



## Michael Howard and Clausewitz

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## Michael Howard and Clausewitz

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### ABSTRACT


The English translation of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* by Michael Howard and Peter Paret has had a major impact on how Clausewitz is read today, especially in the United States and Britain. Howard in particular was determined to make Clausewitz doubly relevant – as one soldier speaking to other soldiers and as an author whose views on war had continuing purchase. However, the result is a text which, in reflecting the issues of its day, is not fully reflective of what Clausewitz himself said and has itself become dated.

**KEYWORDS** Michael Howard; Peter Paret; Carl von Clausewitz; war; limited war; civil-military relations

From the early stages of the Cold War until his death on 30 November 2019 one day after his 97<sup>th</sup> birthday, Michael Howard was a constant presence in two fields of academic enquiry. He redefined military history and he was a leader among those who shaped strategic studies. He could be abrupt if he disagreed with you, but he was a compassionate mentor and a deeply empathetic correspondent and friend.<sup>1</sup> One of the achievements of which he was most proud was his edition of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, published in 1976. On 11 September 2020 just over ten months after Howard's own demise, Peter Paret, his partner in that great enterprise, himself died at the age of 96. This double loss provides an opportune moment to take stock of the contribution made by a great student of war to our understanding of the world's best-known work on the subject.

What follows is about Howard and Clausewitz, not Paret and Clausewitz, but there are moments when the two are not easily separated. Paret's doctoral thesis, published in 1966 by Princeton University Press as *Yorck and the era of Prussian reform 1807–1815*, was trailblazing in its unification of military with intellectual and political history. Although completed at King's College London under Michael Howard's direction, Howard said in

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<sup>1</sup>This article is derived from the Annual Michael Howard Lecture for 2020, delivered online on 19 November, and organised by the Michael Howard Centre for the History of War at King's College London. I am grateful to Joe Maiolo for the invitation and to Christina Goulter for chairing the event.

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his memoirs that it would have been impertinent to describe himself as Paret's supervisor so much did he learn from his student.<sup>2</sup> Paret similarly acknowledged Howard's influence, saying that his supervisor had first introduced him to 'the study of war in the framework of intellectual, social, and political history'.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Howard seems to have read Clausewitz's *On War* for the first time in 1953. His autobiography does not make clear whether he did so in its original German, although he may have done.<sup>4</sup> At this juncture, most English-speakers, at least in Britain, opted for the translation by J.J. Graham, published in 1873 but more commonly encountered in its re-issued form of 1908. This was based on the second and corrected German edition of 1853 and was abridged by Anatol Rapoport for Penguin's Pelican classics in 1968. The Penguin edition omitted books 5, 6 and 7 in their entirety and Rapoport's own concluding remarks ended with the view that 'the political philosophy of war is bankrupt'.<sup>5</sup> In conversation, Howard was scathing in his dismissal of Rapoport. It was less clear what he thought of the other translation into English, that by O. J. Matthijs Jolles, which had been published in 1943 and reissued in 1950. Full and accurate, it was also too literal to be literary, likely to be a besetting sin in Howard's view.

In 1962 Peter Paret persuaded Princeton University Press to undertake a translation into English of all Clausewitz's works in six volumes, with a separate translator and editor for each.<sup>6</sup> So much for the ambitions of youth. Extraordinarily there is no full scholarly edition of Clausewitz's works in his native German. Unsurprisingly, therefore, we are still awaiting an English version – and until recently very little of his massive output beyond *On War* was available to anglophone readers. Before 2010, apart from the three volumes devoted to *On War*, only one element of one other of the ten volumes of Clausewitz's posthumous works published in Berlin between 1832 and 1837 had been translated into English – his account of the 1812 campaign in Russia, which formed part of volume 7.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: A Life in War and Peace* (London: Continuum 2006), 202.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Paret, *Yorck and the Era of Prussian Reform 1807–1815* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1966), v.

<sup>4</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, 141.

<sup>5</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1968), ed by Anatol Rapoport, 416.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Howard, 'Foreword: Clausewitz *On War*: a history of the Howard-Paret translation', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), v–vii. There are inconsistencies in the chronologies given by Howard and Paret for the genesis of their translation of *On War*.

<sup>7</sup>Since 2010 two translations of Clausewitz's account of the Waterloo campaign (volume 8) and translations of histories of the Italian campaigns of 1796 and 1799 (volumes 5–7) have appeared. His lectures on small wars were published as Christopher Daase and James W. Davis, (ed and trans), *Clausewitz on Small War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), and Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (ed and trans), *Carl von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992) published a selection of his many other writings.

Paret was instrumental in convening a conference in Berlin to allocate the work for this massive project. He and Howard agreed to contribute an edited translation of *On War*. This was to be based on the first German edition of *Vom Kriege*, that published between 1832 and 1834, and revived in 1952 as the sixteenth German edition by Werner Hahlweg, the most distinguished post-1945 Clausewitz scholar in Germany, who was himself present at the Berlin conference.<sup>8</sup> In one account Howard says the meeting was held in June 1962 and in another not until 1964.<sup>9</sup> Progress was so slow – and even non-existent according to Howard – that Princeton University Press cancelled the contract. However, Howard and Paret kept their side of the bargain. In 1974 Bernard Brodie, who had also been instrumental in the organisation of the Berlin conference and would write a guide to the reading of *On War* for the new edition, persuaded Princeton to issue a fresh contract for a translation of *Vom Kriege* alone and it was published in 1976. Michael Howard described the task as ‘the most rewarding work, intellectually as well as financially, that I have undertaken. Intellectually it made me realize what a superb training for a historian it is to edit a text: to live in intimate contact with a great mind, place what he wrote in context, and try to express his meaning in terms that made sense for one’s own generation’.<sup>10</sup>

In the age before email and even before faxes, joint working across the Atlantic was not easy. In 1968 Howard was elected to a Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford and had hoped that the college would appoint Paret to a visiting fellowship so that they could work alongside each other. His expectations were disappointed and they seem to have met in person on only two occasions while preparing the text. Paret came to London for one summer and Howard reciprocated with a week in Stanford, where Paret was appointed a professor in 1969.

Importantly, although Howard and Paret did the editing, they did not do the initial work of translation. That was undertaken by Angus Malcolm, a retired diplomat who had already translated Karl Demeter’s *The German officer corps in society and state 1650–1945*, which came out in Germany in 1962 and was published in English with an introduction by Howard in 1965. Malcolm died in 1970, before the work was completed, and in the absence of other evidence we must presume that Howard and Paret finished the job themselves. The fact that at least three hands were at work needs to be borne in mind given what Howard himself said about translation.

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<sup>8</sup>For the history of the publication of the German editions of *Vom Kriege*, see Ulrich Marwedel, *Persönlichkeit und Wirkungsgeschichte seines Werkes bis 1918* (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt 1978).

<sup>9</sup>Howard, ‘Foreword’, v, in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the twenty-first century*, says 1962; Howard, *Captain professor*, 203, says 1964.

<sup>10</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, 203.

Michael Howard was a great stylist, a man who took pride and care in his powers of expression, both on the page and in the spoken word. He wanted the English text to flow, even if it does not always do so in the original German. Clausewitz could produce powerful and punchy prose, qualities especially evident in book 4 of *On War*, that on battle. Here he expressed himself with a directness and sense of irony that are compelling. But he could also write with Teutonic obscurity, in lengthy sentences which seem to lack a subject and whose clauses contain too many constructions in the passive tense. Today even German students can opt to read Howard and Paret's English version in preference to the early nineteenth-century German prose of *Vom Kriege*.

Michael Howard presented Clausewitz in English that is colloquial and accessible. Peter Paret himself said all translation is in the end interpretation, but Howard himself at times went further, likening himself to an impressionist painter.<sup>11</sup> Several scholars, including Jan Willem Honig, have written persuasively of the liberties which they both took with the translation in order to give it contemporary resonance but in the process distorting the original sense.<sup>12</sup>

Clausewitz was not consistent in his use of vocabulary, as Howard and Paret acknowledged, but nor were they in the English words that they employed to translate the German. If it suited them in how they wanted the text to be read, they frequently rendered *Krieg* as 'campaign' rather than 'war', despite the fact Clausewitz was consistent in his of *Feldzug* to mean a campaign. They regularly translated *Handeln* to mean operations, so introducing a contemporary military concept to a text in which it is absent. Most importantly they inserted adjectives like 'political' to gloss the meaning of the text where appropriate. The unwary reader is left with the impression that the theme of war's relationship to policy is much more persistent in *On War* than in fact it is.<sup>13</sup>

In 1976, the Howard and Paret edition of *On War* appeared to triumphant reviews. At a stroke Howard and Paret shattered the illusion, carefully nurtured not just by Clausewitz's British critics but also by Germans, that *On War* was self-contradictory and difficult. Here was *On War* in a version that was both readable and comprehensible. Princeton University Press also managed to reduce its bulk, abandoning the three-volume structure of the original German edition, which had been replicated by the Graham translation, for

<sup>11</sup>Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press 1994), 58; Howard made the reference to impressionism at the conference held in Oxford in March 2005, which resulted in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-first Century*.

<sup>12</sup>Jan Willem Honig, 'Clausewitz's *On War*: problems of text and translation', in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-first Century*, 91–106.

<sup>13</sup>Hew Strachan, 'Clausewitz en anglais: la césure de 1976', in Laure Bardiès and Martin Motte, *De la guerre? Clausewitz et la pensée stratégique contemporaine* (Paris: Economica 2008), 81–122.

a single volume. It was compact enough to be published in due course in the revived Everyman series, a copy of which a reporter found in an al-Qaeda safe house in Afghanistan after 9/11.<sup>14</sup> English-language references to Clausewitz soared to new heights in the early 1980s. In Britain that peak was twice as great as the previous surges in references to *On War*, each of which had occurred in the two world wars, and in the United States it had no previous precedent and was five times bigger than that in Britain.<sup>15</sup>

The Howard and Paret translation effected two major shifts in Anglo-Saxon strategic thought. In the United States, it ended the dominance of Clausewitz's contemporary, Antoine-Henri Jomini, which had persisted since the mid-nineteenth century and was still to be found in legacy form even in the Cold War.<sup>16</sup> In the United Kingdom, it finally up-ended the nonsense written about Clausewitz, especially by Basil Liddell Hart. In *The ghost of Napoleon*, published in 1933, Liddell Hart had lampooned Clausewitz as 'the Mahdi of the Mass', characterising his text as obscure and contradictory. Confusingly he had even argued that Clausewitz believed that war invariably trumped policy.

In his introductory essay on Clausewitz's influence on military thought, written for the translation with obvious relish, Howard demolished Liddell Hart, who had died six years previously. However, his hatchet had a regrettable by-product. Howard failed to notice how profoundly *On War* had shaped Julian Corbett's *Some principles of maritime strategy*, published in 1911. This may have been because Howard had little interest in naval matters or it may have been because some of the ideas which Liddell Hart branded as his own – particularly the British way in warfare, which Howard rejected in a separate lecture in 1974<sup>17</sup> – were lifted unacknowledged from Corbett. Corbett had used Clausewitz to stress the relationship between war and policy, to distinguish between what he called 'major strategy' and 'minor strategy', and to differentiate between major war and limited war. By reading Corbett through the lens of Liddell Hart, not Liddell Hart through the lens of Corbett, Howard contributed to a culture in Britain which concentrated too heavily on Liddell Hart and gave insufficient attention to Corbett's distinctive and more original interpretation of strategy.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Lucasta Miller, 'Bound for glory', an interview with David Fairhall, the publisher of the Everyman series, *The Guardian*, Review, 13 May 2006, 11.

<sup>15</sup>I am grateful for these calculations to Connor Collins, who worked them out using a Google Books ngram search and applied them in an essay for the M Litt in Strategic Studies at St Andrews in 2020.

<sup>16</sup>While most English-language literature focuses on Jomini's influence in the American Civil War, Bruno Colson, *La culture stratégique américaine: l'influence de Jomini* (Paris: Economica 1993) highlights its continuing presence in the SIOPs of nuclear deterrence.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Howard, 'The British way in warfare: a reappraisal', in Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (London: Temple Smith 1983).

<sup>18</sup>I attended a meeting of First World War historians convened by Brian Bond at King's College, London in the late 1980s, at which I suggested to the naval historian, Brian McL. Ranft, that Liddell Hart had lifted his ideas on Britain's use of sea power from Corbett. Ranft discounted the idea but a decade later Azar

The sales of the 1976 English edition of *On War* have comfortably exceeded those of any previous edition in any language, including German. Howard used to cite figures of 200,000 copies. What particularly pleased him was that *On War* was being read by those in uniform, especially at war colleges in the United States. For Howard, Clausewitz was a soldier writing for other soldiers.<sup>19</sup> This facet of Clausewitz's work was evident in the graphic way in which he described combat and was also present in his attention to the issues of morale and friction.

Apart from the edition of *On War* and its introductory essay on its influence, Michael Howard wrote only one extended piece on Clausewitz – a short volume of 74 pages for Oxford University Press's Past Masters series published in 1983. The latter in particular is studded with *aperçus* which reflect the experience of the young Michael Howard as a junior officer in the Coldstream Guards in 1943–45. He empathised with Clausewitz's observations on the military profession, on its resistance to learning, and on the long periods of boredom in war, as well as on the moments of intense terror. The second chapter of Howard's Clausewitz is called 'the theory and practice of war'. It is actually a chapter on practice, not theory, and is in a sense a dialogue between one soldier and another which focuses above all on morale in war.

However, that bond of shared experience then prompted in Howard the same frustration with Clausewitz's methodology which had been expressed by many other soldiers who have read *On War*. At times Howard's comments on Clausewitz read in terms which are as tetchy as those of Liddell Hart. Howard stressed the elements of confusion in Clausewitz's thinking and the contradictions within the text. Although he acknowledged that Clausewitz's approach was dialectical, he never fully embraced the implications of the method. Its purpose was to set up propositions, to juxtapose thesis and anti-thesis, both of them based on historical evidence or on Clausewitz's own experience, so as to generate an understanding of war as a phenomenon. Raymond Aron called his book on Clausewitz, also published in 1976, *Penser la guerre*, or how to think about war. But Howard wanted *On War* to be a book that was more practical than philosophical. He wanted to resolve the paradoxes through congruence. At the beginning of Clausewitz, Howard said that 'Clausewitz had limited his analysis to what would be of immediate utility to a commander planning a campaign'.<sup>20</sup> That made Clausewitz sound like Jomini.

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Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War: Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet, and other Modernists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998), 157–61 made exactly that point. This article was written before the publication of Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2021).

<sup>19</sup>Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983), 2.

<sup>20</sup>Howard, *Clausewitz*, 2.

The third chapter of Howard's Clausewitz is called 'ends and means in war'. Howard mentions the dialectical method at the beginning but then suppresses the tensions in order to develop a linear view of war, shaped by the vocabulary of ends and means. Howard had already summarised Clausewitz's view of war in ways which are inherently hierarchical: 'Military manoeuvre was pointless unless it was designed to culminate in battle; and battle was pointless unless it was designed to serve the ultimate purpose of war'.<sup>21</sup> And so, in the chapter on ends and means, Howard tells us that Clausewitz uses the word *Zweck* to describe the ultimate end of war and the word *Ziel* to describe the intermediate objective of a subordinate military commander, so creating a verbal hierarchy with *Mittel* (means) serving *Ziel* (ways), which in turn serves *Zweck* (ends). The trouble is that Clausewitz does no such thing. In reality, Clausewitz used both *Zweck* and *Ziel* to describe the ultimate aims of war. As a result, it is much less clear in *Vom Kriege* than in *On War* whether Clausewitz is referring to an ultimate or an intermediate objective in war.

A particular source of frustration for Howard was book III of *On War*, that on 'strategy in general'. Howard dismissed it as 'only a collection of chapters on diverse topics linked by no very evident common theme'. One might assume, he went on, that Clausewitz's interest in strategy 'was slight in comparison with his almost obsessive concern with what he saw as the main tool of the strategist', in other words battle.<sup>22</sup> Clausewitz had indeed defined strategy as the use of the battle for the purposes of the war. But Howard neither cited that definition, despite the fact that it was one to which Clausewitz cleaved throughout his writings at the latest from 1809 onwards,<sup>23</sup> nor was ready to accept that it was what Clausewitz believed strategy to be. Howard wanted Clausewitz to have interpreted strategy as 'the ordering of priorities' (Howard cited Clausewitz's own phrase),<sup>24</sup> so that strategy would have a more hierarchical and also modern meaning than Clausewitz accorded it, one in which war was related to policy.

Herein lay the second source of Howard's frustration with Clausewitz: that he actually said very little in *On War* about the idea that war is the continuation of policy by other means. He asserts it in book 1, chapter 1; he develops the implications more fully in book 8, on war plans; but it is absent from book 3 on strategy and almost entirely so from all the other books. The significant exception is its latency in book 6, that on defence. One of Howard's significant contributions was his recognition of how fundamental book 6 was to the evolution of *On War*. Writing it forced Clausewitz not just to address the relationship between attack and defence, but also to embrace a wider history

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<sup>21</sup>Howard, *Clausewitz*, 16.

<sup>22</sup>Howard, *Clausewitz*, 40.

<sup>23</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *Strategie aus dem Jahr 1804 mit Zusätzen von 1808 und 1809*, ed Eberhard Kessel (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt 1937), esp 78.

<sup>24</sup>Howard, *Clausewitz*, 42.



of war than simply his own experience of the Napoleonic wars. Its dominant figure is Frederick the Great, who linked war and policy more successfully than had Napoleon and who used pre-emptive attack as a means for defensive ends. Thinking through the implications was laborious: book 6 is the longest of *On War*, taking up a quarter of the whole. Ultimately it led Clausewitz to recognise the role of policy as way of uniting the different forms which war might assume and of explaining why a commander might switch from one to another, not just from defence to offence but also (as the introductory note to *On War* of 10 July 1827 makes clear) from limited war to a war of annihilation, or vice versa.

Howard and Paret justified their treatment of *On War* by their constant reiteration of the point that the text was unfinished, save in relation to book 1, chapter 1. In other words, they believed that, by taking this chapter in isolation and reading it as a final statement, they could iron out the differences, distinctions, paradoxes and contradictions in what follows, in order to produce an interpretation of both war and strategy that is less about dialectics and more about a sequential relationship from tactics (and battle), through strategy, to war as a political instrument. Paret made the point explicitly, when he included it in its entirety in chapter 11 of his biography of Clausewitz, also published in 1976. In Clausewitz's eyes, Paret believed, 'the opening chapter was the best introduction to his book, and thus it is also the best imaginable guide to his entire theoretical work'.<sup>25</sup> For students pressed for time or just reluctant to devote the effort required to engage with the text as a whole, here is a simple, short and explicit solution.

The basis for this decision was one of two prefatory notes written for *On War*, published by Clausewitz's widow, Marie von Brühl, in her introduction to the first edition in 1832. One, referred to above, is dated 1827 and lays out Clausewitz's plans for revising the text as a whole. The second is undated. It says that the author only regards book I, chapter 1 as finished. Howard and Paret dated this note to 1830, so assuming that Clausewitz had written it as he packed up his papers before returning to active service in Poland as Gneisenau's chief of staff. Given that Clausewitz was never able to return to his manuscript, Howard and Paret were therefore able to conclude that this undated note was Clausewitz's final statement on the preparedness of *On War*. However, Werner Hahlweg, who devoted much of his career to an edition of Clausewitz's manuscripts in what amounts to three volumes, thought this second note was also written in 1827 and others are of the same

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<sup>25</sup>Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1976), 382.

view, including Howard's one-time doctoral pupil, Azar Gat.<sup>26</sup> If this note was written in 1827, then Clausewitz had the time to revise much more of the text than Howard was ready to acknowledge.

Since 1976 the work of a number of scholars has developed and revised our understanding of the genesis of *On War*. They include Werner Hahlweg himself, whose 2-part second volume of Clausewitz's writings was not published until 1990, but to his name must be added Andreas Herberg-Rothe, Anders Palmgren and Paul Donker.<sup>27</sup> They have discovered fresh notes from Clausewitz himself, so relating the evolution of his thought to other publications of the 1820s on which he drew, and they have linked the theoretical text of *On War* to the military histories which Clausewitz wrote concurrently and through which he developed his ideas. Arthur Kuhle and Hervé Drévilion have contextualised Clausewitz, stressing the influence of those he traduced, particularly Bülow and Jomini, and of his contemporaries in France as well as in Prussia.<sup>28</sup> The result has been to push the maturation of Clausewitz's theoretical approaches certainly back to 1825 and possibly earlier, and so further weaken the notion that the full plan emerged only at the very last moment.

Peter Paret pre-empted this point by stressing the early formation of Clausewitz's thinking in 1802–6 through his membership of the *Militärische Gesellschaft* and his attendance at the *Kriegsakademie* under Gerhard von Scharnhorst's direction.<sup>29</sup> Indubitably, these were formative intellectual influences: as already noted, Clausewitz decided on his definition of strategy then and never changed it. However, the effect of going this far back in Clausewitz's life to trace his key concepts is to create another problem, to reduce the importance for the mature Clausewitz of the experiences of the Jena campaign of 1806, of his service in Russia in 1812, and of the wars of German liberation in 1813–15.

Michael Howard, for his part, although he stressed the effect of the later Napoleonic Wars on Clausewitz the soldier, never paid much attention to their contribution to Clausewitz's political thought. He specifically rejected the suggestion that Clausewitz had ever been a German nationalist, not least

<sup>26</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *Schriften-Aufsätze-Studien-Briefe*, ed Werner Hahlweg, 2 vols in 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1966–90), vol 2, part 1, 625; Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989), 169, 230–1, 255–63.

<sup>27</sup>Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Das Rätsel Clausewitz. Politische Theorie des Krieges im Widerstreit* (München: Wilhelm Fink 2001), translated as *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007); Anders Palmgren, 'Visions of strategy: following Clausewitz's train of thought' (Ph D thesis, Finnish Defence University 2013); 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, Faculty of Military Sciences, Netherlands Defence Academy, May 2016).

<sup>28</sup>Arthur Kuhle, *Die preussische Kriegstheorie um 1800 und ihre Suche nach dynamischen Gleichgewichtene* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot 2018); Hervé Drévilion, *Penser et écrire la guerre: contre Clausewitz 1780–1837* (Paris: Passés Composés 2021).

<sup>29</sup>Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, 97.

so that he could rebut the Nazis' appropriation of Clausewitz in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> But the events of 1806–15 did make Clausewitz a German nationalist and it is extraordinary that Howard did not recognise this, given that he lectured on Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the philosopher whose *Reden an die deutsche Natione* (speeches to the German nation), delivered in 1808, so appealed to Clausewitz. Between the treaty of Tilsit in 1807 and Napoleon's demand that Prussia supply a contingent for his invasion of Russia in February 1812, Clausewitz became increasingly frustrated with the reluctance of his king, Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia, to confront the French. The effects radicalised him. He and August von Gneisenau looked with admiration at the insurgencies against French rule in Spain, Switzerland and Italy. In 1812, when the king supplied the troops for the French campaign in Russia, Clausewitz resigned his commission and fought for the Russian against the Prussians. He had defied his king. The lengthy and angry 'confession of faith', which Clausewitz penned in February 1812 in explanation of his actions, was addressed to the German nation, over the head of the Prussian monarchy.<sup>31</sup> Howard blamed the king's distrust of Clausewitz on the king himself, but here was an officer who ultimately put his faith in the nation over his loyalty to the crown and who in the last resort rejected the principle of military subordination to the government.

The neglect of this traumatic phase of Clausewitz's life led Howard to underestimate his contribution in another respect and to overestimate it in a third.

The underestimation relates to Clausewitz's thinking on revolutionary and guerrilla warfare. Howard read this exclusively in the light of what Clausewitz wrote in book 6, chapter 26 of *On War*. Here guerrilla war is largely seen as supplementary to the main effort and that was Howard's interpretation of the text. However, the end of the chapter talks about the nation continuing to fight after 'the major battle'. Howard and Paret translated this phrase as 'a major battle', so diminishing the significance of what Clausewitz was saying. War did not have to end just because a state's regular army suffered a shattering defeat on the battlefield. Instead, the nation could fight on. Howard and Paret translated *Volksbewaffnung*, the arming of the people, as 'general insurrection'. Howard the rationalist could not grasp the emotional intensity which underpinned Clausewitz's writing, even as he translated it: 'There will always time enough to die; like a drowning man who will clutch

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<sup>30</sup>Michael Howard 'The influence of Clausewitz', in Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, trans and ed Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1976), 41; unless otherwise specified this is the edition of *On war* referred to in what follows.

<sup>31</sup>The full text is in Clausewitz, *Schriften*, ed Hahlweg, vol 1, 678–751; for extracts in English, see Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings* ed and trans Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992), 285–303.

instinctively at a straw, it is the natural law of the moral world that a nation that finds itself on the brink of an abyss will try to save itself by any means'.<sup>32</sup>

Book 6, chapter 26 therefore represents the development of Clausewitz's own thinking. It had begun with the received orthodoxy, that small wars were separate operations conducted by isolated bodies away from the main battle, but it was changed by the inspiration which Clausewitz and his contemporaries drew from the guerrilla war in Spain. Here small war became a war of national self-defence. Between 1808 and 1812, Clausewitz, Gneisenau and others had hoped for a national insurgency against the French. It is easy if simplistic to see Clausewitz's lectures on 'small wars', delivered at the war academy in 1810 and 1811, as symptomatic of that aspiration. In practice their content looks back, not forward, to the conduct of so-called 'petty war' in the eighteenth century – harassing the enemy's lines of communications, plundering his convoys or thwarting his outposts. However, because the tactics of petty war showed how to take the fight to the enemy without a major battle, they were also well suited for use not just by specialist units of light troops but by a people in arms.

When book 6, chapter 26 of *On War* is set alongside Clausewitz's private correspondence with Gneisenau and the 'confession of faith' of 1812 (also sent to Gneisenau and found after both their deaths in the latter's papers), it becomes clear that Clausewitz saw the 'nation in arms' or a 'general insurrection' not simply as adjuncts to the regular army but as the ways to convert a war of national survival into an existential conflict. So important were the years between the treaty of Tilsit and the invasion of Russia for Clausewitz's intellectual, political and emotional formation that some have argued that Clausewitz planned a second book on 'small war' to go alongside *On War*, and find evidence to support this in his undated note on the state of the manuscript, which Clausewitz described as devoted to the 'conduct of *major* war' and 'a collection of materials from which a theory of *major* war was to have been distilled' (emphasis added). Howard and Paret, as well as dating this note to 1830, again minimised the implications of what Clausewitz might have been suggesting, omitting the adjective 'major' (*großen*) from their translations of both phrases and in the first of the two rendering 'war' (*Krieges*) as 'operations'.<sup>33</sup> Sibylle Scheipers has gone further in challenging the Howard and Paret interpretation. She has seen the developments of these years as the crucible of *On War* itself: after all, a national insurrection – as Clausewitz certainly recognised at the time – would have been a war without limits.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 483.

<sup>33</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 70.

<sup>34</sup>Sibylle Scheipers, *On Small War: Carl von Clausewitz and People's War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018).

It is here – in relation to the idea of ‘limited war’ – that Howard over-estimated Clausewitz’s contribution. In his other prefatory note, that of 10 July 1827 Clausewitz said that war could be of two kinds – either a war of annihilation, to overthrow the enemy and to dictate a peace settlement, or a war for more limited objectives concluded by negotiation. Here was evidence of just how wrong Liddell Hart had been: Clausewitz did not just describe war as a relentless search for battle and blood but also recognised the possibility of its containment. In seizing on the 1827 note to develop Clausewitz’s binary characterisation of war, Howard was in good company: before 1914 Hans Delbrück and Julian Corbett had made similar points. The fact that what had followed was not one world war, but two, and that Germany was at the heart of both, had discredited their readings of the note of 10 July 1827 but the advent of nuclear weapons gave limited war theory fresh urgency. Howard realised that the second form of war is under-represented in *On War*. It does not develop the idea of limited war more fully, arguing instead that it is in war’s nature for conflict to escalate. Clausewitz lampooned eighteenth-century styles of warfare precisely because they were limited. Not until he wrote book 6, that on defence, which had to use Frederick the Great more than Napoleon as its historical exemplar, did Clausewitz appreciate that any universal theory of war had also to accommodate wars which did not accord with his own experience. Revolutionary France had brought an intensity to war’s conduct which probably presaged its future but might not – and any theory had to allow for that possibility.

The binary interpretation of war is a theoretical construct, and one which required Clausewitz to account not just for war’s tendency to escalate but also for the occasions when it did not – or even went in the opposite direction. Although Clausewitz regarded the fact that fighting could be suspended in mid-war as odd, he recognised that it was a reality which theory had to accommodate.

Both types of war, in Howard’s treatment of Clausewitz’s thinking, were the result of political choice. The note of 10 July 1827 goes on to make what Clausewitz calls ‘another point’, that ‘war is nothing but the continuation of policy [the German in this case is *Staatspolitik*] by other means’.<sup>35</sup> Although Clausewitz did not use the note to produce a unified theory to cover the two types of war (remember that war’s continuation of policy was ‘another point’), within six months he had reached that conclusion. In December 1827 he wrote two letters to Major Carl von Roeder, which gave primacy to the idea that war was the continuation of policy by other means.<sup>36</sup> The objective

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<sup>35</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 69.

<sup>36</sup>Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (ed and trans), *Carl von Clausewitz: Two Letters on Strategy* (US Army War College 1984).

should set the way in which the war was to be fought. What Raymond Aron called 'la formule' could now accommodate both major and limited war, and so provide an overarching framework for all war.<sup>37</sup>

Howard's overestimation of Clausewitz's contribution was the result of his determination to relate this binary model of war to the conditions of the Cold War. Clausewitz dealt with the scale of major war in three ways. In book 1, chapter 1, para 6 he posits an ideal type – absolute war, which he suggests can never be achieved in reality. In book 8, chapter 2, he modifies this by saying that in practice absolute war does sometimes happen and that it did so under the impact of the French Revolution. In book 8, chapter 6 he also introduces the concept of a whole war, entire in itself, which escalates because to do so is in war's nature. Howard tended to lump all three together under the title 'total' war (which was how he and Paret translated *ganz*, from the phrase *wenn der Krieg ganz Krieg, ganz das ungebundene Element der Feindschaft wäre*, on p.605), so introducing a twentieth-century concept which Clausewitz did not use, and instead appropriating Clausewitz's ideas to encapsulate not just the experience of the Second World War but the threat of nuclear war.<sup>38</sup> To offset the impact of this gloss for Clausewitz's reputation as a German militarist, Howard then elevated the role of limited war thinking in Clausewitz's calculations. He confessed that, apart from the prefatory note of 10 July 1827 not much in *On War* addressed the notion of limited war. Instead, because Clausewitz saw war's propensity to escalate, Howard stressed the importance of political control in containing it.

For Howard, the Korean War became the pivot of this argument.<sup>39</sup> Of course, the Korean War did not become a limited war because of Clausewitz's influence, but his theory provided a retrospective analysis as to why it could be construed as one. Howard followed Robert Osgood in seeing Clausewitz as a theorist who could bestow utility on war in an era when nuclear war ruled out major war.<sup>40</sup> It was quite a stretch from the text of *On War*, albeit a sustainable and increasingly fashionable one. In 1946, although citing Clausewitz only as the advocate of 'absolute war', Liddell Hart had also called for the development of limited war thinking. The revolution in warfare, a book conceived as Liddell Hart's response to the horrors of the Second World War, was completed as the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. Liddell Hart argued that the ideas of 'unlimited effort' and 'unlimited aim' had to be disaggregated if war

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<sup>37</sup>Raymond Aron, *Penser la guerre* (2 vols, Paris: Gallimard 1976).

<sup>38</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 76, 579–81, 602, 605–6; see the discussion in Honig, 'Clausewitz's *On War*', in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 64–9.

<sup>39</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 42.

<sup>40</sup>Robert E. Osgood, *Limited war: the challenge to American strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1957), 21–3, 28.

was to have utility in an era when weapons of mass destruction could deprive it of purpose.<sup>41</sup> The Korean War gave wings to the hope that that might be possible.

Michael Howard also used the Korean War to interpret Clausewitz in another way, as a theorist of civil-military relations. In 1957 Samuel P. Huntington took *On War* as the foundational text for 'the formulation of the professional military ethic', because it accepted the subordination of war to policy. For Huntington, 'the concept of war as an autonomous and yet instrumental science implies a similar theory with respect to the specialist in war'. Huntington read Clausewitz as saying that 'the soldier must always be subordinate to the statesman'.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Clausewitz implied the opposite, writing – not least because Napoleon was the model commander of the age – 'that a commander-in-chief must also be a statesman'.<sup>43</sup> Even if he had not, Clausewitz's own actions would have given the lie to Huntington's claim. His behaviour in 1812 had more closely matched that of Douglas MacArthur in 1951 than the theory of democratic civil-military relations suggests should be the norm. MacArthur's call to escalate the conflict in response to China's intervention, contending that 'there is no substitute for victory', not only threatened a shift from limited to 'total war', it also challenged the authority of the president. Clausewitz in 1812 had neither the seniority nor the public charisma enjoyed by MacArthur, but his preference too was to escalate the war and in pursuing that approach he was subverting his own government.<sup>44</sup>

Howard and Paret made great play of the fact that their English translation of *On War* was the only one to be based on the first German edition of 1832–4, implying that this made it superior to those of Graham and Jolles. There were good reasons why both Graham and Jolles had used the second edition, as Howard and Paret acknowledged. The first edition contained significant corruptions and misprints which were subsequently corrected. What irked Howard and Paret was the second edition's handling of the discussion in book 8, chapter 6 of the role of the commander in the decisions of the cabinet. Howard and Paret insisted that the wording of the first edition reflected Clausewitz's true intentions, which were to enable the cabinet to take a part in the commander's decisions, not to enable the commander to take an active part in the cabinet's.<sup>45</sup> Their translation said that the general should be in the cabinet so that his military decisions would be fully consonant with the state's policy. However, it is important to remind ourselves (as the Howard and Paret edition did not) that the cabinet of which Clausewitz

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<sup>41</sup>Basil Liddell Hart, *The revolution in Warfare* (London 1946), 54–5.

<sup>42</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, *The soldier and the State: The Theory and Practice of Civil-military Relations* (Cambridge Mass: Belknap Press 1957), 57.

<sup>43</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 112; see in general book 1, chapter 3 and book 2, chapter 3, in the original German.

<sup>44</sup>Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 390.

<sup>45</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 608 footnote 1.

was speaking was not the equivalent of a modern cabinet in a democratic state, but the private office of the king. In his account of the catastrophe of 1806, written in 1823–4 and first published by the historical section of the German general staff in 1880, Clausewitz had apportioned a large share of the blame for the defeat at Jena to the confusing advice tendered in cabinet to the monarch by his personal advisers.<sup>46</sup> Here and elsewhere Clausewitz saw the workings of a cabinet as too often weakening the conduct of war, not strengthening it. The second German edition of *On War*, Howard and Paret suggested, opened the door to an overmighty military, which would participate in all political decisions, whether they involved war or not. But Clausewitz never drew such a clear demarcation between the political and military. In book 8 he goes out of his way to address the need for policy to be shaped by what is militarily possible, recognising the danger that would arise if the statesman asked war to achieve something of which it was not capable.<sup>47</sup> Clausewitz was emphatic that the commander-in-chief needed to be both a soldier and a statesman. Howard wanted Clausewitz to be addressing the civil-military relationships of liberal democracies in the late twentieth century, when in fact he was confronting those of a weak monarch who still believed in absolutism.

Since the end of the Cold War many commentators have drawn on Clausewitz's brief passage on the 'trinity' at the end of book 1, chapter 1 of *On War*, both to address war's changing character (he likened it to a chameleon) and to explore the role of the people, as well as the army and the government in the war's conduct. Clausewitz addresses both these themes – and others – in a passage that is so distilled and succinct that it can be read in many different ways.<sup>48</sup> In a lecture delivered in 1984, Howard gave the following account of the trinity: 'Clausewitz described war as being compounded of a paradoxical trinity: the government for which it was an instrument of policy; the military, for which it was the exercise of a skill; and the people as a whole, the extent of whose involvement determined the intensity with which the war would be waged'.<sup>49</sup>

His footnote refers to his own translation of *On War*, but his reading is only one of several possibilities. It is open to two criticisms in particular. First, in its focus on the government, the armed forces and the people, it elevates the actors of the so-called 'secondary' trinity over the trinity of reason, the play of probability and chance, and passion which lie at the core of the 'primary' trinity. Secondly, in their translation Howard and Paret gave greater primacy

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<sup>46</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *Preussen in seiner grossen Katastrophe* (Wien and Leipzig: Karolinger 2001), 12; see also Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (London: Atlantic Books), 165–8.

<sup>47</sup>See also Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

<sup>48</sup>For an excellent discussion see Christopher Bassford, 'The primacy of policy and the "trinity" in Clausewitz's mature thought', in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the twenty-first century*, 74–90.

<sup>49</sup>Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 115.



to the role of reason and associated it more directly with the government than does Clausewitz's own text. After all, he had warned (in the English of Howard and Paret's own translation) that: 'A theory which ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless'.<sup>50</sup>

The attentive reader will find only a partial relationship between Howard's selective characterisation of the trinity in his lecture and the English text to which he refers, and even less between either of them and the German of Vom Kriege. The connections between the three elements of both the 'primary' and 'secondary' trinities and the juxtapositions within them are much more variable than the straitjacket that Howard wanted to impose. In elevating the state over war and the political over the social he created a version that suited the circumstances of the Cold War but one far less capacious than Clausewitz's and much less adaptable. In the 1990s the rise of non-state actors and the higher profile of civil wars, insurgencies and so-called 'new wars' made Howard's reading of *On War* too state-centric. Those who heralded the end of 'the post-Westphalian order' challenged Clausewitz's dominant position in the study of war but in many respects their target was not Vom Kriege but the interpretation imposed on it by Howard's and Paret's translation.<sup>51</sup>

Michael Howard was both a Grotian and a Hobbesian. His reaction to the 1977 additional protocols to the Geneva Convention, which recognised the legal rights of 'freedom fighters', and his frustration at the United States' 'global war on terror' adopted in response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001, showed a man who believed that the state had to ensure its monopoly of war in order to control it and who saw policy as a mechanism to limit it. Hugo Grotius's development of international law in 1625 and Thomas Hobbes's Commonwealth in 1651 had provided the framework for a rational order for war which could shape its utility and control its penchant for escalation.<sup>52</sup> In the era of the Cold War and great power competition that was a wise, prudent and humane approach to war, both realistic in its recognition of war's possibility and ambitious in its hope that it could be contained or even averted, but it was not the approach to war which Clausewitz had addressed.

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<sup>50</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

<sup>51</sup>For these critics, see Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press 1991), 33–62; John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Hutchinson 1993), 14–27; Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity 1999), 13–24.

<sup>52</sup>Michael Howard, 'Temperamenta belli: can war be controlled?', in Michael Howard, *Restraints on War: Studies in the Limitation of Armed Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1979), 13–14; Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War: Reflections on War and International Order* (London: Profile Books 2001), Howard, *Captain Professor*, 217–20.

Michael Howard was the founding father of both academic military history and the nascent discipline of strategic studies in post-1945 Britain. Furthermore, he believed – as Clausewitz and his nineteenth-century successors did – that the former was a key component, possibly the key component, of the latter. However, in Clausewitz himself, Howard found a subject where too often the requirements of the first were at odds with the contemporary pressures of the second. In seeking to make Clausewitz relevant to the late twentieth century he could on occasion underestimate the influences of the early nineteenth century. In practice, as events after 9/11 were to show, those very influences were to give Clausewitz a purchase on the developments of the early twenty-first century in ways that Howard's interpretation had underestimated. Like any translation, the 1976 edition of *On War* reflected its own times. None of us, historians or students of strategy, is immune to those pressures, nor should we be if we are to recognise our own humanity and war's assault on it. The point here is not to criticise Michael Howard but to criticise those who have mistaken his extrapolations from *On War* for the nuance and variety of *Vom Kriege*.

### Disclosure statement

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