



READING CLAUSEWITZ, THINKING ABOUT WAR

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Some observers may have thought that, with the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union in 1991, war would cease to be a major problem, at least for Europe. Of course, conflicts would remain (as we have seen: Mali, Syria, Afghanistan), but far from home, and of little consequence to us. This was the dream of a peaceful world. At least for those countries lucky enough to have leaders from the "circle of reason." In other words, liberals who favored the continuation and acceleration of globalization—onwards to an increasingly uniform and smooth world, despite a few inevitable bumps in the road. Such was the outlook.

One wonders whether this was a complete mistake. In other words, was the Cold War not precisely what prevented hot wars? The war in Ukraine in 2022 shows that Europe is not immune to war. Moreover, we have quickly forgotten the wars in Yugoslavia and NATO's bombing of Serbia, an action too quickly assimilated to a simple "correction" administered to a country complacent towards nationalists "from another age." We are all familiar with the formula proclaimed by the ruling caste to all rebels to a new world order that is both geopolitical and moral: "We're not in the Middle Ages anymore!" Which means: "You're wrong to believe in the existence of anthropological constants."

And yet... Chase away reality, and it comes galloping back. War is back, in Ukraine; and its economic consequences—to the detriment of Europe—make this reality more sensitive than ever. But since 2015, (the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks, then Nice, etc.), war has taken on new, extra-state forms. It is partisan warfare, it is terrorism; it is also informational, technological, industrial warfare. These wars are not always declared, but they are nonetheless very real. One side wants to weaken another and bring it to its knees. By any means necessary, even legal ones—the production of laws, for example in the international arena, is also a form of war. Example: war, or at least sanctions, against a country "undemocratic" and not "LGBT-friendly."

We are rediscovering a constant in the history of peoples and civilizations: the world is in conflict. How could we have forgotten this? How can our leaders still remain blind to this obvious fact? How can Macron's talks on foreign policy (for example, on the website, [Le grand continent](#)) be so distressingly insignificant, and his actions so appalling or counter-productive? Unless, of course, these soothing yet worrying speeches are yet another means of waging war against the peoples of the world, in order to conceal from them the fact that there is indeed an oligarchic project of global governance—a project that is perfectly assumed and in line with an ideology that we can contest, but whose coherence is real from a universalist point of view—and that there is only one international policy possible.

Clausewitz's "Formula"

The specter of war hung over Europeans. A war-zone always spreads. A localized war is never guaranteed to stay localized. It is time to think again about what Clausewitz told us about war. First of all, we must not misunderstand Clausewitz's project (1780-1831). He did not provide a "doctrine for winning wars." Not even the wars of his time. Rather, Clausewitz provides a series of observational lessons. Not the same thing. Lessons for understanding different situations. His aim is to show us what characterizes a war conflict in relation to other socio-historical phenomena. What is it about war that is specific to human activity? How can we know war, and what is there to know about war? Beyond the diversity of wars, we need to determine what is common to all wars. It is as vital an undertaking as trying to determine the essence of economics, or the essence of politics.

Much of the discussion revolves around what Raymond Aron called Clausewitz's "Formula": "War is a simple continuation of politics by other means." Considered too brutal by some political scientists, they have proposed either reversing or correcting it, at the risk of stripping it of all its force. Or resorting to pirouetting. What if the question were not to invalidate this formula, but to read it properly, and understand its full explanatory power? War as an expression of politics? Of course, but what kind of politics? According to Clausewitz, war is both a tool of politics and a form of politics. A continuation of politics by other means. A tool and a new tunic. For that matter, should we understand the formula: "by other means [than political means]?" Or "by other means [than the means of peace]?" Hence the question: are all non-directly political means of changing a balance of power, war? The same question applies to all means that are not directly peaceful, i.e., those based on coercion (financial, moral, etc.): technology, mass mobilization, propaganda, intoxication, destabilization, etc. Clausewitz's simple definition readily opens up the possibility of diverse interpretations.

So, is war just a confrontation between two armies, or does it encompass all means—diplomatic, ideological, moral, economic—designed to make an adversary submit? Thus, war can be—in a restricted version—the sole confrontation between armies, or—in a broad version—all means, military or otherwise, designed to submit an adversary to our will and alter the balance of power in our favor. War can therefore be defined according to two interpretations; one restricted, the other broad. War is: a) only when weapons speak; or b) when all levers are mobilized to exert violence on the adversary and make him bend, without armies necessarily coming into action. In both definitions, war presupposes a conflict of interest between two powers, and an awareness of this conflict, at least on one side, and a feeling of hostility, even if unevenly shared. In other words, war is a matter of politics as a means of

managing conflict.

War as a Form of Public Relations

One of the difficulties in reading Clausewitz is precisely this: although he is "both a strategist and a thinker of politics" (Éric Weil), he does not always define politics in the same way. It is "the intelligence of the personified state" (*On War*, Book I, chap. 1), Clausewitz tells us. It is also that which represents "all the interests of the entire community" (Book VIII, chap. 6). These two definitions are not mutually exclusive—understanding where the interests lie in order to defend them; Clausewitz's two propositions complement each other. Let us rephrase this in modern terms: politics is the pursuit of the interests of the state as the representative of the nation. Is war, then, solely the result of politics as a rational analysis of the nation's interests? No. This is the answer Clausewitz suggests. He writes: "War is nothing other than the continuation of public relations, with the addition of other means" (*On War*, Book VIII, chap. 6). This means that war always has a political dimension, but is not always the result of a political choice by a historical subject. War partly escapes the subject-free choice-act dialectic (Descartes' dialectic). It is an interaction. It is a mode of public relations. This is why, when we study the chain of events leading up to a war, we can rarely attribute full responsibility for a conflict to a single side. War occurs when both protagonists want it. If one side simply accepts the war (otherwise, it means surrender), there is also war. But can there be war when neither of the protagonists wants it? That is the hypothesis of an unwanted fatal chain of events. Clausewitz considers both scenarios: the war that is planned and assumed, and the war that partly escapes us.

An example of the rational Clausewitz is the "Formula," already cited above. The rational Clausewitz is also the one who says: "Political intention is the end, while war is the means, and the means cannot be conceived independently of the end." But the irrational comes in when Clausewitz writes: "Let us not start with a heavy-handed, pedantic definition of war; let's confine ourselves to its essence, to the duel. War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale." In a sense, this is a second "Formula," other than "war, the continuation of politics by other means." A second "Formula" that takes us away from the rational. Everyone knows that duels are often a question of honor, much more than a question of interest or rationality. And when the duel is taken to the level of organized groups—from *duellum* to *bellum*—it remains an interaction and a relationship, with its share of irrationality. "I am not my own master, for he [the adversary] dictates his law to me as mine dictates to him," writes Clausewitz. As Freud put it, "the ego is not master in its own house."

War is no Accident

Thus, war is a will applied to "an object that lives and reacts." Clausewitz sums it up: "War is a form of human relationships. The proof of the relational nature of war is that it takes two to resort to violence. If one of the sides under attack responds to violence with non-violence—as Denmark did against Germany in 1940—there is no war (there is, however, occupation and subjugation of the country. The nation is therefore defeated and risks its political demise). War can sometimes be avoided; but if a country designates you as its enemy, you are its enemy, whether you like it or not. Thus, we see that Clausewitz thinks rationality, and hopes for rationality. But he also envisages the possibility of irrationality. Depending on the quotation, the emphasis shifts from one register to the other. For Clausewitz, the rational precedes the irrational. But it does not suppress it.

As we saw earlier, it is sometimes questionable whether a war exists without the protagonists really wanting it to happen. We need to be more precise. War is always the result of decisions: those of the attacker, and those of the attacked, who decide (or not, as we saw with Denmark in 1940) to defend themselves. The idea of war as a simple chain of events has its limits. In *Les Responsables de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Paul Rassinier explains that there is no evidence that Hitler wanted war in Europe in 1939, because he thought he could recover the Danzig corridor without war, control Romanian oil without war, even collapse the Soviet Union without war, and so on. Apart from the fact that this thesis appears very fragile, given Hitler's belief in the "virilizing" virtues of war (a form of "free and undistorted competition" between peoples), it is quite obvious that one cannot argue his desire for peace on the assumption that everyone will capitulate to his demands. However, the relational nature of warfare, as discussed by Clausewitz in chapter 6 of Book VIII, suggests that accident—by which we mean war as accident—is not necessarily impossible. The relationship takes precedence over the subjects of the relationship. On the basis of a misunderstanding, everything can go wrong. But this does not mean that there are not perfectly identifiable responsibilities in the outbreak of war, even if those responsible have sometimes acted or decided in the fog of contradictory or imprecise hypotheses. Take the example of Imperial Germany in 1914: it was rightly said that Wilhelm II did not want war. Maybe he did not. Psychological reality. But the essential point is that he nevertheless decided to give in to pressure from the General Staff, notably by agreeing to invade Belgium, despite its status of international neutrality.

To sum up: accidents can influence decisions, but war does not happen by accident. Another, more burning example. Let us imagine that Putin had thought that, following the launch of the "Special Operation," the Ukrainian government would immediately be overthrown and would negotiate with

Russia in a way favorable to Putin's plans, assuming they had been very clear in his mind. There would be no war. That is true. But this was only a hypothesis, and in fact it did not come true: Zelensky's government did not collapse, for one reason or another. Putin therefore took the risk of war. He is therefore responsible. On the other hand, he is not the only one responsible, because it is well and truly true that the pro-Russian populations of the Donbass had been bombed since 2014, and that the Minsk agreements (2014) had not been applied. Yet again. There is an element of accident in war, but war is not an accident.

The Notion of Total War

Clausewitz's definition of war as a "continuation of political relations" is enlightening not only in itself, for what it says about the dialogical nature of war, but also for what it shows about Clausewitz's conception of politics. Politics is trade between states and nations. Trade is not, of course, simply the trade in goods and money. It is also the trade in ideas. Politics is the relationship between nations as determined by the intentions of each and every one, and by reciprocal interactions. Domestic politics is the same, except that it concerns relations between social groups. For Clausewitz, war is the continuation of politics by means other than peaceful ones. But precisely because it is a continuation of politics, it does not make politics disappear, any more than the other means of politics do.

War does not absorb all politics. "We say that these new means are added to them [to peaceful means] to affirm at the same time that war itself does not make these political relations cease, that it does not transform them into something entirely different, but that they continue to exist in their essence, whatever means they use." This is why war does not exclude parallel negotiations. Raymond Aron (*Penser la guerre, Clausewitz*, vol. 1, 1989, p. 180) writes: "We wage battle instead of sending notes, but we continue to send notes or the equivalent of notes even as we wage battle." The notion of total war (Erich Ludendorff, 1916) expresses the idea that war is more than armed violence. It is the mobilization of everything, including the imaginary (idealization of the self, demonization of the enemy). It is the mobilization of the entire population, including the elderly and children.

If Nazi Germany increased the pensions of its citizens in 1944, it was not because it underestimated the priority of the military, but because it believed that the rear had to hold out if the front was not to collapse. Mobilizing everything and everyone: that is why strategy is not a narrowly military concept, but is the management of all the economic, demographic, political and technological aspects that can lead to victory, as General André Beaufre explains (*Introduction à la stratégie*, Pluriel-Fayard, 2012). War

includes armed violence and its use, but goes beyond it to include peaceful means. Both peace and war are matters of political relations. These relationships are relationships of power, but also asymmetrical relationships between world views. When Napoleon told Metternich in 1813 that he could not return defeated to France, unlike legitimate sovereigns who can return defeated to their country without losing their throne, it is a subjective truth that becomes an objective truth. Insofar as Napoleon himself said that he would be too weakened in front of the French if he accepted defeat, the Allies (then France's enemies) did not want to deal with a weakened ruler who would not guarantee the duration of the peace on the terms they had obtained.

Napoleon's argument backfired. As we can see, the rational dimension of war and politics, which is based on calculation, always intersects with an irrational dimension, which is based on subjectivity. But for there to be war, and not stasis (civil war, violent discord) or terrorism, there must be organized groups, nations or federations of nations—but not ephemeral tribes. In this sense, the post-modern era is bringing with it conflicts that will not—and probably less and less so—be wars in the traditional sense, but which will nonetheless be very violent, and will elude conventional settlement by negotiation: The prospect of increased chaos.

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Featured: [Battle of Avay](#), by Pedro Américo; painted in 1879.
