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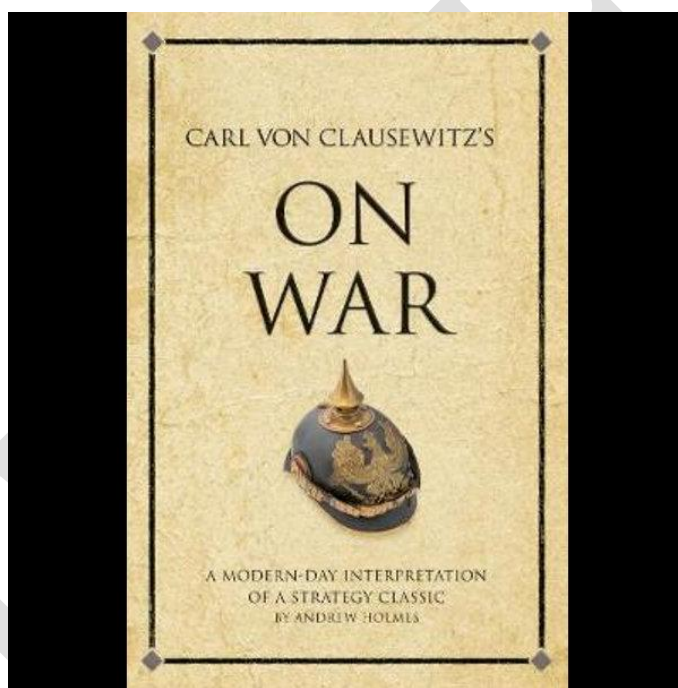
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Is Clausewitz Still Relevant Today?

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ABSTRACT: When almost two-hundred years ago Carl von Clausewitz wrote his famous work 'On War', it was his "ambition to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject".



The fact that, "Carl von Clausewitz's On War is the prism through which we have come to look at war" suggests that Clausewitzian thought was not only a product of and relevant to its time, but that it is still applicable in a modern day context and, hence, timeless. However, when we look at the War on Terror where a state – the US – declared 'war' on a tactic – terrorism – and hence did not follow the traditional model of interstate war, the question of whether Clausewitzian thought is still relevant is an appropriate one.

KEYWORDS: Clausewitz, War, Book, timeless, relevant, today, terror, famous

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I. INTRODUCTION

On War is a standard source[1] for those interested in war and armed conflict, in particular after the 1976 translation by Paret and Howard.[2]

Carl von Clausewitz

- ◆ Carl Philipp Gottlieb von Clausewitz (July 1, 1780 - November 16, 1831) was a Prussian Major-General and military theorist who was most famous for his book "*Vom Kriege*" or "*On War*".
- ◆ Von Clausewitz's strategies of war influenced many leaders after his time and still influence many nations today.



Most scholars would agree that *On War* can generally be characterised in two diametrically opposed but accurate ways. First, it is seen as 'the one truly great book on war yet written'[3] and second, as 'often quoted but little read'.[4] Overall, in spite of its flaws and sometimes contradictory insights, it is one of the very few books in the Western world that seeks to present a theory of war. The work is based on rigorous analysis of the wars of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, all being wars between nation-states. This premise is why the work is often considered to be applicable only to larger interstate wars. With the rise of intrastate conflicts, civil wars and, in particular, terrorism in the last two decades, a 'new wars' school of thought[5] has dismissed *On War* as a relic from the past. According to this school violent conflicts emerge less between states; the lines between state and non-state actors are blurred.

Mary Kaldor, exemplifying the new wars thinking[6], argues that the nature of wars has changed.[7] Violent conflicts tend to be longer, more pervasive, less decisive, fragmented and with more non-state actors claiming power through identity rather than territory.[8] With the state becoming less of an actor Clausewitz's so-called trinity that links the concept of war to the three tendencies of passion, chance and reason was also undermined by critics like Creveld and Keegan.[9] Other scholars, such as Toffler, Owens, Summers and others,[10] have additionally argued that the nature of war has changed because of a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).[11] They claim that as a result of technology – in particular information technology – the disrupting factors that Clausewitz considered

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integral to the nature of war – uncertainty, danger, fear, courage, chance and friction – could be devalued or made redundant.[12]

The U.S. Army, as with most western militaries, has admittedly relied heavily on Clausewitz's teachings for most of the 20th Century and has built itself upon a foundation based heavily on the strategies found in *On War*. Many Army leaders can recite Clausewitz without reference. Who then in the U.S. government was tasked with creating the battle plan for the liberation of Iraq? General Tommy Franks, an Army General and Commander of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), was tasked with replacing an existing, outdated military plan that had been sitting on the shelf at the Pentagon for several years. Gen. Franks oversaw the creation and implementation of the new plan that is now being called one of the most successful military operations ever.



Clausewitz: Enduring Truths

1. War is an instrument of policy.
2. War is a complex and chaotic human endeavor.
3. War is a clash of opposing wills.

Franks is undoubtedly an expert on Clausewitzian strategy due to his experience as an infantry battalion commander, graduate of the Armed Forces Staff College and Army War College, and beneficiary of 35 years of military training and experience. Due to his long Army career and exposure to Clausewitz' theories, he presumably influenced the war planners at USCENTCOM to use the framework described in *On War* when developing the combat plans. Each chapter in *On War* deals with a different and vital aspect of military organization, planning and waging war, and the repercussions of failure. By comparing each chapter with the rapidly changing events taking place today it is easier to illustrate the similarities and differences between Operation Iraqi Freedom and the theories of Clausewitz.[1,2,3]

Clausewitz emphasized the importance of military morale and how high and low moral affected the outcome of the battle. His comments on political will are just as applicable today as they were in the early 19th Century. "Once it has been determined, from the political conditions, what a war is meant to achieve and what it can achieve it is early

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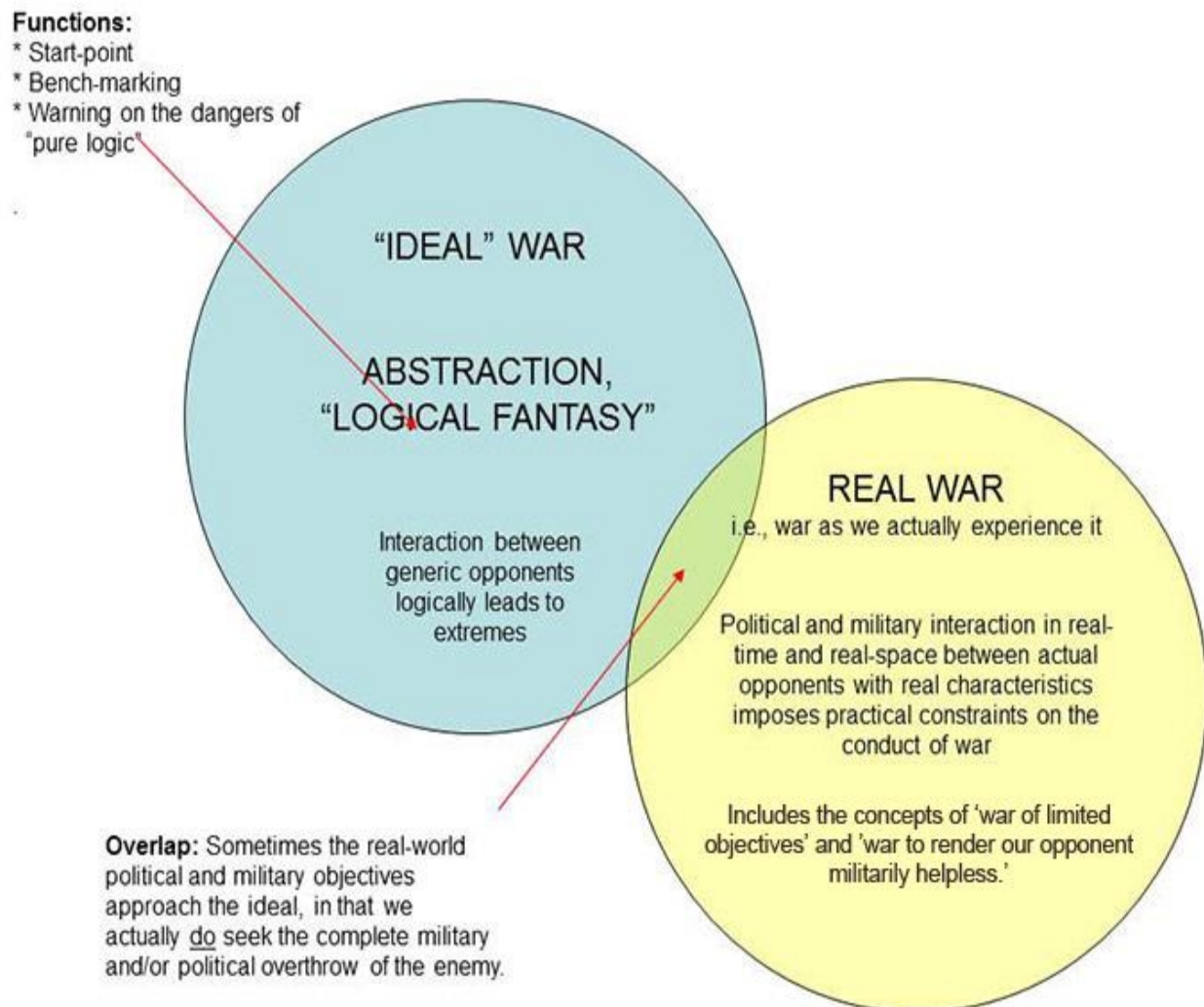
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to chart the course. But great strength of character, as well as great lucidity and firmness of mind, is required in order to follow through steadily, to carry our plan, and not be thrown off course by thousands of diversions."

II. DISCUSSION

Beyond the study of war, Clausewitz's lesson about politics is important.



Essentially, he alludes to the need for sound political decisions when contemplating the use of force. The debate about war today, however, tends not to engage deeply in whether or not the right political decisions are made. The U.N. Charter has limited war to three justifiable reasons, which were mentioned in Chapter 5. However, as can be seen by NATO's use of force in Kosovo, the US invasion of Iraq, as well as the lack of action with regards to

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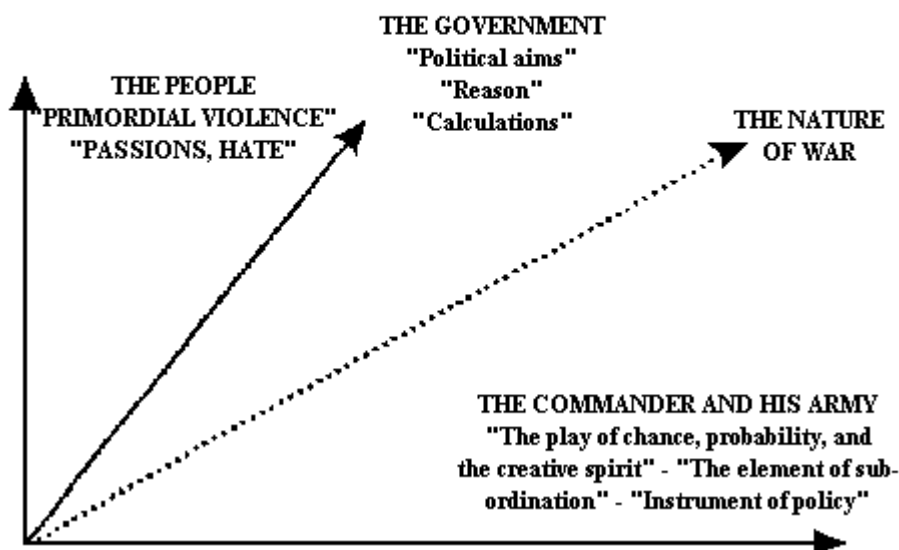
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Rwanda and the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Syria, the really crucial stage of war is not its conduct but the decision to use force in the first place; that is, the politics of other means. Clausewitz and On War remains an invaluable tool that provides readers with an objective analysis of war, reminding us that war cannot be thought of in rigid, dogmatic ways. There are always lessons to be learned from historical events"indeed, those who fail to heed them, are doomed to repeat them.[4,5,6]

On War is not, as many might speculate, a playbook. It is, rather, a work that explains the nature of war and how war interacts with political objectives. Those passages which deal principally with the tactics of war, while interesting, have stood the test of time with varying degrees of success. Indeed, were the book solely a compendium of tactical discussions on the "how to" of waging war, it would now almost certainly be obsolete. The parts of the book that are timeless, and that resonate today, are Clausewitz's philosophical insights into the nature of war. Contemporary strategists or warfighters examining the modern wars of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries should have no problem identifying the relevancy of Clausewitz's writings because of the conventional nature of the conflicts conducted therein.

THE TRINITARIAN ANALYSIS AND THE NATURE OF WAR



Even in the cold war (which of all modern wars may be the hardest to find direct correlations to Clausewitz's theories) there existed two discernable enemies, along with their allies, militaries, etc. These forces sought to achieve political aims, in part, through the application of military power. The nuclear debate was in full bloom with the question of deterrence and its effects, and yet, the famed Clausewitzian trinity of the government, the army, and the people stood like a "sword in the stone" of Clausewitzian warfare philosophy. The two superpowers jockeyed for position and tried to exert their political influence in the global arena.

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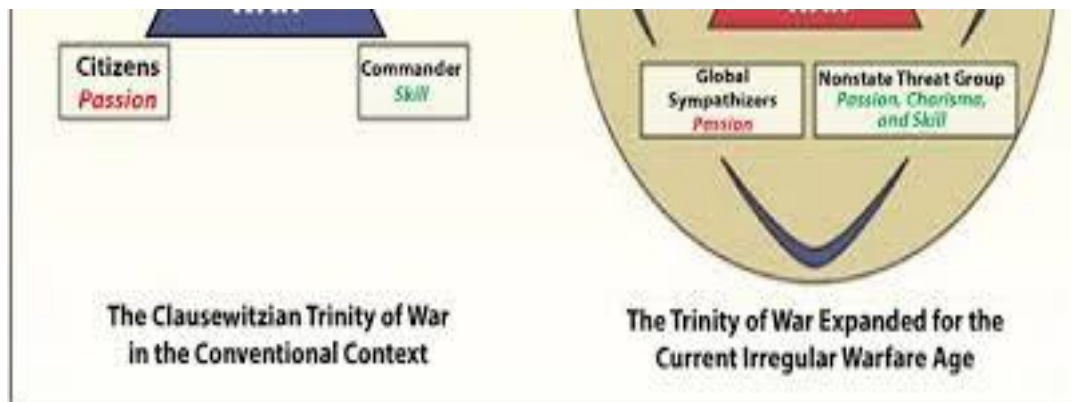
Both countries were:

- 1) concerned about their political aims proportionate to the possible advent of war; and
- 2) occupied with the fog and friction of determining the enemy's will.

Moreover, the cold war frequently went "hot" and was played out through forms of conventional warfare. During the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War, the relevance of Clausewitz's work was apparent[7,8]

III. RESULTS

On the whole it appears that the claim of novelty in contemporary war tends to rest less on objective observations of what went before, than on the ideas of Clausewitz, who is sometimes taken to be the chief interpreter of a dying breed of inter-state war.



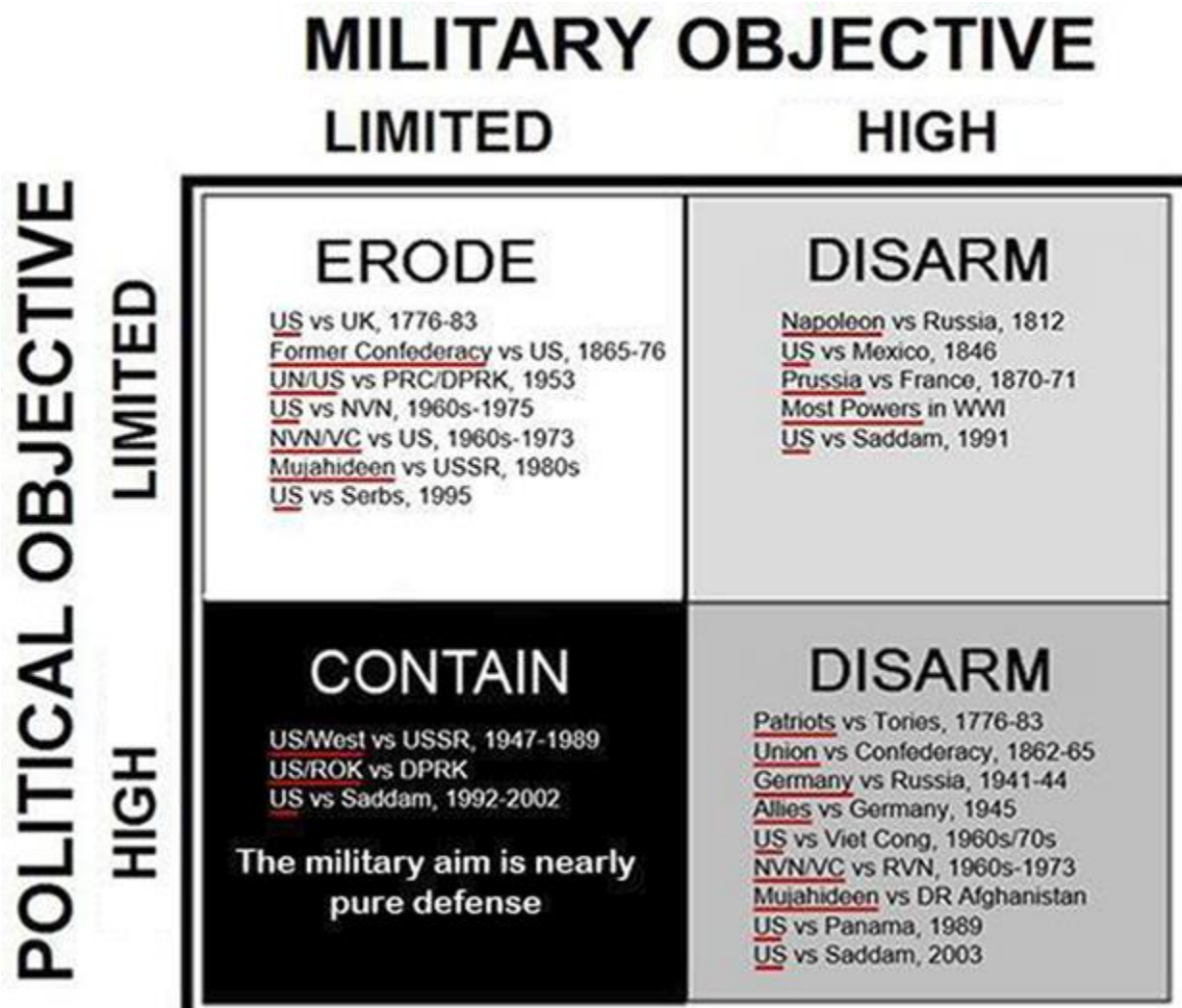
Likewise, those who claim that war has not changed do so on the grounds that Clausewitz essentially got it right. The central problem here lies not in the fact that Clausewitz is utilised as a theoretical starting point for all such discussion, but that his ideas are often distorted and mistakenly presented in order to add weight to a particular argument. If Clausewitz represents all that purportedly went before, then any thesis claiming the onset of a new era of warfare can only benefit from knocking Clausewitz from his pedestal. So, this thesis commenced on the assumption that greater sense can be achieved in the wider debate on the nature of war if we can better understand the chief theory on which the contested claims are made. This meant returning to Clausewitz's central theoretical device – the trinity – extrapolating its central conceptual components and their meaning, and suggesting ways in which they allow for much greater flexibility of interpretation than is commonly allowed. Yet, crucially, this study certainly does not conclude that the trinity can explain everything. Analysts of contemporary conflict – whether of individual wars (ongoing or historical), conflicts in certain geographical regions, or in its myriad forms, from guerrilla warfare to large-scale interstate wars – can provide students with detailed descriptions and observations of the events, causes, trends, and dynamics that comprise these conflicts. [9,10]

These specialist studies are indispensable and in no way do we argue that Clausewitz should supplant them. These authors have revealed the extremely complex and varying character of wars that have emerged in recent decades; wars that appear in many respects radically divergent from traditional interstate wars prominent throughout the so-called 'Westphalian era' and which were undoubtedly the dominant type about which Clausewitz wrote.

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Whether all the features of these wars are as novel as some proclaim – for instance, some commentators such as Münckler see parallels between these wars and earlier forms of conflict such as the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century– need not worry us greatly; the central point being that historical experience has of course revealed radically different forms of war. Clausewitz wrote at a time dominated by wars fought between the armies of sovereign states. That he witnessed, and even lectured on emergent forms of guerrilla conflict and ‘people’s war’ cannot hide this fact. His historical studies provided him with an awareness of different types of war, but the emphasis of his work was on interstate war, and more specifically its Napoleonic manifestation. To expect Clausewitz to be able to explain, in any detail, twenty-first century warfare is ridiculous. Clausewitz knew nothing of the United Nations, humanitarian aid organisations, 24 hour mass media, or laser-guided precision munitions: he was no nostradamus.[11,12]

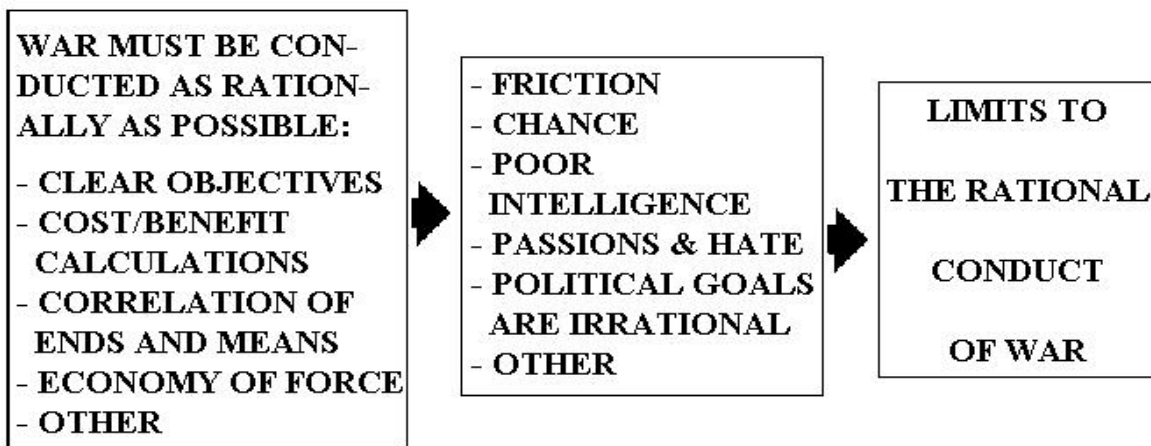
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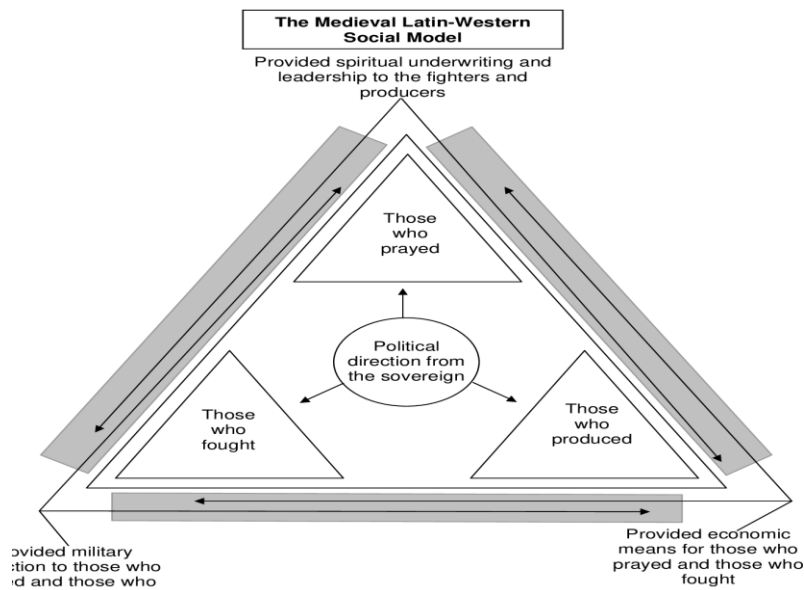
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IV. CONCLUSIONS

Yet, as we have seen, Clausewitz was driven by an intense professional desire to determine whether certain general propositions could be made with regard to the subject; to explore if there did in fact exist an underlying essence to the phenomenon of war, elements universal to all forms of war across the ages. His notably ‘quasi-modern’ and rigorous theoretical standards provided him with the means of carrying out this endeavour. He was ever attempting to establish the bounds of generalisable insights without succumbing to observations of meaningless banality. [13]



He understood that to achieve such an undertaking he would require not only a detailed comprehension of the dynamics of particular wars, but also a sense of how wars differed throughout history.

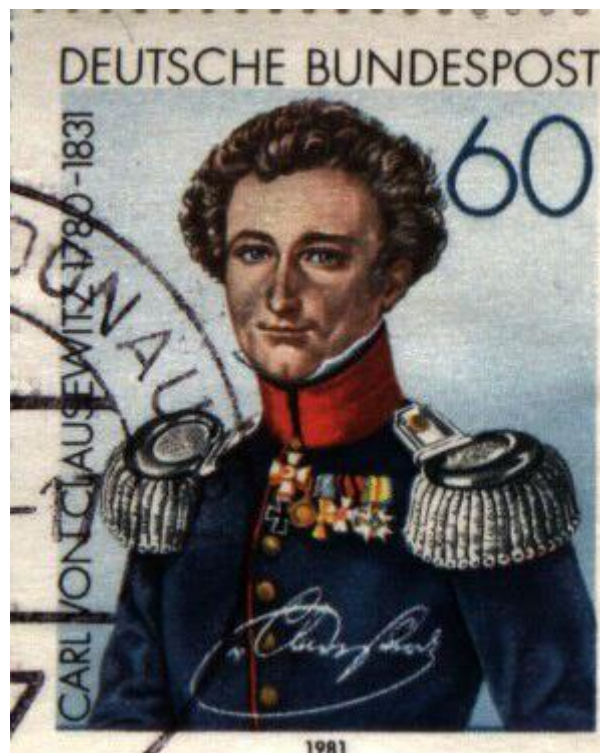


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In a manner largely unprecedented in military theory, Clausewitz truly began the process of, as he put it, ‘thinking about the subject for years on end and testing each conclusion against the history of war’, delving beneath the surface of war in an attempt to distinguish the essential from the incidental, the timeless from the particular. This thesis has argued that the trinity is the culmination – albeit incomplete – of this endeavour and we have defended, through a detailed analysis, those elements which Clausewitz identified as timeless aspects of war. [14,15]



The trinity is a framework that is intended to convey dynamism, flexibility, change, and complexity. This, to many readers, may not be initially apparent, but becomes clear based on a wider reading of the text and once his theoretical objectives and guiding methods are appreciated. In the light of these observations, we should approach the trinity as Clausewitz explicitly intended us to: as a guide to judgement and education, not a prescriptive theoretical manual with which any war can easily be understood or, indeed, fought. This point cannot be overstated.[16,17] It is hoped this thesis has made clear why such representations simply do not convey the depth, richness, and complexity of Clausewitz’s thought. Clausewitz was highly conscious of the fact that great contextual change could render irrelevant any static, dogmatic, or prescriptive theory, as was the fate of many of his contemporary theoretical competitors. In stark terms, he had seen the once incredibly successful Prussian army of Frederick the Great smashed on the battlefields of Jena-Auerstedt, precisely because of an inability to adapt their method of warfare to changed conditions.[18]

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