

## ***Machiavelli, Fichte, and Clausewitz in the Labyrinth of German Idealism*<sup>1</sup>**

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### ABSTRACT

Fichte's 1807 essay on Machiavelli, written when much of Prussia was occupied by French troops, and Clausewitz's lengthy response, based on long acquaintance with Machiavelli's works, discuss Machiavelli's writings as an inspiration and practical guide in helping German states regain their liberty. As well as their authors' politics, the two essays reveal their different views of history – Fichte's being highly deterministic, as is that of his friend Johannes von Müller, the historian of the Swiss struggle for freedom; whereas Clausewitz seeks objectivity in his reading of the past, without which, he has come to believe, he cannot understand war and its place in history. For Clausewitz, Machiavelli's writings are of more than current political significance; they have given valuable support to his growing recognition of the mutual dependence of war and politics.

### KEYWORDS

Fichte, Clausewitz, Johannes von Müller, Historical Objectivity, Interaction of Politics and War.

1. The French Revolution lent new urgency to the German reception of Machiavelli's writings. It was not difficult to find similarities between the multitude of dynastic, ecclesiastical, and civic entities in Central Europe, now targets of vast, previously unknown ideological and military energies from across the Rhine, and early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, its towns and princes unable to

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<sup>1</sup> With this essay I return to a subject I first discussed in my work *Clausewitz and the State*, Oxford – New York, 1976, see especially Chapter 8, section iii, “Fichte, Machiavelli, Pestalozzi.” In a talk “The Capacity of the Reader determines the Fate of Books”, given at the Yale University conference “Around Cassirer” on May 7-9, 2015, and not yet published, I discuss further aspects of the lasting impact of Machiavelli's work as interpreted by Ernst Cassirer in chapter 10 of his *The Myth of the State*, New Haven, 1946.

settle on a common response to foreign threats that soon proved insurmountable.<sup>2</sup> In the early summer of 1807, after the war begun the previous year had led to major Prussian defeats and Fichte quit Berlin before it was occupied by the French, he turned to Machiavelli and his age and wrote an appraisal of the author's personality, his ethics, politics, and experiences as reflected in his writings. The essay could be read as a corrective of mistaken modern views of Machiavelli, aggravated by Frederick the Great's *Anti-Machiavel*. Actually Fichte's purpose was to show that the Renaissance author's account and advice offered nineteenth-century Germans a way to recover political autonomy that would eventually lead from ideas to action.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps not uninfluenced by the climactic end of the French Revolution and the country's return to internal stability, which provided new force to its foreign policy, Fichte's political thought had shifted to value national interests and energies not only for their own sake – a direction he found to be in accord with Machiavelli's ideas - but also for what he saw as the force of the state's far-reaching ethical promise. By pursuing its particular interests and expanding its power in domestic and external affairs, a state, he now claimed, advanced the well-being of humanity in general – an optimistic view of the eventual, boundless implications of these changes that Machiavelli would have dismissed with a shrug.<sup>4</sup> Fichte was identifying burgeoning nationalist sentiments that were beginning to animate the politically inert populations of central Europe, and he accepted the intensification these early phases of nationalism brought to the conflict between states as a necessary step in overcoming local and regional differences to achieve a better world. For Fichte, so Meinecke sums up this turn of his ideas, “the nations' self-generated, individual drives bring about the

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<sup>2</sup> As an example of the recognition of these similarities, in notes from 1807 and 1808, Clausewitz compares the political history of the two countries, and characterizes the failure of German and Italian states to advance from vassals and minor princes to powerful kings as “political fossilization.” Carl von Clausewitz, *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Hans Rothfels, Munich, 1922, pp. 55, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Über Machiavell, als Schriftsteller, und Stellen aus seinen Schriften,” *Gesamtausgabe: Werke 1806-1807*, eds. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky, et al, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1995, pp. 215-275.

<sup>4</sup> In his essay on Machiavelli, *ibid.*, pp. 228-29, Fichte qualifies this assertion by combining it with a realistic understanding of the growth and decline of city-states: “This is not the place to demonstrate that while such small republics might well advance matters of temporary importance, if afterwards they remain independent and want to flourish, they on the whole contradict the *intention of social development and the progress of humanity*...[my emphasis, P.] and will necessarily collapse.”

general and the supranational.”<sup>5</sup> Fichte’s concept of history as progression to a universal, beneficent end, supported his proposition that one state’s accumulation of power leads to justice for all; a visionary joining of two very different ideals, which, whatever its prospect of becoming reality, could in later years justify the excesses of nationalism. At the time, Fichte’s assumption raised his reaction to Prussia’s collapse to a sublime plane above mere hatred of a foreign power’s aggression and encroachment.

In January 1809, a year-and-a-half after the appearance of “On Machiavelli as Writer, with Excerpts from his Works”, Clausewitz, whose view of history differed radically from Fichte’s, responded to the essay with an anonymous letter.<sup>6</sup> The matters raised in this exchange between author and approving but also critical reader, range from basic issues of political structure and practice to an odd specific, the weapon-system best suited to meet the demands of modern war. Fichte’s essay and Clausewitz’s rejoinder have long been recognized as a document of Machiavelli’s presence in German thought at a time when Germans reacted with conflicting assumptions and conclusions to the pressures of the French Revolution and the expansion of French power. In Clausewitz’s life and work, however, his letter of 1809 was merely a segment of the long maturation of his ideas that included earlier readings of Machiavelli, a process the episode with Fichte illuminates, but did not initiate.<sup>7</sup>

In the early 1800s as a student in the Berlin Institute in the Military Sciences, Clausewitz had become familiar with some of Machiavelli’s work. A few years later, notes he wrote on politics and the conduct of war, among them references to coalition policies in early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy show him responding to Machiavelli. In 1803 he reflects on the balance of power, which “had to develop first in Italy”, mentions *Discorsi* II and III in his 1804 manuscript on

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat*, ed. Hans Herzfeld, Munich, 1962, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, “Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte, als Verfasser des Aufsatzes über Machiavell,” in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel, 1806-1810*, eds. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky, et al, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1997, pp. 283 – 89. The text is also printed in the preface to Fichte’s essay in *Gesamtausgabe: Werke 1806-1807*, pp. 218-22. For an English translation, see Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, eds. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, Princeton, 1992, pp. 279-84.

<sup>7</sup> My statement in *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 442, that Clausewitz’s letter to Fichte is among “the sources of primary importance to the genesis of his ideas,” needs to be corrected. It was written before I had traced the development of Clausewitz’s ideas, including his far earlier reading of Machiavelli in the 1790s and the first years of the new century, in sufficient detail.

strategy, and alludes to Machiavelli's works in general in a note dated 1805. Two years later in an extensive note on current military and political events, he refers often to Machiavelli, who, he writes, can be blamed only "for calling things with a certain indecency by their true name."<sup>8</sup> By then Clausewitz had also read *The Prince*, and Frederick the Great's attack on Machiavelli's political morality, and now dismissed the monarch's *Anti-Machiavel* as resembling that "of a young academic, who is delighted for the first time to be able to write in the professorial mode," an example of the detachment, untainted by patriotic admiration, which enabled Clausewitz, though a Prussian officer, to engage and criticize Prussia's great king.<sup>9</sup> His comments on Machiavelli's works, together with reflections and writings in the following years, some linked to Fichte and his circle, further reveal the impact over time of Machiavelli's thought on a creative mind seeking to achieve clarity on the interaction of war and politics.

By the first years of the new century, Clausewitz – then in his early twenties, but a soldier since his twelfth birthday, and already widely read in history and theory – concluded that without taking account of the links between politics and war, he could understand neither the course of history nor the nature of war. This conviction did not originate in his reading of Machiavelli, but was confirmed or influenced by the latter's works among others, as well as by Clausewitz's own first attempts at historical narrative and interpretation. Rather than a crucial episode in the development of Clausewitz's ideas, his response to Fichte's essay confirms and continues what was by then a lengthy intellectual journey, begun in the 1790s, which eventually led to Clausewitz's mature historical studies, and linked to them his theoretical work *On War*.

In the War of 1806 Clausewitz served as adjutant to Prince August of Prussia, with whom he was taken prisoner in the retreat after the battle of Auerstedt, and interned in France, after which he accompanied the prince to Switzerland before returning to Prussia in November 1807. His absence from Germany explains the late reply to Fichte's article, even if a substantial note he jotted down in the summer of 1807, beginning "No book on earth is more essential to the politician than Machiavelli's," might have been an early

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<sup>8</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 241-45; Carl von Clausewitz, *Strategie*, ed. Eberhard Kessel, Hamburg, 1937, pp. 41-42; Rothfels, *Carl von Clausewitz: Politik und Krieg*, pp. 202, 206-10. The implication in the editorial introduction to Fichte's essay in Fichte, *Werke 1806 – 1807*, p. 218, that Clausewitz did not read Machiavelli until 1807- 8 is incorrect.

<sup>9</sup> Rothfels, *Carl von Clausewitz: Politik und Krieg*, pp. 209-10.

response.<sup>10</sup> More likely, the note merely reflected Clausewitz's by then long-standing familiarity with Machiavelli's works. That he did not identify himself as the letter's author, which excluded the possibility of Fichte responding, was an act of necessary caution. With French forces stationed throughout Prussia, a former adjutant of a Prussian prince, known, moreover, to be close to the man heading the reorganization of the reduced Prussian army, would have been ill advised to call attention to himself and his ideas on creating a more effective entity of state, society, and armed force. It was only a few weeks after he wrote to Fichte that Clausewitz was appointed Scharnhorst's principal assistant, a position that formalized their joint effort to consolidate and modernize Prussia's remaining military institutions, and secretly prepare for a new confrontation with France.

2. Fichte begins his essay with a brief, brilliantly written introduction, calling on both Horace and Goethe, personifying Roman classicism and German idealism, as he reflects on various and often unjust ways in which the dead are remembered. The exchange between author and poets is joined by Machiavelli's ghost, who expresses the wish to have his life recalled honestly, a wish Fichte welcomes: "This request of the sublime shadow we will fulfill. We want to contribute to the honorable interment of an honest, sensible, and meritorious man. That and only that is the purpose of the following pages."<sup>11</sup> His programmatic statement is only partly true. Fichte's discussion of Machiavelli's life and works will allow him to declare that the Italian's pragmatism has much to offer Germans in their present state of political confusion and helplessness.

The masterly, versatile style of the opening paragraphs is maintained throughout the essay, which lends a vigorous personal tone to Fichte's historical reflections and political counsel. In the next section, "The Intellectual and Moral Character of the Writer Machiavelli," he introduces him as the supreme realist: "Machiavelli bases himself wholly on life as it actually is, and we believe writes better about it than any other... But the more elevated conceptions of man's life lie entirely beyond his vision..." The last words, at first sight a damning judgment, instead lead to a further appreciation of Machiavelli's pragmatism. Many writers, Fichte explains, lay down rules for the behavior of a prince,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> Fichte, "Ueber Machiavell als Schriftsteller, und Stellen aus seinen Schriften," *Werke 1806-1807*, p. 224.

Machiavelli does so according to different principles. He believes it more useful to remain in touch with things as they are than reach for their imagined, idealized forms. How one lives matters more than how one should live, and abstract ideals can be destructive. Machiavelli thinks, and Fichte agrees, that “a man who in all circumstances wants to be good, will inevitably be destroyed by the many who are not good.”<sup>12</sup>

The essay’s underlying questions have been broached: what are Machiavelli’s ideas, and are they of value to Germans at the beginning of the nineteenth century? Answers cannot be given until Fichte considers major actions in the writer’s life and his version of political and military events in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy, which, in turn, must be preceded by determining whether past centuries can be analyzed with enough reliability to provide guidance to the present. In two paragraphs Fichte combines his appraisal of Machiavelli’s morality with a disquisition on the difficulty of judging a person who lived in the past. Machiavelli, he writes, certainly distinguished between right and wrong ideas and actions. If he did not integrate these values into a comprehensive moral faith, it was not his fault, but that of the time in which he lived. “On no account can he be judged according to concepts he does not possess, and according to a language he does not speak. It is even worse to evaluate him as though he had wanted to write an abstract work of constitutional law, and centuries after his death squeeze him into a school that in life he had no opportunity to attend.”<sup>13</sup> In interpreting and learning from the past, Fichte continues, one must be aware of the distorting effect of intervening time – a necessary warning, but one not easily followed in a tract that looks to the past for inspiration and more. Later in the essay, Fichte himself stumbles over the barrier of time, which at least confirms the danger he warned against.

Machiavelli’s realism, Fichte seems to feel, needs further elucidation. Referring to *The Prince*, he explains that the author isn’t advising one to be a usurper, but is saying simply, “if you are one, or if you gained power by villainy, then – since we already have you – it is still preferable for us to keep you, instead of a new usurper or rival who causes new unrest and commits crimes.” Fichte adds, “to introduce and maintain order and security, particularly in an unsettled age, is worth everything” – an assertion that may be questioned on

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 224-25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

various counts, and finds its justification mainly in his expectation that the strength of one will eventually lead to blessings for all.<sup>14</sup>

Discussions follow on Machiavelli as author and on the character of his writings, among them that his political views are not guided by Christian principles, which Fichte again dismisses as a reflection of his age. He considers him a pagan, “just as popes and cardinals and other capable men of that time were.”<sup>15</sup> His writings benefitted from the broad freedom of the intellectual and social elites to write and publish in those years, a freedom authors at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century might envy.<sup>16</sup> This leads to an enumeration and characterization of Machiavelli’s work, including several paragraphs on his *Sette libri dell’ arte della guerra*. Fichte disclaims any understanding of war, but believes it would be worth having someone of profound knowledge of military affairs, “who is without prejudice or has the strength to renounce it,” to study this work once more.<sup>17</sup> It impresses him that at an age when little value was placed on foot soldiers, Machiavelli demonstrated that infantry constitutes the core of an army, a view that “since then has become generally accepted, perhaps not without Machiavelli’s doing.” On the other hand, “today it is the common belief that artillery is decisive,” and particularly in the French army “everything depends on artillery,” while “Machiavelli thinks that on the battlefield [ i.e. on open ground rather than facing castles or fortifications] cannon are effective only against cowards. A courageous and suitably equipped army has no need for artillery, and could disdain that of the enemy.”<sup>18</sup> It is worth determining, Fichte suggests, whether on this point, too, Machiavelli has an important truth to convey. Despite Fichte’s warning that the profound differences between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century must be kept in mind when reading Machiavelli, his sense of unchanging human nature allows him to ignore the technical advances in the design and construction of cannon over three centuries.

After referring to *The Prince* and others of Machiavelli’s writings, Fichte responds to his central question, how and to what extent do Machiavelli’s politics still apply to our times? Again his answer rests in his conception of the permanent characteristics of mankind’s feelings and desires. Machiavelli

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p 236.

believes, and Fichte agrees, that the state as a coercive institution must recognize man's innate malignancy [*Bösartigkeit*].<sup>19</sup> The function of the state Fichte now writes, is "to create at least the appearance of peace," and to ensure that the destructive tendencies of human nature do not break into the open. A ruler must deal both with his people and with other states. His people either have not yet assented to his rule, or they have come to accept it. "In our age, especially in the country I address in the first instance, Germany, the second condition has obtained for centuries, the princes are at peace with their peoples... so Machiavelli's teachings on how law is imposed on a resistant people, do not apply." But that is not the case with his treatment of relations between states. On the contrary, events since Machiavelli wrote have only confirmed his conclusions.<sup>20</sup>

The heads of state – Fichte refers only to states of some significance - should accept two truths: "Your neighbor, unless he regards you as his natural ally,... is always prepared to grow at your expense." Moreover, "it is not enough to defend your actual territory, you have to ensure that your influence does not wane," meaning you cannot appear reluctant to resort to war. For maintaining one's independence, war and being accustomed to war remain essential. Fortunately Europeans can acquire the needed military experience in wars against barbarians in lands beyond Europe. The prince's duties to his people make these commonsense recommendations a sacred duty: SALUS ET DECUS POPULI SUPREMA LEX ESTO. It follows that Machiavelli's "more serious and energetic conception of the art of governing needs to be renewed in our time" - a time Fichte condemns as having been corrupted by the ideas of the last half of the eighteenth century, which "promoted a certain humanity, liberality, and popularity as the highest value; pleading above all that people be good... recommending the golden mean, chaotically blending all opposites - a time... the enemy of the serious, the consequential, of enthusiasm, of every large thought and decision, of anything rising slightly above the length and breadth of the superficial; but especially enamored of eternal peace." Fichte's disgust at everything unthinking and fashionable stokes the violence of his attack on the late Enlightenment for, in his view, weakening and misleading the peoples and governments of Europe. He then returns to Machiavelli, and with a final quip that scoffs at Machiavelli's bad reputation calls on his fellow Germans to learn

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<sup>19</sup> Already in his *Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* (1804), Fichte had termed the condition of man as one of complete sinfulness.

<sup>20</sup> Fichte, *Werke 1806 – 1807*, pp. 239-40.

from him: “Let therefore someone who is not unknown and not without blemish [*einer der nicht unbekannt ist, und nicht unberüchtigt*] rise from the dead, and show them the right way.”<sup>21</sup>

This would appear to be all Fichte has to say; but to strengthen his case, he adds and comments on excerpts from Machiavelli’s writings. Not until then does he come to the true end of his essay, three paragraphs headed with the title *Beschluss* – he uses the word again at the end of his *Addresses to the German Nation*, perhaps because it combines the meanings of finality and decisiveness. He hopes in this concluding call to action that his words are well received, and, countering future critics, identifies two kinds of unwanted readers, those who find that every statement, every argument refers to living individuals, a charge he denies by characterizing himself, perhaps more fittingly than he knew, as “an author who remains in generalities,” and, secondly, readers whom facts never shock, merely the words that identify them. He ends allegorically: “It is said that the ostrich shuts his eyes to the approaching hunter... as if the danger no longer seen has vanished. He is not the ostrich’s enemy who calls to him: Open your eyes, see the hunter comes, run to this side so you may escape him.”<sup>22</sup>

Fichte’s energetic, engaged text on Machiavelli celebrates a writer whose recognition of the political realities of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy enables him, Fichte believes, to teach early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germans the facts of the dangerously competitive universe in which states exist. A clearer understanding of this reality should give people the insight to survive, and with their physical and cultural vigor contribute to the advance of mankind. To propose a Renaissance writer to perform this educational task is a brilliant choice, and a daring one. Machiavelli’s distance from the present makes it possible to propose him as guide to the eternal qualities of statesmanship. But his remoteness also limits what he can teach.

In the essay Fichte bases his view of government on the malevolent, selfish character of human nature; yet nowhere does he go beyond urging that government and people be lawful, enthusiastic, and energetic. The former admirer of the French Revolution now has nothing to say about the character of government, the structure of society, the relation between prince and people, other than that in Germany ruler and ruled know their responsibilities towards each other, and are at peace. What he asks for is energy and enthusiasm in the conduct of foreign and domestic affairs. His one specific advice beyond these

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 244-45.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 273 -75.

generalizations is a warning that people and governments must not forget how to wage war, and to note that opportunities for this essential experience may be found in colonial campaigns. In 1807, Fichte, having been forced to resign his professorship at Jena, now hoped for a new academic appointment, and had to avoid antagonizing possible patrons in the Prussian government, might have been ill-advised to go more deeply into particulars of the distribution of authority and responsibilities, even had he wished to do so. Nevertheless he was writing at a time when severe military defeat had shaken even some conservatives' faith in post-Frederician absolutism, and efforts were under way to reform the structure of government and administration, modernize the army, turn Prussian subjects into citizens by reducing the privileges of favored groups, and extend and equalize rights and obligations across society. That at this juncture of the old and the new, Fichte published an essay that dared to defend a long-dead writer of questionable repute, but dared nothing else, limited the essay's reach, not least to Clausewitz. By the time he read the essay, Clausewitz was fully engaged in the intellectual and political effort of the reform movement, from making the army more effective – in his lectures at the new War Academy, for instance, and in serving on the committee drafting a new tactical doctrine for the infantry – to advocating policies of broad social implications, such as the introduction of universal conscription, and widening non-nobles' access to officer rank. Fichte had written his essay when the shock of defeat was giving way to the first tentative reforms, Clausewitz answered him when reform was at its peak.

3. He begins his letter to Fichte – five pages in print compared to the essay's fifty pages – by addressing what appears to be a detail, Fichte's questioning of the high value attributed to artillery today, a doubt Clausewitz politely rejects, even as he must have smiled at the learned civilian ignoring centuries of technological change. Fichte asks for a knowledgeable and objective expert to review whether Machiavelli's low opinion of artillery still holds true. Clausewitz disclaims possessing the desired depth of knowledge, but believes he is free of prejudice, "the more so since I have seen all the traditional opinions and forms of military power among which I grew up come apart like rotten timber and collapse in the swift stream of events." Today more than ever, he adds, each

citizen should acquire a sound view of military affairs, and those who seek it should be in touch with each other – hence his letter.<sup>23</sup>

Clausewitz then turns to the issue of artillery: “Like every other weapon, [it] has certainly been badly employed here and there, mainly by the Prussian army in 1806, less so by the French, who do not have much artillery judged by present standards... To overlook artillery entirely would almost certainly have decided disadvantages; ... when guns are concentrated in large numbers it is impossible to do anything against them. Their effectiveness, since Machiavelli’s day has probably doubled at least... So much, for now, on the artillery.”<sup>24</sup>

He continues with a multitude of comments, and observations that combine historical and contemporary specifics with proposals of the most activist wing of the Prussian reformers, beginning with a definition of the current situation: The German art of war is in decline; a new spirit must revive it. His suggestions how this may be achieved are combined with a critique of Machiavelli’s use of history. In many of his works, he writes, he has encountered good judgment and new ideas on matters of war; but just in his book on war, he misses “the free, independent judgment that so strongly distinguishes Machiavelli’s political writings. The ancients’ art of war attracted him too much, not only in its spirit, but also in all its forms.” He agrees with an opinion by Machiavelli that he had read in a work of Johannes von Müller, the famous historian of the Swiss and Fichte’s friend, that in the earlier Middle Ages the art of war was most at home in societies like the Swiss cantons that without having an extensive literature on war, developed their way of fighting according to their geographic, social, and cultural characteristics. But Clausewitz recognizes, as Fichte does not, that in continuing his analysis Machiavelli fails to rise above the intellectual fashions of his time: During the Renaissance, Clausewitz writes, when the practice of war had declined to an uninspired craft, it was easy to go too far in one’s admiration of the ways Greeks and Romans fought. One should not as Machiavelli did, recommend a previous, supposedly better way of fighting, nor return to already developed forms of violence; but try to understand the true nature of war, and seek to discover what is currently appropriate and effective. For Clausewitz that means engaging the abilities of each man as fully as possible. “Rather than

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<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz, Letter to Fichte, Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, eds. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, Princeton, 1992, pp. 280-81.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

using men like simple automata, the modern art of war should vitalize the energies in the individual as fully as the nature of its weapons permit.”<sup>25</sup>

He criticizes 18<sup>th</sup> century warfare, which he experienced as an adolescent in the wars against the French Revolution, for its tendency to turn the military act into a machine that subordinates moral factors [such as enthusiasm and patriotism] to mechanical forces, in contrast to wars in antiquity, when it was generally held that hand-to-hand combat was the best means for animating the spirit of the individual fighter. Since, he continues, most encounters then led to close combat, thus making it a common experience, the value of the individual fighter rested far more in the character of his community and his place in it [in his *bürgerliche Verfassung*] than in his manner of fighting, a distinction proved by the fact that the victorious forces differed from their defeated enemies not in their tactics but in their social and political condition. Society, politics, and the armed forces affect each other, in the past as well as in the present. Clausewitz then leaves antiquity to draw the lesson for his day: to create or improve a viable condition for the individual’s existence is the task of political action and of education; the appropriate means of fighting and their use should be determined by an understanding of war, not by military tradition, which one must be prepared to change – words that sum up the program of the Prussian reformers. After this intense mix of history, theory, and politics Clausewitz concludes with expressions of gratitude to Fichte for “the highest satisfaction with which your arguments have left me. Their results fully agree with those I pursued in my quiet reflections.”<sup>26</sup>

4. Fichte must have welcomed the unknown author’s positive reaction to his essay, and when reprinting the work in 1810 accepted at least a part of the correction of his query whether artillery might not be overvalued in modern war, by erasing his statement that in the French army artillery meant everything. Beyond that deletion the exchange of views seems to have left no great impression on him, nor did it on Clausewitz. With its lack of specificity, Fichte’s essay could have meant little more to Clausewitz than a satisfying sign of encouragement by a famous scholar, whose activism would have pleased him, who shared his belief in the superiority of spirit over form, his faith in the liberating power of education, and his interest in the works of Machiavelli,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 281-82.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 283-84.

whom Clausewitz valued above all for his views on the relations between political rule and armed force, their constant association as they develop and function - a matter on which Fichte's essay offers little but generalizations. New documents may always emerge, as recent discoveries of Clausewitz letters show; but in his known correspondence, Clausewitz refers to Fichte's essay only once, in a note advising his fiancée to read "Fichte's essay on Machiavelli, and reflect on everything that has happened to us."<sup>27</sup>

Machiavelli's works were a well-known presence in German thought at and beyond the end of the *ancien régime*, and as Clausewitz notes in the most polite terms at the end of his response, Fichte's essay said nothing new to him. That Fichte cast his plea for a new form of politics as a vindication of a man whose name had come to stand for public amorality remains an interesting testimony of the insight, energy, at times brutality with which Fichte appraised the political condition of Central Europe after Prussia's defeats. In the history of Clausewitz's thought, his letter to Fichte, while not documenting a shift in a new direction, does point to some sources of the ideas that gradually moved Clausewitz away from the great majority of writers on war of his generation, and enables us to see the early phases of this process more clearly.

Some ten or more years before he wrote to Fichte, Clausewitz had reached a critical phase in his thinking about war. As a lieutenant with combat experience, enmeshed in the routine of garrison duty until admitted as a student to the Berlin Institute, he read the military literature of the day, which offered a variety of innovative but always dogmatic responses to the changes in war brought about by the French Revolution. He rejected these attempts to minimizing the permanent uncertainty of conflict by advocating firm rules in strategy as well as in tactics, and for ignoring the psychology of the combatants – an element the significance of which Clausewitz began to discuss even in late adolescence in notes and in his earliest historical studies.<sup>28</sup> Soon his interest in the emotions men, from musketeer to commanding general, experience in war, blended with his belief in the potential of an individual's mind and spirit, which, he thought, once fostered and educated could achieve more than any prearranged pattern of action. Gradually these reflections on how to raise the

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<sup>27</sup> Clausewitz to Marie von Brühl, January 12, 1809, in *Karl und Marie v. Clausewitz*, ed. Karl Linnebach, Berlin, 1916, p. 209.

<sup>28</sup> For an extensive discussion of Clausewitz's early interest in psychology, see Peter Paret, *Clausewitz in his Time*, New York-Oxford, 2014, pp. 23-25.

effectiveness of contemporary military action expanded into something far larger and more encompassing, an effort to understand war as such.

His growing ambition made the study of history newly important to Clausewitz. To deepen an understanding of war, to recognize constant elements beyond its temporary, time-bound features, meant having to combine knowledge of the present with that of the past, and meeting two further conditions: the continuous interaction of military and non-military elements demanded a broader view of the past than one limited to specifically military events; and, to be useful, that view should not be judgmental, but as far as possible seek to understand the past on its own terms. Clausewitz began to respond to this last demand at a remarkably early age. Not yet twenty, he wrote a long narrative account of the Thirty Years War, which though relying wholly on printed contemporary and later sources, developed an interpretation that rejected the accepted Enlightenment view that the war and its inordinate length were the product of the inadequacies and backwardness of a dark age.<sup>29</sup> The first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote, was not inferior to the present; in some respects it was stronger: prevailing religious and ethical values compelled – and enabled – men to continue fighting even in situations that in 1800 would be dismissed as insurmountable. The particularity of each age was further increased by the fact that the psychology of the leading figures - affected by the times, but not inevitably captive to it - influenced policy. Clausewitz's sense that a comprehensive theory of war demanded factual knowledge and as objective and balanced a view as possible, was moving him in the general direction that the pioneers of historicism were then taking. In the early development of the historical discipline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he is a too often unrecognized transitional figure.<sup>30</sup>

Clausewitz's historical studies were largely, though never entirely, interrupted by his duties during the era of reform and the ultimate campaigns against Napoleon. After peace had returned they became a major occupation and a key to the major theoretical manuscript he now began to write.<sup>31</sup> More

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<sup>29</sup> On "Gustavus Adolphus's Campaigns of 1630-32," see Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 84-89.

<sup>30</sup> On Clausewitz's concept of historical objectivity, and the relationship between his historical writings and the work of innovative historians in the 1820s and '30s, see also my Introduction to Part One of Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 9-14.

<sup>31</sup> Among historical works Clausewitz wrote between 1816 and 1831 are a biography of Scharnhorst, histories of the campaigns of Frederick the Great, histories of the campaigns of 1796, 1799, 1814, 1815, and the history of the War of 1806, including its political background.

than once after 1815 he interrupted the development and expansion of his theories with further historical studies. In the end, historical texts, serving both as a source of facts and as a control over their theoretical interpretation - were to fill seven of the ten volumes of his posthumous works.

Clausewitz's references to Machiavelli in his letter to Fichte and in his notes and manuscripts, rarely identify the passages that contributed to his enlarged view of war. But whether Machiavelli writes on matters of organization, tactics, strategy, or policy, he never strictly separates the military from the political. As Felix Gilbert notes in his important essay on the role of war in Machiavelli's thought: "It hardly goes too far to say that Machiavelli became a political thinker because he was a military thinker. His view of the military problems of his time patterned his entire political outlook."<sup>32</sup> To the young officer, who began to recognize the importance of these links between matters generally kept apart, Machiavelli's texts had to have a powerful impact, whether they first opened his eyes to this fundamental fact or merely confirmed an earlier recognition. None of the authors on military affairs Clausewitz read in his youth, nor subsequently those who wrote on wars of the Revolution and the Napoleonic era, equaled Machiavelli's continuous and explicit treatment of the intense, permanent relationship that linked military, political, and social forces, interests, and concerns. And as Clausewitz's letter to Fichte indicates, Machiavelli remained a presence in his thought and writing.

A further aspect of Machiavelli's impact on Clausewitz becomes apparent when Clausewitz's historical interpretations are compared with those of one of the important historians of the time, Johannes von Müller, once the official historiographer of Prussia, whom Clausewitz knew personally from his years as adjutant of Prince August, and whom he mentions as a source on Machiavelli in his letter to Fichte.<sup>33</sup> Müller's European fame derived from his histories of the Swiss from antiquity to the early modern period, a people he celebrated as natural, unspoiled, innately warlike in their defense of freedom, which they gained and preserved against the German and Italian princes and towns that

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<sup>32</sup> Felix Gilbert, "Machiavelli: The Renaissance of the Art of War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret, Princeton, 1986, p.11. Note also Machiavelli's statement in *The Prince*, "The best foundations of all states... are good laws and good arms," and Ernst Cassirer's brief discussion of Machiavelli as "the first philosophical advocate of a resolute militarism," in *The Myth of the State*, New Haven, 1946, pp. 149, 161-62.

<sup>33</sup> On Clausewitz and Johannes von Müller, see Peter Paret, "From Ideal to Ambiguity: Johannes von Müller, Clausewitz, and the People in Arms," now in Peter Paret, *Clausewitz in his Time*, pp. 87-99.

surrounded their mountain strongholds. Müller's work combines intensive archival research, ahead of its time in his interest in society and culture, with the idealization of his subject into a narrative that responded to powerful concepts and wishes of the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism, not least those valued by Fichte: the goodness of an unspoiled, simple people, driven by the concept of freedom, both qualities seemingly delineated in the historical reality of the early Swiss.

Müller and Fichte were old friends, whose mutual regard surmounted even major political differences: soon after Fichte called on Machiavelli to help Germans regain their liberty, Müller entered the service of Jerome Bonaparte as head of the Department of Education of Napoleon's new creation, the kingdom of Westphalia. The two men's correspondence suggest how their similar understanding of history supported their friendship. Both saw and wrote history from a moral perspective, and both exalted "unspoiled" tribal values as a historical determinant. But Müller, though never losing his belief in the divine meaning of history, lacked Fichte's certainty of an inevitable advance towards universal rationality. And while sharing his friend's exalted vision of the tribal values defining the ancient Germans, he could not grasp his sense that these ancient qualities were now blending into a modern nationalism, which Fichte expected to envelop and discipline the individual's shortcomings and selfishness, humanity's innate *Bösartigkeit*, and - even as the new attitudes lead to painful conflicts - advance humanity towards a better world.

In his work on the Swiss, Müller, by contrast, remained safely in the past. The historical evidence he idealized according to his ethical demands, was, however, more complex than he could admit. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the policies of the Swiss confederation were changing. In the course of freeing itself from internal feudal constraints and hostile neighbors, the confederation had become a considerable military power, and was now aggressively expanding, a phase Müller covers with his usual skill, evidently not recognizing that this development contradicted his image of idealized fighters for freedom. The rise of the Swiss mercenary continued to bear out Müller's belief in the Swiss people's warlike nature. But he seems not to have seen or believed that the Swiss pursuit of conquest and economic gain disproved his basic thesis of ethics driving the actions of the Confederation.

Clausewitz's notebooks of 1804 include some pages on the medieval Swiss based on Müller's histories. He does not specifically address the idealization of the Swiss people in arms, an example of the one-dimensional, moral interpretation he already rejects; but notes that the medieval Swiss were neither

more nor less warlike than other largely rural societies at the time, and that, like everyone else, they could be motivated by more than one cause or interest. The Swiss fighting for freedom in the Alps, also fight for conquest in the Lombard plains, or serve princes and city states as mercenaries, and Clausewitz gives examples.<sup>34</sup> Müller's emphasis on ethical convictions as the formative force in the history of the Swiss is not repeated in the young Clausewitz's historical notes and studies nor subsequently in his theories. Instead Clausewitz seeks to recognize ambiguous reality. He is at one with Machiavelli in not considering ethical concepts as the dominant force in history. He regards ethics - whether in the form of ideas, ideals, or codes - as merely one source of energy - or repression - among many that are significant, and that both the study of the past and a theory of war must accommodate.

To be sure, in Fichte's essay on Machiavelli and in Clausewitz's response the study of history plays a subordinate role. Fichte writes to effect change, and appeals to a figure from the past to help bring it about. Clausewitz agrees that Germans should regain their freedom, and both cite the evidence of German and European history in support of their views. But they see the past differently. Fichte believes in the course of history as the agent and reflection of a grand design. Clausewitz, no less fascinated by present and past reality, does not consider history a parable with a given end. In seeking to identify and comprehend motives and the dynamic by which they become action, he is closer to Machiavelli than to Fichte, even if he shares Fichte's wish for the liberation of Germany, and - in other venues and with other methods - works to bring it about.

Machiavelli, Fichte, and Clausewitz resort to history to further their particular interests. They combine past reality, as they see it, with a wished-for future. Machiavelli uses history to help explain what he has learned in the service of Florence, and combines these recognitions of the current reality of Italy's political fragmentation with an often idealized view of classical antiquity. Fichte tries to turn history into a weapon for freeing the German states from French domination. Clausewitz supports Fichte's political aim, but views historical understanding, as untainted as possible by ideology or partisanship, as a precondition for achieving two personal goals - one general, the other more limited: to exist as a rational, intellectually independent individual in a complex world, and to reach a deeper theoretical mastery of war.

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<sup>34</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, "The Swiss Spirit of the Art of War," *Strategie aus dem Jahr 1804*, ed. Eberhard Kessel, Hamburg, 1937, pp. 43-44.

Objectivity was not one of the principal values of German classicism, and of the idealism it nurtured and expressed. Far more important to the generation of 1800, this “literary age,” was the recognition in literature and music of aspects of life that could be explored and celebrated in isolation from their indifferent or hostile surroundings, or, when in conflict with active and passive antagonists, traced to a triumphant or tragic conclusion. Kant’s critique of knowledge proposed solutions to the problems inherent in judging matter external to oneself. Many readers quickly linked his teachings to ideological purposes, which distorted their impact; Clausewitz, on the other hand, who in his early twenties heard lectures on Kant’s teachings, made use of his ideas in finding a firm base for moving from the pragmatic to the theoretical. We do not know enough of Clausewitz’s psychological dynamics to define and appraise the role of objectivity in his life; but it is striking that even in days when he was deeply worried by the prospect of Napoleon attacking Prussia, he found the emperor’s intentions rational and comprehensible from the French point of view.<sup>35</sup> However short Clausewitz fell in achieving balanced interpretations in his historical writings, he regarded the effort to be even-handed as essential in his life and work. Early on he recognized in Machiavelli a man who, however much influenced by subjective forces in himself and in his environment, valued the recognition of facts over doctrine. In Clausewitz’s works and surviving notes, Machiavelli is among the small number of authors addressing war comprehensively with whose ideas Clausewitz interacts. His teacher Scharnhorst and Frederick the Great are others. The integration of war and politics, for Machiavelli a given, is only the most obvious example of this intellectual exchange and influence as Clausewitz began to feel his way towards studying and interpreting the nature of armed conflict. In the end he created a great, if atypical work of that period of European history. Like the major dramas of German classicism, but in its own, non-aesthetic realm, *On War* brings together historical and permanent elements of its subject, and in combining them approaches their understanding.

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, a note of 1803: “No one can deny a nation to fight for its interests with all its strength to free itself from slavery – not even France can be criticized if she plants her foot on our back and extends her realm of frightened vassals to the polar sea.” Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 239.