Book I—On the Nature of War

Chapter I
What is War?

1. Introduction.

WE propose to consider first the single elements of our subject, then each branch or part, and, last of all, the whole, in all its relations—therefore to advance from the simple to the complex. But it is necessary for us to commence with a glance at the nature of the whole, because it is particularly necessary that in the consideration of any of the parts the whole should be kept constantly in view.

2. Definition.

We shall not enter into any of the abstruse definitions of war used by publicists. We shall keep to the element of the thing itself, to a duel. War is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale. If we would conceive as a unit the countless number of duels which make up a war, we shall do so best by supposing to ourselves two wrestlers. Each strives by physical force to compel the other to submit to his will: his first object is to throw his adversary, and thus to render him incapable of further resistance.

War therefore is an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfil our will.

Violence arms itself with the inventions of Art and Science in order to contend against violence. Self-imposed restrictions, almost imperceptible and hardly worth mentioning, termed usages of International Law, accompany it without essentially impairing its power. Violence, that is to say physical force (for there is no moral force without the conception of states and law), is therefore the means; the compulsory submission of the enemy to our will is the ultimate object. In order to attain this object fully, the enemy must be disarmed; and this is, correctly speaking, the real aim of hostilities in theory. It takes the place of the final object, and puts it aside in a manner as something not properly belonging to war.

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11.—The political object now reappears.

Here, now, forces itself again into consideration a question which we had laid aside (see No. 2), that is, the political object of the war. The law of the extreme, the view to disarm the adversary, to overthrow him, has hitherto to a certain extent usurped the place of this end or object. Just as this law loses its force, the political object must again come forward. If the whole consideration is a calculation of probability based on definite persons and relations, then the political object, being the original motive, must be an essential factor in the product. The smaller the sacrifice we demand from our opponent, the smaller it may be expected will be the means of resistance which he will employ; but the smaller his are, the smaller will ours require to be. Further, the smaller our political object, the less value shall we set upon it, and the more easily shall we be induced to give it up altogether.

Thus, therefore, the political object, as the original motive of the war, will be the standard for determining both the aim of the military force, and also the amount of effort to be made. This it cannot be in itself; but
it is so in relation to both the belligerent states, because we are concerned with realities, not with mere abstractions. One and the same political object may produce totally different effects upon different people, or even upon the same people at different times; we can, therefore, only admit the political object as the measure, by considering it in its effects upon those masses which it is to move, and consequently the nature of those masses also comes into consideration. It is easy to see that thus the result may be very different according as these masses are animated with a spirit which will infuse vigour into the action or otherwise. It is quite possible for such a state of feeling to exist between two states that a very trifling political motive for war may produce an effect quite disproportionate, in fact, a perfect explosion.

This applies to the efforts which the political object will call forth in the two states, and to the aim which the military action shall prescribe for itself. At times it may itself be that aim, as for example the conquest of a province. At other times, the political object itself is not suitable for the aim of military action; then such a one must be chosen as will be an equivalent for it, and stand in its place as regards the conclusion of peace. But, also, in this, due attention to the peculiar character of the states concerned is always supposed. There are circumstances in which the equivalent must be much greater than the political object in order to secure the latter. The political object will be so much the more the standard of aim and effort, and have more influence in itself, the more the masses are indifferent, the less that any mutual feeling of hostility prevails in the two states from other causes, and, therefore, there are cases where the political object almost alone will be decisive.

If the aim of the military action is an equivalent for the political object, that action will in general diminish as the political object diminishes, and that in a greater degree the more the political object dominates; and so is explained how, without any contradiction in itself, there may be wars of all degrees of importance and energy, from a war of extermination, down to the mere use of an army of observation. This, however, leads to a question of another kind which we have hereafter to develop and answer.

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23.—War is always a serious means for a serious object. Its more particular definition.

Such is war; such the commander who conducts it; such the theory which rules it. But war is no pastime; no mere passion for venturing and winning; no work of a free enthusiasm; it is a serious means for a serious object. All that appearance which it wears from the varying hues of fortune, all that it assimilates into itself of the oscillations of passion, of courage, of imagination, of enthusiasm, are only particular properties of this means.

The war of a community—of whole nations and particularly of civilised nations—always starts from a political condition, and is called forth by a political motive. It is therefore a political act. Now if it was a perfect, unrestrained and absolute expression of force, as we had to deduce it from its mere conception, then the moment it is called forth by policy it would step into the place of policy, and as something quite independent of it would set it aside, and only follow its own laws, just as a mine at the moment of explosion cannot be guided into any other direction than that which has been given to it by preparatory arrangements. This is how the thing has really been viewed hitherto, whenever a want of harmony between policy and the conduct of a war has led to theoretical distinctions of the kind. But it is not so, and the idea is radically false. War in the real world, as we have already seen, is not an extreme thing which expends itself at one single discharge; it is the operation of powers which do not develop themselves completely in the same manner and in the same measure, but which at one time expand sufficiently to overcome the resistance opposed by inertia or friction, while at another they are too weak to produce an effect; it is therefore, in a certain measure, a pulsation of violent force more or less vehement, consequently making its discharges and exhausting its powers more or less quickly, in other words
conducting more or less quickly to the aim, but always lasting long enough to admit of influence being exerted on it in its course, so as to give it this or that direction, in short to be subject to the will of a guiding intelligence. Now if we reflect that war has its root in a political object, then naturally this original motive which called it into existence should also continue the first and highest consideration in the conduct of it. Still the political object is no despotic lawgiver on that account; it must accommodate itself to the nature of the means, and through that is often completely changed, but it always remains that which has a prior right to consideration. Policy therefore is interwoven with the whole action of war, and must exercise a continuous influence upon it as far as the nature of the forces exploding in it will permit.

24.—War is a mere continuation of policy by other means.

We see, therefore, that war is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means. All beyond this which is strictly peculiar to war relates merely to the peculiar nature of the means which it uses. That the tendencies and views of policy shall not be incompatible with these means, the art of war in general and the commander in each particular case may demand, and this claim is truly not a trifling one. But however powerfully this may react on political views in particular cases, still it must always be regarded as only a modification of them; for the political view is the object, war is the means, and the means must always include the object in our conception.

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26.—They may all be regarded as political acts.

Returning now to the main subject, although it is true that in one kind of war the political element seems almost to disappear, whilst in another kind it occupies a very prominent place, we may still affirm that the one is as political as the other; for if we regard the state policy as the intelligence of the personified state, then amongst all the constellations in the political sky which it has to compute, those must be included which arise when the nature of its relations imposes the necessity of a great war. It is only if we understand by policy not a true appreciation of affairs in general, but the conventional conception of a cautious, subtle, also dishonest craftiness, averse from violence, that the latter kind of war may belong more to policy than the first.