War Essay, Research Paper

War

War is nothing but the continuation of political intercourse with the intermixing of other means (Clauswitz). This dictum, so many times quoted, is from the most famous book on war called On War written by Carl Von Clauswitz, a Prussian veteran of the Napoleonic wars. Its simplicity gave many civilized leaders the much-needed justification to send millions to their deaths to further their political and social objectives. Looking at mankind s history, one must come to the conclusion that this is what WAR IS NOT.

Clauswitz, in his dictum, implies the existence of state, state interests, and rational calculation analyzing war. Yet war antedates the state, diplomacy and strategy by many years. Warfare is almost as old as mankind, and reaches into the most secret places of the human heart. Places where self dissolves rational thinking, where pride reigns, where emotions are paramount, and where instinct is king. Clauswitz does not dare confront the thought that man is a thinking animal in whom the intellect directs the urge to hunt and the ability to kill.

This is not an idea easy for the modern man to confront. Our moral values remain those of the great monotheistic religions, which condemn the killing of other people. Although psychoanalysis tries to convince us that the savage in all of us lurks not far below the skin, we prefer, nonetheless, to recognize human nature as we find it displayed in the everyday behavior of the civilized majority in the modern world.

As John Keegan states in his book The History of Warfare, history s lessons remind us that the modern life, that is the states in which we live in, our institutions, and our laws have come to us through conflict, often of the most bloodthirsty sort. Our daily diets of news bring to us reports of the shedding of blood, in regions quite close to us. Yet we succeed in camouflaging these lessons to a category of otherness , while calling the use of violence by our own institutions of state civilized warfare .

Clauswitz does not acknowledge the idea of pacifism, yet he does distinguish sharply between the lawful and unlawful bearer of arms. His dictum presupposes a high level of military discipline and an awesome degree of obedience. It expect that war will take certain narrowly definable forms siege, pitched battle, skirmish, raid, reconnaissance, patrol and outpost duties each of which has its own recognized conventions. It assumes that wars have a beginning and an end.

War is the continuation of policy does not allow for pre-state people rebellions, a type of warfare in which there is no distinction between lawful and unlawful bearers of arms. This form of warfare prevailed during long periods of mankind history and was utilized by the civilized states many times. During the eighteenth century many regular, civilized armies employed such forces, making names such as the Cossacks, Highlanders, and Hussars part of the military jargon. The civilized employers ignored these irregular warriors habits of loot, pillage, rape, murder, kidnap, extortion, and systematic vandalism. The civilized employers averted their gaze from the unlawful, uncivilized, and barbaric methods of fighting; yet without the services these unlawful warriors offered, the over drilled armies, in which Clauswitz and his kin had been raised, would have scarcely been able to keep the battlefield. That it was an older and more widespread form of warfare than that which they themselves practiced they preferred not to admit. War is the continuation of policy – Once Clauswitz had formulated the thought, proved to offer the thinking officer a convenient philosophical bolthole from contemplation of the older, darker, and fundamental aspect of his profession.

However Clauswitz did see, with half an eye, that war was not what he claimed it to be. In his book he raises the question if the wars of the civilized people are less cruel and destructive than those of savages. Although he never answers this burning query, a short glimpse at one part of his life may provide the answer.

As part of the forces opposing Napoleon in his Russia campaign of 1812, Clauswitz saw Moscow burning as the result of the Cossacks acts. The Cossacks were soldiers of the tsar. The story of their origin has been called a myth, yet the essence of the myth is both simple and true. Cossacks – the name derived from the Turkic word for freeman were fugitives from Poland, Lithuania, and Russia, who preferred to live in freedom in the rich but lawless surface of the great Central Asian steppe.

By the time Clauswitz came to know the Cossacks, they were regarded by the tsar as freestanding warriors societies, responsible for supplying regiments for war in return for their freedom. They were much nearer to the freebooting murderers of original Cossackdom than the dashing rovers whom Tolstoy was later to romanticize in his early novels, and their burning of the outskirts of Moscow in 1812, which led to the conflagration of the whole capital, was wholly in character. The Cossacks showed how cruel they could be when the long columns of Napoleon s grand army that straggled knee-deep through the snow toward the hope of safety were stalked just out of musket-shot by their waiting squadrons. When a group was succumbed it was ridden down and wiped out; and when the Cossacks caught the remnants of the French army that had failed to cross the Beresina River before Napoleon burned the bridges, slaughter became wholesale.

Clauswitz told his wife that he had witnessed ghastly scenes if my feelings had not been hardened it would have sent me mad. Even so it will take many years before I can recall what I have seen without a shuddering horror (Keegan 8). One must ask, how can it be that a professional soldier, a survivor of the battles of Jena, Borodino, and Waterloo, a man who had seen blood shed in gallons, had had men killed at his side, and had barely escaped death, find the horrors of the Cossacks so particularly horrible?

The answer is that we are hardened to what we know, and we rationalize and justify cruelties practiced by us while reserving the right to be outraged and disgusted by practices equally cruel that other cultures perform. Clauswitz was revolted by Cossacks habits such as riding down stranglers at the point of a lance, selling prisoners for cash, and stripping the unusable ones to the bare skin for the sake of their rags. These acts have strengthened his opinion that Cossacks did not deserve the dignity of the title soldiers , that they were mere scavengers.

But then again, what were Clauswitz and his kin? The real work of a western civilized war until WWII has been butchery. Men standing silent in rows to be slaughtered, often for hours at a time; at Borodino the infantry corps are reported to have stood under point blank artillery fire for two hours, during which the only movement was the stirring in the lines caused by falling bodies (Keegan, 9). So while Clauswitz, representing the modern, western world way of thinking, call cultures like the Cossacks barbarians he showed no better characteristics in war. And if you ll give this description of war to a Cossack, you won t hear yourself because of his laughter.

In short it is in the cultural level that Clauswitz s answer to the question, what is war?, is defective. That is not altogether surprising. We all find it difficult to stand far enough outside our own culture to perceive how it makes us, as individuals, what we are. Clauswitz was a man of his times, a child of the Enlightenment, a contemporary of the German romantics, an intellectual, a practical reformer, a man of action, a critic of his society, and a passionate believer in the necessity for it to change. He was a keen observer of the present and a devotee of the future. Where he failed was in seeing how deeply rooted he was in his own past, the past of the professional officer class of a centralized European state. Had his mind been furnished with just one extra intellectual dimension, he might have been able to perceive that war embraces much more than politics, that it is always an expression of culture, often a determinant of cultural forms, and in some societies the culture itself.

Clauswitz s book is a must in all-military academies around the world. As a young man in the Israeli officers academy I too had to read it. By the time I have finished my service I came to acknowledge both the flaws and brilliance of his words. Yet feeling he had never fully answered the question, what is war? I had to turn to the words of General William Tecumseh Sherman, who had burned Atlanta and put a great swathe of the American South to the torch during the Civil war, words that are almost as famous as those of Clauswitz: I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine WAR IS HELL.

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