

War and philosophy?

A report on a conference on military history that took place recently in Switzerland, by Laurent Murawiec.

Is it possible to think through *war* and *philosophy* together? Is there something in common? Do they influence one another? What is it that connects the thoughts of the philosopher, and the actions of the warrior? Today's philosophy—the myriad heirs to Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, the social philosophers, sociologists, psychologists—pay no attention to such questions. Or, philosophers who busy themselves writing about war, take and use Clausewitz as a textbook, some form of once-and-for-all scholastic recipe: They do not think about war, but about Clausewitz's thoughts about war.

The military seems so deeply ensconced in high-technology weapon systems that philosophy is derided as a futile intellectual exercise; intelligence, command and control, sophisticated and “smart” weapons command all the attention. And the last decades have presented the soldier with the complex constructions of the deterrence doctrine, MAD [Mutual and Assured Destruction], which start with the axiom that technological progress, in the form of thermonuclear weapons, has abolished global warfare. As a result, global war is considered “the unthinkable,” and the only modes of warfare that are deemed worthy of attention are so-called sub-threshold conflicts: low-intensity conflicts, terrorism, and regional wars which fit well-established patterns of the past. Major, recent wars, such as the Vietnam War, respond to the commandments of MAD, where war is treated as an adjunct of diplomacy, and the warrior as the scarecrow used to frighten the opponent to go to the negotiating table.

In the end, there is no commonality between the two areas. The military are firmly pushed back into their job, as experts and specialists, and the philosophers into their ivory tower, the world of academia where nothing is allowed to happen unless a footnote justifies and records it.

“To understand War, one must envision the parameters of *shock*, *firepower*, *maneuver* and, fourth, *uncertainty*, just as in the Art of the Fugue, when the fourth voice of the fugue is heard without being written in the score,” and that principle clearly emerges from the *Theodicy* of Leibniz, the Johann-Sebastian Bach of modern thought. This unusual dialogue between the Art of War and Science was presented by Col. Daniel Reichel, of the General Staff of the Swiss Army, at the annual conference of his *Centre d'Histoire et de Prospective*

militaires (CHPM) held near Lausanne, Switzerland on Oct. 21-22.

“Military thought is *durchdenken* [to think through fully—ed.], it is essentially maneuver, encirclement, and a *Weltanschauung* must necessarily preside over strategy and tactics, a “system of coordinates” which organizes the way in which the warrior thinks. For *singularities*—uncertainty—tear systems asunder,” Colonel Reichel said. It is therefore not any particular tactics that matters, wars are not won or lost on the basis of pre-established blueprints, *method* wins wars.

We must be Leibnizians!

Later, in his conclusion, Colonel Reichel asked: “What science is there that allows us to grasp irrationality—that is where Karl Marx failed so completely. We must be Leibnizians!”

Such bold thoughts deserve elaboration, which much of the conference was devoted to.

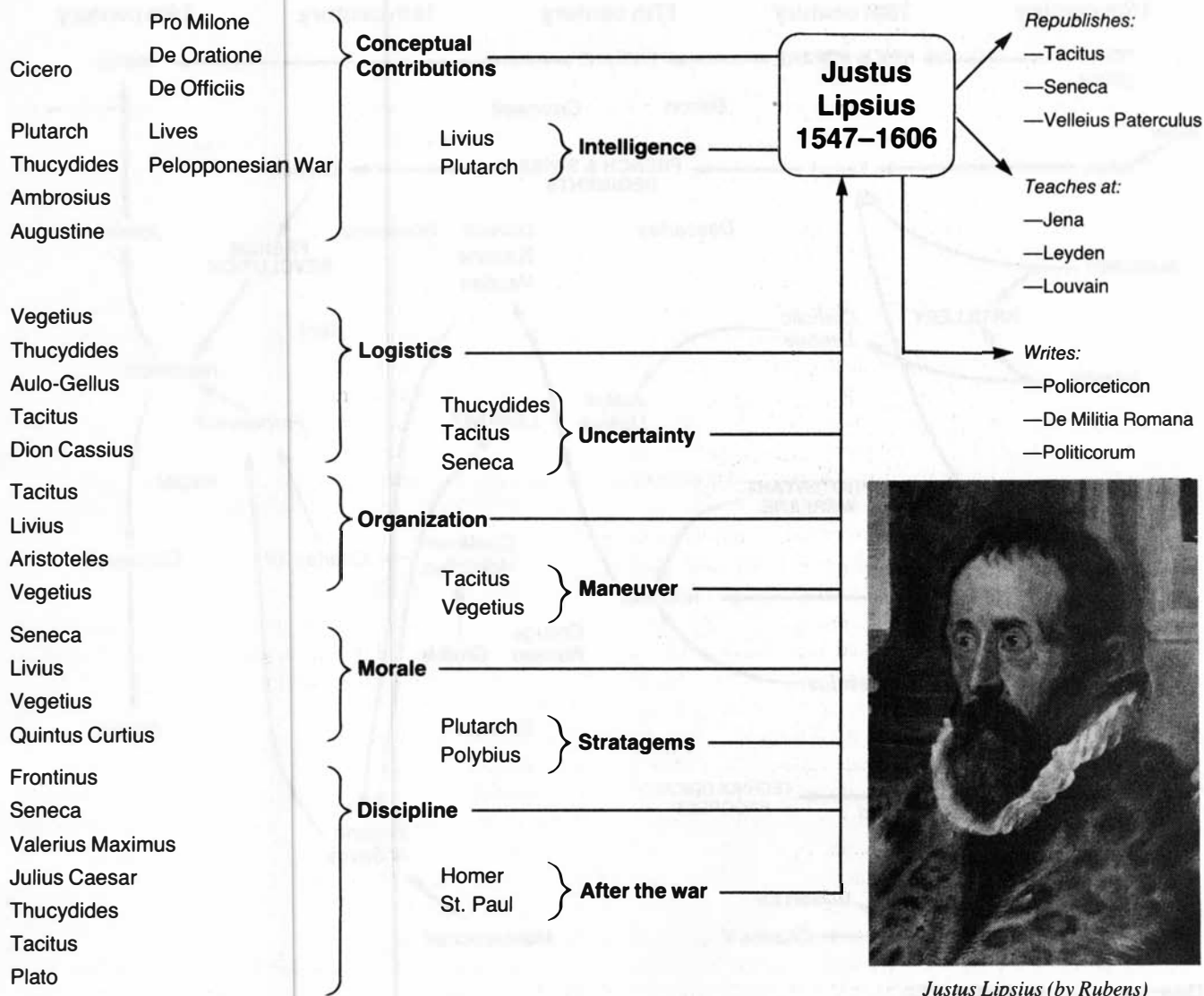
Figure 1 shows a simplified version of a “map” prepared by the CHPM, which charts the texts gradually collected by the Humanists of the 15th and 16th centuries from the works of authors of Ancient Greek and Roman times: Saint Augustine discusses that the quintessence of the art of war is the art of winning the peace; Saint Ambrose presents the religious justification of war, against barbarians. Cicero discusses fortitude as the key factor of victory, which Machiavelli later will call *virtù*. Renaissance Humanists took concrete case-studies from Thucydides, Plutarch, Tacitus; studied logistics and organization in Vegetius; looked at morale and discipline in Plato and Caesar. The greatest Renaissance collector was Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), successively a professor at the Universities of Jena, Leyden, and Louvain, who republished many of the works of Tacitus, Seneca, and others, and whose own books, *Politicorum* (1589), *De Militia Romana* (1595), *Polioreticon* (1596), were military “best-sellers.”

War had been undergoing revolution upon revolution. The medieval knight's army had been exterminated in the Hundred Years' War. Accelerated technological progress in artillery and firepower had brought to an end the age of cavalry. The Swiss infantry, the Italian *condottiere*, Machia-

FIGURE 1

The synthesis of Justus Lipsius

Basic documentation gradually collected (15th and 16th centuries) by the Humanists



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velli's concept of the militia had been succeeded in the 16th century by the Spanish *Tercio*. The Thirty Years War again changed the rules of the game, with Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden coming after the Orange-Nassau military reforms, and later with Vauban and Turenne of France. At every major point, as **Figure 2** shows, a revolution in warfare, albeit the result of complex interactions, is produced by the coupling of vanguard scientific-philosophical thinking with leading statesmen and warriors: Leonardo da Vinci with Machiavelli, Erasmus and the Dutch reformers, Grotius and Gustavus Adolphus, and with Leibniz in the central position.

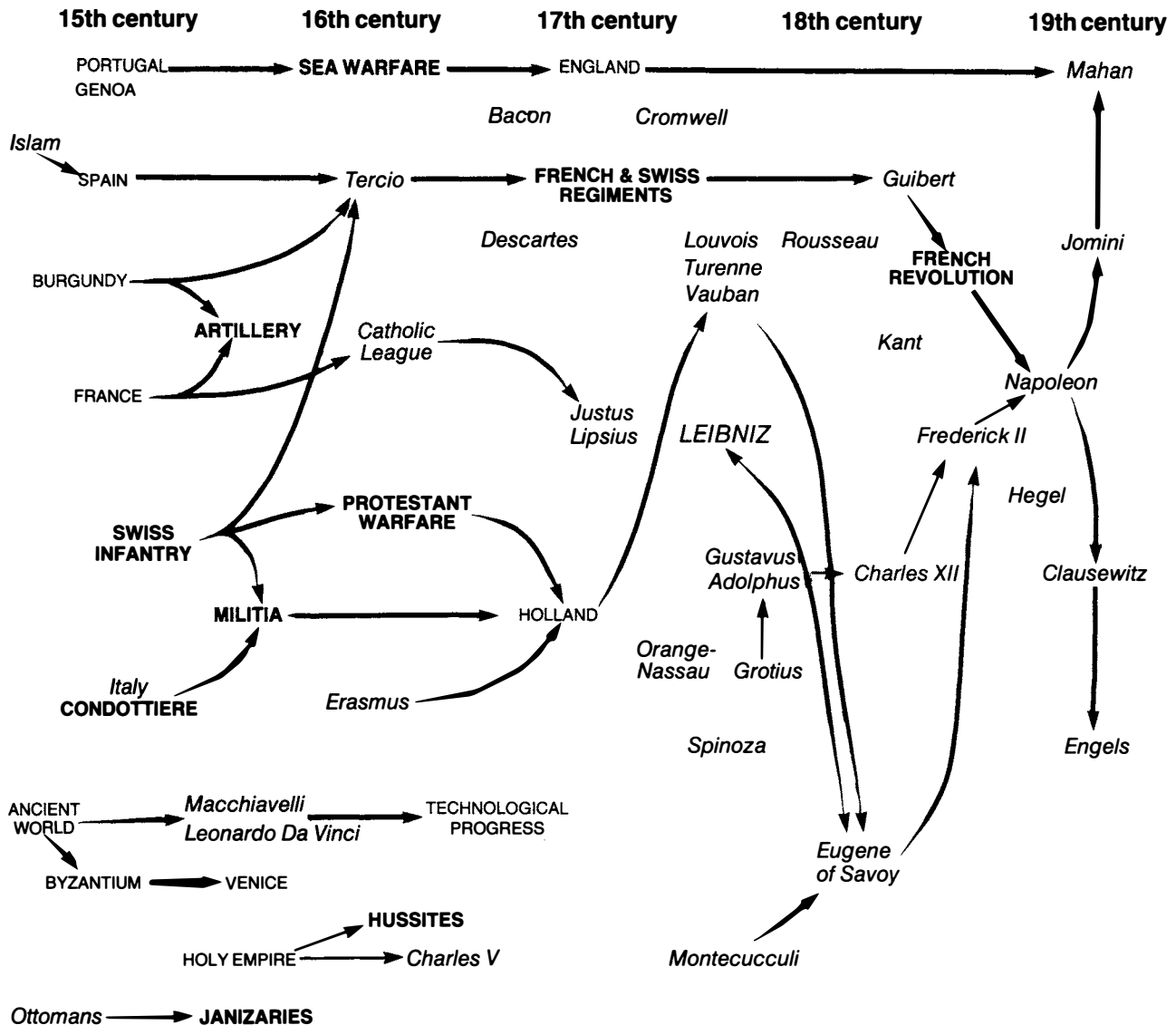
Figure 3 details the 18th century, featuring in particular the dialogue between the two famous correspondents, Leibniz and Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736), and the conveying of Leibniz's thought through the Oratorians to Lazare Carnot, the "Organizer of Victory" of the French Revolution.

What is asserted throughout is that War and Philosophy are *integral* to one another.

The question of the Tercio

A concrete demonstration was brought by Rene Quatrefages, Professor of History at the University of Montpellier,

FIGURE 2
Sketch of genealogies of influence



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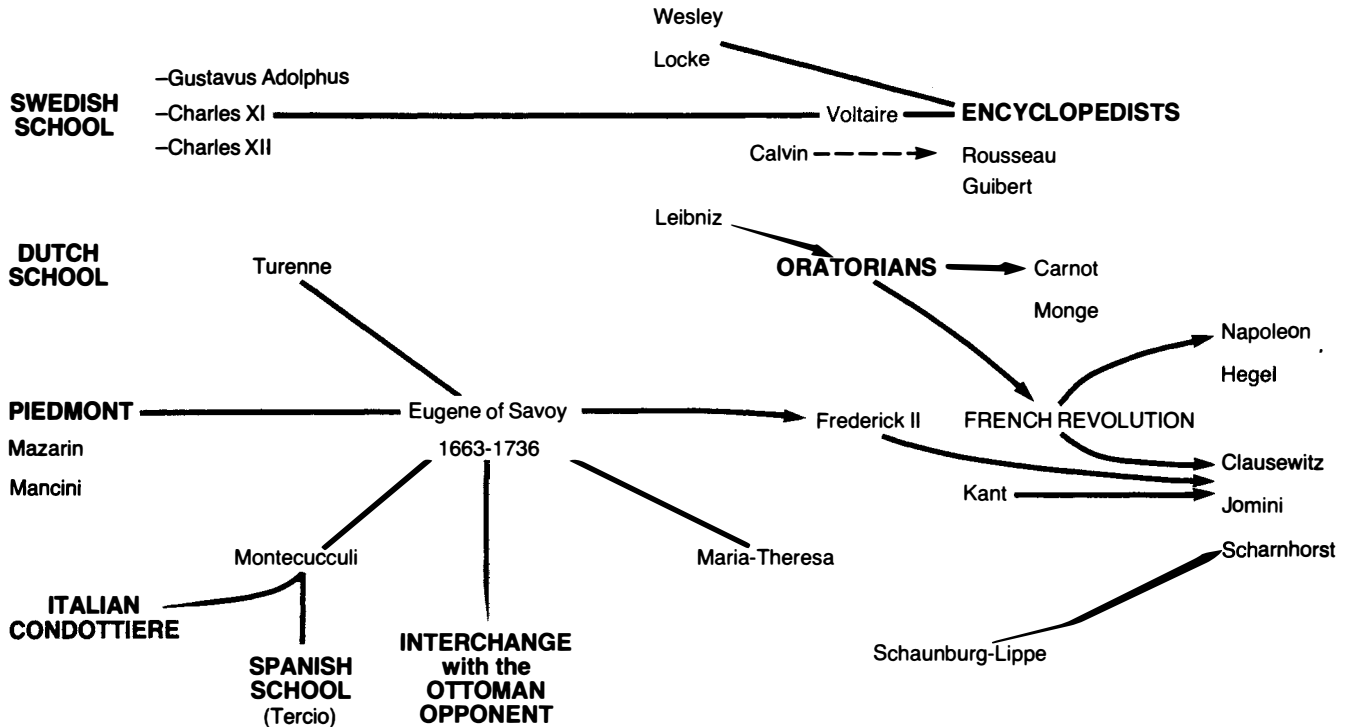
whose presentation documented the development of the Spanish fighting unit, the *Tercio*, the first formation capable of beating the Swiss, the kings of the battlefield in the 16th century. The *Tercio* drew upon the entirety of Spain's military history, and of course, the seven-centuries-long *Reconquista*, which Quatrefages polemically asserted had not been a *religious* but a *national* war. The religious aspect of a crusade had essentially been grafted upon it, *post facto*, for ideological reasons. The war of *Reconquista* was carried out with massive popular participation. Its soldiers were soldiers of the people and of the land, and in all successive march

lands of the *Reconquista*, life was military—which explains the lateness and attenuation of feudality in Spanish history. On that basis emerged the *Hidalguía*, "the sons of a combative people," fighting for Hispania.

It was a group of humanists that worked out the development of the *Tercio*. Among them, most prominent was Alonso de Palencia, whose 1459 *Treatise on Perfection and on Military Victory* reflected and started to solve the crisis and end of the medieval system, the supremacy of cavalry in particular. The king commissioned Palencia to draft a report on a system of militia and the general arming of the people—

FIGURE 3

Eighteenth-century poles of influence and currents of thought



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which was finally introduced in 1497, and led to the great turning point, which Quatrefages called “the first modern battle,” the Battle of Cerignoles, in Italy (1503) where the myth carried by the French, the supremacy of frontal shock and assault, was cut to pieces by the *Tercio* infantry deployed with skirmishers and riflemen who combined firepower and “the security of closed ranks.”

The fascinating element about Alonzo de Palencia, the king’s “Latin Secretary,” i.e., foreign minister, Quatrefages mentioned, was that he spent several years in Rome, “in the entourage of Cardinal Bessarion,” one of the moving spirits and great actors of the 1439 Council of Florence, one of the leading introducers of Plato into the Western world, and the collaborator of Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa. The Byzantines brought to the West experience of warfare with the Ottomans. Hence, a necessary hypothesis: Was the dialogue carried out in Rome integral to Palencia’s later concept of the *Tercio*?

Quatrefages also underlined the decadence of the *Tercio*, when it later became, under Emperor Charles V, imbued with “Imperial messianism” and an expression of the Council of Trent’s Counter-Reformation. The essential role of the individual combatant’s mind was emphasized by Colonel Reichel, in his discussion of Machiavelli’s *virtù*. Thomas Aquinas had defined the Knight’s motivation as the uninter-

rupted line of loyalty descending from God through the Sovereign to the Knight, that is, through the links of feudal vassalage. The personal responsibility of the individual combatant toward God was consubstantial to the development of the *militias*, he stressed, and his responsibility toward the nation. Mercenary armies could not face militia armies inasmuch as “it was faith that gave a content to the militia—and the musket.” Machiavelli was to unify the conception, seeing the infantryman as a citizen-soldier charged with defending the fatherland.

Further aspects came to light, notably with a presentation by Pierre Boyer, Chief Keeper of the French Overseas Archives, Aix-en-Provence: The Spanish Army lost its war against France, in 1557, when the undisciplined troops wasted two weeks looting the town of St. Quentin, in Northern France, whose fortress they had taken after a siege, and which was a crucial choke-point in the defense of Paris. Professor Courtes, of the University of Montpellier, discussed Cromwell’s address to his soldiers—“Place your trust in God, and aim at the ribbons of the shoes!”—there is God’s Providence, and the soldier’s skills, moral authority, and professional rigor. Courtes contrasted Machiavelli’s immense concern, in his book *De re militari (Of Things Military)*, for the instrument, the trooper, the unit, to the algebra

of war compiled by Sun Zu in his own *Art of War*. The spark that turns numerical inferiority into strategic superiority is "the manner of thinking that reorganizes mentally the theater of war."

In another line of thinking, Professor Luraghi, of the Universities of Rome and Genoa, spoke on the 17th-century captain of war Prince Montecucculi, who had joined the Austrian Emperor's Army as a soldier, and rose to the rank of Field Marshal. One of his mottos was that "mathematics is the science of war," a conception inherited by Wallenstein who rationalized logistics to the point of being able to calculate and optimize supplies for his armies. Unfortunately, the announced discussion concerning the influence of Italian philosopher Campanella upon Montecucculi, who was an avid reader of his works, did not take place.

Col. Pierre Carles, of the French Army, developed some extremely interesting ideas of the development of guerrilla warfare—what was called "the small war"—from religiously-motivated irregular warfare in the 17th century (the Valdensian War and the Camisards War in France under Louis XIV) to the attention paid by such a great strategist as Marshal Maurice de Saxe—and Napoleon's blindness and inability to face the Spaniards' guerrilla war against his regular troops. Gen. Jörg Zumstein, chairman of the CHPM and former chief of General Staff of the Swiss Army, stressed the overriding importance of the moral factor throughout the history of war.

MacArthur and Plato

In the course of the many question and answer periods, it was brought up that throughout his campaign of the Pacific, Douglas MacArthur was carrying Plato's *Republic* in his hip pocket. This is no quirk or idiosyncrasy. Winning the war means winning the peace. War is only in small part the exerting of military force. War is determined by the mobilization of economic, social, political, and cultural forces. MacArthur's war of the Pacific was a Leibnizian war, that is, a principle of least action continuously guided the choice of targets and the deployment of forces, in order to accomplish the most with the least. The same principle is displayed by Lazare Carnot's German student General Scharnhorst, the strategist of the German Wars of Liberation and the man who beat Napoleon. Scharnhorst's book *The General Causes of the Success of the French in the Revolutionary Wars, and Especially the Campaign of 1794*, applies the Leibnizian method, least action and flanking. Scharnhorst's definition of the new mode of warfare generated by the American and the French Revolution was based on *national* war, a *war of ideas* (or of *ideals*), and one where a principle of least action is applied politically, geographically, and geometrically.

"Continuity and discontinuity must be thought together—that is the secret of war. Let us be Leibnizians!" concluded Colonel Reichel—a battlecry strangely efficient, and squarely opposed to the organized illiteracy generally promoted with respect to military science.

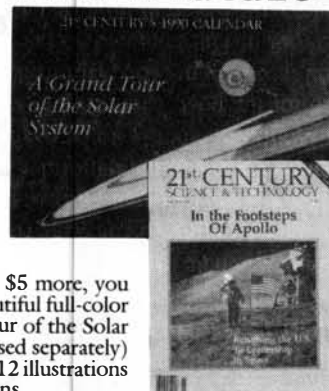
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