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A History of Warfare

John Keegan

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About the Author

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killed at the battle of Lauffeld
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INTRODUCTION

I was not fated to be a warrior. A childhood illness left me lame for life in 1948 and I have limped now for forty-five years. When, in 1952, I reported for my medical examination for compulsory military service, the doctor who examined legs – he was, inevitably, the last doctor to examine me that morning – shook his head, wrote something on my form and told me that I was free to go. Some weeks later an official letter arrived to inform me that I had been classified permanently unfit for duty in any of the armed forces.

Fate nevertheless cast my life among warriors. My father had been a soldier in the First World War. I grew up in the Second, in a part of England where the British and American armies gathering for the D-Day invasion of Europe were stationed. In some way I detected that my father's service on the Western Front in 1917–18 had been the most important experience of his life. The spectacle of the preparation for invasion in 1943–4 marked me also. It aroused an interest in military affairs that took root, so that when I went up to Oxford in 1953 I chose military history as my special subject.

A special subject was a requirement for a degree, no more than that, so that my involvement in military history might have ended at graduation. The interest, however, had bitten deeper during my undergraduate years, because most of the friends I made at Oxford had, unlike me, done their military service. They made me conscious of having missed something. Most had been officers and many had served on campaign, for Britain in the early 1950s was disengaging

from empire in a series of small colonial wars. Some of my friends had soldiered in the jungles of Malaya or the forests of Kenya. A few, who had served in regiments sent to Korea, had even fought in a real battle.

Sober professional lives awaited them and they sought academic success and the good opinion of tutors as a passport to the future. Yet it was clear to me that the two years they had spent in uniform had cast over them the spell of an entirely different world from that they were set on entering. The spell was in part one of experience – of strange places, of unfamiliar responsibility, of excitement and even of danger. It was also the spell of acquaintance with the professional officers who had commanded them. Our tutors were admired for their scholarship and eccentricities. My contemporaries continued to admire the officers they had known for other qualities altogether – their dash, élan, vitality and impatience with the everyday. Their names were often mentioned, their characters and mannerisms recalled, their exploits – above all their self-confident brushes with authority – recreated. Somehow I came to feel that I knew these light-hearted warriors and I certainly wanted to know people like them very badly, if only to flesh out my vision of the warrior's world that, as I laboured over my military historical texts, was slowly taking shape in my mind.

When university life came to its end, and my friends departed to become lawyers, diplomats, civil servants or university tutors themselves, I found that the afterglow of their military years had cast its spell on me. I decided to become a military historian, a foolhardy decision since there were few academic posts in the subject. More quickly than I had any right to expect, however, such a post became vacant at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Britain's cadet college, and in 1960 I joined the staff. I was twenty-five, I knew nothing about the army, I had never heard a shot fired in anger, I had scarcely met a regular officer and

the picture I had of soldiers and soldiering belonged entirely to my imagination.

The first term I spent at Sandhurst pitched me headlong into a world for which not even my imagination had prepared me. In 1960 the military staff of the Academy – I belonged to its academic side – was composed, at the senior level, exclusively of men who had fought in the Second World War. The junior officers were almost all veterans of Korea, Malaya, Kenya, Palestine, Cyprus or any one of another dozen colonial campaigns. Their uniforms were covered with medal ribbons, often of high awards for gallantry. My head of department, a retired officer, wore on mess evenings the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross with two bars and his distinctions were not exceptional. There were majors and colonels with medals for bravery won at Alamein, Cassino, Arnhem and Kohima. The history of the Second World War w4as written in these little strips of silk that they wore so lightly and its high moments were recorded with crosses and medals which the bearers scarcely seemed conscious of having been awarded.

It was not only the kaleidoscope of medals that entranced me. It was also the kaleidoscope of uniforms and all that they signified. Many of my university contemporaries had brought with them scraps of military glory – regimental blazers or British Warm overcoats. Those who had been cavalry officers continued to wear with evening dress the morocco-topped patent-leather boots, slotted at the heel for, that belonged to their Lancer or Hussar uniforms. That had alerted me to the paradox that uniform was not uniform, but that regiments dressed differently. How differently Sandhurst taught me on the first mess evening I spent there. There were Lancers and Hussars in blue and scarlet, but also Household Cavalrymen crushed by the weight of their gold lace, Riflemen in green so dark it was almost black, Gunners in tight trousers, Guardsmen in stiff shirts, Highlanders in six different patterns of tartan,

Lowlanders in plaid trews and infantrymen of the county regiments with yellow, white, grey, purple or buff facings to their jackets.

I had thought the army was one army. After that evening I realised it was not. I still had to learn that the outward differences of dress spoke of inward differences of much greater importance. Regiments, I discovered, defined themselves above all by their individuality and it was their individuality which made them into the fighting organisations whose effectiveness in combat was proclaimed by the medals and crosses I saw all about me. My regimental friends – the ready friendship extended by warriors is one of their most endearing qualities – were brothers-in-arms; but they were brothers only up to a point. Regimental loyalty was the touchstone of their lives. A personal difference might be forgiven the next day. A slur on the regiment would never be forgotten, indeed would never be uttered, so deeply would such a thing touch the values of the tribe.

Tribalism – that was what I had encountered. The veterans I met at Sandhurst in the 1960s were by many external tests no different from professional men in other walks of life. They came from the same schools, sometimes the same universities, they were devoted to their families, they had the same hopes for their children as other men, they worried about money in the same way. Money, however, was not an ultimate or defining value, nor even was promotion within the military system. Officers, of course, hankered for advancement, but it was not the value by which they measured themselves. A general might be admired, or he might not. Admiration derived from something other than his badges of superior rank. It came from the reputation he held as a man among other men and that reputation had been built over many years under the eyes of his regimental tribe. That tribe was one not only of fellow officers but of sergeants and ordinary soldiers as well.

‘Not good with soldiers’ was an ultimate condemnation. An officer might be clever, competent, hard-working. If his fellow soldiers reserved doubt about him, none of those qualities countervailed. He was not one of the tribe.

The British army is tribal to an extreme degree; some of its regiments have histories which go back to the seventeenth century, when modern armies were only beginning to take shape from the feudal hosts of warriors whose forebears had entered western Europe during the invasions that overthrew the Roman empire. I have encountered the same warrior values of the tribe in many other armies, however, over the years since I first joined Sandhurst in my youth. I have sensed the tribal aura about French officers who fought the war in Algeria, leading Muslim soldiers whose traditions belong with those of the *ghazi*, Islam’s frontier marauders. I have sensed it, too, in the recollections of German officers, re-enlisted to build Germany’s post-war army, who had fought the Russians on the steppe and preserved a pride in the ordeal they had undergone that harked back to the wars of their medieval ancestors. I have sensed it strongly among Indian officers, above all in their quickness to insist that they are Rajputs or Dogras, descendants of the invaders who conquered India before its history had begun to be written. I have sensed it among American officers who served in Vietnam or the Lebanon or the Gulf, exponents of a code of courage and duty that belongs to the origins of their republic.

Soldiers are not as other men – that is the lesson that I have learned from a life cast among warriors. The lesson has taught me to view with extreme suspicion all theories and representations of war that equate it with any other activity in human affairs. War undoubtedly connects, as the theorists demonstrate, with economics and diplomacy and politics. Connection does not amount to identity or even to similarity. War is wholly unlike diplomacy or politics because it must be fought by men whose values and skills are not

those of politicians or diplomats. They are those of a world apart, a very ancient world, which exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it. Both worlds change over time, and the warrior world adapts in step to the civilian. It follows it, however, at a distance. The distance can never be closed, for the culture of the warrior can never be that of civilisation itself. All civilisations owe their origins to the warrior; their cultures nurture the warriors who defend them, and the differences between them will make those of one very different in externals from those of another. It is, indeed, a theme of this book that in externals there are three distinct warrior traditions. Ultimately, however, there is only one warrior culture. Its evolution and transformation over time and place, from man’s beginnings to his arrival in the contemporary world, is the history of warfare.

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War in Human History

WHAT IS WAR?

WAR IS NOT the continuation of policy by other means. The world would be a simpler place to understand if this dictum of Clausewitz's were true. Clausewitz, a Prussian veteran of the Napoleonic wars who used his years of retirement to compose what was destined to become the most famous book on war – called *On War* – ever written, actually wrote that war is the continuation 'of political intercourse' (*des politischen Verkehrs*) 'with the intermixing of other means' (*mit Einmischung anderer Mittel*).[1] The original German expresses a more subtle and complex idea than the English words in which it is so frequently quoted. In either form, however, Clausewitz's thought is incomplete. It implies the existence of states, of state interests and of rational calculation about how they may be achieved. Yet war antedates the state, diplomacy and strategy by many millennia. Warfare is almost as old as man himself, and reaches into the most secret places of the human heart, places where self dissolves rational purpose, where pride reigns, where emotion is paramount, where instinct is king. 'Man is a political animal,' said Aristotle. Clausewitz, a child of Aristotle, went no further than to say that a political animal is a warmaking animal. Neither dared 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 any easier for modern man to confront than it was for a Prussian officer, born the grandson of a clergyman and raised in the spirit of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. For all the effect that Freud, Jung and Adler have had on our outlook, our moral values remain those of the great monotheistic religions, which condemn the killing of fellow souls in all but the most constrained circumstances. Anthropology tells us and archaeology implies that our uncivilised ancestors could be red in tooth

and claw; psychoanalysis seeks to persuade us that the savage in all of us lurks not far below the skin. We prefer, none the less, to recognise human nature as we find it displayed in the everyday behaviour of the civilised majority in modern life – imperfect, no doubt, but certainly cooperative and frequently benevolent. Culture to us seems the great determinant of how human beings conduct themselves; in the relentless academic debate between ‘nature and nurture’, it is the ‘nurture’ school which commands greater support from the bystanders. We are cultural animals and it is the richness of our culture which allows us to accept our undoubted potentiality for violence but to believe nevertheless that its expression is a cultural aberration. History lessons remind us that the states in which we live, their institutions, even their laws, have come to us through conflict, often of the most bloodthirsty sort. Our daily diet of news brings us reports of the shedding of blood, often in regions quite close to our homelands, in circumstances that deny our conception of cultural normality altogether. We succeed, all the same, in consigning the lessons both of history and of reportage to a special and separate category of ‘otherness’ which invalidates our expectations of how our own world will be tomorrow and the day after not at all. Our institutions and our laws, we tell ourselves, have set the human potentiality for violence about with such restraints that violence in everyday life will be punished as criminal by our laws, while its use by our institutions of state will take the particular form of ‘civilised warfare’.

The bounds of civilised warfare are defined by two antithetical human types, the pacifist and the ‘lawful bearer of arms’. The lawful bearer of arms has always been respected, if only because he has the means to make himself so; the pacifist has come to be valued in the two thousand years of the Christian era. Their mutuality is caught in the dialogue between the founder of Christianity

and the professional Roman soldier who had asked for his healing word to cure a servant. ‘I also am a man set under authority,’ the centurion explained.[2] Christ exclaimed at the centurion’s belief in the power of virtue, which the soldier saw as the complement to the force of law which he personified. May we guess that Christ was conceding the moral position of the lawful bearer of arms, who must surrender his life at the demand of authority, and therefore bears comparison with the pacifist who will surrender his life rather than violate the authority of his own creed? It is a complicated thought, but not one which Western culture finds difficult to accommodate. Within it the professional soldier and the committed pacifist find room to co-exist – sometimes cheek-by-jowl: in 3 Commando, one of Britain’s toughest Second World War units, the stretcher-bearers were all pacifists but were held by the commanding officer in the highest regard for their bravery and readiness for self-sacrifice. Western culture would, indeed, not be what it is unless it could respect both the lawful bearer of arms and the person who holds the bearing of arms intrinsically unlawful. Our culture looks for compromises and the compromise at which it has arrived over the issue of public violence is to deprecate its manifestation but to legitimise its use. Pacifism has been elevated as an ideal; the lawful bearing of arms – under a strict code of military justice and within a corpus of humanitarian law – has been accepted as a practical necessity.

‘War as the continuation of policy’ was the form Clausewitz chose to express the compromise for which the states he knew had settled. It accorded respect to their prevailing ethics – of absolute sovereignty, ordered diplomacy and legally binding treaties – while making allowance for the overriding principle of state interest. If it did not admit the ideal of pacifism, which the Prussian philosopher Kant was only just translating from the religious to the political sphere, it certainly distinguished sharply

between the lawful bearer of arms and the rebel, the freebooter and the brigand. It presupposed a high level of military discipline and an awesome degree of obedience by subordinates to their lawful superiors. It expected that war would take certain narrowly definable forms – siege, pitched battle, skirmish, raid, reconnaissance, patrol and outpost duties – each of which had its own recognised conventions. It assumed that wars had a beginning and an end. What it made no allowance for at all was war without beginning or end, the endemic warfare of non-state, even pre-state peoples, in which there was no distinction between lawful and unlawful bearers of arms, since all males were warriors; a form of warfare which had prevailed during long periods of human history and which, at the margins, still encroached on the life of civilised states and was, indeed, turned to their use through the common practice of recruiting its practitioners as ‘irregular’ light cavalry and infantrymen. From the unlawful and uncivilised means by which these irregular warriors rewarded themselves on campaign and from their barbaric methods of fighting, the officers of the civilised states averted their gaze; yet without the services they offered, the over-drilled armies in which Clausewitz and his kin had been raised would scarcely have been able to keep the field. All regular armies, even the armies of the French Revolution, recruited irregulars to patrol, reconnoitre and skirmish for them; during the eighteenth century the expansion of such forces – Cossacks, ‘hunters’, Highlanders, ‘borderers’, Hussars – had been one of the most noted contemporary military developments. Over their habits of loot, pillage, rape, murder, kidnap, extortion and systematic vandalism their civilised employers chose to draw a veil. That it was an older and more widespread form of warfare than that which they themselves practised they preferred not to admit; ‘war . . . the continuation of policy’, once Clausewitz had formulated the thought, proved to offer the thinking officer a convenient philosophical bolt-hole from

contemplation of the older, darker and fundamental aspects of his profession.

Yet Clausewitz himself saw with half an eye that war was not altogether what he claimed it to be. ‘If the wars of civilised peoples are less cruel and destructive than those of savages’, he conditionally began one of his most famous passages. It was a thought he did not pursue because, with all the considerable philosophical force at his disposal, he was struggling to advance a universal theory of what war *ought* to be, rather than what it actually was and had been. To a very great degree he succeeded. In the practice of warmaking it is to the principles of Clausewitz that the statesman and the supreme commander still turn; in the truthful description of war, however, the eye-witness and the historian must flee from Clausewitz’s methods, despite the fact that Clausewitz himself was both an eye-witness and a historian of war, who must have seen and could have written of a great deal that found no place in his theories. ‘Without a theory the facts are silent,’ the economist F.A. Hayek has written. That may be true of the cold facts of economics, but the facts of war are not cold. They burn with the heat of the fires of hell. In old age General William Tecumseh Sherman, who had burned Atlanta and put a great swathe of the American South to the torch, bitterly delivered himself of exactly that thought, in words that have become almost as famous as those of Clausewitz: ‘I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine . . . War is hell.’[3]

Clausewitz had seen the hellish fires of war, had indeed seen Moscow burn. The burning of Moscow was the single greatest material catastrophe of the Napoleonic wars, an event of European significance akin in its psychological effect to that of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. In an age of belief the destruction of Lisbon had seemed awful evidence of the power of the Almighty and had been the stimulus of a religious revival throughout Portugal and Spain; in the age of revolution the destruction of Moscow was seen to testify

to the power of man, as indeed it did. It was taken to be a deliberate act – Rostopchin, the city governor, claimed credit for it, while Napoleon had the alleged incendiarists hunted down and executed – but Clausewitz, strangely, could not convince himself that the burning was a deliberate policy, a scorching designed to deny Napoleon the prize of victory. On the contrary: 'that the French were not the agents I was firmly convinced,' he wrote, 'that the Russian authorities had done the act appeared to me, at least, not proven.' He believed it instead to be an accident.

> The confusion which I saw in the streets as the [Russian] rearguard moved out; the fact that the smoke was first seen to rise from the outer edge of the suburbs where the Cossacks were active, both convinced me that the Moscow fire was a result of the disorder, and the habit the Cossacks had of first thoroughly pillaging and then setting fire to all the houses before the enemy could make use of them . . . It was one of the strangest happenings of history that an event which so influenced the fate of Russia should be like a bastard born from an illicit love affair, without a father to acknowledge it.[4]

Yet Clausewitz must have known that there was nothing truly accidental about the fatherless act of Moscow's burning or any of the other numberless illegitimacies that attended Napoleon's campaign in Russia in 1812. The involvement of the Cossacks was in itself a guarantee that incendiarism, pillage, rape, murder and a hundred other outrages would abound, for to the Cossacks war was not politics, but a culture and a way of life.

The Cossacks were soldiers of the tsar and at the same time rebels against tsarist absolutism. The story of their origins has been called a myth and there is no doubt that they did mythologise their own beginnings as time drew on.[5] Yet the essence of the myth is both simple and true. Cossacks – the name derives from the Turkic word for freeman – were Christian fugitives from servitude under the rulers of Poland, Lithuania and Russia, who preferred to take

their chance – to ‘go Cossacking’ – on the rich but lawless surface of the great Central Asian steppe.

By the time that Clausewitz came to know the Cossacks, the myth of their birth in freedom had grown in the telling but diminished in reality. At the outset they had founded genuinely egalitarian societies – lordless, womanless, propertyless, living embodiments of the free and free-ranging warrior band that is such a powerful and eternal ingredient of saga across the world. In 1570 Ivan the Terrible had had to barter gunpowder, lead and money – three things the steppe did not produce – in return for Cossack help in liberating Russian prisoners from Muslim enslavement, but before the end of his reign he had begun to use force to bring them within the tsarist system.[6] His successors sustained the pressure. During Russia’s wars with Napoleon, regular Cossack regiments were raised, a contradiction in terms though all of a part with the contemporary European fashion for incorporating units of forest, mountain and horse peoples in the different states’ orders of battle. In 1837 Tsar Nicholas I completed the process by proclaiming his son ‘Ataman of All Cossacks’, whose followers were represented in the Imperial Guard Corps by regiments of Cossacks of the Don, the Urals and the Black Sea, differentiated from other units of tamed frontiersmen, Lesquines, Musalmans and Caucasian Mountaineers, only by the details of their exotic uniforms.

Yet despite the lengths to which domestication went, the Cossacks were always spared the indignity of paying the ‘soul tax’, which branded a Russian subject a serf, and they were specifically exempt from conscription, which the serfs regarded as a sentence of death. Indeed, to the very end of tsardom the Russian government preserved the principle of treating with the various Cossack hosts as if they were free-standing warrior societies, in which responsibility to answer the call to arms fell on the group, not its individual members. Even at the outbreak of the First World War the

Russian war ministry looked to the Cossacks to provide regiments, not heads, a perpetuation of a system, part feudal, part diplomatic, part mercenary, that in a variety of forms provided states with ready-trained military contingents almost from the beginning of organised warfare.

The Cossacks whom Clausewitz knew were much nearer to the free-booting marauders of original Cossackdom even than the dashing rovers whom Tolstoy was later to romanticise in his early novels, and their burning of the outskirts of Moscow in 1812, which led to the conflagration of the capital, was wholly in character. The Cossacks remained cruel people and the burning was not the cruellest of their acts, though cruel enough – it left several hundred thousand Muscovites homeless in the face of a sub-Arctic winter. In the great retreat that followed, the Cossacks showed a cruelty which stirred in their western European victims a reminder of the visitations of the steppe peoples, pitiless, pony-riding nomads whose horsetail standards cast the shadow of death wherever their hordes galloped, visitations that lay buried in the darkest recesses of their collective memory. The long columns of the Grand Army that straggled knee-deep through the snow toward the hope of safety were stalked just out of musket-shot by waiting squadrons of Cossacks who swooped whenever weakness overcame a sufferer; when a group 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. Clausewitz 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.’[7]

Yet Clausewitz was a professional soldier, the son of an officer, raised to war, a veteran of twenty years of campaign and a survivor of the battles of Jena, Borodino and Waterloo,

the second the bloodiest battle Napoleon ever fought. He had seen blood shed in gallons, had trodden battlefields where the dead and wounded lay strewn close as sheaves at harvest, had had men killed at his side, had a horse wounded under him and had escaped death himself only by hazard. His feelings ought indeed to have been hardened. Why then did he find the horrors of the Cossack pursuit of the French so particularly horrible? The answer is, of course, that we are hardened to what we know, and we rationalise and even justify cruelties practised by us and our like while retaining the capacity to be outraged, even disgusted by practices equally cruel which, under the hands of strangers, take a different form. Clausewitz and the Cossacks were strangers to each other. He was revolted by such Cossack habits as riding down stragglers at the point of a lance, selling prisoners to the peasants for cash and stripping the unsaleable ones to the bare skin for the sake of their rags. It probably inspired his contempt that, as a French officer observed, ‘when we faced up to them boldly they never offered resistance – even [when we] were outnumbered two to one’.[8] Cossacks, in short, were cruel to the weak and cowardly in the face of the brave, exactly the opposite pattern of behaviour to that which a Prussian officer and gentleman had been schooled to observe. The pattern was to persist. At the battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War of 1854 two Cossack regiments were sent forward to oppose the charge of the Light Brigade; a watching Russian officer reported that, ‘frightened by the disciplined order of the mass of [British] cavalry bearing down on them, [the Cossacks] did not hold, but, wheeling to their left, began to fire on their own troops in an effort to clear their way of escape.’ When the Light Brigade had been driven out of the Valley of Death by the Russian artillery, ‘the first to recover’, reported another Russian officer, ‘were the Cossacks, and, true to their nature, they set themselves to the task in hand – rounding up riderless English horses and offering them for

sale'.[9] The spectacle would no doubt have reinforced Clausewitz's contempt, strengthening his conviction that the Cossacks did not deserve the dignity of the title 'soldiery'; despite their mercenary conduct, they could not even be called proper mercenaries, who are normally faithful to their contract; Clausewitz would have probably considered them mere scavengers, who made a living on the offal of war but shrank from the butchery.

For the real work of war in the age of Clausewitz was butchery. Men stood silent and inert in rows to be slaughtered, often for hours at a time; at Borodino the infantry of Ostermann-Tolstoi's 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'. Surviving the slaughter did not mean an end to butchery; Larrey, Napoleon's senior surgeon, performed two hundred amputations in the night after Borodino, and his patients were the lucky ones. Eugène Labaume described 'the interior of the gullies' that crisscrossed the battlefield: 'almost all of the wounded by a natural instinct had dragged themselves thither to seek protection . . . heaped on top of each other and swimming helplessly in their own blood, some called on passers-by to put them out of their misery.'[10]

These slaughterhouse scenes were the inevitable outcome of a way of warmaking that provoked peoples whom Clausewitz found savage, like the Cossacks, to flight when it threatened to involve them but, if they had not witnessed it, to laughter when they had it described to them. European drill, when first demonstrated by Takashima, the Japanese military reformer, to some high-ranking samurai in 1841, evoked ridicule; the Master of the Ordnance said that the spectacle of 'men raising and manipulating their weapons all at the same time and with the same motion looked as if they were playing some children's game'.[11] This was the reaction of hand-to-hand warriors, for whom fighting was an

act of self-expression by which a man displayed not only his courage but also his individuality. The Greek *klephts* – half-bandits, half-rebels against Turkish rule whom their sympathisers, the French, German and British Philhellenes, many of them ex-officers of the Napoleonic wars, tried to instruct in close-order drill at the outset of Greece's war of independence in 1821 – also reacted with ridicule, but in disbelief rather than contempt. Their style of fighting – a very ancient one, encountered by Alexander the Great in his invasion of Asia Minor – was to build little walls at a point of likely encounter with the enemy and then to provoke the enemy to action by taunts and insults; when the enemy closed, they would run away. They lived to fight another day, but not to win the war, a point that they simply could not grasp. The Turks also fought in ethnic style: theirs was to rush forward in a loose charge with a fanatical disregard for casualties. The Philhellenes argued that unless the Greeks stood up to the Turks they would never win a battle; the Greeks objected that if they stood in the European fashion, breasts bared to the Turkish muskets, they would all be killed and so lose the war in any case.

'For Greeks a blush – for Greece a tear' wrote Byron, the most celebrated of the Philhellenes. He had hoped with other lovers of liberty 'to make a new Thermopylae' at the side of the Greeks. His discovery that they were invincible only in their ignorance of rational tactics depressed and disillusioned him, as it did other European idealists. At the heart of Philhellenism lay the belief that the modern Greeks were, under their dirt and ignorance, the same people as the ancient Greeks. Shelley, in his preface to *Hellas* – 'The world's great age begins anew/The golden years return' – put this belief in its most succinct form: 'The Modern Greek is the descendant of those glorious beings whom the imagination almost refuses to figure to itself as belonging to our kind, and he inherits much of their sensibility, their rapidity of conception, their enthusiasm and their courage.'

But Philhellenes who shared a battlefield with Greeks not only rapidly abandoned their belief in the common identity of ancients and moderns; among those who survived to return to Europe, 'almost without exception', writes William St Clair, the historian of Philhellenism, 'they hated the Greeks with a deep loathing, and cursed themselves for their stupidity in having been deceived'.[12] Shelley's naïvely poetic proclamation of the courage of the modern Greeks was particularly galling. The Philhellenes wanted to believe that they would display the same tenacity in close-order, in 'the battle to the death on foot', as the ancient hoplites had done in their wars against the Persians. It was that style of fighting which, by devious routes, had come to characterise their own brand of warfare in western Europe. They expected at the least that contemporary Greeks would show themselves willing to re-learn close-order tactics, if only because that was the key to winning their freedom from the Turks. When they found that they would not – that Greek 'war aims' were limited to winning the freedom to persist in their *klepht* ways of cocking a snook at authority in their mountain borderlands, subsisting by banditry, changing sides when it suited them, murdering their religious enemies when chance offered, parading in tawdry finery, brandishing ferocious weapons, stuffing their purses with unhonoured bribes and never, never, dying to the last man, or the first if they could help it – the Philhellenes were reduced to concluding that only a break in the bloodline between ancient and modern Greeks could explain the collapse of a heroic culture.

The Philhellenes tried but failed to make the Greeks accept their military culture. Clausewitz did not try but would have failed to make the Cossacks accept his military culture. What he and they failed to see was that their own Western way of fighting, typified by the great eighteenth-century French Marshal de Saxe in his acute critique of the military shortcomings of the Turks and their enemies as

marked by '*l'ordre, et la discipline, et la manière de combattre*', was quite as much an expression of their own culture as the 'live to fight another day' tactics of the Cossacks and the *klephts*.[13]

In short, it is at the cultural level that Clausewitz's answer to his 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. Modern Westerners, with their commitment to the creed of individuality, find the difficulty as acute as others elsewhere have. Clausewitz 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 centralised European state. Had his mind been furnished with just one extra intellectual dimension – and it was already a very sophisticated mind indeed – 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, in some societies the culture itself.

WHO WAS CLAUSEWITZ?

Clausewitz was a regimental officer. That requires some explanation. A regiment is a unit of military force, typically a body of soldiers about a thousand strong. In eighteenth-century Europe, the regiment was an established feature of the military landscape and it survives intact into our own time; indeed, some existing regiments, notably in the British and Swedish armies, have continuous histories of some three centuries. Yet at its birth in the seventeenth century

the regiment was not merely a new but a revolutionary constituent of European life. Its influence became as significant as that of autonomous bureaucracies and equitable fiscal authorities, and interwoven with them.

The regiment – semantically the word connects with the concept of government – was a device for securing the control of armed force to the state. The complex reasons for its emergence derived from a crisis which had developed two hundred years earlier in the relationship between European rulers and their providers of military service. Traditionally kings had depended for the raising of armies, when needed, upon landholders in the countryside, to whom local rights of subsistence and authority were devolved in return for their promise to bring armed men, in numbers proportionate to the grants of land held, and for a stated period, on demand. The system was in the last resort determined by the subsistence question: in primitive economies, where harvesting and distributing are constrained by difficulties of transport, armed men must be planted on the land, with rights over the harvest, if they are not to relapse into labouring status.

This feudal system was never neat, however – its varieties in place and over time defy categorisation – and rarely efficient. By the fifteenth century it had become very inefficient indeed. A condition approaching permanent warfare afflicted much of Europe, the result of both external threat and internal fractiousness, which the feudal armies could not suppress. Attempts to make armed forces more effective, by conceding greater independence to landholders in the worst-troubled areas or paying knights to serve under arms, only heightened the problem; the landholders declined to muster when called, built stronger castles, raised private armies, waged war in their own right – sometimes against the sovereigns. Kings had long supplemented feudal with mercenary force – when they could raise the money. In mid-fifteenth-century Europe,

kings and the great landholders alike found their territory ravaged by mercenaries who had been called into service by offers of cash which had then dried up. Unpaid mercenaries became a scourge, sometimes as greatly feared as the intruders – Magyars, Saracens, Vikings – who had inaugurated the militarisation and castellation of Europe in the first place.

The problem was circular: to raise more soldiers as a means of restoring order was to risk adding to the number of marauders (*écorcheurs* as the French called them, scorchers of the earth); to shrink from restoring order was to condemn the tillers of the soil to rape and pillage. Ultimately a king of France, the country worst afflicted, took the plunge. Recognising that the *écorcheurs* had 'become, despite themselves, military outcasts, yet hoping sooner or later to be recognised by the king or the great lords', Charles VII 'proceeded in 1445–6 not, as is sometimes said, to create a permanent army but to choose from the mass of available soldiers' the best on offer.[14] Mercenary companies with a uniform composition were formed and officially recognised as military servants of the monarchy, whose function would be to extirpate the rest.

The *compagnies d'ordonnance*, as Charles VII's creations were called, were made up of infantrymen, whose social inferiority to the feudal cavalry put them at a military disadvantage, enhanced in turn by prevailing doubts about their physical ability to stand against cavalry on the battlefield. Some infantry, notably the populist Swiss, had already shown a capacity to do down mounted men with edged weapons alone; when effective handguns came into general use at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the *moral* point, as the military historian Sir Michael Howard has characterised it, was settled by technology for good.[15] Thenceforward infantry consistently beat cavalry, which found itself marginalised on the battlefield, while continuing to insist on recognition of its ancient social standing. That