

Clausewitz's "Wondrous Trinity" as a Coordinate System of War and Violent Conflict

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Clausewitz's "Wondrous Trinity" as a Coordinate System of War and Violent Conflict

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Rather than discarding Clausewitz's theory of war in response to the revolutionary changes in modern warfare, this article articulates a broader theory of war based on his concept of the "wondrous trinity," identifying it as his true legacy. The author shows that the concept of trinitarian war attributed to Clausewitz by his critics, which seems to be applicable only to wars between states, is a caricature of Clausewitz's theory. He goes on to develop Clausewitz's theory that war is composed of the three tendencies of violence/force, fighting, and the affiliation of the combatants to a warring community. Each war can be analyzed as being composed of these three tendencies and their opposites.

Since the 1990s various influential authors have argued that Clausewitz's theory of war is no longer applicable, both in relation to contemporary conflicts and in general (see the discussion in Nooy 1997). Some have suggested that it is harmful (van Crevelde 1991, 1998) and even self-destructive (Keegan 1993, 1995) to continue to use this theory as the basis for understanding current warfare and as a guide to political action, given the revolutionary changes in war and violent action occurring in the world's communities.¹ Clausewitz, it is proposed, was concerned only with war between states employing regular armies, whereas conflict today mainly involves non-state actors.

Both claims are overdrawn, however, with respect both to the core of Clausewitz's theory (Strachan 2007) and the unique characteristics of today's "new wars" (Kaldor 1999).² With the exception of much of Africa and some very old conflicts at the fringes of the former empires, existing states, along with hierarchically organized political-religious groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, are still the decisive, if

no longer the sole, actors in war. Additionally, Clausewitz has much more to say about contemporary forms of warfare than the highly selective interpretations by his modern critics might suggest (Howard 2002; Lonsdale 2004; Angstrom and Duyvesteyn 2003; Duyvesteyn 2005). However, the criticisms by Clausewitz's newest detractors are both provocative and constructive (Strachan 2007), in that they force us to read Clausewitz more exactly (Heuser 2002, 2005; Smith 2005) and to extract aspects of his work that were previously underexposed. The attempt to develop a non-linear theory of warfare following Clausewitz's conception of friction (Beyerchen 1992), the updating of his concept of strategy (Heuser 2002, 2005), and the adaptation of Clausewitz for the information age (Lonsdale 2005) are worth noting.³

A series of authors (Bassford and Villacres 1992; Echevarria 1995a, 1995b, 2003; Handel 2001; Herberg-Rothe 2001a, 2007) have attempted to foreground the "wondrous trinity" that Clausewitz himself describes as his own "Consequences for Theory" (Clausewitz 1984, 89). Here he indirectly

¹ On Keegan's criticisms, see Herberg-Rothe 2001b; on van Crevelde see Herberg-Rothe 2001a.

² For a more sophisticated view than that of Kaldor, see Munkler 2004.

³ All of these contributions were presented at the conference on "Clausewitz in the Twenty-first Century," Oxford, March 2005, and can be found in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007.

repeats his renowned adage that war is “merely the continuation of policy by other means” (87), while at the same time identifying it as only one of three principal tendencies of which each war is composed.

The significance of the “wondrous trinity” as the starting point of Clausewitz’s theory of war is indirectly acknowledged by his present critics, who impute to Clausewitz the concept of the “trinitarian war.” Strictly speaking, the concept of the “trinitarian war” does not stem from Clausewitz, as it fundamentally contradicts the concept of the “wondrous trinity.” The former term actually comes from Harry G. Summers, Jr., who, in the early 1980s (as a U.S. Army colonel), wrote a most influential book in which he analyzed the mistakes made in the Vietnam War by drawing on the example Clausewitz mentions in the “wondrous trinity” while flipping Clausewitz’s central point on its head in the process (Summers 1982; Heuser 2005, 66–69).

The critique of Clausewitz reduces his whole theory to one sentence: war is the continuation of policy. Keegan and van Creveld, his most eminent critics, often quote only half of the famous phrase: Whereas Clausewitz emphasized a dialectical tension in his formula (war is a continuation of policy, but using means other than those of policy itself) they usually suppress the second part of this inherent tension in their interpretations and often even in their quotations. This caricature of Clausewitz, which is obviously inadequate as a theory to address current developments, is used to construct an unbridgeable gap between “new” and “old” wars as well as to call into question the primacy of politics. Additionally, much of the criticism of Clausewitz contains hidden paradigms which are controversial and problematic in their own right, and would require discussion if they were not contrasted with the caricature of Clausewitz’s theory. I will first discuss the criticisms highlighted by Martin van Creveld as a prominent example of such an approach, before introducing the “wondrous trinity” and explaining why it

must be regarded as Clausewitz’s actual legacy (Aron 1980, 1986; Herberg-Rothe 1998, 2007). Following this I will methodologically interpret the “wondrous trinity” as a uniform, comprehensive concept from Clausewitz’s different and in part contradictory definitions, terms, and formulas, and try to develop this concept into a general theory of violent conflict.

1. A Fundamental Paradigm Change

Expectations of a largely peaceful and development-led twenty-first century that were widespread in the early 1990s have been dashed by the brutal wars in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Kosovo, the numerous wars in sub-Saharan Africa, the threat of terrorism, and finally the Iraq war. In response, theorists have attempted to bring about a fundamental paradigm change in the political theory of war, from Clausewitz to Nietzsche—the two names representing two contradictory discourses. Martin van Creveld’s anti-Clausewitzian approach is of course “pure Nietzsche,” as he himself emphasized (van Creveld 2000).

At first sight Clausewitz’s discourse would seem not to offer an adequate basis for understanding the development of current types of warfare, or the shift from war between states to war that is globalized but basically domestic. The key problem, however, is not the changes in global war and violence, but the assessment of this process. In parts of the discourse in political theory, the indisputable changes serve as arbitrary examples, as a way of bringing about a more fundamental shift from the primacy of politics and civil society—via the military—to the primacy of violent fighting.⁴

Van Creveld’s acknowledgment of his debt to Nietzsche helps to elucidate his theoretical approach—without getting into a separate Nietzsche discussion, which would be a different debate. Sentences from van Creveld’s work, like his statement that it is violent fighting which gives meaning to

4 In German, Clausewitz always uses the term *Kampf*, which can be translated by “struggle,” “fight,” or even “combat,” depending on context. I have chosen to use “fighting” or “fight” as best expressing Clausewitz’s concept. A similar problem arises with Clausewitz’s term *Gewalt*, which can

be translated as either “force” or “violence.” Here I choose “violence,” which in most cases should be understood as violent action. Rather than searching for a single translation for every term, I recognize that Clausewitz’s terms articulate tensions within the concepts they denote. In

some cases I have tried to mark these tensions by using more than one possible translation, for example: “fight/struggle” or “violence/force.”

human life, no longer appear just as an incomprehensible accompaniment to a basically correct analysis of current changes, but reveal the fundamental premises of this non-Clausewitzian theoretical approach. Following Nietzsche, with his statement that war was not the continuation of politics, but politics the continuation of war by other means, Michel Foucault seemed to bring this counter-program to Clausewitz to the heart of the debate (Foucault 2003).⁵

This giving primacy to violent fighting has overturned the original intentions in some of the civil war discussion of the 1990s. Trutz von Trotha's attempt to shed light on the tendency of every war to be a social action in itself and to become independent of any purpose from outside led to a problematic conclusion that seems to be a reversal of his original intentions: with respect to civil wars, Trutz von Trotha predicted a development for Europe similar to the one that can currently be observed in sub-Saharan Africa. Von Trotha argues that in world-historical terms, the idea of the primacy of the public good in the state and public space, that heritage of the Greek *polis*, can only be considered as "exotic." The western world would now return slowly to historical normality, which has always been the reality in Africa: to the concentric order in which the priority of the primary, special relationship applies—the commitment to whoever is nearest to us. According to von Trotha, sub-Saharan Africa foretells the future of the western world.⁶

On the one hand this perspective seems to constitute a warning of seemingly endless wars, and even genocide, that would not be limited to sub-Saharan Africa. Von Trotha states, however, that this is also the "future," which realizes what the West has always attributed to the modern age: movement, experimentation, and the invention of new ways of exercising political power, a remarkable individualism

of risk and power. Developing this position, von Trotha argues that civilization is reverting to "Bellum omnium contra omnes" in the "classic Hobbesian sense" *because* the modern war of the state not only condemns man to a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," but also is able to put an end to it (Trotha 1999, 92–94). When even the horrors of war and violence in Africa are seen in relative terms, with reference to an exemplary individualism of risk and might, the questionable consequences of this kind of discourse become obvious.

This change in priorities with its emphasis on violent fighting, including the inversion of Clausewitz's formula, has become established outside the civil war discussion. Samuel P. Huntington's "clash of civilizations" is a prominent example of this paradigm change (even though Huntington's expositions are clearly more sophisticated). According to Huntington, people use politics not only to claim their interests, but also to define their own identity: "We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against" (Huntington 1997, 21). In this way, Huntington formulates a significant aspect of the non-Clausewitzian paradigm, the rejection of an instrumental view of war and violence, and replaces it with the view that war relates to identity.

I should emphasize that the current critics of Clausewitz go beyond questioning whether his concept of the relation of policy or politics to war is still adequate to address the current changes in warfare. More important, they reduce his complex theory of dynamic relations to a single formula, in order to contrast this seemingly inadequate approach with their own concepts.

⁵ It has to be acknowledged that despite this apparent claim, such statements must not always be interpreted in a generalized sense (Lemke 2008), but also be considered with respect to the context of the proposition itself as well as the context in which Foucault made the statement. For example, Foucault was correct concerning the understanding of politics during and between the two world wars. In the case of Clausewitz, Foucault later reversed his statement by acknowledging that Clausewitz's

proposition was correct within a particular context: Clausewitz's formula would have merit concerning the period of the institutionalization of the military, and the perpetuation of the military as an institution would not indicate the presence of warfare in times of peace, but of diplomacy within a broader concept of politics. (Foucault 2007, 305–306). In my opinion Foucault's proposition can be a useful tool for analyzing some historical developments and thus has some merit. Nevertheless, as a general

proposition this statement would not only be wrong, but would have problematic consequences. In my view it is nearly impossible to distinguish in Foucault's writings between statements which are only valid within a particular context and those which could be regarded as propositions in general.

⁶ Trotha (2000) simply adopts some aspects of the approach of Robert Kaplan (1994) and overemphasizes them.

2. The "Wondrous Trinity"

Clausewitz's "wondrous trinity" is found at the end of the first chapter of Book I of his *On War* under the heading "Consequences for Theory." He states: "War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject" to pure reason (Clausewitz 1984, 88–89; 1980, 213).⁷

What is immediately apparent about the wondrous trinity is that it reiterates the primacy of policy, but as only one of three tendencies. Moreover it must be stressed that at least two of these tendencies are extreme contrasts: primordial violence in conjunction with hatred and enmity "which are to be regarded as a blind natural force," on the one hand, and the subordinated nature of war as a political tool "which makes it subject to pure reason," on the other.

In the paragraph on the wondrous trinity Clausewitz writes that the first of these tendencies "mainly" (*mehr*) concerns the people, the second mainly the general and his army, and the third mainly the government. It cannot be inferred from this qualifier "mainly" that this "second trinity" (Heuser 2002) is actually Clausewitz's true concept, as Summers has claimed. This second trinity in the form of "trinitarian war" of People/Population/Nation, Army/General, and Government is used by Clausewitz as a practical example, while the wondrous trinity through its three tendencies—the primordial violence of war, the play of chance and probability, and the subordinating nature of war—is defined as a political tool. A fundamental difference between Clausewitz's wondrous trinity and the concept of trinitarian war as originally developed by Summers and van Creveld is that the three elements are ordered into a hierarchical structure

with People/Population/Nation as its base, Army/General above, and Government at the top (as explicitly expressed by Peter Waldmann in the preface to van Creveld 1998). This hierarchical construction of the trinitarian war is historically explicable, and in certain instances a meaningful explanatory model. However, it does not correspond with Clausewitz's formulation and even conflicts with it to some extent.

Clausewitz stresses that "[t]hese three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another" (Clausewitz 1984, 89; Clausewitz 1980, 213). This means nothing more than that these three tendencies, although common to all wars, can, in their respective limited socio-historic instances, have a different meaning and influence—although without leaving out any one of them. In contrast, establishing a hierarchy between the three tendencies asserts an established relationship, which directly contradicts Clausewitz's formulation.

3. The Riddle of the First Chapter

Clausewitz's work contains a crucial passage that was evidently inserted very late as a result of his analyses of Napoleon's campaigns and which may explain the overall structure of the first chapter, with all its internal contradictions. Clausewitz writes: "Once again we must remind the reader that, in order to lend clarity, distinction, and emphasis to our ideas, only perfect contrasts, the extremes of the spectrum, have been included in our observations. As an actual occurrence, war generally falls somewhere in between, and is influenced by these extremes only to the extent to which it approaches them" (Clausewitz 1984, 517; 1980, 859). Clausewitz's contemporary Hegel, whose lectures in Berlin were probably known to Clausewitz, maintained that truth could not be spoken in a single sentence; for him, as for Clausewitz, every statement requires a counter-statement.⁸ The statements and counter-statements made by Clausewitz "are like weights and counterweights, and one

⁷ Clausewitz's phrase *wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit* has been variously translated as a "paradoxical", or "strange" trinity, among other formulations. When citing from other works, I follow their

authors' translations. Nonetheless I am convinced that the original meaning is best translated by "wondrous trinity," which Clausewitz chose to express something that astonished him: the floating

balance of conflicting tendencies within war.

⁸ On the relationship between Clausewitz and Hegel, see Herberg-Rothe 2000.

could say that through their play and interplay the scales of truth are brought into balance."⁹

From this methodological point of view, Clausewitz's formulation of opposing, apparently contradictory definitions of war, even within the first chapter of Book I, is explicable. Of additional importance is that, in this first chapter, Clausewitz often interrupts his discussion to directly bring up the respective counter-statement to a given idea. For example, he explains the transition of the three interactions to the extreme to the three tendencies of limited war with reference to the opposition of idea and reality: in theory each war tends to the absolute, but in reality it is limited. (Clausewitz 1984, 75–78; 1980, 192–99; for more details, see Herberg-Rothe 2001a and 2007). What is decisive, however, is the very sudden transition from one pole to its opposite. Similarly, Clausewitz argues that, among all human activities, war is most closely related to a game of cards, in order to stress uncertainty of the outcome, and then immediately breaks off to insist that war remains "nonetheless a serious means to a serious end" (Clausewitz 1984, 85–86; 1980, 207–209). Apparently the pursuit of only one pole in an opposing pair indeed leads at the beginning of an argument to a true statement, although it does not determine the whole war so that, in Clausewitz's view, the respective counter-statement must be formed from scratch.

What is actually problematic is that within the first chapter Clausewitz articulated the respective "extreme opposites" in conjunction with the categories "Definition," "Concept," and "Result for Theory," as well as in an apparently simple formula. Until now it has remained unexplained if there is a contemporary or systematic derivation of Definition, Concept, and Theory¹⁰ that Clausewitz is referring to, or if he kept these categories unreflective. It must also be noted that the connection of some poles of

these opposites with the categories of Definition, Concept, and Theory had partially catastrophic consequences—for instance, the "destruction principle" and the extreme of the three interactions, viewed in isolation, could be taken as Clausewitz's actual concept of war and universalized (the historical consequences of this interpretation are explored in Heuser 2002).¹¹

But if we take seriously Clausewitz's claim that the wondrous trinity is the summation of his analysis in his first chapter, we can bring what he called "unity and clarity" to our examination. Clausewitz identifies the three tendencies of the wondrous trinity as the primordial violence of war, the play of probability and chance in war, and the subordinated nature of war as a political tool (Clausewitz 1984, 89; 1980, 212–13). However, he uses a very broad political term here that refers not exclusively to state action, but to any purposeful action by organized communities.

The second of Clausewitz's three tendencies is the play of chance and probability, which relates to the unknown outcome of the fight (Herberg-Rothe 2001a, chap. 6; 2007, chap. 4). At the beginning of Book II he states: "Essentially war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war" (Clausewitz 1984, 127; 1980, 269). In addition, although Clausewitz stresses (at the beginning of the second chapter of Book I) how varied are the forms of fighting in war, how far it may be removed from the brute discharge of hatred and enmity in a physical encounter, and how many variables come into play that are not themselves fighting, it would nevertheless be inherent in the very concept of war that all effects must originally derive from fighting (Clausewitz 1984, 95; 1980, 222). It must be emphasized, finally, that although fighting is inherent within each war, it is only one tendency of

⁹ Karl Linnebach, cited by Werner Hahlweg in an appendix to the German edition of *On War* (Clausewitz 1980, p. 1361).

¹⁰ J. G. C. Kiesewetter, a pupil of Kant's and the author of *Outline of a General Logic* following Kantian Principles (Berlin, 1795), should most probably be considered here. Clausewitz attended some of Kiesewetter's lectures. The beginning of Clause-

witz's first chapter, with the three reciprocal actions as concept of war, may correspond with Hegel's transition from reciprocal actions to the concept (see Herberg-Rothe 2000). However, the drift between the opposites in the wondrous trinity, as well as the methodological passage mentioned above, are instead related to Kiesewetter's conception of conflict (this reference I owe to Antulio Echevarria). Clausewitz's concept of attack and defense nevertheless

shows that he adopted to some extent a middle way between Kant and Hegel: he stresses Hegelian ideas of reciprocal transition between opposites, but these remain drifting between the contrasts. For references to this interpretation and its utilization for general philosophical problems, see Herberg-Rothe 2005.

¹¹ This interpretation also takes the form of an ideal type in Max Weber's sense; see Kleemeier 2002.

the whole of war in Clausewitz's concept of the wondrous trinity.¹²

If we generalize the second tendency in this sense and consider Clausewitz's very general conception of politics (*Politik*), then the wondrous trinity states that war is composed of the tendencies of its primordial violence, the imponderability of fighting, and its subordinated nature as purposive collective action—in short, violence, fighting, and the membership of the combatants in a community. Even more briefly put: War is the violent fighting of communities. If we differentiate each of these three aspects and investigate their interaction, the inner structure of the first chapter as a guide for Clausewitz's entire work and as starting point for a theory of war is revealed. Whether this corresponds totally to Clausewitz's own thought processes or whether it represents mainly my own creation may remain in dispute.

4. Clausewitz's Concept of the Political

While, according to his critics, Clausewitz is outdated because his theory refers primarily to inter-state war,¹³ his proponents emphasize the continued utility and relevance of his work. Antulio Echevarria writes, Clausewitz's "conception of war, his remarkable trinity, and his grasp of the relationship between politics and war will remain valid as long as states, drug lords, warrior clans, and terrorist groups have mind to wage it." The starting point for this position is a differentiation and expansion of Clausewitz's conception of politics. It has long been known by Clausewitz scholars that he often articulated completely different dimensions of the political, without making sufficient distinctions (Echevarria 1995a; Diner 1980; Aron 1980, 1986). Thus Aron distinguishes between two dimensions: first, objective politics as the whole of the socio-political condition, and second,

subjective policy as "guiding intelligence" (Clausewitz 1984, 607; 1980, 993).¹⁴

Similarly, Dan Diner explicitly distinguishes two forms of Clausewitz's concept of politics. The first form of the term is understood as a purposive-rational goal-oriented organized use of force. This purposive rationality refers to every martial action. In contrast, Clausewitz's concept of *Politik* can also be understood as action-relevant expression of social conditions, which precede the use of force and are not arbitrarily manipulated by its actions. The political in this sense is a willful steering concept of means and purpose-extracted substance, which similarly goes along with the prevailing social traffic (Diner 1980, 447–48; Aron 1980, 389). It is worth mentioning that Clausewitz used this second conception mainly in analyzing the influence of the French Revolution on warfare as well as the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, whereas the first concept is more related to the failures of the Prussian leadership and of other European powers to recognize the revolutionary changes in warfare and act appropriately.

An even broader interpretation of Clausewitz's idea of politics is evident in Echevarria's argument that "Clausewitz used *Politik* as an historically causative force, providing an explanatory pattern or framework viewing war's various manifestations over time" (Echevarria 1995a). This interpretation relies on a chapter which researchers have insufficiently considered, in which Clausewitz tries to clarify the connection between "political aim" (Clausewitz 1984, 586; 1980, 961) and the concrete process of warfare, while at the same time using a very general concept of politics.¹⁵ Here Clausewitz determines that historical wars are dependent not on deliberate decisions or political relations in the nar-

¹² Paret and Howard translate the German term *Kampf* in this paragraph as "combat." For the purpose of generalizing Clausewitz's concept I'm using the term "fighting," in accordance with their own translation of the term at the beginning of Book II: "Essentially war is fighting" (Clausewitz 1984, 127; 1980, 269).

¹³ Paradoxically, Clausewitz's most famous critics consider his work to be outdated for completely different and indeed contradictory reasons. For Keegan (1993), Clausewitz is the fundamental theoretician of boundless and "modern" war, from whom humanity must turn away in order not to perish, while van Creveld (1991) argues that Clausewitz propagates limited warfare, with such a limited starting point that no war can be won against opponents who are fighting for their very existence and identity.

¹⁴ Clausewitz also uses the term "intelligence of

the personified state" to justify that limited and unlimited forms of warfare are equally determined by policy (Clausewitz 1984, 88; 1980, 212). The status of the term "intelligence" is thus not entirely unequivocal. I use this term to express the subjective autonomy of political actions.

¹⁵ Related to Part B of the third chapter of Book VIII (Clausewitz 1984, 585–94; 1980, 960–74).

rower sense, but on the political attitude of communities as well as states. His recounting includes “semi-barbarous Tartars, the republics of antiquity, the feudal lords and trading cities of the Middle Ages, eighteenth-century kings and the rulers and peoples of the nineteenth century.” All these communities conducted war “in their own particular way, using different methods and pursuing different aims” (Clausewitz 1984, 586; 1980, 962). Despite this variability, Clausewitz stresses that war is also in these cases a continuation of their politics by other means.

In this manner Clausewitz's apparently clear statements relativize themselves: war is merely a continuation of state politics only if we apply a restrictive modern understanding of the state. By the term “state” Clausewitz evidently means, at least in Book VIII and in his historical studies, the political and social orientation of a community. In the modern state, this orientation a relative independence from the respective social relations; where the Tartars and other forms of non-state warfare are concerned, the independence of political decisions is limited and they correspond more to the societal attitude to the ways and means of warfare.¹⁶ However, it is questionable whether it is meaningful today to adopt such a general sense of politics—meaning the political-social or even the culturally caused attitude of a community—in order to apply Clausewitz's formula of war as continuation of policy by other means to all forms of war (as Duyvesteyn [2005] is doing). The danger here is that a modern political concept is being applied to other social relations and by doing so the actual dynamics of these social relations are missed.

It could be worthwhile to replace Clausewitz's term “state” with the concept of “community,” which may be a political society, social community, or religious or otherwise oriented community (or, of course, a modern state). Such an inclusive concept corresponds far more closely to his understanding of “state policy” than the more modern understanding. In the case of modern states, war is composed of

violence, fighting, and the policy of the state; in the case of other communities it is also composed of violence, fighting, and actions derived from the orientation of this community and its purposes, goals or identity.¹⁷

5. Violence and Fighting

At first glance, war is distinguished from other human actions by the massive use of force; it is a violent action, and force is based on the asymmetrical relationship between active power and suffering. With the use of force arises the fundamental problem of its becoming independent of its rational purpose, a problem to which Wolfgang Sofsky referred when he wrote that force and violence are self-escalating (Sofsky 1996, 62). Clausewitz described this “act of independence” of force thus: “war is an act of violence, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force” (Clausewitz 1984, 77; 1980, 194). Without denying the tendency for violence to become independent of any rational purpose in war, especially in direct combat, nonetheless violence in war is not an end in itself but a means of expressing the interests, values, and culture of a community. Uncontrolled violence, for Clausewitz, is dysfunctional in principle and even self-destructive, as he learned in his analysis of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo (Herberg-Rothe 2001a, 44ff; 2007).

How is war different from other forms of mass violence? Genocides are very often accompanied by war—for instance, the genocide of the Armenians before the First World War and the murder of Jews in the Second World War—but even these cases are described as genocide and not war between nations (*Völkerkrieg*). In addition to the aspect of mass violence, war needs a minimum of real fighting or struggle—otherwise it would be a massacre, mass destruction, or mass murder (Waldmann 1998, 16ff). The occupation of Czechoslovakia by the German armed forces, for example, was not a war, but rather an annexation. Clausewitz brought this problem to a head in noting that war actually begins with defense, not with attack. Only

¹⁶ I develop this distinction from my critique of John Keegan; Herberg-Rothe 2001b.

¹⁷ Hans Delbrück made the connection between war and the social order of the community into the pivotal point of his monumental work, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen*

Geschichte (rev. ed., 2000); Clausewitz himself clarified this connection specifically in his writing on “Agitation” (Clausewitz 1992, 335–68).

when one party defends itself against a massive use of force does a real fighting, and thus a real war, arise: "Essentially, the concept of war does not originate with the attack, because the ultimate object of attack is not fighting; rather it is possession. The idea of war originates with the defense, which does have fighting as its immediate object" (Clausewitz 1984, 377; 1980, 644).

How are violence and force differentiated from fighting? Force and violence are marked by the aforementioned asymmetrical relationship between action and suffering. Fighting, in contrast, requires a minimum of symmetry between the combatants—Clausewitz's term for this is the duel (Clausewitz 1984, 75; 1980, 191). To sustain this minimum of symmetry between warring parties, in the course of the development of war combatants established conventions: war is bound by rules about the purpose and means of fighting, and about who may be allowed to do the killing and who may be killed. Without such admittedly limited conventions, every warring community or society would internally disintegrate. The outward exercise of violence would no longer have any boundaries that could protect the inner community.

In war, *communities* "stand against" each other. Clausewitz stressed that combat in war is not a fight (*Kampf*) of individuals against individuals, but rather of armed forces, that is, an "armed people": "Everything that occurs in war results from the existence of armed forces" (Clausewitz 1984, 95; 1980, 222).¹⁸ Because they deploy weapons as instruments for killing other human beings, armed forces must have a minimum of organizing structures and principles, in order to distinguish between "friend and foe" (Carl Schmitt); these organizing structures of the armed forces themselves create or are related to a community, which is "superior" to the armed forces themselves. Fighting communities can take various forms: religious, ethnic, or cultural units, clans, heterogeneous communities under warlords, or states. Affiliation to one of these communities determines

not only the fight's goal and purpose, but also the ways and means of warfare. Thomas Hobbes's famous reference to a "war of all against all" is not really war, but rather the rule of naked, pure violence.

A fight between two or more opponents can concern the acquisition of goods and advantages of power, or the preservation of one's own existence and identity. There are certainly combinations of these objectives and cases in which they cannot unequivocally be differentiated. The goal of preserving one's own identity and existence as an ethnic group, nation, or tribe can lead straight to the conquest of opposing areas and the destruction of one's opponents. The violent exclusion of minorities, a significant characteristic of the twentieth century, was based on this make-believe defense and the retention of ethnic or national identity.¹⁹

In many cases the opponent is coerced through violence to do our will (Clausewitz 1984, 75; 1980, 191). But this can be achieved in two different ways. The first is by causing the opponent the greatest possible damage. Pre-modern forms of warfare often did not involve battles between opposing armies, but rather took the form of devastation of the opponent's territories. The aim of such destructive measures was the same as the aim of a decisive battle, to force the opponent to obey the attacker's will; but the means was the infliction of the most damage. Some examples are the wars of the Cossacks and the invasions that ended the Roman Empire. Throughout most of history wars at the edges of great civilizations took this form. The raids of plundering tribes created havoc and destruction, forcing the empires to pay subsidies to the plunderers to stop such raids (Munkler 2007).

In contrast to this last kind of war, warfare in Europe from the end of the Thirty Years' War until the First World War was to a large extent characterized by the avoidance of indiscriminate, socially extensive destruction within Europe. The lamentable experiences of the Thirty Years'

¹⁸ In German, Clausewitz uses, as always, the term *Kampf*, which Howard and Paret translate as "combat" but which I prefer to translate as "fighting" (Clausewitz 1984, 95; 1980, 22–23).

¹⁹ For the distinction between instrumental warfare and essential warfare, and their importance in history, see Munkler 1992, 92ff.

War, in which approximately one third of Europe's population perished either directly from war or indirectly from its consequences, led to a historically unique containment of war. Unlike wars at the borders of the great empires (Rome, Byzantium, China) the destruction in the 'Thirty Years' War could not be limited to the periphery or to lesser allied nations (*Hilfsvölker*); instead, destruction ravaged the heart of Europe.²⁰ The crucial innovation of the new containment of warfare after the 'Thirty Years' War was that a military defeat no longer jeopardized the defeated party's existence or led automatically to widespread destruction of territories and persecution of populations. Battles were fought mainly outside the towns and decisions were sought on the battlefield in order to shorten the war. Even Napoleon, whose armies conquered almost the whole of Europe, and who determined its rulers by his own political will, did not wage war against specific populations. This European *Sonderweg* in warfare was a direct reaction to the devastation of the 'Thirty Years' War.

But the history of war is characterized by paradoxes. On one hand, the focus on decisive battles between regular armies served to protect the European civilian population. On the other hand, the advent of industrialized war with machine guns, armored vehicles, aircraft, virtually unlimited production of weaponry, and the shortening of supply routes through a developed rail system, meant that clinging to a strategy of decisive battles led to catastrophic loss of life in the First World War. In order to force a decision, whole armies and nations were bled dry. Finally, in the Second World War the civilian population once again became a military target. The limitation of warfare in Europe since the 'Thirty Years' War is not separable from its consequences in the catastrophes of the First and Second World Wars.

The limitation of warfare within Europe is also not separable from the contrasting experience in the colonies, where the same armies that showed a maximum of restraint against European opponents often led destructive cam-

paigns against native populations. In 1898 British troops in Egypt mowed down thousands of rebel Mahdi fighters with only six Maxim guns. This was no clash between armies, but rather a massacre. The Mahdi fighters simply could not comprehend the firepower of this new weapon and kept on charging at the British position (Diner 2000). The European armies themselves also learned little from this experience: in the First World War their own infantry and cavalry charged without any cover, at first with heroic songs on their lips, into the fire of the machine guns.

The "new wars" (Munkler 2004) we are witnessing today are nothing fundamentally new in the historical development of war. What is new, however, are the intermixed fields, in which different forms of war are no longer spatially separate from one another, but rather overlap (Munkler 2004). For a long time, the European state-centered form of war was recognized as the norm, while non-state forms of violence were characterized as primitive throwbacks or as expressions of irregular violence. This perspective is not useful, as it is unable to comprehend contemporary developments; but it would be equally inadequate to view inter-state war merely as a historical exception to the rule. War is therefore understood here as a phenomenon which is composed of opposite tendencies: violence/force, fighting, and the affiliation of the fighters to a community. Throughout history, there have always been phases in which one of these three aspects seems to have determined the war as a whole. Nevertheless, following Clausewitz, each war is composed of all three tendencies, whose meaning and influence varies due to aspects such as the development of weapons, societal-historical circumstances, and relations among the warring communities as well as their internal characteristics.

6. The Wondrous Trinity as a Differentiated Coordinate System

Clausewitz divides each of the three tendencies of the wondrous trinity further into additional oppositions, in which his various definitions of war arise as "moments." Each war can be located within these opposites, depending on histori-

²⁰ Some scholars nevertheless argue that the limitations of warfare after the 'Thirty Years' War resulted from the socialization of violence (*Verstaatlichung*) and depended on the control that the state was now

able to exercise (Foucault 2003). That is surely an aspect of historical development, but I think that a political input was additionally needed, such as the experience of endless suffering during the Thirty

Years' War, just as after the World War II, though in contrast to developments after World War I.

cal, social, political, and cultural conditions. These oppositions are typical of every war, and each is influenced by socio-historic circumstances. These opposing tendencies are like “different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone”, it would immediately become involved in such a contradiction with the reality that it might be regarded as destroyed at once by that alone, Clausewitz emphasizes (Clausewitz 1984, 89; 1980, 213). I will lay out four oppositions within the three concept-fields (*Begriffsfelder*) of “violence/force,” “fighting,” and the fighters’ “community” in order to explain the various aspects of the coordinate system introduced in this article. The basic thesis is very simple: that every real war is in part similarly but also differently composed of these tendencies.²¹

5.1 *Gewalt*: Violence/Force

- (a) The crucial opposition within Clausewitz’s concept of violence or force (*Gewalt*) is that of violence as instrumentality versus violence’s assuming an independent existence (*Verselbständigung*). The instrumental pole of this pair of opposites is found in Clausewitz’s definition (75) and in the world-renowned formula (87), as well as in the third tendency of the wondrous trinity (89). Clausewitz discussed the problem of violence’s becoming absolute and therefore an end in itself in the three interactions to the extreme (75–78), directly before the formula (87), as well as in the primordial violence of war in the first of the three tendencies of war’s wondrous trinity (89).
- (b) A significant contrast, which Clausewitz implicitly and repeatedly brings up, is whether the combatants are amateurs or specialists in violence. He did not formulate this opposition explicitly, but invoked it in his explanation of the success of the French Revolution’s troops over those of the ancien régime.²² The politically, ideologically, and/or religiously defined motivation of combatants opposes a knightly code of honor.²³

- (c) Clausewitz also brings up the fundamental opposition between distance and proximity in the use of force. Distance makes a relative rationality possible, while bringing the problem of impersonal killing—in which the humanity of the opponent is effaced by large separations of time, space, or social distance (Bauman 1989, 1991). Using force or violence “face to face” with an opponent calls on different characteristics; for example, aggressiveness and hate can lead to an increasingly independent use of force, but at the same time still make it possible to perceive the opponent as human.
- (d) A further criterion is the means of force and violence. This problem is not separately posed by Clausewitz and must be supplemented here. A significant factor is the financing of combatants’ weapons. The risk of losing very expensive weapons systems and highly trained combatants can lead to a certain limitation of war (as was the case in the eighteenth century). In contrast, wars waged with inexpensive weaponry and fighters are more likely to escalate.

5.2 *Kampf*: Fight

- (a) The necessity of escalation in war in order not to be defeated is found in Clausewitz’s three interactions to the extreme (75–78), whereas the game of chance and probability is discussed in the second of the three tendencies of the wondrous trinity (89) as well as in the respective sections of the first chapter concerning war as a gamble (85–86), and finally in the section about friction (119).
- (b) The condition of symmetry or asymmetry between combatants (so often discussed today), in their strategy as well as the social composition of their armed forces, is discussed by Clausewitz in the first chapter, with reference to the opposition of attack and defense (82–84), in detail throughout Book VI about defense, and generalized in the second chapter of Book I (93–94).
- (c) A crucial distinction within the first chapter is whether combat in war is directed against the opposing will (as

²¹ I have tried to use this coordinate system to outline a general social history of war in Herberg-Rothe 2003. For better readability in the following discussion, page references refer only to Clausewitz 1984.

²² For the meaning of this distinction, see Herberg-Rothe 2003, in particular the typology of combatants, pp. 60–83.

²³ This opposite is most clearly emphasized by John Keegan (1993), and in a more sophisticated manner by Michael Ignatieff (1998); see also Herberg-Rothe 2003.

in Clausewitz's definition of war, p. 75) or if it is directed toward the destruction of the opposing armed forces. Clausewitz understands the latter as reducing them to such a condition that they can no longer continue to fight (90). But the original and lasting opposition between these two aims is merely repeated in Clausewitz's differentiation of the principle of destruction (90–94).²⁴

(d) For a long time, Clausewitz favored Napoleon's strategy, in which the armed forces of the opponent are directly attacked. Clausewitz's critics, however, favor an indirect strategy (see Heuser 2002). For a general theory of war, Clausewitz thus needs to be supplemented, so that in addition to considering a direct strategy against the opposing armed forces, we start from the assumption that every war is a combination of direct and indirect tendencies, which are differently composed in each different instance.

5.3 Warring Communities

(a) It is first necessary to discern whether warring communities are relatively new or long-existing groups. In newly constructed communities, violence plays a more constitutive role, while in long-existing societies, more aspects contribute to the war.²⁵ Thus Clausewitz argues that the length of time a group has existed reduces the

tendency to escalation in the interactions to the extreme, as other factors must be included that may affect the course of the war. Clausewitz emphasizes that war is never an isolated act: it does not consist of a single short blow and its result is never final (78–81).

(b) A further opposition concerns whether the war serves the self-preservation of a community or society or, especially in revolutionary situations, whether it leads to the formation of new ones (Münkler 1992).

(c) Yet another opposition concerns whether war is subordinated to the following of "interests" or the spreading of the values, norms, or ideals of the related community. Herfried Münkler juxtaposes both contrasts (b) and (c), noting the opposition between the "instrumental" compositions of war of the later Clausewitz against the "existentialism" of the early Clausewitz (Münkler 1992).

(d) Closely related to this, although not exactly congruent, is the question of whether the purpose of war lies outside of or within the fight of warring cultures. The social composition of each society, like those of the combatants (regular armies, conscription armies, pistoleros, etc.), plays an important role here.²⁶

If we summarize these fundamental differences, the following coordinate system of war and violent conflict emerges.

²⁴ Compare only the beginning of the first chapter of Book VIII, in which it is retrospectively summarized as "and we concluded that the grand objective of all military action is to overthrow the enemy—which means destroying his armed forces" (577) with "We can see now that in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat" (94).

²⁵ I do not wish to assert that all communities are constituted by force and violence, as one could interpret the theory of Carl Schmitt. Here I'm only emphasizing the difference between newly constituted communities and long-existing ones and their different practices of violence. Nevertheless the so-called "new wars" could be better described in terms of Carl Schmitt than those of Thomas Hobbes; see Herberg-Rothe 2004 and Herberg-Rothe 2006. This difference for example played a most important

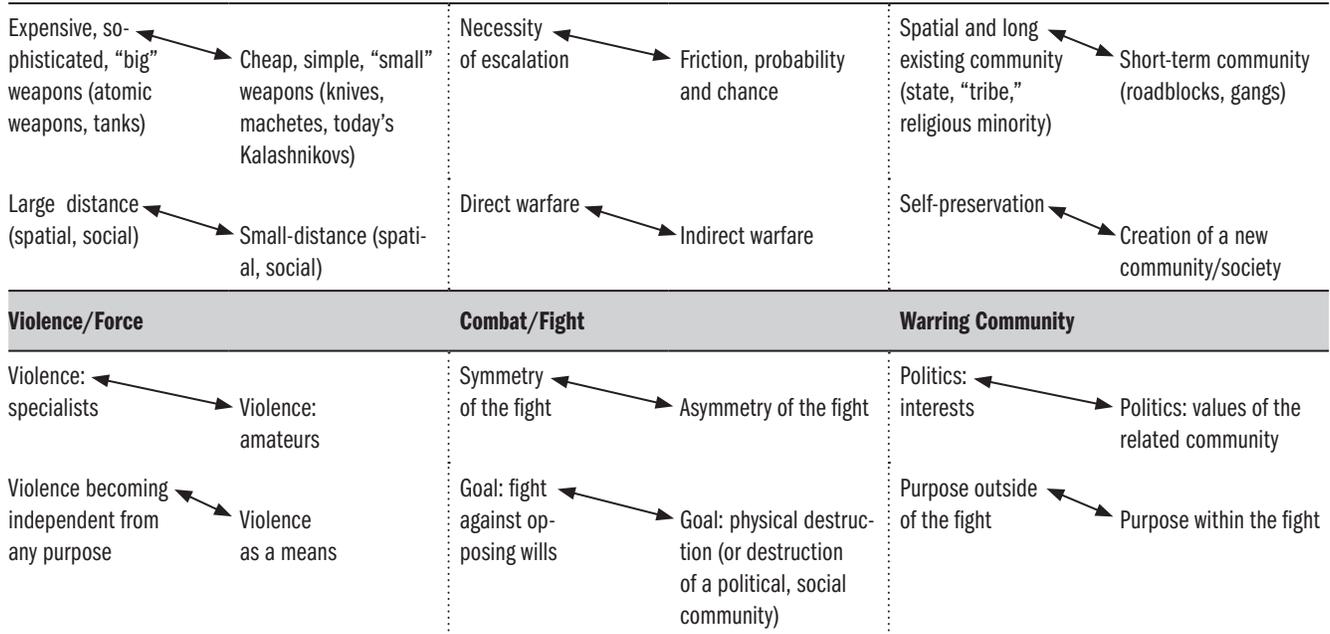
role in the misunderstanding of Hezbollah by the Israel Defense Forces in the last Lebanon war. Obviously Hezbollah was seen as something like a "warlord system," which consequently would break down after a short blow against its infrastructure. In retrospect one could even argue that the war strengthened the militia and its social cohesion.

²⁶ Here I explicitly do not differentiate among culture, society, and community, in order to emphasize the difference between internal and external influences on the conduct of war. In different circumstances these influences from outside may be determined by culture, society, or the political community. Perhaps there is a misunderstanding by German and English readers concerning the translation of the German terms *Gemeinwesen* and *Gemeinschaft*. In English I use the term "community," which does not have the burden of the German discourse

about *Gemeinschaft* derived from the sociologist Tönnies. In my view, the English term "polity" might best translate *Gemeinwesen*—but this term in turn would evoke a mainly political community.

6. The Coordinate System

Clausewitz's wondrous trinity as coordinate system of war and violent conflict



Every war is accordingly defined in terms of the three tendencies of violence/force, fight, and the affiliation of the combatants with a community, since in war there are always communities that fight against one another (although the weapon carriers can act on behalf of the community or constitute it). Moreover, these three tendencies within the wondrous trinity are further differentiated into additional opposites from which every war is composed, in different ways. Thus every war has symmetrical and asymmetrical tendencies, even when it may appear in certain situations as if only one of these tendencies comes to the fore.

The paradoxical aspect of criticism of Clausewitz is that Clausewitz himself is well equipped to respond to it. Keegan is obviously criticizing the early Clausewitz, the supporter of Napoleon's strategy and of the destruction principle as a military method. Van Creveld, by contrast, is attacking the late Clausewitz, who emphasized the antithesis between

limited and unlimited warfare, which became the critical point of his planned revision of the whole work (Clausewitz only managed to revise the first chapter of the first book).²⁷ In this respect, Keegan's criticism could be answered by the later Clausewitz, while the early Clausewitz can respond to van Creveld's criticism.

But, most important, both critiques show how current attempts to develop a non-Clausewitzian theory of war take place within a field of antitheses whose bounds were set out by the early and later Clausewitz himself. Although the early Clausewitz was oriented toward the Napoleonic strategy of unconditional offensive and the destruction of the enemy (i.e. beyond the enemy's military defeat), the position of the later Clausewitz was defined by other priorities resulting from Napoleon's failures in the Russian campaign and his defeats at Leipzig and especially Waterloo. In this later period, the difference between limited and unlimited

²⁷ See Clausewitz's note from July 1827; Clausewitz 1984, 69–70.

warfare and the insight into the necessity of war's limitation became the focal points of Clausewitz's thinking.

In accordance with the contrasting propositions of the early and the late Clausewitz, my coordinate system concentrates on the transitions between opposites as well as on their respective internal logic, rather than on action maxims derived from only one of these poles, as has so often prevailed in the history of warfare. Such a transition between opposites can be observed when an irregular partisan army, having gained a certain degree of military strength, moves from an asymmetrical strategy to a symmetrical fight; it also characterizes the transformation of the highly asymmetrical ideological conflict between the former superpowers and their alliance systems in the Cold War into a symmetrical effort by both sides to avoid atomic war (Herberg-Rothe 2003).

7. A General Theory of War?

Finally, we have to answer the question: to what extent does this coordinate system, based on my interpretation of Clausewitz's wondrous trinity, enables in principle (with further differentiations) a general theory of war and violent conflict? In my opinion, other competing approaches derive their theories from only one of these conflicting tendencies, all of which contribute to every war. For example, Marx's analysis is based on the assumption that war depends on the economically or socially determined interests of the warring parties. Despite their differences with respect to other aspects, Panajotis Kondylis (Kondylis 1988) as well as Martin van Creveld concentrate only on the concept of violent fighting. Additionally, Kondylis as well as Keegan substitute Clausewitz's concept of politics—or at least their reduction-

istic interpretation of it through the concept of culture. To give another example, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz's greatest opponent in the current discourse about war (although they have been dead for millennia and centuries, respectively), concentrates on the concept of struggle as a universal principle by neglecting particular political dimensions. Even the "war of interpretation" in the German discourse between *Gewalt-Innovateure* and so called traditionalists could be framed as a dispute about whether Clausewitz's first or the third of his three conflicting tendencies of war and violent conflict is put at the center of the interpretation (Trotha 1997).

In contrast to these single-cause approaches, in my interpretation Clausewitz's theory of war is based on dialectic opposites which together constitute war as a whole: he describes violence as both an independent force and an instrumental tool with which communities preserve their identities and pursue their interests. In contrast to all other approaches, Clausewitz's theory is based on three conflicting tendencies. These tendencies are the borders within which war happens. As long as communities wage war in order to preserve their identities as well as pursue their interests, Clausewitz's theory is the appropriate tool for analyzing war and violent conflict.²⁸

In summary, I would define war as the violent fight of communities. This definition articulates three different as well as conflicting tendencies: at first violence/force, then fight/struggle, and finally the nature of the warring communities. One could further differentiate each of these tendencies to develop a systematically as well as historically informed general theory of war and violent conflict.

²⁸ Instead of adding a necessarily too short analysis of a current conflict as a demonstration of the usefulness of my coordinate system, I would like to refer to the discussions in which I have already used it as a guiding principle: my critique of the so called "new wars," the estimation of a re-politicization of war and violent conflict, the concept

of a new containment of war and violent conflict, and finally the notion of a democratic warrior: see Herberg-Rothe 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009; Herberg-Rothe and Honig 2007. I outline the problems of supplementing Clausewitz through a particular understanding of Sun Tzu with respect to the Iraq war in the preface to Herberg-Rothe 2007.

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