I

A study of Clausewitz's influence on the thoughts and minds of those who made Nazi Germany is an exercise in the futility of traditional intellectual history, at least in so far as it applies to the events of recent times. In an age of demagogy, mass propaganda and irrational ideology, the accepted, commonsense standards of intellectual influence and causation prove largely worthless. Books are read, if at all, not as a source of enlightenment but of justification for dogmas already held. Ideas and their formulators no longer represent public values to be appropriated by anyone able and willing to do so, but become the medium of barter, mere tokens in a war of words which any and all sides may dole out in return for power and support. It comes, therefore, as no great surprise to find this frankly admitted with respect to Clausewitz, as in the following passage from the officer's periodical of the German army in the penultimate year of the Second World War:¹

Never before, as in these war years, has all history so clearly recognized its duty: the mobilization of the past in the interests of the preservation of the present and the future . . . . In accordance with this fundamental conviction, Clausewitz is here treated in a manner which does not, of course, satisfy the historical thist for knowledge and the requirement of completeness, but in one which may nevertheless demonstrate the continuing importance and relevance of this truly great German.

With this in mind, it is less difficult to make sense of the wild

*Journal of Contemporary History* (SAGE, London and Beverly Hills), Vol. 16 (1981), 5-26
fluctuations of opinion which vie for the honour of explaining Clausewitz’s role in Nazi Germany and the Second World War. For, employing the standard criteria of intellectual history, it is possible to dress Clausewitz up to fit any part desired: evil genius of Prussian militarism; sober philosopher, misunderstood and perverted by the National Socialists; spiritual forefather of the German resistance. All these positions can be argued for and have been supported with approximately equal force.

The simplest view of the matter, one advanced by allied and neutral observers during and immediately following the war, stated that Hitler, although perhaps the black sheep of the family, was nonetheless a direct descendant of Clausewitz, the father of Prussian militarism. This was usually meant to refer to Hitler’s war aims and conduct. But Wyndham Lewis, a man of piquant and often flippant style, now more fondly remembered for his literary efforts than for his political views, saw in the tactics with which the Nazis battled their competitors before being lifted legally to power, an embodiment of Clausewitz’s teachings on the nature of war.

Another, more sophisticated approach does not stop at an assertion of the continuity of the Prussian military tradition, but singles out various Clausewitzian doctrines for attack. Particular opprobrium is reserved for the idea that war, by definition, involves a maximum exertion of effort, force and therefore violence. This idea, so runs the argument, laid the foundation of the so-called Vernichtungsgedanke, which regards as the only legitimate goal of war the complete decimation of enemy forces, ideally in one, all-decisive battle, the Vernichtungsschlacht. No war effort can, according to the dictates of this theory, ever aim at lesser goals or employ limited means. That not all wars have been of this extreme sort can therefore be explained only by the interference of extra-martial factors which deflect the war effort from its original, ferocious intent. This is the gist of Liddell Hart’s argument, presented in the early 1930s, in which he traced much of the horror of the First World War back to the influence of Clausewitz. More recently, this position has been expanded and elaborated to include the Second World War. At the same time, however, more subtle analyses have emphasized the pernicious contribution of Schlieffen to the formulation of the Vernichtungsgedanke and have credited the Clausewitzian doctrine of the primacy of the political viewpoint over the purely military conduct of war with a moderating if, perhaps, therefore largely neglected character. The rehabilitation
of Clausewitz reaches its pinnacle in those studies that attempt to portray him as an important spiritual force behind the internal German resistance to Hitler. As is so often the case with rehabilitations, however, this one too leans occasionally towards the other extreme, as for example when, with disconcerting naiveté, the reader of a popular edition of *Vom Kriege* is assured that, ‘The First World War would have been different, the Second would probably never have taken place, would never have been allowed to take place, had those responsible studied Clausewitz carefully and drawn practical lessons from him.’

Various and opposing factions made use of Clausewitz’s theories for their own purposes. In the period under consideration, however, the importance of his ideas lies less in their purely philosophical impact than in their role as an intellectual shibboleth. For the Nazis, the name Clausewitz lent an aura of respectability to their theories, their use of him suggested an unbroken line of historical continuity from Brandenburg to Berchtesgaden. But in order to enlist his reputation, they had to do violence to his ideas. For the anti-Nazis, it was precisely this impermissible deviation from true Clausewitzian doctrine which demonstrated that the Nazis were an aberration. Those who disputed Clausewitz’s spiritual legacy were thus at odds on a comparatively narrow range of topics; it was primarily the honour of standing in the mainstream of the Prussian military tradition which was at stake. Yet within this limited scope vehement disagreement was possible. This essay considers two closely related ideas in particular: first, the well-known Clausewitzian leitmotiv that war is but a continuation of politics with other means, *la Formule* as Raymond Aron calls it; second, the notion of ‘absolute war’.

II

Clausewitz’s theories are widely known. It is therefore not so much their content as the ambiguity that plagues their formulation which deserves emphasis. The unfinished state of his writings at his death in 1831 has made them a treasure of often contradicting, mutually compromising statements which may submit to synthesis and harmonization at the hands of the patient scholar, but which can also be taken by the more pragmatic-minded statesman or soldier as a source of widely varying opinion. Thus, for example, everyone
knows that, according to Clausewitz, war is subordinated to politics. But does this, to test one common assumption, mean that war is somehow subdued or tamed by political control, that politics act in a moderating, restraining fashion on the tempest which martial zeal left to itself would unleash? ‘Thus politics’, writes Clausewitz, ‘makes of the all-overwhelming element of war a mere instrument. Out of the dreadful broadsword which seeks to be grasped with both hands and swung with full force, thus to strike once and for all, it fashions a light, handy sword which can on occasion even be handled as a rapier to exchange thrusts, feints and parries.’ In the same chapter, however, he also argues that it is a misunderstanding to speak of the detrimental influence of politics on warfare. If a war is unsuccessful, then not the political influence, but rather the nature of the politics in question is to blame. ‘If the politics are right, that is, if they hit their mark, then they can work only to the advantage of war . . .’. This would seem to place politics and war on equal footing and might even be construed as a reversal of the usual sense of the Formule.9

Similar problems arise concerning the idea of absolute war. For Clausewitz, absolute war is a strictly philosophical concept, an abstraction on the analogy of the Kantian Ding an sich. In its purely military essence, war is a struggle fought with all available means until one side is unable to offer any further resistance. Two rational creatures, locked in combat, both realize that the victory will go to whichever exerts the most effort. Thus a continual escalation of force follows until one is completely vanquished. True to his philosophical calling, when Clausewitz writes that, ‘never can a principle of moderation be introduced into the philosophy of war itself without committing an absurdity’, he is making a statement about the nature of war in a logical sense.10 He is not, as he is often misunderstood to say, advocating utmost brutality as the way to conduct any actual war.11 Absolute war is the peak of the escalation of violence in the struggle between two rational creatures. It is the ideal type of war, never found in reality, which all real wars approximate but never attain. Clausewitz thought that, in his own day, Napoleonic warfare represented a new type of people’s war which came much closer to the absolute form of war than the cabinet wars of the previous era.

To explain why absolute war is never met in reality, Clausewitz borrows the image of friction from physics. Not all forces can, in actuality, be deployed simultaneously, nor will those in charge of
making the appropriate decisions ever be of one mind. Due to such 'modifications of reality', actual wars do not escalate to the absolute stage as a purely theory-bound consideration would expect.

Nevertheless, although Clausewitz did at one time think that all wars, however limited in scope and objective they might on occasion be, aimed at the idea of absolute war and were prevented from achieving this goal only through the interference of the frictions of reality, the development of his thought led him to argue that limited wars with circumscribed aims and motivations might represent a special class of war, one no less 'ideal' than absolute war. He distinguishes various types of war in accordance with the intensity and importance of their motivations. The stronger the motives, the more every aspect of the peoples concerned is involved, the more war approaches its abstract form, the more it aims solely at crushing the enemy and, consequently, the more completely the military and political objects overlap, 'the more purely military and less political the war seems to be.' The weaker the motives, the more the war takes on a political cast.

Thus Clausewitz distinguishes the purely military aims of war, the aim of struggle as a theoretical concept (destruction of the enemy), from the political manoeuvres which make use of war for ends which may very well be far more modest than those dictated by military considerations. Yet he wrote in the eighth book of Vom Kriege (one he did not live to revise) that, given sufficiently urgent political motives, it is possible for political and military goals to coincide. 'If war belongs to politics, then it will assume its character. As politics become greater and mightier, so does war; this can continue to the point at which war attains its absolute form.' Given the ultimate motives of a battle for sheer survival, war can apparently lose its political aspect and be characterized wholly by the military goal of a completely vanquished opponent. 'It would be conceivable that the political viewpoint should lose its influence at the outbreak of war only if war were fought out of pure hatred as a struggle for life or death . . . ' This is not to say that, prompted by even the strongest of motivations, war is not actually political, but rather that at this extreme the political and military intentions seek one and the same object.

The point, therefore, is not that Clausewitz did not regard war as subordinate to politics or that he thought of limited wars as mere aberrations of the ideal war of utmost violence, but that his thought is genuinely ambiguous and therefore easily used and abus-
ed. ‘Should an early death interrupt my work’, he cautioned in his preface of 1827, scant years before one did, ‘then what is here will, of course, only deserve to be called a shapeless mass of thoughts, . . . subject to endless misunderstandings . . . ’.

III

However else they may have made use of him, the National Socialists regarded Clausewitz as a good Prussian, a valiant German, a dedicated soldier and therefore, it was assumed, an example that every Nazi might be proud to emulate. The National Socialists thought of themselves as fighting for Germany and her survival much as Clausewitz and others had done during the wars of national liberation. ‘Who liberated Germany? 1813’, Hitler scribbled in his notes for a speech already in the twenties. ‘Not the host of the meek, but the hardheads. Not the Simons — Wirts — Erzbergers — Rathenaus, etc., but the Blüchers, Scharnhorsts, Yorcks and Gneisenaus. The spirit that Clausewitz expressed in a pamphlet: Clausewitz’s Bekenntnis.’16 ‘Thus Clausewitz stretches out his hand to us over the civilian nineteenth century’, wrote a fledgling National Socialist scholar in his Heidelberg dissertation from 1934.17 It was only natural then that Vom Kriege should have shared the honour of inclusion on the list of the first hundred books for Nazi bookstores, along with the works of such luminaries as Rosenberg, Darré, Nietzsche, Bismarck, Ranke, Wagner and Jünger.18

Just as the Nazi rise to power was accompanied by a train of references to Clausewitz, so during the decline the philosopher’s name was invoked, although now in a less optimistic, more desperate sense. As the war drags on toward the end, allusions to the man and his works turn up with increasing frequency as a sort of spiritual talisman. His Bekenntnis, read by Heinrich George, precedes Hitler’s midnight address over the radio on New Year’s Eve 1944. Snippets of his writings appear in military periodicals zur Beherzigung, or as a source of ‘the power of inspiration in difficult times’. And, finally, in his political testament to Dönitz shortly before his suicide, Hitler appeals to ‘the ideals of the great Clausewitz’, for which he exhorts Germany to continue fighting.19

But the National Socialists made use of Clausewitz in more than this primarily ceremonial fashion. A quick check of the indexes to Hitler’s various writings reveals that, with the exception of Luden-
dorff and Wagner, no other figure who could properly be considered an intellectual influence is mentioned or referred to as often as Clausewitz. This lends support to the observation that Hitler used Clausewitz as a source and justification for his thoughts in a fundamentally different sense than he did any of his other purported spiritual predecessors.  

It is often suggested that Hitler and the Nazis turned Clausewitz’s *Formule* on its head, treating politics as the continuation of war and thus blurring the distinction between peace and war. This gave the Nazis a measure of freedom from the constraints of traditional diplomacy and foreign policy, which they exploited to full measure by militarizing what would normally be regarded as peaceful international relations up to the actual outbreak of hostilities in 1939. ‘Anyone familiar with the thinking of Clausewitz and Schlieffen knows that military strategy can also be used in the political battle’, Hitler told Richard Breiting in 1931. A decade later as Germany reaped the fruits of this doctrine, a German lieutenant-general looked back and concluded:

> Already before the outbreak of this war, we were witnesses to how the Führer made use of war, that is, the determination to go to war, as the most effective means of his politics, in the occupation of the Rhineland, the *Anschluss* of Austria, in the liberation of the Sudetenland and in the annexation of the protectorates of Bohemia and Moravia. Doesn’t this correspond exactly to Clausewitz’s view when he writes: ‘If one concedes the influence of the political goal on war, . . . then there is no longer any limit and one must put up with descending even to such wars that consist merely in threatening the enemy and in negotiations.’

Some observers assert that by reversing the *Formule*, Hitler subordinated politics to war and that the insanity of the Second World War is best explained by the predominance of the military element and the exclusion of a restraining political conception — a sort of war for war’s sake. This view ignores the redefinition of the nature of politics and war which the Nazis undertook. It rests on evidence provided by Ludendorff who, drawing on his experience in the First World War and his belief in the *Dolchstosslegende*, suggested in 1935 that Clausewitz had been outmoded. In the future, the leadership of the entire war effort should go to the military. For the military, thought the general, would be more willing to pursue a hard line than the civilian leadership. Hitler did not see it this way. Although he considered himself the
great general and shouted, 'I shall make war', at Rauschning, he thought of the fight itself as political, though political, to be sure, in a new sense of the word: as a fanatical, uncompromising battle, 'the execution of a nation's struggle for existence', inspired by Nazi ideology. This sort of politics, unlike that Clausewitz had in mind, was more savage than anything the military, left to its own devices, could ever dream up; the new political conception raised the possibility of brutality to unprecedented levels. 'The lack of a great, creative, renewing idea means at all times a limitation of fighting force', Hitler had written in 1926. 'Firm belief in the right to apply even the most brutal weapons is always bound up with the existence of a fanatical faith in the necessity of the victory of a revolutionary new order on this earth.' Hitler complained of his generals that they were a moderating influence, bound by moribund conceptions of war and its limits. Of the war against the Soviet Union, he said in 1941,

It is a fight with the great opponent of our Weltanschauung, a struggle for life and death in which each soldier must feel like a political fighter and act accordingly. The German officer and soldier is far too deeply rooted in the conceptions of an antiquated era. It is impossible ever to overcome Bolshevism with these principles of a chivalrous, purely military conduct of war.

In fact, Hitler quoted Clausewitz on the superiority of the political aim over the military — a stricture which the generals of the First World War had ignored as too restrictive of their freedom of action — against his generals when they proved to be too old-fashioned and temperate to follow the radical new political demands he made of them. The document 'Die Kriegführung als Problem der Organisation' was issued by the OKW, over which Hitler has assumed personal control in February, on 19 April 1938, that is, shortly after the Fritsch-Blomberg affair had cleared some of the conservative underbrush out of the General Staff so that Hitler could implement his war plans unhindered. In it Clausewitz is quoted in support of the assertion that the soldier has no higher duty than to obey the dictates of the political command. 'If the assertion is advanced that one cannot demand of a Commander in Chief of the army that he conquer in accordance with a "foreign concept", then it should be recalled that we soldiers are all bound by the duty to conquer according to the political concept of the head of state . . . . To lead the complete war effort is the affair of
the Führer and Reichskanzler.39 Similarly, in later disputes over Russian strategy, Hitler invoked Clausewitz to subdue his recalcitrant generals.30

What Hitler and the National Socialists did do was to take the Formule and, in combination with their new definition of politics and war, vitiate the distinction between the two, turning belligerence and peace, war and politics into one continuous whole. ‘... Clausewitz says that “war is the continuation of politics, although with different means”,’ Hitler told the Industrie-Klub of Düsseldorf in 1932. ‘Conversely, Clemenceau thinks that today peace is nothing but the continuation of war and the pursuit of the war aim, though again with other means. In short: politics is and can be nothing other than the safeguarding of a people’s vital interests with every means.’31 It was no longer the distinction between politics and war which was of interest, but rather that which separated the ‘political (diplomatic) and military (strategic) duties of the conduct of war’, as Konstantin Hierl, Nazi military expert and later authority on labour policy questions, wrote as early as 1929.32 Consequently, a duality of leadership, military and civilian, could not be tolerated. One man, alone responsible for the Gesamt-politik of the day would secure for Germany its continued existence and prosperity. Where if in 1934 it was still possible to express doubts as to whether the complexity of modern political and military functions would ever allow the emergence of a new Alexander, Frederick the Great or Napoleon, later this position was specifically attacked and rejected.33 Also Clausewitz was brought into line. The academic specialists were now quick to present the argument that, despite the common misconception, nothing in Clausewitz’s thought indicates that war is in any way moderated or restrained by politics; on the contrary, war can only be fully pursued when assured of the complete support of politics.34 ‘In the current German fight for freedom, the German people...turns to Clausewitz, the German philosopher of war; for it has, admiringly and gratefully, experienced the unity of political combat and ingenious generalship in its Führer Adolf Hitler to an historically unique extent’, the readers of a Clausewitz anthology were told.35

The unity of politics and war was, of course, closely linked with the concept of total war, which in turn owes much to a misuse of Clausewitz.36 Employing the new National Socialist conception of politics, the following passage demonstrates the ease with which the transition from Clausewitz to total war was effected:37
The primacy of politics over war is the axis around which Clausewitz's thought concerning war revolved. Thus Clausewitz had attained the peak of his conception of the uninterrupted nature of war . . . War is one side, peace the other of an indivisible historical reality . . . . Thus the liberal idea that war is an unfortunate interruption of peaceful conditions . . . was overcome. Only this overcoming brought forth for the first time, as a possibility, the character of the concept 'total war' as we know it today.

The nature of total war ideology was most succinctly described in the appendix to the OKW memorandum of 19 April 1938, entitled 'Was ist der Krieg der Zunkuft?':

War in its absolute form is the violent conflict of two or more states using all means.

Despite all attempts to proscribe war, it remains a law of nature which may be checked but never eliminated, and which serves the maintenance of the people and the state or the assurance of its historical future.

This high moral aim gives war its total character and its ethical justification.

It lifts it above being a purely military act or a military duel for the sake of some economic advantage.

Stakes, winnings and losses rise to hitherto unsuspected heights. Not only damage, but the annihilation of state and people threatens the loser of any war.

Thus the war of today becomes a national emergency and a fight for survival for each individual.

Since each person has everything to win and everything to lose, each must contribute the utmost.

The use of Clausewitzian terminology at the beginning was no coincidence. The great philosopher of war was hailed also as the prophet of total war and as a star witness for the accuracy of the assertion that, 'only those nations can maintain themselves which can and are determined to throw themselves completely onto the scales of war'. Total war was thought of as the practical realization of absolute war, the overcoming of the 'modifications of reality'. Prompted by the strongest of motives, military and political goals coincided and utmost effort was to be expended in the attempt to destroy utterly the enemy that would not hesitate to do likewise. 'Already Clausewitz', Hitler confided to Horthy and Antonescu in 1943, 'had quite rightly labelled this uncompromising war of allies against a merciless enemy as the natural form of war and had distinguished it from those wars which are conducted like a joint-stock company, in which, instead of capital, one contributes 30,000 or 40,000 men. We must stake everything; we have
everything to win or everything to lose.'40 Early in 1945, Hitler described the war he had begun in terms which all but duplicate Clausewitz's account of the logical form of war: 'In a ghastly conflict like this, in a war in which two so completely irreconcilable ideologies confront one another, the issue can inevitably only be settled by the total destruction of one side or the other. It is a fight which must be waged, by both sides, until they are utterly exhausted...'41

The motivations of war, which Clausewitz had linked with its nature, were presented time and time again as absolute: life or death, complete victory or utter defeat as the only alternatives. The possibility of limited wars was abruptly dismissed. 'The time of cabinet wars and wars with limited political goals is over. They were often more like armed robberies than a struggle of profound moral justification as is the total war for the survival of a people.'42 That Hitler should have thought of the alternatives only as life and death is perhaps not surprising late in the war.43 But already in 1936 as he was unveiling the Four Year Plan to prepare Germany militarily, he argued that, 'the victory of Bolshevism over Germany would not lead to a Versailles Treaty, but to a final destruction, yes, extermination of the German people.'44 It is also clear that his antisemitism, stemming largely from his belief that the Jew, as 'the mightiest counterpart to the Aryan', represented a most potent threat to the very existence of Germany, was closely tied to his conception of war, especially that against Russia.45 But the Russians and the Jews were not the only ones who could force the issues to such extremes. When, at Casablanca, Roosevelt declared the allied war aim to be the unconditional surrender of Germany, Goebbel's responded on 18 February 1943 with his infamous speech proclaiming the total war. 'Everyone knows that this war will destroy us all if we lose it. And therefore the people along with their leaders are determined to seize the most radical means of self-help.'46 'Unconditional surrender', Ernst Jünger, who knew a lot about the subject, wrote in his diary at the end of the war, 'that is the counterpart to total war.'47

IV

While Hitler and the National Socialists were plundering Clausewitz's writings for their own purposes, others were making
use of him for quite different reasons. The Nazis themselves intimated that Clausewitz's thought contained potentially subversive traits. 'The Führer has referred repeatedly to Clausewitz', one retired lieutenant-general whose hobby it was to reinterpret Clausewitz in the spirit of the new age assured his readers. 'Thus it is clear, in the battle over Clausewitz's heritage, that a supporter of Scharnhorst's gifted apprentice could not also be against Adolf Hitler.' At about the same time, as Hitler was presenting the General Staff with his war plans and eliminating those members too conservative to back him, a German expatriate in Paris, Albert Schreiner, was pointing out the presence of a conflict within ranking German military circles between the Clausewitzians who continued to believe in the primacy of politics and its restraining influence and those who thought Ludendorff's reversal of Clausewitz correct. This latter faction he identified with the National Socialists. Although at the moment, he warned, the Clausewitzians still held their ground, the future boded a swing in the opposite direction.

Others, outside of Germany, commented on the use of Clausewitz as a justification for the unprecedentedly belligerent nature of German foreign policy before the war, or used his ideas as an argument against the theoretical validity of total war ideology.

More interesting, however, is the use to which Clausewitz was put by members of the internal German opposition, especially by Colonel-General Ludwig Beck, Chief of Staff of the Army from 1935 to 1938, but also by Karl Goerdeler, sometime Lord Mayor of Leipzig. Both were participants in the assassination attempt of 20 July 1944 and perished in its aftermath. Conservative in outlook and intention, these two looked back to the days of Bismarck and his relations to Moltke for the ideal, traditional relationship of politics to war, wherein politics guided and restrained the otherwise directionless fury of unleashed martial energy. 'Only the failure of the political leadership during the last fifty years has made possible the fateful error of speaking of total war in the sense that in war any means are permissible', Beck and Goerdeler argued in a collaborative memorandum early in 1941. Commenting on the failure of German foreign policy during the First World War in 1944 they observed that, 'A situation in which ever greater risks were taken was allowed to develop. Thus, in the face of the clear
understanding of Clausewitz and the experiences of 1866 and 1870, war became total and the military leadership predominated.\footnote{53}

In strict Clausewitzian fashion, they pointed out that, since war as such has no aim other than the destruction of the enemy, it can be no more than a tool in the political workshop. 'Wars may not be waged for their own sake', Goerdeler wrote in a memorandum from 1940. 'Even Moltke emphasized this; Clausewitz and all great statesmen have acknowledged it; reason and a sense of responsibility dictate it. The goal is always and alone an honourable and equal peace.\footnote{54} 'For it is precisely the aim of politics', the two continued in 1941, 'flexibly to find and determine the right thing for each step of the development. Politics therefore do not grant the soldier every form of warfare; for example, it must be evaluated whether the effect at which destruction aims brings one closer to the considered and possible goal of an advantageous peace and its desired form and whether it serves to preserve this.\footnote{55} Like many later commentators, Beck saw Hitler's conduct of the war in terms of an unrestrained, hypertrophied militarism. In a draft of his 'Aufruf an die Wehrmacht' from the fall of 1943, he wrote, in allusion to Bismarck: 'that leadership which no longer regards politics as the art of the possible and strives to attain its goal with the most sparing use of effort, but which revels in fantastic plans of limitless conquest, which recognizes no moral obligations whatsoever towards either its own people or towards others, can never arrive at peace with foreign nations.\footnote{56}

With respect to total war, Beck has left behind a remarkable testimony to the various uses to which Clausewitz was put. In 1938 he had remained content with the charge that no one, however much a genius he might fancy himself, could, as the dictates of total war required, be a modern Napoleon, commanding both the military and political aspects of a future war. Two years later he set forth the usual opinion that Clausewitzian absolute war dominated military thinking and had found its realization and expansion in total war.\footnote{57} In June 1942, however, he delivered a lecture before the Mittwochgesellschaft, a distinguished intellectual gathering of which he was a member, in Berlin. Here he attacked the Ludendorffian concept of total war and argued for a return to the diversity and therefore limitation of war in the sense that Clausewitz had depicted.

Whereas Clausewitz thought of absolute war as being an
abstract, philosophical concept, Beck accurately noted, Ludendorff and the other prophets of total war mistook this conception for a new form that war takes on in reality, one which excludes all other types of conflict. He suggested that Ludendorff diverged from Clausewitz in that, failing to understand the theoretical nature of absolute war, he attempted to impose this purely logical concept directly on reality. Of total war and Ludendorff, he said:

With the creation of this new, exclusive concept, he is forced — to use the Clausewitzian expression — to extremes by moving in the abstract realm of pure concepts. These extremes are nothing but a play of ideas and prevent the return from abstraction to reality. Only through this return do the probabilities of real life replace the most radical and absolute aspects of the concept and only thus is the strict law according to which force must always tend toward the utmost invalidated for the entire military act.58

A very concrete manifestation of Beck's rejection of total war ideology may be found in his approach to the question of its motives. In a memorandum from 2 January 1940, he noted that in his New Year's address Hitler had told the army that the coming struggle would be a matter of life or death. To this Beck replied that, although Germany's position could and should be much improved in many respects,

Neither our own situation, nor the desire of the people, nor our enemies force the German people into a struggle over existence or non-existence. In these circumstances, intentions to force, or beliefs that one is obliged to force, the German people through a fight for existence or non-existence, over matters actually or supposedly essential to its survival . . . can no longer be described with the vocabulary appropriate for politics and strategy and place themselves beyond the pale of the laws which govern these areas.59

Another, perhaps the most remarkable document on Clausewitz from this period, was left by the historian Gerhard Ritter who was a member of an anti-Nazi circle of conservative academics and theologians in Freiburg. Entitled 'Die Lehre Carls von Clausewitz vom politischen Sinn des Krieges', it was published in the 1943 volume of Historische Zeitschrift, the most important German historical periodical. Although his article seems at first glance to be but one of many similar scholarly contributions to the topic in question,60 if read in conjunction with the arguments of this essay, its between-the-lines meaning suddenly becomes clear and quite a bit more interesting than the ostensible subject. For what Ritter did
was to bring forth the themes discussed here and refute the Nazi interpretation of Clausewitz point by point. In strong contrast to the historical attitude quoted at the beginning of this essay, he rejected the tendency of each age to interpret Clausewitz after its own whims and insisted on going back to what Clausewitz himself meant.

If one considered only his early writings, Ritter granted, one might be led to interpret Clausewitz’s *Formule* in the sense that is prevalent today:

That politics is nothing but a continuous fight for power, that war is only the intensification of this with an admixture of violent means, that political and military aims are essentially identical: the overwhelming of enemy forces. According to this, the role of the leadership of the state in war would be determined in a purely military fashion, as the preparation of all material and spiritual means for the *Vernichtungskampf*.

This interpretation, however, he insisted, would represent ‘an inadmissible modernization of the true Clausewitz’. Like Beck, Ritter emphasized the equal status which Clausewitz accorded to wars with limited goals and motivations, carried out with limited means. Similarly, he went back to a traditional interpretation of the moderating influence of politics: Clausewitz clearly states that political and military goals are not necessarily identical, and rather than assign to politics ‘an ancillary and auxiliary role in war, he determinedly maintains its primacy . . . . Thus politics in no way appears as the intensifying element, but as the moderating.’

Turning to the question of absolute war, Ritter argued that, as a purely theoretical construct, this can never embody an actual political goal. The aim of war does not, without exception, always require the greatest exertion of force. Moreover, he continued, what Clausewitz meant by absolute war cannot without further ado be equated with modern *Vernichtungskrieg*. Not every war need be the catastrophes of total war:

What Clausewitz does not see, or what in any case he will not allow, is the possibility of war, once it has broken loose, developing its own logic, . . . raging forth like an avalanche over all original war aims, over all wishes and considerations of politicians, like the First World War, until it has destroyed not only millions of human lives, but also the possibility of any lasting European peace for generations. Clausewitz knows absolutely nothing of a ‘total’ conduct of war.
At the risk of ending on a sour note, one final group of Clausewitz interpreters must be mentioned. This consists primarily of young academics who made their fortunes in the wake of the National Socialists without ever becoming mere propagandists. Sophisticated sycophants, they clearly recognized what was being done to Clausewitz, but, instead of objecting like Ritter even in so covert a fashion, they glossed over the problem with overly subtle distinctions and protestations that what was said was not also meant.

Karl Linnebach, for example, an Oberarchivrat, in 1934 cited — preposterously — Clausewitz as evidence for the statement that a Vernichtungskrieg aims at the destruction of the enemy state and 'in certain cases even the extermination of the enemy people'.62 He then, however, went on to draw an acute and accurate distinction, occasionally neglected even by recent observers. He separated the conception of total war as the development of military technology and its increasing power and destructiveness from that conception of total war which was also Hitler's, by which the capacity to carry out the military aim is not synonymous with the decision to do so, in which the Vernichtungs-aim is a political decision. But, Linnebach hastened to add, as the National Socialist state holds the national rights of other countries in high regard, a Vernichtungskrieg is, for it, an impossible political goal. Similar is the case of another disputation on the nature of total war from 1937. The author understood perfectly well that, as the discussion stood at the moment, what was meant by total war was really Ausrottungskrieg, wherein peace is not honourably concluded with an eye to re-establishing an equilibrium of relations, but, as he said with a phrase that could have been lifted from Hitler's Table Talk, 'which one concludes on the grave of the enemy people in order to enslave the survivors'.63 But this, the author was certain, although on what basis remains unclear, is a misunderstanding, and future wars will not be of this nature.

Walther Malmsten Schering, who made something of a career studying Clausewitz and, by adding doses of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, concocting a murky intellectual brew called Wehrphilosophie for which he was appointed to a professorship in Berlin, is perhaps the classic example of this unappetizing species. He was conscientious and serious enough in his studies to realize and indicate that absolute war is merely a theoretical construct,
that it should not be confused with total war, and that by \textit{Vernichtung} Clausewitz meant nothing more catastrophic than \textit{wehrlos zu machen}. Nevertheless, he made his peace with the problem of reconciling his knowledge of what Clausewitz had said to what he was being made to say through specious distinctions with which he separated the innocuous from the unpleasant and dismissed the latter as outside his domain. ‘As with most catchwords, the expression “total war” includes too much and in this lies the danger’, he wrote. ‘For by it is understood that which belongs in the concept “natural war”, that is, actual destruction or even extermination of a people due to a one-sided predominance of emotion and passion. It can hardly be assumed that this is what the European peoples want.’

\section*{VI}

The usual attempts to determine the intellectual origins of National Socialism, in particular the \textit{Sammelsurium} of prejudices, \textit{Lebensphilosophie} and snippets of fact, bound together by the glue of pseudo-scientific pretension that passed for a coherent view of things in Hitler’s mind, take place in a manner which can perhaps best be described as an intellectual police line-up. As a row of suspicious, unpleasant, pERVERse or merely asocial thinkers squint and sweat under the blinding glare of arclights, historians, armed with a knowledge of Hitler’s intellectual deviations, search their faces for tell-tale similarities. Nietzsche, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Gobineau, Wagner and so forth have all been picked out in much this fashion and damned accordingly. Conversely, when attempting to rehabilitate any such figure, it has usually been necessary to argue at great length and with much subtlety that in his work can be discerned a certain core of thought which, when divested of its nebula of contradictions and reversals, may not rightly be confused with the misinterpretations foisted on it by the likes of Hitler. Such is the way, for example, in which Walter Kaufmann has rehabilitated Nietzsche. This may be a valid approach in some abstract sense, but it rests on a — for the historian — fruitless attachment to questions of timeless verity in favour of the misunderstandings, questionable associations and unjustified appropriations that characterize the thinking of those who shape the not so lofty aspects of the world. The \textit{true} Nietzsche, the \textit{essential}
Wagner, or whatever, cleansed of his sins, sits purified in the academician's heaven while his mortal coil is dismissed as of only secondary importance and left to the scavengers to rip apart.

Clausewitz has borne the brunt of both these efforts: damnation and rehabilitation. Neither is convincing, though not because the Nazis did not, in fact, misuse his thought or because Beck and Ritter did not tend to go back to the heart of his thinking. Clausewitz's ambiguity facilitated misinterpretation; it did not cause it. The problem is more fundamental. Those who had power did not learn from Clausewitz, but sewed his name like a fashionable label into their pirated, imitative intellectual vestments which would not have differed substantially in cut or quality had he never existed. Those who may have learned from him were not men in a position to have much effect: hesitant conspirators, incapable of acting until threatened with catastrophe; scholars writing for each other and posterity. Clausewitz, in other words, is not as important or interesting in this context and time as those who used him, the ways in which they did so and the reasons why. The really intriguing question concerns the extent to which this may be said of all similar figures.

Notes

I am indebted to Ernest R. May and Agnieszka Kolakowska for comments and suggestions, both substantive and stylistic.


8. *Vom Kriege*, VIII.vi.B.

9. This point is made in Nielsen, op. cit., 168-169.


11. For example: ‘Just a century earlier, Clausewitz . . . had indoctrinated the Prussian Officers’ Corps with exactly the same principles . . . . [H]e warned his pupils against attempting to disarm an enemy without the maximum of “bloodshed”, begged them to avoid a “benevolent” spirit towards a stricken foe, dismissed all humanitarian restrictions on the conduct of war as “hardly worth mentioning”, and denounced “moderation” in an officer as “an absurdity”.’ J. H. Morgan, *Assize of Arms* (New York 1946), 148-149.

12. Concisely on this very important development is P. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (New York 1976), 356 ff.


14. *Vom Kriege*, VIII.vi.B.

15. Ibid.


31. Hitler, *Reden und Proklamationen*, 69-70. This was echoed exactly by Goebbels a decade later in his speech on 30 September 1941, 'Politik und Kriegführung', in *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel* (Munich 1941), 590.


38. IMT, XXXVIII, 48.
39. Horst von Metzsch, Der einzige Schutz gegen die Niederlage. Eine Fühlungnahme mit Clausewitz (Breslau 1937), 8-9; Metzsch, Zeitgemässe Gedanken um Clausewitz (Berlin 1937), 5.

40. Quoted as a freundliche Mitteilung from Paul Carell by Norbert Krüger ‘Adolf Hitlers Clausewitzkenntnis’, Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau, 18 (1968), 471.


42. Ludendorff, op. cit., 6.

43. For example, Hitler’s speech, after the final defeats at Stalingrad, read by Goebbels in the Sportspalast on 30 January 1943, where he says that this war will not leave behind it victors and the vanquished, but only survivors and the annihilated. Reden und Proklamationen, 1978-79.

44. ‘Denkschrift Hitlers über die Aufgaben eines Vierjahresplan’, Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte, 3, 2 (April 1955), 205.

45. Mein Kampf, 300; Eberhard Jackel, Hitlers Weltanschauung (Tübingen 1969), 79 ff.


47. Ernst Jünger, Jahre der Okkupation (Stuttgart 1958), 111.


49. Albert Schreiner, Vom totalen Krieg zur totalen Niederlage Hitlers (Paris 1939), 45 ff.


54. ‘Denkschrift zur Kriegs- und aussenpolitischen Lage’, ibid. 265.

55. ‘Das Ziel’, ibid. 85.


58. ‘Die Lehre vom totalen Kriege. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung’, ibid., 241. It is interesting to note the resemblance between Beck’s criticism of Ludendorff and National Socialist conceptions of total war and Hannah Arendt’s brilliant and still eminently useful insight into the nature of totalitarian ideology in general: ‘An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea . . . . The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same “law” as the logical explanation of its “idea”.’ The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York 1973), 469.

60. It was in fact reprinted with only minor changes in chapter 3, volume I of his *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk* (Munich 1959), English translation, *The Sword and the Scepter* (Coral Gables 1969).

61. The later version, not surprisingly, adds the Second.

62. K. Linnebach, ‘Zum Meinungsstrect über den Vernichtungsgedanken in der Kriegführung’, *Wissen und Wehr*, 15, 11 (1934), 743. Here a comparison with arguments possible before the Nazi accession to power is instructive — for example, Günther Gründel ‘Die Krise des Vernichtungsgedankens in der neuzeitlichen Kriegführung’, *Militär-Wochenblatt*, 117, 7 (18 August 1932), who argues that not *Vernichtung* but only ‘“painless” disarmament’ can be the goal of future wars.


**Peter Baldwin**

is a graduate student in the History Department at Harvard University and is the author of forthcoming articles on Max Nordau and on Weimar Jewry.