



# Annihilation vs. Attrition

Maneuverist Paper No. 11:  
Origin and misuse of these terms in a military context  
by Marinus

**M**aneuverist No. 1, “Marine Corps Maneuver Warfare: The Historical Context” (*MCG*, Sep20) and Maneuverist No. 10, “On Defeat Mechanisms” (*MCG*, Jul21) both discuss how maneuver warfare proponents and skeptics used the terms *attrition* and *annihilation* in the 1970s and 1980s to explain their differing views of warfighting. The papers also summarize the general misunderstanding of the terms’ meanings at the time and the ways in which earlier theorists and historians used or misused them. We are often reminded that “words matter.” This was certainly the case during the development of the 1989 and 1997 editions of *Warfighting* and remains true today: words do matter.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the advocates of several important terms related to annihilation and attrition, to describe the terms’ influence on current doctrine and our contemporary professional lexicon, and to serve as a reference for faculty and instructors who teach maneuver warfare to Marines.

As is often the case with contemporary operational concepts, we must look to history to trace the multiple beginnings of certain fundamental ideas. In this instance, we first turn to Clausewitz and thoughts he distilled on the phenomenon of war in the late 1820s.

## The Clausewitzian Origin

Clausewitz in his effort to comprehend war created an intellectual fiction, namely an ideal or pure form of war that he labeled “absolute war” (*absoluter Krieg*).<sup>1</sup> Absolute war does not exist in our world any more than other abstract constructs such as perfect beauty or absolute peace. They are ideals—figments of our imaginations that we create to allow us to better grasp the subject we want to study. In thinking about absolute war as an abstract idea, Clausewitz contended that such a phenomenon would have no bounds and accordingly be unconstrained in scope and scale. His examination of history revealed there had never been such a war, though Napoleonic wars had reached new heights of violence and involved forces of a size theretofore unknown. Clausewitz concluded a nation could never reach the pure or absolute state of war for three reasons. First, because humans are short of perfect, it is not possible for a nation to conduct such a war. Second, inherent friction would always constrain the forces waging war. Finally, policy goals would modify every war. When he recognized the perfect form—absolute war—could not exist, he identified that which could as *real* war.<sup>2</sup> If this were the end of the matter, it might be easier for us to analyze and evaluate military theory and derivative concepts, but it is not, for Clausewitz went a step further in his effort to understand war.

*Today’s Marines must have the historical background of warfighting concepts to fully understand contemporary doctrine. (Photo by MSgt John Nimmo, Sr.)*

In his study of military history Clausewitz observed that nations fought some wars with the objective of destroying an enemy's ability to resist, thereby enabling the winner to impose its will. Generally, this meant seizing the enemy capitol. (Today, we might call this decapitation or regime change.)<sup>3</sup> He also studied other wars in which nations were content to seize territory for purposes of negotiating a favorable outcome.<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz thus wrote that war can be of two kinds in terms of objectives. However, some later scholars transformed this thought into two types of war, *total* and *limited*.<sup>5</sup> In his opus, *On War*, Clausewitz used neither of these terms in the sense these scholars imply. Nonetheless, total war and limited war remain in the vocabulary of today's political leaders, defense officials, and military officers.

Of course, use of the similar terms *absolute*, as Clausewitz postulated for understanding war as a phenomenon, and *total*, as others did for delineating one of two supposed types of wars, can confuse someone not familiar with the historical literature. Again, if this were the end of the matter, the few similar terms would not be a significant hindrance to studying the concept of maneuver warfare. But there is more to the story.

### The Influences of a German Historian and an American Historian

In 1920, renowned German historian Hans Delbrück (1848–1929) in his *History of the Art of War* contended that Clausewitz's two types of objectives were in reality two different strategies.<sup>6</sup> He argued that a war to overthrow an enemy involved a strategy of "annihilation" (*Niederwerfungsstrategie*, translated as destruction or overthrow) while a war whose constrained aim was to bring about an acceptable negotiated peace involved a strategy of "attrition" (*Ermattungsstrategie*, also translated as erosion or exhaustion). The first so-called strategy he deemed to focus on a "single pole"—battle—with the goal of destroying an enemy. Because the second supposed strategy required battle and maneuver, Delbrück called it a "two pole" or "twin pole" strategy.<sup>7</sup>

Problematically, Delbrück errs in describing *Niederwerfung* and *Ermattung* as strategies. True strategy incorporates ends, ways, and means, but Delbrück's constructs really qualify only as ways.<sup>8</sup> In short, attrition and annihilation are not strategies but are better described as defeat mechanisms (see Maneuverist No. 10). With this error, the story pauses for a little more than half a century.

In 1973, noted American historian Russell Weigley (1930–2004) in his *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy* asserted that America's preferred method of war was annihilation, not attrition. He founded his argument on Clausewitz's statement that wars can have two types of objectives and Delbrück's concept of two forms of "strategy."<sup>9</sup> Long a standard text in American command and staff colleges and war colleges, Weigley's book had a profound influence on the thinking of military officers from the mid-1970s through the 1990s. These officers, along with many historians and military thinkers, accepted his thesis and used it to help frame intellectual debates after

the Vietnam War. However, later scholarship undermined Weigley's assertion by pointing out that a careful reading of *The American Way of War* reveals that he used the terms annihilation and attrition ambiguously and on occasion interchanged them.<sup>10</sup> In a response agreeing with the critique of his book, Weigley surprisingly confuses the two terms again.<sup>11</sup> Astonishingly, nearly two decades later, after the confusion over annihilation and attrition supposedly has been cleared up, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, continues the error by equating the two terms.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the discussion of maneuver warfare in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s centered on two alleged approaches to warfighting treated in Chapter 2 of *Warfighting* under the heading "Styles of Warfare": maneuver warfare and attrition warfare. These, of course, are at best operational methods, so the arguments were not about strategies. Some saw obvious similarities between attrition warfare and Delbrück's "strategy" of attrition but struggled to see a connection between maneuver warfare and "strategy" of annihilation. Many critics of past wars saw maneuver warfare as preferable to attrition warfare, especially considering the then-recent experience of the Vietnam War. Additionally, many of those promoting maneuver warfare referenced Weigley's *The American Way of War* to support their case.<sup>13</sup> There is

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little evidence that these proponents of the maneuver style of warfare were aware of Delbrück's two purported strategies and their connection to Clausewitz's two types of objectives in war. If they had been, they likely would have seen that what they were really arguing for was the maneuver element of Delbrück's "two pole" alleged strategy and the avoidance of unnecessary battles. A notable exception is *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, which discusses the two ostensible strategies in some detail and references Delbrück, employing *incapacitation* as a synonym for annihilation to avoid confusion.<sup>14</sup> *Warfighting* also provides a substantive description of maneuver warfare as pursuing the *systemic disruption* of the enemy, which is very consistent with Delbrück's concept of *Niederwerfung*.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, *MCDP 1-1, Strategy*, covers the two approaches or methods at some length while acknowledging their origin with Delbrück.<sup>16</sup>

Relatively few in the U.S. military would have known of and thus referred to Delbrück's two supposed strategies in the intellectual and conceptual renaissance that flourished in the years after the Vietnam War. However, several officers, especially in the Army, would have been aware of a similar idea from their study of Russian and Soviet thinking during the Cold War. Marshall Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky, the creator of deep operations theory, was an advocate of annihilation as an operational concept. Tukhachevsky was "an active champion of a decisive offense in the "spirit of destruction" which in his opinion, Clausewitz had preferred in his teachings on war."<sup>17</sup> Opposing him and other Soviet officers in this school was the originator of the term "operational art," MajGen Aleksandr A. Svechin, who looked to history in his study of strategy and operations.<sup>18</sup> He accepted Delbrück's single- and two-pole approaches, naming annihilation "destruction" (*sokrushenie*) and attrition "starvation" (*izmor*). He maintained attrition offered an alternative to destruction that "allows for the shaping of a conflict to one's advantage in both domestic and international terms."<sup>19</sup> Officers well-schooled in Clausewitzian theory and the antecedents of annihilation and attrition authored the seminal 1986 *U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations*, though the terms do not appear in the manual in their classical meaning.<sup>20</sup>

### Summary

We need be aware that Clausewitz offers us two theoretical constructs for war: *absolute* war as an ideal form and *real* war for war as it exists. Other supposed authorities have described two types of war, *total* war and *limited* war, the first unconstrained in terms of a level of effort and use of resources and the second constrained because of particular circumstances. In addition, we have Clausewitz's two types of war based on aims or objectives: "to overthrow the enemy" and "merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts," that is, to "annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations." Then there are Delbrück's asserted strategies of *annihilation* and *attrition* (each with several synonyms), the former to render an enemy defenseless through battle and the second to use battle or maneuver or a combination of the two as a means of achieving limited aims. We also have the 1970–1990s debate over the merits of *maneuver* versus *attrition* as styles of warfighting. More recently, we have the notion of *attrition* and *systemic disruption* as defeat mechanisms, which we argue is a more useful construct. Finally, we have numerous joint and Service publications that for the most part ignore all these terms. In assessing the merit or lack thereof of those and other terms used in military theory, concepts, and doctrine, we must not allow those efforts to become a purely scholastic exercise but must stay focused on how those terms, and the concepts they describe, support, or hinder military effectiveness.

### Notes

1. Some critics interpret Clausewitz's use of this term in *On War* as suggesting he saw the Napoleonic Wars as absolute; see book VIII, chapter

2. Most authorities, however, believe his words in book I, chapter 1 state his final position.

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

3. Ibid. "Note of 10 July 1827."

4. Ibid. Clausewitz frequently used two opposites to explain an idea, accepting that the two seldom appeared in perfect form, but in a combination of attributes that caused the subject to lie between or incorporate the extremes. In his frequent dialectics, he seldom resolved the tension between the things he was examining, some suggest because he understood the inherent dynamism of war and the uncertainty it produced.

5. Jan Willem Honig, "Problems of Text and Translation," *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007). Honig writes, "The term 'total war' as such does not appear in Clausewitz. It was invented towards the end of the First World War in France and popularized by the German Gen Erich Ludendorff in the mid-1930s." This may be so in the original German text, but not in the Howard and Paret translation of *On War* where "total war" appears on pages 280 and 605. The former speaks to a "total war area," which in our mind is a term related to terrain, not the phenomenon of war. The latter seems to be a synonym for "absolute." Early in the Cold War, there was considerable interest in understanding limited war as a way of using military power in a war waged without nuclear weapons. In 1957, Robert E. Osgood wrote an influential book titled *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*. In a second book in 1979, Osgood stated that wars "fought to annihilate, to completely defeat or completely dominate the adversary" were rare in history. He went on to say, "the consciousness of limited war as distinct kind of armed conflict, to be understood and practiced according to special theories and doctrines, has emerged in reaction to the growing capacity and inclination to wage general, total warfare." He cites neither Clausewitz nor Delbrück, though he claims limited war is a strategy. See Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979).

6. Personal email correspondence between author and Clausewitzian scholar Antulio J. Echevarria on 12 November 2012. Echevarria wrote the following: "Delbruck tries to argue that Clausewitz was heading in the direction of developing two different types of strategy, in other words, that Clausewitz's definition of strategy as the 'use of engagements to achieve the purpose of war' would have been augmented by a second one, 'the use of maneuver to achieve the purpose of war,' and thus that strategy could swing between poles as needed; but there is no evidence that Clausewitz was moving in this direction. Clausewitz clearly implied maneuver in his definition of strategy, as a way of putting oneself in the best position to win the engagement. Battle is required, even if only as a threat, to coerce an opponent. Clausewitz's two types of war (or political objectives) are actually independent of the types of military strategy that might be employed."

7. Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War, Volume IV: The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, trans. Walter Renfoe, Jr., (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985). Delbrück originally published this book in Berlin in 1920.

8. Arthur F. Lykke, Jr. (a mentor to Marinus many years ago) introduced the "ends-ways-means" construct in "Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy" in *Military Strategy: Theory and Application*, (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 1989), giving credit for the original idea

to Gen Maxwell D. Taylor. Marinus' favorite strategic theorist, Colin Gray, after many years of thought, adopted a definition of strategy based on Lykke's construct, "The direction and use made of means by chosen ways ... to achieve desired ends." See Lawrence Freedman, "Strategy's Evangelist" in *Naval War College Review*, (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, Winter 2021).

9. Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973).

10. Brian M. Linn, "The American Way of War Revisited," *The Journal of Military History*, (Lexington, VA: Society for Military History, April 2002). Linn also makes a case that the United States has employed additional strategies to include continental defense and deterrence.

11. Russell Weigley, "Response to Brian McAllister Linn by Russell F. Weigley," *The Journal of Military History*, (Lexington, VA: Society for Military History, April 2002).

12. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 2013 with Change 1 dated July 2017).

13. As examples see John F. Antal, "Thoughts About Maneuver Warfare" and Richard D. Hooker, Jr., "Ten Myths About Maneuver Warfare" in *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, ed. Richard D. Hooker, Jr., (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993).

14. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: June 1997).

15. Ibid.

16. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-1, Strategy*, (Washington, DC: November 1997).

17. Andrei A. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998).

18. Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. Kent D. Lee, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: East View Information Services, 1991). Voennyivestnik originally published this book in Moscow in 1927.

19. Jacob W. Kipp, "The Tsarist and Soviet Operational Art, 1853-1991," *The Evolution of Operational art: From Napoleon to the Present*, eds., John A. Olsen and Martin Van Creveld, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

20. The three authors were LtCols Huba Was de Czega, Leonard Donald Holder, Jr., and Richard Sinnreich. These officers held advanced degrees, and all served in the order listed as the first three Directors of the U.S. Army School for Advanced Military Studies.



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