

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832/1834)

Abstract

In these passages, the famous Prussian general and battle theoretician laid down principles that figured prominently in German military thought for more than a century. Some scholars argue that Clausewitz's principles prophesied the extermination campaigns of the German army in German South West Africa (1904–1908), the slaughter-battles of World War I (1914–1918), and the *Wehrmacht's* genocidal practices in World War II (1939–1945). For Clausewitz, a systematic analysis of the empirical facts of war produced certain absolute requirements, including the “annihilation” of the enemy in furious, concentrated attacks whose success determined the fate of the nation-at-war. Such was the application of “enlightened” knowledge and scientific “perfection” to modern conflict.

Source

BOOK IV. CHAPTER II. CHARACTER OF THE MODERN BATTLE

[...]

ACCORDING to the notion we have formed of tactics and strategy, it follows, as a matter of course, that if the nature of the former is changed, that change must have an influence on the latter. If tactical facts in one case are entirely different from those in another, then the strategic, must be so also, if they are to continue consistent and reasonable. It is therefore important to characterise a general action in its modern form before we advance with the study of its employment in strategy.

What do we do now usually in a great battle? We place ourselves quietly in great masses arranged contiguous to and behind one another. We deploy relatively only a small portion of the whole, and let it wring itself out in a fire-combat which lasts for several hours, only interrupted now and again, and removed hither and thither by separate small shocks from charges with the bayonet and cavalry attacks. When this line has gradually exhausted part of its warlike ardour in this manner and there remains nothing more than the cinders, it is withdrawn and replaced by another.

In this manner the battle on a modified principle burns slowly away like wet powder, and if the veil of night commands it to stop, because neither party can any longer see, and neither chooses to run the risk of blind chance, then an account is taken by each side respectively of the masses remaining, which can be called still effective, that is, which have not yet quite collapsed like extinct volcanoes; account is taken of the ground gained or lost, and of how stands the security of the rear; these results with the special impressions as to bravery and cowardice, ability and stupidity, which are thought to have been observed in ourselves and in the enemy are collected into one single total impression, out of which there springs the resolution to quit the field or to renew the combat on the morrow.

This description, which is not intended as a finished picture of a modern battle, but only to give its general tone, suits for the offensive and defensive, and the special traits which are given, by the object proposed, the country, &c. &c., may be introduced into it, without materially altering the conception.

But modern battles are not so by accident; they are so because the parties find themselves nearly on a level as

regards military organisation and the knowledge of the Art of War, and because the warlike element inflamed by great national interests has broken through artificial limits and now flows in its natural channel. Under these two conditions, battles will always preserve this character.

This general idea of the modern battle will be useful to us in the sequel in more places than one, if we want to estimate the value of the particular co-efficients of strength, country, &c. &c. It is only for general, great, and decisive combats, and such as come near to them that this description stands good; inferior ones have changed their character also in the same direction but less than great ones. The proof of this belongs to tactics; we shall, however, have an opportunity hereafter of making this subject plainer by giving a few particulars.

CHAPTER III.

THE COMBAT IN GENERAL

THE Combat is the real warlike activity, everything else is only its auxiliary; let us therefore take an attentive look at its nature.

Combat means fighting, and in this the destruction or conquest of the enemy is the object, and the enemy, in the particular combat, is the armed force which stands opposed to us.

This is the simple idea; we shall return to it, but before we can do that we must insert a series of others.

If we suppose the State and its military force as a unit, then the most natural idea is to imagine the War also as one great combat, and in the simple relations of savage nations it is also not much otherwise. But our Wars are made up of a number of great and small simultaneous or consecutive combats, and this severance of the activity into so many separate actions is owing to the great multiplicity of the relations out of which War arises with us.

In point of fact, the ultimate object of our Wars, the political one, is not always quite a simple one; and even were it so, still the action is bound up with such a number of conditions and considerations to be taken into account, that the object can no longer be attained by one single great act but only through a number of greater or smaller acts which are bound up into a whole; each of these separate acts is therefore a part of a whole, and has consequently a special object by which it is bound to this whole.

We have already said that every strategic act can be referred to the idea of a combat, because it is an employment of the military force, and at the root of that there always lies the idea of fighting. We may therefore reduce every military activity in the province of Strategy to the unit of single combats, and occupy ourselves with the object of these only; we shall get acquainted with these special objects by degrees as we come to speak of the causes which produce them; here we content ourselves with saying that every combat, great or small, has its own peculiar object in subordination to the main object. If this is the case then, the destruction and conquest of the enemy is only to be regarded as the means of gaining this object; as it unquestionably is.

But this result is true only in its form, and important only on account of the connection which the ideas have between themselves, and we have only sought it out to get rid of it at once.

What is overcoming the enemy? Invariably the destruction of his military force, whether it be by death, or wounds, or any means; whether it be completely or only to such a degree that he can no longer continue the contest; therefore as long as we set aside all special objects of combats, we may look upon the complete or partial destruction of the enemy as the only object of all combats.

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BOOK VIII. CHAPTER IX.

PLAN OF WAR WHEN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ENEMY IS THE OBJECT

Having characterised in detail the different aims to which war may be directed, we shall go through the organisation of war as a whole for each of the three separate gradations corresponding to these aims.

In conformity with all that has been said on the subject up to the present, two fundamental principles reign throughout the whole plan of the war, and serve as a guide for everything else.

The first is: to reduce the weight of the enemy's power into as few centres of gravity as possible, into one if it can be done; again, to confine the attack against these centres of force to as few principal undertakings as possible, to one if possible; lastly, to keep all secondary undertakings as subordinate as possible. In a word, the first principle is, *to act concentrated as much as possible*.

The second principle runs thus *to act as swiftly as possible*; therefore, to allow of no delay or detour without sufficient reason.

The reducing of the enemy's power to one central point depends

1. On the nature of its political connection. If it consists of armies of one Power, there is generally no difficulty; if of allied armies, of which one is acting simply as an ally without any interest of its own, then the difficulty is not much greater; if of a coalition for a common object, then it depends on the cordiality of the alliance; we have already treated of this subject.
2. On the situation of the theatre of war upon which the different hostile armies make their appearance.

[...]

But against *the enemy* at whom the great blow is aimed, there must be, according to this, no defensive on minor theatres of war. The chief attack itself, and the secondary attacks, which for other reasons are combined with it, make up this blow, and make every defensive, on points not directly covered by it, superfluous. All depends on this principal attack; by it every loss will be compensated. If the forces are sufficient to make it reasonable to seek for that great decision, then the *possibility of failure* can be no ground for guarding oneself against injury at other points in any event; for just by *such a course* this failure will become more probable, and it therefore constitutes here a contradiction in our action.

This same predominance of the principal action over the minor, must be the principle observed in each of the separate branches of the attack. But as there are generally ulterior motives which determine what forces shall advance from one theatre of war, and what from another against the common centre of the enemy's power, we only mean here that there must be an *effort to make the chief action over-ruling*, for everything will become simpler and less subject to the influence of chance events the nearer this state of preponderance can be attained.

The second principle concerns the rapid use of the forces.

Every unnecessary expenditure of time, every unnecessary detour, is a waste of power, and therefore contrary to the principles of strategy.

It is most important to bear always in mind that almost the only advantage which the offensive possesses, is the effect of surprise at the opening of the scene. Suddenness and irresistible impetuosity are its strongest pinions; and when the object is the complete overthrow of the enemy, it can rarely dispense with them.

By this, therefore, theory demands the shortest way to the object, and completely excludes from consideration endless discussions about right and left, here and there.

If we call to mind what was said in the chapter on the subject of the strategic attack respecting the pit of the stomach in a state, and further, what appears in the fourth chapter of this book, on the influence of time, we believe no further argument is required to prove that the influence which we claim for that principle really belongs to it.

Bonaparte never acted otherwise. The shortest high road from army to army, from one capital to another, was always the way he loved best.

And in what will now consist the principal action to which we have referred everything, and for which we have demanded a swift and straightforward execution?

In the fourth chapter we have explained as far as it is possible in a general way what the total overthrow of the enemy means, and it is unnecessary to repeat it. Whatever that may depend on at last in particular cases, still the first step is always the same in all cases, namely: *The destruction of the enemy's combatant force, that is, a great victory over the same and its dispersion.* The sooner, which means the nearer our own frontiers, this victory is sought for, *the easier* it is; the later, that is, the further in the heart of the enemy's country it is gained, the more *decisive* it is. Here, as well as everywhere, the facility of success and its magnitude balance each other.

If we are not so superior to the enemy that the victory is beyond doubt, then we should, when possible, seek him out, that is his principal force. We say *when possible*, for if this endeavour to find him led to great detours, false directions, and a loss of time, it might very likely turn out a mistake. If the enemy's principal force is not on our road, and our interests otherwise prevent our going in quest of him, we may be sure we shall meet with him hereafter, for he will not fail to place himself in our way. We shall then, as we have just said, fight under less advantageous circumstances an evil to which we must submit. However, if we gain the battle, it will be so much the more decisive.

From this it follows that, in the case now assumed, it would be an error to pass by the enemy's principal force designedly, if it places itself in our way, at least if we expect thereby to facilitate a victory.

On the other hand, it follows from what precedes, that if we have a decided superiority over the enemy's principal force, we may designedly pass it by in order at a future time to deliver a more decisive battle.

We have been speaking of a complete victory, therefore of a thorough defeat of the enemy, and not of a mere battle gained. But such a victory requires an enveloping attack, or a battle with an oblique front, for these two forms always give the result a decisive character. It is therefore an essential part of a plan of a war to make arrangements for this movement, both as regards the mass of forces required and the direction to be given them, of which more will be said in the chapter on the plan of campaign.

It is certainly not impossible, that even Battles fought with parallel fronts may lead to complete defeats, and cases in point are not wanting in military history; but such an event is uncommon, and will be still more so the more armies become on a par as regards discipline and handiness in the field. We no longer take twenty-one battalions

in a village, as they did at Blenheim.

Once the great victory is gained, the next question is not about rest, not about taking breath, not about considering, not about reorganising, etc., etc., but only of pursuit of fresh blows wherever necessary, of the capture of the enemy's capital, of the attack of the armies of his allies, or of whatever else appears to be a rallying point for the enemy.

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Source of original German text: *Hinterlassene Werke des Generals Carl von Clausewitz über Krieg und Kriegführung. Vom Kriege*. Erster Theil [First Part]. Berlin bei Ferdinand Dümmler, 1832, pp. 282–86; and Dritter Theil [Third Part]. Berlin bei Ferdinand Dümmler, 1834, pp. 161–62, 174–78.

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