

# Who Won at Waterloo? Rühle von Lilienstern, Jomini, Clausewitz, and the Decisive Battle

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## ABSTRACT

*Napoleon and his supposed recipe for victory became the great model for subsequent generations of strategists. This is odd in the light of his epic defeats of Leipzig and Waterloo, and of the total disappearance of his empire. This essay examines whether and to what extent this is due to the first three great analysts of his “way of war”, Rühle von Lilienstern and Clausewitz in the German-speaking world, and francophone Jomini. We find their analysis sufficiently complex to exculpate them in part from the excessive adulation of Napoleon by following strategists. Nevertheless, especially Clausewitz’s and Jomini’s writing focused so much on Napoleonic warfare that through this his way of war came to dominate strategic thinking.*

## Introduction

‘War nowadays generally appears in its natural form, i.e. as a bloody encounter of nations, in which each contending side seeks the complete defeat, or, if possible, the destruction of the enemy.’ Thus wrote Colmar von der Goltz in 1895. Anything less than that would not do, he argued, as Napoleon’s wars had shown us.<sup>1</sup> Goltz was typical not only for Prussian thinking on the eve of the First World War, but also for many of his generation in other Western countries. In France, the later Lieutenant General L. Maillard, wrote in his *Elements of War* (1891): ‘The destruction of the enemy is the aim; the offensive is the means’.<sup>2</sup> His compatriot Captain Georges Gilbert, called for a return to Napoleonic warfare. Had not France invented this major and decisive form of major warfare? Under Napoleon’s leadership, it had attained perfection. After 1815, however, France had lost ‘the sense of her own history’; forgotten her own *acquis*; neglected her military heritage. Having thus offended her genius, she was duly punished in 1870, when Prussia turned the Napoleonic recipe for success on her. France thus had to find her genius again, go

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<sup>1</sup> Goltz, Comar Freiherr v.d., *Krieg- und Heerführung* (1895, Berlin: R.v. Decker’s Verlag, 1901<sup>2</sup>) trs as *The Conduct of War: A Short Treatise on its most important Branches and Guiding Rules* trs by Major G.F. Leveson (London: Kegan Paul, 1899), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Azar Gat, *Military Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.122-25.

back to Napoleonic warfare, and she would once again emerge victorious.<sup>3</sup> There were few who, like Jean Jaurès, argued to the contrary that Napoleon had not provided a recipe for success but for disaster, and that with his insatiable lust for war and conquest, and his unending string of battles, he had risked and lost the great *acquis* of the French Revolution, a loss symbolised in his defeat at Leipzig and, of course, Waterloo.<sup>4</sup>

Here is the puzzle. How did majority opinion arrive at this interpretation of Napoleon's wars, when these so clearly showed not only the triumph of his method, but also his resounding defeat? To address this question, we shall examine here how three early interpreters of Napoleon who themselves witnessed his rise and fall saw this issue, and whether it was their writings that cast the mould for later interpretations. Two of them in particular are seen as having laid the ground for the great yearning for a return to the decisive Napoleonic battle, what I have elsewhere called the Napoleonic Paradigm. Yet Napoleon was also decisively defeated, especially at Waterloo, less lastingly but at the time decisively also at Leipzig two years earlier. This fact relativizes the importance of battle in war and puts it in a larger context of the aim to establish a new situation that would last. Is this not reflected in the writing of the first great interpreters of Napoleon? We shall therefore examine here how Rühle von Lilienstern, Jomini, and Clausewitz evaluated Napoleon's battles, with particular focus on Waterloo.

### **The Experience of the Three Authors**

Before moving on to consider this question, here are some brief background notes on the three authors; as it stands to reason that their personal experiences influenced their perceptions of the Napoleonic Wars. The three authors had a remarkable amount in common, as we shall see. All three were born within 15 months of each other, all three came from fairly humble origins, all three were born to large families with numerous children, and while Rühle and Clausewitz were farmed out to become officer cadets for sheer economic necessity (the state would now take on the cost of feeding, clothing and educating them), Jomini chose his military career over a civilian alternative his family wanted for him. Thus, all three became soldiers, and all three changed sides at some stage in the Napoleonic Wars, albeit for different reasons. Of the three, only Clausewitz took part in the Battle of Waterloo. Rühle and Clausewitz were in the same young officers' promotion. Both Rühle and Clausewitz worked, and in due course directed, the Prussian Military Academy. Jomini also went into the military educational sector: he would persuade

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Gilbert, *Essais de critique militaire*, (Paris: Librairie de la Nouvelle Revue, 1890 ; repr. Paris: Hachette, 1978), id. : *Sept études militaires*. (Paris: Librairie de la Nouvelle Revue, 1892).

<sup>4</sup> Jean Jaurès, *L'Armée nouvelle: L'organisation socialiste de la France* (originally Nov. 1911, Paris: Eds Sociales, 1978).

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the Russian tsar to found a military academy. All three were personal tutors to princes.

Rühle and Clausewitz thus knew each other well, and Rühle definitely knew Jomini, as he published Jomini's first article. Jomini and Clausewitz may have met when both were in the services of Tsar Alexander, but no evidence of this has yet been unearthed. Clausewitz, who knew French, must have read Jomini's earlier work, such as his article in Rühle's journal. Jomini's German was rudimentary, so he must have struggled to read *On War*, but we know that he did, not least because he criticised it fiercely for stealing some of his ideas.

### **Antoine de Jomini**

The oldest of the three by a year, Antoine Henri Jomini was born on 6 March 1779 in the tiny Swiss Francophone town of Payerne. The family persuaded young Antoine to become an apprentice banker in Bâle at the age of 16, where he acquired some rudimentary German. A year later he moved to Paris to work for other banks, but his heart was with the great military events of the day which he monitored closely from the French capital. In 1798 he volunteered to join the Swiss armed forces, having the luck of being appointed aide of the new Swiss Minister of War in Bern, serving also under his successor whom he assisted with reforms of the Swiss militia.

Jomini's passion was writing about war, but he was ardently committed to only one thing – his own career. Even in his early 20s, he wanted faster promotion, which led him to resign his commission, and to return to Paris. He had a talent for writing (in French), and he started to write a military history of the wars of Frederick II, and produced a draft of his reflections on war, *Principles of the Art of War*, and the first volume of his *Treatise of Grand Tactics*, initially without an income.<sup>5</sup> His next important step up the career ladder came when he met the Alsatian French officer, Michel Ney, who would become a Marshal in 1804, and made Jomini his aide-de-camp in the following year, but actually allowed Jomini to continue his writings.<sup>6</sup> It is thus that the Swiss Jomini came into the employment of Napoleon's forces, which continued until 1813. Jomini accompanied Ney on the campaigns of Ulm and Austerlitz, meanwhile writing the following volumes of his *Traité*. He met Napoleon himself, and never ceased to brag about the great impression he made on the

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<sup>5</sup> Henri Antoine Jomini, *Principes fondamentaux de l'art de guerre* (written in 1804, first printed in Glogau in 1807) ; id. *Traité de grande tactique ou relation de la guerre de sept ans, extraite de Tempelhof, commentée et comparée aux principales opérations de la dernière guerre* vols. 1 & 2 (Paris: Giguet et Michaud; Magimel, 1805), vol. 3 (Paris: Giguet et Michaud; Magimel, 1806).

<sup>6</sup> Jomini, *Observations sur la probabilité d'une guerre avec la Prusse et sur les opérations militaires qui auront vraisemblablement lieu* (s.l.: s.n., 1806); id.: *Traité des grandes opérations militaires, ou, Relation critique et comparative des campagnes de Frédéric et de l'empereur Napoléon* vol. 4-6 plus 1 Atlas (Paris: Giguet et Michaud, 1807-1811).

emperor, in particular with a prediction of Napoleon's campaign plans for 1806. Jomini was in his entourage in the following years and was created a 'Baron of the [French] Empire' in 1808, no mean achievement for a peasant boy from Vaud. The corps to which he was attached then moved to Spain, where he gained a frightening insight into the Spanish insurgency against the French, but soon moved on again. Being moved from Ney's command to that of Marshal Berthier, with whom the dislike was mutual, Jomini first pleaded ill health to obtain furlough and then started casting about for a new employer. Apparently the Russians had made an overture to Jomini in 1808, and as in 1810, Jomini resigned his French commission, and offered his service to the Russians – admittedly at a time when Russia and France were not yet enemies. Instead of accepting his resignation, Napoleon made Jomini a general at the end of 1810, and a year later, in January 1812, he was appointed director of the historical section of the general staff of the Grande Armée. He then took part in Napoleon's Russian campaign, but in the lucky position as governor of Vilna and Smolensk, and he later moved on to Borisov, today in the Tverskaya oblast, half-way between Vilna and Moscow. Here Jomini came down with flu, possibly with pneumonia, but survived. Not entirely recovered, he followed the sorry remnants of the French army to Danzig, and then to Paris in January 1813.

In the spring of 1813, he joined Ney again in East Germany, but also renewed his quarrel with Berthier, who took disciplinary action against Jomini over a trifling matter. This led to Jomini's second resignation in August 1813.<sup>7</sup> The Berlin newspapers would call this a desertion, as Jomini went straight from the French forces stationed near Dresden to join Tsar Alexander's forces near Prague from whom, in the meantime, he had finally secured a firm offer of employment.<sup>8</sup> Jomini was instantly made lieutenant general. The Tsar himself took him under his protection, again assigning him historical writing tasks. At the time of the Battle of Leipzig, in October 1813, Jomini was thus on the side of France's enemies. He took part in the 1815 campaign against Napoleon, but along with Russian and Austrian forces, Jomini was absent from the Battle of Waterloo: he left Vienna for Southern Germany at the end of May, and was in Heidelberg for a meeting between Prince von Schwarzenberg and the Tsar from 12-18 June, and thus at the time of the Battle of Waterloo. He entered Paris as a member of the Tsar's company on 10 July.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, he later wrote an account of the battle which he had not witnessed in his *Political and Military Life of Napoleon* published in 1827 in form of a biography curiously written as though it were presented by the emperor himself before a tribunal of judges composed of Alexander the Great, Caesar, and Frederic II of Prussia. Couched in terms of an apology, it did not include any critical reflection on

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<sup>7</sup> John Shy, 'Jomini', in Peter Paret (ed.): *Makers of Modern Strategy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1986), p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Langendorf, *Faire la guerre: Antoine-Henri Jomini* vol. 1 (Geneva: Ed. Georg, 2001), p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.120-136.

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the causes or consequences of the defeat.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Jomini was among Tsar Alexander's advisers at the Vienna Congress in 1815, the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, in Verona in 1823.

Jomini continued with his military writing, busily recycling parts of his earlier works but also adding insightful new historiographic works such as his life of Napoleon (see above).<sup>11</sup> He was appointed tutor to the tsar's two younger brothers, one of whom would succeed Alexander as Tsar Nicholas I in 1825, and who continued to keep Jomini in his employment. In 1828 he accompanied Nicholas on his Turkish campaign. During these years, Jomini was allowed to travel to Paris and to Switzerland, and his Russian income seems to have been supplemented by the revenue engendered by his publications. He worked on Alexander and Nicholas to create a military academy, but when this project finally became reality, a Russian general was made its director, to Jomini's great disappointment. In 1837, however, he was made the tutor to yet another future Tsar, the future Alexander II. At the outbreak of the Crimean War, he was once again invited by Tsar Nicholas to act as his adviser in his operations against the Anglo-Franco-Ottoman alliance. After a long peripatetic life spent shuttling between St Petersburg, Paris, and Switzerland, Jomini finally retired to Paris, where he died on 22 March 1869.

### **August Rühle von Lilienstern**

(Johann Jacob Otto) August Rühle von Lilienstern was born in Berlin on 16 April 1780 to a Hessian lieutenant in the service of the Prussian monarchy, and to a Pomeranian mother. Clausewitz's senior by a mere two months, both boys were sent to join the Prussian cadet corps in Berlin at the age of 13, and both were in the same, first promotion of (then) Colonel Scharnhorst's newly founded Academy for Officers in Berlin. The two students competed for the top marks in their year, with Clausewitz winning by a whisker. While Scharnhorst took Clausewitz under his wing, another lecturer, Massenbach, became Rühle's patron, and assured his admission to the newly formed General Quartermaster's Staff in 1804. Under Massenbach's command, Rühle participated in the campaign of 1806, losing his position after the Prussian defeat of Jena and Auerstedt.

Jena lay within the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, and Rühle seems to have taken lodgings in Weimar after the battle. Here he wrote an eye-witness account of that campaign, in which Duke Charles Augustus of Saxe-Weimar had taken part, who in turn hired Rühle as tutor to his second son, the teenage Prince Bernhard. Rühle clearly had enough time for research and writing, founding a journal devoted to political and

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<sup>10</sup> [Henri, Baron de Jomini:] *Vie politique et militaire de Napoléon*, vol. 4 (Paris: Anselin, 1827), pp. 605-645.

<sup>11</sup> Jomini, *Tableau analytique des principales combinaisons de la guerre, et de leurs rapports avec la politique des Etats, pour servir d'introduction au Traité des grandes opérations militaires* (Paris: chez Anselm, successeur de Magimel, 1830); id.: *Précis de l'Art de la Guerre* 2 vols. (Paris: Anselin, 1837).

military matters which he called *Pallas* after the Greek goddess of war, Pallas Athena. Rühle himself benefitted from the intellectual climate of Weimar, the most vibrant intellectual centre of the German-speaking lands of the time, marked by Goethe, Schiller, and many other poets and “thinkers”. Both may well have been moved to Dresden, however, where the regiment to which Prince Bernhard was assigned was stationed. When in 1809 his tutee, at the age of 17, was dispatched with a Saxon contingent to fight alongside Napoleon’s armies against Austria, Rühle with the rank of Colonel accompanied him, keeping the war diary. The campaign culminated in Napoleon’s victory at Wagram. Rühle later published an eye-witness account of the campaign.

In 1811, when Prince Bernhard no longer needed his tuition, Rühle was dismissed, and after giving lectures on war in Dresden,<sup>12</sup> he unsuccessfully tried his hand at farming, using up his small fortune. In 1813 he therefore volunteered to join the Prussian army, to fight, this time *against* the French, in Blücher’s general staff. He wrote a *Military Catechism* or handbook, and worked closely with Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, and Müffling, until a throat disease forced him to take prolonged sick leave. In 1813 he produced his short treatise criticising Kant’s *Eternal Peace*, originally headed *An Apology of War*, which he republished one year later under the title *Vom Kriege* (On War), which inspired Clausewitz’s choice of title for his own more famous work.

In September 1813, Rühle rejoined Blücher’s Headquarters. He co-ordinated the Allies’ operations before the great Battle of Leipzig (the ‘Battle of Nations’), gaining admiration for his successful shuttle diplomacy between Prussian, Russian, and Austrian commanders-in-chief, and may have helped effect the decision of the Saxons to betray their French ally and to join the Austro-Prusso-Russian coalition. After Leipzig, Rühle was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and Commissar General for military procurement and recruitment, working from Frankfurt am Main. He was then dispatched to the Vienna Congress, and was thus far from the events at Waterloo. After a brief secondment to Aachen (Aix la Chapelle) to help the commanding general to organise a militia, he returned to Berlin, assuming a variety of duties, including Chief of the Section for War History of the newly formed Grosser Generalstab, and from 1821 chief of the Grosser Generalstab itself under Lieutenant General von Müffling. At the same time, Rühle taught at the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* (the Prussian military academy), alongside Clausewitz. In 1817/18 Rühle published a *Handbuch für den Offizier* (handbook or field manual) in two volumes, and acted as editor of another military journal, besides continuing to write prolifically.

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<sup>12</sup> Which he later published as *Aufsätze über Gegenstände und Ereignisse aus dem Gebiete des Kriegswesens*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Mittler, 1818), vol. 1.

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A Lieutenant General since 1835, he in 1837 became Clausewitz's third successor as Director of the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule*, and finally became inspector general for military education and director of the officers' exams board. He was a member of commissions devoted to education, military justice, and the development of the railway system. In 1839 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Kiel. He died aged 67 on 1 July 1847 in Salzburg on the way back from a spa where he had hoped to find relief from his recurrent throat ailment.



Image 1: *Allgemeine Kriegsschule (Prussian War Academy), Unter den Linden 74, Berlin*

### **Carl von Clausewitz**

Like Rühle, Carl Philipp Gottlieb von Clausewitz was the son of a Prussian military officer of low rank; he himself was somewhat ashamed of his paternal home which he described as being frequented by his father's former fellow-soldiers, discussing former campaigns in a less than intellectual fashion,<sup>13</sup> and one assumes, lubricated by much German beer. Carl's paternal grandfather, Benedict Gottlob Clausewitz (1692-1749), the intellectual of the family who had been a first a protestant minister and then professor of Theology at the University of Merseburg, died when Carl's father Friedrich Georg Gabriel Clausewitz, the youngest of six sons, was in his infancy, and the intellectual strand had clearly skipped over a generation.

The family fortunes were inversely proportional to the number of children. Carl, born just three months after Rühle, in the small provincial town of Burg near Magdeburg, was one of six children, the youngest of four boys. Like his father before him, Carl and two of his brothers were too many for their family to feed, so they were sent off to become military cadets in early youth (all three of them would

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<sup>13</sup> 'News about Prussia in its great catastrophe' (1823/24), quoted in Eberhard Kessel (ed.): *Carl von Clausewitz - Strategie aus dem Jahr 1804 mit Zusätzen von 1808 und 1809* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1943), p. 9.

eventually become generals). They thus escaped the influence of their parents during their most formative years: Carl was twelve when he left home for good.

Before the theologian, some Clausewitzes had aspired to a low form of nobility, designated by the little word 'von', but as this was so totally at odds with their actual social standing, it had been dropped by Carl's more immediate ancestors. Carl, his father and his brothers would later take great pains to reactivate it. They eventually succeeded with the help of Royal grace and favour, as it was important to have that particle in front of their name for promotion within the Prussian army. Moreover, his engagement to Marie von Brühl, a descendant of the highest nobility (a love match if ever there was one), lasted for years because the refusal of her family to accept her marriage to what they considered to be an upstart of lowly origins.

Carl, however, followed a natural instinct to improve himself, and given the chance to use the library which Frederick II had left behind in the palace of Neuruppin, where the adolescent Carl was stationed, he read voraciously. Largely as an autodidact, he finally received some formal education when, along with Rühle, he entered Scharnhorst's Academy at the age of 21. After graduation, Scharnhorst in turn presented his protégé to the court, and Carl by now was sufficiently presentable – one imagines he might have shed his regional Saxon accent and adopted the finer Hanoverian pronunciation of his mentor – to be made companion to Prince August Ferdinand. At court, he also met his future wife.

Throughout his life, France was the enemy for Clausewitz. He first saw military action at the age of 13 during the French Revolutionary Wars. All his subsequent military clashes, bar the last in his life, were with the armies of Napoleon. He harboured a deep dislike for all things French, even though Prussia's crushing defeat at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806 took August Ferdinand and Clausewitz to Paris for over a year, as gentlemen prisoners of war, which meant they could play tourists all the time, had free board and lodging, and access to some of Europe's finest libraries; any civilised person's dream.

Back in Berlin in 1808, Clausewitz was made tutor to the Crown Prince, the future King Frederick William IV, while his day job was teaching at the military academy that was established in 1810 as the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* in the centre of Berlin (pictured above). Next to Weimar, Berlin was the hub of intellectual development, where a ferocious and infectious new brand of German nationalism flowered, well-watered by the philosophers Hegel and Fichte. Clausewitz was indeed strongly infected, so much so that he resigned his commission in 1812, unwilling to serve a king whom he saw as kowtowing to the French and thus adding to the humiliation of Prussia, and he offered his services to the Russians, at much the same time as Jomini, but for very different reasons. These he articulated in his "Confession Memorandum", written in



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1812 and addressed to his new mentor, General Neidhardt von Gneisenau, penned in a style so ferociously nationalistic that it served Hitler's propaganda apparatus as material for a broadcast inciting the Germans to refuse to surrender even at the very end of the Second World War. (A year later, equally infected by the rabid nationalism of the time, Rühle published his own ghastly *Apology of War*.)

As a staff officer in the Russian Army (where he was not necessarily of great use to anybody, as there were many such émigrés in the Tsar's employment and Clausewitz spoke no Russian), he witnessed Napoleon's catastrophic 1812 campaign close-up, including in particular the battles of Smolensk and Borodino, and saw Moscow (which he referred to as "the capital") burning. This experience, which he recorded in a campaign history,<sup>14</sup> would strongly inspire his Book VI of *On War*. Clausewitz was well aware that the catastrophic losses of the French Army were due not to any defeat in battle, but to illness, caused by the long marches and poor supplies, deficient medical services and a particularly hot summer. He squarely blamed Napoleon's 'bloody tactics and extravagant offensives' for this.

Clausewitz participated in the negotiations between Russians and Prussians which would lead to the Treaty of Tauroggen of December 1812, by which Prussia joined the Russian war-effort against Napoleon. In the summer of 1813, Clausewitz was re-admitted to the Prussian military through Gneisenau's patronage, but his resignation in 1812 could still be viewed, retrospectively, as desertion (and implicit criticism of the King and his politics) and may have been seen as a stain on his CV.

Nevertheless, fully readmitted as an officer to the Prussian armed forces, Clausewitz thus took part in the campaigns of 1813-1815: in August 1813 he was Chief of Staff to Lieutenant General Count Wallmoden's corps that was stationed about 100 miles NW of Berlin.<sup>15</sup> He took no part in the battle of Leipzig, but did take part in the Battles of Ligny and Waterloo, after each of which he wrote to his wife to say that he was well, and that the same applied to all their closer acquaintances. In his second letter he told her that on the day after the main Battle of Waterloo, Marshal Grouchy returned to the charge and, with fresh forces which had not seen action on the previous day, attacked the Prussian third army corps to which Clausewitz was assigned. Marshal Grouchy's forces drove the Prussians back across the road to Brussels and almost up to Leuven, but had to give up and retreat to Namur on the following day, as he was cut off from the other French forces. Clausewitz's army

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<sup>14</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *Der Feldzug von 1812, der Feldzug von 1813 bis zum Waffenstillstand und der Feldzug von 1814 in Frankreich, dans Hinterlassene Werke des Generals Carl von Clausewitz* Tome 7 (Berlin: Dümmler, 1835).

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Gneisenau of 4 August 1813, Werner Hahlweg (ed), *Carl von Clausewitz: Schriften, Aufsätze, Studien, Briefe* vol. 2.1 (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), p. 148.

corps then moved south towards Charleroi, and then took up position in Étampes outside Paris, where Napoleon finally surrendered.<sup>16</sup>

After the end of the wars, Clausewitz was sent back to teach at the military academy, now called the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* in Berlin, together with Rühle von Lilienstern. In 1818, Clausewitz became its second director, following Carl Andreas von Boguslawski. This is when he found the time to write *On War*, and a few other smaller pieces (such as a campaign plan for a new war against France) and campaign histories. While this was the most productive time in his life which would ultimately lead to his lasting fame, he was keen to see action again. In 1830, together with Gneisenau, he was sent off to forestall an uprising in Prussian-occupied Poland which might have followed the anti-Russian insurgency further East. Both officers did not fall heroically in battle, but very suddenly succumbed to a cholera epidemic; when Marie received Clausewitz's last letter in 1831, unbeknownst to her, her husband was already dead.

His *magnum opus* remained unfinished, as he had feared it might when he left a note on the manuscript prior to departing for Poland. His grieving widow published it posthumously, together with his campaign histories and other major pieces of writing, not attempting to edit out any of the many contradictions which the unfinished work still contained.

### **The Decisive Battle in Their Works**

So: did Rühle von Lilienstern, Jomini, and Clausewitz miss the point that Waterloo (like Leipzig two years earlier) was a defeat for Napoleon? Did they question the applicability of the Napoleonic Paradigm as the sure way to success?

#### **- Rühle von Lilienstern**

Rühle did not miss the point of Napoleon's defeat. Of the three authors, he was the one who remained utterly unimpressed by Napoleon's (or for that matter, anybody else's) big battles. In his field manual, he noted even in 1817 that "the engagement" (*das Gefecht*), a generic term which includes anything from a skirmish to a major battle, did not necessarily have to aim for "victory". He conceded that both belligerents ceaselessly aimed to win at the highest military level and to bring about a glorious end to the war, but he stressed that all military action was subordinate to a higher political purpose (*Zweck*) that would vary according to the particularities of each war.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See his letters of 17 and 21 June 1815 to his wife in Karl Linnebach (ed.): *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz: ein Lebensbild in Briefen und Tagebuchglättern* (Berlin: Martin Warneck, 1917), p.380f; and of 18-24 July 1815 to Gneisenau, in Hahlweg (ed): *Clausewitz: Schriften, Aufsätze, Studien, Briefe*, pp.180-184.

<sup>17</sup> [August] R[ühle] v[on] L[lilienstern]: *Handbuch für den Offizier zur Belehrung im Frieden und zum Gebrauch im Felde* (Berlin: G.Reimer, 1817), p.2.

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He elaborated on this point in the second volume of his field manual, published in the following year. Here he stressed that both war itself and any of its operations were subordinated to a higher purpose, which on the level of war would always be a political purpose. And this is where we find the passage which is perhaps his greatest insight:

[O]perations only serve to make possible the final purpose of the war. Whatever is achieved in these individual operations is not the ultimate purpose in itself, but only a means or a step towards the final purpose, a condition for the possibility of the realisation of attaining this final purpose. If the success of these operations does not lead to the realisation of the political purposes, if indeed they clash with them, or do not further their attainment, they are pointless, however brilliant and exemplary their achievement may {otherwise} have been. ... [p.9] Some say that the aim of war is victory. Others say it is peace. Even others say it is the defence ... or the conquest of large pieces of land. In some cases any of these definitions may be right. In general, however, one is as unsatisfactory as the other, for otherwise each of these {three definitions} would have to State the same. Victory, however, is not always the necessary condition of conquest or of peace, and peace is not always the necessary result of victory and conquest.

Here he inserted a footnote that read:

Each war has an outstanding or a main purpose, which, however, according to the opinion of some, is not always peace. Peace can be seen merely as the end-state of war. The obstacle which in war obstructs the attainment of the main purpose is the enemy, and it has to be cleared out of the way. In the best case this may lead to victory, but for this reason alone, victory is not the main purpose of the war, but only a subordinate purpose within war. If somebody concludes a peace without attaining the main purpose – that which was supposed to be attained by the war – he can be called the defeated party, however many battles he may have won, even if he has won all of them. {End of note}

The main passage then continued:

To the contrary, victory and conquest are often causes of the continuation, the renewal and the multiplication of war. Often, peace comes because none of the warring parties was able to defeat the other, and often war is not made in order to establish peace.

Rühle had by implication correctly worked out that Napoleon was not interested in peace: indeed, as Bruno Colson's study of Napoleon's writings and reported conversations shows, he distrusted peace and thought of it solely as an armistice in which to prepare the next campaign.<sup>18</sup> In short, Rühle is not to be blamed for the subsequent apotheosis of the decisive battle. But then, Rühle's writings were soon completely eclipsed by those of Jomini and Clausewitz .

### **- Clausewitz**

In *On War*, Clausewitz mentions Waterloo – or rather, as the Prussians called it, Belle Alliance – six times. Tellingly, he distinguished between decisive battles, where one side was morally defeated – citing Jena and Belle Alliance as examples – and non-decisive battles, where he cited the Battle of Borodino during Napoleon's Russian campaign.<sup>19</sup> At Borodino on 7 September 1812, Napoleon's forces were victorious on the battlefield, but the Russians by no means admitted defeat in the campaign which, of course, they ultimately won. Here, then, we see the definition of decisive battle in contrast to a victorious, but non-decisive battle made and illustrated with actual historical examples. Interestingly, a little further on, he blamed Napoleon for having allowed Waterloo to become such a decisive battle, by trying until the very end to turn the tide, while it would have been wiser to have opted for an orderly retreat and to have tried his luck again in a subsequent battle.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, Clausewitz here effectively criticised Napoleon for not having followed the politically calculating recipe of the commanders in the wars prior to the French Revolution – precisely the style of warfare in which decisive battles were so rare. Also, we find here the importance of morale underscored: at Jena, Ratisbon, Leipzig and Waterloo; Clausewitz opined, the side that was eventually defeated was brought down in part by illness and fatigue and the constant fear that one might already be defeated.<sup>21</sup> Upon further reflection, Clausewitz also noticed that the banal factor of the force ratio was (just as?) important: with one sole exception (Dresden 1813) , Clausewitz claimed that Napoleon had won whenever he had superior forces, and had lost when his armies were outnumbered – such as at the battles of Leipzig, Brienne, Laon, and “Belle Alliance”.<sup>22</sup>

Waterloo thus does serve as an example, both of the decisive battle which for Clausewitz was long the central aim of warfare, and of fatal mistakes made by “Bonaparte, the greatest general of modern times”.<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz himself thus offers a nuanced picture both of Napoleon's achievements and of the desirability of a decisive

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<sup>18</sup> Bruno Colson (ed), *Napoléon: De La Guerre* (Paris : Perrin, 2011), pp.32-36.

<sup>19</sup> Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, IV.4 (p. 235 of the Howard & Paret translation). See also IV.13.

<sup>20</sup> Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, IV.9 (p.251f in H&P).

<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, IV.12 (p.270 in H&P).

<sup>22</sup> Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, V.3 (p.283 in H&P).

<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, V.3 (p. 283 in the H&P translation).

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battle; decisive because taken to its logical conclusion it would bring about the political change desired by one side. Clausewitz also wrote a history of the campaign of 1815, and gave its detail a considerable amount of attention. He drew on eyewitness reports but also on sources subsequently printed, including Napoleon's memoirs written in St Helena, and Fleury de Chabulon's memoirs. He developed the conclusion he had presented in *On War*, namely, that Napoleon had brought the total defeat upon himself by passing up the moment when he could still have formed a rear guard of soldiers to manage an orderly retreat of the remnants of his army. When night came, it was too late, and the confusion on the French side was no longer manageable.<sup>24</sup> Having studied the state of the fortifications of Paris itself, and the numbers of forces in and around Paris, on both sides, however, Clausewitz concluded that another battle outside Paris would not have reversed the situation permanently, even if Napoleon had managed to secure the orderly withdrawal of more of his forces at Belle Alliance.<sup>25</sup> In short, only a very superficial reading of Clausewitz would suggest an unconditional prescription on the quest for a decisive battle.

### **- Jomini**

It was probably Jomini who was chiefly guilty of devising a general rule for victory, namely, the big battle, even though, as we shall see, he later backtracked on his emphasis on battle. We find it already in the little article which he wrote in Posnan in 1806, and which, as an internationally recognised rising star, Jomini was invited to publish by Rühle von Lilienstern in the very first issue of Rühle's periodical *Pallas* in 1808. It begins:

The art of war is the simplest thing, if one considers it with common sense and a clear mind: the entire construction of combinations depends on one key, and that key is a general principle which can be grasped by any thinking person. If one knows that principle, one only needs common sense to apply it on all occasions.<sup>26</sup>

Jomini drew on examples from the Seven Years' War to the (still ongoing) French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

The fundamental principle, by the application of which all combinations are good and without which all are bad, is very simple: it consists of *bringing, with the greatest mass of one's forces, a combined effort onto the decisive point.* [Italics in original] ...

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<sup>24</sup> *Hinterlassene Werke des Generals Carl von Clausewitz über Krieg und Kriegführung*, vol. 8 *Der Feldzug von 1815 in Frankreich* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1835), 183f.

<sup>25</sup> *Hinterlassene Werke* vol. 8, pp. 213-227.

<sup>26</sup> Colonel H. Jomini, 'L'art de la Guerre', in *Pallas* No. 1 of (1808), pp. 31-40, p.31; my translation.

1. The first means is to seize the initiative of the movements. ...
2. The second means is to direct one's movements against the most important weak part [of the adversary's forces]. The choice of this part depends on the position of the enemy. The most important point will always be the one which to occupy gives us the most favourable chances and the greatest results; for example the positions from which one can control the communications of the enemy with his base of operations ...
3. ... if one has to attack, by preference, the end of a line, one must also beware of attacking both ends at once, unless one has very much larger forces. ...
4. In order to be able to deploy [*opérer*] a great mass against one *sole* point, it is thus important to keep ones forces together on a more-less square area in order to keep them available. Large fronts are also contrary to good principles, as they are cut up by lines, large detachments and isolated divisions unable to support them.
5. One of the most effective means to apply the general principle that we have outlined is to make the enemy commit errors contrary to this principle. ...
6. When taking the initiative of a decisive movement, it is important not to neglect anything to find out about the enemy's positions and the movements that he might make.
7. In order to conduct a war well, it is not enough to move one's masses ably to the most important points, one must also know how to engage them. ...
8. If the art of war consists of concerting a superior effort of one mass against the [enemy's] weak points, it is incontestably necessary to pursue a beaten army vigorously. ...
9. In order to make the superior impact of a physical mass decisive, a general must spend much effort on raising the morale of his army. ...<sup>27</sup>

Under point 10, Jomini claimed that this would lead to the realisation that there are three factors of necessary to realise this principle: (1) enveloping (*embrasser*) the enemy's lines of operation; (2) 'the art of bringing one's masses the most rapidly possible to the decisive point of the main line of operations, or of the incidental line'; (3) 'the art of combining the simultaneous employment of one's largest mass against the most important point of a battlefield.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-38.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

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All this was of course written before Napoleon's decisive defeats of 1813 and 1815. We do, however, find that Jomini's mind about how to achieve a victory was essentially made up before Napoleon's defeats. His 'recipe' would echo through his other writings, uninfluenced by his own realisation – in my view, his most important contribution to strategic thinking – that wars can have a whole series of different aims, and that these influence the way wars are fought. In turn, this realisation should have, but effectively did not, lead him to a nuanced view of how to achieve these aims, and to the realisation that Napoleon's way of war was not the recipe for enduring victory.

In his *Précis of the Art of War*, published, as we have seen, in the late 1830s, Jomini was much more circumspect. He clarified that political aspects – which he discussed in particular in relation to the causes of wars – often overrode the principles of strategy<sup>29</sup> (which he defined in a more restricted way than writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: 'strategy takes armies to the decisive point of the area of operations, prepares the chances of the battle, and influences its results in advance.'<sup>30</sup>). He noted that 'it is said that battles are definitively the principal and decisive action in war; this assertion is not always true...'. Armies could be wasted in many little engagements, or a small but decisive victory somewhere could lead to the same result as 'great strategic combinations'.<sup>31</sup> This last point, however, lends itself to ambiguity, as it can be read to reinforce the faith in the crucial importance of the decisive battle.

### Conclusion

This paper has established that these three contemporary interpreters of Napoleon showed a nuanced appreciation of the worth of his obsessive quest for battles, it is something of a riddle then how the Napoleon-fans of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century with their obsession with the decisive battle miss that point. But that, perhaps, is another question, deserving its own study.

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<sup>29</sup> Antoine Henri, Baron de Jomini, *Précis de l'Art de la Guerre* (1837, repr. Paris: Ivrea, 1994), p.24f.

<sup>30</sup> Jomini, *Précis*, p.201.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*