

A review of *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* by Thomas Waldman

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For more than one century Carl von Clausewitz's theory of war has formed a major pillar of the U.S. military doctrine. However, once the iron curtain fell and the Soviet Union came to demise triggering possibly more problems than solutions in the newly emerged bipolar world, the old doctrines became highly obsolete. With the rapid rise of unconventional skirmishes including civil wars, genocide, terrorist attacks etc. the classical war paradigm fell like a house of cards. Instead both academia and the military circles produced numerous conceptual frameworks in attempt to capture the complexity of so-called "new threats".¹ This led to the claim that the age of conventional, or as Martin van Creveld put it "Trinitarian", wars was over.² By "Trinitarian" he explicitly referred to Clausewitz's *wondrous trinity* consisting of violence, chance and policy,³ which is precisely the subject of Thomas Waldman's book titled *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity*. This very subject is the element that is not only the most central feature of Clausewitz's writings, but also the most understudied and the most misunderstood.

In his book Waldman seeks to revive the debate of Clausewitz's continuous relevance, however, acknowledging that "[...] we should not cling dogmatically to any theory that can no longer sufficiently explain its subject in the light of rapid and significant change".⁴ Thus, instead of beginning the book with the claim of trinity's validity, the author prefers to maintain a rather defensive posture dedicating every effort to "show" and reconstruct the gran master's thought process. Waldman's approach is very reminiscent of the English School Approach to International Relations Theory a la Quentin Skinner, thus instead of engaging with the pure theory of war he begins with laying down theoretical foundations which are further reinforced by reconstruction of the historical and intellectual contexts. Precisely, these events, according to Thomas Waldman, shaped the intellectual backbone Clausewitz's magnum opus *On War*. The author, thus, offers with a thorough examination of German thought and culture prevailing during Clausewitz's times, as well as the influences Prussia's defeats by Napoleon had upon the military theorist.

¹ These concepts include "new wars", "hybrid warfare", "war amongst the people", 4GW or 4th generation warfare, various population-centric counterinsurgency doctrines, to name but a few. See for instance Mary Kaldor, *Old and New Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006).

² Martin Van Creveld, "The Transformation of War Revisited", *Small War & Insurgencies*, No. 13.2, 2002, pp. 3-15.

³ Von Clausewitz, Carl, *On War* translated from German by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 30-31.

⁴ Thomas Waldman, *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2013), p. 13.

However, despite the very detailed analysis the author could have put more emphasis upon the significance of battles of Jena, Moscow and Waterloo that had a profound influence upon Clausewitz's theory. Arguably, these led to a theoretical alteration from his earlier views evident from the author's note Clausewitz wrote in 1827.⁵ Having built up a strong theoretical foundation underpinning Clausewitz's thought, Waldman proceeds to discuss each element of the trinity. In his discussion of policy, the author makes a laudable and important, if seemingly logical, observation, which many seem to take for granted, namely the fact that policy and war have a symbiotic two-way relationship.⁶ The policy-strategy-tactics triad is not a one-way street.

Overall, *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* is a valuable contribution to the existing literature on classical strategic theories. Given the great magnitude of neologisms trying to capture the very essence of *war*, Thomas Waldman's book helps to fill the theoretical void that exists at present reminding us that we should not just discard a theory just because it is outdated. Rather, we should look for more imaginative way to tailor it to our ever-changing circumstances. It unfolds a development of Clausewitz's intellectual thought, yet, not leaving the readers imprisoned in the framework of Clausewitz's theory; rather giving them enough space for their own interpretation as to avoid "over-interpretation" by the author. In other words, Waldman is not guilty of being caught up in a hermeneutical cycle.

However, if someone is looking for an applied explanation of Clausewitz's concepts (or Clausewitz in a Nutshell), this is probably not the right book to start with, for the discussion of the actual trinity and its elements appears in the second half of the book, in chapters 4 to 7.⁷ The main reason behind this logic of structure is the importance to build a strong theoretical substructure preparing for examination of the paradoxical trinity. Thus, for those looking for a more explanatory writings on Clausewitz a good place to start would be Michael Howard's *Clausewitz: A very short introduction*.⁸

⁵ After the battle of Moscow, to name an example, Clausewitz came to realize the significance and the superiority of policy over military aims and the military importance of avoiding decisive battles. For a more detailed account, see Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *The Clausewitz Puzzle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 15-38.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.128.

⁷ Waldman, *op cit.* p.72

⁸ Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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