

Thomas Waldman. *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Index. x + 203 pp. ISBN 978-1409451396. Price £55.00.

For an idea which appears only once, fleetingly, on one page in a book that stretches to over a thousand in the standard modern German edition, Clausewitz's trinity has generated an unusual amount of attention. Martin van Creveld devoted a whole book to the claim that the trinity underscored the irrelevance of Clausewitz's 'On War' to modern warfare. Now Thomas Waldman has written a book to support the counterclaim that the trinity remains 'the central theoretical device for understanding war'. Waldman usefully focuses on what he calls the primary level of the trinity: war conceived as the interplay of reason (read by him as politics), chance and passion. What many, including Van Creveld, tout as the trinity — the people, military and government — he correctly sees as an 'illustrative device' which is of secondary order importance and which should anyway not be too closely associated with the modern state. As others (including myself) have argued this secondary trinity could easily be applied to any form of political organisation. Waldman's approach also leads him to a more sophisticated understanding of the common notion that 'war is a continuation of policy by other means'. He approvingly quotes Antulio Echevarria, who (again correctly in my view) wrote that 'policy is shaped by the processes and conditions within which it is developed, in a word by politics' (p. 96).

By putting the trinity at the heart of Clausewitz's theory of war, Waldman reads the whole of 'On War' (which as said never mentions the trinity again) through the lens of this conceptualisation of war, connecting idea after idea, quote after quote, with each of the three elements that make up this entity. That is a useful and at times illuminating exercise, illustrating the breadth of Clausewitz's thinking and his concern with the contextual factors shaping war. In so doing, Waldman joins the ranks of those who seek to complete Clausewitz's unfinished work by stretching the lineaments sketched out in the final paragraphs of the only finished first chapter, to encapsulate firmly the whole of 'On War'.

This is an undertaking fraught with more hazard than the book under review suggests. Take the word trinity. Clausewitz was never one to choose his terms lightly. The word should immediately give away that, as in Catholicism, the concept represents a fundamental credo. In case a reader overlooks that, the adjoining adjective 'wunderlich' underlines that Clausewitz's trinity also struggles with, and goes beyond, reason. He clearly believed that his trinity was a strange, wondrous object of astonishment. This was not so much because the elements comprising it were strange bedfellows. The surprise was that he had had to develop the concept at all. Reason was the solid foundation of his theory, but the rigours of reason had led him to develop doubts about the applicability of his theory to reality, and especially the claim theory gave rise to that all war must involve a mutual process of forceful disarmament. The trinity, as Azar Gat argued persuasively more than twenty years ago, was his late leap of faith towards a new and radical philosophical method to reconcile the two. The author's astonishment at his own conundrum should warn the reader that tracing the lineaments of his new theory would not be straightforward.

Absent in Waldman's book is a discussion of the tensions in Clausewitz's thought and his ability to express surprise, honest frustration and defiant dogmatism at his recalcitrant object of study. Indeed, the reasons why Clausewitz saw fit to develop the trinity so sudden and late in life are not explained. This may be partly due to Waldman's reliance on the Howard and Paret translation of Clausewitz, rather than on the German text. The original language conveys with far greater immediacy the philosophically rigorous yet emotionally laden and doubt-ridden quality of the argument. Waldman, like Howard and Paret, views Clausewitz as an organic thinker who refined his theory as he grew older. For Waldman everything can be reconciled in the trinity. The result is an exposition that is perhaps too indeterminate. 'None' of the trinity's three tendencies, he writes, 'represent forces which necessarily cause escalation — they are *a priori* ambiguous in this respect. They all can lead to extremes, but equally they may exert countervailing and limiting forces.' (p. 163) Such a reading may please those who prefer very broad and malleable theory, including many military historians. Others may think that Waldman's approach overly contextualises war and makes 'the thing in itself' disappear from view. Given Clausewitz's passionate attachment to analysing war itself through the deployment of very specific and high-handed theory and method, a disregard of these matters makes the book's interpretation suited to our times, but likely quite distant from the 'real' Clausewitz it purports to unveil.

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