



WAR IN UKRAINE AND ENDURING RELEVANCE OF THE CLAUSEWITZIAN THEORY

WOJNA W UKRAINIE I NIEUSTAJĄCA AKTUALNOŚĆ TEORII CLAUSEWITZA

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— ABSTRACT —

The article discusses selected theoretical and practical problems of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war since 2014 from the perspective of Carl von Clausewitz's political theory of war. It argues, first, that defining the first phase of the conflict as "hybrid war" on theoretical grounds is an unnecessary exercise that obscures the methodologically important difference between war and peace. Second, despite technological innovations, the concepts of "fog of war" and "friction" remain relevant. Third, the current phase of the conflict shows that the spontaneous and grassroots involvement of citizens in the war was a transitional phenomenon that became subordinated to central command structures. It also shows that from the perspective of Clausewitz's theory, Russia's strategic failure in the first part of the second phase of the conflict is completely understandable.

Keywords: Clausewitz; strategy; war in Ukraine; political theory of war; hybrid war

— ABSTRAKT —

W artykule omówiono wybrane teoretyczne i praktyczne problemy trwającej od 2014 r. wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej z perspektywy politycznej teorii wojny Carla von Clausewitza. Stwierdzono, po pierwsze, że definiowanie pierwszej fazy konfliktu jako „wojny hybrydowej” jest na gruncie teoretycznym zabiegiem zbędnym, który zaciemnia metodologicznie ważną różnicę między wojną a pokojem. Po drugie, pomimo innowacji technologicznych, koncepcje „mgły wojny” i „tarcia” pozostają aktualne. Po trzecie, obecna faza konfliktu pokazuje, że spontaniczne i oddolne zaangażowanie obywateli w wojnę było zjawiskiem przejściowym, które uległo podporządkowaniu centralnym strukturom dowodzenia. Ukazano również, że z perspektywy teorii Clausewitza strategiczna porażka Rosji w pierwszej części drugiej fazy konfliktu jest całkowicie zrozumiała.

Słowa kluczowe: Clausewitz; strategia; wojna w Ukrainie; polityczna teoria wojny; wojna hybrydowa

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The full-scale Russian invasion of the Ukrainian territory on February 24, 2022, caused a global upheaval. Stimulating numerous reflections of a moral, political, social or economic nature, it also became a contributor renewing once again discussions on the realities of international relations, the contemporary battlefield and, with these, the nature of war itself. In the background of this, there is a broader theoretical discussion that concerns the validity of classical strategic thought in the realities of a contemporary battlefield, steeped in technological innovations and increasing digitalisation. After the end of the Cold War, one might have had the impression that full-scale conventional conflicts between developed nation-states had become a thing of the past, and with them, the modernist understanding of war as an extension of the diplomacy of sovereign states, presented in its full glory in the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz's famous treatise *On War*. Researchers such as Martin van Creveld (1991) have argued that the nature of war is not about politics but about the perennial violence that accompanies it, making war as a phenomenon elude rational analysis. On the other hand, Mary Kaldor (1999) stated that the nature of war has changed, because modern wars are mainly waged by non-state authors – local warlords, rebels, terrorists. Also since the 1990s, a global Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has been widely discussed in the community of military strategists. It is associated mainly with the computerisation of armed forces, which allows the conduct of warfare from long distances and with the minimum involvement of traditional ground forces (Metz & Kievit, 1995). Examples of such operations include all major military conflicts of the past few decades: the Persian Gulf war, the bombardment of Yugoslavia, and the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The advocates of RMA claim that it changes the nature of war thoroughly (Sloan, 2002). An additional argument for this was the large-scale introduction of drones after 2000, which further reinforced the narrative of epochal changes in the conduct of warfare (Kreuzer, 2016; Stafi, 2018). The above optics were further reinforced after the 9/11 attacks and the declaration of the “war on terror”, when theories of new wars began to gain enormous popularity. Both neoconservative commentators and postmodern thinkers emphasised the blurring of distinctions between war, peace, and politics. On this basis, attempts have been made to dismiss Clausewitz's theory, even though this theory in its historical dimension amounted to a refutation of all sorts of dogmas about the nature of war (Strachan, 2013). However, the problematic nature of the conflict in question seems to provide further evidence of an over-hasty formulation of such theses.

The thesis of this article is that the Russian-Ukrainian war, despite its specific character and the use of innovative technological solutions, demonstrates the fallacy and undue haste of making such comments. Its first two parts focus on theoretical grounds and demonstrate the validity of the Prussian general's theses by showing that the leading concepts and terms used in the contemporary geopolitical literature are essentially contained within them, without undermining his main ideas as to the nature of war. The remaining two are of a more practical nature, showing how Clausewitz's particular concepts on the importance of morale, the participation of armed citizens in war, the "friction" and "fog of war" are confirmed in the light of the available information on the situation at the front.

A NEW KIND OF WARFARE OR EVOLUTION IN STRATEGY?

Since the first phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which began in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the separatist uprising in Donbass, the concept of "hybrid war" and the related terms of "cyber war" or "information warfare" have gained extraordinary popularity, which was a natural continuation of theoretical innovations based on the RMA concept, which were criticised by such Clausewitzian strategy experts as Colin Gray (1999) as recently as last century. According to Mirosław Banasik, despite its innovative formula, it is nevertheless in line with the Clausewitzian view of war as an extension of politics (2015, p. 30). It is seen as a type of asymmetric conflict, where, with unofficial state involvement, there is both physical violence performed by irregular paramilitary groups carrying out guerrilla, sabotage and terrorist actions, accompanied by operations of a political, diplomatic, informational, economic, and propaganda nature (Banasik, 2015, pp. 21–25). A common feature of the various studies is certainly the reference to the use of non-military means based on modern technologies (Banasik, 2015, p. 25). This is particularly emphasised by Jarno Limnéll (2015), who details specific non-kinetic cyber/information aspects of the Russian-Ukrainian war consisting in: 1) DDoS attacks on media and government websites; 2) information leaks; 3) cyber espionage; 4) use of information to mobilise one's own population and demonise the enemy; and 5) disruption of the enemy's communication. However, as Benon Szałek demonstrates in his analysis of numerous publications on the subject, in principle, it is difficult to speak of any coherent theory of hybrid war, apart from the general remark that

hybrid actions may constitute a prelude to, or fulfil an auxiliary function in, an actual armed conflict (Szatek, 2020).

From the Clausewitzian perspective, the narrative about above concepts is completely wrong, as it blurs the fundamental difference between war and peace. In its context, war can only be spoken of when a state attempting to impose its political will by violence encounters an opponent (Libiseller & Milevski, 2021). In this sense, the first phase of the conflict in Ukraine was also a war, but of a limited nature. In the light of David Lonsdale's analysis, rather than speaking of a new kind of war, it would be more appropriate to treat activities taking place in the broadly understood *infosphere* as the fifth dimension of strategic power besides land, sea, air, and space (2004, p. 148), in which: "a dynamic relationship exists between those wishing to protect their information activities and those attempting to undermine them. Protecting and securing information flow and integrity will require constant vigilance" (2004, p. 150). In this view, the concepts of "information war", "cyber war", or "hybrid warfare", understood as an original product of Russian strategic culture, lose their sense, since, from the Clausewitzian perspective, the increasing role of operations in the information space constitutes an element of a broader, long-standing evolution of the art of war, which was used just as effectively by the Americans, for example, during the Kuwait War (1991), as well as by non-state actors associated, for example, with terrorist organisations (Lonsdale, 2004, pp. 151–152). Therefore, "hybrid activities" as such do not have an autonomous character, but belong to the classical field of strategy, understood in Clausewitzian terms as a set of measures aimed at achieving geopolitical objectives (Lonsdale, 2004, p. 149).

The validity of the above theses is demonstrated by commentaries on the second phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, where activities taking place in the information space are analysed with no less seriousness than those taking place in the other strategic areas (Chen & Ferrara, 2023; Serpanos & Komninos, 2022; Stănescu, 2022; Sopilko et al., 2022). However, it is difficult to regard this area of warfare as in any way conclusive or autonomous from the others. Ultimately, as pointed out by Antulio Echevarria, in the light of Clausewitz's thought, war has only one means at its disposal, namely combat. However, his understanding of combat is so capacious that it can nowadays include the threat of combat itself, as well as operations of a guerrilla or terrorist nature (Echevarria, 2007, pp. 135–140). "Hybrid" operations thus seem to be fully included in this extremely broad classical concept of war.

THE “FOG OF WAR” AND “FRICTION”

Clearly, the role of information technology in the effective conduct of warfare cannot be denied. What draws attention is that, in the light of intelligence data, the February 2022 invasion itself, as well as the subsequent operational movements of the Russian army, came as little surprise to Western agencies and enabled the Ukrainian side to prepare accordingly (Dylan & Maguire, 2022). Furthermore, the role of real-time intelligence provided to fighting troops by drone operators, as well as other forms of intelligence activity that provide real-time information on the enemy's movements, making it practically impossible for the enemy to have the surprise effect of allowing a sudden breakthrough of the front line, is constantly emphasised.

At first glance, the technological sophistication of the current conflict seems to sideline the problem of the “fog of war” described by Clausewitz in his classic work. The Prussian general believed that: “Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain” (von Clausewitz, 2008, p. 117), further stating that commanders overestimate bad news and consequently lose self-confidence (p. 118). However, Clausewitz did not at all underestimate the role of reconnaissance on the battlefield and treated it as an integral part of the battle. He was more concerned with ensuring that an excess of information should not adversely affect the commander's talents or limit his boldness in decision-making (Anastaplo, 1989).

It seems that we are still a long way from removing the fog of war. Technological inventions such as drones remove some obstacles, but they also create new challenges, as both sides of the conflict benefit from their advantages (Raza & Rafi, 2016). Thus, they can use, for example, digital space to carry out disinformation activities, which, paradoxically, may increase the fog of war even more. While the origins of the current conflict have been widely discussed (Ellison et al., 2023), academic analysts have no doubt about the presence of the fog of war at the strategic level: “Uncertainty about Russia's objectives and an overload of open source intelligences – from satellite imagery to TikTok videos – coupled with emotional outrage has made it very difficult to provide an objective analysis of what is going on” (Dijkstra et al., 2022, p. 464).

The fog of war phenomenon is associated with another universal aspect of any war that Clausewitz wrote about, namely “friction”. In his words: “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable

unless one has experienced war” (1989, p. 119). Friction, then, is something that makes perfection in war impossible (Echevarria, 2007, p. 117), although many contemporary analysts believe that friction can be eliminated by nothing but technology (Echevarria, 2007, p. 194). And yet, in the view of commentators, the classic combination of friction and the fog of war makes the course of warfare extremely difficult to predict also in this war (Langfitt, 2023), while many analyses have limited themselves to simplistic historical analogies referring to the Cold War (Monaghan & Gaub, 2022). It was precisely this kind of thinking that the Prussian general warned against, arguing that while history provided realistic examples, general theoretical conclusions could not be drawn from it (von Clausewitz, 2008, p. 173).

In this sense, it seems that Hegel’s statement that “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk” is also valid in the context of this war, in view of which a rational reconstruction of the main strategic events will probably be possible many years after the end of the conflict. It must be stressed that the presence of fog of war in the context of the conflict in question is also present especially in the propaganda of both sides actively using social media for this purpose, so that most of the information reaching us about this war has a distorted character. However, this does not preclude an assessment of some of its specific aspects, as will be discussed below.

THE PEOPLE IN ARMS?

Clausewitz was developing his doctrine at a time of change in the art of war resulting from the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era that followed (Smith, 2004, pp. 25–27). The idea of a citizen army and also the possibility of an armed insurrection against the French regular army was discussed by Generals Gerhard von Scharnhorst and Hermann von Boyen the Elder after the outbreak of the Franco-Russian War in 1812. Their theses deeply influenced Clausewitz. In developing his ideas about relations between state, people and army, Clausewitz paid great attention to Machiavelli’s arguments on the matter (Paret, 2018, pp. 160–178), which made him an attentive student of his philosophy (Aron, 2022). Ultimately, the Prussian general concluded that past wars fought by small professional armies were merely a historical aberration from the nature of war presupposing mass engagement (Gat, 1989, p. 212).

We should also highlight in this context the innovative character of his theses contained in separate lectures (von Clausewitz, 2015), emphasising the role of guerrilla warfare carried out by irregular troops and the common movement of the people acting against the invader, which constitutes an important complementary factor supporting or hindering operations carried out by regular armies (Heuser, 2010). It seems that while in the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war it was possible to speak of this type of action, it has been transformed into a regular war under strict government control, which should cool the enthusiasm of commentators who sometimes speak of the grassroots, popular character of the armed involvement of one side or the other.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the separatist rebellion in the Donbass, supported by its material and human resources, its use of local militias, volunteers, gangsters, etc., has been recognised by experts as a good example of an unconventional way of "conducting politics by other means" in the Clausewitzian sense, which, however, with regard to the Russian art of war, has its roots in the imperial era and the use of Cossack troops, for example (Galeotti, 2016). The main innovation of the latest iteration of the Russian methods of operation can be seen as a certain dimension of "information warfare" whose means were used to create propaganda impressions of grassroots support of the people of Crimea and Donbass for this intervention, which, in Clausewitzian terms, is an element affecting the morale of the fighting troops (Fedyk, 2017). More broadly, Putin's strategy was to consist in a war whose then limited character was to result politically from appealing to nationalist-ethnic sentiments (Deep, 2015) and economically from the weakness of the Russian state, which could not afford to escalate the conflict (Freedman, 2014). In this way, the conduct of the Russian authorities was in line with the Clausewitzian model, according to which a limited war consists in seizing a certain part of the enemy's territory (Smith, 2004, pp. 138–139).

It seems that the conflict in eastern Ukraine in its initial phase favoured the methods known from the "small war". Both pro-Russian militias and Ukrainian forces composed largely of "volunteer battalions", due to the lack of sufficient forces and a permanent front line, used tactics of ambushes and assaults on isolated enemy posts. The situation changed after a deep rally by Ukrainian forces almost to the border and a counter-offensive by separatists supported by Russian troops, which culminated in the decisive battles of Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, won by the latter. However, according to commentators, even in such large-scale

operations, it was possible to distinguish elements of ambushes and the extensive use of irregular troops for reconnaissance purposes (Kováts & Takács, 2022).

The 2022 invasion and the battle for Kiev, however, highlighted a much less known but also timeless aspect of the Prussian general's theory referred to as the "warlike element". According to the analysis performed by A.J. Echevarria, it can be understood as "enthusiasm for combat" associated with the human passion for enmity and hatred that is an indispensable element of Clausewitz's trinitarian concept of the nature of war¹. According to Echevarria, these characteristic features can be attributed to Ukrainian actions. This was evidenced by numerous examples of Ukrainian civilians volunteering for territorial defence units, who in the initial phase of the invasion also grabbed available weapons on their own and spontaneously organised themselves into irregular units defending their homes. The initial awkwardness of the Russian army, combined with the grassroots cooperation of armed citizens and the regular Ukrainian army, determined the successful defence of the Ukrainian capital (Echevarria, 2022). However, in a short period of time, the war in Ukraine took on a centralized character, where there is no question of spontaneous, grassroots armed involvement. Any irregular or militia units, such as the volunteer battalions on one side or the militias of the DNR and LNR as well as the famous Wagner group, were placed under the strict supervision of the high command. This, moreover, confirms the reasoning of Clausewitz, who saw state supervision as a factor in rationalising and controlling the spontaneous activity of the masses in war. As also noted by Carl Schmitt, who referred to him, guerrillas and irregular troops escape the friend-enemy divide adopted in wars governed by diplomatic relations (Schmitt, 2007). Consequently, with the development of war into its full conventional form, the above regulations may not come as a surprise. In this context, the Russian-Ukrainian war also demonstrates the validity of the role of mass armies and extensive command structures in protracted conflicts, which cannot be replaced by professional, private, or volunteer formations.

¹ "As a total phenomenon, its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone" (von Clausewitz, 2008, p. 89).

STRATEGIC REALITY DIMENSION

The presence of natural and, according to Clausewitz, invariable elements of war such as friction, the fog of war, emotion, unpredictability, chance, probability, creativity, and a complex (geo)political dimension raises a legitimate question about the strategic depth of this conflict. Let us therefore try to discuss the analyses that have been conducted so far.

There is no doubt that the Russian-Ukrainian war represents, on the one hand, a challenge to the liberal international order (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022) and, on the other hand, an existential threat to the Ukrainian state itself (Knott, 2023). According to most Western commentaries, undermining the existing international relations and destroying the Ukrainian state in its current form was Putin's primary political objective. From the Clausewitzian perspective, this implies an escalation of the conflict towards "ideal war", which, however, implies some a priori philosophical ideal of war, unfettered by real-world constraints. From this point of view, Putin's plan allegedly based on such idealistic assumptions could not work and met the limitations of "real war", where the phenomena of friction and the fog of war come into full force. In this respect, it is reminiscent of Napoleon's plan for war against Russia, already described by the Prussian general himself, in which Napoleon did not take into account the "real" factor of the necessity to destroy the Russian army (von Clausewitz, 2008, p. 582).

The above strategic dimension of this war perceived from the Clausewitzian point of view is confirmed by the comment of Jim Holmes, who argues that Putin wanted to get everything, expecting only symbolic resistance. Meanwhile, he neglected to consider the issues of more detailed operational plans and the issue essential in any war, namely, that of logistics. His overly bold and maximalist plan to overthrow the Ukrainian government only fuelled the opponent's resistance, which constituted violation of the basic strategic principle of respecting and understanding the opponent. Furthermore, Holmes argues that the Russian plan was based on a previously developed scenario, which contradicts the recommendations of Clausewitz, who always emphasised the impossibility of implementing such scenarios in conditions of war. At the same time, as a result of the perennial friction of war, the aggressors failed to take sufficient care of supplies to replenish ammunition, equipment, etc. (Holmes, 2022).

In this sense, the phenomenon of friction turned in Ukraine's favour, as an illustration of Clausewitz's well-known thesis that defence is the strongest side of war in every dimension, and in the military aspect insofar as it makes it possible

to launch an effective counter-offensive (von Clausewitz, 2008, p. 613), the case in point being the Ukrainian successful operation to retake the Kharkiv region. At the same time, it should be remembered that the aforementioned friction eventually forced the Russians to abandon their ambitious plans and shift their so-called centre of gravity to the Donbass region (Tribolet, 2022), where they stabilized their positions and even achieved some successes.

The phenomenon of friction also affects the higher international level and US-Russia relations, resulting in fears of conflict escalation and risks inherent in the implementation of projects such as “no-fly zone” over Ukraine, which look impressive on paper, but actually could lead to unpredictable events. Obviously, all this is linked to the possession of nuclear weapons by both states and asymmetric strategic assumptions about their use (Beres, 2023).

It could be said that the very role of the United States in this conflict is covered by the fog of war. Some openly challenge the hypothesis that the Russian-Ukrainian war is in fact a proxy war in which the Americans use the Ukrainians and the resources of their NATO allies to destroy Russia. This would contradict some definitions of proxy war according to which the lead state primarily uses non-state actors, including paramilitary groups and other irregular troops, as exemplified by US support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan during the Soviet intervention. Moreover, it is noted that the scale of aid provided by the Western states to Ukraine is nevertheless quite limited (Hughes, 2022). On the other hand, it is growing all the time, and the term ‘proxy war’ is also used to refer to Cold War conflicts between states, such as the Vietnam War. Other commentaries also point out that the protracted war ultimately seems to be advantageous to the US (Habib, 2023), despite reports of Russia’s strengthening relations with countries such as India. In this context, the most convincing argument seems to be that put forward by the American military historian Christopher Bassford, who noted that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a pivotal event undermining the meaning of “Pax Americana” due to the lack of sustained opposition, similarly to the ancient times when the defeat of all significant enemies by the Romans was the beginning of the end of the “Pax Romana” (Bassford, 2022). In this sense, it may well be that Putin has indeed, quite like Napoleon in Clausewitz’s times, overbid, achieving the opposite of his intended outcome.

CONCLUSIONS

This article discusses the issue of the Russian-Ukrainian war from the perspective of Carl von Clausewitz's classical political theory of war. As demonstrated in the first part, the noticeable technological changes of recent decades, which are being successfully exploited during the conflict, have not led to a fundamental change in the very nature of war described in the Prussian general's dialectical formulas. War continues to be something unpredictable, based on the interplay of irrational forces and rationally set political objectives that fall into contradiction, making war plans immeasurably more difficult to execute. The war instigated by Putin and his entourage is, in this context, just another example of its actuality. Blown up by the media and supposedly innovative measures used by the aggressors, as well as those used by the defenders, have long been part of the arsenal of the art of war. By contrast, the mistakes made by Russian decision-makers, which prevented a swift end to the conflict, are a good illustration of the conclusions that Clausewitz drew from the differences between the idealistic image and realities of war.

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