In 2003, communication scholar Benita Steyn pointed out that the term ‘corporate communication strategy’ remained ill-understood, having seldom received proper academic treatment in the scientific community. Steyn wrote that:

> [t]he concept ‘strategy’ is well-known in management theory and practice. The concept of ‘corporate communication strategy’, however, has received little attention in the public relations (corporate communication) body of knowledge. There is mention of a strategic role for the corporate communication practitioner, but few explanations or descriptions of what corporate communication strategy means in a strategic organizational context.

Steyn, 2003, p. 168

Steyn’s call for coming to grips with communication strategy came late, it seems. It came at a time when the term was already *en vogue* with practitioners, having been on everybody’s lips for at least a decade. In 1997, Tibbie (cited in Steyn, 2003) had remarked that “it is increasingly difficult to pick up any pitch document without finding chapters on ‘strategic direction’, ‘communications strategies’, ‘strategic’ messages and so on” (p. 357). Steyn makes clear, however, that widespread usage and thorough understanding do not necessarily go hand in hand. She agrees with Tibble, who points out that the term *strategic* has been used very sloppily (Tibble, 1997, p. 358) and has been “bandied around like a mantra” (p. 357). She also agrees with Lukaszewski (2001) who referred to strategy-making as one of the mysterious areas of public relations practice—thus again, like Tibble, invoking the vocabulary of the esoteric.

It is curious, however, that Steyn then limits her explorations of strategy to the business administration and management literature. That the word *strategy* ultimately derives from the classical Greek word στρατηγός, denoting a military commander and being in use in the 6th century BC, is well-known. Also known is the fact that the most frequently cited strategy definition goes back to Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), whose magnum opus *Vom Kriege [On War]* (version 1989 and 1991) probably represents the single most influential treatise on strategy.

Scholars concerned with strategic communication are, of course, aware that the concept of strategy is rooted in military theory. Nevertheless, the scientific community has seldom displayed more than a limited interest in the military classics. That is particularly puzzling when one considers that the literature of strategic management, often idolized, brims over with references, implicit and explicit, to
(Re-)Reading Clausewitz

Sun–Tzu, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Mao, Guevara and their contemporary heirs. Hinterhuber (1990), to name one example, develops a book on Wettbewerbsstrategie (competitive strategy) from Prussian military theory, referring not only to Clausewitz but also to Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Moltke.

There are reasons for this reluctance. Indeed, one could argue that communication is the very opposite of warfare, war denoting a state of non-communication, that is, unwillingness to understand the other. It is important to note, however, that strategy is ultimately concerned with conflict, not necessarily with force; although Clausewitz, dealing with armed conflict, warns against artificial attempts to separate the two in warfare (On War, I.1.1.3). Strategy is about winning or prevailing, one could say, not necessarily about violence. If it was otherwise, the concept would not have been easily adopted by management theory and business administration; although we would argue that twenty-first century business cannot be understood without understanding brutality. But then again, the desire to shun the dichotomous, distinctly asymmetric vocabulary of winning versus losing so prevalent in business and management texts might have been another reason to avoid military discourse in strategic communication literature, which sometimes seems to confuse the academic treatment of public relations with public relations for public relations.

We believe, conversely, that there is a lot to gain from a glimpse at military theory once semantic sensibilities have been overcome. Clausewitz, in particular, is recommended reading for practitioners and theorists of strategic communication for two additional reasons. Clausewitz not only worked in what we would term today “public relations” during the Prussian reform era (Ritter, 1931, p. 46), but also identified, in his early writings (Principles of War, III.1, (version 1812), the “capture of public opinion” as one of three general principles of strategy (the other two being the destruction of the hostile army and the seizure of its resources and means). It is from this perspective, then, that the authors propose to reread military theory, and Clausewitz’s On War in particular, with a view to clarifying the concept of strategic in strategic communication.

The starting point is a passage in On War in which Clausewitz gives a stunningly straightforward answer to a question with which, in the authors’ opinion, generations of writers on management and business strategy have struggled, with a greater or smaller degree of success, namely what to concern yourself with when concerning yourself with strategy.

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ( . . . ) the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

On War, I.1.27 1989, pp. 88–89

To address this issue this chapter briefly provides a methodological orientation before touching on three topics. However, we return repeatedly to the concept of supreme act of judgment, that is, the question of the nature of the conflict one is embarking on. The three topics are organized under the following headings. First, Reading Clausewitz: Learning from the classics, in which we argue that Clausewitz’s careful dialectic reasoning about the relation of politics, people and professionals; about the distinction of art, science and craft; and about means, aims and ends paves the way out of fruitless debates in strategic communication literature. Next, Rereading Clausewitz: Parallel developments in warfare and communication, in which we adopt the argument that since the invention of professional armies, their very regularity has been confronted by people’s uprisings as well as by antagonists waging irregular, asymmetrical or guerrilla warfare—guerrilla meaning here small war. The early nineteenth century saw not only the refinement of the grisly practice but also the development of substantial theories of people’s wars and guerrilla warfare. We want to trace the discourse and its major concepts insofar as they are relevant for strategic communication. Last, in Re-rereading Clausewitz: deconstruction, we conclude the article with a counter-point, a demontage of our hero, a
deconstruction of Clausewitz. Knights and Morgan (1990) have convincingly argued that Clausewitz and his contemporaries, being middle-class, created a (pseudo-)scientific discourse on the art of warfare in order to protect their position as experts with an exclusive problem-solving capability. We argue that communication specialists nowadays pursue a similar strategy, and encounter similar problems.

Methodological Orientation

In the inaugural issue of *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, the board of editors dedicated itself to the question of what strategic communication is and, in particular, what the qualification strategic implies (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Siramesh, 2007). The editors pointed to the fact that, nowadays, in a twenty-first century oscillating between late modernism and post-modernism, the term strategic must be considered a “rich” concept (p. 11). Although it is still associated with a predominantly modernist management approach, as Hallahan et al. point out, a lot of alternative readings of the term co-exist.

The authors of course agree with the editors’ decision not to limit the discourse to narrow-minded, exclusive concepts which, by way of definition, mask out exciting alternative perspectives. But then, to deliberately remain on the level of heuristic vagueness is not a satisfactory state of affairs for a professional field or research domain. It is necessary to further our understanding by sharpening and deepening the understanding of the term strategy. We do not believe, however, that one needs to strive for an essential definition of strategy; neither do we believe in the popular approach of synthesizing a compromise out of the plethora of strategy definitions, schools and models. The third way, which we wish to pursue here, is to discuss the core ideas of major authors who visibly and invisibly have shaped the field, of whom the first and foremost is Clausewitz. We believe, then, that familiarity with Clausewitz’s core ideas furthers our understanding of strategy simply by furthering our understanding of the genealogy of the strategic discourse, and that that, therefore, is valuable in itself for strategic communicators. To clarify their points the authors will cite selected passages of Clausewitz’s magnum opus, but also other writers, aligned or contraposed, including “practitioners” such as Mao Tse-tung (1936/1938/1966), Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1965, 2003a, 2003b), Harry Summers (1982), Rupert Smith (2006), and “theorists” and historians such as Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx (passim), Basil Liddell Hart (1991/1929/1954), Robert Asprey (1994), Peter Paret (2007), Michael Howard (1993), Carl Schmitt (2007), Herfried Münkler (1990), and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (2008). We do believe that our selection does not do injustice to Clausewitz, but readers should be aware that we are dealing with ideas taken out of the context of a grand edifice of thought. *On War* is a substantial, highly complex and ultimately provisional book, and any attempt to summarize Clausewitz’s dialectical, multi-layered thinking within a couple of lines is doomed to distort.

Reading Clausewitz: Learning from the Classics

First, Clausewitz’s careful dialectic reasoning in *On War* and other minor and earlier writings paves the way out of some fruitless debates in strategic communication. In order to understand the nature of strategic communication, we argue, professional strategic communicators must develop a mature understanding of the status of the concept of strategy, the viability of the idea of systems of strategy, and the relationship between craft, science and art.

The Status of the Concept of Strategy

Clausewitz’s classical rendering defines tactics as teaching “die Lehre vom Gebrauch der Streitkräfte im Gefecht” [“the use of armed forces in engagement”] whereas strategy teaches “die Lehre vom Gebrauch der Gefechte zum Zweck des Krieges” [“the use of engagements for the object of the war”] (On
As has been mentioned, Clausewitz’s classic definition of strategy with its inherent subordination of tactics is still taught in business schools and military academies today. It is interesting to note, moreover, that Drucker (1909–2005) made a lasting impression, with a definition for effectiveness and efficiency very similar in structure—a distinction easily and frequently confused with Clausewitz’s. For Drucker there is a difference between doing things right (tactics = efficiency?) and doing the right things (strategy = effectiveness?) (Drucker, 1993/1967).

What is often overlooked when dealing with On War, however, is that Clausewitz did not claim originality for his definition. Clausewitz conceded, even argued, that he derives his understanding from the general and accepted usance of the time:

This distinction between tactics and strategy is now almost universal, and everyone knows fairly well where each particular factor belongs without clearly understanding why. Whenever such categories are blindly used, there must be a deep seated reason for it. We have tried to discover the distinction, and have to say that it was just this common usage that led to it. We reject, on the other hand, the artificial definitions of certain writers, since they find no reflection in general usage.

It is striking, we believe, that Clausewitz’s early nineteenth century lines may well serve as a description of the state of the professional discourse in the communication management literature about 200 years later. What Clausewitz seems to be saying, in modern terms, is that strategy, in his times, was a buzzword but that there is something substantial behind or in the concept, that is, a “deep seated reason” (“tiefer Grund”). Although there has been no lack of buzzwords in the communication management discourse of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, strategy might have been the most persistent. The concept has been so astonishingly persistent that one wonders whether belittling it as another buzzword does the term justice. The concept, in its richness and complexity, has recently started a remarkable career as a umbrella term and may emerge as the missing link between marketing communications, public relations, organizational communication and other disciplines—a view expounded by Falkheimer and Heide (2007) and Hallahan et al. (2007).

What needs to be learned from Clausewitz is that the concept of strategy may very well be both a buzzword and a substantial concept. Accepting the duality would at least explain the irritating yet unsurprising state of the professional discourse during the turn of the century. As has been described, scholars such as Steyn (2003) argued it may be time to get to grips with a term that had been, by then, in widespread use for years or even decades. Furthermore, the duality is by no means unnatural or new. It is often the case with professional terms enjoying long-term use that they serve a double need. The term strategy, thus, is broad and vague enough to come in handy as a catch-all phrase conveying a vague sense of overall importance. It also is deep and complex enough, with 2,000 years of etymology, to elaborate at length about it. The upshot is that strategy is there. It is there as something that modern theorists would call a discursive practice, and it is actually from a careful analysis of practice that Clausewitz arrives at his theory.

The Concept of Systems of Strategy

In retrospect, Clausewitz appears as a prototypical writer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Paret (2007) convincingly traced the influences in Clausewitz’s thinking to contemporaries such as philosopher Fichte and educational reformer Pestalozzi and, above all, to Kant—not in substance, but in form and mode of reasoning. It is also true that Clausewitz, as a military man, was a member of a small but influential circle of reformers grouped around the prominent figures of Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, eager to transform the Prussian state. What is less well known is that
Clausewitz by no means represented the mainstream of military thinking of his age. Clausewitz started his career as a military writer by arguing against the mainstream, the popular mainstream at least, and at the time of his early death in 1831 at 51 years of age he was still considered an outsider. Clausewitz’s writings have stood the test of 200 years of time, however, and what was considered mainstream and the height of theoretical achievement by then, has been relegated to the archives as historical curiosity. Thus, for communication scholars it is interesting to ask what has been discarded over time and what has been regarded as substantial.

We wish to argue that the substantial element of Clausewitz’s thinking is his very urge to deal with the essentials of his object of study, in his case war. Although *On War* contains a lot of practical advice on eighteenth and nineteenth century military operations, Clausewitz always refused to be drawn into dogmatic debates or to set up systems. Clausewitz’s severe criticism of the writings of military theorists Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow (1757–1807) and Antoine Jomini (1779–1869), who were quite en vogue at the time, reveals Clausewitz’s piercing eye and urge to get to the heart of the matter by methodical reasoning. Bülow, for example, although not a distinguished military man himself, was one of the most frequently read military writers of the time (for the following cf. Paret, 1989). His thoughts reflected the age by proposing a military theory along mechanical and geometrical lines, declaring actual combat and tactical engagements insignificant in comparison with strategy comprehended as a system of lines of support, operational bases and angles of approach. Clausewitz, in contrast, argued that strategy and combat cannot and must never be disconnected. In a simile that delighted Friedrich Engels in particular (Howard, 1989, p. 43), Clausewitz (I.I.2.) argued that for all small and large operations in war, “decision by arms is for all major and minor operations in war what cash payment is in commerce.” [“Die Waffenentscheidung ist für alle großen und kleinen Operationen des Krieges, was die bare Zahlung für den Wechselhandel ist.”]. At the time, Bülow’s theories seemed in accordance with the realities of the battlefield, to be sure. Warfare had indeed developed into a game of maneuver and counter-maneuver, with actual battle being very rare during the fin de siècle.

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), however, swept away the artificialities of contemporary military theory, inflicting one crushing defeat after the other on the anciens régimes because he was prepared to pay in cash, that is, because he actively sought decision in battle. What needs to be learned from this historic example, thus, is that theorists should take care never to artificially separate the ‘bloody’ groundwork of the tactical from the high, clinical realm of the strategic level. Just as wars are not decided by strategies but by successful engagements decided in one’s own favor due to superior strategy, communication strategies do not communicate, do not convince—people, products, services and messages do. Furthermore, the dream of arriving one day, by theory, at a ‘scientific system’ of communication management or strategic communication is just that: a dream.

**Craft, Science and Art**

Bülow belonged to the generation of writers whom Clausewitz’s writings swept away, just as Bonaparte’s armies swept away the armies of Prussia in 1806. Writers like Bülow, as Paret’s (1989) account argues, wanted to turn the military art into a science in line with the causal-mechanical world view of the time. Clausewitz, as we will see, re-introduced the human, psychological element: the genius of the respective commanders, the spirit of the soldiers, the friction of details and minutiae, and also violence, hatred, passion, and fear.

With a view to the Napoleonic age, Clausewitz seems vindicated: Napoleon, by psychology, or by what we might label masterful leadership and skillful propaganda today, achieved stunning success out of proportion to the material means available. Contrarily, in a larger historical context, the two world wars of the twentieth century and the military operations of the twenty-first seem to favor a return to the simple and straightforward causal-mechanical view; not in the rather complicated sense of Bülow, but in a simpler sense. With the exception of Vietnam, which is interesting for that very
reason, the side commanding overwhelming material and technological superiority prevailed; and the way to material and technological superiority was paved by science and economic prosperity. Clausewitz did see that, however. In a distinction later referred to by Summers (1982, ch. 4) he differentiated two categories of activities characteristic of war, namely preparation for war on the one hand, and war proper on the other. Clausewitz wrote:

The knowledge and skills involved in the preparations will be concerned with the creation, training and maintenance of the fighting forces. . . . The theory of war proper, on the other hand, is concerned with the use of these means, once they have been developed, for the purposes of the war.

On War, II.1

Preparation for war and war proper, Clausewitz explained earlier, stood in about the same relationship as the craft of the swordsmith to the art of fencing (On War, II.2). Expressed in modern terms, thus, Clausewitz clearly saw that certain areas in the conduct of war lend themselves to the scientific method while others do not.

US military writer Summers (1982, 42–51), in his analysis of the US failure in Vietnam, brilliantly transposes Clausewitz’s analysis to the 1960s. Summers argued that one reason for US failure was the quantitative-economic paradigm in the US Department of Defense under the aegis of Secretary Robert McNamara. McNamara, one of the “whizz kids” in the Ford Motor Company, brought commercial systems analysis and quantitative statistics to bear not only on defense budgeting but also on operations in Vietnam (for a thorough critique that is controversial for framing Vietnam predominantly as a guerilla war see Asprey, 1994). Although senior observers such as Henry Kissinger conceded that systems analysis, overall, was more often right than wrong, the quantitative paradigm, which was perfectly applicable to preparation for war, eroded the capability to fight the war proper (1979). Kissinger (1979, as cited in Summers 1982, p. 48) described the impact McNamara’s whizz-kids, Allan C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith in particular, had on the military establishment:

A new breed of military officers emerged: men who had learned the new jargon, who could present the systems analysis arguments so much in vogue, more articulate than the older generation and more skillful in bureaucratic maneuvering. On some levels it eased civilian-military relationships; on a deeper level it deprived the policy process of the simpler, cruder, but perhaps more relevant assessments which in the final analysis are needed when issues are reduced to a test of arms.

There is a double lesson for communication management in this comment. First, communication managers need to understand that, as in war, there are areas of communication management that lend themselves to the scientific method while others do not. Preparing for communication management can be organized along scientific lines; communication management proper, as it unfolds in real time and space, can only be supported by scientific approaches. It is particularly important to emphasize Clausewitz’s message at a time when elaborate systems of controlling communication are being developed and balanced scorecards and strategy maps have become accepted tools. The systems help in preparation, to be sure. But they neither do the actual fighting nor the actual communication for you. The other, second issue is of course the well-known organizational fact of life that it is far easier to talk the talk than to walk the walk. There is a tendency in modern management to adopt a clinical, scientific discourse which seems perfectly rational, until it is confronted with the ‘irrationality’ of reality.
Rereading Clausewitz: Parallel Developments in Warfare and Communication

Clausewitz’s *On War* is the result of decades of practical experience and a lifelong attempt to come to grips with its object of interest, that is, warfare, which is different from the theory of warfare. But *On War* would have been inconceivable had its author not witnessed far-reaching changes sweeping away the established systems with its concurrent theories and practices. Thus, it seems appropriate for us to ask which far-reaching changes we can observe in communication practice today. With Clausewitz in mind we also must ask how contemporary developments influence our theoretical understanding.

Surprisingly, the strategic communication community can learn a great deal from Clausewitz and from current attempts in military theory to make sense from what is currently happening in strategic communication. We refer, here, to current trends that have changed the rules: trends such as genuine grassroots campaigning, autonomously organized social movements, and diverse forms of “irregular” communication practices like counter-public-activity, guerrilla-marketing, hacking-activities or “irregularities” in political communication, the growing number of filibusters in the U.S. Senate, for example. It is not a coincidence, we believe, that these practices often refer metaphorically to two forms of warfare, namely, people’s wars and guerrilla wars. These became important military concepts in Clausewitz’s times and were theoretically outlined, at least in a sketchy way, for the first time in Clausewitz’s earlier work and later condensed into *On War*. Clausewitz’s sketchy approach was subsequently elaborated upon both in practice and in theory by some of his great admirers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Relationship of Organizational Set-Ups and Actions in the Field

While delving deeper into the distinction of cabinet wars, people’s wars and guerrilla wars, we have to take into account that *On War* was never finished (see Paret 1989). Although the textual corpus exists completely, the larger part of it is provisional. Clausewitz wanted to rework it but died before doing so. What he had planned in the revisions, it seems, was to emphasize two different ideal types of wars with different logics of conflict. The first type is a limited conflict, which in Clausewitz’s time was a typical eighteenth century cabinet war, the end of which might be, for example, to settle a quarrel about borderlines between two states. The second ideal type of war, conversely, is a deeply political conflict, the end of which is to shatter, destroy and abolish an adversary in a political sense. The conflict between early revolutionary, later Napoleonic, France on the one side and the ancient European monarchies on the other, in Clausewitz’s time, was a conflict of the second type—a contest for the political existence of different conceptions of society.

In Clausewitz’s distinction of different types of conflict, sketched but not thoroughly elaborated, we encounter the idea of a deep structural connection between the ‘organizational logic’ of a system engaging in war, and its concrete military action. In other words, when two systems clash in a battle for survival, the operations by which they engage in the struggle are expressions of their organizational logics. It is in this area that Clausewitz’s famous phrase ‘war is a continuation of politics by other means’ finds an alternative, second meaning. War cannot only be understood as a tool of politics, it might be viewed as an expression of it. In *On War* Clausewitz was of course employing the German term *Politik*, a very vague notion connoting three different political dimensions of polity, policy and politics, which are political institutions, political programs or tasks, and the logic of political procedures, that is, ways of doing things. It is precisely because of this ambiguity that one can find two different English translations of Clausewitz’s famous dictum: “war is a continuation of policy by other means”, and “war is a continuation of politics by other means”. The term one chooses is not only a matter of translation, whether one finds the right version or not. Clausewitz seems to be employing the German term in different ways and sometimes in its opaque ambiguity. Mostly
he seems to be thinking of policy, and in those passages war appears as a means to realize political programs or to achieve a certain political will. Here war is a tool. But one can find also passages where he is obviously thinking about politics, that is, the logic of a political process being expressed in the organizational structure of a particular political system.

To understand what Clausewitz was thinking of when he related politics and warfare one has to take into account that Clausewitz’s theory of warfare and his strategic thinking developed and matured in a unique historical situation. By the end of the eighteenth and during the beginning of the nineteenth century Europe had been a battlefield for decades. During the Napoleonic Wars French armies conquered nearly the whole continent—from Spain in the south west to the Russian capital Moscow in the far north east of Europe. This great military success was not only due to Napoleon’s outstanding abilities, but also the result of the very idea that war is a continuation of an organizational set-up of a social system by a specific form of action. Clausewitz wrote:

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, when that remarkable change in the art of war took place, when the best armies saw part of their doctrine become ineffective and military victories occurred on a scale that up to then had been inconceivable, it seemed that all mistakes had been military mistakes. It became evident that the art of war . . . had been surprised. . . . But is it true that the real shock was military rather than political? . . . Clearly the tremendous effects of the French Revolution abroad were caused not so much by new military methods and concepts as by radical changes in policies and administration, by the new character of government, altered conditions of the French people, and the like. That other governments did not understand these changes, that they wished to oppose new and overwhelming forces with customary means: all these were political errors.

On War, VIII.6.B

The French armies during the Napoleonic Wars seemed not only invincible because of the strategic capabilities of Bonaparte and his marshals, but also due to the political changes in all three fields of polity, politics and policy of the French Revolution they were bringing with them. They inspired not only French soldiers, but also many other people all over Europe, with revolutionary new ideas of how to organize society and how to organize military institutions. What is important here for our topic of military strategy and strategic communication, is the fact that warfare, in Clausewitz’s thinking, is inextricably linked to the organizational (political) condition of a war-making system. Napoleonic warfare was influenced by French revolutionary political developments and was successful because of it. Napoleon’s real strategic achievement can be seen in translating the new revolutionary political conditions into the field of warfare, forging out of a new society the strongest military force of the era (Schmitt, 2007, p. 3).

Once we have grasped the historical development in the realm of military theory and practice, some striking parallels with contemporary developments in the world of strategic communication emerge. Reformulating Clausewitz, we postulate that if communication is a continuation of politics, then that does not describe communication as a neutral tool to achieve whatever aim—on the contrary. How and what an organization communicates will and must be intertwined with its organizational form: it must and will be an expression of its purpose. In Clausewitz’s words, it is the relationship of a political purpose and an operational objective (On War, VIII.2).

Forms of Conflict and Concepts of Communication

As mentioned, Clausewitz distinguished between three different forms of war: cabinet wars, people’s wars and guerrilla wars. It is not too far-fetched to claim that classical, professional campaigns bear a strong resemblance to cabinet wars, grassroots campaigns might be understood as people’s wars,
and guerrilla communications could correspond to guerrilla wars. The important point, however, is that the categories do not only capture different instruments or tools, but different patterns or types of conflict.

Clausewitz’s theoretical distinction arises from analyzing developments in the practice of warfare during the Napoleonic Wars. The new revolutionary thinking, being politically relevant since the French Revolution, was opposed to the thinking of the ancien régimes, and resulted in a revolution of warfare: the people’s war. The relatively small armies of the ancient European monarchies, consisting of mercenaries or gang-pressed soldiers, were confronted with armies consisting of a mass of volunteers or conscript soldiers. To put it simply, French armies mustered a larger number of more motivated soldiers than their opponents, which was one important reason why Napoleon was able to conquer nearly all of Europe in a few years. A paradoxical detail, however, is the fact that although these new revolutionary developments in the political field impacted warfare in the strongest way, on the surface they had nearly no impact on what military action looked like. While the French Revolution changed the political condition in France, and some organizational conditions of French armies, it did not fundamentally change the way the French fought (see Asprey 2000 and 2001 for a military history of Napoleon’s campaigns). It is true that the French soldiers marched faster with less baggage, endured longer in the field without food, and attacked with more spirit and depth, but the weapons they carried, the maneuvers they executed, the whole face of war remained familiar. Napoleon did not re-invent regular warfare, he cannot, even, be considered particularly innovative. What he did followed established standards and rules. The military action of a people’s war might be understood, thus, as the military action of a cabinet war brought to perfection or taken to extremes.

The greatest lesson lies in the fact that contemporary observers, despite experiencing the differences as shattering defeats, were slow to grasp the roots of Napoleon’s dominance. To a lot of contemporaries, Napoleon and the new kind of People’s War appeared similar to monarchies’ mercenary armies and their cabinet wars. The reason was that the root causes were deeply buried. The powerbase of revolutionary and early Napoleonic France, which had tapped into the energies of the people en masse, was fundamentally different from the powerbases of Prussia or Britain or Russia (see Smith, 2006, for a concise introduction). We argue, therefore, that the distinction of people’s wars and cabinet wars bears a striking resemblance to the distinction of grassroots campaigns and classical campaigns. Grassroots campaigns differ from classical, professional campaigns because of the constitution of the powerbase, but on the surface the communication looks very similar. What we contest, here, is the widespread belief that the same tactical and strategic principles apply no matter which organization communicates which issue. The disaffection of the people with politics might have something to do with professional campaign managers and spin doctors who attempt to apply cabinet war principles to what should and must, essentially, be a people’s war.

Guerrilla warfare, to turn to the third type, differs from classical cabinet wars not only in the organization of the powerbase, but also in the way fighting occurred. The Spanish guerrilla war against French armies from 1808 to 1814 counts as the second important politico-military development to take place in Clausewitz’s times. While Napoleon was defeating several armies of European powers, including Prussia, Russia, Austria, Italy and Spain, and their diverse coalitions, his army was unable to defeat an uprising undertaken autonomously by the Spanish people after the regular Spanish army’s defeat. This new Spanish adversary was a relatively small one, estimated to comprise 50,000 militiamen, while Napoleon’s army, part of the strongest military force in this time, numbered about 250,000 experienced soldiers (Schmitt, 2007, p. 6). Despite their great advantage, the French proved unable to defeat the Spanish. The reason was that guerrilla warfare differed fundamentally from the regular military actions the French army was prepared for.

The birth of guerrilla warfare is often dated back to the early 1800s in Spain because the actual expression was coined there—guerra meaning ‘small war’ in Spanish. But the practice is much older. Asprey (1994), for example, traced guerilla warfare back to Ancient Persia. However, it was
at this time that a systematic theory of guerrilla warfare took shape in Prussia, and in the very circles Clausewitz moved in (Schmitt, 2007). Some military advisers of the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840) were reflecting systematically about the phenomenon of small wars that they observed in Spain. In 1813, their ideas led to the king’s Verordnung über den Landsturm [Ordinance on the citizen force], that is, a legal text ordering the Prussian people to resist by all means to public authorities in case of foreign occupation (Friedrich Wilhelm III, 1813). The edict gave a detailed plan on how to disturb public order by means of everyday instruments and weapons, and the king even decreed that some excessive or riotous mobs against law and order were better than a peaceful country leaving the enemy all his troops for military action (Friedrich Wilhelm III, 1813, p. 83). The decree established “a state of legalized anarchy,” as Clausewitz called it (On War, VI.26). Thus, on the one hand the existence of the Prussian king’s Verordnung indicates how strong French revolutionary armies were in comparison to the monarchist mercenary armies, and on the other how strong the forces unleashed by a people’s war were in comparison to the force of a cabinet war. For Prussian strategists in 1813, there seemed to be no regular military means left to resist Napoleon. On the other hand, guerrilla warfare was a smart weapon with which to fight against the armies of a people’s war, namely by activating irregular forces against the regular enemy.

By reflecting on guerrilla warfare, we come to better understand the two dimensions of organizational logics and actual, concrete and specific actions. A people’s war means that the full force of a nation-state is unleashed and placed in the service of war—not only, as in the cabinet war, the fractions which the ruler or sovereign trusts to be armed and is able to pay out of his own pocket. The way people’s wars are fought, however, is conventional mostly for the reason that the conventional form of warfare, in a military Babbage principle, is designed to make use of ordinary people who are always available in abundance, whilst heroes are always in short supply.

Guerrilla warfare, in contrast, differs qualitatively in both dimensions: organization and action. A guerrilla organization is marked by extremely decentralized structures, sometimes without any central command. Guerrilla war is a series of autonomous actions executed by different more or less independent groups or individuals, which does not necessarily add up to a series at first glance. Guerrilla organization is a form of organization, which was developed to resist in a very inferior position against stronger forces. The weapons of guerrillas, thus, are almost always simple everyday implements (in Friedrich Wilhelm’s edict, for example, hayforks and peasant hatchets). The example of Spain shows that a guerrilla organization in its own mountainous terrain can be extraordinarily efficient—a small number of militiamen armed with simple means resisted the strongest military force of its time. Several other examples, especially of anti-colonial wars during the twentieth century, prove the point further. Nevertheless, as several theorists have pointed out, guerrilla wars are ultimately not conflicts to win but conflicts to resist defeat. In order to win, the decentralized guerrilla activity needs to coalesce into a more regular organization, that is, the regular force of a people’s war (Mao, 1936, pp. 90–91; Guevara, 2003a, pp. 45).

Translating our observations into the field of strategic communication, we argue that guerrilla communications, that is, a plethora of communication activities denoted as ‘guerrilla’ forms of communication, almost always characterize an inferior position in conflict and represent ‘irregular’ ways to communicate (Schölzel, 2012).

The phenomenon of guerrilla communication poses the question of whether to win a conflict or whether to change its rules. In one definition, Clausewitz describes war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” (On War, I.1). In contrast Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong, who was one of the most influential theorists of guerrilla warfare and a great admirer of Clausewitz, defined the ends of war as surviving a struggle and destroying the adversary (Mao, 1938, p. 171). He was not thinking of physical survival or destruction, but of political survival or destruction, arguing, again, on the level of organizational structures and activities, not only on the level of military action. While Clausewitz’s definition referred to his own first ideal type of war, a conflict of equal adversaries,
or “countless duels,” which “go to make up war,” as he wrote (On War, I.1), Mao referred to the second ideal type, a struggle between different types of social organizations. Guerrilla wars, understood in Mao’s way, are (comparable to revolutionary people’s wars) conflicts between different logics of social organizations and their different ways of doing things. Guerrillas usually find themselves in a dramatically inferior position in such a struggle. They are not external adversaries of a state, but internal contesters of a societal order, which they perceive as illegitimate and want to overthrow. Thus, ‘regular’ conflicts are conflicts aimed at winning within an existing ruling framework, and ‘irregular’ conflicts are conflicts breaking existing rules and aiming to change a system’s procedures.

The main idea here, which we believe is also relevant for strategic communication, is that strategy in regular conflicts can be understood as finding the best way to apply general rules to win a game. Irregular conflicts, in contrast, are rule-breaking games where conflicting parties, on the one hand, try to implement their own rules, and, on the other hand, try to interrupt the adversary’s game. In such conflicts, every strategic move is a double-sided move: breaking rules and establishing a new game. We can find these productive and destructive dimensions of guerrilla conflicts in classical writings, for example Guevara (2003a, p. 37, p. 163), and also in contemporary concepts of guerrilla marketing as ‘irregular’ business politics and advertisement. In marketing, Levinson (1984) and Ries and Trout (1986) represent the constructive dimension, and Kotler, Keller and Bliemel (2007, pp. 1124–1127) the destructive dimension. Both dimensions may lead to a third effect, which is a transitional process, namely, changing rules at a larger level. Military guerrillas, for example, fought throughout the twentieth century to change political systems in various respects (Münkler, 1990, p. 16). In contemporary military discussions we can find notions like Networks or Swarms as metaphors describing today’s outcomes of recent transition processes in organizing warfare (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000, 2001). The irregulars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ guerrilla wars are to be found, today, in postmodern ideas of “guerrilla” network organizations or swarm intelligence as new forms of “regular” warfare.

This is highly relevant for strategic communication today because for several years now we have been observing a rapid development of communication practices, partly due to fast-growing technological developments, partly due to shifting social values and changing relationships. Whoever reflects on strategic communication in the times of the Social Web, should take a close look at guerrilla theory. If we are correct in describing many contemporary organizations as structured along the lines of absolute monarchies, and a dominant conception of strategic communication referring to classical cabinet wars, then obviously there exists a kind of structural conflict with the concept of network society (Castells, 1997; Van Dijk, 1999) and its swarming phenomena. Strategic communication, therefore, not only has to take into account rules of ‘classical’ communication but also the ‘rules’ of ‘strategic’ rule-breaking games. These general reflections lead back to our initial question: the problem of how to adequately conceptualize strategic communication today.

**Strategic Communication by Deploying Utterances**

In the contemporary lingo of communication consultants the guerrilla metaphor is used as a catch-all concept to describe a wide variety of creative or innovative forms of communication. Creativity and innovation do not mainly refer here to the organizational set-ups behind concrete communicative action, but apply first and foremost to the activities and the means of communication that appear as irregular.

The type of strategic communication referred to remains conceptualized along the lines of a paradigm of information flow, information transfer, information submission, or the like. This paradigm originates from information theory and the treatment of problems of technical transition of information. Based on this way of thinking, several models of communication have been developed during the last few decades, from simple container and stimulus-response models by way of two-way
exchange models towards complex models of feedback-flows of information. But these models are not well suited to understand guerrilla communication because its technical vision does not recognize phenomena of semantics or discursive practices. The relevance of typical guerrilla-like communication, such as word-plays, communicative violation of all kinds of rule (from typography to legal norms), or seemingly mindless utterances, is not to capture information flow. It is interesting to note that art schools, where some years all aspects of creative and innovative communication practices have been developed and taught, have far fewer difficulties in coming to grips with this. They offer approaches of communication that are based on semantics, on linguistic theory or discourse theory. While the seemingly mysterious phenomena of creative communication are not mysterious at all from their point of view—they are simply discursive practices—the approach of art schools does not seem to be very sensitive to problems of strategic communication. But the guerrilla metaphor in communication may serve as a vehicle to develop an understanding of communication that is based on discursive approaches, and is sensitive to strategy and tactics, or, in different words, to the conflict dimension of communication. And military theory, especially concepts of guerrilla warfare, may help to trace a way toward such an understanding (Schölzel, 2012, pp. 47–82).

In On War, Clausewitz established a close relationship between warfare and communication. The fact that war has communicative dimensions seems a trivial finding. First, the term lines of communication (meaning supply lines) was in use before the word “communication” had anything to do with media. Second, one could think about communication in the sense of exchanging information. This kind of communication is certainly necessary to conduct and execute military operations, as captured in the modern military phrase C3 (command, control, communication). Third, one could also think about influencing public opinion by communicating about a given war, which is relevant to establishing or maintaining a motivational element. These three dimensions can be traced in all military struggles, sometimes as decisive elements. Triumphs and failures in battle are often explained as results of superior communication or, conversely, failures or breakdowns of communication. Any gain or loss of troops, material or territory has always been the object of either intense news coverage or of efforts to cover up the very same. What we have here are communicative activities in warfare or about warfare. It seems Clausewitz also thought about another relationship, namely, the idea not only that communication is a corollary element of warfare, but that warfare in itself might be understood as a form of communication. Clausewitz for example asked rhetorically:

Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is not war just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.

On War, VIII. 6. B

A prominent reflection of warfare as a kind of communication in itself is Guevara’s concept of foco guerrillero, developed in the Cuban and the Bolivian campaigns during the late 1950s and the early 1960s. He conceived that a single military operation was meant not only to hit an adversary, but also to communicate to the people. Its function was to be a meaningful event in a double sense by integrating a military and a communicative effect. First, in a military sense, an operation planned and conducted according to the concept of foco guerrillero was a single, focused operation of a guerrilla campaign. Its military aim was to hit and defeat the opponent by a surprise attack at one specific point of weakness, thus weakening him by this operation in a general sense. Guerrilla war boils down to a great number of individual tactical operations without an overall operational strategy. The second, communicative effect, however, was to create utterances (Äußerungen), which are expressions, speech acts, and communicating to the people that they should join the revolutionary uprising. As a communicative event, the military operation should focus the people’s attention on the existence and the relative success of the revolutionary guerrilla movement, and the necessity as well as the
possibility to fight against an oppressive regime. Both were represented in the focused military operation (Guevara, 1965, p. 15).

In today’s conceptions of networked warfare and military swarming, every maneuver is now regarded as intertwined with communication processes. There are mixed forms of physical and communicative conflicts in a broad spectrum between “nonmilitary modes of conflict” and “information-oriented warfare” (Arquilla, Ronfeldt, Fuller & Fuller, 1998, p. 8) for which “managing . . . information flows” plays a crucial role (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000, p. viii). Netwar and Swarming describe doctrines of warfare, in which the difference between war and communication is blurring because communication itself plays a decisive role in conflicts. Elements of military conflict count themselves as forms of communication. The relevance of communication thus “refers not only to communication media and the messages transmitted, but also to the increasingly material ‘information content’ of all things” (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000, p. iii).

What Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2000) appear to be thinking of when they speak of “information content of all things,” (p. iii) is a kind of utterance or even performative utterance of military actions or, more generally, of all entities that are relevant elements in conflict. Strategy appears here not only as a problem of managing information flows but also (or maybe first and foremost) as a problem of managing systematically the relationships of different utterances that are relevant in conflict. The lesson for strategic communication, thus, is that strategic communication is about deploying utterances to form a discursive environment via campaigns or other complex processes of communication management, or deploying single but relevant utterances as a guerrilla action (Schölzel, 2012, pp. 329–339). Those utterances then establish specific relationships with their targets and may support the probability of a certain intended behavior. Further reflections may help to put into perspective current conceptions of strategic communication still implicitly or explicitly relying on the idea of communication as a kind of information flow. These reduced and one-sided concepts, we argue, are in dire need of complementary discursive conceptions.

Re-ReReading Clausewitz: Deconstruction

We conclude by deconstructing Clausewitz and thus, to a degree, our own writing. Clausewitz is often regarded as the high priest of strategy. As modern Germany emerged due to Prussian leadership, he is also regarded as one of the spiritual fathers of German militarism—to a considerable extent responsible, his critics maintain, for the two world wars of the twentieth century. Judged only from the substance of his theory, it is very strange that Lidell-Hart (1991/1929/1954), in particular, elevated Clausewitz to this dubious height. Erich Ludendorff, the generalissimo dominating the German High Command from 1916 onwards, with Hindenburg as his figurehead, proposed a concept totally opposite to Clausewitz and indebted to Moltke (the Elder), who was, as Howard (1989) found, a great admirer but not a great reader of Clausewitz. In Erich Ludendorff’s (1865–1937) deluded worldview the military did not serve the state: the state existed only to organize the existential total war of the races (see Asprey 2005 for an account of Ludendorff in perspective).

When dealing with Clausewitz, it is important to realize that the man and his work have become iconic, which means what he really says is less important and open to interpretation. What counts is the aura. One glance is enough to see what aura Carl Philipp Gottlieb von Clausewitz (hereafter Clausewitz) brings to a discourse. Firstly, the man writes in the tradition of German idealist philosophy in a style that is notoriously rigorous, complicated and inaccessible. Clausewitz is German, moreover. Second, On War is a lengthy book. It adds up to nearly 600 pages in some editions. It was never finished and as a consequence it is badly structured, at times muddled, at other times tedious, which ensures that few will actually read it from cover to cover. Yet, third, Clausewitz, despite his philosophical style, is a writer of the highest order and it is possible to pick and quote passages of piercing clarity. Finally, when actually read and studied, Clausewitz is a thinker of enormous
substance. The fact that eminent and serious scholars, such as Princeton professor Peter Paret, have devoted much of their work to the man, without exhausting the subject, may serve as evidence.

Specifically, many people are interested in the iconic character of Clausewitz because, as sociologists Knights and Morgan (1990) have argued, Clausewitz’s concept of strategy lies at the very core of a discourse that created the concept of professionals and a professional class, first in the military, then in business.

The formation of strategic discourse, the ability to ‘see’ the correct strategy and implement it was the role of the professional officer class. This class developed out of classical traditions of ‘chivalry’ and ‘honor’ but it was not until the early nineteenth century that expertise as opposed to status became a defining characteristic. The access to a professional ideology legitimated the power of the military elite: in this ideology, military strategy and tactics studied at the emerging officer’s schools of the day, played a central role along with skills of leadership and scientific understanding of weapons systems.

Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996) agreed with Knights and Morgan’s claim that business appropriated the logic of the military elite: “If nothing else, managers have always fancied themselves as an officer class. Strategy is what separates them from the sergeants” (p. 160).

It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that Clausewitz and On War are keystones in the architecture of a discourse that is highly relevant to today. What is interesting for communication scholars is that there are two intertwined efforts going on at present that very much resemble the establishment of a professional officer class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First, there is the effort to adapt the discourse and terminology of ‘PR-reborn-as-strategic communication’ in a way that it emulates the discourse in strategic management. The effort is apparently directed upwards, the idea being to gain access to the professional officer class, or even to the general staff—to gain access to the keys that unlock the boardroom, as Bütschi and Steyn put it (2006). Second, there is the effort of universities and other institutions of higher education, it seems, to erect a barrier. The barrier, possibly facilitated by the Bachelor/Master distinction, is erected between candidates who receive training and education for largely technical or operational jobs in communication management on the one hand, and candidates who are initiated into the higher realms of strategy on the other that might or not to be functional. What is interesting, however, is that the former is offered a ‘practical’ education with hands-on experience, while the other is being brought into touch with ‘theory’.

The assumption that theory prepares for real strategic decision-making, as opposed to creating an aura of importance, is highly debatable, however. From the first part of On War, the only part authoritatively completed, it is clear that Clausewitz would have contested it. But what is even more important, we argue, is to understand that there is no such thing as a purely and exclusively communicative campaign or conflict. Campaigns and conflicts are about something and conducted by someone against or for someone else. So first and foremost the issue or topic needs to be mastered. To socialize students into believing a few principles of communication will go far in any kind of campaign or conflict will go against Clausewitz’s admonition: one has to establish the kind of ‘war’ on which one is embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This, to echo Clausewitz, is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

References
Howard Nothhaft and Hagen Schölzel


