 1799, or 1815 studies being incorporated into *Vom Kriege*, though there are numerous references to 1796 in the latter. [The 2010 Bassford/Moran/Pedlow translation of the 1815 study is discussed in an earlier footnote. There is now a very good English translation of *Der Feldzug von 1796 in Italien*, albeit with the unfortunate title *Napoleon's 1796 Italian Campaign*, trans/ed. Nicholas Murray and Christopher Pringle (University Press of Kansas, 2018).] For discussions, see Eberhard Kessel, "Die Entstehungsgeschichte von Clausewitz' Buch *Vom Kriege*," in *Militärsgeschichte und Kriegstheorie in neuerer Zeit Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, Hrsg. und eingeleitet von Johannes Kunisch (Berlin: Verlag Duncker & Humblot, 1987), pp. 1–20; Paul Donker, "[Die Entwicklung von Clausewitz' Vom Kriege Eine Rekonstruktion auf der Grundlage der früheren Fassungen seines Meisterwerks](#)," in the Clausewitz-Gesellschaft's *Jahrbucher 2017*, pp. 14–39 [in English, Paul Donker, trans. Paul Donker and Christopher Bassford, "[The Evolution of Clausewitz's Vom Kriege: a reconstruction on the basis of the earlier versions of his masterpiece](#)," *ClausewitzStudies.org*, August 2019]; Daniel Moran, "[Clausewitz on Waterloo: Napoleon at Bay](#)," in *On Waterloo*, pp. 237–255. See also Moran's introductions to, and translations of, Clausewitz's "Europe since the Polish Partitions" (1831) and "On the Basic Question of Germany's Existence" (1831) in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, eds/trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 369–384.

Book I on the other, presumably reflects *Vom Kriege's* final evolutionary phase before the project was unexpectedly suspended and—unfortunately and unintentionally—terminated.<sup>72</sup>

In any case, Book VIII's experiment with 'absolute war' was a conceptual failure that Clausewitz evidently came to reject for many reasons. It described a linear learning process that could not account for the likely recurrence of non-absolute war, just as it could not account for the waging of non-absolute war in the past by competent leaders like Frederick II and Marlborough. It did not account for the differing objectives of the contending parties; in particular, it did not reflect much of the dynamic relationship between the strategic aggressor and the strategic defender explored in Books VI and VII. Nor could it account for wars in which *neither* side sought—or, in many cases, rationally *could* seek—a 'decision.' The latter could not be simply a less intense or less 'perfect' form. The very notion of 'perfection' becomes problematic if war can justifiably take so many forms (i.e., not merely the pure 'limited' form and its pure opposite, but the many ways in which those forms can mix and exist simultaneously). It is particularly important to note that absolute war hovered awkwardly between the more intense spectrum of real-world war and a purely philosophical notion of perfection. The resolution to that problem will be found in the purely abstract character of Book I's ideal war.

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<sup>72</sup> The ambition of fully exploring the implications of Clausewitz's mature strategic-analytical structure was a major impetus behind the massive military-historical work of Hans Delbrück (1848–1929), who wrote: "In a report that [Clausewitz] wrote on 10 July 1827 and that is placed at the head of the work he left behind, *Vom Kriege*, he considers redoing this work once more from the viewpoint that there is a double art of war, that is, the one 'in which the purpose is the overthrow of the enemy,' and the one 'in which one only intends to make a few conquests on the borders of the country.' The 'completely different nature' of these two efforts must always be separated from one another. Clausewitz died in 1831, before he could carry out this work. To fill out the lacuna that he left has been one of the purposes of the present work." *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History* [*Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte*], 4 vols. (Berlin: Verlag von Georg Stilke, 1900–1920), vol. IV, "The Dawn of Modern Warfare," trans. Walter J. Renfro, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975–85), p. 454. Delbrück is not widely known in English, but John Keegan correctly acknowledged him as "a great pioneer" in the writing of modern, 'scientific' military history, calling him "the figure who bestrides the military historian's landscape." Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (Viking Press, 1976), pp. 32, 53. There is, however, no reason to think that Keegan would have been able to recognize the nature or the source of the military, historical, and political ideas Delbrück spent so much time illustrating.

The contradictions and failures of absolute war as it is described in the first half of Book VIII demonstrate Clausewitz's struggle to express his recognition that the variety of war as we experience it in the real world does not reflect a simple linear spectrum from weak and befuddled to energetic and competent. They sparked his full, final acceptance of war's "double nature," i.e., his recognition that war actually has two foci or attractors, two *legitimate* tendencies that coexist and must be respected. For convenience—but not accurately—we often call these two tendencies 'limited war' and 'unlimited war,'<sup>73</sup> but in fact they concern the separate, unilateral *objectives* of the opposing parties, which are seldom mirror-images. This realization had been brewing for some extended period of time. He was not forced to fully confront the inadequacies of his earlier concepts and terms until he turned from historical analysis to future planning (a major topic of Book

<b>EARLY, "TYPOLOGICAL" MODEL</b>		
<p><b>Absolute War</b></p> <p>Based on real-world Napoleonic campaigns and allied campaigns after 1809</p> <p>While sometimes discussed in idealized terms, exemplified using real campaigns, commanders, and wars. Essentially historical and thus achievable in reality</p> <p>Military objective is annihilation</p> <p>The model to be emulated whenever possible (regardless of political objective)</p>	<p><b>vs.</b></p>	<p><b>War of Observation</b></p> <p>Based on 'cabinet-wars' in the pre-revolutionary era c.1661-1789 (and on ineffectual attempts to follow that model when confronted by the French Revolution)</p> <p>Essentially historical</p> <p>Military objective is limited unless one is presented with an irresistible opportunity to crush a foe at low cost</p> <p>A feckless model to be deprecated and avoided</p>
<p>When presented as a quasi-abstraction, this model appears to characterize a war overall. In practical examples, the two categories appear as contrasting styles—one admirable, one contemptible—that may appear simultaneously.</p>		

<sup>73</sup> As noted above, the term 'limited war' appears only once in H/P (p.602), and in that case the German original is *beschränktes Ziel* (limited goal). The much-discussed phrase 'unlimited war' does not appear at all even in H/P. The correct terminology thus focuses on the type of objective each side is unilaterally pursuing—the 'limited aim' on the one hand and *Niederwerfung/Vernichtung/Entwaffnung* (disarming the opponent) on the other—rather than the 'type' of war in the multilateral, interactive sense.

VIII). Required to do this by his own research design, he had to produce an analytical structure applicable to a truly realistic variety of strategic futures. The confusing mix of terms and conceptualizations in its nine chapters reflects the misfiring of his initial concept for the discussion and his efforts to repair it on the fly.

### **‘IDEAL WAR’ IN BOOK I: A RADICALLY NEW CONSTRUCT**

Many writers argue or simply assume that the “ideal war” discussed in Book I is identical to the “absolute war” that appears in the first half (but not the second half) of Book VIII,<sup>74</sup> and that the innovations in Book I primarily reflect Clausewitz’s allegedly sudden discovery, very late in the day, either that war is an expression of politics or that it has a “double nature” (i.e., the distinction between the pursuit of limited objectives vice the aim of rendering one’s opponent militarily helpless).<sup>75</sup> These are serious misperceptions. The ‘ideal war’ construct of Book I reassembles the underlying components of Book VIII’s ‘absolute war’ in a radically different manner, and Clausewitz had noted the decisive role of policy objectives and the distinctions in war’s dual nature at

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<sup>74</sup> [This note is a repetition of fn.38 above, provided for the reader's convenience.] My position is that none of the 13 uses of the word absolute in Book I (15 in the German version) refer to absolute war and that 'ideal war' is a pure abstraction descended from Book VIII's absolute war but entirely freed from the latter's deep roots in the real—principally Napoleonic—world. Hew Strachan, in contrast, says "the idea of absolute war permeates Book I, Chapter 1." *Carl von Clausewitz's On War*, p. 151. Jon Sumida's extensive discussion of the subject makes it clear that he regards Book I's discussion of ideal war to be a discussion of absolute war. See for example *Decoding Clausewitz*, pp. 123–24. Jan Willem Honig's discussion of absolute war clearly assumes that Clausewitz's "logical fantasy" of ideal war is about absolute war. See Honig, "Problems of Text and Translation," pp. 57–73; see p. 64 and especially p. 66. Consequently, most of the criteria Honig lists clearly cannot be met or even approached by any war in the real world, which would render moot Clausewitz's argument in Book VIII that commanders should strive to approximate absolute war whenever possible. Philosopher W.B. Gallie's influential article "Clausewitz Today," *European Journal of Sociology*, v.XIX (1978), pp. 143–167 [a review essay on H/P's *On War*; Paret's *Clausewitz and the State* (Oxford University Press, 1976) and Raymond Aron's *Penser la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976)] considers the discussion in Book I, Chapter 1, to be about absolute war. That confusion may be a key to understanding Gallie's contemptuous rejection of that chapter (see esp. p. 152) despite his deep admiration of the many "wonderful insights" Clausewitz has to offer.

<sup>75</sup> On this point, see footnote 8, which discusses in some detail the claim to this effect by Azar Gat and its adoption by subsequent writers.

least as early as 1804. The latter notion was clearly retained and somewhat further developed in 1816's first draft of *Vom Kriege*.<sup>76</sup>

Rather, to understand Clausewitz's final discussions of the role of politics in the dual nature of war, we need to understand how it reflects the lessons learned from the collapse of the absolute war concept described in the previous section. He by no means radically changed his direction in Book I. He simply pushed further down the same path, making incremental but—taken as a whole—profoundly significant changes to several components of his argument and to the terminology with which it was described. The thought-structure built around 'absolute war' is not replaced in Book I by one built on another such singular phrase or 'type,' nor on a new set of types. Rather, it is built around the clarification of a set of concepts or dialectical pairs that, taken together, are far more able to account for the variety of war as we experience it in the real world. The concept of 'absolute war' itself bifurcates into the unmitigated abstraction of ideal war and the real-world unilateral military objective of disarming the opponent. 'War of observation,' which Clausewitz had variously depicted as either a case of mutual ineffectuality or as an outright error in the face of the innovations of the French Revolution, had already morphed towards the end of Book VIII into the unilateral limited military objective of wearing down the opponent's will to continue a struggle—forcing him to drop political goals that can, however regretfully, be jettisoned without surrendering his existence.

At times, I myself have erroneously assumed that 'ideal war' is a synonym for absolute war. It is not. The ideal model is described in the first 5 (of 28) sections of Book I, Chapter 1 and then

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<sup>76</sup> Re 1804: Carl von Clausewitz, *Strategie aus dem Jahre 1804 mit Zusätzen von 1808 und 1809*, Hrsg. von E. Kessel (Hamburg, 1943), s.20 (my translation): “The policy goal of the war can be twofold [kann doppelter Art sein]. Either completely annihilating the enemy, abolishing his state existence, or prescribing conditions for peace. In both cases it must be the intention to paralyze the enemy forces in such a way that he cannot continue the war either at all or not without endangering his entire existence.” 'Policy' is the correct translation here, as Clausewitz is not describing a type of war but simply a unilateral objective. In this line, however, written as the French threat to Prussia's independence was rising towards the crescendo it would reach in 1806, he was still prescribing military annihilation as the proper route to either policy goal and not considering the possibilities that such a military goal may be unaffordable or simply unachievable to begin with. Thus the strategy of exhaustion does not seem to be on his list of options. In 1816, however [see Donker, *Aphorismen*, s. 63–64 (aphorism #26)], he wrote (my translation) that “It is often sufficient to tire the enemy armed forces and the hostile will....”

(unlike absolute war in Book VIII) is systematically demolished as a guide to the real world, starting in section 6, *Modifikationen in der Wirklichkeit* ("Modifications in the Reality").<sup>77</sup> The core of the ideal concept is contained in three interactions between notional (and mirror-image) adversaries, each of which results in an "extreme." The logic is that each adversary, recognizing from the start that any partial outlay of force will be matched by the opponent, understands that it has no choice but to preempt the other's inevitable escalation by marshalling all of its power in advance in order to disarm the enemy in one overwhelming blow aimed at leaving him defenseless. These three extremes are:

(Section 3.) "The Maximum Use of Force."<sup>78</sup>

(Section 4.) "The Aim is to Disarm the Enemy" (and this is necessary for both sides, in all cases).

(Section 5.) "The Maximum Exertion of Strength" (meaning the total means at each side's disposal and the total strength of their wills, exerted in one stroke).<sup>79</sup>

"Thus in the field of abstract thought the inquiring mind can never rest until it reaches the extreme." Clausewitz then asks, "Would this ever be the case in practice?" Yes, it would if:

(a) "war were a wholly isolated act, occurring suddenly and not produced by previous events in the political world."

(b) "it consisted of a single decisive act or a set of simultaneous ones."

(c) "the decision achieved was complete and perfect in itself, uninfluenced by any previous estimate of the political situation it would bring about."

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<sup>77</sup> H/P (p.78) and Jolles both translated this as "Modifications in Practice"; I've given the unambiguous Graham version.

<sup>78</sup> One of the odd things about Clausewitz's approach is that his discussion seldom stays in either the extreme/abstract/ideal or the real realm for long—he is constantly jumping back and forth from the real to the unreal, and the section that lays out the three extremes is full of references to very real factors and forces (as in "the maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect," which is a perfectly reasonable statement in the real world).

<sup>79</sup> This, he notes, does not occur in reality: "the very nature of war impedes the *simultaneous concentration of all forces*." H/P, section 9, p. 80.

In the real world, however, section 7 says "War Is Never an Isolated Act," section 8 says "War Does Not Consist of a Single Short Blow," and section 9 says "In War the Result Is Never Final."<sup>80</sup>

In section 10, the probabilities of real life are then contrasted to the term "*ein idealer*"<sup>81</sup> (referring to the discussion of logical extremes). "Move from the abstract to the real world, and the whole thing looks quite different..." So, war in the real world is subject, not to that rigid logic leading inescapably to the ideal, but to "its own peculiar laws," which perforce must be distinctly different from those of the ideal. Consequently, the ideal model, to use the language that appears in H/P, "leave[s] the real world quite unaffected" and will not "ever be the case in practice."

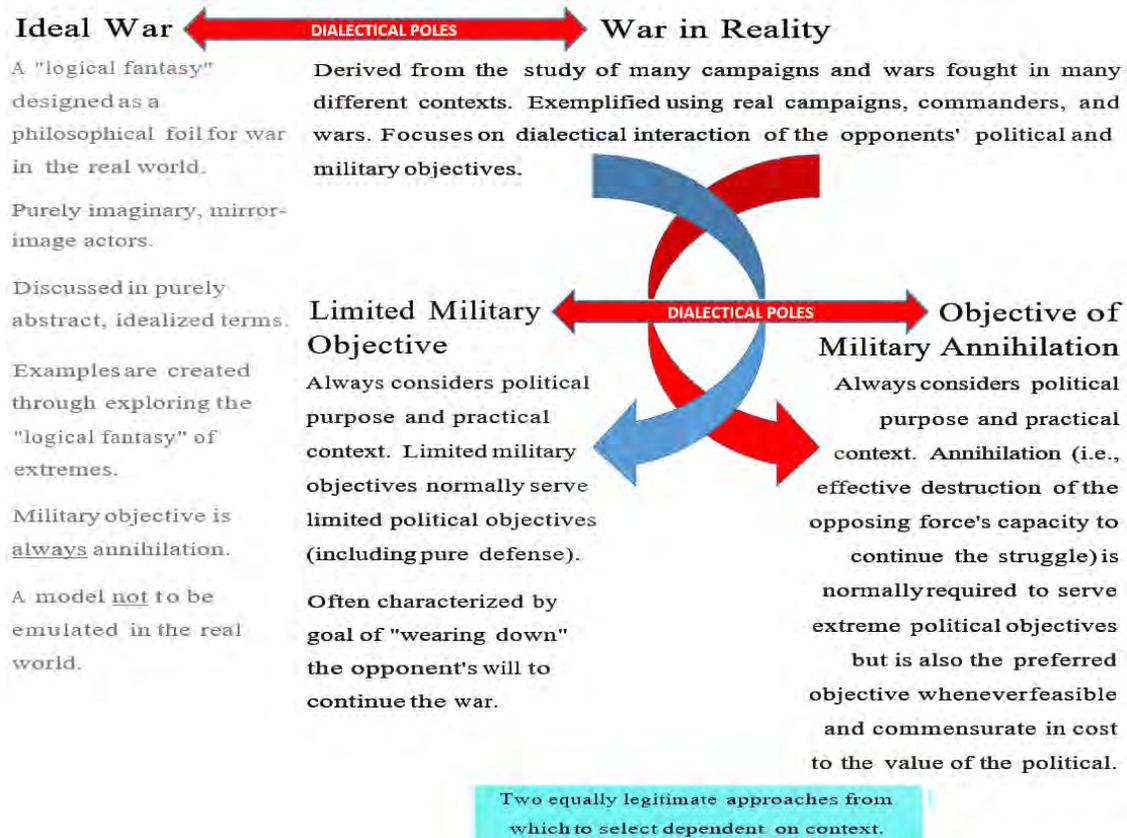
Thus Clausewitz's latest version of Book I eliminates the ambiguity surrounding absolute war's actual existence. It sets up a clear dialectical distinction between the pure abstraction of ideal war on the one hand—driven to utterly unachievable extremes outside the boundaries of time, space, and man's political nature—and war in practical reality on the other. For that reason it is demonstrated via notional opponents rather than the real-world Napoleonic anecdotes used to illustrate Book VIII's real-or-near-real absolute war.

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<sup>80</sup> Personally, I'm not sure the Carthaginians would agree with this last point. And they have plenty of company.

<sup>81</sup> The term "ideal war" (*idealer Krieger*), like the term "trinity," occurs only once in H/P—in Book I, Chapter 1, section 25. In *Vom Kriege*, however, this earlier reference in section 10 to "an ideal" as a fully abstract way of thinking about war—"ist der Krieg nicht mehr ein idealer"—shows that Clausewitz was indeed treating the ideal as a distinct, fully abstract category (and thus quite different from 'absolute war'). H/P, unfortunately, vaguely renders the line as "when war is no longer a theoretical affair." (Jolles does something similar there, but Graham got it right.) Book I also contains the 4 references to the "pure concept" of war mentioned earlier in this paper, which in Book I must refer back to ideal war and the three "extremes," not to absolute war, since the latter term has not yet appeared. While the word ideal appears 7 times in *Vom Kriege*, outside of those two references in Book I, Chapter 1, there is only one other use of it in the sense of an abstraction of the idea of war itself, and that reference is dismissive. That is in Book VIII, Chapter 3.B., in the aforementioned line that theory's "purpose is to demonstrate what war is in practice, not what its ideal nature ought to be." (H/P p. 593.) Thus the relationship between reality and abstraction in 'absolute war' remained vague, but Clausewitz evidently later decided that the completely abstract 'ideal' did in fact have to be explicitly explored in order for its relationship with reality to be better understood.

## LATER (“MATURE”) DIALECTICAL MODEL



'Ideal war' serves important purposes. First of all, it serves the function of an immovable benchmark. Unlike Napoleon's style of war-making, it is not going to be made obsolete by future developments. Not even full-SIOP<sup>82</sup> nuclear war can ignore time and space, and the fact of its historical non-occurrence implies that it can't transcend real-world politics and policy either.

Secondly, ideal war is an exercise in pure logic, serving to demonstrate the dangers of rigid logic in the human social universe and forcing the discussion to return to the practical domain of politics and real war:

Assuming ... that this extreme of effort were an absolute quantity that could easily be discovered, we must nevertheless admit that the human mind would hardly submit to be ruled by such logical fantasies.... If the two adversaries are no longer mere abstractions

<sup>82</sup> Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), the over-all U.S. plan for nuclear war, 1961–2003.

but individual states and governments, if the course of events is no longer theoretical [*ein idealer*] but one that is determined according to its own laws, then the actual situation supplies the data for ascertaining what is to be expected, the unknown that has to be discovered.<sup>83</sup>

This "logical fantasy" of ideal war is not merely an invention to provide philosophical atmosphere or 'cover.' I have known plenty of soldiers (and not a few civilians) who propounded that same perfectly logical—if utterly unrealistic—reasoning.

Unfortunately, Book I/Chapter 1's dense abstraction seems to have stopped many—probably most—would-be readers in their tracks. It has this effect either because it seems so difficult to grasp; because 'ideal war' is so repellant in its rigid logic and extreme violence; or, conversely, because some readers take the discussion of the extremes in ideal war to be *On War's* singular thesis and practical prescription (i.e., 'ideal war' must mean 'real-good war'). The latter thesis, once grasped, evidently obviates any need to plow through the rest of the chapter, much less the whole book.

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<sup>83</sup> The first half of this block quote is from Book I, Chapter 1, section 6, the second from section 10. I have been forced to use the more precise Jolles translation here.

The dialectical opposite of 'ideal war' is 'real war,' a term that occupies its literal meaning, encompassing war as it actually occurs, in all of its variety.<sup>84</sup> Within real war, there now appears a dialectical pair of equally respectable options: two distinctive but equally legitimate types of objective, which can coexist because objectives are unilateral and can vary between the opposed parties and can change, on either side, over time. One of these respectable types is the limited aim (which had already appeared in Book VIII, in the course of which it evolved out of the unrespectable "half-thing" or "war of observation"). The limited aim can be defensive: "pure" defense aims only at self-preservation and has no "positive aim" of increasing the defender's power—it poses no threat to the attacker other than that of frustrating him. Or it can be offensive: the attacker seeks only a modest goal—e.g., to grab a piece of territory, to gain a bargaining chip, or to make the defender give up some political objective of his own, etc. The limited military aim implies no need to render the opponent helpless. The purpose of military operations is merely to wear down his will to continue an unprofitable struggle, as the American revolutionaries wore down Great Britain's will to retain the 13 colonies, or as the North Vietnamese wore down the Americans' will to maintain an independent Republic of Vietnam.

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<sup>84</sup> Thus the term "real war" is not truly a term of art or a formal category—it simply means war as it appears in the real world. Clausewitz refers to it in many different ways. However, in Book VIII, p. 604, H/P uses the phrase "real war" in a manner that makes it appear to be some kind of specialized category or even a synonym for absolute war: "The art of war will shrivel into prudence, and its main concern will be to make sure the delicate balance is not suddenly upset in the enemy's favor and the half-hearted war does not become a real war after all." Unfortunately (unfortunate because this line had given me an interesting idea, now irrelevant), this is simply an error—and a puzzling one. Clausewitz's actual wording is "*Die ganze Kriegskunst verwandelt sich in bloße Vorsicht, und diese wird hauptsächlich darauf gerichtet sein, daß das schwankende Gleichgewicht nicht plötzlich zu unserem Nachteil umschlage und der halbe Krieg sich in einen ganzen verwandle.*" The last phrase is literally "the half-war does not become a whole." J.J. Graham had rendered this sentence correctly: "All military art then changes itself into mere prudence, the principal object of which will be to prevent the trembling balance from suddenly turning to our disadvantage, and the half war from changing into a complete one." Oddly, Jolles also renders *einen ganzen* as "a real one," though he avoids some of H/P's other questionable decisions (e.g., rendering *verwandelt*—transforms or changes—as the pejorative "shrivels").

This confusion permeates the literature. A good example is Paul Schuurman (a writer with whom I normally tend to agree), "Clausewitz on real war," *Peace Review* 26 (2014) 372–379. There, Schuurman portrays 'real war' as being some particular part of the spectrum of war in our actual historical experience, suggesting that its specific location on that spectrum changed over the course of Clausewitz's evolution. Describing the early phases of that evolution, he contrasts 'real war' with 'absolute war' in a manner that seems to portray the latter as both the high end of war in the real world and as a pure abstraction. Here he seems to have been misled by H/P's erroneous use (p.604; see paragraph above) of the term "real war" in describing the opposite to 'wars of observation' (i.e., as 'absolute war'). Later in the article, Schuurman portrays 'real war' as war of limited objectives in contrast to the pursuit of more extreme objectives. (Unfortunately, this article lacks notes, so it is impossible to follow his argument in terms of exactly which sections of *Vom Kriege* he refers to. Clearly, however, he views 'ideal war' as being the same concept as 'absolute war' and 'real war' as a term describing only some of history's actual conflicts.)

The aim to "wear down" (*ermatten* or *ermüden*) the opponent in pursuit of limited aims (defensive or offensive) is very fully developed in Book I, Chapter 2, which notes that by far the most important method, judging from the frequency of its use, is *to wear down* the enemy. That expression is more than a label; it describes the process precisely, and is not so metaphorical as it may seem at first. Wearing down the enemy in a conflict means using *the duration of the war to bring about a gradual exhaustion of his physical and moral resistance [physischen Kräfte und des Willens]....*<sup>85</sup> It is evident that this method, wearing down the enemy, applies to the great number of cases where the weak endeavor to resist the strong.<sup>86</sup>

The dialectical opposite of the aim of wearing down the opponent is the aim of disarming him—militarily incapacitating him, which may be the positive goal of an aggressor or the optional riposte of a defender who has played his cards well.<sup>87</sup> The goal of military operations in that case is the destruction of the opponent's capacity for further warfare, leaving him unable to continue the struggle regardless of his will to do so.

The aim of disarming the enemy appears both in ideal war and in real-world war (it is the sole overlap), but with crucial differences. In the second extreme of ideal war, the aim of disarming the enemy "must always be the aim in warfare.... [and] must be taken as applying to both sides." Completely disarming a foe is something that certainly has been achieved many times in the real

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<sup>85</sup> Book I, Chapter 2, "Purpose and Means in War" (*Zweck und Mittel im Kriege*), H/P pp. 93–94. To say 'exhaust his resistance,' rather than 'his will' as in the German original, seriously distorts the meaning here, implying that this is something the attacker does to the defender. In fact it works both ways, and Clausewitz's actual emphasis is on its usefulness to the defender.

<sup>86</sup> H/P's "wear down" is meant in the sense of the German meaning "to tire or to fatigue the opponent." "Wear down" in English can also mean "to erode," and Erosion was the label we used for the same concept in *MCDP 1-1, Strategy* and *MCDP 1-2, Campaigning* (USMC Combat Developments Command, 1997). The slight difference in meaning is worth noting, as the metaphorical entailments of exhaustion and erosion differ. In practical terms, however, *es macht nichts*.

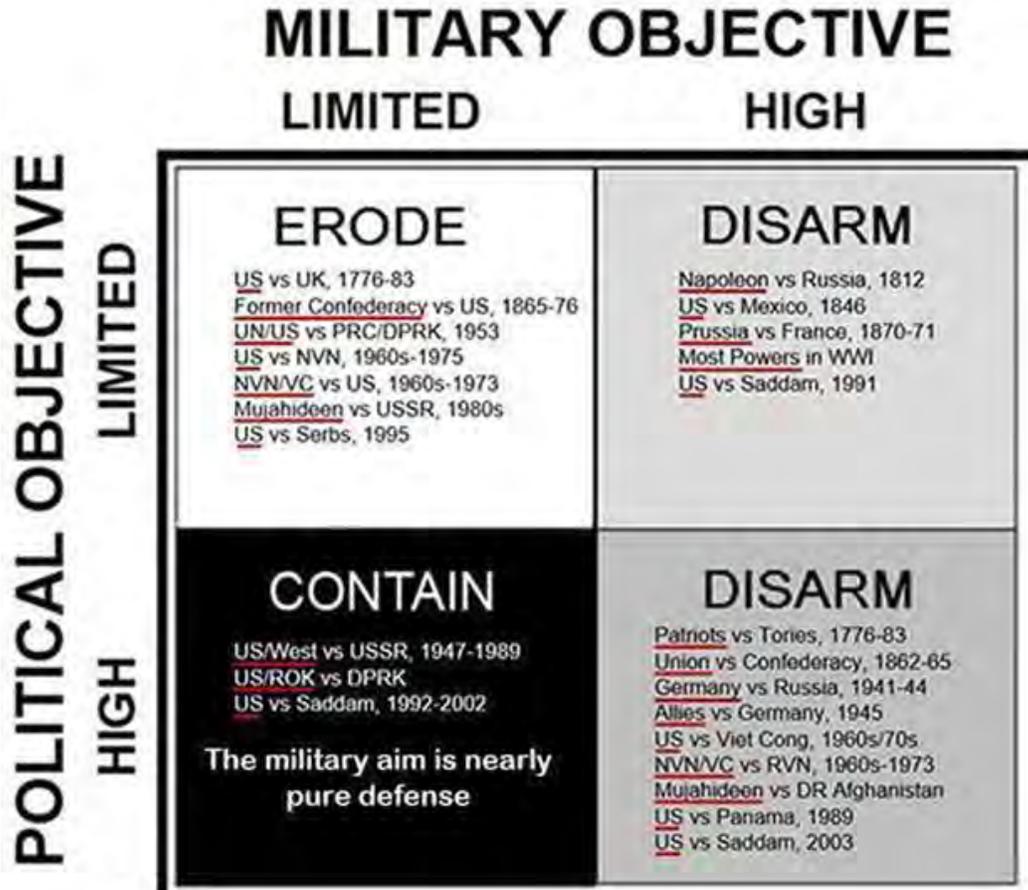
<sup>87</sup> Another way to summarize this (which I include here simply because I like the phrasing despite its redundancy to the main text): Ideal war is an exercise in pure logic: it assumes mirror-image notional contestants that lack the asymmetrical features of real political entities and it ignores inescapable features of reality (especially time, space, and humans' political nature). Any description of real war has to take all of those missing features into account while it cannot, in turn, completely escape logic. *Disarming* the opponent is a logical solution when the enemy's motives to continue the struggle are greater than his ability to defend himself. *Wearing down* your opponent's will to continue the struggle is a logical solution when a) the value to him of his objective is less than the cost of rendering you helpless, or b) disarming the opponent is not an available objective in the first place because he is too powerful to disarm.

world; "that aim is derived from the theoretical concept of war; but since many wars do actually come very close to fulfilling it, let us examine this kind of war first of all." It is not, however, achieved in the manner described by the three extremes (i.e., not in one blow simultaneously marshalling all of our strength), nor is it necessarily a part of all wars, nor do both adversaries necessarily pursue it even in cases where one does, nor does either side actually have to threaten to achieve it even if it doesn't actually have to deliver on the threat in reality. There is nothing inevitable about the aim of disarming the enemy in the real world.

Both of these military objectives—wearing down the enemy or disarming him—may serve either limited or extreme political objectives, depending on circumstances and costs. They can be mixed and matched in multiple ways to suit the changing circumstances of either side. For example, in the Second Indochina War the North Vietnamese pursued limited military and political aims against the United States while simultaneously and on the same terrain pursuing the complete military and political destruction of the Republic of Vietnam. The North's posture regarding the United States is best seen as a matter of defense (in the North's view the US was a foreign aggressor occupying half of the national territory), while its stance regarding the South Vietnamese state was indisputably offensive. Though Clausewitz himself normally envisioned the political ends of warfare in rather civilized dimensions, this structure is adaptable to far more savage political goals like those of Nazi Germany or ISIS. One cannot exterminate helpless populations until one has stripped away their military shield.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> As an aside, I would add that even in real wars in which one side actually disarms the enemy, that disarming is often relative. In the 1991 Iraq War, for instance, Iraq was quite thoroughly disarmed in relation to the US-led coalition (and this would have been true even if the coalition had gone on to invade Iraq seeking to overthrow Saddam politically). The regime was nonetheless still able to defend itself against its domestic rebels.



The relationship between real-world political and military objectives in *On War*, Book I. This graphic is derived from Figure 3 in *MCDP 1-1, Strategy* (p. 57). Note that Clausewitz is describing types of objective, not types of war. Objectives are unilateral—what one belligerent intends to do to another. In describing the objectives of rendering the opponent politically or militarily impotent, we use the term "high" as the counterpart to "limited" because Clausewitz offered no simple or short label for positive political objectives so ambitious that they provoke the opponent to maximum resistance, and thereby require the destruction of his military capacity rather than the mere wearing down of his will.

It is important to note that this approach to characterizing real wars in the terms of Book I is not determined by their scale, their duration, the resources committed, the passions driving them, or the number of casualties (factors best dealt with through the lens of Clausewitz's "fascinating trinity"). World War I, despite its enormous length, scale, and sacrifices, was generally a war of limited political objectives—i.e., there was rarely an intention to overthrow regimes or eliminate states; those Great Power governments that were overthrown fell to internal opponents. These limited political objectives were coupled with the pursuit of military annihilation (to be achieved, in practice, via tactical attrition—a semantic issue discussed in our next section). On the other hand,

though rather modest in scale the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama sought extreme political objectives—the complete overthrow and replacement of the opposing government—and accomplished that through the complete destruction (by Clausewitz's definition) of the Panamanian forces. Militarily, despite its low casualties, it was a war of annihilation. During the Cold War, the West certainly sought and eventually achieved massive political change in the Soviet Union, but militarily its objectives were carefully limited—indeed, almost 'pure defense.' (The decisive offensive instruments in the West's containment strategy against the USSR were not military in nature.) In 1991, the US and its allies effectively annihilated Iraqi military power in pursuit of the limited aim of expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait; the US toyed with supporting the political overthrow of Saddam Hussain but backed off because of the implications of a Shiite takeover in Iraq (thus allowing him to slaughter the Shiite rebels whom the US had encouraged). The 2003 US invasion of Iraq employed a strategy of military annihilation to disarm Saddam's state, permitting the imposition of US political objectives as extreme as any in history. All of these variations can be richly described using Clausewitz's mature analytical structure.

This structure offers no recipe for strategic success. One can easily use its categories to describe failure. In 1812, Napoleon sought to annihilate Russia's armies in pursuit of the limited political goal of forcing Russia to comply with France's economic isolation of Great Britain. The Russian Czar Alexander I, however, perceived that Napoleon's success in that endeavor would effectively mean the extinction of Russia as a Great Power—i.e., a matter of survival in his own eyes which permitted no compromise, no surrender. In Indochina the USA sought what it considered to be the limited objective of eroding the will of North Vietnam to continue its assault on the sovereign South. The North was quite incapable of complying with that policy, which it construed as tantamount to political suicide: How does a nationalist movement justify its existence (and its repressive methods of governance) after accepting the permanent loss of half of the nation to imperialist enslavement? In the American Civil War, the southern Confederacy pursued what it perceived to be the limited, defensive goal of its own independence, which the northern Union perceived to be an existential attack on "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Each of these cases involves a cognitive dissonance between the adversaries, and all demonstrate the value of understanding both one's own objectives and their appearance in the minds of one's opponent.

Thus the notion that Clausewitz's mature 'dual nature of war' reflected two 'types' of war—'limited war' and some distinct and murderous opposite, variously labeled 'absolute,' 'unlimited' or 'total war,' etc.—is utterly incorrect. A full listing of the 'types' we could generate using Clausewitz's objectives-based model would be of little value and would end up sounding like Lichtenberg's "Extract from a Fire Regulation."<sup>89</sup> There would be a category we could label 'limited war,' but this would apply only to situations in which all of the antagonists aim at military and political goals short of threatening the military capacity and the political existence of their adversaries (a description that does not apply to either the Korean or Vietnamese wars, which are often used to exemplify the phrase). It is much simpler and far more useful to apply the concept to a specific war or potential war within the specific political context that exists when that conflict appears on our radar screens. It should not be necessary to stress (but, unfortunately, it is) that whatever static description we use it to construct applies only to a particular phase of the conflict. It may not reflect the conscious thinking of the participants, who may categorize their own, their allies', or their opponent's objectives quite differently (and act accordingly). It may apply to only one element of a given side because political entities are not unitary rational actors—the various armed services and the diplomatic corps or propaganda arm may be pursuing objectives quite different from one another's and from those that the political leadership thinks it has ordered. And so on, because politics is infinitely creative.

Clausewitz's latest dialectical construct better connected the character of warfare to its dynamically changeable political motives, better accounted for the differences in the power and motives of the two sides, better reflected the dynamics of offense and defense described in Books VI and VII, and better accounted for the vast variety of strategic configurations found in real-world warfare. It is adaptable to even greater changes in warfare than Clausewitz had seen in the history

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<sup>89</sup> Clausewitz's example of mindless theoretical *reductio ad absurdum*. H/P pp. 61–62.

he had surveyed or experienced personally.<sup>90</sup> It enables us to describe the complexities and uncertainties of real-world warfare within a meaningful strategic-analytical structure, and thereby to generate meaningful comparisons, better questions about historical analyses, and better proposals for coming military operations. It does not, unfortunately, enable us to eliminate either the uncertainties or the complexity.

### AN EXCURSION INTO THE TACTICAL REALM

Particularly among soldiers, much of the resistance to Clausewitz's distinction between pursuit of the limited aim and its dialectical opposite, leaving the enemy militarily helpless (“disarmed”), turns on a major semantic confusion in the way we apply terms like annihilation, exhaustion, erosion, containment, etc., at the strategic vice the tactical or operational levels.

For example, in 2010 Wilf Owen took me to task for some criticisms I had made of an article in *Small Wars Journal*. He said that "amongst soldiers, there is not much of an intellectual debate between 'annihilation' and 'exhaustion.'"<sup>91</sup>

The main reason soldiers don't think about this distinction is because they are professionally focused at the tactical and operational levels and very naturally confuse annihilation and attrition as battlefield *methods* with annihilation and exhaustion as strategic *objectives*. Soldiers also very often confuse exhaustion and annihilation as being the same damned thing—i.e., if the enemy is truly "exhausted," that means he's got nothing (*nihil*) left—right?<sup>92</sup> Finding accurate and effective

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<sup>90</sup> This last proposition is arguable, in that Clausewitz's historical studies encompassed a great variety of wars. Most of the discussion in *On War* is of intra-European wars between 1618 and 1815, and this tends to focus on contrasts between the rather restrained warfare between c.1661 and 1789 and the revolutionary struggles after c.1792. Clausewitz was certainly aware, however, of the vicious character of Europe's so-called “religious wars” c.1517–1648, the conflicts between the Christian Powers and the Ottoman Empire, and the murderous 'small wars' of his own era like those in the Vendée, the Tyrol, and Spain. And he was familiar with a broader historical scope encompassing ancient and medieval Europe and the Mongol conquests. Rudolf von Caemmerer, *Clausewitz* (Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag, 1905), p. 76, calculated that he had studied "*mehr als 130 Feldzüge*." Admittedly, he somehow failed to study the industrial wars of the 20th century, which many commentators view as quintessentially "Clausewitzian" struggles.

<sup>91</sup> Christopher Bassford and William ["Wilf"] Owen, "[Comment/Reply](http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/CommentReHedgehogs.htm)" at <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/CommentReHedgehogs.htm>, which concerns Justin Kelly and Mike Brennan's article "Looking For the Hedgehog Idea," *Australian Army Journal*, Volume VII, Number 1, pp. 41–56; reprinted in *Small Wars Journal*, 13 OCT 2010. (Some of my comments therein serve, incidentally, to demonstrate my own earlier confusion over the relationship between absolute and ideal war.)

<sup>92</sup> This hardly means that there are no such fine distinctions within tactics. Given the tactical mission of 'suppression,' for example, the artillery tactician would almost certainly pick different munitions and deliver them in a different manner than if he had been given the tactical mission of 'destruction.'

words that can elicit the right behavior without stimulating actual critical thought can be awfully difficult, as any good doctrine writer soon discovers.

Understanding these semantic overlaps and disjunctions, we need to peel apart strategic or operational objective and tactical method. Annihilation at either the tactical or strategic level means rendering the enemy force incapable of further effective resistance. On the ground, the soldier's objective in battle is indeed, of necessity, almost always the destruction of the force confronting him. (Friction being pervasive, in practice he usually has to settle for mere attrition.) But that's not necessarily the same thing as strategic annihilation. Annihilating one of the enemy's battlefield forces may be a step towards annihilating the whole or merely a means of inflicting stress upon it and its political masters. We tend to think of a 'battle of annihilation' as an exhilarating, relatively cheap, overwhelming victory over an opponent vastly inferior in numbers, combat power, or (and this is especially enticing) skill. Examples are, respectively, Little Bighorn (1876); Omdurman (1898); Tannenberg (1914). On the other hand, one may achieve strategic annihilation without any such economy through a campaign of battlefield attrition. For example, in the American Civil War the Union sought to annihilate (strategic military objective) the Confederate Army, thus disarming the Confederate government, thus freeing the USA to eliminate that government and completely re-absorb (political objective) the Confederacy's people and territory. But the Union armies achieved this annihilating victory via a grinding campaign of tactical attrition that fatally drained Confederate resources and manpower but cost the North a worse-than-1:1 casualty exchange ratio.

Strategic exhaustion or erosion refers to wearing down the opponent's will to pursue an optional objective (i.e., one he can give up without risking or actually sacrificing his existence). As we have noted above, however, political leaders don't get tired of surviving (which they seldom consider an optional goal) and are normally willing to resist to the last soldier. We don't usually use the word exhaustion in a tactical sense, but attrition means essentially the same thing. The goal of an exhaustion or attrition strategy is to make one's enemy so tired of the struggle that he is willing to accept the accomplishment of your own objectives—which have to be 'limited' because political entities seldom get tired of existing. We may erode his will through continual small-scale attrition and drawing out the conflict, as is typically the method of guerilla warfare. But many guerilla campaigns are merely a phase in a longer insurrectionary struggle aimed at the political

overthrow of a government. In that case the actual or long-term *military-strategic* goal is annihilation, since one cannot get to a government to destroy it without somehow removing its military shield. There are, however—as Clausewitz notes—many ways to ‘destroy’ an army that do not involve its physical destruction, or even combat. Given the means and the opportunity, however, we may pursue the enemy's exhaustion through a battle or series of battles that result in battlefield annihilation of the particular enemy forces involved. If our objectives are limited and our enemy thinks he can survive the acceptance of defeat, he can concede the political issue before his overall force is eliminated leaving him disarmed. (And we, in turn, because our political objectives are limited, will accept a negotiated end to hostilities that leaves our opponent still in existence and with some continued military capacity.) But if the purpose of your attritional tactics is to cause the enemy's military collapse (whether or not you intend his political destruction), your military-strategic objective is annihilation.

A military commander not conscious of these distinctions, working for a political leadership with similar shortcomings, will find it very difficult to understand his or her true mission and options.

### **ANOTHER EXCURSION, THIS TIME INTO THE REALM OF VISUAL METAPHORS**

While I have found visual metaphors very powerful when describing various conceptualizations of Clausewitz's Trinity,<sup>93</sup> I have had depressingly little success trying to convey this paper's concept via graphics. Nonetheless, I have wasted sufficient time doing so that I feel obliged to include at least the following such effort in this paper.

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<sup>93</sup> See the section “Visual metaphors” in Christopher Bassford, “Tiptoe Through the Trinity: The Strange Persistence of Trinitarian Warfare,” *ClausewitzStudies.org*, working paper, <https://clausewitzstudies.org/mobile/trinity8.htm#VisMet>.

## The Evolution of Clausewitz's Strategic-Analytical Framework



**Clausewitz v1.0.** War is one, fundamentally self-similar phenomenon. “War of Observation” is practiced by low-energy incompetents. The actual trajectory on the X-Y axis is purely notional. Absolute war is achievable in reality or nearly so, while also sometimes appearing as something of an abstraction, and should be pursued in practice.

**Clausewitz v2.0.** War in the real world involves two distinctly different kinds of objective—i.e., ‘attractors’ or foci. Thus the “double nature of war”/“*doppelte Art des Krieges*.” (The red image is a Lorenzian ‘strange attractor’ from the field of nonlinear dynamics.)<sup>94</sup> The pursuit of limited objectives can be perfectly legitimate. Ideal war is shown as being clearly outside the bounds of reality.

This treatment of ‘version 1’ and later ‘version 2’ is, of course, artificial. Clausewitz experimented with various ways of framing the problem.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>94</sup> The quotation is from the Note of 1827. For the relevance of mathematical nonlinearity to the study of Clausewitz, see Alan D. Beyerchen, “[Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War](#),” *International Security*, 17:3 (Winter, 1992), pp. 59–90.

<sup>95</sup> For instance, the hard-to-follow discussion at the beginning of Book VIII, Chapter 3.A, makes a distinction between the version of absolute war achievable in reality and another real-world form which goes unnamed. The reader may infer that the latter is the form elsewhere labeled ‘war of observation’ or one in which both sides are pursuing limited aims. The basis for the distinction in this discussion, however, lies in whether there is one continuous struggle in which only final victory counts or, instead, there is a series of distinct episodes and one side or the other wins “on points.” It is possible to connect this analysis to the framework either of Book VIII’s absolute war discussion or of Book I’s approach to war in the real world, but it appears to be abortive as a fundamental distinction between types of real war. H/P’s version of this discussion is incomprehensible, but the Jolles translation is clear, as is Graham’s.

## CONCLUSION

My reconstruction of the evolution of Clausewitz's thinking is not strongly based on documentation or historical records. Although there is certainly some suggestive evidence, the sources necessary to support such an effort don't exist, especially in regard to the writing history of Book VIII. Such sources probably never did exist. After all, the thinking process occurs only partly on paper. Rather, this reconstruction is based on a close examination of the actual terminologies and logic Clausewitz deployed—and on where they appear in the existing book *Vom Kriege*—in the light of what little we do know of the text's history. Regardless of whether the particular 'story' I've built is accurate, there remains no reason to doubt that the entire absolute war construct and its distinctive terminology—which is confined almost entirely to the first three chapters of Book VIII—was dropped at some later point in the evolution of Clausewitz's thinking. It was replaced by a subtly but nonetheless radically altered treatment of the same elements. This new approach was most clearly reflected in the Note of July 1827 and largely executed in the first two or three chapters of Book I—by common agreement and Clausewitz's own description the last work he completed before his untimely death—and in the second half of Book VIII. We cannot know in any detail the actual train of thought that led Clausewitz to make these changes, though the sharp turn in the middle of Book VIII is suggestive. However, now we can understand much better exactly what Clausewitz was doing in the new framework:

- firmly migrating the most extreme conception of war from the quasi-real, quasi-abstract, but fundamentally actionable absolute-war model into the purely abstract sphere described by “ideal war.” There it could serve as a permanent benchmark (and foil) for the range of warfare actually to be encountered and practiced in the real world (i.e., ‘real war’).
- dropping the practice of treating real-world opponents as mirror-image equals with identical motives and objectives and fully recognizing the antagonists' real-world differences, not merely in terms of their differing innate characteristics and capabilities but in terms of their differing (and ever-shifting) policy goals.
- dropping the effort to describe interactive wars as singular “types” *at all* and switching to a focus on the interaction of different types of objectives, which now becomes the basis for explaining the kaleidoscopic diversity in the strategic structures of real-world wars.

- Preserving the real-world version of absolute war in the form of the unilateral military objective of rendering the opponent's forces unable to continue the struggle, but leaving that military objective free from a fixed association with any particular kind of political objective.
- dropping the effort to type-classify warfare into intrinsically superior and inferior modes, i.e., dropping the prejudicial treatment of the pursuit of limited objectives as “a half-thing” and recognizing its legitimacy and full equality, in principle, with the objective of rendering the opponent helpless.

Thus we must recognize that the absolute war model appearing in Chapters 1–3.B of Book VIII and the dialectical “ideal war vs. real-war” model of Book I (which is also largely reflected in the second half of Book VIII) are in fact distinct and distinguishable strategic-analytical structures, even though they co-exist incompatibly and profoundly confusingly in different sections of the existing texts of *Vom Kriege* and (especially) *On War*. Once we acknowledge this fact, it is not difficult to see the serious flaws of the former (i.e., the absolute war vs “war of observation” model), including both its weaknesses and its inconsistencies, and the superior utility of the latter (i.e., the ideal war vs. war-in-reality model), with its full recognition of the dual nature of war and its practical relevance for actual warfare.

This recognition will take us a long way towards resolving what have appeared for nearly two centuries to be irresolvable contradictions in Clausewitz's arguments. The contradictions are, of course, real. But so is Clausewitz's own solution.

