

## Is Military Genius made or born?

### Introduction

Carl von Clausewitz states that military genius expresses itself as a higher form of analysis by which one 'arrives at a decision: rapid, only partly conscious weighing of the possibilities.'<sup>1</sup> He continues saying that 'the higher the military rank, the greater is the degree to which activity is governed by the mind, by the intellect, by insight.'<sup>2</sup> In order that actions don't 'degenerate into purposeless bursts of blind passion', most soldiers are disciplined by service regulations whereas the commanding officer must be disciplined by reflection.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this essay is twofold. First, I will analyse what military genius is made of, the innate characteristics which can be developed, and second, I will describe how – from Clausewitz's point of view – officers can be trained to gain the necessary qualities appropriate to their level of responsibility.

### What is 'military genius' made of?

Remembering general Gerhard von Scharnhorst, Clausewitz sums up what a great commander – say military genius – is:

...I...recall his individuality, his daring, his caution and imperturbability, his composure in moments of crisis, his practicality, cunning, and secretiveness, all bound together by an exceptional theoretical and operational understanding of war.... What he told me about the conduct of the war in 1813 and what I saw of him on the battlefield...have only confirmed [my] opinion....<sup>4</sup>

Military genius reveals itself through the commander-in-chief's capability to transform successfully political war aims into military campaigns whereby 'strategy and policy coalesce: the commander-in-chief is simultaneously a statesman.'<sup>5</sup> According to Clausewitz, 'a general

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<sup>1</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 192

<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 191

<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 190

<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz (1992), p. 109

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 111

can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources....<sup>6</sup>

In order to follow through steadily, to carry out the plan, and not to be thrown off course by thousands of diversions, great strength of character, as well as great lucidity and firmness of mind are required.<sup>7</sup> For Clausewitz, strength of character is rooted in temperament.<sup>8</sup>

However, the strength of character stems from the commander's ability to stick to his convictions. Even in times of emotional turmoil and distress his views are stable and his nerves steady because he has self-confidence in the chosen course of action. He draws the necessary self-confidence from a higher understanding gained in course of his critical analysis of war and experience through training. Clausewitz further asserts that even if one's temperament is initially not composed under stress, training, self-awareness, and experience sooner or later teaches how to be on guard against it.<sup>9</sup>

Clausewitz discerns two kinds of courage without which no campaign can be successfully seen through. The first being the overcoming of one's own fear<sup>10</sup> on the battlefield whether through indifference to personal danger or ambition, and the second being the acceptance of responsibility once a decision has been taken.<sup>11</sup> For the former, so Clausewitz asserts, 'training must provide...[officers] with a certain strength of body and soul'<sup>12</sup> or physical exertion and suffering as well as the psychological impact<sup>13</sup> of firepower will destroy us. The latter, according to Clausewitz, results from determination and again from the officer's self-confidence in his abilities 'to scent out the truth' due to his sensitive and discriminating judgment and skilled intelligence.<sup>14</sup> Experience gained through war in theory, war in practice and exercises and manoeuvres<sup>15</sup> let the mind emerge 'unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen....'<sup>16</sup>

Determination is, according to Clausewitz, a quality that can be aroused only by the intellect.<sup>17</sup> Wavering and hesitating in a time of crisis cast doubt and foster insecurity in subordinates. The commander's insight will cast his own fear aside and act decisively. The ability to recognise quickly 'a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study an reflection'<sup>18</sup> is called *coup d'oeil* [*Feldherrenblick*<sup>19</sup>]. The capacity to

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<sup>6</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 177

<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 178

<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 106

<sup>9</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 107

<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 138

<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 101

<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 101

<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 170

<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 101

<sup>15</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 122

<sup>16</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 102

deal with the unexpected is called presence of mind. Both are closely related to each other.<sup>20</sup> *Coup d'oeil* is more a mental capability to quickly appreciate an overall-situation whereas presence of mind is more a practical capability to quickly find an appropriate solution to a given problem.<sup>21</sup> In the similar category falls the sense of locality. Clausewitz defines it as an act of the imagination quickly and accurately grasping the topography of a given area.<sup>22</sup> This enables a man to find his way about any time. Clausewitz continues that ' things are perceived...partly by the naked eye and partly by the mind, which fills the gaps with guesswork based on learning and experience, and thus constructs a whole out of the fragments that the eye can see....' Practice and training will develop this ability.<sup>23</sup> However once conditions become difficult, only tremendous will-power and utmost energy stemming from the commanding officer's ambition to excel will overcome this in every large organisation inherent resistance.<sup>24</sup>

Although only combat experience will give the final touch in a officer's education, war is the exception he will find himself in. However, Clausewitz states that it is necessary to prepare oneself mentally and physically for the exertion of war in peacetime. Therefore, the officer must have a clear picture what modern war is.<sup>25</sup> Only with an accurate conception of the dangers in battle one understands the realities of war.<sup>26</sup> In unfolding – in John Keegan's words – the face of battle in front of one's inner eye, one can prepare oneself mentally for the horrific spectacle that awaits in the baptism of fire.<sup>27</sup> Not grim severity such as corporal punishment nor iron discipline will create military virtues in a unit, but up-to-date training methods and an appropriate system of promotion.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, discipline, skill, goodwill, a certain pride, and high morale, will be the attributes of an army trained in times of peace.<sup>29</sup> To be able to excel in war, the commander has to form an army that not only maintains its cohesion under the most murderous fire but trusts – even after setbacks – its officers. Therefore, not only bravery has to be developed but 'the natural tendency for unbridled action and outbursts of violence must be subordinated to demands of a higher kind:

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<sup>17</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 103

<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 102

<sup>19</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 1083, footnote 18

<sup>20</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 103

<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 103

<sup>22</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 109

<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 110

<sup>24</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 104-105

<sup>25</sup> Clausewitz (1952b), p. 941

<sup>26</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 114

<sup>27</sup> Clausewitz (1952b), p. 949

<sup>28</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 189; Clausewitz (1992), p. 93

<sup>29</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 189

obedience, order, rule, and method.<sup>30</sup> Soldiers are prepared to undergo harsh physical training and are ready to suffer from privation when their training is ultimately crowned by success.<sup>31</sup> Clausewitz acknowledges that drill and 'constant practice leads to brisk, precise, and reliable leadership, reducing natural friction and easing the working of the machine.'<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the one who trains the capacities war demands, gains ease and confidence through it.<sup>33</sup> In Clausewitz's eyes, the distinct business of war, physical and psychological exertion in training, and success in war will inspire soldiers with an *esprit de corps* which importance for cohesion in times of crisis must not be underrated.<sup>34</sup>

Clausewitz concludes,

If we...ask what sort of mind is likeliest to display the qualities of military genius, experience and observation will both tell us that it is the inquiring rather than the creative mind, the comprehensive rather than the specialized approach, the calm rather than the excitable head....<sup>35</sup>

### **How can officers be trained to become military geniuses?**

In the conception of the wondrous trinity, Clausewitz describes war as a human endeavour that involves 'primordial violence, hatred, and enmity.'<sup>36</sup> In war nothing is certain and decisions are made on 'play of probabilities and chance.'<sup>37</sup> War is 'an instrument of policy'<sup>38</sup> and therefore serves a political purpose. Clausewitz ascribes the first tendency to blind instinct [*blinder Naturtrieb*]<sup>39</sup>; the second tendency to the creative spirit [*freie Seelentätigkeit*]<sup>40</sup>; the third tendency to reason [*blosser Verstand*].<sup>41</sup> In Clausewitz's eyes, all three tendencies and their interrelation transcend history. Their interrelation may vary over time and from one culture to another, but they still are timeless features of war. Human beings are subjected to reason and creativity. However, human beings are to a certain extent instinct driven. Contrary to animals, the instincts of human beings are rudimentary, and therefore human actions are mostly guided by mores and norms. These mores and norms may differ from one culture to another but nevertheless they identify what is right and what is

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<sup>30</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 187

<sup>31</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 187, 189

<sup>32</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 153; Keegan (1991), p. 21-22

<sup>33</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 187

<sup>34</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 187

<sup>35</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 112

<sup>36</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 89

<sup>37</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 89

<sup>38</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 89

<sup>39</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 111

<sup>40</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 111

<sup>41</sup> Clausewitz (1952a), p. 111

wrong for each culture. Inevitably, a human being exercises free choice. Therefore, human beings' action can be characterised as morally good or bad.<sup>42</sup> However, a military commander has to hold crude and blinding passion in check. He has to be guided by reason, prudence, firmness, tirelessness, and composure – all expressions of civilized behaviour – if he wants to excel. Clausewitz attributes utmost importance to intellectual qualities<sup>43</sup>, trained mind and experience in military matters. He is convinced that insight gained through inquiring self-study and practice will show pitfalls in one's own shortcomings and help to circumvent them in due course.

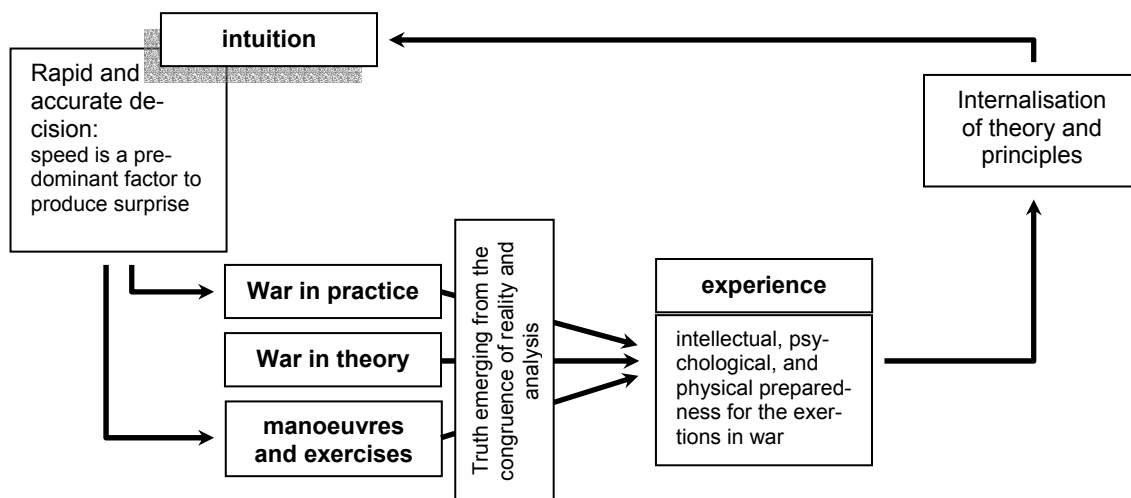


Fig. 1. Military genius – process of its development in the course of officer training

Insight gained through relentless, lifelong self-education in military matters, self-confidence and trust in one's own judgement and abilities through training and experience combined with a certain predisposition of character, talent and common sense assure the attainment of *coup d'oeil*. Analysis and observation, theory and experience must support each other.<sup>44</sup> During captivity in 1806/7, Clausewitz visited Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in Yverdon whose approach on education obviously left a lasting imprint on him.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Prussia's educational reform was moulded according Pestalozzi's teachings.<sup>46</sup> For Clausewitz however, his mentor general Scharnhorst personifies not only the ideal of military genius but also a teacher who understood to foster the officer's imagination and independent judgement. His relentless questioning of theoretical constructs and speculative thought through cross-checking with historical evidence furthered one's own understanding of the

<sup>42</sup> Vogel (1989), p. 97-101  
<sup>43</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 139  
<sup>44</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 61  
<sup>45</sup> Smith; Rosen (1997), p.15  
<sup>46</sup> Stübig; Rosen (1997), p.15

nature of war and undermined hardened preconceptions.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, his teaching inspired self-confidence and opened new doors of perception through self-criticism: 'Like a skilled engineer, he [Scharnhorst] erected a dam against people's opinions in those areas where they felt inhibited only a little or not at all, and so imperceptibly turned the flow of their convictions against their own prejudices.'<sup>48</sup> Clausewitz sees in theory and principles a mere tool to train one's own judgment through thorough analysis.<sup>49</sup> He states that

Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield.<sup>50</sup>

Clausewitz admits that 'no activity for the human mind is possible without a certain stock of ideas; for the most part these are not innate but acquired, and constitute a man's knowledge.'<sup>51</sup> However, Clausewitz rejects any prescribed theories, principles or systems. A commander has to discover his own theory through deliberate and objective analysis.<sup>52</sup> Once its meaning is absorbed into his own way of thinking, it becomes one's second nature. In this way, every commander finds and improves his own, particular theory that 'helps the study of the conduct of war, and educates the mind and judgement....'<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, it 'will smooth and protect his progress and will never force him to abandon his convictions for the sake of any objective fact.'<sup>54</sup> It ought to be the teacher's aim, says Clausewitz, to encourage 'men to think for themselves, and the salutary effects of this genuine awakening of the mind will surely be felt for years to come.'<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion**

A commander can be called a military genius when he excels in war. This is the ultimate proof for his capability to transform knowledge into ability. All his military training and education serves to this one and only end. Clausewitz states, one 'must recognize with admiration the commander's success, the smooth unfolding of events, the higher working of his genius.'<sup>56</sup> The higher working of genius is, however, the product of reason and intellect that must penetrate everything. '...war...cannot be waged with distinction except by men of

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<sup>47</sup> Clausewitz (1992), p. 100-104

<sup>48</sup> Clausewitz (1992), p. 101

<sup>49</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 141; Hartmann (1998), p. 134

<sup>50</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 141

<sup>51</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 145

<sup>52</sup> Clausewitz (1992), p. 104

<sup>53</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 154

<sup>54</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 147

<sup>55</sup> Clausewitz (1992), p. 104

<sup>56</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 165

outstanding intellect,<sup>57</sup> states Clausewitz. Certainly, a predisposition of character, talent and common sense may be necessary, but at the end it boils down first, to hard and relentless work, and second to an urge to act rationally at all times. Clausewitz concludes that

The man of action must at times trust in the sensitive instinct of judgment, derived from his native intelligence and developed through reflection, which almost unconsciously hits on the right course. At other times he must simplify understanding to its dominant features, which will serve as rules; and sometimes he must support himself with the crutch of established routine.<sup>58</sup>

A learning process is necessary to gain the quality of military genius. Military training has to be applied in a such way that it first, inspires self-confidence in one's own abilities, and second educates officers to think for themselves. Only adept methodology and clever didactics will instil needed self-criticism and open-mindedness which are a pre-condition for *coup d'oeil*. Clausewitz was aware of this. A chaos of opinions and considerations would fatally entangle judgment in times of crisis, was there not the military genius who had the quality of intuition that perceives the truth at every point.<sup>59</sup> Clausewitz admits the utility of law, principle, rules, method and routine as tools for critical analysis and to a certain extent as a means to avert the overpowering psychological impact of battle. However through study and experience, military genius has absorbed them in such an extent that they become second nature: 'Critical analysis being the application of theoretical truths to actual events, it not only reduces the gap between the two but also accustoms the mind to these truths through their repeated application.'<sup>60</sup> The military genius, therefore, rises above all rules<sup>61</sup> because it is capable to hit almost unconsciously on the right course despite the ever-changing circumstances of actual events. In doing so, military genius increases operational tempo, which is an important factor in first, reducing the stalling of operations<sup>62</sup>, and second gaining and keeping the initiative through surprise.<sup>63</sup>

Clausewitz asserts that, 'genius consists in a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest.'<sup>64</sup>

However, the quality and degree of development of military genius may differ according to the level of responsibility. Therefore, an appropriate system of promotion has to prevent the rise through ranks beyond one's abilities. Clausewitz remarks that 'nearly every general

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<sup>57</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 110

<sup>58</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 213

<sup>59</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 112

<sup>60</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 156

<sup>61</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 136

<sup>62</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 217

<sup>63</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 198; Svechin (1992), p. 250-252; Simpkin (1987), p. 53-55

<sup>64</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 100

known to us from history as mediocre, even vacillating, was noted for dash and determination as a junior officer.<sup>65</sup>

In defining the art of war as the art of using the given means, say armed forces, Clausewitz asserts that '...in its wider sense the art of war includes all activities that exist for the sake of war, such as the creation of the fighting forces, their raising, armament, equipment, and training.'<sup>66</sup> Clausewitz's personal experience gave him in general von Scharnhorst a living example of a military genius - a master in the art of war who not only excelled in battle but also as a teacher and reformer of the armed forces. I am therefore convinced that the purpose of Clausewitz's chapter of military genius is twofold. First, it serves as an aide-memoire for discerning different qualities of military genius. It therefore helps in the selection of officers. Secondly, it serves as basis for the development for appropriate qualities for a given level of responsibility.

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<sup>65</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 191

<sup>66</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 127



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