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## Geniuses Dare to Ride Their Luck: Clausewitz's Card Game Analogies

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**ABSTRACT:** Scholars have been using the wrong card games to analyze Carl von Clausewitz's analogies in *On War*, which has led to errors in understanding his ideas. This article identifies the games Clausewitz discusses, allowing for a more accurate interpretation of his original meaning for the study of war. Since Clausewitz's ideas underpin strategy development within service education systems, it is critical his ideas are fully understood in context.

**Keywords:** card games, luck/chance, genius, gambling, daring, probability, trinity, cheating

Carl von Clausewitz's argument that chance and probability play a central role in war is one of his most famous ideas and a component of his "paradoxical trinity," those elements crucial to understanding war's nature.<sup>1</sup> Knowing how Clausewitz sees the role of chance is central to understanding what he thinks war is. In *On War*, Clausewitz uses the analogy of card games to help explain the nature of war and the role of chance or luck, but he does not name the card games in question. This lack of specificity has led scholars and commentators to use bridge, poker, or blackjack as examples of card games mimicking war; likewise, game theory uses games like poker and chess as the "fundamental unit of analysis."<sup>2</sup> The problem with using these games to understand the role of chance and player interaction is that they were not invented or played in Germany until after Clausewitz's death, and they do not closely resemble the games mentioned in his writing. Thus, examples like poker, bridge, or blackjack are wrong given the context, and, therefore, the conclusions drawn from such analyses will not match his intended meaning. Furthermore, in Clausewitz's time, gambling and cards were rife with cheating, which is rarely addressed when discussing his ideas about chance, luck, and emotion. Omitting these contextual factors

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1. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege: Hinterlassene Werke über Krieg und Kriegführung*, three volumes (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1832–34), bk. 1, chap. 1, 1:31; and Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), bk. 1, chap. 1.

2. Paul Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 138.

is a major oversight, given Clausewitz's emphasis on situating theory within the historical context from which it emerged.

Clausewitz explicitly criticizes previous theorists for their lack of effective analysis of historical evidence and context.<sup>3</sup> Peter Paret, the late coeditor and co-translator of the English-language edition of *On War*, similarly admonishes readers that "Clausewitz's ideas are expressed in terms of the years in which they were written, and do not always readily translate into equivalents today."<sup>4</sup> To understand Clausewitz, we must correctly identify and analyze the specific games to which he alludes.

This article identifies faro, skat, and ombre as the gambling and card games Clausewitz references and considers what this choice, and the effect of cheating, means for understanding his ideas regarding luck, chance, the "paradoxical trinity," and war and strategy. Furthermore, if war resembles a card game where cheating is routine, these games must involve far greater chance and luck and far less control and predictability than the games often found in analyses of Clausewitz's writing.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is a disconnect between how we think Clausewitz understood the problem of war and how he actually understood it.

## Wrong Game, Wrong Outcome

Some commentators, such as Antulio J. Echevarria II, Justin Conrad, and Thomas Waldman, use blackjack or poker to illustrate Clausewitz's analogy of war as a card game. Others, including Alan Beyerchen, do not use a specific card game but instead focus on the interactive nature of card games, in which presumably the ability to learn an opponent's character and personal tendencies makes the game "a matter of skill as well as odds."<sup>6</sup>

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3. Clausewitz, *On War*, 61, 63, 70. See also Jan Willem Honig, "Clausewitz and the Politics of Early Modern Warfare," in *Clausewitz: The State and War*, ed. Andreas Herberg-Rothe, Jan Willem Honig, and Daniel Moran (Stuttgart, DE: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011), 29–48.

4. Peter Paret, *Clausewitz in His Time: Essays in the Cultural and Intellectual History of Thinking about War* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 17.

5. Antulio J. Echevarria II, "Clausewitz and the Nature of the War on Terror," in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 196–218; and Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), 240.

6. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72; Justin Conrad, *Gambling and War: Risk, Reward, and Chance in International Conflict* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017); and Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz and the Non-Linear Nature of Warfare: Systems of Organized Complexity," in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, 53, as quoted in Thomas Waldman, "War, Clausewitz, and the Trinity" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2009), 257, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/40048786.pdf>; Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security* 17, no. 3 (Winter 1992–93): 59–90; and Beyerchen, "Systems of Organized Complexity," in *Clausewitz*, 45–56.

There is no inherent problem with this logic, except we now know these games did not exist or were not popular in Germany during Clausewitz's lifetime.

Additionally, the degree of cheating in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gambling and card games further undermines claims that Clausewitz's card game analogies demonstrate a reasonable degree of calculable probability in war. In the case of Beyerchen's arguments about nonlinearity and great uncertainty, this information supports his broader point that war is inherently unpredictable.<sup>7</sup>

Analysis of the wrong games has led scholars to misunderstand Clausewitz and develop faulty conclusions. When possible, it is best to identify the correct games in Clausewitz's writing to understand his meaning. For example, in their translation of *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret translate the expression *Vorteil der Hinterhand* ("advantage of [the] last hand") as "riposte," which poorly fits the context of *On War* and obscures the original connection to the card game skat.<sup>8</sup> Their word choice is curious as the other two English translations of *On War* retain the original reference to cards.<sup>9</sup> Given the market dominance of the Howard and Paret translation, it is no wonder the connection to card games has been lost in this instance. Elsewhere, in "Über das Fortschreiten und den Stillstand der kriegerischen Begebenheiten," Clausewitz uses the card game faro to make a point about gambling.<sup>10</sup> Paret and Daniel Moran neglect to mention faro and comment, "The comparison with games points to the belief that the cardplayer tends not to play his best cards at once, but gradually in the course of the game."<sup>11</sup> That may be true, but the card game Paret and Moran describe bears no relation to faro, the game explicitly named in Clausewitz's essay, which is a game where the bets are made before each card is drawn and the players do not hold cards to play later.<sup>12</sup> Thus, their analysis is wrong.

Such misleading analyses lead to false conclusions about some of Clausewitz's central ideas. After all, if a game is reasonably

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7. Beyerchen, "Unpredictability of War," 59–90.

8. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 6, chap. 28, 489, and bk. 7, chap. 16, 550; and Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 2:395, 3:46.

9. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. O. J. Matthijs Jolles (New York: Modern Library, 1943), 469, 539; and Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), 548, 631.

10. Carl von Clausewitz, "Über das Fortschreiten und den Stillstand der kriegerischen Begebenheiten," in *Ausgewählte militärische Schriften*, ed. Gerhard Förster and Dorothea Schmidt (Berlin: Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1980), 384.

11. Carl von Clausewitz, *Carl von Clausewitz: Two Letters on Strategy*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1984), 29n11; and Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 361.

12. Clausewitz, "Über das Fortschreiten," *Ausgewählte*, 384.

predictable—and not subject to cheating—the role of chance is minimal. Players would be less subject to sways of emotion wrought by bad luck and can make simpler, rational decisions. If a card game such as faro is not as interactive as poker or blackjack, what would it mean for his theory? Would it mean war is not interactive? That would not make sense, as Clausewitz tells readers almost from the first sentence of *On War* that war is inherently interactive.<sup>13</sup> His meaning in this context is that any interaction must include all the elements of his trinity and be subject to all their whims.

### Clausewitz's Correct Card Games

In *On War*, Clausewitz, directly and indirectly, cites the card games faro, skat, and ombre as an analogy for war. The key to understanding the significance of these games lies in their degree of luck and the nature of the interaction between players. The games have a more extreme calculable probability: they are far chancier than the games often (inaccurately) cited on his behalf and are not all interactive. They were also known to be rampant with cheating, which has profound ramifications for how Clausewitz's contemporaries would have understood his arguments.

Clausewitz uses the analogy of card games several times in *On War*, twice explicitly and twice implicitly. The first explicit mention occurs in book 1, chapter 1, when he asserts, "In short, absolute, so-called mathematical, factors never find a firm basis in military calculations. From the start there is an interplay of possibilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry. In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards."<sup>14</sup> Significantly, his assessment of luck's role in warfare precludes predictability. Therefore, games like blackjack cannot represent Clausewitz's depiction of war, given that something as simple as card counting allows blackjack players to alter the odds in their favor. One of Clausewitz's key points is that war is not predictable or is so difficult to calculate that "Newton himself would quail before the algebraic problems it could pose."<sup>15</sup> If one of history's greatest mathematical minds would shrink before the probability problems war would pose, then mere mortals have no chance of successfully calculating its odds. The odds of accurately predicting success in war would more closely resemble the odds in a game of faro. The broader context of book 1, chapter 1 of *On War* shows how war in its ideal form can move to the extreme, and thus, the risk of serious

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13. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 1, chap. 1, sect. 2, 75.

14. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 1, chap. 1, 86; and Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 1:24.

15. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 8, chap. 3b, 586.

escalation is real. Simply waging war is a huge gamble that can put the entire state at risk, with no ability to calculate the probability of a specific outcome with precision. Clausewitz's explicit mentions of games such as faro are extremely important to the point he was making, as they tell us he was thinking of extreme odds, with little-to-no chance of accurate calculation, albeit with tremendous potential for huge success—if one, therefore, was willing to make a bet.

Faro is a banking card game, and its near incalculability and predisposition to cheating make it little more than an adapted game of dice.<sup>16</sup> It descends from the game *basset*, which was notorious for heavy losses, swings of fortune, and its similarity to a lottery.<sup>17</sup> In faro, players bet upon the turn of one card and could win “15, 30, and 60 times the amount staked” by accumulating bets. Presumably, the possibility of high returns accounts for its popularity despite the high risk involved.<sup>18</sup> As Richard Seymour notes in *The Compleat Gamester*, gambling in general and faro, in particular, were notorious for cheating and fraud, which readers of Clausewitz should bear in mind when Clausewitz explicitly mentions the game.<sup>19</sup>

The second explicit mention of card games occurs in book 8 in the context of the discussion of wars in the era prior to the French Revolution, in which states could calculate the probabilities of any given moment instantly. As such, “[t]he conduct of war thus became a true game, in which the cards were dealt by time and by accident. In its effect it was a somewhat stronger form of diplomacy, a more forceful method of negotiation, in which battles and sieges were the principal notes exchanged.”<sup>20</sup> In this case, Clausewitz frames the card game analogy with limited risk and a reasonable degree of calculability, with warring states unlikely to move to an extreme level of violence and with relatively clear and predictable means. This description points to a different card game than the earlier faro analogy, and it is reasonable to believe Clausewitz's contemporaries would have understood this difference because faro was a game of almost pure chance with lots of cheating.

Instead, the above description appears to match the game of skat—which was popular in Germany during Clausewitz's lifetime—perhaps indicating Clausewitz had different games in mind for different concepts. Clausewitz indirectly mentions skat via the phrase

16. David Parlett, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 76–79.

17. Richard Seymour and Charles Johnson, *The Compleat Gamester: In Three Parts* (London: J. Hodges, 1750), 110, <https://books.google.com/books?id=CrtBAQAAMAAJ>.

18. Parlett, *Card Games*, 77.

19. Seymour and Johnson, *Compleat Gamester*, 118, 127.

20. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 8, chap. 3b, 589–90; and Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 3:113.

*Vorteil der Hinterhand*. Clausewitz uses this phrase twice in *On War*, once in *Der Feldzug von 1796 in Italien*, and again when writing on Frederick the Great.<sup>21</sup> The expression *Vorteil der Hinterhand* denotes the advantage of playing the last card or hand and is closely associated with skat.

Skat originated in Thuringia in the early nineteenth century, just southwest of where Clausewitz spent much of his life.<sup>22</sup> It is a bidding trump-taking game involving three players, each of whom has a role: the “Forehand,” “Middlehand,” and “Rearhand” (the *Hinterhand*).<sup>23</sup> The advantage generally sits with either the Forehand or Rearhand, with the latter holding some clear advantages in bidding and play, as the former dictates which card is played first, and the latter sees what cards others have played before deciding what to do.<sup>24</sup> A nineteenth-century description of the game indicates the necessity of luck and daring:

Very few hands, and those of very rare occurrence, are absolutely certain to win a given game; while, on the other hand, a concurrence of lucky accidents may enable you to bring a very poor, indeed a downright hopeless-looking hand, to a successful issue, and overthrow one which seems to be all but certain of winning.<sup>25</sup>

This description indicates that strategy and skill are important but still subordinate to the play of chance and probability. Throw in the additional factors of betting, cheating, and the corresponding excitement or apprehension these possibilities generate, and the importance of emotion, reason, and chance becomes apparent. It is a key point that as reasonably calculable as the wars prior to the French Revolution may seem, even those wars were subject to the vagaries of chance and emotion.

Clausewitz directly mentions a third game, ombre, in his history of the campaign in Russia. While discussing General Hans Karl von Diebitsch, Clausewitz notes, “[Diebtisch] wished, however, like an ombre player,

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21. Carl von Clausewitz, *Der Feldzug von 1796 in Italien: Hinterlassenes Werk* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1833), 339; Carl von Clausewitz, *Napoleon's 1796 Italian Campaign*, trans. and ed. Nicholas Murray and Christopher Pringle (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), sect. 74, 279 and 279–80n11; and Carl von Clausewitz, *Strategische Beleuchtung mehrerer Feldzüge von Sobieski, München, Friedrich dem Großen und dem Herzog Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand von Braunschweig, und andere historische Materialien zur Strategie* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1837), 144.

22. Parlett, *Card Games*, 271–79.

23. Parlett, *Card Games*, 273.

24. A. Hertefeld, *The Game of Skat in Theory and Practice* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1893), 28–31.

25. Hertefeld, *Game of Skat*, 15.

to play a small trump, in order to see how the cards played out.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Clausewitz’s friends corresponded about ombre. Professor Johann Benzenberg wrote to August von Gneisenau, “in Warburg, where I was staying for the sake of studying, I learned nothing very well but *ombre*.”<sup>27</sup> Clausewitz attended parties with Gneisenau where card games were played and likely had some familiarity with ombre since his friends played it; it was wildly popular, and, not least, because he specifically named it.

Ombre (or *hombre*, “man”) was “the greatest card game of the Western World” throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> The game is played between three players with a special 40-card deck. Each player receives nine cards, and then bidding begins with “the highest bid [determining] *hombre*, who, depending on the bid, may declare trumps or exchange cards.”<sup>29</sup> Players follow suit, where possible, and the player with the highest card of the original suit played wins the trick unless there is a trump played, in which case the highest trump wins. Additionally, certain cards function as *matadors*, in essence, a type of trump card, adding an extra element of uncertainty and chance to the game.<sup>30</sup>

Ombre rewards “ambition, boldness, and cunning,” and its “strategies typically rest on *creating* risk, even ignoring risk. . . . In many ways the play of *hombre* closely resembles a military campaign, with two players temporarily allied to defeat a common foe.” The game is one of daring, and, as scholar Jesse Molesworth describes it, its “pleasure . . . lies not really in winning but in making one’s name on the field of battle: a daringly waged campaign ending in failure is more honorable than a cautiously waged campaign ending in victory.”<sup>31</sup> The game resembles Clausewitz’s views on military genius, including the need for boldness and his caustic criticism

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26. Carl von Clausewitz, *Der Feldzug von 1812 in Russland, der Feldzug von 1813 bis zum Waffenstillstand und der Feldzug von 1814 in Frankreich* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1835), 210–11. See also Carl von Clausewitz, *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia*, trans. anon. (London: John Murray, 1843), 221.

27. Johann Benzenberg to August von Gneisenau, July 3, 1816, in *Das Leben des Feldmarschalls Grafen Neidhardt von Gneisenau*, vol. 5 of 5, Georg Heinrich Pertz and Hans Delbrück (Berlin: Georg Reimer Verlag, 1880), 5:123–126.

28. Parlett, *Card Games*, 198.

29. Jesse Molesworth, *Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Realism, Probability, Magic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 72.

30. Parlett, *Card Games*, 198.

31. Molesworth, *Chance*, 72–73.



of cautious generals.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, it appears somewhat less predictable than skat, yet more predictable than faro.

In addition to the above, Clausewitz provides other clues elsewhere. In one essay, he makes a point about risk and probability using faro.<sup>33</sup> In a letter to Clausewitz discussing the essay, Gneisenau compliments Prince Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher's "daring" [*verwegener Spieler*] in decision making and mentions that Blücher was "well practiced with *Pharao* and *Würfel*."<sup>34</sup> *Würfel* means "dice" but is a generic term for various dice games. Dice games were also riddled with cheating, as Clausewitz's comment about "loaded dice" in a letter to his wife indicates.<sup>35</sup> Gneisenau's use of the word *daring* in the context of risk-taking corresponds closely with Clausewitz's concept of daring and its role in military genius, and genius, of course, is the antidote to, or mitigator of, chance. Daring forms a significant part of his idea of genius as these games were synonymous with cheating, and only a daring player would have the courage to make the necessary bets. Cheating and gambling comprised two parts of a whole.

Cheating was rampant in card and gambling games of the era, and gambling houses and card games were synonymous with fraud. As eighteenth-century writer Richard Seymour notes in his guide, *The Compleat Gamester*, "there is fraud in all games."<sup>36</sup> The role of cheating in Clausewitz's thoughts is unclear, but his choice of games provides some indications. Skat seems to align more closely with his description of more limited war, while faro seems to match his description of war in its more absolute form. Faro was notorious for cheating, which may imply Clausewitz sees war's ideal form as one where cheating increases fog and friction and changes the character of war in more profound ways. For example, finding out a game is rigged will likely upset players and cause them to seek recompense or even revenge. Alternatively, they might decide to cheat from the start, leading to an escalation of cheating by other players, or they might use violence

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32. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 1, chap. 3, 100–112; Carl von Clausewitz, *Napoleon Absent, Coalition Ascendant: The 1799 Campaign in Italy and Switzerland*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Nicholas Murray and Christopher Pringle (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020), sect. 13, 111 and 120, and sect. 36, 281 and 283; Carl von Clausewitz, *The Coalition Crumbles, Napoleon Returns: The 1799 Campaign in Italy and Switzerland*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. Nicholas Murray and Christopher Pringle (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021), sect. 65, 61, and sect. 91, 232.

33. Clausewitz, "Über das Fortschreiten," *Ausgewählte*, 384–85.

34. Gneisenau to Carl von Clausewitz, April 6, 1817, in Pertz and Delbrück, *Das Leben*, 5:199–200.

35. Carl von Clausewitz to Marie von Clausewitz, December 1, 1806, in Karl von Clausewitz and Marie von Clausewitz, *Ein Lebensbild in Briefen und Tagebuchblättern*, ed. Karl Linnebach (Berlin: Verlag von Martin Warneck, 1916), 69; and Vanya Eftimova Bellinger, *Marie von Clausewitz: The Woman Behind the Making of On War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 75.

36. Seymour, *Compleat Gamester*, 211.

as a deterrent, which could result in other players turning to threats or violence to protect their interests. Players may make their own rules and rob each other, having decided not to go through the motions of a dishonest game.

For example, revolutionary France could be accused of cheating in the game of war for mobilizing its population in a manner the more traditional states opposed to France could not or would not countenance, which increased the financial costs and violence of the war and changed the war's character to suit their interests and move away from the more limited character of war (which Clausewitz describes in book 8). Thus, the revolutionaries and Napoleon could be accused of not playing war by the rules agreed upon in spirit. The amount of cheating and extreme chance in faro seems to match Clausewitz's description of changing rules and the unpredictability of war. Once one player cheats, other players would be foolish not to cheat, unless they thought not cheating was the only way to retain their stakes. Once they lose their stake and realize they have been fleeced, it is logical that players would change how they approach the next game and either copy their opponents' behavior or escalate first. Clausewitz considered war even less certain, whose exit, therefore, required even more forethought, much the way sensible gamblers should have a clear idea of what they are willing to wager, why they are gambling, whether they will cheat, and what they are willing to risk.

The roles of cheating and escalation have important implications for wars of limited aims. One cheating party might escalate violence to a more absolute form of war, outweighing the value of the original political goals and leading to a more costly conflict. Perhaps ombre belongs here, since it seems to fit between the other two games Clausewitz references, neither extreme in chance or calculation, but a bit of both.

### **Genius, Luck, or Both?**

In his writings, Clausewitz discusses the relationship of daring to chance, luck, and probability. In *On War* and his histories, he focuses most on the relationship between risk and chance within the context of the wars of Frederick the Great, the French Revolutionary Wars, and the Napoleonic Wars. In a letter dated September 20, 1806 (just before the

Battle of Jena), Clausewitz reflects on Frederick's victories at Rossbach and Leuthen, observing,

The king gathered the remains of his armies and led them, thirty thousand strong, towards the ninety thousand Austrians near Leuthen in Silesia. He was determined to win everything back or lose it all, like a desperate gambler and—as our statesmen would do well to remember!—in this ardent courage, which is simply instinctive for a man of strong character, there lies the greatest wisdom.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, Clausewitz's "greatest wisdom" is the courage to act in uncertainty. This idea is significant because the games he references contain a far greater degree of chance, including cheating, which logically means the strength of character required for decision making is greatly amplified. Boldness is a virtue.

Clausewitz's argument for daring relates to the need for commanders to make decisions despite the fog and friction of war and relates to the fact that luck will play a significant role. Readers should recall the considerable role luck plays in games like skat or faro and that there are no hands strong enough to guarantee success, making a daring strategy imperative—especially if one possesses a strong hand that might be the only opportunity to win big.

Clausewitz praises French General Barthélemy-Catherine Joubert for his boldness in the 1796 campaign in Italy.

In this situation, which within a few days would surely have led to General Joubert's complete downfall, on 3 April he had the incredible luck to learn for certain from a colonel (Eberle by name, so probably a Tyroler), who had managed to get into the Drava valley disguised a peasant, that Bonaparte had successfully crossed the Alps. Joubert instantly decided to march through the Puster valley to join him, thus moving his line of retreat to that region where at least there were no enemy regular troops; and at the same time, by combining with the main army in the critical situation that it must be in, to be of decisive use to it.<sup>38</sup>

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37. Clausewitz and Clausewitz, *Ein Lebensbild*, 61–62. Thanks to Chris Pringle for his help in translating this passage via an e-mail exchange on March 29, 2021.

38. Clausewitz, *Napoleon's 1796 Italian Campaign*, sect. 72, 271 and 271n20.

Had this plan gone poorly, or if the information had been wrong, Joubert would have been cut off and likely annihilated. The risk he took was bold—and ultimately correct—because it worked, and inaction would have likely led to the loss of his force anyway. Had Joubert not acted, or been more cautious, he might have avoided blame for poor decision making, but he would not have achieved the success he did. Furthermore, Clausewitz highlights the “incredible luck” of the information arriving in the first place. Readers should consider what someone would have had to do to cross the Alps at that time of year while avoiding interception and getting waylaid, then successfully finding Joubert in time to provide the information. That Joubert had already experienced great luck meant he should continue trusting it.

Numerous examples in Clausewitz’s historical writings resemble the descriptions of the gambling games he references rather than the more predictable ones typically analyzed. In the 1796 campaign, Napoleon made one of his biggest gambles, and again, it is important to provide Clausewitz’s thoughts in a fuller form. He observes,

That fierce desire to be the first at the gates of Vienna, to raise his name high above his rivals, while he dictated peace to the Emperor without anyone else involved, that sense of his personal power, that trust in his luck: that is what swept Bonaparte onto the victory path that opened up before him, with little calculation or weighing up of risk. He dared to take a huge gamble, because it was in his character and in his personal interest.<sup>39</sup>

At the time, Napoleon was far ahead of the rest of the French armies and had gambled repeatedly on the chance the Austrians would cave in if he kept pushing them—he might as well have bet big, as any small bet likely would not have delivered the subsequent Austrian offer of terms. Clausewitz explicitly addresses such behavior: “The French Revolution made the most daring of gamblers [Napoleon], always betting everything on one card. Since his appearance almost all campaigns have gained such a cometlike swiftness that a higher degree of military intensity is scarcely imaginable.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, commanders became like players in faro, better off making one big bet, with the potential for significant gains and massive escalation, than frittering away resources in a series of small bets at low odds. If they lost, the result would be the same; and if they won, they would gain all on the turn of one card.

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39. Clausewitz, *Napoleon's 1796 Italian Campaign*, sect. 74, 275–76.

40. Clausewitz, “Über das Fortschreiten,” *Ausgewählte*, 384–93.

Here lies the connection between luck, the rest of Clausewitz's trinity, and the need for *coup d'oeil* (vision) and *courage d'esprit* (moral courage). The essence of military genius is having the vision to see the potential gain and the moral courage to make the bet.

Clausewitz makes it clear that commanders must be willing to gamble and take risks and repeatedly criticizes those unwilling to do so. One of the regular recipients of his criticism was Archduke Charles.

The fact that the French dispositions were not so excellent as we would have to imagine them to be in order to excuse the archduke's passivity is proved by the action of 8 June, so when we see the archduke making no such attempt [i.e., to force the issue in Switzerland], we may well say that at least for this section of the campaign, his military leadership lacks *the daring to take advantage of a favorable opportunity*. Since war is not purely the product of rigid functions between ends and means, but rather always retains something of the nature of gambling, so the art of command cannot entirely dispense with that element either; and a commander who is too reluctant to gamble will fall short in his winnings, and in the great ledger of military success he will get deeper into debt than he thinks.<sup>41</sup>

Clausewitz's and Charles's views on gambling in war are quite different. Charles's history of the same campaigns argues that "rashness" was a result of France's "incompetent leadership" and that the French Revolution encouraged the breaking of rules, "and expecting every gamble to produce results, [the revolutionaries] followed this impulse whenever they saw no other way out."<sup>42</sup> By contrast, Clausewitz asserts that the character of war had changed and that daring was essential in an irrational environment. Notably, Charles's views align closely with those of prominent contemporaneous writers, such as the great eighteenth-century theorist Maurice, count de Saxe.

Saxe argues that battles are too risky and should be avoided and contends it is possible to make war "without trusting anything to accident."<sup>43</sup> Applying pure reason can help avoid hasty or fear-based decisions,

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41. Italics in the original, Clausewitz, *Coalition Crumbles*, sect. 66, 2:64.

42. Karl Erzherzog von Österreich, *Geschichte des Feldzuges von 1799 in Deutschland und in der Schweiz*, vols. 1–3 (Vienna: Anton Strauss, 1814), 1:286–87.

43. Maurice, count de Saxe, *Reveries, or, Memoirs Concerning the Art of War*, trans. anon. (Edinburgh: Sands, Donaldson, Murray, and Cochran, 1759), 226–27.

and accurate calculability could permit armies to make war without trusting to accident. This argument directly contradicts Clausewitz's teachings, where luck is a foundational part of his trinity of war. Furthermore, to make war without risk of accident presumes the ability to avoid chance and emotion. Clausewitz fundamentally rejects this presumption, as war itself constitutes chance, reason, and emotion.

As with luck and other Clausewitzian ideas beyond the scope of this article, Clausewitz sprinkles examples of emotion in decision making throughout his histories. For example, in his books on France's 1799 campaigns, he complains that commander Jean-Baptiste, Count Jourdan, "had no prospect at all of victory, so he went on to incur a defeat simply to avoid appearing inactive. This is a practice that criticism can never tolerate."<sup>44</sup> Simply put, Jourdan acted for action's sake, which was a waste. In the same history, Clausewitz criticizes General Baron Paul Kray for his moral failure to make a clear decision under trying circumstances.<sup>45</sup> In his earlier history of the 1796 campaigns in Italy, Clausewitz writes that during the height of the battle of Rivoli, Napoleon "saw the positive side of his situation [despite the precariousness of the French position], and his calm certainty made him seem like a demi-god to his generals and soldiers."<sup>46</sup> In many ways, Clausewitz's description matches his ideas regarding military genius in *On War*, where calm certainty and vision combine with the moral courage to make a decision despite the perceived uncertainty.<sup>47</sup> It also matches Clausewitz's thoughts on *coup d'oeil* and card games such as faro, in that Napoleon understood it was better to make one big bet and take a chance than lose opportunities at lower risk because mechanistic, or more predictable, games would not require the same leap of faith and trust in luck for an instant decision.

## In Conclusion

Understanding the role of chance in Clausewitz's trinity is central to understanding his view of war. Although Clausewitz provides a useful analogy to explain the centrality of chance and probability to war, his lack of specificity in *On War* and scholars' subsequent misidentifications of the relevant card games has created a problem in Clausewitzian scholarship and a misunderstanding about his original meaning. Even mentions of poker or blackjack can lead readers to misinterpret Clausewitz because their ideas

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44. Clausewitz, *Napoleon Absent*, sect. 13, 1:114.

45. Clausewitz, *Napoleon Absent*, sect. 54, 1:399.

46. Clausewitz, *Napoleon's 1796 Italian Campaign*, sect. 63, 228.

47. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 1, chap. 3, 100–112.

of what blackjack or poker look like will bear little to no resemblance to the games Clausewitz had in mind. Even if any subsequent analysis is accurate, the incorrect foundational basis of the analysis will fundamentally undermine any conclusions drawn from it, given the significant variations of the stochastic and probabilistic natures of faro, skat, and ombre vary significantly from those of blackjack and poker. Of course, where scholars restrict themselves to a simple reference to the interactive nature of a card game, they will be on firmer ground. Even here, however, a fundamental problem exists, as at least one of the games has little to no interaction between players. Despite the best intentions of scholars, the misidentification of games fundamentally fails to capture Clausewitz's ideas.

What do these findings mean for fields such as game theory? If game theory requires rational actors with a fixed card deck then it is not useful.<sup>48</sup> If chance and luck in war are far more extreme than was thought and players struggle to make rational decisions because of the extreme emotions involved, scholars must revise how they might use game theory to model behavior. Furthermore, if there is no baseline expectation of honesty, then the role of luck and emotion is enhanced, and genius as Clausewitz describes it becomes critical. The games Clausewitz uses explained here, especially when including cheating, would allow a genius to rise above or even write the rules.<sup>49</sup> After all, why cheat when you can just change the rules?

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48. Ken Binmore, *Game Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

49. Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. 1, chap. 2, 100–112, and bk. 1, chap. 3, 136; and Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "The Relationship of History and Theory in *On War*: The Clausewitzian Ideal and its Implications," *Journal of Military History* 65, no. 2 (2001): 333–54.

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