

Is Clausewitz's Thinking Still Relevant?

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War is one of the oldest fact in human history. After human beings developed tool making, they developed organization and therefore war was born. Carl Von Clausewitz developed the strategy to separate the war from a brutal massacre. These two phenomena, which have existed throughout history, were described by a man in the 19th century as a great breakthrough innovation. Carl Von Clausewitz was a Prussian General during the 18th and 19th centuries who fought in the Napoleonic Wars. Clausewitz most renowned for his military theory book "On War", which was compiled following his death by his wife, Marie Von Clausewitz in 1832. Many contemporary military strategists and practitioners highly value the philosophies contained within On War and its relevance to present day conflicts. Clausewitz, who was groundbreaking with the ideas he brought to war, has been widely discussed for 200 years. In the current world, it is a matter of great debate whether Clausewitz's ideas are still valid or not. The new war theorists argue that Clausewitz has lost its meaning, the world has changed and there are new types of wars. On the other hand, some military and political thinkers argue that Clausewitz's thoughts are actually to understand the nature of war, each period creates its own war, but the basis is still the same. Beyond all these discussions, there are empirical findings that suggest that there are some changes in wars, but that conventional wars such as the Ukraine-Russia War brought Clausewitz back. As war has changed, it has also not changed.

What is Clausewitz's Thinking?

Clausewitz defines war in two complementary ways. One of these definitions has two elements, the other has three elements. In the first Chapter, entitled "What is War," he begins his reasoning by defining war as an act of mutual violence in which opposing wills clash. In other words, war is "an act of violence that compels the adversary to do our will."¹ Military disarming (or destroying), the opponent or self-destructing in order to achieve the goal it is necessary to bring it into a situation where it feels under such a serious threat. Both parties mutual action that occurs because they have the same goal logically leads to

¹ Clausewitz, Carl von, Savaş Üzerine, Doruk Yayınları, 2011

extremism. The means and efforts will be given to the enemy. However, since the enemy will act in the same way, this logic, which is the inner dynamic of the war, turns into a competition that pushes the parties to extremes. Clausewitz calls this conflict, which is defined by unlimited violence, "absolute war". This concept is a pure abstraction, an "ideal-type". It is war that is abstracted from any variable detail and taken out of historical and political context. Opposite of this concept is "real war," that is, the concept of war in historical context. At the forefront of the absolute form of war Clausewitz's aim was to compare this abstraction with wars in historical context to explore similarities, differences and their reasons.² Clausewitz, "the absolute does not make a value judgment between "absolute war" and "real war".

According to Clausewitz, war is the act of using force to defeat the enemy on a large duel arena. In this respect, imposing the will of one side on the other is the defeat of the enemy. Naturally, he who has laid down his weapon cannot take up a challenge again. So war is just an act of force but also of an emotional nature. War suddenly appears that emerges and spreads, with its effects rapidly manifesting. What is the situation of the parties, what is their power? By looking at what it contains and what it can do, one can grasp how much force must be used in war, or whether war will ensue. For Clausewitz, war is a political act. It emerges for a reason determined by politics, but from the moment it emerges, it is politics itself. It now takes the place of politics simply by following its own laws. At this point, the war it is nothing but a tool to achieve goals. Political purpose does not mean sameness in all terms and conditions. Every war is different may have political aims, objectives and effects. However, we see war as a chameleon emerging from immutable common features. These features are violence, which should be considered a natural and blind instinct, and war on the other hand probability calculations and coincidences that make it an independent psychic activity. In this respect, the concepts of "friction" and "fog of war" are very important contributions of Clausewitz. "Everything in war is very simple, but even the simplest thing is difficult. Difficulties pile up on one another, and such it creates friction that anyone who has not seen the war cannot properly visualize it. Friction is the only concept that quite distinguishes real warfare from the war read in the books. Clausewitz coined the term "fog" as the uncertainty of war rather than a meteorological phenomenon and uses it

² Paret, Peter, Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, s.356-381.

to define to emphasize the unreliability of information and intelligence. According to Clausewitz Three-quarters of the factors on which military action is built are surrounded by a fog of uncertainty.

The Clausewitzian war, taken as a whole, was a three-pronged define it as an event. The Twenty-Eighth Subchapter of Part One of Book One begins with the sentence: "War is a true chameleon whose characteristics change to some extent in each concrete event."³ On the one hand, primitive violence, hatred and enmity, a natural blind force; beyond on the other hand, the coincidence and probability calculations that make war a free and creative activity of the soul; finally, the identity of a political instrument that subordinates war to reason (reason) only.⁴ Clausewitz, derives a second trilogy from this trilogy. When we rank, the first of the three trends is more popular, and between three and two, the third trend concerns the government more than the second trend. Although the elements in these trilogies differ in degree from event to event, rooted in every war. All of them need to be taken into account when examining each concrete battle. Wars have changed according to historical periods as well as from the conjuncture within the same historical period. It also changes according to the context. As Raymond Aron said, "it changes, but the more it changes, the more the same."⁵ because the three basic elements Clausewitz mentions (blind violence, probability calculations, and coincidences, political instrument identity and plausibility) intensities and how they interact whatever it takes, it is present in every war. In Clausewitz's war, the tool is one and it is a battle. Battle is the fight of an organized whole rather than a one-on-one encounter of individuals. Units formed to wage war consist of soldiers. What is aimed together is nothing but the destruction of the enemy's force. This is the most used part in Clausewitz's criticisms. Because in terms of new wars, power struggles without war find more place in today's world.

New Wars

Creveld argues that new wars cannot be understood in terms of end-means. In other words, rational and utilitarian approaches are not enough to understand wars. Today, these concepts are no longer valid. People today are ethnic and they fight for religious reasons. In

³ Clausewitz, Carl von, Savaş Üzerine, Doruk Yayınları, 2011

⁴ Hew , Strachan , "Clausewitz and the Dialectics of War", page.43-44.

⁵ Aron, Raymond, Clausewitz, Philosopher of War, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, page.184-185.

today's wars, the conflicting parties are not states. In new wars, the non-state actors are the component of new types of wars. Low-intensity battles versus conventional battles taking its place made the states weaker and weaker. In the long run, various war organizations will take its place. According to Creveld, this development invalidated Clausewitz's triple definition. In low-intensity conflicts, the people becoming the center of gravity of the war. The front and rear-front, combatant and non-combatant changed in low-intensity conflicts.⁶ Contemporary wars, which Kaldor calls "new wars", are the wars between the state and the non-state. These wars take place between "networks" of units. Such wars are armed struggles carried out by complex legal and/or illegal organizations that involve many transnational relations. The Networks such as diasporas, companies, mercenaries, volunteers, non-governmental organizations, religious and ethnic groups, international organizations those who cannot keep up with global change, cannot solve their problems and destroy legitimacy. Seen in countries that have experiences in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq are the best examples of such wars. Common ethnic or religious affiliation is the basis for networks and it is an organizational principle. War, on the other hand, is also a means of political mobilization. War expands and strengthens the network used for political mobilization.⁷ Like Creveld, Kaldor thinks that in today's wars, the political will of the states is broken and the will of the people is more intense. According to Kaldor, the violence perpetrated by networks of state and non-state actors was directed at the people in order to weaken the existing order and build new identities and the new wars actors are paramilitary groups, terrorist organizations, private military companies, diasporas, multinational companies, foreign volunteer fighters etc.⁸ For actors, shared identity is a fundamental organizational element. Organizing the people around a certain discourse through identity is a political mobilization tool.⁹ Münkler states that in today's wars, the monopoly of the nation-state is broken, and non-state actors are fighting for transnational effects and identity-based reasons therefore that a certain front will not be possible in

⁶ Creveld, Martin Van, *The Transformation of War*, page. 192-198.

⁷ Kaldor, Mary, "Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars, and the War on Terror", *International Politics*, No 42, 2005, s. 498

⁸ Kaldor, Mary, "Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars, and the War on Terror", *International Politics*, No 42, 2005, s. 498

⁹ Ali, Gök, *Hibrit Savaşlar*, Nobel Bilimsel, Ocak 2021

today's wars due to the asymmetric effects of many actors. This situation makes the people living in the inhabited area a direct actor of the war.¹⁰

Criticism or Relevance

Carl von Clausewitz, not as a 'captive' of military thought of the Napoleonic era, but as a military analyst who understands that 'every age has its own war' found his idea universal and timeless, rather than focusing too much on specific theses". Owens approached Clausewitz's book "On War" from a methodological perspective. He applied his criteria for what constitutes a valid and useful theory to Clausewitz's thinking and concluded.¹¹ Some of the "friction" factors have especially increased their effectiveness in our time. The effort to protect or gain legitimacy, the tendency to comply with the law and human rights, interventions of international organizations and non-governmental organizations, public opinion, media and the sensitivities of other communication centers can be counted among these factors. In other words, not ending the war is also a form of extremism. The most important thing is the inner rather than whether the trend of affecting the internal dynamics. According to many of today's critics of Clausewitz, such as Creveld, "politics" means the political purpose of the state; a rational end-tool between politics and war and this relationship represents the interest of the state (national interest). Clausewitz after critics have defined it this way, it is clear that this model state that they fail to explain. There are two main mistakes here. First, this account is far from fully reflecting Clausewitz's view. Second, contemporary battles also largely fit the above model. They also have political aims. In them, too, violence is used to achieve political ends. In On War, the concept of politics has two dimensions. Its objective dimension refers to all existing historical, political and social conditions. What is at issue here is the context. The second one is the subjective dimension, where we talk about the policy of the conflicting party, its subjective politics, that is, its political aim in the narrowest sense. Politics is purely because it is one-sided. It can be considered rationally. Politics, on the other hand, is bilateral or multilateral and always reciprocal. It includes interactions. Conflicts and collaborations are part of the policy because they involve mutual interactions. It prevents it from reaching its purely rational goal. When we reach this point, we find ourselves again. We find ourselves alone with the holistic and

¹⁰ Münkler, Herfried, *The New Wars*, Polity Press, 2010

¹¹ Owens, Mackubin Thomas. "The Main Thing – We Could All Use a Little Clausewitz Lesson." *National Review Online* (2003). Web. 01 Nov. 2011

inclusive meaning of politics. Time cannot be subject to its own laws, it cannot escape being a part of another whole; this whole is politics.” For him, we can only rationalize the relationship between politics and war. If we reduce it to the end-means model, we move away from Clausewitz. However, if we look at the new wars by emphasizing the dimension of politics that reflects the network of relations, we can see that Clausewitz has nothing to do with it. We can seize the opportunity to multiply our preferences in conceptually arranging the complexity of war, which he is not familiar with.

One of the criticisms of Clausewitz is that his approach covers only interstate wars. Another criticism is that Clausewitz's writings are valid for conventional wars but not for war types such as irregular warfare, asymmetric warfare etc. However, Clausewitz's paradigm is not only states, but also encompasses non-state units, can also be applied to non-state social organizations, such as Kaldor's "networks". Every community participating in new wars whether it is organized or not, it has an organization of its own, a leadership and armed units. The structure of the organization can be flexible and divided into cells, as in al-Qaeda or it can be more hierarchical as in the PKK. The multiplicity of actors in the fight against these organizations and its diversity can complicate the struggle. There may even be many different organizations in conflict with each other. The situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are the most striking examples of this. The only significant difference separating the belligerents from each other concerns legitimacy. Some of the actors are considered legitimate, while others are considered illegitimate. The state is legitimate, the PKK it is illegitimate. This difference should be taken into account in strategic analysis, like many other factors. It would be wrong, if necessary, to think that it made a significant difference that changed the nature of warfare. Moreover, in new wars, non-state units also sought legitimacy and we can observe that they begin to behave accordingly. One of the most interesting examples of this is PKK. The Sixth Book of *On War* has a Chapter examining people's wars. In addition, Clausewitz thoughts wars involving non-state actors and popular uprisings in the Vendée, Tyrol and Spain. Moreover, Napoleon's invasion of Prussia in 1812 analyzes the struggle through non-state organizations to resist. When we examine Clausewitz's work as a whole, in the eyes of the Prussian theorist, a war is war according to strategic criteria. It does not matter whether the actors are organized as states or not.

All these discussions gained another dimension with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After the Second World War and in the 21st century, although there were only a few conventional wars, these remained limited wars, not total wars, for the parties. However, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a whole country's territory has been targeted, and the Ukrainian army has turned into a fighting element in the Ukrainian people, as well as being the primary target. From the point of view of Clausewitz's theories, the Ukraine-Russia war, being a conventional war, fully meets the Clausewitzian war characteristics. If we interpret on the basis of Clausewitz's statement that he defines war as a continuation of politics, it can be clearly seen that the wars of Russia and Ukraine are a continuation of Russian policy. From the point of view of Clausewitz, who likens the war to a duel made to make our opponent accept our will, the Russian side is clearly trying to impose its political will on the Ukrainian side by using force. In this respect, the nature of war, written by Clausewitz, continues with all its reality. Despite all the advantages of the development of information and communication sources, instant satellite images and technological developments, the fog of war rose and continued throughout the Ukraine war. For this reason, Ukraine's success in unexpected places and the Russians causing serious damage especially to the air power and mobilized troops despite Ukraine's excessive aid is an example of friction. The battlefield highlighted by Clausewitz, on the other hand, is clearly in the middle, especially in the Donbass region and Eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian-Russian war proved to us that Clausewitz's ideas is still valid. Especially in the conventional warfare sense. Despite the fact that there are great innovations in the modern world in terms of technology, strategy and capabilities, Clausewitz's thoughts still remain valid in terms of the nature of war.

Conclusion

As a result, war has changed, and at the same time, war never changes. Clausewitz, with his work explaining his period and the nature of war, went beyond his own period, opened the horizon to modern thoughts, and became a source of reference for modern strategy. Clausewitz's clear distinction between the declaration of war and peace, which is unique to his period, is not in today's world, war and peace, military and civilian are intertwined. New types of warfare have emerged, special units and advanced technology have assumed a dominant role. However, Clausewitz argued that each era creates its own war. From this point of view, such innovations and new war phenomena put forward by new war theorists

have their fair share. However, Clausewitz is not only a soldier who explains the Napoleonic wars or the wars of the 19th century, but also a soldier who uses dialectical thinking and emphasizes that war and fighting are a phenomenon intertwined with politics. In this respect, Clausewitz is a thinker who is still the most valid for conventional wars, but still needs to be evaluated, even if not literally, because of the same nature for different types of warfare, but the difference in type and shape.

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