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## LESSON 4

### CLASSICAL THEORISTS (II): CLAUSEWITZ

*War is a mere continuation of politics by other means.*

--Clausewitz, *On War*

*War develops directly from the political conflicts of States... It is, therefore, impossible to appreciate correctly the nature of war in all its relations and effects if we view it outside the political reasons which brought it about... If war is resolved upon, the military object takes the place of the political purpose... The "military object" may be imagined and termed, as it were, the equivalent of the "political purpose."*

--General Friedrich von Bernhardi,  
*How Germany Makes War* (1914)

## Introduction

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**Purpose** This lesson introduces you to one of the most influential military theorists, Carl von Clausewitz.

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**Who was Clausewitz?** Many, particularly those having a Western cultural perspective, view the Prussian general and theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) as the unrivaled philosopher of war.

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## Introduction, Continued

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### Why is Clausewitz Important?

Clausewitz is important for three reasons:

- No one else has had his scope and influence. Clausewitz's work is relevant at the political, strategic, operational, and historical levels of policy and study.
- No other theorist has had a comparable impact on recent U.S. military doctrine. Both the Army's FM 100-5 *Operations* (1993) and the Marine Corps's MCDP 1 *Warfighting* (1997) are heavily influenced by the ideas in *On War*.
- Clausewitz has many intellectual descendants, for example, the British naval theorist Sir Julian Stafford Corbett. You must understand the famous Prussian theorist before you can understand the works of these Clausewitzian successors. It is difficult to appreciate what most of Clausewitz's critics and competitors are saying unless you understand his theory.

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### Relationship to Other Instruction

- Clausewitz's concepts are found throughout the U.S. military doctrine, and in various ways they permeate military thought and writing throughout the modern world.
- The relationship between a nation's military, its political life, and its policies will be explored in *Strategic Level of War* (8802) and *Operational Level of War* (8803) of the CSCDEP (8800). These concepts also will be covered later in the case studies of *Operations Other Than War* (8809).

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### Study Time

This lesson, including the issues for consideration, will require about 5.5 hours of study

# Educational Objectives

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**Purpose of War** Examine Clausewitz's approach to the development and purpose of a theory of war. [JPME Areas 3b and 4b]

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**Interrelationship of Factors** Explain Clausewitz's theory on the relationship between politics, policy, and war. [JPME Areas 3e and 4b]

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**Trinity of War** In identifying Clausewitz's "remarkable" or "paradoxical" trinity of war, explain the interrelationships of its elements. [JPME Area 3b]

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**Effect on U.S. Doctrine** Explain Clausewitzian concepts that affect U.S. military doctrine, including for example

- Centers of gravity
  - Culminating point
  - Critical vulnerabilities
  - Relationship between the offense and the defense [JPME Area 3b]
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**MCDP 1 and Clausewitz** Understand how the Marine Corps' MCDP 1 *Warfighting* (1997) incorporates Clausewitzian concepts. [JPME Area 3b]

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**JPME Areas/ Objectives/Hours (accounting data)** 3/b/2.5  
3/d/1.0  
3/e/0.5  
4/b/0.5

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## Historical Background

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### Clausewitz's Impact

Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) has been raised to a level approaching idolatry as an unrivaled military thinker. He is one of a number of theorists that wrote during the early 19th century. He has been credited with being the first to analyze the true nature of war. His treatise *On War* provided the world with a theory to explain past, present, and future wars. Clausewitz's writings had a profound impact on many of the great captains of history, and his *On War* has retained its importance both at the operational and strategic levels of war and in the political and historical areas of study. Particularly since the end of the Vietnam War, Clausewitz has dominated U.S. military thought.

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### Major Views

Although even Clausewitz admitted that *On War* was incomplete, his writings are still considered the most profound on the art of war. He clearly subjugates military effort to the policies of the state and lays the foundation for understanding the nature of war as a continuation of policy. By viewing war as a continuation of policy, one gains an appreciation for why opposing sides take up arms with fervor.

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## Required Readings

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***European Armies and the Conduct of War*** Strachan, Hew. "Clausewitz and the Rise of Prussian Military Hegemony." *European Armies and the Conduct of War*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1983, pp. 90 to 107. Discussed in this chapter is one of the foremost contributors to western military thought, Clausewitz. His inspiration can be viewed more clearly in the proper context of his times. Because *On War (Vom Kriege)* was never completed by Clausewitz, Strachan bridges the inconsistencies and expounds on valuable points.

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***On War*** Clausewitz, Carl, eds./trs. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. *On War*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Read the following:

- Book 1, Chapters 1 to 8, pp. 75 to 123
- Book 6, Chapter 25, pp. 469 to 478
- Book 7, Chapter 22, pp. 566 to 573
- Book 8, Chapters 2, pp. 579 to 581
- Book 8, Chapters 4 to 6, pp. 595 to 610

If you find *On War* difficult, examine the book more closely. At its end, Bernard Brodie has written a section titled "A Commentary: A Guide to the Reading of *On War*." Brodie gives guidance on, and synopses of, the key points in each chapter of each book of *On War*. You might find it helpful to read the appropriate "guide" for each assigned chapter.

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***Warfighting*** United States Marine Corps, MCDP 1, *Warfighting*, United States Government as represented by the Secretary of the Navy, 1997, Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 3 to 49. Using this doctrinal publication, trace the evolution of Clausewitzian thought. This manual is not intended to be a guide to actions in combat, but rather a guide for thought processes.

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## For Further Study

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### Supplemental Readings

The readings listed are **not** required. They are provided as recommended sources of additional information about topics in this lesson that may interest you. They will increase your knowledge and augment your understanding of this lesson.

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### Essays in the Translation

In the Howard and Paret translation of *On War*, you will find three introductory essays by the two editors Michael Howard and Peter Paret and by commentator Bernard Brodie. You might want to review them before beginning your required reading in *On War*.

- "The Genesis of *On War*," by Peter Paret, pp. 3 to 25.
  - "The Influence of Clausewitz," by Michael Howard, pp. 27 to 44.
  - "The Continuing Relevance of *On War*," by Bernard Brodie, pp. 45 to 58.
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### Additional Readings

- Strange, Joe. "Centers of Gravity & Critical Vulnerability: Building on the Clausewitzian Foundation So That We Can All Speak the Same Language." *Marine Corps University Perspectives on Warfighting*, No. 4. Marine Corps University, 1997.
  - Giles, Kevin Phillip (Major) and Galvin, Thomas P. (Captain). *Center of Gravity: Determination, Analysis, and Application*. U.S. Army War College. Carlisle Barracks: Center for Strategic Leadership, 1996.
  - Paret, Peter. "Clausewitz." *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 186 to 213.
  - Watts, Barry D. *Clausewitzian Friction and the Future of War*. *McNair Paper 52*. National Defense University: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1996.
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## Issues for Consideration

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### War as Continuation of Politics

How do you interpret the famous phrase *War is a continuation of [policy or politics] by other means?*

- How many different interpretations can you draw? What are the advantages of and dangers in the various interpretations?
  - The word *continuation* is important here. What possible interpretations can you give to this concept? Do you see how the total interface implied by Clausewitz's definition of continuation can create difficulties when defining the total scope of a war?
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### Characterizing War

Look at the following quotation on Clausewitz by Peter Paret from Chapter 7, P. 199 of *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*:

*The thesis of total war as the ideal war is followed by the antithesis that war, even in theory, is always influenced by forces external to it.*

- What does this quotation express about Clausewitz's concept of the nature/characteristics of war?
  - Is the nature of war fixed or multisided? Why?
  - How might you interpret Clausewitz's theory on the nature of war?
  - What kind of meanings does his concept give to violence?
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### The Trinity

- What does Clausewitz mean by his concept of the trinity?
  - How does this concept apply to the military tradition of the United States?
  - What is the difference between politics and policy?
  - Have we seen evidence of this difference in the military history of the United States?
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## Issues for Consideration, Continued

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### **Culminating Point**

Review Clausewitz's concept of the culminating point of the offensive.

- How does this concept apply to Napoleon's Russian campaign?
- How does this concept apply to Napoleon in Spain? Were Napoleon's difficulties in Spain only military in nature? Or were there other factors?
- Is culminating point applicable in the contemporary era? If so, how?
- Consider if (then how) culminating point applies at each of the three levels of war? Can you give examples if it does indeed apply?

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### Center of Gravity

- What does Clausewitz mean by the phrase center of gravity?
  - What is the difference between a center of gravity and the doctrinal concept of a critical vulnerability?
  - Consider the importance of dependence in this concept. Can there be more than one center of gravity?
  - Are there centers of gravity at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war?
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