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Clausewitiz on the Moral Forces in War

Norman H. Gibbs

Clausewitz's dictum that "war is an extension of policy by other means" has become an article of faith for the military professional. While this concept provides a much needed theoretical framework for understanding and dealing with the phenomenon, his discussion on the moral (psychological) forces provides an equally illuminating insight into the dynamics of war.

CLAUSEWITZ ON THE MORAL FORCES IN WAR

An article prepared

by

Dr. Norman H. Gibbs

Clausewitz was deeply concerned with why men fight, what it is that makes wars emerge and develop as they do, and what general factors contribute to victory and defeat. However, the writing and discussion about Clausewitz's book *On War* which have taken place during the past 30 years or so have concentrated largely on his argument that "war is an extension of policy by other means." It is undoubtedly an argument basic to his whole concept of the nature of wars that actually occur as distinct from any theoretical concept of war; or, to use his own words, it is an argument which helps explain the contrast between real war on the one hand and absolute or ideal war on the other. But the view of war as an extension of policy was no discovery of Clausewitz, as I think he would have been the first to admit. We do him an injustice by stopping at that point. I believe that he has something equally significant to say about the importance of the moral forces in war.

This is one of those points at which Clausewitz goes in a new direction in which he is concerned with the importance of the concept of ideology in war. But first a proviso. I think we have a tendency to be overly narrow in our use of the word "ideology" and, therefore, reduce its usefulness for our purpose. Ideologies are not just political creeds. To be of full value in the analysis of warfare, or indeed any other part of social analysis, ideology should be seen as something more comprehensive than simply political doctrine; something which, operating in the hearts and minds of men, moves them and inspires them to action. Of course, it is true that "something" can often be identified with political doctrine and that such

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doctrine can be a contributory cause of war. Nonetheless, as I have already said, I think it would be wrong for us to limit the meaning of the word "ideology" to political doctrine, and I would argue that Clausewitz himself adopts a looser interpretation when dealing with warfare in general and the period of war between 1792 and 1815 in particular. In discussing these issues of ideology he uses the phrase "moral forces" though I think we would now delete "moral" and substitute "psychological."

To Clausewitz and to many of his contemporaries, warfare had in their own time become revolutionary in two senses; not only had it stemmed, politically, from the Revolution in France, but it was also conducted, militarily, in a new and sometimes startling way. In their view warfare in the 18th century had settled down into a static condition which limited its political utility. Even the major countries of continental Europe operated with relatively small armies compared to those commanded by Napoleon. These small armies moved about as single, often cumbersome, units, accepting without serious question severe restrictions upon their mobility. For example, although a good deal of road and canal improvement was going on in some countries of Western Europe during the 18th century, military leaders failed to take advantage of the opportunities they presented. Generals tended to restrict their operations to fixed lines determined by prepared depots, to generally slow movement, and, by limiting methods, to limited results. In other words, the wars of the 18th century were limited both in the employment of facilities and resources and in their political purposes. On more than one occasion Clausewitz wrote contemptuously of the attitudes and beliefs which produced such a state of affairs.

However, despite all this, changes in thinking were going on in the generation before 1789, and new ideas about warfare were most apparent in France. There, theorists and professional soldiers were advancing technical changes such as improvements in artillery and organizational improvements in the adoption of the division as a smaller tactical unit. The division composed of all arms made possible both greater concentration of firepower and greater mobility and flexibility in the use of armies. Others went beyond considerations of this kind and, by applying the new ideas about government and society—exemplified in Rousseau's *Social Contract*—to the business of making war, argued that if political and social structures could be radically changed, then so could man's ability to use organized force for political purposes. The best known of these writers was a French nobleman, the Comte de Guibert, who produced a substantial work in the 1770's called *A General Essay on Tactics.*

> "What," Guibert wrote,
> can be the result today of our wars? The States have neither treasures nor superfluous population. Their expenditure, even in peace, is in excess of their revenues. Nonetheless they declare war. They take the field with armies which they can neither recruit nor pay. Victors and vanquished are alike exhausted. The mass of the national debts increase. Credit falls. Money grows scarce. Fleets are at a loss for sailors and armies for soldiers. The ministers on both sides feel that it is time to negotiate. Peace is made. A few colonies or provinces change masters. Often the source of the quarrels is not dried up, and each side sits on its shattered remains while it tries to pay its debts and to sharpen its weapons.
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> But suppose there should arise in Europe a people endowed with energy, with genius, with resources, with government; a

people which combined the virtues of austerity with a national militia and which added to them a fixed plan of aggrandizement; which never lost sight of this system; which, as it would know how to make war at small cost and subsist on its victories, would not be compelled by calculations of finance to lay down its arms. We should see that people subdue its neighbours, and upset our feeble constitutions as the north wind bends the slender reeds.

These were the ideas which the French increasingly put into practice with the outbreak of war in 1792 and which the other nations of Europe-Prussia among them—subsequently learned from the French. And you will notice that Guibert is just as much concerned with the spirit or attitude of mind in the military as with their weapons and logistic systems.

The French Revolution broke out in 1789, and it soon became clear that the monarchy and the whole social and economic order in France were threatened. In 1792 Prussian and Austrian Armies invaded France to stop the Revolution and restore the monarchy to its former position. In response, the Terror and the rule of the Committee of Public Safety developed in France in 1793 in an attempt to weed out traitors and strengthen the resolve of French citizens. Then, faced with the need for ever-increasing numbers of troops, the revolutionary government issued its most important statement of military policy and belief the decree announcing conscription. The French Army had faced disruption in the first 2 or 3 years after the Revolution, partly because of the emigration of aristocrat officers and partly because of the lack of discipline in the absence of effective central authority. This plus the danger from external enemies, forced the creation of a great national army to fight for the nation's survival. And so the revolutionary government, through the *levée en masse*, announced that political liberty and military duty were to go hand-in-hand. Thus was proclaimed the concept of the "nation in arms." The people would fight because they were fighting for themselves, not for a king or an aristocracy. They now had a stake in their own country and a corresponding duty to protect it. On 23 August 1793 it was announced that:

> From this moment until that in which every enemy shall have been driven out of the territories of the Republic, every Frenchman is permanently under requisition for service with the armies. The young men will go out and fight; the married men will manufacture weapons and transport stores. The women will make tents and clothing and nurse in the hospitals; the children will scrape lint from old linen. The aged will betake themselves to the public squares, there to raise the courage of the warriors and to preach hatred against kings and in favour of the unity of the Republic. The levee will be a general levee. Unmarried citizens and childless widowers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five will be the first to march. The battalions we raise in each District will be gathered round a banner bearing this inscription: "This, the French Nation Has Risen Against Tyrants."

Inspired by their beliefs the new armies of France swept across Europe. It is difficult for us to understand, given modern means of transport and communication, quite what a phenomenon the armies led by the generals of the Revolution, and then by Napoleon, were. To those who welcomed them they were the bearers of a new gospel. To those who feared them they were a scourge. These were larger armies than Europe had ever seen, and they traveled

much faster. Whereas generals previously had fought with armies of 60 to 70 thousand men, Napoleon often commanded armies of a quarter of a million. Moreover, he depended for success on surprise combined with accurate timing and was prepared to go right across Europe to get the battlefield he wanted. In 1805, for example, Napoleon led his army from Boulogne to Ulm on the Danube in 10 days, arriving at the right place at the right time. This was lightning, blitzkrieg warfare of a kind modern Europe had never previously experienced. As Clausewitz himself put it, those who had expected the traditional kind of warfare in 1792-3 were taken completely by surprise,

> . . . such a force as no one had any conception of made its appearance. War had again suddenly become an affair of the people, and that of a people numbering thirty millions, every one of whom regarded himself as a citizen of the State. . . By this participation of the people in the War instead of a Cabinet and an Army, a whole nation with its natural weight came into the scale. . . . After all this was perfected by the hand of Buonaparte, this military power, based on the strength of the whole nation, marched over Europe, smashing everything in pieces so surely and certainly, that where it only encountered the old-fashioned Armies, the result was not doubtful for a moment.

You will notice that Clausewitz is not concerned with inequalities arising from an arms race. In stressing the commitment of the whole nation to war, he is concerned—as so much of his work demonstrates—with moral or psychological forces. Of all the campaigns Napoleon fought and of all the peace treaties he imposed, by far the most successful campaign and by far the harshest treaty were those against Prussia in the 1806 Battle of Jena and at the subsequent Treaty of Tilsit. Until the Prussians were handsomely defeated at the battles of Jena and Auerstedt, they considered themselves the foremost military nation in Europe and had behind them a tradition of military success going back to the Great Elector of the mid-17th century, culminating in the reign of Frederick the Great. The harsh terms of the Treaty of Tilsit drawn up in the summer of 1807 were simply imposed on Prussia by an alliance between France and Russia with the Prussian Government helpless in between. By the terms of that treaty, Prussia lost much of her most prosperous territory; her armies were reduced by four-fifths; and she was compelled to close all her ports to trade with England as part of the Continental System. This was total war and unconditional surrender, all happening within the space of a few months.

Clausewitz, in common with many other Prussians, was profoundly shocked by what had happened. Professional and patriotic pride were hurt. Shock, however, spawned a determination to find how and why matters had gone so wrong and to search for a remedy; and it was this search which led to the period of political, social and economic, and military reform in Prussia from 1808 guided by Stein and Scharnhorst.

The reformers' explanation of what had happened and their suggested remedies were roughly as follows. The old Prussian Army reflected Prussian society and government. Only aristocrats could be officers. The rank and file were recruited from the streets and the fields and, although then highly trained, were treated like the scum their officers believed them to be. How could such men—without rights, without dignity, without education or possessions—be expected to fight for a government in which they played no part and for policies which they did not understand

and perhaps would not have agreed with even had they understood them? In France, on the other hand, the Revolution had given Frenchmen a voice in their own government (or so it seemed), a belief in their leaders, and a sense of fighting to defend what properly belonged to them. The reasons for their victory were to a great extent psychological, or moral, ones. Therefore, if Prussian Armies were to wipe out the disgrace of defeat, the Prussian Government and society had to be reformed as those in France had been. Liberty and responsibility would go hand-in-hand, and men would fight for what they believed in.

What happened was that Prussians began to expound the concept of the "nation in arms" even more explicitly than the French had done. There were political and social reforms and a corresponding degree of reform within the army as well. The result, as Clausewitz and others saw it, was that with the widespread reaction against Napoleon in 1813 "in Germany, Prussia rose up the first, made the War a National Cause, and without either money or credit and with a population reduced one-half, took the field with an Army twice as strong as that of 1806."

Against this background let us return to Clausewitz's general exposition of the place of moral or psychological forces in war. He saw the events of his own time—as most of us do—through tinted spectacles; sometimes biased and even sentimental. But, in effect, he was saying no more in relation to the events of his own time than the French writer George Sorel has said in general, i.e., that all great social movements find a driving force in a body of images or myths. It is the existence of the driving force which matters.

In Clausewitz's analysis, war as a concept—is identified with violence and violence naturally tends to extremes. In his own words, "war is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will" and is, in fact, "an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds." When viewed in such a theoretical way, it follows that the overthrow or even the extermination of the enemy must always be the aim of warfare. But these are logical propositions, not an accurate description of the real world.

"Reasoning in the abstract," writes Clausewitz,

> the mind cannot stop short of an extreme because it has to deal with an extreme, with a conflict of forces left to themsleves, and obeying no other but their own inner laws. If we should seek to deduce from the pure conception of war an absolute point for the aim which we shall propose and for the means which we shall apply, this constant progression to extremes would involve us in difficulties which would be nothing but a play of ideas produced by an almost invisible train of logical subtleties.
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> If adhering closely to the absolute we try to avoid all difficulties by a stroke of the pen, and insist with logical strictness, that in every case the extreme must be the object and the utmost effort must be exerted in that direction, such a stroke of the pen would be a mere paper law, not by any means adapted to the real world. . . . But everything takes a different shape when we pass from abstraction to reality.

In Clausewitz's view there are two reasons why real wars, wars which actually take place, are different from—in the sense of being less extreme than—ideal or absolute war. The first is the political context or purpose of actual wars. Given this context, we are concerned not with a blind force risking uncontrolled to total destruction, but "a calculation of probability based on definite persons and relations." Or, as

Clausewitz puts it in more detail:

> The smaller the sacrifice we demand from our opponent, the smaller, it may be expected, will be the means of resistance which he will employ; but the smaller his preparation, the smaller will ours require to be. Further, the smaller our political object, the less value we shall set upon it, and the more easily shall we be induced to give it up altogether. Thus, therefore, the political object, as the original motive of the War, will be the standard for determining both the aim of the military force and also the amount of effort to be made.

This, as I suggested earlier, is the part of Clausewitz with which we are most familiar. But a few pages later he goes on to argue that a realistic theory of war "... must also take into account the human element; it must accord a place to courage, to boldness, even to rashness. The Act of War has to deal with living and with moral forces, the consequence of which is that it can never attain the absolute and positive."

In other words, those two factors, political and psychological, work—at least to a great extent—in the same direction. In that sense it is also reasonable to claim that Clausewitz's whole book is an argument about limited war. But, having said that, it is important to remember that these same two factors, within the overall limits of real war, also produce all the variations between a skirmish or border incident on the one hand and world war on the other. To quote Clausewitz again—

> The greater and the more powerful the Motives of a War, the more it affects the whole existence of a people. The more violent the excitement which precedes the War, by so much the nearer will the war approach to its abstract form, so much the more will it be directed to the destruction of the enemy. . . .

Moreover, Clausewitz was convinced that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, because of the great political interests and deep-rooted psychological forces engaged in them, had approached nearer than ever before to the absolute or extreme. Or, in language more familiar today, that he and his contemporaries had in their time witnessed the nearest approach to total war. The basic cause of that phenomenon "was the participation of the people in this great affair of State."

Primarily in books I and VIII of his work *On War*, but repeated elsewhere, Clausewitz returns to his theme of war as a continuation of policy. And, equally frequently, he returns to the importance of the moral and psychological forces. For example, when in book I he writes of ends and means in war, Clausewitz lists as one of his basic considerations—i.e., in addition to destruction of armies and annexation of territory—the "gradual exhaustion of the physical powers and of the will by the long continuance of exertion." The willpower of combatants figures repeatedly. In the long chapters on defense and attack, the psychological aspects of both forms are ranked as highly as the purely physical or material ones. Defense is argued to be the stronger form of war partly because of the moral reassurance of beginning the fight on one's own chosen ground and partly because of the psychological exhilaration of being able to go over to attack from defense encouraged by the thought that the enemy has been held and one's own efforts have thus far succeeded.

"During the twelve hours' rest," Clausewitz writes,

> which usually succeeds a day's work, what a difference there is between the situation of the defender in his chosen, well-known, and prepared position, and that of the assailant occupying a bivouac into which—like a blind man—he

> has groped his way . . . when the defender is close to his fortresses and supplies, whilst the situation of the assailant, on the other hand, is like that of a bird on a tree.

Likewise, looked at from the other side, "The success of the attack is the result of a present superiority of force, it being understood that the moral as well as physical forces are included."

Again, in a long chapter entitled, "The Genius for War," Clausewitz is almost exclusively concerned with such qualities as presence of mind, strength of character, and the calculations of the trained intellect, arguing that as war progresses from the actions of half-civilized tribes to that of organized political communities, so the powers of understanding and the soul increasingly predominate. Early in book III, "Of Strategy in General," Clausewitz claims that:

> . . . the moral forces are amongst the most important subjects in War. They form the spirit which permeates the whole being of War. These forces fasten themselves and with the greatest affinity on to the Will which puts in motion and guides the whole mass of powers, uniting with it as it were in one stream because this is a moral force itself.

Then follows an analysis of what he considers the chief moral forces—boldness, perseverance, national feeling, the military virtue of an army, the talents of the commander. He also includes a chapter on "The Surprise" as an element of strategy on the ground that the surprise is "to be regarded as a substantive principle in itself on account of its moral effect."

The evidence I have pointed to is merely a selection of what could be produced to support my argument that Clausewitz is just as much concerned with the importance of the moral forces in war as he is with his more familiar argument that war is a continuation of policy by other means. My objective in this discussion is to suggest two conclusions. When contrasted with other writers who have written about the place of warfare in society, Clausewitz is sometimes described as a rationalist. It is true that, unlike many ancient and medieval writers, he pays no attention to cyclical theories of human behavior and human institutions, nor does he regard war as a natural phenomenon like an earthquake or a flood. His explanation of war as a political act with a political purpose certainly implies a rational approach. War is something which, broadly speaking, has cause and effect. However, he does not stop there. War, he repeatedly reminds us, is characterized by chance more so than other human activities. It cannot all be calculated to the last decimal point. It involves dynamic and reacting forces, the result of which is that anyone "seeking and striving after laws like those which may be developed out of the dead material world could not but lead to constant errors." Of all the factors in war which defy the making of laws, the most important are the moral or psychological ones. "They will escape from all book analysis," he tells us, "for they will neither be brought into numbers nor into classes, and require to be both seen and felt."

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Dr. Norman H. Gibbs is the Chichele Professor of the History of War, All Souls College at Oxford University. He has had a long and distinguished career at Oxford and in World War II served in the 1st King's Dragoon Guards and in the Historical Section of the War Cabinet office. Dr. Gibbs is a member of the International Council of the Institute for Strategic Studies and served as a research associate at the Center for International Studies, Princeton University. His publications include *The Origins of the Committee of Imperial Defence* and *The Soviet System and Democratic Society.*

Secondly, Clausewitz is sometimes labeled as the prophet of the vast armies of the 20th century and the belief that more men, machines, and ammunition are bound to win. The late Sir Basil Liddell Hart, for example, called him the Mahdi of Mass. Clausewitz certainly did scoff at what he considered the fancy theories of some of his predecessors, and he also argued that "the first rule is therefore to enter the field with an Army as strong as possible." Would any general not do so? If you look at book III, you will find that he deals with numbers after moral forces; he then follows on with a chapter on "The Surprise," a factor which he argues is equally as important as numerical superiority. Surprise leads to confusion and broken courage, and out of these arise defeat even for the side which may possess more men and machines.

Finally, far from being a militant, Clausewitz had a clear understanding of the limits of war as an instrument of policy. If later generations of Germans thought and acted otherwise, and if Clausewitz was, in fact, their textbook, then the fault was theirs through mistakes in interpretation. In his own more critical view of the value of war for political purposes, Clausewitz's appreciation of the importance of moral forces in war played a vital part.

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