

'The most beautiful of wars': Carl von Clausewitz and small wars

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Abstract

Carl von Clausewitz was both an avid analyst of small wars and people's war and, during the wars of liberation, a practitioner of small war. While Clausewitz scholars have increasingly recognised the centrality of small wars for Clausewitz's thought, the sources and inspirations of his writings on small wars have remained understudied. This article contextualises Clausewitz's thought on small wars and people's war in the tradition of German philosophical and aesthetic discourses around 1800. It shows how Clausewitz developed core concepts such as the integration of passion and reason and the idea of war in its 'absolute perfection' as a regulative ideal in the framework of his works on small wars and people's war. Contextualising Clausewitz inevitably distances him from the twenty-first-century strategic context, but, as this article shows, it can help us to ask pertinent questions about the configuration of society, the armed forces and the government in today's Western states.

Keywords

Clausewitz; People's War; Kant; Schiller; Aesthetics

Introduction

The classical perception of Carl von Clausewitz up until 1976 was one that depicted him as the paradigmatic thinker of regular interstate wars. Since 1976, the year that saw the publication of two seminal books on Clausewitz (Peter Paret's *Clausewitz and the State* and Raymond Aron's *Penser la guerre*), Clausewitz scholarship has moved on considerably.¹ The Clausewitz reception in the past decade has continued the appreciation of Clausewitz as a thinker of small wars as well as large wars. It has acknowledged that Clausewitz himself did not subscribe to a binary view of war that distinguishes between these two as fundamentally different forms of war.² Beatrice Heuser's work on

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¹ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher or War* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976). See also Hew Strachan, 'Clausewitz en anglais: la césure de 1976', in Laure Bardiès and Martin Motte (eds), *École pratique De la guerre? Clausewitz et la pensée stratégique contemporaine* (Paris: Economica, 2008), pp. 81–122.

² Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Books, 2007); Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Christopher Daase, 'Clausewitz and small wars', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 182–95.

Clausewitz as a thinker who lived at a ‘watershed’ moment between partisan warfare and people’s war also emphasised the centrality of small wars for Clausewitz’s thought.³

This article expands the study of Clausewitz’s analysis of small wars by highlighting the relevance of moral and aesthetic elements for this analysis. It demonstrates how Clausewitz engaged with his contemporary aesthetic and philosophical context, in particular the ideas of Kant and Schiller, in order to understand the transformation of small wars from partisan warfare to people’s war that occurred during his lifetime. Clausewitz developed his understanding of people’s war – ‘the most beautiful of wars’ (*‘der schönste aller Kriege’*)⁴ – as war in its existential form in what we could call a dialogical process with Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy around 1800. The phenomenon of people’s war confronted Clausewitz with the question of how to integrate and harmonise passion and reason, which was at the same time one of the core problems of post-Kantian philosophy in Germany. What this article shows is that Clausewitz developed his idea of reason and passion as potentially opposite human faculties that had to be integrated in some way in his early writings on small wars. This idea was to become highly relevant in the framework of *On War*, specifically in Clausewitz’s trinity of passion, reason, and chance and creativity.⁵ Even though tracing the connections between Clausewitz’s conception of small wars and his magnum opus, *On War*, in a systematic fashion is beyond the limits of this article, it prepares the ground for such an endeavour and provides glimpses of the outcomes that such a study may produce.

This article follows Paret’s argument that contextualising Clausewitz is crucial to understanding his work.⁶ However, contextualising Clausewitz’s writings on small wars and people’s war inevitably distances them from the contemporary strategic context. It implies that Clausewitz’s ‘wisdom’ may not indeed be timeless. Clausewitz wrote primarily with a view to Prussia’s political and strategic situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Prussia’s survival was at stake. People’s war, and the inclusion of the people in the defence of their country – their nation – was Clausewitz’s solution to Prussia’s strategic problems. But a contextual approach to Clausewitz’s writings can open up new perspectives on contemporary strategic problems: it prompts us to think, for instance, about the way in which reason and passion are integrated in today’s wars when Western states are involved.

Yet, a contextualisation of Clausewitz in the methodological tradition of Quentin Skinner’s approach to intellectual history can only go so far, as it is difficult to discern Clausewitz’s ‘intentions’ from his work given that he often seemed to eschew positioning himself intellectually and politically.⁷ The alternative, poststructuralist approach to intellectual history as a ‘map of misreadings’ and an iterative

³ Beatrice Heuser, ‘Small wars in the age of Clausewitz: the watershed between partisan war and people’s war’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33:1 (2010), pp. 139–62. See also the contributions in the Special Issue of *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 25:4 (2014): ‘The Origins of Small Wars: From Special Operations to Ideological Insurgencies’.

⁴ ‘Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte’, in Walther Malmsten Schering (ed.), *Carl von Clausewitz: Geist und Tat* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1941), p. 71.

⁵ See also Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), pp. 121ff. Sumida recognises the relevance of small wars for Clausewitz’s theory of war; however, he fails to grasp the importance of Clausewitz’s engagement with his intellectual context in this respect and claims that Clausewitz was a largely idiosyncratic thinker.

⁶ Peter Paret, ‘Text and context: Two Paths to Clausewitz’, in P. Paret (ed.), *Clausewitz in His Time: Essays in the Cultural and Intellectual History of Thinking about War* (New York: Berghahn, 2015), pp. 5–17.

⁷ Cf. Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas’, *History and Theory*, 8:1 (1969), pp. 3–53. More recently Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

and productive process of 'reading sense' into classical thinkers through the eyes of the contemporary reader is not a viable methodological option either.⁸ If the poststructuralist announcement of the 'death of the author' does not consciously call for a selective and self-serving interpretation of Clausewitz, at least it offers little hope of being able to avoid the pitfalls of such an approach.

The solution to this dilemma consists in constructing a methodological middle ground between Skinner's contextualism and the poststructuralist perspectives associated with Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. This middle ground lies in acknowledging that contemporary readers can analyse Clausewitz's *actions* (including speech acts) as a soldier, reformer, and theorist of war, even though his *intentions* often remain opaque.⁹ It acknowledges both the agency of the historical subject, Clausewitz, and the interpreters' own agency as a historically contextualised individual. Put simply, Clausewitz was an avid reader and there is evidence that he engaged – intellectually and/or politically – in many debates of his time, but he was not an empty receptacle of others' ideas or a mouthpiece of any tradition of thought. He absorbed notions and concepts that emerged in his time, but he also transformed them and integrated them into his *oeuvre* in a partly idiosyncratic way. What this study seeks to establish is hence not 'influence' by, but engagement with his context. The Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism is useful in this respect.¹⁰ The dialogical perspective suggests that reading Clausewitz's texts is akin to overhearing a person speaking on the telephone: we can only observe one side of the dialogue. The contemporary interpreter of Clausewitz's writings therefore possesses agency too, in that s/he actively has to reconstruct the other side of the dialogue. But this agency is not boundless; on the contrary, it is limited. The reconstruction has to make sense against the background of the manifest side of the dialogue as well as against the background of the specific historical context of the dialogue.

The remainder of this article proceeds in four steps: the next section introduces Clausewitz's cultural, philosophical, and political context as far as this is possible on the basis of his writings, notes, and correspondence. It indicates the extent to which Clausewitz was exposed, intellectually as well as socially, to the turn-of-the-century philosophical debates. The second part moves on to a reconstruction of what Clausewitz referred to as the 'most beautiful of wars' – defensive people's war. It draws upon Kantian aesthetics and, in particular, Schiller's aesthetic theory. The third and final section outlines how arguments and themes from Clausewitz's conception of small wars and people's war stemming from the reform years continued to play a role in the context of his later writings on small wars and people's war. The conclusion summarises the article's main arguments and discusses to what extent Clausewitz's analysis of small wars can be relevant for today's strategic debates.

Clausewitz's cultural, philosophical, and political context

Clausewitz's early educational background was untypical for the role and status he was to assume later in his life. In 1807, he wrote to his then fiancée (and later wife), Marie von Brühl:

Take into account that I am a son of the military camp, the real one, that is, not one from Schiller's poetic world like Max Piccolomini. ... I could have turned out worse, I grant you that; however,

⁸ Cf. Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 68ff.

⁹ Cf. Tony Burns, 'Interpreting and appropriating texts in the history of political thought: Quentin Skinner and poststructuralism', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 10:3 (2011), pp. 313–31.

¹⁰ Allen, *Intertextuality*, pp. 21ff.

the protection of a diligent education, under the guidance of a worthy friend, could have conferred a purer content upon my background, could have developed my intellectual strengths more thoroughly and could have equipped me with knowledge and an aesthetic education.¹¹

Even though Clausewitz is entirely honest about his lack of a formal education in early life, the ease with which he slips in a reference to Schiller's *Wallenstein* illustrates that, at the age of 27, he was well-studied. The fact that he had eventually found that 'worthy friend' in Gerhard von Scharnhorst, who was Clausewitz's instructor at the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* in Berlin between 1801 and 1804 and became his lifelong mentor, had played a large part in this. Scharnhorst imbued Clausewitz with a fiercely critical theoretical perspective and an acute sense for the relevance of history to the study of war.¹² Johann Gottfried Kiesewetter, a populariser of Kant's writings, lectured on logic and mathematics at the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule*. Clausewitz deepened his study of Kant by also attending Kiesewetter's lectures in the *Pépinière*, the Prussian academy for army surgeons.¹³ The influence of Kantian philosophy on Clausewitz's own writings, in particular in the area of his method of reasoning and of the concept of genius, has been widely recognised.¹⁴

Marie von Brühl, whom Clausewitz married in 1810, was another important source of cultural and philosophical education for Clausewitz. In 1787, her father, Charles von Brühl, had become the governor of the Prussian crown prince, the later Frederick William III. In contrast to Carl, Marie had enjoyed a diligent education; she spoke French and English fluently and had taken lessons in history and fine arts.¹⁵ In the previously cited 1807 letter to Marie, Clausewitz promised her to catch up on whatever cultural education he may be lacking: '... wherever you find me wanting, I will soon improve in your proximity and under the influence of your entire noble being'.¹⁶ During his time in Paris as a prisoner of war, urged on by Marie, he visited picture galleries and studied the paintings of Rubens and Raffael, but he reported back to his fiancée that his lack of knowledge of the fine arts prevented him from finding immediate intellectual access to them.¹⁷ On another occasion, Marie seemed to have urged Clausewitz to take up an instrument, to which he replied that he had regretfully no talent at all for music.¹⁸

However, the letters between Carl and Marie reflect that there was one area in which Clausewitz matched his fiancée's knowledge and enjoyment of the arts: the theatre. It played an important role for the development of their relationship, as the theatre was one of the few places where Carl and Marie, whose social backgrounds were worlds apart, could meet informally.¹⁹ Their correspondence reflects that they had a joint admiration for Friedrich Schiller's dramas in particular. Schiller is the figure

¹¹ Karl Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz: Ein Lebensbild in Briefen und Tagebuchblättern* (Berlin: Verlag Martin Warneck, 1916), p. 83. On Clausewitz's early education see also Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 36ff.

¹² Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 71.

¹³ Erich Weniger, 'Philosophie und Bildung im Denken für Clausewitz', in Walther Hubatsch (ed.), *Schicksalswege deutscher Vergangenheit* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1950), p. 141.

¹⁴ See, for example, Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 161; Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War*, pp. 90ff.; José Fernández Vega, 'War as "art": Aesthetics and politics in Clausewitz's social thinking', in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe (eds), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 122–37.

¹⁵ Vanya Eftimova Bellinger, *Marie von Clausewitz: The Woman behind the Making of On War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 13ff.

¹⁶ Linnebach, *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz*, p. 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁹ Marie wrote in her notes on her acquaintance with Carl: 'Most often I saw him in the theatre [in der Komödie]', see Linnebach, *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz*, p. 45.

mentioned most often in Carl's letters to Marie; Clausewitz was familiar with many of his plays, he had read his *History of the Thirty Years' War* and cited at least one of his poems.²⁰ Two of Schiller's dramas stand out as apparently particularly significant for both Carl and Marie: *Wallenstein* and the *Maid of Orleans*. In his letters to Marie, Clausewitz compared himself more than once to the young and idealistic yet tragic figure of Max Piccolomini from *Wallenstein*.²¹ Carl proposed to Marie on the occasion of their watching together the *Maid of Orleans* at least for the second time on 25 May 1806.²²

The topic of both *Wallenstein* and the *Maid of Orleans* is war. Schiller's perspective on war was ambivalent, in particular in his *Wallenstein* trilogy, which he completed in 1799. On the one hand, he depicted both Wallenstein and the Emperor as morally corrupt figures and war itself as a bloody and senseless business. On the other hand – and this must have appealed to the young Clausewitz, who knew that rapid advancement through the ranks was his only chance of marrying Marie – the figure of Max Piccolomini embodies the promise of a meritocratic military system and, by extension, a meritocratic and republican society.²³ The *Maid of Orleans*, completed in 1801, is less ambivalent about war, even though the disruption of established gender relations, epitomised in the figure of the warrior-woman Johanna, indicates that war itself is a deeply disruptive force. And yet, the *Maid of Orleans* establishes an analogy between the moral education and empowerment of the individual and the possibility of national catharsis and rebirth.²⁴

Clausewitz, who grew increasingly disheartened and gloomy about the chances of Prussia's revival after the Tilsit peace treaty of July 1807, echoed the idea of a national catharsis in a letter to Marie from 1 September 1807:

But if men have degraded our human nature, then men must be able to ennoble it again; I do not talk of peace and its feeble measures; war opens up a wide field of energetic measures, and if I were to confide in you the most secret thoughts of my soul, I am in favour of the most violent [measures]; I would rouse the languid animal with whiplashes and teach it to break the chains that it allowed itself to be shackled in.²⁵

The idea of war as an educational experience for the individual and a transformative process for the community in the widest sense was not confined to Schiller – it was widespread in German literature and philosophy in the early years of the nineteenth century. Theodor Körner, Ernst Moritz Arndt, and Heinrich von Kleist are seen as paradigmatic examples in this context, as are Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (more on whom below) *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808). But not only romantic authors but also confessed liberals and humanists such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, whom Clausewitz met in Berlin around 1809, linked the experience of war to the concept of *Bildung* (education).²⁶

²⁰ See also Paret's preface to the 2007 edition of *Clausewitz and the State*, p. xii: 'Clausewitz's appreciation of the works of Schiller deserves further study.'

²¹ In 1808 he wrote to Marie: 'I have recently reread "Wallenstein". How wonderful, divine, tender and pure are Max and Thekla!'. See Linnebach, *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz*, p. 156, see also p. 83.

²² Bellinger, *Marie von Clausewitz*, p. 64.

²³ Elisabeth Krimmer, *The Representation of War in German Literature: From 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 35.

²⁴ Krimmer, *The Representation of War in German Literature*, p. 45.

²⁵ Linnebach, *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz*, p. 135.

²⁶ Felix Saure, 'Agamemnon on the Battlefield of Leipzig: Wilhelm von Humboldt on ancient warriors, modern heroes, and Bildung through War', in Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson (eds), *Enlightened War: German Theories and Cultures of Warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz* (New York: Camden House, 2011), pp. 75–102.

Even Kant himself, though most commonly interpreted as a die-hard pacifist owing to his paradigmatic pamphlet on *Perpetual Peace* (1795), recognised the sublime quality of war:

War itself, if it is carried on with order and with a sacred respect for the rights of citizens, has something sublime in it, and makes the disposition of the people who carry it on thus, only the more sublime, the more numerous are the dangers to which they are exposed, and in respect of which they behave with courage. On the other hand, a long peace generally brings about a predominant commercial spirit, and along with it, low selfishness, cowardice, and effeminacy, and debases the disposition of the people.²⁷

This is the intellectual context in which Clausewitz and his fellow reformers developed their ideas of a people's war against French occupation. There can be no doubt that Clausewitz was not only aware of this context; rather, he engaged with many of its ideas and concepts. He did so in his letters to Marie in which aesthetic contemplations are interwoven with political comments and military considerations. The importance of late-Enlightenment/German idealist aesthetic concepts for the young Clausewitz is further highlighted by the fact that he wrote four fragments on aesthetic theory, which Paret dates to 1808 or 1809.²⁸ It is thus plausible to argue that aesthetic theory and the expression of political ideals in works of art, and in particular the influence of Kant and Schiller, provide valuable hints for decoding the young Clausewitz's conception of small wars and people's war.

The 'most beautiful of wars'

The younger Clausewitz was not only an ardent analyst of small wars, he also became a practitioner of small war in the framework of the wars of liberation. In 1810 and 1811 he lectured at the Berlin *Kriegsschule*, the war academy, on the subject of small wars.²⁹ In his lectures, he referenced eighteenth-century classics on *petite guerre* (small war) such as Gerhard von Scharnhorst 'pocket manual' on the subject and the writings of Johann von Ewald and Andreas Emmerich. These practitioner-scholars largely treated small wars as a tactical subset of large wars. Unsurprisingly, Clausewitz himself focused his lectures on the tactical nature of small wars. However, the eighteenth-century context was by no means irrelevant for Clausewitz's further intellectual development. On the contrary, he extrapolated from his analysis of the tactical nature of small wars their strategic potential as well as their exemplary nature for the study of war as such. Small wars, he wrote in his lecture script are 'particularly interesting' because they require a combination of 'audacity and caution' and hence illustrate the 'free play of the spirit [*Geist*]' – a notion to which Clausewitz returned in his famous trinity in book I, chapter one of *On War*.³⁰

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft, Werkausgabe, Volume X* (Frankfurt, AM: Suhrkamp, 1974 [orig. pub. 1790]), §9.

²⁸ 'Über Kunst und Kunsttheorie'; 'Über den Begriff des körperlich Schönen'; 'Architektonische Rhapsodien', all undated, in Schering (ed.), *Carl von Clausewitz*, pp. 153ff. The essay entitled 'Über den Begriff des körperlich Schönen' reads like a short synopsis of Kant's third Critique for Clausewitz's personal use. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 163.

²⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, 'Vorlesungen über den kleinen Krieg', *Carl von Clausewitz: Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe, Volume I*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966), pp. 208–599. An English translation has been published recently: *Clausewitz on Small War*, ed. and trans. James W. Davis and Christopher Daase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 19–168.

³⁰ Clausewitz, 'Vorlesungen über den kleinen Krieg', p. 239. The notion of the 'free play' of the spirit or of all human faculties first appeared in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoon* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012 [orig. pub.

As a member of the Prussian reform movement, Clausewitz also played a central part in the plans for a popular insurrection against Napoleon's occupation of Prussia. In his letters to Gneisenau between 1809 and 1812 Clausewitz reviewed various options to leave Prussia in order to fight against Napoleon.³¹ In September 1811 Clausewitz submitted a plan for 'Operations in Silesia' to Gneisenau, for which neither of them had official backing at the time.³² Between 1808 and 1812 Gneisenau himself, as well as Clausewitz's mentor Gerhard von Scharnhorst, worked on plans for a popular insurrection against French occupation, plans that were in explicit breach of the terms of the 1807 peace treaty of Tilsit.³³ As is well known, Clausewitz left Prussian service on 18 April 1812 in order to join the Russian forces fighting against Napoleon. He joined the Russo-German Legion, which effectively fought as an auxiliary force to the regular Russian army, and served as its chief of staff. In February 1813, Clausewitz and his fellow reformers Yorck and Dohna gave orders to raise an East Prussian *Landwehr* after Yorck had signed the Convention of Tauroggen which ended the Franco-Prussian alliance – both without the consent of the king.

The most notable of the texts that Clausewitz wrote in the years 1806 to 1813 is his *Bekanntnisdenschrift* of February 1812.³⁴ This document was not intended for immediate publication; instead, Clausewitz only circulated it among some of his friends and fellow Prussian reformers. Clausewitz's theory of war has often been described as battle-centric; however, in the text, he presented battle in a very different light from the central relevance that battle holds in *On War*.³⁵ The mobilisation and unification of all insurrectionary forces, Clausewitz wrote, could turn the tide of victory against the French occupation forces, thereby becoming more decisive than the 'dubious fortune of battles'.³⁶ In his plans for the mobilisation of *Landwehr* (militia) and *Landsturm* (insurrection) forces, he made it clear that these forces were not intended as a mere reserve for the regular army. Rather, he explicitly argued that they should stay away from any major engagements.

1766]), p. 26. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft, Werkausgabe X*, §9, also used it in the *Critique of Judgment*. For both Lessing and Kant, the 'free play' indicated that the experience of beauty had to transcend the level of sensual perception and had to engage reason. Hence Lessing's and Kant's aesthetics were fundamentally rationalist. For Schiller, sensibility and reason had to be engaged in equal measure in the experience of beauty in order to realise the ideal of freedom. Frederick Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 233f.

³¹ See, for example, the letter from Clausewitz to Gneisenau on 29 January 1811, in Hahlweg (ed.), *Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe I*, p. 638.

³² Letter from Clausewitz to Gneisenau on 13 September 1811, in Hahlweg (ed.), *Carl von Clausewitz: Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe I*, pp. 661ff.

³³ August Neidhardt von Gneisenau, *Denkschriften zum Volksaufstand von 1808 und 1811*, ed. Harald von Koenigswald (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1936); Gerhard von Scharnhorst, *Private und dienstliche Schriften, Volume V*, ed. Michael Sikora (Hamburg: Böhlau, 2009), p. 434. Gneisenau's 1811 memorandum on the *Landsturm*, which he and Scharnhorst jointly submitted to the Prussian chancellor Karl August von Hardenberg, served as the template for the 1813 *Landsturmedikt*. In the *Landsturmedikt*, the Prussian king sanctioned the organisation of a popular insurrection against the Napoleonic forces. However, the edict was never implemented and was weakened to the point of suspension by a revision of 17 July 1813.

³⁴ 'Bekanntnisdenschrift', in Hahlweg (ed.), *Carl von Clausewitz: Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe I*, pp. 682ff – I am using my own translations of the German edition, since Paret and Moran unfortunately did not include the full text of the *Bekanntnisdenschrift* in their edition of Clausewitz's historical and political writings. See Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. P. Paret and D. Moran (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

³⁵ 'But since the essence of war is fighting, and since the battle is the fight of the main force, the battle must always be considered as the true center of gravity of the war.' Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Micheal Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), book IV, ch. 9, p. 248; German edition: *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Bonn: Dümmlers, 1980), p. 453.

³⁶ 'Bekanntnisdenschrift', p. 733, emphasis added.

Their role was supposed to be modelled on the historical examples of the popular uprisings in the Tyrol, Spain, and the Vendée, meaning that they were intended to cut off the opponent from his supplies and prevent him from requisitioning resources from the local population. In such a role, Clausewitz argued, the *Landsturm* would be a ‘terrifying force’ and it would be ‘*decisive*’.³⁷ ‘A general cause becomes prevalent and the skill, power and greatness of the individual man [Napoleon, presumably] is shattered like a small skiff by the furious waves of the stormy sea.’³⁸ In this situation, the occupying power would find itself fighting ‘this most *unfortunate* [*unglückseeligste*] of wars’.³⁹

In his letter to the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte of 11 January 1809, Clausewitz had matched the notion of the ‘most unfortunate of wars’, viewed from the perspective of the occupying power, with the term of the ‘most *beautiful* of wars’, which described the perspective of the defending side in a people’s war.⁴⁰ He explained that ‘the most beautiful of wars’ was a war ‘in which a people fights on its own territory for its freedom and independence’.⁴¹ Clausewitz’s letter referred to an article that Fichte had published in 1807 entitled ‘Machiavelli’. Clausewitz criticised Machiavelli and, by extension, Fichte’s take on Machiavelli, for trying to revert back to classical *forms* of warfare, whereas Clausewitz himself argued that reviving the classical *spirit* was what was needed. He explained:

The modern art of war, far from using men as simple *machines*, must vitalize their energies as far as the nature of its weapons permits. There are of course limits to this, as it is an indispensable requirement for mass armies that a sensible will can lead them without too much friction [*Reibung*].

But this should be the natural limit, and one should not, as was the tendency in the eighteenth century, try to form the whole into an *artificial machine*, in which the *moral forces* are subordinate to the *mechanical forces*, the effect of which is achieved through a simple mechanism, which are supposed to defeat the enemy through mere forms, and in which the individual is given the smallest task for the use of its intellectual forces. The history of all citizens’ wars [*bürgerliche Kriege*], and in particular the Swiss war of independence and the French Revolutionary War, demonstrate that one can achieve infinitely more by vitalizing individual energies than by relying on artificial forms.⁴²

In this context, victory is presented as the result of the moral and intellectual strengths of the *individual*. That the individual and not the collective is the starting point of a potential political rebirth of Prussia (and, in fact, possibly of Germany and the whole of Europe) is a thought that Clausewitz had developed early. In 1806, he wrote to Marie from the cantonment in the county of Mansfeld: ‘The troops that are passing by give a truly aesthetic impression, but one that is quite different from our military parades. While the latter display rigid formations, here you can clearly discern *the individual in all its singularity* in the open ranks, and the steady movement of the procession coexists with diversity and the full expression of life.’⁴³ The notion of individuality would later recur in his lectures on small war, even though in the context of those lectures it had a merely

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 720ff., emphasis added.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 733.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 731, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ ‘Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte’, in Schering (ed.), *Carl von Clausewitz*, p. 72, emphasis added. Again I am using my own translation in order to avoid some inaccuracies in Paret and Moran (eds), *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*.

⁴¹ ‘Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte’, p. 71.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 71ff.

⁴³ Linnebach, *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz*, p. 58; emphasis added. The idea that the moral qualities of the individual were corrupted by machine-like drill and discipline can also be found in Kleist and W. von Humboldt; see Paret, ‘A Learned Officer among Others’, in Paret (ed.), *Clausewitz in His Time*. p. 46; Saure, ‘Agamemnon on the Battlefield of Leipzig’, p. 87.

tactical meaning: 'The individual Hussar and *Jäger* has an enterprising spirit, a confidence in himself and his luck that is barely known to him who always served in the line.'⁴⁴ In his concept of people's war, Clausewitz effectively fused the tactical capacity of the individual in small wars with the transformative potential in aesthetic-moral terms of people's war.⁴⁵

It was from the perspective of the centrality of the individual that Clausewitz took issue with the argument Fichte put forward in his Machiavelli text: faced with the dilemma of how to free the individual from the shackles of a corrupted political system and society, Fichte's position after 1800 vacillated between 'conscious, collective, transformative action' on the one hand and the 'imposition of constraint in order to raise individuals to the practice of virtue' on the other. The latter was the gist of the Machiavelli text.⁴⁶ Fichte believed that the warrior ethos instilled by the modalities of ancient warfare was an important potential source of such virtue. Clausewitz disagreed:

Surely in ancient times the value of the individual warrior was generated more by their civic constitution [*bürgerliche Verfassung*] than their way of fighting, which is even more undeniable given that those peoples who proved themselves in war differed from the defeated with respect to their civic constitution rather than their being accustomed to personal combat.⁴⁷

Against Fichte, Clausewitz emphasised the transformative potential of the individual. He acknowledged the potentially vicious circle consisting of a corrupted political system that suppressed the moral qualities of its individuals, hence making it difficult for individuals to unfold their full potential. However, the 'most beautiful of wars' appeared to be the way out of this conundrum.

What did Clausewitz mean by the phrase 'the most beautiful of wars'? In his writings, he never ceased to emphasise the cruelty of war, the violence, and the destruction – in fact, he repeatedly exhorted his readers to face up to the gruesome realities of mass warfare. So surely Clausewitz did not think that people's war, which he saw as particularly atrocious, was an uplifting or aesthetically pleasing spectacle.⁴⁸ The answer to this puzzle lies in Clausewitz's reception of the aesthetic writings of his time, and in particular those of Kant and Schiller.

Kant wrote his third critique not with a view to founding an aesthetic theory in the sense of a theory of art, but to close a gap in his epistemology. According to Kant, knowledge based on experiences involves three faculties: sensibility, imagination, and understanding. The third of these faculties, understanding, allows the human mind to sort its experiences according to rational concepts. The characteristic feature of the aesthetic experience, according to Kant, is that it initiates a process in which sensibility and understanding enter into a 'free play' of 'harmonious activity' in which neither gains the upper hand, as it were, but one furthers the other and *vice versa*.⁴⁹ This evidently indicates that rationality – understanding – plays a central part in the aesthetic experience, but it is not its ultimate arbiter. The process is an infinite one, meaning that the mind never arrives at a 'concept', at an ultimate interpretation.

Kant's idea of beauty comprises a number of features: beauty is a concrete experience; it is sensual without being linked to immediate interests (such as appetite or sexual desire); the experience of

⁴⁴ Clausewitz, 'Vorlesungen über den kleinen Krieg', pp. 237f.

⁴⁵ On this fusion see in more detail Heuser, 'Small wars in the age of Clausewitz', pp. 139–62.

⁴⁶ Douglas Moggach, 'Fichte's engagement with Machiavelli', *History of Political Thought*, 14:4 (1993), p. 589.

⁴⁷ 'Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte', pp. 72ff.

⁴⁸ 'Bekennnisdenschrift', p. 733.

⁴⁹ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, *Werkausgabe X*, §9.

beauty is inherently social as the judgment of taste is universal even though it cannot be subsumed under a rational concept; finally, the experience of beauty has a vitalising effect on all human faculties, in as much as they enter into a free play of harmonious activity.

Most importantly, however, for Kant, ‘The beautiful is the symbol of the morally good.’⁵⁰ The concept of morality inhabits the realm of rationality, but it cannot be experienced through the senses. Moral notions such as freedom can be derived in a rational way, but they lack empirical demonstrability. In this sense, the experience of beauty is the counterpart of the concept of morality: the first is empirical without ever arriving at a rational concept, the second is conceptual, but devoid of empirical content.

Against this background, Clausewitz’s notion of the ‘most beautiful of wars’ makes more sense: what it hints at is the moral value or character that a people’s war against French occupation had in Clausewitz’s eyes. Such an interpretation gains additional plausibility when we take into account Clausewitz’s closing statement in his letter to Fichte, where he wrote that he believed that people’s war ‘will overcome any other art of war, however perfect a product of reason the latter may be, not to mention that it [people’s war] would according to its nature come closest to the most perfect form [ihrer Natur nach sich der vollkommensten Form am meisten nähern würde].’⁵¹

‘Freedom’ is the next central term that defines the ‘most beautiful of wars’. As we have seen above, such a war is defined as one being fought by a people ‘on its own territory for its *freedom* and independence’.⁵² This is where Schiller’s aesthetics come into play. In his aesthetic letters, Schiller wrote that ‘beauty is the only *possible expression of freedom in appearance*’.⁵³ Schiller built on Kantian aesthetic theory, which had already emphasised the link between beauty and freedom. This link existed both in the sense that the experience of beauty liberated the individual from desire and in the sense that beauty was a symbol of the morally good, in the framework of which, in turn, freedom played a central role.⁵⁴

In the context of Schiller’s philosophy, beauty and art became the centrepiece of his emancipatory project. Schiller and Clausewitz, and Fichte, for that matter, shared some core convictions: they deplored the moral and political weakness of Prussia and the hopeless situation of Germany in the face of French expansion more broadly and they emphasised the need to overcome this situation through education. Schiller’s diagnosis of the political and social ills of his times was twofold: the upper strata of society were ‘overrefined’ and, as a result, suffered from languor and permissiveness and a general lack of energy and vitality.⁵⁵ This is a charge that Clausewitz also made in the

⁵⁰ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Werkausgabe X, §59.

⁵¹ ‘Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte’, pp. 73ff. Here Clausewitz follows Schiller’s argument of beauty as a regulative ideal that can only be reached through the integration of reason and sensibility. Note also that a parallel idea recurred later in book VIII, ch. 3B of *On War* in which Clausewitz depicted the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and the resistance against them as instances in which war ‘rather closely approached its true character, its absolute perfection’; *On War*, book VIII, ch. 3B, p. 593 (*Vom Kriege*, 972).

⁵² ‘Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte’, p. 72, emphasis added.

⁵³ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), letter 23, emphasis added.

⁵⁴ Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 29.

⁵⁵ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education*, letter 5; compare Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 48.

Bekennnisdenschrift, where he argued that Prussia's political elites masked their fears as rational decisions and, as a result, became paralysed and incapable of action:

Reason alone is supposed to decide, everyone demands. As if fear weren't an expression of the mind [*Gemüth* – more emotional than rational], as if it would allow for a free judgement of reason. All that can be granted is that both confessions of faith, that in favour of resistance and that in favour of subservience, emanate equally from the mind [*Gemüth*], but that the first is fuelled by courage, whereas the second is fuelled by fear. Fear paralyses reason, whereas courage energizes it.⁵⁶

If Schiller, who wrote his aesthetic letters under the impression of the reign of terror in revolutionary France, did not appreciate the decadence of the ruling classes, he did not have much trust in the moral resources of the people either. Whereas the elites were given to decadence, he argued, the 'numerous classes', if let loose, displayed 'barbarity'.⁵⁷ The central question for Schiller, then, was how to break out of the vicious circle of the corruption of the state and its elites on the one hand and the lack of education of society, which stifled the attainment of freedom by the individual, on the other. Schiller's solution consisted in the idea of the 'aesthetic state', a political collective that comes into existence once human beings have transformed themselves into holistic individuals through aesthetic education: 'The aesthetic state alone regards us as whole beings, as both rational and sensible, because we participate in social life from inclination rather than duty. ... Only in beauty do we bring together both universal and individual, the will of the whole and the nature of the individual.'⁵⁸

It was Fichte who pointed out the essential weakness of Schiller's ideas, in an article entitled '*Ueber Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie*' ('On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy') that Fichte submitted in 1794 to the journal that Schiller edited, entitled *Die Horen*:

[I]f it is on the one hand not advisable to give freedom to man before his aesthetic sense is developed, it is on the other hand impossible to develop the latter before he is free; and the idea to lead man to the appreciation of freedom through aesthetic education and hence to freedom itself gets us into a vicious circle unless we find a means beforehand of awakening the courage in some individuals out of the great multitude to be nobody's master and nobody's slave.⁵⁹

Unsurprisingly, Schiller refused to publish Fichte's article.

Clausewitz was not convinced by Schiller's aesthetic utopia either:

A nation cannot break free from the slavery of foreign domination through the arts and sciences. It has to throw itself *into the ferocious element of fighting* [*ins wilde Element des Kampfes*]; to gamble a thousand lives for the thousand-fold gain of life. Only thus can it rise from the sickbed to which foreign bonds had shackled it.⁶⁰

In other words, for Clausewitz *fighting* was the way out of the vicious circle of the corruption of state and society on the one hand and the lack of individual moral qualities on the other. In this context,

⁵⁶ 'Bekennnisdenschrift', p. 707.

⁵⁷ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education*, letter 5.

⁵⁸ Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, p. 163.

⁵⁹ Fichte quoted in Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 59.

⁶⁰ 'Vergleich zwischen den europäischen Staaten', in Schering (ed.), *Carl von Clausewitz*, p. 7, emphasis added.

Clausewitz, then, remained true to his combat-centric perspective on war, but he harnessed his belief in the centrality of combat to his views on the possibility of political emancipation.

This is not to say that Clausewitz did not realise the chicken and egg problem that Fichte and Schiller were grappling with. In the *Bekenntnisdenschrift*, in which he often weighed his arguments against possible counter-arguments, he considered that the government may have to give the first impetus to a general insurrection, should the people not take up arms on their own account: ‘There is a form of coercion, and even terrible coercion, which is not tyranny.’ And yet, his trust in the emancipatory spirit of the people reasserted itself just a few lines below: ‘Nothing is as true as that extraordinary adversity, once man decides to confront it with extraordinary means and to focus all his forces against it, conduce him to rise above himself and excite the forces of the mind [Gemüth] and reason of which he himself was not aware.’⁶¹ The free play of passion and reason, which was at the heart of Schiller’s idea of freedom, enabled Clausewitz’s individual to rise above all internal and external constraints.

In contrast to both Fichte and Schiller, however, Clausewitz evidently did not fear that a sudden empowerment of the people could unleash forces that would inevitably turn against the emancipatory project. Such concern was common in German literary and philosophical circles around 1800. It found its probably most famous expression in Goethe’s exclamation at the end of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice: ‘From the spirits that I called/Sir, deliver me!’ Clausewitz, on the contrary, anticipated a general insurrection to be met with particularly cruel and ferocious measures by the French (he had studied the war in the Vendée and the Peninsular War, after all) and exhorted his fellow Prussians to outbid the cruelty of Napoleon’s forces: ‘Let us take our chances at paying back atrocity with atrocity, at reciprocating cruelty for cruelty! It will be easy for us to outbid the enemy and to lead him back into the boundaries of restraint and humanity.’⁶²

Traces of Clausewitz’s early writings on people’s war can still be found in *On War*. In book VI, chapter 26, the chapter on ‘People’s War’, Clausewitz wrote:

No matter how small and weak a state may be in comparison with its enemy, it must not forego these last efforts [popular insurrection], or one would conclude that *its soul is dead*. ... A government that after having lost a major battle, is only interested in letting its people go back to sleep in peace as soon as possible, and, overwhelmed by feelings of failure and disappointment, lacks the courage and desire to put forth a final effort, is, because of its weakness, involved in a major inconsistency in any case. It shows that it did not deserve to win, and, possibly for that very reason was unable to.⁶³

Absolutism was the heyday of body metaphors and body politics, as the seminal studies of Ernst Kantorowicz, Norbert Elias, and Michel Foucault have shown. The state was imagined as a body, personified in the absolutist ruler, who was also often depicted as its soul, mind, or spirit that animated his or her subjects.⁶⁴ Clausewitz attributed this animating function, the image of the soul, to the people. But the notion of the soul also played a role in the framework of German aesthetic theory. One of the first attempts to push beyond the Cartesian dualism of the body and the soul was

⁶¹ ‘Bekenntnisdenschrift’, p. 739.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 734.

⁶³ *On War*, book VI, ch. 26, p. 483 (*Vom Kriege*, pp. 703f).

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Merrick, ‘The body politics of French absolutism’, in Sara E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg (eds), *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 13.

made by Julien Offray de la Mettrie in his 1747 essay entitled 'L'homme machine'. In this essay, de la Mettrie imagined the human body as some kind of mechanical clockwork and the soul as its – equally mechanic – extension. In his 1793 essay *Anmut und Würde* (Grace and Dignity) Schiller aimed to demechanise the soul while at the same time retaining its synthetic connection with the body: grace is physical beauty in motion, animated by the soul.⁶⁵ There are echoes of this anti-mechanistic impetus in Clausewitz's letter to Fichte, where he repeatedly pitched the moral forces of the individual against the mechanical, over-rationalised machine-like tendencies of eighteenth-century military organisation.⁶⁶

However, because Schiller's aesthetic theory is inherently a theory of morality, the significance of the soul for Schiller went further. In *Anmut und Würde* he introduced the notion of the 'beautiful soul'. The term stemmed initially from the context of German Pietism – a tradition that Clausewitz was probably familiar with from his childhood years.⁶⁷ For Schiller, 'A beautiful soul is someone who does their duty from inclination, who acts on the moral law with joy. Schiller describes the beautiful soul as a person who acts with complete freedom, and therefore without the constraint of sensibility or the moral law.'⁶⁸

The beautiful soul for Schiller possessed *virtue* in the sense of a natural disposition to act according to the moral principle. In this context, Schiller further developed Kantian ethics based on principle and law and introduced the notion of virtue in a bid to render the reconciliation of passion and reason, which according to Kant only occurred during the experience of beauty, more sustainable in time. This idea resonates deeply with Clausewitz's notion of passion and reason, in particular as he represented it in his letter to Fichte, where he continued to emphasise that passion and reason have to be integrated in order to enable both victory in the 'most beautiful of wars' and the emancipation of the individual. It is not surprising that he ended his letter with the speculation that warrior *virtue* could be partly instilled by good military leadership, but had to rely on the primordial moral qualities of the individual in the first place.⁶⁹

Small wars and people's war after the reform years

Clausewitz's concept of people's war is an eminently political one. This resonates with recent research that has shown that Clausewitz did not develop the idea of war as a political act late in the process of writing *On War*.⁷⁰ On the contrary, the political character of war was an element of Clausewitz's thinking that evolved from his earliest writings, in particular those on people's war. Of specific importance in this respect is the relationship between passion and reason. 'The most beautiful of wars' requires the integration of the dichotomy between passion and reason – a thought that Clausewitz developed in an intellectual 'dialogue' with the German aesthetic discourse around 1800.

⁶⁵ Jane V. Curran, 'Bodily grace and consciousness: From the enlightenment to Romanticism', in Marianne Henn and Holger A. Pausch (eds), *Body Dialectics in the Age of Goethe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), p. 419.

⁶⁶ 'Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte', pp. 80ff.

⁶⁷ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, pp. 82ff. For Goethe's and Hegel's critique of the notion of the 'beautiful soul' see David Ellison, *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 125ff.

⁶⁹ 'Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte', p. 73. Of course, the notion of virtue also refers to Machiavelli in this context.

⁷⁰ Anders Palmgren, 'Visions of Strategy: Following Clausewitz's Train of Thought' (unpublished PhD thesis, Helsinki: National Defence University, 2014).

Passion is not something that needs to be suppressed in order to enable military effectiveness and political freedom; on the contrary, passion is an integral part of both. Without passion, the soul is dead, and the rational capacities of men become formalistic and idle.⁷¹ The integration of passion and reason is also what makes war so eminently political; in other words, what enables war to transform the political realm: ‘Where policy is pitted against passion, where hostility ousts rationality, the characteristics of war itself can subordinate usurp those of the “trinity” [of passion, reason and creativity].’⁷²

The integration of passion and reason is central to Clausewitz’s thought, and it continued to play a crucial role in his later writings. Even his essay entitled *Umtriebe*, written in the early 1820s and according to Paret ‘the most puzzling of all of Clausewitz’s works’, reflects the essential gist of Clausewitz’s conception of people’s war.⁷³ As Daniel Moran explained in his introduction to the text, *Umtriebe* was written at a time when Clausewitz hoped for an appointment as Prussian ambassador to Great Britain, and was hence at pains to distance himself from the revolutionary agitations of individuals such as Karl Sand, who had murdered the conservative August von Kotzebue in March 1819, and from the broader national revolutionary movement in Germany more generally.⁷⁴

According to Clausewitz, the root cause of these revolutionary agitations were the *ideas* put forward by ‘scholars and philosophers’: ‘these people [the agitators] were strongly taken with the philosophy and politics of Paris, and the majority threw themselves into the maelstrom of revolutionary ideas in a wholly different way [than the majority of the people – *die große Masse des Volkes*].’⁷⁵ In this scenario, reason and passion are out of balance. The older Clausewitz became increasingly aware of the pitfalls of demagoguery and the danger that intellectual elites and interest groups could whip up the passions of the masses with the help of ideas that the latter were unable to grasp. Clausewitz’s lifelong ambivalence towards parliamentary democracy was rooted in these concerns.

For Clausewitz, the involvement of the people in the defence of their country, be it in the framework of people’s war or in the framework of a popular militia, the *Landwehr*, were the central institutions of a reformed Prussian state and society. Clausewitz never ceased to defend the *Landwehr* against its – increasingly numerous and influential – detractors. In two 1819 essays, entitled ‘Our Military Institutions’ and ‘On the Political Advantages and Disadvantages of the Prussian *Landwehr*’, his belief in popular participation in war and the defence of the nation as a substitute for parliamentary democracy is fully evolved:

But the *moral power* of the *Landwehr* also affects the way people live. When all state institutions are organized around an armed *Landwehr*, when all the state’s energies are directed towards it, when all officials, high and low, are instructed to treat this institution, which in principle knows no bounds, *as an expression of the absolute power of the nation*, then any

⁷¹ Aron comes closest to acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between passion and reason, but *Zweckrationalität*, instrumentality, trumps the equivalence between the two elements: Raymond Aron, ‘Reason, passion and power in the thought of Clausewitz’, *Social Research*, 39:4 (1972), pp. 599–621. See also Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz’s On War*, pp. 93ff.

⁷² Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz’s On War*, p. 179.

⁷³ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 299.

⁷⁴ Moran in Paret and Moran (eds), *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 335ff. Cf. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 303.

⁷⁵ ‘Umtriebe’, in *Carl von Clausewitz: Politische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Hans Rothfels (München: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922), pp. 167, 169, my translation.

direction imparted to it from above will produce entirely different results than if everything remained confined within an institution divorced from the people themselves.⁷⁶

Here, Clausewitz depicted the *Landwehr* as the only viable expression of popular sovereignty. In contrast to participatory democratic institutions, Clausewitz argued, the *Landwehr* fostered unity, not division; in fact, it could even be used in order to keep revolutionary factionalism in check:

With this institution let the government mobilize the energies of a valiant people against its external enemies and rivals; with this institution let the government enchain reckless forces if they turn against their own community in frenzy and ferment.⁷⁷

Finally, these arguments are also in line with Clausewitz's perspective on the Polish question, which he elaborated in two essays in 1831, 'Europe since the Polish Partitions' and 'On the Basic Question of Germany's Existence'. Both essays have been interpreted as proof of the mature Clausewitz's turn to political realism.⁷⁸ It is true that Clausewitz framed his arguments against Poland's restoration in terms of balance-of-power considerations and expressed the fear that a liberated Poland would ally itself with France.⁷⁹ However, this did not signify a turn away from his earlier political convictions. For Clausewitz, the Polish rebellion of 1830–1 was not a self-defensive people's war, not a 'beautiful war', in other words, because the Poles were not a nation (an argument he also made, to a lesser extent, with respect to Belgium and Italy). He denounced the Poles as a 'very able people, but one that for centuries has remained half-Tartar in the midst of civilized European states'.⁸⁰ For twenty-first-century readers, this reads like a racist slant. It is definitely orientalist, in that it pits the Poles against the supposedly more civilised European states. It is also true that Clausewitz did not like the Poles, but his reference to their 'Tartar' habits probably did not aim at their racial origin, but at their irregular way of fighting, which linked them to the eighteenth-century partisan warfare tradition.⁸¹

Clausewitz, having lectured on 'small wars' at the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* in 1810 and 1811, was of course familiar with this tradition. While Clausewitz perceived it as an illustration of the tactical potential of people's war, he became increasingly concerned about instances in which partisan warfare emerged in the context of people's war, as had happened, for instance, with the emergence in 1813 of Lützow's Free Corps. 'Lützow's unruly volunteers', as Clausewitz referred to them in *Umtriebe*, had

⁷⁶ 'Our Military Institutions', in Paret and Moran (eds), *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*, p. 323, emphasis added.

⁷⁷ 'The Prussian Landwehr', in Paret and Moran (eds), *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*, p. 333. Also printed as 'Über die politischen Vorteile und Nachteile der preussischen Landwehr', *Geist und Tat*, pp. 203–8.

⁷⁸ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 420.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 406ff.

⁸⁰ 'Germany's Existence', in Paret and Moran (eds), *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*, p. 381.

⁸¹ In his 'Der Krieg der Russen gegen die Türken von 1736–1739', Clausewitz discussed the irregular tactics that the Crimean Tartars used against Russian forces. See *Hinterlassene Werke des Generals von Clausewitz, Volume X* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1837), pp. 17ff. Tartars also feature in book II, ch. 6, of *On War* alongside 'Cossacks and Croats', which once again indicates a tactical – as opposed to a racial – understanding of the term. *On War*, book II, ch. 6, p. 170 (*Vom Kriege*, p. 336). In his broad-brushed overview of the historical development of war in book VIII, ch. 3B, Tartars feature as an example of a war-like people who were, even though they are 'semi-barbarous', militarily highly proficient. *On War*, book VIII, ch. 3B, p. 586 (*Vom Kriege*, p. 962). In the Tartars' wars, the war-like element (primordial violence) manifested itself in a particularly unrestrained way; however, this was not owing to their semi-barbarous character. Rather, it was a function of the identity of popular passion and political aim, which could also occur among 'civilised' peoples – for example in the framework of popular insurrections. Cf. Palmgren, *Visions of Strategy*, p. 206.

been a pan-German unit of volunteers authorised by Scharnhorst.⁸² The Free Corps had the reputation of being mainly composed of students and academics, and a number of them became leading figures in the national revolutionary movement after the war. For Clausewitz, these were precisely the intellectuals who were misguided by ‘revolutionary ideas’ that did not have any connection to the masses of the people.⁸³ In other words, nineteenth-century partisan warfare was no longer a mere tactical complement to regular warfare, as it had been in the eighteenth century; rather, it was an ideologically-driven form of war conducted by intellectual elites that threatened to undermine the unity and strength – the ‘beauty’ – of people’s war. And this is precisely the charge that Clausewitz levelled against the Polish rebellion: it was not a people’s war, not a war of national self-defence, but a brainchild of ‘the political philosophers of our day [who] wish to reform the process of national development’.⁸⁴ Once again, the relationship between reason and passion was upset, in that reason – revolutionary ideas and ideologies – tried to harness popular passion to its idiosyncratic aims which were neither connected to realpolitik nor to the needs of the people. Even though Clausewitz grew increasingly aware of the danger that demagogues could try to harness the idea and the passion of people’s war to their own revolutionary and factionalist motivations, his basic convictions on the empowerment of the people in the framework of national self-defence did not change over time.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Clausewitz in his writings between 1806 and 1813 sketched out an eminently political understanding of war, in which people’s war, which he referred to as the ‘most beautiful of wars’, possessed inherently liberating qualities. Clausewitz exhorted his fellow Prussians to engage in people’s war not only in order to rid Prussia of the yoke of Napoleonic domination, but also to liberate its citizens from the corruption of the Prussian late-absolutist monarchy. The ‘most beautiful of wars’, understood as a moral war, hence unified and integrated the instrumental quality of war as a liberation from foreign domination on the one hand and the existential quality of war as an emancipation of the individual through the experience of combat and the concomitant revelation of its inherent moral capacities.

The acknowledgment of the existential aspect of war, combat, and violence and their immediate political significance, both for the internal coherence of a nation and for the external power of a state, is a thought that Clausewitz took most likely from his mentor Scharnhorst.⁸⁵ Clausewitz’s original contribution consisted in putting this idea on a philosophical basis, the main ingredients of which he developed in the framework of a ‘dialogue’ with the German aesthetic discourse around 1800, in particular Kant’s and Schiller’s aesthetic theories. Clausewitz largely followed Schiller’s aesthetic theory in its attempt to integrate reason and passion, and this integration formed a core element of his concept of people’s war. In *On War*, this dichotomy was broadened to the ‘wondrous trinity’, ‘composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity’, ‘of the play of chance and probability in which the creative spirit is free to roam [*freie Seelentätigkeit*]; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone’.⁸⁶ The notion of ‘*freie Seelentätigkeit*’ itself is a reincarnation of the ‘*freie Spiel des Geistes*’, a notion that Clausewitz had already used in 1810 and

⁸² ‘Agitation’, in Paret and Moran (eds), *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*, p. 358. See also Heuser, ‘Small wars in the age of Clausewitz’.

⁸³ ‘Agitation’, Paret and Moran (eds), *Carl Von Clausewitz: Historical and Political Writings*, p. 347.

⁸⁴ ‘Europe since the Polish Partitions’, in *ibid.*, p. 373.

⁸⁵ Gerhard von Scharnhorst, *Private und dienstliche Schriften, Volume II: Stabschef und Reformator (Kurhannover 1795–1801)*, ed. Johannes Kunisch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), Aufzeichnung 309, p. 763.

⁸⁶ *On War*, book I, ch. 1, p. 89 (*Vom Kriege*, p. 213).

1811 to describe the characteristic feature of small wars. Finally, the way in which Clausewitz, in analogy to Schiller's aesthetics, used the notion of the 'most beautiful of wars' as a regulative ideal, something that approaches the 'most perfect form' of war recurred in the notion of 'absolute war' in book VIII of *On War*, when Clausewitz described the era of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as a time in which war had reached a 'state of absolute perfection'.⁸⁷

Reconstructing Clausewitz's writings against the backdrop of his intellectual and political context highlights that his conception of small wars does not provide a timeless 'wisdom' that can be applied to twenty-first-century problems. The strategic context in which he lived and which he analysed is about as far removed from the strategic context of Western states today as it could be. Most European countries – the current exception being the Baltic states and Eastern Europe – are surrounded by friends. Moreover, after almost two centuries of mass conscription (again, there are exceptions) most Western states have turned away from conscription and the ideal of the citizen-soldier as the foundation of their national and collective defence. The increasing professionalisation of Western armed forces is the flipside of the abolition of conscription.⁸⁸

However, Clausewitz asked a pertinent question, and one that is today probably more relevant than ever: how to integrate reason and passion in politics and war. For Clausewitz, the first step to achieve this integration was the involvement of the people in the defence of their own country. Clausewitz was right in assuming that the nationalisation of war that had started with the French Revolution was to transform war in Europe for a long time and that it was deeply entangled with political transformations and the democratisation of war and politics. Conversely, the increasing professionalisation of Western armed forces will require a new balance or a new alignment in the relationship between reason and passion in war. Today's debates in strategic studies indicate that Clausewitz's question is still of central importance: from the debate over 'post-heroic' societies and the lament over the decline in republican virtues to the observation that Western wars today are essentially conducted 'without the people', there is a sense that reason and passion are again out of balance.⁸⁹ Clausewitz's conception of small wars and people's war focuses the mind on this issue, even though the answers he gave reflect his early nineteenth-century context and cannot be readily applied to the twenty-first century.

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⁸⁷ *On War*, book VIII, ch. 2, p. 580 (*Vom Kriege*, p. 953).

⁸⁸ Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces: From the Rhine to Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸⁹ Cf. Sibylle Scheipers (ed.), *Heroism and the Changing Character of War: Toward Post-Heroic Warfare* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Pascal Vennesson, 'War without the people', in Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds), *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 241–58.