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The Evolution of Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*: a reconstruction on the basis of the earlier versions of his masterpiece

by Paul Donker

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Note on this translation: This article for *The Clausewitz Homepage* is an English translation of the German text of the article "[Die Entwicklung von Clausewitz' *Vom Kriege*: Eine Rekonstruktion auf der Grundlage der früheren Fassungen seines Meisterwerks](#)" as it appeared in the Clausewitz-Gesellschaft's *Jahrbuch 2017*, pp.14–39. However, this 2019 English version, trans. Paul Donker and Christopher Bassford, reflects some additional research and some new discoveries made since 2017.

Although *Vom Kriege* (*On War*) is one of the most important works in the field of war studies, not much is known regarding how Clausewitz went about writing it. Since its first publication in 1832–34, this work has been studied from many angles, but questions about its genesis have been curiously underexplored. However, some recent discoveries now make it possible to reconstruct the origins of *Vom Kriege* quite accurately, and going forward this will help us to solve many of the interpretation problems concerning this work.

This article reconstructs the writing and publishing processes using original handwritten manuscripts, letters, forewords, and loose notes both from earlier versions of *Vom Kriege* and from comments elsewhere by Clausewitz and his wife. First of all, I will present the peculiar history of the personal records and papers he left behind at his death in 1831. A review of that history will show how and why research into the book's genesis has always been seriously hindered. After that I will briefly discuss the structure of *Vom Kriege* as it was actually published in 1832, which was quite different from that of the translation *On War* by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Subsequently, this article will reconstruct and explain Clausewitz's writing process and the process

Marie von Clausewitz followed in editing and publishing his works. In conclusion, I will propose several important inferences to be drawn from this reconstruction.¹

Clausewitz's Legacy: A Unique Story

Normally, an author goes through a lengthy process of conception, writing, rewriting, and finally publishing a work. If that has been the case, the reader may assume that the printed version of that work adequately reflects the author's views. Truly contradictory interpretations are then not likely to happen. Author and book agree.

However, this is not the case with Clausewitz and his *Vom Kriege*. Every reader apparently reads and interprets this book differently. There are two main reasons for this, which reinforce each other. First, the text was incomplete when Clausewitz stopped writing, and secondly, his wife made various modifications to the publication. The final, printed version of *Vom Kriege* is therefore a compilation of older and newer chapters, which are in substantial disagreement or at least poorly aligned with one another. As the final text is not completely consistent, it obviously leaves much room for major differences in interpretation.²

Especially in cases like these we would like to use the original manuscripts to determine what views the author held during the final stages of his thinking process. Regrettably, most of Clausewitz's archive was lost at the end of World War II, making that impossible. Nevertheless, since 1832 much research has been conducted on *Vom Kriege*, and some important manuscripts have fortunately reappeared between 1954 and 2014. A thorough examination of these recovered texts is interesting not only from a historical point of view, but also because it is likely to have great consequences for today's interpretation of *Vom Kriege*.³

Clausewitz himself published very little during his life. Only six such texts are known, and they were all printed anonymously in magazines and newspapers.⁴ After his death in November 1831, his widow immediately began the publication of his remaining works. The best known of these are, of course, the ten-volume *Surviving Works of General Carl von Clausewitz on War and Warfare*.⁵ Of these, the first three volumes are better known under the title *Vom Kriege (On War)*.

¹ This article often refers to the original German text of *Vom Kriege* as it appears in the 19th edition edited by Werner Hahlweg (Berlin: Dümmlers Verlag, 1980). However, all the quotations in English are taken from the translation by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, entitled *On War* and published by Princeton University Press in 1976 (revised 1984), as most readers will probably draw on that version. However, some issues with that translation are mentioned in this article's text and notes.

² For a great discussion of current views on this subject, see Chapter 2: "The Writing of *On War*," in Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War, A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007).

³ See also Christopher Bassford's working paper, "Clausewitz's Categories of War and the Supersession of 'Absolute War,'" <http://www.clausewitz.com/mobile/Bassford-Supersession5.pdf>.

⁴ Ulrich Marwedel, *Carl von Clausewitz, Persönlichkeit und Wirkungsgeschichte seines Werkes bis 1918* (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1978), p. 259; Peter Paret, "An Anonymous Letter by Clausewitz on the Polish Insurrection of 1830–1831," in *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 42 (1970), no. 2, pp. 184–190.

⁵ *Hinterlassene Werke des Generals Carl von Clausewitz über Krieg und Kriegführung*, 10 vols. (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1832–1837).

In addition, Marie von Clausewitz persuaded the famous historian Leopold von Ranke to include the article *On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst* in his journal in 1832.⁶ Until recently, it was always thought that Ranke had undertaken this publication on his own, but in 2016 it came to light that Clausewitz's widow took the initiative.⁷

Since Marie von Clausewitz had thus given the impetus to these two publications, it may be assumed that she is also responsible for a third text, which appeared immediately after Clausewitz's death, entitled *Aphorisms on War and Warfare (from the writings left by General Carl von Clausewitz)*.⁸ This text, which bears a strong similarity in content to *Vom Kriege*, was published between 1833 and 1835 in serial installments in a military magazine managed at that time by friends of Clausewitz. This and also the close correspondence between the German titles of the *Aphorisms* and the major work (see footnotes 5 and 8) offer clear indications that his widow probably published this third text as well. However, that text was immediately forgotten—which, in my opinion, is completely unjustified. As will be detailed below, *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* is almost certainly the first version of *Vom Kriege*.

Sadly, Marie von Clausewitz suffered severely from poor health during the publication of Clausewitz's works and died in January 1835. From then on his personal archive, containing the vast majority of his written legacy, remained in the alternating possession of her and his family. It is important to be aware of this fact. The Clausewitz archive always remained family property until it disappeared at the end of the Second World War. As a result, his archive was never transferred to an official library or state archive, and thus was never properly documented. This has had significant consequences, one of which is that we lack a good overview of its full contents.

On the positive side, the family allowed one French and several German researchers to examine the archive. Through their books and articles, portions of the texts have been preserved for us. Between 1870 and 1945 there appeared several biographies and theoretical studies full of quotations that come directly from the archive's texts.

One of the researchers who had access to the archive was Hans Rothfels (1891–1976). He wrote two scholarly works about Clausewitz that are significant because Rothfels was the first to refer briefly to *Aphorisms on War and Warfare*. In his book *Politics and War*, published in 1920, he compiled a chronological index of Clausewitz's works, which states that this text was written earlier than *Vom Kriege*.⁹ Precisely because Rothfels had access to the entire archive and therefore probably saw the original version, this message is an important one. Unfortunately, Rothfels was

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, "Über das Leben und den Charakter von Scharnhorst," in Werner Hahlweg, ed., *Carl von Clausewitz, Verstreute kleine Schriften* (Osnabrück: Biblio, 1979), pp. 199–249.

⁷ Vanya Eftimova Bellinger, *Marie von Clausewitz, The Woman behind the Making of On War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 231.

⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, "Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung (Aus den hinterlassenen Schriften des General von Clausewitz)," in *Zeitschrift für Kunst, Wissenschaft und Geschichte des Krieges*, achtundzwanzigster Band, viertes Heft, 1833, up to and including fünfunddreißigster Band, siebentes Heft, 1835.

⁹ Hans Rothfels, *Carl von Clausewitz, Politik und Krieg, Eine ideengeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1920), pp. 230–232.

interested only in Clausewitz's political ideas and therefore did not investigate the evolution of *Vom Kriege* any further.

By 1935, however, two other researchers, Herbert Rosinski (1903–1962) and Eberhard Kessel (1907–1986) explicitly addressed the question of the origin of *Vom Kriege*.¹⁰ Regrettably, neither had access to the original material and therefore they had to rely entirely on the printed version. Nevertheless, they were able to recognize important developments in the text. They undoubtedly would have been able to reconstruct its genesis if they had had an insight into the archive.

The last researcher to hold the archive on loan was Walther Malmsten Schering (1883–1954). Schering wrote three theoretical works and some articles about Clausewitz, and he also quoted from material that was in the archive. However, he did not do this with sufficient care, and this is where research into the genesis gets lost. Schering claimed without offering any evidence that he had found the first version of *Vom Kriege* and that it had already been written between 1809 and 1812.¹¹ This contradicts the statements of Clausewitz and his wife, as they both wrote that the first version came about only in 1816 in Koblenz. Fortunately, the manuscript to which Schering referred has been preserved, and so we can put it to a closer examination.¹² I will of course return to that, for I believe that that writing was not the first, but rather the second version of *Vom Kriege*.

Schering was the last one to examine the archive. In May 1943 it was still complete. There is a graphological report, dated 11 May 1943 by a certain C. Braun-Runge, confirming that the original manuscripts of *Vom Kriege* are all in Clausewitz's own hand.¹³ In addition there is a short letter from Schering to the Dean of the University of Berlin, dated 2 March 1945, in which he informs the Dean that he has brought several irreplaceable manuscripts to a safe place.¹⁴ After March 1945, the rest of Clausewitz's archive is untraceable.

Now there is a strange turn. After Schering passed away in 1954, important original manuscripts by Clausewitz reappeared in various places in West Germany. Among them were also some early versions of *Vom Kriege*. Incidentally, it was the well-known Clausewitz researcher Werner Hahlweg who found and also published much of this material.¹⁵

¹⁰ Herbert Rosinski, "Die Entwicklung von Clausewitz' Werk *Vom Kriege* im Licht seiner 'Vorreden' und 'Nachrichten,'" in *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 151, 1935, pp. 278–293, and Eberhard Kessel, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Clausewitz's Werk *Vom Kriege*," in *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 152, 1935, pp. 97–100.

¹¹ Walther Malmsten Schering, *Carl von Clausewitz, Geist und Tat, Das Vermächtnis des Soldaten und Denkers* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1941), pp. 51–60.

¹² Carl von Clausewitz, "Entwürfe und Vorarbeiten zum Werk '*Vom Kriege*,'" in Werner Hahlweg, ed., *Carl von Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), pp. 22–31.

¹³ C. Braun-Runge, *Schriftexpertise*, 11 Mai 1943, Wehrtechnische Studiensammlung in Koblenz, Nachlass Hahlweg, NLH-A0031.

¹⁴ Christian von Gyldendfeld, *Von Alfred Vierkandt zu Carl v. Clausewitz, Walther Malmsten Schering und die Quellen gemeinschaftlichen Handelns in Frieden und Krieg* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2002), p. 17, note. 34.

¹⁵ Werner Hahlweg, "Überlieferungsgeschichte des Clausewitz-Nachlasses (resp. der Clausewitz-Dokumente)," Beilage 1 in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 1171–1172.

- In 1954, a small part of the archive was recovered in Regensburg. This includes some historical studies, some service correspondence, several letters, and even some poems by Clausewitz. This material is now kept in the Münster University Library.¹⁶
- In the same year, 1954, Schering's widow presented several original manuscripts to the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin.¹⁷
- The most puzzling events are associated with yet other manuscripts, including the original manuscripts of Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of Book I in Clausewitz's own hand and the complete Books I and II, in clean copy in the hand of an unknown copyist, which were used in 1832 to publish *Vom Kriege*. Hahlweg acquired these in 1963 at the renowned antiquarian auction house Stargardt in Marburg.¹⁸ For reasons unknown, he never said anything about this unique rediscovery. After his death in 1989, his extensive archive went to the Wehrtechnische Studiensammlung BWB (Bundeswehr Defense Technology Collection) in Koblenz. There it is impeccably and meticulously archived and preserved. In 2014 the Clausewitz researcher Andreas Herberg-Rothe told me where Hahlweg's archive is kept, and there I discovered this important material.¹⁹ Sometimes a researcher is just lucky.
- Sometime between 1963 and 1969, from nowhere, other manuscripts re-emerged. This is also extremely valuable material, as these four manuscripts are earlier versions of *Vom Kriege*. They are now preserved at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin.²⁰ Hahlweg published them in 1990. There is, however, reason to question his dating, as he followed Schering's idea that Clausewitz had already started in 1810.

From this brief outline of the history of the archive, it becomes obvious why the process whereby *Vom Kriege* emerged has never been thoroughly investigated. The researchers involved in this question had no access to the original material, while the researchers who did have access to it never asked themselves this question. On the positive side, a lot of material has been recovered. In total, as of 2019 we have eight different texts or manuscripts that may be related to the genesis of *Vom Kriege*. Sometimes their chronological relationship is evident; sometimes it has yet to be determined.

¹⁶ G. Goldschmidt, J. Kießling, "Verzeichnis des Clausewitz-Nachlasses im Besitz der Universitätsbibliothek Münster/Westf.," Beilage 4 in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 1178–1190.

¹⁷ "Verzeichnis des Clausewitz-Nachlasses im Besitz der Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin," Beilage 5 in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 1195–6.

¹⁸ *Auktionsrechnung 31 Mai 1963, Antiquariats J.A. Stargardt*. Wehrtechnische Studiensammlung, Nachlass Hahlweg, NWH–A0029. In addition, Hahlweg acquired at the same auction Clausewitz's almost unknown work, "Taktische Rhapsodien."

¹⁹ Andreas Herberg-Rothe is the author of *Das Rätsel Clausewitz, Politische Theorie des Krieges im Widerstreit* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), and co-editor (with Hew Strachan) of *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and (with Jan Willem Honig and Daniel Moran) *Clausewitz, The State and War* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011).

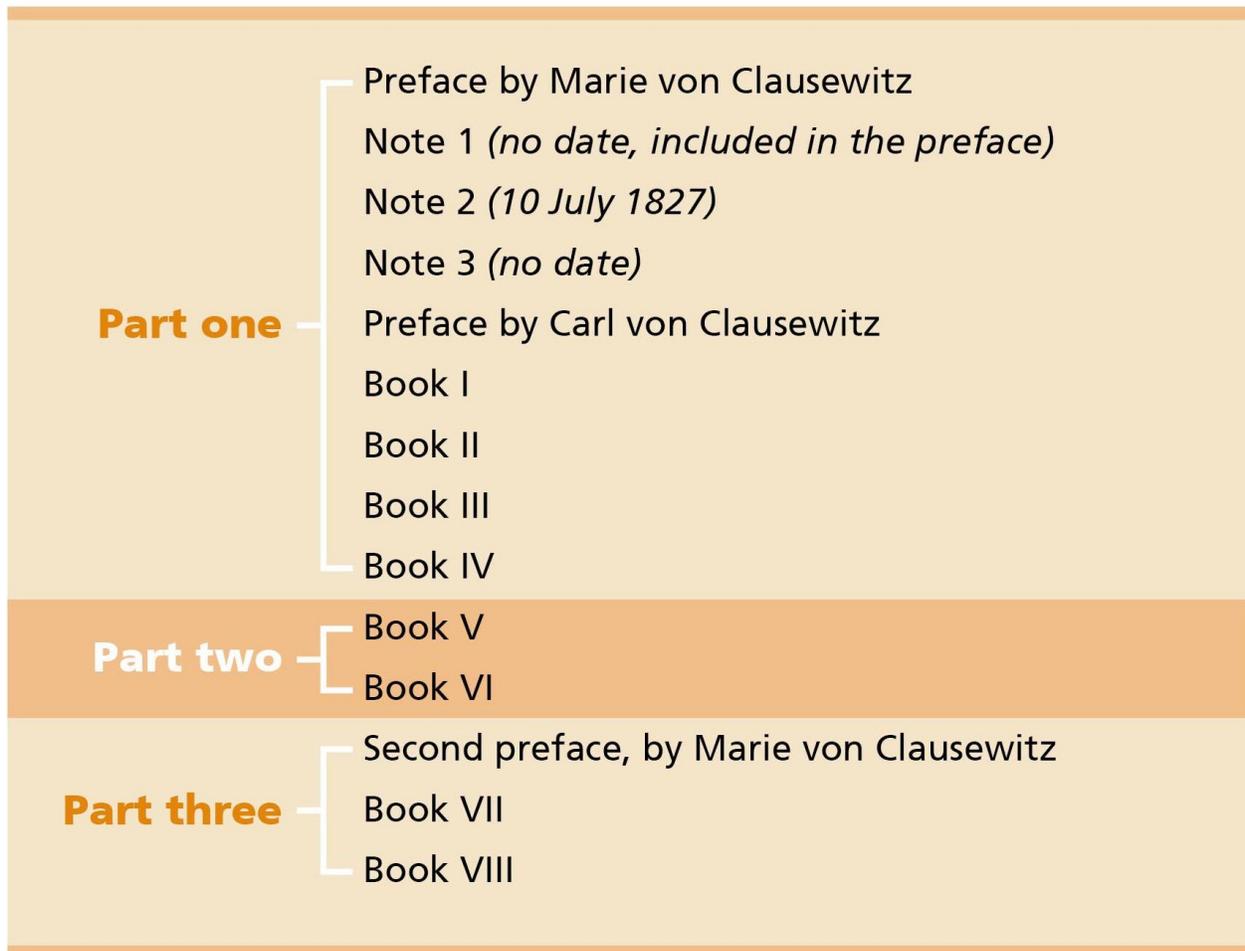
²⁰ See note 17.

The Original Composition of *Vom Kriege*

Before we can reconstruct the writing and publishing process of *Vom Kriege* in more detail, it is important to have a closer look at the structure of that work, because the reconstruction will show that the different components were created at different times. Furthermore, the reconstruction will refer back to these books and chapters every time, as well as to the notes and forewords or prefaces printed in the original German *Vom Kriege*. Readers of the translation *On War* by Howard and Paret may be especially confused because it contains a different order.

As I have already mentioned, between 1832 and 1837 Marie von Clausewitz published the ten-volume *Surviving Works of General Carl von Clausewitz on War and Warfare*. Collectively, the first three volumes are better known under the title *Vom Kriege*. Volume 1, or better, Part 1 (Books I–IV), appeared in the fall of 1832, about a year after Clausewitz's death. Part 2 (Books V–VI) appeared in 1833, and after some difficulties Part 3 (Books VII–VIII and five appendices) was published in 1834. Together, these three Parts comprise eight Books containing 124 Chapters. See also the adjacent diagram 1, “The structure of *Vom Kriege* as published 1832–34.”

THE STRUCTURE OF *VOM KRIEGE* AS PUBLISHED 1832-34



Marie von Clausewitz wrote forewords for both the first and the third Parts. In her first preface she makes some important remarks about editorial problems, especially regarding Book I. She told us that her brother helped her in finding the “revisions” which “have been inserted in those parts of Book I for which they were intended (they did not go further).”²¹ In the second preface (which is oddly not included in the Howard and Paret translation) she apologizes to the reader that Part 3 has been waiting for so long. She wrote that the texts of Books VII and VIII consisted only of sketches and preparatory work and that Major O’Etsel helped to revise them.²² These remarks make it clear that there is a difference between Clausewitz’s own manuscripts and the final printed version. Unfortunately Marie does not communicate exactly what was changed. It is noteworthy that recent discoveries confirm her statements. As will be discussed below, various chapters have actually been rearranged in Book I and II, but this was in keeping with Clausewitz’s intent.

In her first foreword, Marie also writes that Clausewitz started *Vom Kriege* in Koblenz in 1816, that there were three versions, and that Clausewitz began a major revision in 1827. To support all of this, she has inserted three notes from her husband explaining how far he had progressed with his work. These three notes are therefore crucial to our understanding of the origins of his major work. Unfortunately, two of the three notes are not marked with a date.

- In the undated first note—which Marie records in the middle of her own first foreword—Clausewitz actually describes three consecutive versions of *Vom Kriege*. Primarily, he explains what the first version of his masterpiece must have looked like, but he also tells how he proceeded afterward.²³
- In his second note, dated 10 July 1827, Clausewitz wrote that he was not satisfied with *Vom Kriege* and that he intended to completely rewrite the work. In doing so, he wanted to start from two important concepts: “the two types of war” and the idea “that war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means.”²⁴ Because he gave this note its date, we know exactly when it was that the extensive revision began.
- In the third note, which unfortunately is not dated, is a sentence that may reflect the latest state of affairs. Clausewitz wrote that “The first chapter of Book One alone I regard as finished. It will at least serve the whole by indicating the direction I meant to follow everywhere.”²⁵ This is, of course, an extremely important statement about the condition of the

²¹ Marie von Clausewitz, “Preface,” dated 30 June 1832, in Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 65–67, in particular p. 67.

²² Marie von Clausewitz, no title, 5 December 1833, in Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg, ed., 19th edition (Bonn: Ferdinand Dümmlers Verlag, 1980 and 1990), pp. 865–866. It is not included in Howard and Paret’s version of Clausewitz, *On War*.

²³ Carl von Clausewitz, Author’s Comment, “On the Genesis of his Early Manuscript on the Theory of War, Written around 1818,” in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 63. I disagree with this early date for this note, for which Howard and Paret provided insufficient argument. In my view, in this note Clausewitz described not only his first version of *Vom Kriege* but also his second and third version and even the revision.

²⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, “Note of 10 July 1827,” in Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 69–70, in particular p. 69. We may question the translations by Howard and Paret of “die doppelte Art des Krieges” as “the two types of war” and of “die fortgesetzte Staatspolitik” as “the continuation of policy.”

²⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, “Unfinished Note, Presumably Written in 1830,” in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 70.

work. If Clausewitz himself wrote that only the very first chapter is finished, then that must be decisive for all of our interpretations. All other parts of *Vom Kriege* must first be compared with this chapter before we can interpret their content. However, since this third note is not firmly dated, it is not incontrovertibly clear that this is Clausewitz's last opinion of *Vom Kriege*. Since 1989, this has led to a heated debate among the experts.²⁶

Just because so much is unclear; because Clausewitz states several times that he is not yet satisfied with his work; and because, moreover, parts of the text were adapted during the publication process, we would like to be able to refer to the original manuscripts. The question therefore arises of whether it is possible to reconstruct the writing and publishing process of *Vom Kriege* so that it becomes clear which parts of the text best reflect Clausewitz's own last views.

Reconstructing the Creation of *Vom Kriege*

With hindsight, of course, we can say that the question of how Clausewitz wrote his masterpiece could have been better investigated when his archive was still complete. Given the eight Books that make up the printed version of *Vom Kriege*, it would have been possible to investigate which manuscripts were written by Clausewitz himself and whether there are older versions of them as well. In this way one could easily have gotten a picture of the genesis of his work. Precisely because Clausewitz and his wife saved a lot of such material, this problem could possibly have been solved at that time.

Because Clausewitz's archive is still incomplete nowadays, we should be careful in one respect when reconstructing the genesis of *Vom Kriege*. We cannot rule out that at some point completely new material will be found that throws a new light on the matter. With this single reservation, we can say that it is possible to reconstruct the writing and the publication process quite thoroughly. In my opinion, the puzzle is not that complicated. By comparing all the available manuscripts with Clausewitz's own letters and notes, a surprisingly coherent picture emerges.

Two questions are crucial: when did Clausewitz take up the work on *Vom Kriege* and how many different versions have there been?

Almost all researchers are of the opinion that he started in 1816 in Koblenz. However, as already mentioned, Schering assumed that Clausewitz started between 1809 and 1813, though he did not substantiate this dissenting view. Precisely because Marie and Carl both refer to the Koblenz period, we have to start from 1816.

Fortunately, the experts agree regarding the second question. They all assume that there were three consecutive versions of *Vom Kriege*, that Clausewitz subsequently began a thorough revision of the text in 1827, and that his wife eventually published it with some modifications.²⁷ This means that in total we have five steps. It is noteworthy that we also have original material from each of

²⁶ See also my "[The Genesis of Clausewitz's *On War* Reconsidered](#)," in *British Journal of Military History*, vol. 2, issue 3, July 2016.

²⁷ Some researchers may be inclined to consider the third version and the revision as one.

these five stages. Unfortunately, we do not have everything, but we have enough to prove the existence of each stage.

The First Version of *Vom Kriege*

As is well known, after the final victory over Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815 the Clausewitzes lived a good two years in Koblenz before moving to Berlin. For a short time Count von Gneisenau was the commander of Prussian troops on the Rhine and Clausewitz became his chief of staff. According to Marie von Clausewitz, these were two very happy years for the couple.

In addition to his demanding work and many social commitments, Clausewitz found time to write a book. This fact arises from several letters from these years and is confirmed in his wife's foreword to *Vom Kriege*. The very first indication is a letter that Clausewitz sent to Gneisenau on 14 November 1816, in which he reported that he was writing a text concerning war. He promised Gneisenau that on occasion he would send him the results.²⁸ A few months later, on 4 March 1817, this actually happened, when Clausewitz attached to his letter the essay *On Progression and Pause in Military Activity*.²⁹ Incidentally, at Gneisenau's request Clausewitz sent manuscripts to him quite often, and fortunately they have therefore been preserved. These letters and the essay prove that Clausewitz began the first version in Koblenz, as Marie asserted in her foreword. There can be no more misunderstandings on this point, and Schering would have had to produce very strong arguments to get him started much earlier.

However, the letters also give us important information about the content and the literary form of the version. In the letter to Gneisenau of 4 March 1817, Clausewitz wrote:

Your Excellency, I would like to send a small article, of which the subject must be clearly thought through if one wants to bring light and context in strategy. If, as here, a treatise has become too long-winded for my taste, I take up the result in a shorter form in my little work and throw the preliminary work into the fire like fallen wood-shavings.³⁰

Clausewitz tells us that strategy is the subject of the first version and explains that sometimes he first writes a longer essay, from which he brings only the essence into "my little work."

Gneisenau discussed the essay *On Progression and Pause in Military Activity* with some friends and in response Clausewitz sent a short letter to their mutual friend, Count Carl von der Gröben, on 17 May 1817. After a few introductory remarks, he wrote the following:

As far as the work, of which Count Gneisenau has spoken, you are already familiar with the first version of it. In the past winter I have worked out the greater part of strategy in

²⁸ Letter from Clausewitz to Gneisenau, 14 November 1816, in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 234–237.

²⁹ Clausewitz to Gneisenau, 4 March 1817, "Ueber das Fortschreiten und den Stillstand der Kriegerischen Begebenheiten," in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 243–255.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 243.

this way, but the manuscript is not suitable for publication at all, since it is nothing but raw work pieces that are still in the process of rewriting, and which perhaps must even be partially rejected. Furthermore, it is written illegibly, and also far from complete. I still have not convinced myself whether I will ever let it come to light, because I have to repeat to you that something ordinary does not satisfy me and that I have a true reluctance to multiply the number of mediocre and therefore useless books. But I promise you that, if I progress further and find a good copyist, I will send you the whole manuscript for the sake of your judgment. By the way, I ask you not to talk about it, because I like to do my things quietly for myself and without attracting attention."³¹

In this short letter we recognize Clausewitz immediately. He is not quickly satisfied with his own work and wants to labor on it soberly. Whether or not his book will ever be published, he deliberately leaves open. This attitude would not change in the fourteen years he worked on his masterpiece. Furthermore, we can conclude again that the first version would focus on strategy and thus that it had not yet developed the wider scope of the final version of *Vom Kriege*. All these elements can also be found in Clausewitz's first note in *Vom Kriege*.

The statements set down here deal with what in my opinion are the major elements of strategy. I regarded them as early drafts, and had more or less reached the point of fusing them into a single work.

These drafts did not follow any preliminary plan. My original intention was to set down my conclusions on the principal elements of this topic in short, precise, compact statements, without concern for system or formal connection. The manner in which Montesquieu dealt with his subject was vaguely in my mind.³²

These quotations show not only that the first version was about strategy but also that it had a particular literary form ("in short, precise, compact statements"), and that Clausewitz sometimes wrote a lengthy text from which he then incorporated the essentials into his book. Naturally, the reference to the French philosopher Montesquieu also speaks along this line. It is well known that the adolescent Clausewitz read his work, so it does not shock us that he was inspired by that literary form. In his classic work *l'Esprit des Lois*, Charles de Montesquieu constructed his chapters from numbered sections of compact text.

Of course, the eye-catching literary form described is reminiscent of the already briefly mentioned *Aphorisms on War and Warfare*. This text consists of 177 individual, numbered aphorisms. These were published between 1833 and 1835, with several at the same time in successive numbers of the German military *Magazine for the Art, Science and History of War*.³³ This coincided, as has been discussed, with the first publication of *Vom Kriege* by Marie von Clausewitz.

³¹ Letter contained in Eberhard Kessel, "Zur Genesis der Modernen Kriegslehre: Die Entstehungsgeschichte von Clausewitz' Buch, *Vom Kriege*," in *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau, Zeitschrift für die Europäische Sicherheit*, 3rd year (1953), Issue 9, pp. 420–421. Kessel thought that this letter was written in 1816, however there is strong evidence that this was written a year later.

³² Carl von Clausewitz, "Author's Comment," in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 63.

³³ See note 8.

The full text of *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* counts in total about 8,750 words, which is the size of a long article. Most importantly, the content is very similar to the text of the first four books of *Vom Kriege*. But there is no aphorism corresponding to anything in Books V to VIII, and there are no corresponding aphorisms for some chapters and important sections even of the first four Books. Six of the 177 aphorisms are retained verbatim in *Vom Kriege*, and 56 aphorisms are retained in modified form. In no less than 76 cases, the text is very different but still fully recognizable. 13 of the aphorisms are not found in *Vom Kriege*. In eight cases a different wording is used, and in three cases a very different example is provided. In at least 11 cases, the text of *Vom Kriege* is a clear development from the corresponding aphorism.³⁴

As an example of the six aphorisms that have been taken over verbatim in *Vom Kriege*, number 149 should be mentioned: "Fighting is the central military act; all other activities merely support it."³⁵

Even more interesting, of course, is the series of at least eleven examples in which the text in *Vom Kriege* represents a clear development from the corresponding aphorism. Aphorism No. 22 is about the 'remarkable' (or, in the words of Howard and Paret, "paradoxical) trinity," one of Clausewitz's best-known concepts. If, however, we contrast the full text of this aphorism with the full corresponding text in *Vom Kriege*, we see that the latter has three major new insertions: "a true chameleon," a "paradoxical trinity," and the triad of "the people," "the commander and his army," and "the government."

³⁴ See my *Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung as the first version of Clausewitz's masterpiece, A textual comparison with Vom Kriege* (Breda: Research Paper 108, Faculty Military Science, Netherlands Defence Academy, May 2016).

³⁵ Ibid. p. 24, and Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 227.

Aphorism No. 22	<i>On War</i> (Howard and Paret)
<p>From the above one obtains the following consequences for theory.</p> <p>War, in reality, often changes its nature, and due to its dominant tendencies it is composed of the following three tendencies: 1) primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; 2) the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; 3) its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.</p> <p>The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone.</p>	<p>§ 28. The Consequences for Theory</p> <p>War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. 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.</p> <p>The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government. The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone.</p>

It is unthinkable that Clausewitz—or anyone else, if we must consider that possibility—would have omitted these three striking ideas if he had derived Aphorism No. 22 from *Vom Kriege* at a later date. On the other hand, it is very conceivable that Clausewitz wrote down Aphorism No. 22 around 1817, prior to adding those crucial elements ten years later.³⁶

If we take into account that Marie von Clausewitz was clearly driven to publish her husband’s work and had full access to his archive; that *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* was published at the same time as *Vom Kriege*; that the original German titles of those two publications are similar; that the text partially corresponding with Books I–IV and that the literary form of *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* was mentioned in various letters and notes; and also that the textual comparison leaves no other sequence between those two works, we may conclude that *Aphorisms* is in all

³⁶ Ibid. p. 29, and Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89. We may question the translations by Howard and Paret of “wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit” as “paradoxical trinity” and of “dem bloßen Verstande” as “reason alone.”

likelihood the first version of *Vom Kriege*. Furthermore, as we shall see later in the reconstruction, this assumption explains much and solves many questions.

The Second Version

It is most likely that Clausewitz carefully placed the manuscript of *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* in a folder at the end of 1818 and then moved to Berlin to become director of the War College there. He must have enjoyed this new position a great deal in the beginning. On March 21, 1819, he sent his chiefs a detailed report on teaching at the war school entitled *Memorandum on the Reform of the General Military School in Berlin*.³⁷ The report shows that Clausewitz had heard a large number of lectures in the first few months of his tenure at the War College. He was very critical both of the curriculum and of various lecturers. Of course, he also made several suggestions for improvement. It is well known, however, that a Director was not allowed to deal with the content of the lessons at the time, and the report disappeared into the drawer.

Nevertheless, I suspect that this study of the curriculum inspired Clausewitz himself in the writing of *Vom Kriege*, especially in the second version. In his first note he comments as follows:

[M]y nature, which always drives me to develop and systematize, at last asserted itself here as well. From the studies I wrote on various topics in order to gain a clear and complete understanding of them, I managed for a time to lift only the most important conclusions and thus concentrate their essence in smaller compass.³⁸

Again, Clausewitz says that he has taken "the most important results" from other "treatises" in his own work, a book of small size. Furthermore, it is noticeable that he has systematically built up this second version. So, it cannot be about aphorisms anymore.

Now, there is a text written by him that could be the remnant of this second version. I am referring to the text that Schering claimed to be the first version, but he did not put forward any arguments for that view. Schering found the manuscript in the archive at that time, and Hahlweg published a copy of it. Because Clausewitz had not given the original manuscript a title, Hahlweg called the text "Drafts and preparatory work for the work 'Vom Kriege.'"³⁹

The original manuscript is kept in Berlin. Because it consists of two introductions and several unconnected chapters, it seems likely that these represent two separate attempts by Clausewitz to write a book. Thus it is the remnant of those experiments. The interesting thing is that all these chapters are about the art of war, not about strategy. The art of war is the central topic, a topic that is discussed in *Vom Kriege* only in the second Book, and that, of course, is also related to the curriculum of the War College.

³⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, "Denkschrift über die Reform der Allgemeinen Kriegsschule zu Berlin," Berlin, 21. März 1819, in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 1151–1163.

³⁸ Clausewitz, "Author's Comment," in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 63.

³⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, "Entwürfe und Vorarbeiten zum Werk 'Vom Kriege,'" in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 22–102.

For reasons of form and content, this text cannot be the first version, for it consists of self-contained chapters on the art of war, while Clausewitz himself said that the first version, as in Montesquieu, consists of individually small pieces of text dealing with strategy.

My thesis is now that “Drafts and preparatory work for the work ‘*Vom Kriege*’” is not the first, but the second version. Clausewitz wrote this version as director of the War College after drafting his report on the school’s syllabus. Art of war is the central theme. He dealt substantively with this matter and wrote and revised several chapters. As we will see later, he included some of them in the third version; the rest he left in his archive.

The Third Version

Little is known about the reasons or about the specific time at which Clausewitz decided to start with the final, i.e., third version of *Vom Kriege*. Given the scale of this work, which includes eight Books, it must have been launched at the beginning of the 1820s.

Luckily, several manuscripts belonging to the third version have been recovered. Two of them confirm my thesis that the first and second versions must have formed the starting point for the writing of the first four Books of *Vom Kriege*. These two manuscripts are now kept in Berlin. Hahlweg also published copies of them under the title “Transcripts of the Work ‘*Vom Kriege*.’”⁴⁰ In terms of content, these are earlier versions of Books I and II. This is the case because the chapters correspond in part—but in part not—to the printed version, which was published in 1832. We will return later to the question how Clausewitz modified these chapters after 1827.

It is important to note that many of the aphorisms can be found in this earlier version of Book I and that Book II deals exclusively with the art of war, without any connection with the aphorisms. A second striking feature of the two manuscripts is that they were written by Clausewitz himself on paper of better quality. It is clear that these are not draft versions, full of deletions and improvements in the text. On the contrary, they are neatly written out word for word, as though Clausewitz intended to publish them.⁴¹ And that gives us the possibility of unambiguous dating. For in his second note, which dates to 10 July 1827, there is an aside right at the beginning, shown below in added italics, that many researchers have overlooked:

I regard the first six Books, *which are already in a clean copy*, merely as a rather formless mass that must be thoroughly reworked once more.⁴²

Of course, the remark by Clausewitz that the first six Books had already been neatly copied is not merely a marginal observation. We should be aware of how much work it must have cost him to

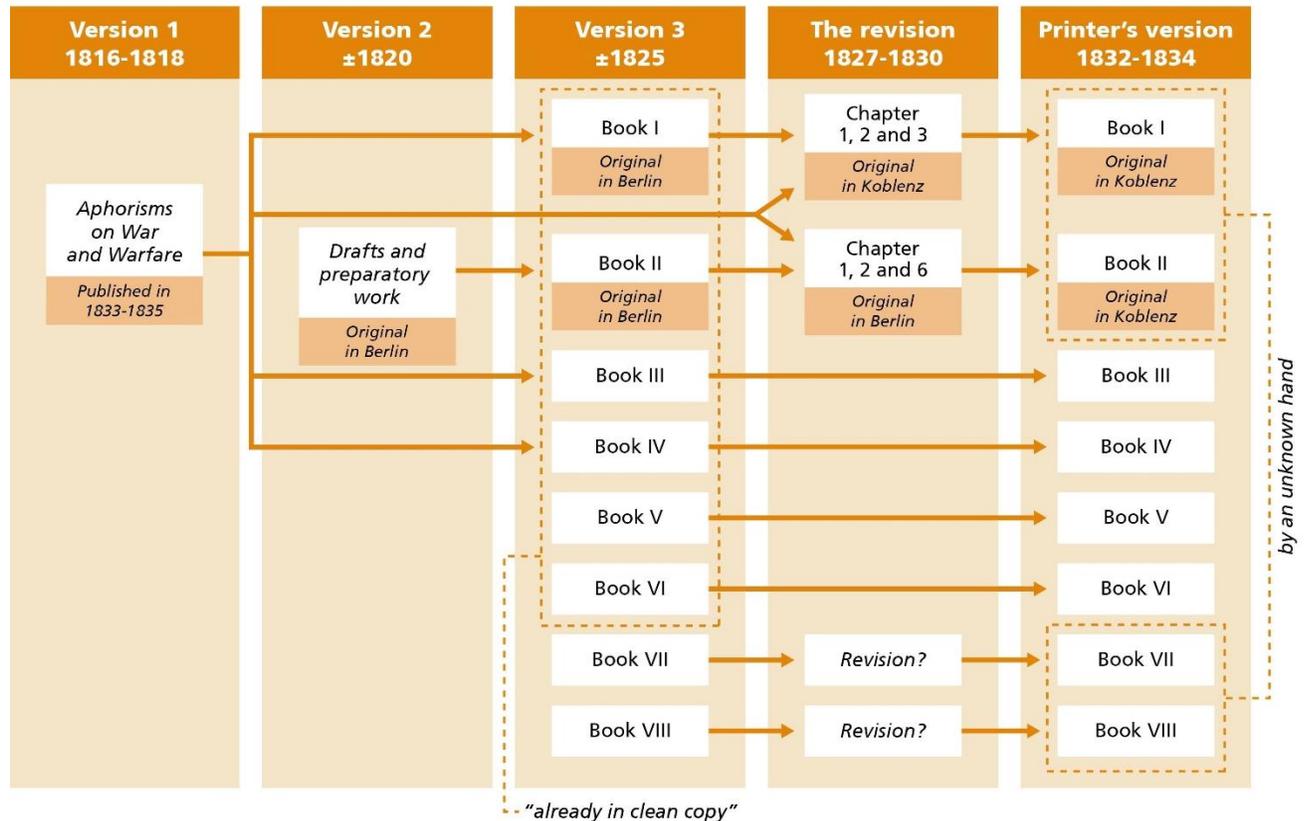
⁴⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, “Niederschriften des Werkes, *Vom Kriege*,” in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 630–717.

⁴¹ At a later date, Clausewitz provided these manuscripts with notes. See also my article, “The Genesis of Clausewitz’s *On War* Reconsidered,” pp. 112–113.

⁴² Clausewitz, “Note of 10 July 1827,” in *Clausewitz, On War*, p. 69.

write out all of these six Books, letter by letter. He could have done that only if he was really satisfied with the content of the text. We can therefore safely assume that on July 10, 1827, six of the eight Books were ready for publication and that the manuscripts in Berlin are two of them. However, on the same day Clausewitz decided to start a wholesale revision. At the same time, we know that his health was poor between the end of 1826 and June 1827, and that progress was slow.⁴³ Recalculating from this point in time, we can conclude that these six Books had been rewritten in a clean form around 1825.

THE EVOLUTION OF VOM KRIEGE



In Graphic 2, “The Evolution of *Vom Kriege*,” the structure and relationships of the three versions are shown. By 1825, eight books had been written, six of which had already been rewritten in a clean version. Now we can also clarify the contextual relationship between version one, version two, and the 1825 version of *Vom Kriege*. Books I, III and IV are based on the *Aphorisms on War and Warfare*. Furthermore, Clausewitz carries over various chapters of his second version, whether in modified form or not, in Book II.

⁴³ Between 5 December 1826 and 19 June 1827, Clausewitz did not write any letters to Gneisenau. In the letter of 19 June he speaks of paralysis (“I’m still lame”) in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 516–521.

The Revision

After Clausewitz had been ill for quite some time, he resumed work on his study in the summer of 1827. In the meantime he had been able to distance himself from the existing text, of course, and after reading it anew he was very dissatisfied. In the note of 10 July 1827, he clearly states that he wants to rewrite all eight Books and that two important concepts will be decisive:

I regard the first six Books, which are already in a clean copy, merely as a rather formless mass that must be thoroughly reworked once more. The revision will bring out the two types of war with greater clarity at every point. All ideas will then become plainer, their general trend will be more clearly marked, their application shown in greater detail....

This distinction between the two kinds of war is a matter of actual fact. But no less practical is the importance of another point that must be made absolutely clear, namely that *war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means*.⁴⁴

For years, researchers have been discussing the question of where these two famous concepts (*the two types of war* and *war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means*) come from. The answer is very simple in my opinion. These two concepts are found almost verbatim in *Aphorisms on War and Warfare*: Aphorisms 1 and 2 are almost the same word-for-word as in Clausewitz's second note (i.e., that of 1827).⁴⁵ From this we can conclude that in July 1827 he was drawing on this earlier study.

⁴⁴ Clausewitz, "Note of 10 July 1827," in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 69. We may question the translation by Howard and Paret of "die doppelte Art des Krieges" into "the two types of war" and of "die fortgesetzte Staatspolitik" into "the continuation of policy."

⁴⁵ Donker, *Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung' as the first version of Clausewitz's masterpiece*, pp. 39–41.

Aphorism	Note of 10 July 1827 (Howard and Paret)
No. 2	<p>I regard the first six Books, which are already in a clean copy, merely as a rather formless mass that must be thoroughly reworked once more. The revision will bring out the two types of war with greater clarity at every point. All ideas will then become plainer, their general trend will be more clearly marked, their application shown in greater detail.</p> <p>War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to <i>overthrow the enemy</i>—to render him politically helpless or military impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or <i>merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts</i> so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations. Transitions from one type to the other will of course recur in my treatment; but the fact that the aims of the two types are quite different must be clear at all times, and their points of irreconcilability brought out.</p>
No. 1	<p>This distinction between the two kinds of war is a matter of actual fact. But no less practical is the importance of another point that must be made absolutely clear, namely that <i>war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means</i>. If this is firmly kept in mind throughout it will greatly facilitate the study of the subject and the whole will be easier to analyze.</p>

The fact that Clausewitz actually used excerpts from *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* is confirmed in two other manuscripts, one of which is in Koblenz and the other in Berlin. These are the draft versions of the three new chapters of Book I and some of the chapters of Book II, respectively.⁴⁶ These manuscripts provide evidence that between 1827 and 1830 Clausewitz rewrote several chapters for these two Books, using the remaining aphorisms as a starting point.⁴⁷ As a result, the final printed version of Books I and II bears more resemblance to *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* than to the interim version of 1825. This may cause astonishment, but we can easily conclude that Clausewitz was returning to his first version.⁴⁸

The Printed Version of 1832–1834

As has already been shown, Marie von Clausewitz encountered various editorial problems when she wanted to publish her husband's work after his death. In her first preface she points to Book I and in her second preface to Books VII and VIII. And we just saw that Clausewitz also revised Book II. There are no indications that he also rewrote Books III–VI.

⁴⁶ The concept versions of Chapters 1, 2 and 3 for Book I, are in Koblenz, but unfortunately the manuscript is not entirely complete. The conceptual versions of Chapters 1, 2 and 6 for Book II are in Berlin. The latter were published by Hahlweg in *Clausewitz, Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 680–717.

⁴⁷ For Book I, Chapters 1, 2 and 3, and for Book II chapters 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6.

⁴⁸ Donker, *Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung' as the first version of Clausewitz's masterpiece*, pp. 37–39.

This trajectory for Books I and II is confirmed by two manuscripts, which are also kept in Koblenz. Both are written in clean text that is identical to the corresponding printed version of 1832. These have both been set down by an unknown scribe, using of course the original material by Clausewitz himself.

In Graphic 2, these two Books are listed on the top right. And now we can see exactly how the process of revision went. Clausewitz rewrote several chapters for Books I and II, but he never incorporated them himself. After his death his wife caused these Books to be rewritten and printed in the latest form. For most of these new chapters we have an original version from Clausewitz. In all the new chapters, we again find fragments of the aphorisms, which in turn shows that *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* was an important source of inspiration for the revision.

The revision of Books I and II can now be reconstructed in detail. Book I receives three new chapters (1, 2, and 3), and the chapter “Friction in War” moves from 2nd place in the old version to 7th place in the new one. In Book II, Clausewitz deleted no less than eleven chapters: he wrote five new chapters and carried over only the chapter on *Art of War or Science of War* to the final version.⁴⁹

Even more remarkable is the fact that the emergence of Clausewitz's famous first chapter can now be reconstructed very accurately. To write this chapter, he used some parts and some scattered remarks in the margin of the old version of this chapter, revising 17 aphorisms and inserting others almost verbatim, and writing several new sections.⁵⁰ This reconstruction will obviously have great consequences for our interpretation of *Vom Kriege*.

Since there are no manuscripts that suggest a revision of Books III–VI and Marie did not comment on the issue, we may assume that the printer, Ferdinand Dümmler, used the 1825 version written by Clausewitz himself. These four Books are therefore relatively old; Books I and II are partly reworked and therefore younger. About Books VII and VIII nothing can be said with certainty, due to lack of material evidence. In 1825 they were draft versions, and in 1830 they were still conceptual versions. Presumably, Clausewitz thoroughly re-worked Book VIII, but that needs further investigation.

Since we can now quite clearly see what Clausewitz actually revised after 1827, we can also shed light on the date of the third note—a question that has occupied the experts for years. Most likely, Clausewitz first revised Book II and carefully put together the old and new chapters. That's why Marie says nothing about it; the text just had to be written out in clean form. Maybe he was still working on Book VIII, but in any case he wrote the three new chapters for Book I last.⁵¹ And thus it is not surprising that Clausewitz is actually satisfied only with the very last-composed chapter of Book I, i.e., Chapter 1, “What is War?”

⁴⁹ An extensive explanation is contained in my *Aphorismen über den Krieg und die Kriegführung as the first version of Clausewitz's masterpiece*, pp. 17–18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–44.

⁵¹ See also my *The Genesis of Clausewitz's On War Reconsidered*, p. 115.

Conclusions

First of all, it is possible to reconstruct rather closely the genesis of *Vom Kriege* from surviving manuscripts, letters, and notes. The result is a coherent picture (Graphic 2) in which all eight manuscripts could be placed in such way that the chronological order between them became clear. It turns out that we have material from all five steps that made up the writing and publishing process. Only a few elements are missing, especially from Books VII and VIII.

Second, the reconstruction makes it possible to retrace the most important theoretical steps that Clausewitz made between 1816 and 1830. The emergence of *Vom Kriege*, in the conceptual sense, can now be much better studied, because we now can closely follow the evolution of many of his ideas. We also know now which parts of the printed text are rather old and which parts are younger. This reconstruction also gives answers to long-standing questions such as, for instance, how Clausewitz conceived in 1827 of the “two types of war” and his view that “war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means.”

Third, we can conclude that *Vom Kriege* did not emerge as the result of a preconceived plan. Clausewitz never made arrangements with a publisher for the publication of this work, and his superiors never pressed for its completion. Only a few people knew what he was up to. In his spare time in Koblenz he began writing a book of aphorisms on strategy. Once he had made his study of the curriculum of the War College, he undertook a second book, the theme being the art of war. He built on both works in conceiving the third version. After a long period of illness, he decided in 1827 to rewrite *Vom Kriege*, but in 1830 he was still not satisfied with it. So it was the circumstances that enabled him to gradually work on his scientific study, and that led to his ten-volume *Surviving Works*. He would have preferred to be commanding officer of an operational unit. But he did not have that, and so he spent almost fourteen years thinking and writing.

The reconstruction further shows that Clausewitz’s personal war experiences were a very important source of inspiration for *Vom Kriege*. He started writing immediately after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars and “Aphorisms on War and Warfare” stems from those wars. Moreover, this text was not just the first version of *Vom Kriege*; a great deal of the content can be found in the third version and it also plays a crucial role in the last revision. In that sense Clausewitz resorted again and again to his own experiences in war. He proves to be a true military thinker—emphasizing “military,” as practical military experience is crucial in his theory.

Finally, what does this mean for our interpretations of *Vom Kriege*? The reconstruction makes it possible for the first time since 1832 to track Clausewitz’s train of thought between 1816 and 1830. Precisely because many of its important concepts and ideas are already contained in one or more of the 177 aphorisms, it is quite possible to reconstruct how they evolved during these fourteen years, especially as there are often intermediate versions. In any case, it becomes clear that Clausewitz worked from military practice, from which he deduces his concepts step by step, and then further systematizes them.

The reconstruction also shows that Clausewitz did not gain wholly new insights in 1827, as some experts had thought. The basic idea of interrelating the conduct of war with *Politik* is a consistent theme from very early in Clausewitz’s writing career. In 1827, he returned in both literal and figurative terms to his much earlier *Aphorisms on War and Warfare* and decided to pursue that

interrelationship to a greater extent in *Vom Kriege*. And precisely because he takes up his fascinating perception of the role of war within politics in the only chapter with which he was content in 1830, we may conclude that the idea that war is the “continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means,” is the culmination of a fourteen-year thought process. His celebrated first chapter is the foundation for this view: according to his own words, this very chapter best presented his latest ideas.

