

# Military theoretical basics of the concept of culture of warfare

FORGÁCS Balázs<sup>1</sup>

*The study demonstrates the evaluation of the concept of culture of warfare and highlights its relations with Clausewitz's perspective on military affairs. The model of cultures of warfare in Hungary was created in the 1990's by Kovács Jenő, a Hungarian general and military theorist who used the original British concept of military culture as a base. He thought that different cultures of warfare evolved throughout history due to the varied historical and cultural patterns of the societies causing differences in concepts of leadership, manoeuvre and engagement. The theoretical bases of varied ways of warfare can be found in Clausewitz's "On War". The Prussian military theorist defined the dual nature of war, which means different use of the instruments of force and violence: aspiration to annihilation or attrition. Thinking about war in the framework of a general theory of the use of force and violence does bring us closer to discover and understand the basic aims of warfare.*

## Introduction

When examining the topic of cultures of warfare, first of all, we need to make it clear that the concept itself and also the typology of the means of fighting wars is well established from the point of view of military sciences. Following the usual methodology of general military theory I have based my study on the fundamental work of Carl von Clausewitz's "On War". Even though the book was written almost two centuries ago, it has been an adequate source for defining the basics of any study on the art of war ever since.

## The origins of the concept

It would be a vain effort to look for the concept of the culture of warfare in any Anglo–Saxon, Russian or Hungarian encyclopedia of military sciences. Because of the novel and unsettled nature of the concept, it has not yet become one of those notions which describe the characteristics and nature of war, the armed forces, the ways of war is fought, the periods previous to fighting and following war, or those that describe the environment in which actual fighting takes place. The concept was not included in the Hungarian Encyclopedia of Military Sciences (Szabó, 1995), even though the Hungarian person who elaborated on this concept, Jenő Kovács, as an expert of military sciences and the art of war, was an active participant in producing this Encyclopedia.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1st Lieutenant, PhD, National University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary, [forgacs.balazs@uni-nke.hu](mailto:forgacs.balazs@uni-nke.hu)

FORGÁCS Balázs: Military theoretical basics of the concept of culture of warfare

The concept of military culture exists in Anglo–Saxon literature. It is important to note that Soviet–Russian military science lacked this concept or anything similar, as Jenő Kovács put it: “former Soviet military science examined the set of problems closely related to culture of warfare as part of the study of means and forms of strategy.” (Kovács, 1995: 18) Even though Jenő Kovács examined the “forms of strategy” while studying the characteristics of meeting engagement during the second half of the 1960s, he only reflected on the Soviet–Russian point of view and results. As he put it: warfare is “... the sum of all (forms), methods applied and actions taken in order to carry out all tasks at any level of fighting a war.” (Kovács, 1995: 12) The extensive study of culture of warfare and its introduction to Hungarian military sciences could only take place after he had examined the Anglo–Saxon views as well. (Kovács, 1995: 18) (Kovács, 1967a: 7–19) (Kovács, 1967b: 3–12) R. A. D. Applegate and J. R. Moore in their study “Warfare – an Option of Difficulties. An Examination of Forms of War and the Impact of Military Culture”, (1990: 13–20) stated that all military organizations are influenced by certain conditions (terrain, weapon systems, time, resources, training and morale) and various circumstances (geographic factors, strategic aims, climate, presence of allies, number of population, level of their education), which set up the basic framework within which a military organization operates and one in which military culture is formed.

The latter was defined as: “A military culture is the collection of ideas, beliefs, prejudices and perceptions which constitute and determine the relationship between the constituent parts. As a result, military culture determines internal conditions such as selection and promotion criteria, training, education, the allocation of resources and the vocabulary of military debates; these in turn combine to give a distinct character to a military organism and determine the nature of operations they can execute and hence the form of war they adopt. Thus the internal conditions

of an army (ie its culture) can have a greater influence on the form of war adopted than the external conditions and circumstances – this can be the path to defeat.” (Applegate, Moore, 1990: 13) This study and the mentioned definition provides the basis for Kovács’s terminus technicus introduced in the Hungarian military literature.

At the beginning of the 1990’s Kovács Jenő made an attempt to draft the theoretical basics of an independent Hungarian military strategy. Within this framework he also studied cultures of warfare comparing the sometimes contradictory views of Western and Eastern scholars. The concept was first outlined in one of his social theoretical essays, in a chapter titled “*Military Strategy and Cultures of Warfare*”. (Kovács, 1995: 12–48) The military theorist — following Western methodology — founded his thesis on the empirical fact that peoples, societies and their military leaders try to employ available military forces in different ways. Thus he recognized that belligerent forces mostly belonged to different cultural complexes, and carried different cultural values. Thus, military leaders commanded their forces in different ways, and applied different combat tactics. He realized that – just like many other processes – war was dependent, and is still dependent on the culture of the given societies: this is why he differentiated among cultures of warfare. Based on this, Kovács Jenő defined culture of warfare as: “*the sum of all military, intellectual and material values that determines the basic aims of disorganizing enemy forces and the preserving of one’s own forces. Culture of warfare can be described as a development of military sciences or as the character of the armed forces, but in other ways as well.*” (Kovács, 1995: 17–18) It is obvious that Kovács’s transformed version of the original concept has become shorter and much simpler. In my opinion the reason for this was that the Hungarian military theorist used a

FORGÁCS Balázs: Military theoretical basics of the concept of culture of warfare

different system of typology than his Anglo–Saxon contemporaries. Kovács Jenő had certain knowledge of Western military sciences and he could interpret basic Western terminology within the very rigid Soviet–Russian system of typology.

In his interpretation, culture of warfare is “*a set of social, military theoretical and material conditions and circumstances, upon which other elements, dependent on the characteristics of the given war, the level of military technology, and the theatre of war and on morale, rest. Tactical manuals articulate mainly the principles and rules resulting from this dependency. Culture of warfare at the same time carries a broader meaning than operative manuals do, as it penetrates all aspects of societal life (science, art, education, economy, etc.)*.” (Kovács, 1995: 18–19) To put it shortly, culture of warfare in his interpretation shows how society relates to the military affairs of the country, and as a continuation of this, we also get a picture of how members of the military and the phenomenon of war relate to each other.

Kovács Jenő differentiated among the following three cultures of warfare: *manoeuvre–centric* and *material–centric* cultures of warfare, and that of *guerilla warfare*. It is important to note that in the original study of Applegate and Moore, which provided the basis for his work, the authors differentiated among four types of warfare: positional war, manoeuvre war, long–range penetration and guerilla war. In case of the latter, the combined use of these concepts (the mixed use of operational–tactical, strategic and grand strategic concepts) clearly shows that the typology of the Anglo–Saxon military specialists was still novel at the turn of the 1980s–1990s. Based on these I think that the use of Kovács Jenő’s categories is more justifiable when setting up a typology for wars in general. According to the logic of the use of force, we can group cultures of warfare based on his typology as follows: manoeuvre–centric culture of warfare is aimed at annihilation, while material–centric and guerilla cultures of warfare are primarily aimed at attrition. To put it in another way: the first reflects the characteristics of direct warfare, while the other two indirect warfare. (Forgács, 2008a) (Kessel, 1987) (Nagy, 2004a) According to which the cultures of warfare have been — mostly unintentionally — articulated and followed by nation states these were the strategic aims which built their armed forces, defined their use and fought their wars based on these purposes.

## The theoretical foundations

It might seem surprising when reading Kovács’s study that he only briefly dealt with the military theoretical basics and other theoreticians of the concept. He based his studies primarily on secondary sources while he only used a small number of primary sources. In my opinion the explanation lies within the ARMS (1996) itself produced by Kovács Jenő throughout his life: his work focused mainly on the practical approach and on satisfying practical needs, so studying the theoretical fundamentals was only a secondary aim for him. Cultures of warfare constituted only a part of his work dealing with a new Hungarian military strategy, so the above mentioned circumstances and his early death give an explanation for the lack of further in–depth research. My studies so far, and the complex review of primary and secondary sources indicate that we can apply Clausewitz’s thesis to the use of military power when taking a closer look at the cultures of warfare.

The basis of the above mentioned hypothesis was developed by Clausewitz in his thesis on war and its dualism, manifesting in the parity of attrition and annihilation. (Clausewitz, 2004) (Clausewitz, 2004: 639–690) (Kessel, 1987: 157–174) (Perjés, 1983) (Nagy, 2004a:

FORGÁCS Balázs: Military theoretical basics of the concept of culture of warfare

146–175) Without repeating his thoughts here, I would like to note that the Prussian military theoretician studied the dual nature of war and the aims of annihilation and attrition in his book, *On War*, in different depth but baring the same importance, thus, marking the beginning of a new era. While the former was given a complete in–depth analysis, one finds only frag- mented sketches exist on the latter. But this does not mean that Clausewitz devoted less atten- tion to indirect warfare — as it is underpinned by the “Notice” at the beginning of his book. The Notice also indicates that the author planned a fundamental revision and restructuring of the book, but his early death prevented him from doing so. As Nagy Miklós Mihály put it: “*The main point is, that Clausewitz already recognized the dualism of war. By stating that oc- cupying a given territory will bring results during the peace negotiations already established the idea that the purpose of armed forces is not simply waging war.*” (Nagy, 2004a: 155)

Based on my previous experience and the relevant literature, I think that certain phenom- ena of recent military affairs, like terrorism, can be explained through the study of culture of warfare and the concepts of attrition and annihilation. (Hahlweg, 1976) (Nagy, 2004b:

16–20) (Kiras, 2005) (Forgács, 2008b: 88–100) In practice, the conceptual categories defined by Kovács Jenő are the equivalents of attrition and annihilation from the point of view of military theory, as explained above. At the same time it would create a theoretical trap if we tried to prove by practical and historical examples that these cultures of warfare are clearly separate and have a clear borderline among them.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became clear during the so called “strategy debate” (Delbrück, 1920) (Perjés, 1983: 438–448) well–known from Hans Delbrück that neither at- trition, nor annihilation can be clearly determined as unique strategic aims. The historical experience of wars show, although to a different extent, that both of them are present in the superior acts of war. This leads us to the conclusion that even though in theory we can clearly differentiate among the three above mentioned cultures of warfare, in present practice, how- ever, their characteristics are mixed, thus, nowadays we experience the gradual disappear- ance of the clear borderlines among them.

## Clausewitz’s perspective on military affairs

When studying the concept of cultures of warfare we need to start from the definition of war itself. It was defined by Clausewitz as: “*War therefore is an act of violence to compel our op- ponent to fulfill our will.*” (Clausewitz, 2004: 1) The First Book of “*On War*”, “*On the Nature of War*”, then examines the functioning of military power: he states that military power leads to the utmost use of force and this process is intensified by three interactions. The first is that the belligerent parties mutually generate and increase their use of force in order to achieve victory.<sup>2</sup> The second is that the parties are insecure concerning their own survival right until they are able to make their opponent defenseless. Until that point both parties are endangered by the fact that the other party might do so, thus generating a spiral of the use of utmost force.<sup>3</sup> The third interaction supposes that the parties may know the defense capabilities of their counterparts thus, both will increase their own effort in order to subdue the other, or

2 “*As one side dictates the law to the other, there arises a sort of reciprocal action, which logically must lead to an extreme.*” (Clausewitz, 2004: 3)

3 “*As long as the enemy is not defeated, he may defeat me; then I shall be no longer my own master; he will dictate the law to me as I did to him.*” (Clausewitz, 2004: 4)

FORGÁCS Balázs: Military theoretical basics of the concept of culture of warfare

until he reaches the limits of his options.<sup>4</sup> The utmost use of force constitutes the category of absolute war which is only a theoretical concept.

After defining these interactions Clausewitz immediately asks the question: *What are the modifications in reality?* (Clausewitz, 2004: 4) He makes it clear when this process could work in real life: “*It will if, (1) war becomes a completely isolated act, which arises sud- denly, and is in no way connected with the previous history of the combatant States; (2) If it is limited to a single solution, or to several simultaneous solutions. (3) If it contains within itself the solution perfect and complete, free from any reaction upon it, through a calculation beforehand of the political situation which will follow from it.*” (Clausewitz, 2004: 4) Sum- ming it up, in a real war there are both generating and moderating factors of violence, and to the extent generating factors are present, moderating factors will also be at play. Based on all these I agree with Nagy’s thought, that as he puts it: “*the logical system of arms (1929–2017) developed by Clausewitz is a unified set of interactions which prevents the utmost use of force through its own internal mechanisms.*” (Nagy, 2004a: 152)

The most important among the moderating factors is the political aim of the war,<sup>5</sup> as “*war is only a part of political intercourse, therefore by no means an independent thing in itself.*” (Clausewitz, 2004 Book 8 Chapter 6 part A and B: 672–674; Vol. II.: 672–681) According to Clausewitz “*War is only called forth through the political intercourse of Governments and Nations.*” (Clausewitz, 2004: 674) Based on this he states that “*We maintain, on the contrary, that War is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means.*” (Clausewitz, 2004: 674) Thus politics have a direct effect on the way war is fought, as: “*The perfectly unbridled element of hostility, for all the circumstances on which rests, and which determine its leading features, viz., our own power, Allies on both sides, the characteristics of the people and their Governments respectively etc., – as enumerated in the first chapter of the first book – are they not of a political nature, and are they not so inti- mately connected with the whole political intercourse that it is impossible to separate them.*” (Clausewitz, 2004: 675) “*In one word, the Art of War in its highest point of view*

is policy, but, no doubt, a policy which fights battles instead of writing notes.” (Clausewitz, 2004: 677) Kessel also supports these theses in his basic study, as ‘the nature of war depends, or could depend on the nature of political aims and vice versa, just as the political aim is influenced by the same political conditions, from which war itself is derived.’ (Kessel, 1987: 159)

According to these it is easy to see that the aims of war reflect the political will. Kessel suggests that “the whole issue can be divided into two main concepts: on the one hand there is the political aim at the beginning of the outbreak of war; on the other hand there is the political influence upon war during fighting, which may vary according to the state of affairs.” (Kessel, 1987: 159) This political aim is present in the Notice of On War by Clausewitz, where he states: “The two kinds of War are, first, those, in which the objects is the overthrow

---

4 “Granted we have obtained in this way an approximation to the strength of the power to be contended with, we can then take a review of our own means, and either increase them so as to obtain a preponderance, or, in case we have not the resources to effect this, then do our best by increasing our means as far as possible. But the adversary does the same; therefore, there is a new mutual enhancement, which, in pure conception, must create a fresh effort towards an extreme.” (Clausewitz, 2004: 4)

5 About the political aims moderating war Clausewitz wrote the following: “Thus policy makes out of the all-powering element of War a mere instrument, changes the tremendous battle-sword, which should be lifted with both hands and the whole power of the body to strive once for all, into a light handy weapon, which is even sometimes nothing more than a rapier to exchange thrusts and feints and parris.” (Clausewitz, 2004: 675)

FORGÁCS Balázs: Military theoretical basics of the concept of culture of warfare

of the enemy, whether it be that we aim at his annihilation, politically, or merely at disarming him and forcing him to conclude peace on our terms, either for the purpose of retaining them permanently, or of turning them to account as matter of exchange in the settlement of a peace.” (Clausewitz, 2004: 37)<sup>6</sup> Based on the dual nature of war — attrition or annihilation

— we can conclude that the will of fighting the war is present in completely different forms, which manifest in the different use of the military and the different intensity of fighting. (Kessel, 1987: 157) Clausewitz also mentions the transition between these different characteristics: the common element in both cases is violence, which, according to Kessel, connects the two types, “this is why these two types of war may change from one into the other.” (Kessel, 1987: 169)

## Conclusion

In my opinion the characteristics described above are also reflected in the differences of the types of cultures of warfare, namely in the differences in use of force indicated by the war aims that are determined by political aims. When studying the cultures of warfare it is best to differentiate among them by examining their characteristics, as differences are present in several areas: violence, political aims, intensity of violence, and the parity of annihilation and attrition.<sup>7</sup>

## References

- APPLEGATE, R. A. D., MOORE, J. R (1990): Warfare — an Option of Difficulties. An Examination of Forms of War and the Impact of Military Culture. In. *The RUSI Journal* Vol. 3, pp. 13–20.
- CLAUSEWITZ, C. von (2004): *On War*. Volume I – II. New York: Barnes & Noble Books
- DELBRÜCK, H. (1920): Nachtrag. Über den Gegensatz der Ermattung- und Niederwerfungstrategie (Epilogue: On the Contradiction of Attrition and Annihilation in Strategy.) In. Delbrück, H.: *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Gesichte*. Berlin: Neuzeit Verlag von Georg Stillze
- FORGÁCS B. (2008a): Napjaink hadikultúrái (Cultures of Warfare in Our Days), In. Szelei I. (ed.): *Hadtudományi Doktorandusz Konferencia 2008. Conference Summary*, Budapest: ZMNE
- FORGÁCS, B. (2008b): Káosz vagy rend a gerilla hadviselésben? (Order or Disorder in Guerilla warfare?) In. *Kommentár* Vol. 1 pp. 88–100.
- HAHLWEG, W. (1976): Theoretische Grundlagen der modernen Guerilla und des Terrorismus (The theoretical base of modern guerillas and terrorism), In. Tophoven, R. (ed.): *Guerilla und Terrorismus heute, Politik durch Gewalt*, Bonn: Wehr und Wissen Verlag, 315
- KESSEL, E. (1987): Die doppelte Art des Kriegs (The dual character of war), In. Kessel, E.: *Militärgeschichte und Kriegstheorie in neuerer Zeit, ausgewählte Aufsätze*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot

---

6 Notice, emphasis by Clausewitz: On the dual nature of war and the political will determining wars see: Kessel, 1987: 157–174)

7 The differences of cultures of warfare can be determined by examining the following factors: the means of violence, the political aims; the intensity of violence and the parity of annihilation and attrition. These are the most important, ever returning questions of any military theory.

FORGÁCS Balázs: Military theoretical basics of the concept of culture of warfare

KIRAS, J. D. (2005): Terrorizmus és irreguláris hadviselés (Terrorism and Irregular Warfare), In. Baylis, J. et al. (eds.): *A stratégia a modern korban. Bevezetés a stratégiai tanulmányokba. (Strategy in the*

- Contemporary World. An Introduction to Strategic Studies*), Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó
- KOVÁCS, J. (1967a): A fegyveres küzdelem megvívásának módja (Ways of Fighting Battle), In. *Honvédelem* Vol. 4, pp. 7–19.
- KOVÁCS J. (1967b): A fegyveres küzdelem megvívásának módja (Ways of Fighting Battle), In. *Honvédelem* Vol. 7, pp. 3–12.
- KOVÁCS J. (1995): *Magyarország katonai stratégiája [Komplex kutatási téma] (Hungary's Military Strategy [A Complex Study])* Volume II, s. n.
- NAGY M. M. (2004a): A katonai erőszak elmélete és a XX. század (The Theory of Military Power and the 20th Century), In. *Múltunk* Vol. 4, pp. 146–175.
- NAGY, M. M. (2004b): A terrorizmus hadelmélete (The Military Theory of Terrorism), In. *Kapu* Vol. 6–7, pp. 16–20.
- PERJÉS Géza (1983): *Clausewitz*, Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó
- SZABÓ J. (ed.) (1995): *Hadtudományi lexikon, (Hungarian Encyclopedia of Military Sciences)* Volume I–II. Budapest: Magyar Hadtudományi Társaság