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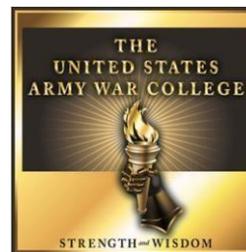
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Clausewitz's "Small Wars" and Russia: Lessons For Today's War Fighter

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In the realm of military theory, there has always been much focus on Clausewitz' epic On War. In 2015, a new addition to the Clausewitzian canon on war became accessible to English speakers when Clausewitz' Lectures on Small War were translated from their original German into English. This paper argues that Clausewitz' ideas on how to successfully wage a small war against a more powerful enemy holds valuable lessons for today's modern war fighter. Clausewitz broadens our understanding about when and how small war is successfully waged. To demonstrate the modern relevance of Clausewitz' teachings on the subject, this paper studies Russia's campaigns against Estonia, Ukraine, and the U.S. as small wars that Russia is fighting to weaken its stronger enemies in an effort to achieve its larger strategic objectives of territorial security and restoration of historical sphere of influence. Based on this analysis, this paper makes recommendations for policy makers and strategists to consider as they continue their discussions about how best to respond to Russia.

Clausewitz's "Small Wars" and Russia: Lessons For Today's War Fighter

In 2015, a new addition to the Clausewitzian canon on war became accessible to English speakers when Clausewitz' *Lectures on Small War* were translated from their original German into English. This military theorist gave these lectures to new cadets entering the Prussian War College in 1810-1812.

This paper argues that the thoughts Clausewitz shared with his new cadets on how to fight a Small War successfully against a more powerful enemy, in addition to the thoughts on this topic that he wrote in his "Confessions," hold valuable lessons for today's modern war fighters. These documents broaden our understanding about when and how non-traditional Small War is successfully waged. To demonstrate the modern relevance of Clausewitz' teachings on the subject, this paper applies them to Russia's recent actions against Estonia, Ukraine, and the U.S. It asserts that these interventions could be considered Small Wars that Russia is fighting to weaken a stronger enemy and achieve its larger strategic objectives: territorial security and restoration of its historical sphere of influence. Finally, this paper offers some thoughts for leaders to consider regarding best to respond to Russia. Small War, and irregular war more generally, are almost always the tactics of weaker powers. This point seems to be absent in the current discussion about Russia. This paper asserts that the U.S. Government needs to widen its aperture on its Russia strategy. The National Security Strategy identifies two issues, "Promoting American Resilience," and "Keeping Americans Safe in the Cyber Era," that we should invest in to effectively counter the Small War Russia is waging against the U.S.¹

This paper's aim is not to provide an in-depth analysis of Clausewitz' Small War tactics themselves. Nor does this paper present an analysis of irregular warfare in general. Rather, it focuses on the strategic level of analysis in its treatment of Clausewitz' *Small War lectures* and his "Confessions" to provide a lens through which the reader can better analyze and understand Russia's behavior.

Historical Context:
Prussia Struggling to Respond to French Imperial Hegemon

In 1810 and 1811 the Prussian General Staff was intensely focused on seeking ways to confront and defend the country against Napoleon. This confounded the Prussian military leadership. How could an impoverished Prussia, having lost half of its territory and struggling to protect itself with a negligible army of just 43,000 men, face one of the greatest commanders of all time, whose troops numbered a half a million?²

Against this political backdrop, Clausewitz, a staff officer on the Prussian General Staff, taught his course on Small War to incoming cadets at the Prussian Military Academy in the 1810-1811 academic year.³ As a member of a small group of military reformers, he realized that the Prussian military needed to change its approach to stand a chance against Napoleon's French empire. Clausewitz focused on widening the aperture for cadets on how war could be conducted via his *Small Wars Lectures*. He was asking his students think anew about how they defined war and to consider unorthodox approaches to achieve strategic goals. "My entire merit [as a professor] will perhaps be found in the destruction of preconceived notions and the eradication of prejudices, and in this way to remove every obstacle to such an extent as to allow you a clear view of the issue so that you will soon be able to draw your own conclusions, which is always best."⁴

In the Napoleonic era, the military approach centered on large army engagements in pursuit of decisive battles. Clausewitz referred to this approach as Large War. The small unit tactics that Clausewitz taught his cadets could be used to fight a Small War.⁵ Rather than engage France only in a Large War (which Prussia could not win), Clausewitz was suggesting a shift in the way war could be fought with the introduction of Small War.

Small War Explained

The following section explains the tenets of Clausewitz' Small War, and its strategic importance in confronting a more powerful enemy.

What did Clausewitz Mean by the Term "Small War"?

It is important to note that Clausewitz' idea of Small War [Kleiner Krieg] differs from the modern day understanding of guerrilla warfare. Guerrilla warfare relies mostly on irregular warfare to defeat the enemy, while in Small War, the irregular units always operate in coordination and in support of a larger conventional force. The small units (ranging from 20-500) in the field, impede a larger, more powerful enemy's advance, as opposed to precluding the advance all together.⁶ The goal was not to defeat the enemy. Rather, the objective was to weaken and confuse the adversary. This, in turn, would improve the chances of successfully waging Large War against the weakened enemy and achieve the larger strategic objective.⁷ Advances made by small units fighting Small Wars could create advantages, but the goal was not for them to be decisive.⁸

It is worth noting that Clausewitz differed from B.H. Liddell Hart's indirect approach in that Clausewitz viewed Small War as a tactical way to help win the Large War and achieve its strategic objectives. Clausewitz explicitly noted that Small Wars were tactical in nature.⁹ Small Wars alone could not achieve strategic objectives; they

played a supporting role.¹⁰ Tactics, Clausewitz explained to the cadets, were about the “use and command of the armed forces *in battle*,” whereas the battles *themselves* were utilized to support strategy.¹¹ *How* battles were fought was a tactical decision, and Clausewitz was making the argument to his cadets that there was a different (and better) way to fight when faced with a much stronger enemy.

Conversely, B.H. Liddell Hart was thinking on different planes: his indirect approach was focused on developing a strategy to help achieve the “grand strategy.” Clausewitz on the other hand, applied his indirect approach at the tactical level to achieve the strategic objective. Clausewitz was focused on “grand strategy” in the way that Hart was.¹²

Why a Military Would Choose to Engage in a Small War?

Clausewitz explained that Small Wars should be fought to weaken a stronger enemy and increase the chances of winning the Large War and achieve its strategic objectives. Small units engaged in Small War would “pursue the enemy” with the purpose of “harassment and hindrance of his march that makes his retreat more arduous and leads to larger losses.”¹³

How Should a Small War be Waged?

The order, spirit, and conduct of battle in a Small War differed from that of a Large War.¹⁴ Clausewitz emphasized that these small units would often arrive at a battle without specific goals for that particular battle. They would only have the general principles to guide them.¹⁵ So how could these small units achieve their tactical goals of impeding a more powerful adversary? Clausewitz explained, “Their purpose is not always defense or offense, which is the case with large units. Rather, they usually have a purpose that is relatively alien to Large Wars, namely observation of the enemy.”¹⁶

Clausewitz noted that this unique aspect of Small War, which he called a “new peculiarity,” “enhances the difference between it [Small War] and the remaining forms of war.”¹⁷

However, he also noted that “real assaults” still had a role in Small War:

Almost all attacks in Small Wars are carried out by means of assault... to benefit from the confusion in order to take prisoners and loot, to destroy something, etc. and then quickly remove. *It is even more necessary to attack if one is oneself so weak that success can only be found in the enemy's confusion.* Remarks on the effects of assaults on morale- enemy troops are fatigued; terror is easily spread among them.¹⁸

This description of the proper use of attacks as an offensive defense is particularly salient to the Russia case study later in this paper.

In his lectures, Clausewitz explained how one could successfully engage in a Small War by finding and exploiting the enemy's weaknesses by unconventional means.¹⁹ For example, Clausewitz emphasized the importance of using light infantry units, which could maneuver quickly and quietly in all directions, including behind enemy lines.²⁰ Attempting to tip the balance in one's favor in battle by operating at the enemy's rear, harassing his troops, and attacking his supply lines was not the conventional approach toward fighting war at the time.

Small War, Clausewitz explained, should be conducted by compact detachments, which “could easily sustain themselves almost anywhere; conceal their presence, move fast, and which possessed a spirit of initiative and confidence that traditional soldiers who “hold the line could hardly imagine.”²¹ Unlike the massive marching columns of soldiers used in Large War battles, these units could operate close to the enemy and remain undetected.²²

Clausewitz characterized Small Wars as a “free play of the intellect... where it does not depend merely on a determined onslaught.”²³ Soldiers in these small units were meant to use their knowledge and their cunning to respond to the constantly evolving and unfolding events on the ground in real time. It gave the units the flexibility they needed to achieve their objectives using any/all tactics as they saw fit.²⁴ This independent approach ran counter to the way that soldiers were traditionally taught to fight in columns in large field battles of Large Wars. One can only imagine how challenging it was for Clausewitz’ cadets to comprehend what he was trying to teach them.

Clausewitz explained that whether the actions of a small unit engaged in Small War tactics appeared offensive or defensive, ultimately Small War was a defensive tactic.²⁵ In his “Confessions,” Clausewitz noted that a defensive strategy could be implemented via offensive tactics, “It is self-evident that the strategic defense does not necessarily imply a tactical defense.”²⁶ Contrary to the ‘cult of the offensive,’ which dominated Napoleonic warfare, Clausewitz asserted that “with regard to the effectiveness of the armed forces, the defensive form is stronger than the offensive.”²⁷ With that conclusion, Clausewitz changed the warfighting calculus. Self-defense was strength.

Who Should Fight a Small War?

Clausewitz provided a detailed narrative about the ideal Small War soldier in his lectures. He possessed “a spirit of initiative.”²⁸ Small War soldiers had both the “greatest audacity and boldness,” to accomplish their missions, as well as a “much greater fear of danger” than traditional soldiers, which keep them alert and alive.²⁹ The Small War soldier’s “experience and habit make him calm and relaxed while facing the manifold

difficult tasks” and he did not engage in battle unless absolutely necessary.³⁰ Clausewitz concluded his description of the ideal Small War soldier, “This clever combination of audacity and caution (this lucky admixture of courage and fear) is what makes Small Wars so immensely interesting.”³¹

How did Clausewitz Envision the Practical Application of Small War?

In his *Small War* lecture series (which he gave in 1810-1811), Clausewitz provided his analysis of the ‘what,’ ‘how,’ and ‘who,’ regarding Small War theory. In his “Confessions,” which he wrote in 1812,³² Clausewitz shifted focus to his contemporary circumstances and addressed the question of “when” to engage in a Small War in his passionate call to resist French expansion.

Prussian King Frederick Wilhelm III determined that resisting France was not feasible. He made an alliance with Napoleon, but it included extremely unfavorable conditions for Prussia. Incensed at the king’s decision to acquiesce to the emperor, Clausewitz called for an uprising against France in his “Confessions.”³³ A new English translation of Clausewitz’ “Confessions” is also included in the recent publication of his “*Small Wars*” lectures, thereby widening the latter’s interpretation. There was, in Clausewitz’ view, only one way to definitively deal with France: “The only true remedy is the fight for independence.”³⁴ The answer to “when” this fight should happen, Clausewitz concluded, would come about organically as circumstances under which people were living became too difficult to bear.³⁵

In the meantime, Clausewitz exhorted all Prussians to prepare for the inevitable uprising.³⁶ Similar to his Small War lectures, in his “Confessions” Clausewitz was urging his fellow reform-minded military colleagues to think about how to re-shape the character of war to do what was needed to win. Bringing the local population into the

fight, drawing upon their passion for their cause, brought strength to the battle. This paper demonstrates in the case study that Russia has understood the importance of igniting a population's passions for a cause, and consistently leverages that attribute with ruthless effectiveness in each of the fights it wages against its more powerful enemy.

Applying Clausewitz' Small Wars Theory to Russia

Russia has used irregular warfare for generations. The term 'Petty Warfare' "appeared in Russian literature in the 18th and 19th centuries to refer to a particular form of warfare in which small units – avoiding collisions with larger military forces – attack communication and small fortified posts, enemy convoys, armories, etc."³⁷ Petty Warfare is called "*malaya voyna*" in Russian, which literally means "small war." The Russians adopted the term from the German "Kleiner Krieg" (Small War), the same title as Clausewitz' lectures on the subject. Soviet tacticians developed and incorporated the concept into their military strategy. Russian military history books describe the Soviets' use of Small War tactics, which align with the concepts that Clausewitz taught his cadets in 1810.³⁸ Soviet strategists also built upon the principles that Clausewitz taught, and divided their Small War tactics into separate domains:

- economic (impact on enterprises, railways and transport, finance and in general economic ties of the country);
- political (propaganda, corruption and intrigue among government and influential public organizations);
- military (explosion and spoilage of weapons, combat equipment, warehouses, arsenals, fortifications, communication stations, etc.);
- terrorist (killing or poisoning of public, political and military figures).³⁹

Scholarship and books on Small War continue to be developed in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

With the overlap in concepts found in Clausewitz' Small War lectures and Soviet/Russian military use of them in operations, it would seem natural that applying a Clausewitz Small War lens to Russia's operations today would provide useful insights and help us better understand and properly interpret Russia's military actions today.

Russia has, thus far, not sought to engage the U.S., NATO, or any other major military power in a direct confrontation that would necessitate a military response and would constitute a Large War. Russia is looking for weaknesses to exploit in order to gain advantages over its stronger enemies. Russia's actions in Estonia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and in the U.S. during the presidential election in 2016 are examples of its strategic use of the tactics that Clausewitz outlined in his Small War lectures: observe the enemy and look for weaknesses; engage in 'the free play of intellect' to develop and execute tactics to attack these weaknesses; and use these tactics to harass and weaken the enemy as part of the Small War's support of the Large War.

Modern Russian Military Strategy

In his 2013 article "The Value of Science is in the Foresight," Russian Chief of General Staff General Valery Gerasimov shared his thoughts on modern Russian warfare.⁴¹ It is instructive to note that Gerasimov did not use the term "hybrid warfare" in his text. The phrase is a western invention attempting to explain Russia's approach⁴². Indeed, using this term to describe Russia's actions risks mischaracterizing and subsequently misunderstanding Russia, which could negatively impact efforts to deal appropriately with Russia. In their critique of the relevance of the term "hybrid warfare"

when discussing Russian military operations, authors Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith note

In the aftermath of Crimea, 'hybrid warfare' was turned from a military concept into a quasi-theory of Russian foreign policy, further decreasing the concept's utility for analysis or as the basis for policy making. The idea that Russia is conducting 'hybrid warfare' against the West tells us nothing about Russian goals or intentions. The idea mistakenly implies that Russian foreign policy is driven by a universal 'grand strategy'. However, Russian goals and intentions, as well as likely approaches, differ on the global level, within the former Soviet space and with regards to the European Union. This is an important consideration when it comes to policy making, which requires an equally differentiated approach."⁴³

Gerasimov wrote, "The very 'rules of war' have changed...The emphasis of the methods of confrontation used is shifting towards broad application of political, economic, information, humanitarian and other non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character."⁴⁴ Gerasimov's comment about the "protest potential" of the population that Russia is targeting is particularly salient to each of the examples below.

Gerasimov provides more fidelity on his views,

Head-on clashes of large groups of troops at the strategic and operational level are gradually disappearing into the past...Differences are erased between the strategic, operational and tactical levels, offensive and defensive actions...Widespread use of asymmetric actions allow for the leveling of the enemy's superiority in the armed struggle. These include the use of special operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanent front across the entire territory of the opposing state...⁴⁵

One analysis of Gerasimov's article notes, "The Gerasimov Doctrine builds a framework for these new tools, and declares that non-military tactics are not auxiliary to the use of force but the preferred way to win. That they are, in fact, the actual war. Chaos is the strategy the Kremlin pursues: Gerasimov specifies that the objective is to

achieve an environment of permanent unrest and conflict within an enemy state.”⁴⁶

Gerasimov’s objective is identical to the goal of Small War according to Clausewitz: observe the enemy, identify his weaknesses, and then frustrate and destabilize him with tactical moves that seemingly come out of nowhere and occur behind enemy lines. In Russia’s case, its powerful enemies lose some of their advantage and Russia, which is in an economically and politically weaker position than them, ends up with better chances in the event of a geopolitical confrontation.

Case Studies

The following section provides three examples of Russia’s recent belligerent actions towards other countries. Applying Clausewitz’ theory to these examples, this paper argues that Russia’s interventions in Estonia, Ukraine, and the U.S. could all be considered Small Wars that Russia is fighting to weaken its stronger enemies (the U.S. and NATO) in an effort to achieve its larger strategic objectives of territorial security and restoration of its historical sphere of influence.

Estonia 2007

In the very early hours of April 27, 2007, the Estonian Government took quick action to remove and relocate a famous monument in Tallinn, “the Bronze Soldier.”⁴⁷ This statue was originally erected by the Soviets in 1947 and dedicated to the “liberators of Tallinn, memorializing the Red Army soldiers who conquered the city in 1944.”⁴⁸ The presence of the statue had become increasingly controversial as Estonians grew more and more disenchanted with the Russian/Soviet narrative of what happened during WWII in Estonia, which did not correspond to their memory of the Red Army’s actions in their country during this war. Estonians increasingly subscribed to the narrative that the Soviets were occupiers, not liberators, of Estonia.⁴⁹ As the Estonian Government’s

plans to remove the statue became public, ethnic Russians in Estonia rioted in protest of the statue's impending removal. The unrest resulted in one death and more than 100 injured.⁵⁰

A quarter of the Estonian population is ethnically Russian.⁵¹ The Russia Government had vigorously opposed moving the statue. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sent an open letter to "Western partners of Estonia" protesting Estonia's actions, and the Russian youth organization "Nashi," which is associated with the Kremlin, staged a protest in front of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow.⁵²

The statue's removal was symbolic of Estonia's efforts to break away from the Soviet past and "the national tragedy of fifty years of Soviet occupation."⁵³ In removing the statue, "Estonia underlined its sovereignty to make decisions on their own, without consulting anyone else."⁵⁴ This was a message for Russia; Estonia was taking an important symbolic step away from the Russian sphere of influence. One Estonian blog discussion about the Bronze Soldier Statue riots summed up the larger stakes at play, "It's about choosing whether you want to be a 'Soviet person,' *homo sovieticus* [sic] who has no respect for anything and spits on it all, or whether you want to be a law-abiding person living in the [the] democratic Estonian Republic, member of the European Union and NATO."⁵⁵

Western European countries expressed support for the Estonian Government's decision to remove the Soviet statue, and Estonians expressed relief and gratitude for the support. They viewed this support "as a gesture of recognition and as support for Estonia's international security...the power struggle with their perceived 'former occupant' had finally been won."⁵⁶

The Russian Government was not at all happy about losing its traditional place of honor in the historical narrative of Estonia as the “liberator” who saved Estonia from the Nazis in World War II. Russia was incensed about losing its influence over a key piece of real estate and a population that it had always viewed as an integral part of its sphere of influence. Therefore the Kremlin could not let Estonia’s action pass without a response. Russia needed a way to respond that if felt was proportionate and would send a clear message that Estonia’s action was not acceptable. Estonia, however, was a member of NATO. This presented Russia with a conundrum; how could Russia attack a NATO member without inciting the full fury and weight of the NATO alliance? The Kremlin did not want to engage in the kind of open military conflict that could open up the possibility of NATO invoking Article Five (collective defense).⁵⁷ Where could Russia strike Estonia where it would really hurt without inciting a NATO military response? Russia found the answer online.

Estonia is one of the most wired countries in the world. It has moved the vast majority of public services and a host of private service industry functions online.⁵⁸ The Baltic republic has declared internet access to be a basic human right, and proudly refers to itself as a “digital society.”⁵⁹ On the day following the Estonian decision to move the Bronze Soldier statue Russia launched a series of cyberattacks against Estonia that overwhelmed the government.⁶⁰ The cyberattacks hit the Estonian presidency, its parliament, most of the government’s ministries, political parties, three major news organizations, and two of the country’s biggest banks.⁶¹ Newspapers could not publish. Banks could not distribute money. Government employees could not use

email. One analysis opined, “Russia’s cyberattack against Estonia marked a watershed in the use of state-sanctioned cyberattacks to advance foreign policy goals.”⁶²

While the cyber domain did not exist in Clausewitz’ time, the strategic tenets of Small War that Clausewitz articulated nonetheless provide a robust framework to understand and explain Russia’s cyberattack on Estonia. If one understands that the operation was not simply a response to a statue being removed, but rather a reaction to the larger issues of a) the dissolution of the Russian narrative of history and identity in Estonia, and b) the threat of NATO gaining strength as a result of the Estonian government’s action to align itself (its narrative and its identity) with Western Europe/NATO alliance and not with Russia, then the Russian response to the statue removal comes into clearer focus. It seems more proportionate. In looking at the situation through this lens, we have in essence applied Clausewitz’ Small War theory to explain what actually happened.

Clausewitz taught his cadets that Small War was the use of small units to impede a larger, more powerful enemy’s advance, as opposed to stopping the enemy’s advance all together. Russia interpreted the Bronze Soldier statue removal from the center of Tallinn as an indication of Estonia’s efforts to realign its historical narrative, national identity, and alliance more with the West and less with Russia. The West’s physical and cultural advance had come very close to Russian borders. The Kremlin needed to respond to Estonia’s move, which threatened Russia’s influence over its neighboring states, a zone in which Russia considers it alone should have such influence. The cyberattack on Estonia may not have stopped Estonia from moving itself more firmly into NATO’s orbit, but it definitely struck a blow against Estonia, and therefore, by

extension, NATO too. Clausewitz taught that the small units assigned to fight Small Wars should penetrate behind enemy lines and observe the enemy to better understand its weaknesses. Then using “intellectual free play,” these small units would devise and execute ways to hit the enemy in its weak spots, *using unconventional means*. Operating in the enemy’s rear this way would sow confusion, fatigue the enemy, and spread terror among the enemy.⁶³

Russia, aware that it did not have the ability to go on the military offensive against a NATO member and win, looked for another way to engage and weaken its opponent. Cyberattacks against the Estonian government and key infrastructure sectors were an effective way to strike at Estonia’s weak spot: its online network. Estonia prided itself on building “the most advanced digital society in the world,” in which everything functioned online, including government.⁶⁴

It could be argued that Russia was operating “deep behind enemy lines.” Probing deep into sovereign Estonian digital territory Russia engaged in “intellectual free play” during its “war of observation” of Estonian weaknesses, and then executed the ways it had designed to sow confusion, fear, and fatigue among Estonian society. Clausewitz laid out all of these actions as classic components of Small War tactics. As a cyber-defense expert at Estonia’s state Information System Authority noted, “Cyber-aggression is very different to kinetic warfare. It allows you to create confusion, while staying well below the level of an armed attack.”⁶⁵

This “Small War” waged against Estonia helped weaken the enemy in pursuit of the “Large War” strategic objective: Russia had found a way to confuse its ultimate enemy, NATO, by attacking one of its member states indirectly in the cyber domain. By

engaging in a Small War against Estonia, Russia avoided direct confrontation with---and subsequently risk military retaliation from—Russia’s larger enemy, NATO itself. The tactical Small War operation against Estonia was a cunning strategic move. Russia is looking for ways to deter its bigger enemy, NATO, from overtaking its traditional sphere of influence, getting too close to its border, and threatening its territorial sovereignty without ever engaging in direct battle. It is a tricky thing to deter and defeat an enemy while avoiding direct combat.

In summary, using Clausewitz to analyze the Estonian case study, it becomes clear that Russia views itself in a defensive position when it comes to NATO, and therefore is fighting to weaken NATO’s expanded influence and power and ultimately roll back NATO’s enlargement into an area that Russia feels fundamentally belongs under its own sphere of influence. It is worth noting that Russia has not used these Small War tactics only against Estonia. It has also engaged in cyberattacks against other sovereign states along its borders, including Georgia and Ukraine, who have also expressed interest in joining NATO.⁶⁶ As a cyber security official in Estonia's Ministry of Defense noted, "Cyber has become a really serious tool in disrupting society for military purposes."⁶⁷

Crimea 2014

Russia’s siege and annexation of Crimea in 2014 is a second instance in which Clausewitz’ Small War theory can help us understand and interpret, and thus better respond to, Russian belligerence. For Putin, Ukraine is not an external or international issue. Ukraine is a domestic issue.⁶⁸ In his view, Ukraine falls squarely within the Russian sphere of influence. Allowing western institutions like the European Union (EU) or NATO to bring Ukraine into their orbit with any kind of partnership or formalized

cooperation would constitute an existential threat to Russia's territorial rights and integrity.⁶⁹

Thus, in 2013 when Ukraine moved to sign an Association Agreement with the EU to eventually become a full EU member, Putin exerted intense pressure on Ukrainian President Yanukovich to reverse course.⁷⁰ Yanukovich folded to Russian pressure and abruptly backed out of the Agreement and instead took an offer from Moscow to join a customs union led by Russia.⁷¹ Ukrainian protests against Yanukovich promptly ensued, which resulted in the Ukrainian Revolution.⁷² Yanukovich fled Ukraine on February 22, 2014.⁷³ On February 27, Russian troops took over the Crimean Parliament.⁷⁴ A pro-Russian government was installed. A referendum was called, and Crimeans voted overwhelmingly to join Russia. Russia annexed Crimea on March 18, 2014.⁷⁵

Russia's invasion in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea demonstrated a new level of Russian military prowess. In addition to cyberattacks and a relentless disinformation campaign, Russia's attack on Crimea has become linked to the phenomenon of "little green men."⁷⁶ The term was used to refer to the groups of organized men in unmarked Russian military uniforms, who took control of the airport, the Parliament, and most military bases in Crimea. They appeared on the evening of Friday, February 28, 2014. By Sunday, March 2, they controlled most of the government buildings and had blockaded Ukrainian security force bases and barracks.⁷⁷ Russian small tactical units penetrated quickly and deeply far into the enemy's rear area, causing confusion and fear as they seized key Ukrainian assets. Russia managed to seize Crimea before the other side had time to figure out what was really going on.⁷⁸ This is an excellent

example of the way in which, according to Clausewitz, small units should operate in Small War.

Further, these unmarked Russian small units caused confusion with their lack of identifiable markings and their marked lack of interest in any kind of direct military confrontation.⁷⁹ This is also a textbook example of the way in which Clausewitz taught that confusion should be employed in Small War to weaken the enemy. The infiltrators, or “little green men,” benefited from the confusion to seize control of key buildings and barricade Ukrainian security forces in their barracks. These ‘little green men’ enabled Russia to execute its larger strategic objective, which was to emplace a pro-Russia government in Crimea. The new government promptly called for a referendum on whether Crimea wanted to become part of Russia. Two weeks after the Russians invaded, on March 16, 2014 an overwhelming majority of citizens of Crimeans voted to join with Russia, according to the referendum organizers.⁸⁰

Additionally, due to the fact that Ukraine has such a large ethnic Russian population who already felt a sense of loyalty to Russia, the Russian military was able to rally large numbers of the local Crimean population to support its Small War against the Ukrainian government.⁸¹ Russia recruited local military to help the Russian military to carry out its tactical objectives, which included sending in small groups of unidentified Russians to conduct paramilitary operations and to foment local protests against the Ukrainian government and dominating the local media to saturate the locals with pro-Russia propaganda messages.⁸² In mobilizing the local population to rise up in support of its efforts to annex Crimea, Russia employed a Small War tactic that Clausewitz

identified and discussed in his “Confessions”: mass mobilization of the local population to support your cause.

Russia used Clausewitzian Small War tactics to achieve its larger strategic objective of repelling western encroachment (in the form of Ukraine’s EU association agreement) in its sphere of influence in the region. Annexing Crimea supported this larger strategic goal. By making Crimea part of Russia, Putin shored up his sphere of influence in the region.

United States 2016

Russia’s effort to influence the 2016 U.S. Presidential election provides a third example to which Clausewitz’ Small War theory can be applied to better analyze, understand and respond to Russia’s belligerent actions.⁸³ Putin’s KGB career and the way in that experience informs his views and actions are well documented. His intense ambition for Russia to be restored to great power status in the international system is well known. In Putin’s world view and in the narrative he promotes to his domestic audience, there is always an enemy actively threatening Russia, against which Russia must take all necessary measures to defend itself.⁸⁴ For Putin, this enemy was, is, and will continue to be the United States and the security alliance it leads, NATO. Over the years Putin has provided a plethora of public comments explaining this worldview and national narrative. His State of the Nation Speech on March 1, 2018 is the most recent example.⁸⁵

Attacking the U.S. using Small War tactics to help achieve his Large War strategic objective of deterring the U.S. is a natural fit for Putin’s strategy playbook. Attacking the U.S. democratic process is an ideal way to confuse and weaken Russia’s number one enemy. Furthermore, Moscow cannot fight and win a Large War against

the U.S. or the security alliance it leads (NATO). Russia does not have the capability that would be needed to engage U.S. or NATO in direct combat.⁸⁶ Even if Russia did have the technical capacity, the political and economic repercussions from directly engaging the U.S. militarily would likely be damaging enough to Russia to render such an option less than appealing to Putin.

Therefore, the Kremlin has had to find another way to fight the U.S. Russia went deep behind enemy lines, observed where the weaknesses and fault lines in American society were, and engaged in “intellectual free play” to develop ways to exploit those weaknesses and leverage them to its own advantage. These are classic Clausewitzian Small War tactics.

The January 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment of Russia’s activities in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections found that

Russian efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow’s longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order, but these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations...Moscow’s influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations- such as cyber activity- with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users, or “trolls.”⁸⁷

The means that Russia used to do this were not expensive, and the ways were surprisingly easy to execute. According to the indictment issued by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is in charge of investigating Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, a Russian troll factory called the Internet Research Agency (IRA) had a monthly budget of \$1.25 million to use internet bots to spread fake news and sow internal discord across the U.S. as part of its influence campaign in the run up to the 2016 election.⁸⁸

This Small War included another characteristic that Clausewitz taught his cadets. The small units, which in this case were the Russians working at the Internet Research Agency troll farm, were engaged in a battle for which they had no specific goals, but rather just some guiding principles. Clausewitz taught that such would often be the case in Small War. It was up to the small units to decide exactly what to do and how to execute it in the way that best supported the Large War strategic objectives. The people working at the IRA faced a similar situation in deciding how to best execute their online campaign of misinformation and influence peddling. They needed to identify the specific fissures in American society, learn about and tap into the sub-groups in American culture, and then determine how best to use their weapon of social media to attack in such a way that it would cause the enemy the most confusion and fear possible, thus weakening the enemy to the best of their ability.⁸⁹

This online Small War was incredibly effective in helping Russia fight its Large War against the U.S. It significantly impacted Russia's enemy, U.S. society and Americans' trust in the democratic process.⁹⁰ One of the Russians who worked at the IRA explained his work and shared his views of its effectiveness, "Your first feeling, when you ended up there, was that you were in some kind of factory that turned lying, telling untruths, into an industrial assembly line. The volumes were colossal — there were huge numbers of people, 300 to 400, and they were all writing absolute untruths. It was like being in Orwell's world ...*But for Americans, it appears it did work. They aren't used to this kind of trickery. They live in a society in which it's accepted to answer for your words.*"⁹¹

Another former employee explained the goal of the trolls working there, “We raised social issues and other problems that already existed in the US, and tried to shine as bright a light as possible on them.”⁹² Additionally, Russians who were not from the IRA spent tens of thousands of dollars on online campaign ads that spread misinformation during the election.⁹³

The Kremlin effectively mobilizes its own population to support its bellicose actions abroad. In this instance, Russia went one step further and succeeded in rallying another national population (Americans) to rise up in support of a cause, who should win the U.S. presidential elections, which they believed was their own. However, upon further investigation it was revealed that the rallying cries they coalesced around online were manufactured by Russia to manipulate Americans and their passions to support its own, starkly different, objective. The Kremlin effectively stoked Americans’ emotions through widespread disinformation to wake up their passions support of one side of the political spectrum or the other in the U.S. Presidential election to achieve its goal of sowing discord and casting doubt on the U.S. democratic process.

Similarly, Russia effectively motivated the ethnic Russian population living in Ukraine to support its invasion, and they willingly did so. Clausewitz would likely be thrilled with that move. In the case of Estonia, based on press reports of Russia’s actions related to the Bronze Soldier statue removal in Tallinn, it would not be unreasonable to deduce that Russia played an active role in whipping up the sentiments of the ethnic Russian minority in Estonia, which constitutes 25 percent of the total population, to rise up in violent protest at the statue’s removal.⁹⁴The specific tactics employed may look different than 1812, but overall strategy remains the same.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This paper demonstrates the value of studying military theory. There is nothing new in Putin's strategy. However, it could be argued that part of Russia's initial success was due to the fact that its actions were perceived as novel. At a strategic level, when we apply Clausewitz' Small Wars tenets to Russia's operations against Estonia, Ukraine, and the United States, we observe a country playing defense by using a range of tactics to weaken a stronger adversary that it views as a threat to its sovereignty and international influence. Observing such behavior, one can infer that President Putin is willing to accept a high level of risk.⁹⁵ He took a chance on hobbling Estonia's online network, invading Crimea, and interfering in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections. Clausewitz might applaud Putin for following Clausewitz' Small War playbook so well. Brazen leadership is, after all, a quality that Clausewitz praised in desperate and unequal situations.⁹⁶

Russia engaged in a 'war of observation' of its adversary, deep behind enemy lines in the heart of the foe's society, and identified key weaknesses. Then Russia engaged in the 'intellectual free play' needed to come up with a unique 'battle plan' of tactics tailored to each of the weak spots. Russia motivated next the relevant populations en masse to support its action. Finally, in none of these examples did Russia attempt to defeat its adversary. Putin's goal was to weaken his enemies by confusing them, and he succeeded with aplomb.

The idea that Russia is running defense and not offense confounds some in how to properly respond to Russia's bellicose actions. Russia turns traditional deterrent mechanisms on their head when it claims that it is acting in support of self-defense and sovereignty. Article 51 of the UN Charter permits self-defense. The question arises:

how should NATO respond when the attack in question is either characterized as such, or is denied outright by the attacker?

Russia's 'new generation warfare,' to use General Gerasimov's term, deliberately blurs the line between military and nonmilitary action, making it more difficult to even determine or agree that an armed attack has actually occurred, especially when the belligerent claims to act in self-defense, a universally recognized right among sovereign states? Ultimately, both Russia and its opponents lean on the same words to legitimize their policies: words like "self-determination," "self-defense," and "sovereignty."⁹⁷ This 'blurring of lines' is what Clausewitz called on his cadets to do when fighting a stronger opponent in order to confuse and weaken them.

In his "Confessions," Clausewitz noted that "defense can be "tactical, strategic, or political,"⁹⁸ and "strategic defense does not necessarily imply a tactical defense."⁹⁹ Clausewitz explained, "One can be active in defense and thereby combine it with an attack."¹⁰⁰ In reviewing the advantages of defense and applying them to both tactics and strategy both, Clausewitz determined that "through defense one can accomplish results as decisive as through the offense, for in this respect the active defense is in no way different from the offense."¹⁰¹

Clausewitz added that "theaters of war remain defensive in which forces weaker than those of the enemy are deployed."¹⁰² This thought explains Russia's bellicosity well. Russia uses its attacks against other countries like Estonia, Ukraine, and the U.S. as part of its active defensive, because ultimately Russia sees itself in a defensive posture. Analysts today refer to "offensive defense" when explaining Russia's bellicose actions against other countries.¹⁰³

This paper posits that the Large War Russia is fighting is ultimately about its self-preservation--political sovereignty, territorial integrity, and way of life-- and preservation of its traditional sphere of influence. It is worth noting that Russia's Large War and its Small Wars would likely each require different responses. Small Wars are tactical operations and therefore would require a tactical response. Large War is strategic in nature, and as such, the strategic objective of Russia's Large War would need to be addressed at the strategic level.

On the question of how to mount an adequate response to the Small Wars Russia is waging, perhaps the answer lies in Clausewitz' teachings: we should consider opening our aperture on the acceptable ways and means to achieve this end. One analysis of Gerasimov's 'new theory' of War for Russia notes, "Herein lies the power of the Gerasimov-style shadow war: It's hard to muster resistance to an enemy you can't see, or aren't even sure is there. *But it's not an all-powerful approach...Its tactics begin to fail when light is thrown onto how they work and what they aim to achieve.* This requires leadership and clarity about the threat- which we saw briefly in France, when the government rallied to warn voters about Russian info ops in advance of the presidential election."¹⁰⁴

Building on this idea of exposing Russia's tactics in plain light, in a recent interview with the former Acting Director of the CIA Michael Morrell, former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy suggested that Putin needs to feel the consequences of his bellicose actions. He needs to pay a price. One possible way to do this would be to "expose the deep corruption around him...attack his standing."¹⁰⁵

Flournoy also recommended creating some form of cooperation between “high tech, the media, and the government to harden” the U.S. against Russian attacks on our democratic processes such as elections.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, “Keeping Americans Safe in the Cyber Era” is one of four lines of efforts articulated in pillar one of the current National Security Strategy (NSS), which is focused on “protecting the American people.”¹⁰⁷ The NSS notes,

Today, cyberspace offers state and non-state actors the ability to wage campaigns against American political, economic, and security interests without ever physically crossing our borders. Cyberattacks offer adversaries low-cost and deniable opportunities to seriously damage or disrupt critical infrastructure, cripple American businesses, weaken our Federal networks, and attack the tools and devices that Americans use every day to communicate and conduct business.¹⁰⁸ The NSS identifies priority actions to address this issue: “identify and prioritize risks” and “deploy layered defenses to address them.”¹⁰⁹

Another line of effort within this pillar is “Promote American Resilience.”¹¹⁰ The NSS notes,

A democracy is only as resilient as its people. An informed and engaged citizenry is the fundamental requirement for a free and resilient nation. For generations, our society has protected free press, free speech, and free thought. Today, actors such as Russia are using information tools in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of democracies. Adversaries target media, political processes, financial networks, and personal data. The American public and private sectors must recognize this and work together to defend our way of life. No external threat can be allowed to shake our shared commitment to our values, undermine our system of government, or divide our Nation.¹¹¹

To address this threat, the NSS identifies the following priority actions: “improve risk management” and “build a culture of preparedness.”¹¹²

This paper asserts that the U.S. Government needs to widen the aperture beyond its geographic borders and partner with its allies to promote similar resilience among them, in both the cyber and the societal realms, as described in the NSS.

Putin has been so successful in waging his Small Wars that other revisionist powers and rogue regimes are undoubtedly studying Russia's actions to determine how they might be able to adapt the Russian playbook to meet their own strategic ends. Those powers need to be deterred from thinking that such Small War tactics might help them effectively weaken their more powerful adversary. The U.S. Government needs a comprehensive strategy not just to deter Russia, but also all other potential adversaries who might be inclined to steal a page out of Putin's playbook. This strategy will require all elements of national power--diplomatic, informational, military, and economic--to comprehensively address the needs of America's allies in shoring up their resilience to Small War attacks.

On the question of how to effectively respond at the strategic level of the "Large War" that Russia is fighting to preserve its political sovereignty, territorial integrity, way of life, and its traditional sphere of influence, the daunting challenge lies in convincing Russian leadership and the Russian population that these things are not under threat from other countries. This challenge has dogged the U.S. for decades as successive administrations wrestle with how to manage the Russian security dilemma. It is baked into Russian DNA that other countries are all threats to Russian sovereignty, thus creating the existential need for Russia to have a 'buffer zone' of countries on his western flank to protect it from encroaching western powers.

Managing this wicked problem is a more viable option than attempting to actually solve it. Russia has a very long history of leaders who play the "invader at the gate" card to derive authoritarian control over the country, current leadership included. Effectively countering that narrative would require an immense effort and significant

support from authentic Russian voices. The current environment in Russia is the antithesis of the circumstances that would be needed for such an effort to succeed.

In conclusion, perhaps Clausewitz' idea about the trinity of the people, the government, and the military as practical embodiments of the enduring elements of war (passion, reason, and chance), holds clues to an enduring answer for America's Russia conundrum. Empower the people, ensuring that their passions are informed by engagement with the world in which they live. Ensure the government is a voice of reason, which serves the needs of the population, not the other way around. Create a military that is exists to manage the friction and chance that exists in an anarchic international system in which states inevitably come into conflict with each other. Clausewitz' military theory continues to provide insight in how to decipher and address today's modern military conflicts.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

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¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

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²¹ Ibid., 21, 23.

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²⁴ Ibid., 133, 140.

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²⁶ Ibid., 212.

²⁷ Ibid., 215

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³² Clausewitz sent his Confession to his fellow military reformer and mentor Field Marshal Neidhardt von Gneisenau, political reformer Karly August von Hardenberg, and the Prussian Chancellor. Ibid., 3.

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