



jeder militärische Triumph erweist
sich in Wahrheit als Niederlage aller Beteiligten.

- Carl von Clausewitz -

The transformation of the war military-Earth thinking notebook

le Chef de bataillon Cyrille YOUCHTCHENKO

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Histoire & stratégie

Author Martin Van Creveld is a military historian and studies war as a social behaviour. He teaches at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Considered to be the promoter of reflection on military transformation over the last twenty years, he is the author of *Supply and War* (1977), *Command and War* (1985)[1], *Technology and War* (1988) and *Women and War*[2].

Critic of Clausewitz, Martin Van Creveld is a follower of the so-called "chaos school"[3]. According to him, terrorist, mafia and civil wars are becoming the normal form of violent conflict and are likely to become widespread. This is what he claims to demonstrate in *The Transformation of War*, written before the end of bipolarity but published in France in 1998 under the title *La transformation de la guerre*.

[1] Analysis of the history of command through the ages as an endless race between the growing need for information and the ability of command systems to respond to it.

[2] Thesis that it was the decline of military organization that led to the recruitment of women. This recruitment accelerates the decline of armies. The author relativizes the progress of women's access to the military and demonstrates that, where war is played out, men still have a monopoly on violence since they are the ones who pay what Clausewitz called "the price of war" and who "commit" what Tolstoy called "the act of killing".

[3] Chaos Theory: the end of bipolarity will consecrate a theory according to which the master thinker in strategy will no longer be Clausewitz but Sunzi. In fact, as the enemy becomes indistinct and his behaviour random, it is no longer a question of fighting decisive battles and destroying the opponent but of managing crises and winning without fighting. This thesis is also defended by John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, (London 1993).

By studying precisely and with great erudition all forms of warfare from tribal societies in prehistoric times to the present day, Martin Van Creveld theorizes the asymmetrical warfare that has been emerging since 1945. He stigmatizes the maladjustment of the old conceptions of Western countries to the new realities of war. He pursues two lines of

thought that are relatively critical of Clausewitzian thought:

- the war described by Clausewitz in Vom Kriege is a war between nation-states. Today, however, large-scale interstate and conventional warfare is almost obsolete. It will gradually be replaced by forms of conflict involving new political organizations and by low-intensity ethnic or religious conflicts;

- As a result, Western civilizations, blinded by the considerable influence of Clausewitz, have never understood the very nature of war. The will to fight on the part of the majority of combatants is not a continuation of politics, but rather a phenomenon in itself: man would fight out of a simple desire to risk his life.

Inter-state warfare is now obsolete

Modern military force is largely a myth and conceptions of war have reached a dead end.

Indeed, if we look closely at the history of armed conflict, the world has been dominated by low-intensity conflicts, while all-out warfare has become obsolete. Clausewitz's total war is a relatively small period of history from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 to the end of the Second World War.

In fact, conventional wars seem to have died out by themselves because the balance of power between the two great powers (or today the imbalance between the power of the United States and the rest of the world) as well as the nuclear threat have deterred any form of direct confrontation since 1945.

Moreover, conventional warfare has been progressively codified by the international community (protection of prisoners, distinction between combatants and non-combatants, arms limitation and the establishment of international conventions) because war is violent, brutal and total. Thus, the various states have voluntarily limited the war. From now on, only combatants who do not claim to be part of a state entity can wage all-out war, as they are not obliged to comply with these rules.

Finally, according to Clausewitz, all wars involve three entities: the state, the army and the population. In fact, it is a state that declares war and it is the (standing) army that wages war on behalf of the state. The population, for its part, stays out of the war and submits to the victor. However, an analysis of history shows that, apart from the period studied by Clausewitz in Vom Kriege, the stake in armed conflicts has always been the population. This is especially true for low-intensity conflicts [1].

Thus, through Clausewitz's criticism, inter-state warfare appears obsolete. Paradoxically, there have never been as many low-intensity conflicts as there are today.

War will now take on a new form

The war will have a new form: it will be terrible, atrocious and endless and will not be fought on a battlefield by men in military dress using sophisticated weapons.

It is therefore groups called terrorists, guerrillas, bandits or highway robbers and not states that will wage tomorrow's war. These groups will be guided either by fanaticism or ideology.

Western nations and their armies will be little able to face this threat: States will weaken because they will not be able to ensure the systematic defence of their citizens, and this is their fundamental expectation. Thus, it is the very existence of the state that is in danger, and with it the legal and cultural notions of war.

Western armies, despite their reduced size, are ill-adapted to counter this threat because they are too much subject to their technical means, their command structures are overloaded and their procedures are too restrictive.

War thus becomes an unavoidable phenomenon because for man, fighting is as essential as eating and drinking.

The war will continue

Whatever men's wishes to limit the war, it will continue because man cannot turn away from his power of distraction, inspiration or fascination.

Indeed, man does not fight for political reasons. War is not the "continuation of politics by other means" but "the continuation of sport by other means". These means would be violent. Man would therefore fight out of a simple desire to risk his life.

War is therefore not a means, it is an end, like drinking, eating or sleeping. Thus, it is life. It alone allows and requires the use of all human faculties, the highest and the lowest. Brutality, harshness, courage, determination and pure strength are at the same time its causes. Literature, the arts, sport and history eloquently illustrate this.

Ultimately, the Western nations must adapt as quickly as possible and transform their armies according to the threat, because low-intensity wars will be increasingly present and, Clausewitz's only concession, more than ever the "fog" of war will be opaque.

Editor's Commentary

Rich and well-documented, "The Transformation of War" written in 1991 may appear as a visionary work. Martin Van Creveld is nevertheless deliberately polemical and is customary in fact. Challenging Clausewitz today may seem extremely pretentious. However, the arguments developed by the author have the merit of asking the right questions to encourage the leaders of Western nations to reflect on the "future" of the European Union. The author's arguments, however, have the merit of asking the right questions in order to encourage the leaders of Western nations to reflect on the future, training, equipment and format of their armed forces, designed to fight a conventional (or generic) enemy that may no longer exist.

Martin Van Creveld was sadly visionary when he wrote in 1991 "The fascination of jihad has never been greater than it is today throughout the Muslim world. All this shows that even today the idea of war as a continuation of religion, even and especially in its most extreme forms, is more alive than ever. Spiritual" heirs of Clausewitz, Western strategists would therefore be well advised to become aware of it, unless they risk becoming its first victims (p187)". More than ever confronted with this reality, it is for such assertions that The Transformation of War has been widely disseminated in the United States, even outside military circles.

It is also polemical when it claims that men go to war because they are at war. (General Lee, Churchill or Patton, among others, have said so) and when he compares war to ecstatic delirium or a simple sporting game. Nevertheless, he agrees on this point with Ernst Jünger who compares war as an interior experience [2] and who claims that the experience of the front line is an unforgettable freedom. Men fight for the taste of sport, to survive or to surpass themselves, regardless of the political goals of war. It is for this reason, according to Martin van Creveld, that wars will never end. This statement is interesting because it calls into question the Kantian vision[3] of the world, i.e. the harmonization of international relations through economic development, a vision that has guided international relations, particularly since 1945 and the starting point of European construction (cf. the ECSC). Since war is inherent to man, it becomes inevitable. To avoid it, strong states are needed, the strength of a state being its legitimacy and effectiveness more than its military or technical means.

Above all, Clausewitz's criticism seems particularly pertinent. The facts seem to prove him right. Indeed, Clausewitz, strongly marked by the wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, described in *Vom Kriege* only clashes from fort to fort with a decisive battle and the annihilation of the opposing army as the key to success. His analysis of historical cases is deliberately limited to a very short period. Martin Van Creveld, on the contrary, based on his historical erudition, demonstrates, not without relevance, that it is low intensity conflicts that have dominated the world until now and are only increasing. Thus, he confines the teachings of Clausewitz to a particular period of military history and claims that Sunzi's precepts are far more timeless.

If Martin Van Creveld's thesis is founded, it becomes urgent to measure all the consequences because : "The modern state has no future if it is unable to defend itself effectively in the event of a low-intensity internal or external conflict, as seems to be the case. The state that seriously engages in a confrontation of this kind will have to win a swift and decisive victory. But the fight by itself will weaken its foundations: in fact, it is the fear of embarking on such an adventure that has hindered the willingness of countries - Western countries in particular - to engage in the fight against terrorism. Let us make no mistake: this scenario is not imaginary. Even today, in many parts of the world, the dice are on the table and the game has indeed begun (P252)". In fact, Western democracies generate their own weaknesses because the fight against terrorism calls into question the fundamental values on which they are based, such as freedom (of the individual, of expression or of movement, for example).

The upper staff course is the ideal place to reflect on the future of the army and its adaptation to the changing threat. The generic enemy as it is defined today poses an artificial and far too convenient intellectual threat to Western armies: theorised, the enemy is predictable and becomes an intellectual abstraction too far removed from reality. In the field, armed forces face groups whose goals and behaviour are unpredictable. Faced with such enemies, modes of action exist. Indeed, modern warfare has already been theorized by French officers and the theses developed are relatively close to those of Martin Van Creveld. In particular, they agree on the importance of the population. The conquest of the population will be the centre of gravity of all future confrontations. Isn't the "little war" defined by H. Coutau-Begarie simply "war"? Perhaps it would be necessary to republish - other than in English - Colonel Trinquier 's *Modern War* [4] ?

[1] A term that appeared in the 80s and that Martin Van Creveld characterizes in three points:

- Conflicts that tend to proliferate in the less developed regions of the planet (in the developed countries, they are generally resolved by the (In developed countries, they are generally referred to by various terms such as "terrorism", "peacekeeping" or, in the case of Northern Ireland, "unrest";
- They very rarely pit regular troops against each other, although regular troops often fight rebels, terrorists and even civilians, including women and children;
- Collective armaments, which are the pride and joy of any modern army, are not privileged.

[2] La guerre comme une expérience intérieure Christian Bourgeois edition 1997

[3] Thesis developed in Project for Perpetual Peace

[4] Roger Trinquier codified, in 1961, the principles that can enable Western armies to resist victoriously the subversive enterprises of the enemy whose stakes are the masses; victory in modern warfare can only be achieved by eradicating the opposing organization by revising the traditional modes of action of armies. This work is currently being studied at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth.

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