

Review - Clausewitz on Small War

Written by Simon Taylor

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SIMON TAYLOR, MAR 12 2016

Clausewitz on Small War

Christopher Daase and James W. Davis

Oxford University Press, 2015

Amongst Clausewitz scholars there is an oft-quoted phrase that Clausewitz is “more often cited than read” (p. 3) — a barb aimed at those who have tended to use Clausewitz as a form of shortcut for large, inter-state, regular wars fought for clear political ends. This interpretation has tended to stem from a loose understanding of Clausewitz most celebrated and famous work *On War*, which remains one of the greatest theories of war and its conduct for nearly 200 years. However, Clausewitz wrote far more than only *On War*. Despite the eminent German military historian Werner Halweg editing and publishing a vast collection of these works, very little has ever been translated into English, thus remaining inaccessible to non-German speakers. Christopher Daase and James W Davis in presenting *Clausewitz on Small War* offer an initial attempt to redress this lack of scholarship. The intention of the editors, in selecting these works on Small War is to dispel the notion that asymmetric warfare and small-scale wars are recent developments in the history of warfare. Rather, as Clausewitz argues, such conflicts have long been an aspect of warfare and that Clausewitz’s analyses still bear some relevance today.

The collection is based on what the editors consider to be the most important writings on “Small War”, to date there are no other English translations available. The editors have translated the four texts themselves, mindful of the difficulties and controversies that have stalked English translations of Clausewitz’s works (especially the 1908 and 1974 translations of *On War*). The editors sought to present a readable translation from the early nineteenth century German and have made notations where key phrases or words could not be simply translated. As to the overall quality of the translations, that is a question best left to those familiar with the original German texts. The volume comprises an Introductory Essay by James W Davis and four texts from Clausewitz: “My Lectures on Small War, held at the War College in 1810 and 1811”; “*Bekennnisdenschrift*” (Testimonial); “On the political advantages and disadvantages of the of the Prussian institution of the *Landwehr*”; and a chapter from *On War*, “*Volksbewaffnung*” (The arming of the people).

In Chapter 1, James W Davis presents the context of Clausewitz’s work on Small War, detailing the history of interpretation (and misinterpretation) of Clausewitz’s work over nearly 200 years. Davis attends to the debates in the literature over notions of pre- and post-Clausewitzian warfare, as argued by van Creveld, Keegan, Kaldor and others. With this collection of works, the editors demonstrate that Small War still concurs with Clausewitz’s broader theoretical framework espoused in *On War*.

The first collected works, “My Lectures on Small War”, presents a series of lectures delivered by Clausewitz during his time at the Prussian War College in Berlin between 1810 and 1811. Clausewitz draws upon examples of the rebellion in the Vendée (1793-8), the Tyrolean uprising (1809) and the then current Spanish insurrection in the Peninsular War against Napoleon, as well as some experiences of German units and commanders serving on the side of the British in the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Through these examples, Clausewitz examines small unit warfare, detailing tactics and strategies within a broader context of a theory of Small War, which he defines as “the use of small units in the field. Battles of 20, 50, 100, 300 or 400 soldiers, as long as they are not part of a larger battle” (p. 21).

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In the second text, "*Bekenntnisdankschrift*" (Testimonial), we see Clausewitz developing his political arguments for a popular uprising against the French occupation of Prussia, in a similar fashion to the Spanish insurrection during the Peninsular War — a war which coined the term "*guerrilla*", literally "small war". This text is possibly the most interesting as Clausewitz mounts an increasingly passionate cry for a mass, popular uprising of the Prussian people to throw off the shackles of Napoleonic oppression. Several exerts could find resonance with any insurgent group fighting a war against oppression. For example, in closing the text, Clausewitz argues:

"Finally, there are those who tremble before the idea of a people's war, because it is bloodier than any other, seldom remains free of dreadful scenes, and will escalate all tragedy and ruin.

But who is to blame for that? Is not he drives others to the height of despair to blame? The people's war is here. You condemn its ruinous effects – well condemn those who forced it upon us. If you pose as judges of human behaviour, then do not condemn the oppressed because he is weak, but be just. Hurl your allegations at those who have made this evil necessary" (p. 209).

The third and fourth texts concern Clausewitz's thinking on militias and reserve forces, the Prussian *Landwehr* and *Landstrum*. "On the political advantages and disadvantages of the of the Prussian institution of the *Landwehr*" (1819) is a memorandum sent by Clausewitz to his friend Gneisenau, where he presents an argument for the retention of the *Landwehr* after its mobilisation in the war against Napoleon. The *Landwehr* had played an instrumental role in the war and Clausewitz saw its formalisation as a means of active defence against another possible invasion by France. At the time, however, the Prussian aristocracy was fearful of an armed populace, believing that doing so would lead to a similar revolution as experienced in France. These fears are countered by Clausewitz, who argues that the threat of invasion is far more possible than revolution, and that a militia-type defence system would be cheaper, with more devout fighters than a standing army.

However, this was not a politically popular argument, and Clausewitz soon tempered his ideas, as evidenced in the fourth text, "*Volksbewaffnung*" (The arming of the people). This text is a new translation of a chapter from *On War*, written sometime after 1819. There is a visibly reduced enthusiasm in his writing, but nonetheless argues for a systematic approach to a militia and reserve system as part of the broader defence. The chapter was written largely in response to Revolutionary and Imperial France's use of mass conscription, a practice that breached "old artificial barriers by the warlike element in our times" (p. 221).

Clausewitz on Small War is a welcome addition to the growing recent scholarship on Clausewitz and will add depth to theoretical and analytical approaches to war and strategic studies, tackling as it does the artificial divide between "big" and "small" wars. Military academies and academics in the fields of international relations, politics, history and strategic studies would benefit enormously from this new addition to the Clausewitz canon.

About the author:

Simon Taylor formerly worked for the South African Foreign Service and is now a PhD Candidate at the University of St Andrews, researching types of combatants in conflicts in Africa.