



Empire of  
Chance

— THE NAPOLEONIC WARS  
*and the* DISORDER OF THINGS

Anders Engberg-Pedersen

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# EMPIRE OF CHANCE



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*The Napoleonic Wars  
and the Disorder of Things*

Anders Engberg-Pedersen



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*For Benjamin*



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Chance is the only legitimate king in the universe.

—Napoleon





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## EMPIRE OF CHANCE



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# Introduction

## *The Prism of War*

**L**et us accompany the recruit onto the battlefield,” writes Carl von Clausewitz in his unfinished magnum opus *On War*. “As we approach,” he continues,

the increasingly loud thunder of the cannon is followed by the howling of bullets, which attracts the attention of the inexperienced. Bullets begin to strike the ground close to us, before and behind. We run toward the hill where the commanding officer is positioned with his large retinue. Here the impact of the cannonballs and the explosion of shells become so frequent that the seriousness of life shatters the adolescent fantasy. Suddenly a friend falls to the ground—a shell explodes in the crowd and sets off a number of involuntary movements—you begin to feel that you are losing your calm and your composure.—Now one step further into the battle which is raging in front of us, still almost like a scene in a theatre, on to the next division general; here bullet follows bullet and the noise of the artillery increases your distraction. From the division general to the brigadier—a man of recognized valor, who stands cautiously behind a hill, a house or some trees;—a certain sign of the increasing danger—grapeshot rattles on the roofs of the houses and in the fields; cannonballs howl over us, and plough the air in all directions, and soon there is a frequent whistling of musket bullets; one step further toward the troops, toward the infantry that for hours has withstood a heated

attack with indescribable pertinacity; here the air is filled with the hissing of bullets that announce their proximity by a short sharp noise as they pass within an inch of the ear, the head, or the chest.

Clausewitz's fiction leads us directly into the state of war.<sup>1</sup> Immersing us into an imagined world, the text seeks to impart the virtual experience of the hazards and contingencies, the pervasive but elusive conditions that organize the world of war. Here, Clausewitz notes, deep inside the war matrix, "the light of reason moves through different media, it is broken into different rays than during speculative contemplation."<sup>2</sup>

Returning from the battlefield, a number of writers and thinkers sought to come to grips with the phenomenon that had deflected the light of their minds. Imposing itself with a hitherto unseen force in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, from 1792 to 1815, warfare gave rise to a discourse across a number of fields and disciplines that grapples with war as a pervasive state or condition. Joseph de Maistre, writing in 1797, calls war the "habitual state of human kind," peace serving merely as a brief respite.<sup>3</sup> But how should we understand the *state of war*? What is the nature of the war matrix that formed the lives of a generation and has continued to shape the way modernity has been imagined? That is the concern of the present book.

In the eighteenth century it was deemed barbarous to pose this question. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his fragment *L'État de guerre* (The State of War), drafted in the late 1750s, issues a vehement warning against a philosophical analysis of war: "Ah! Barbarous philosopher! Come and read your book to us on a battlefield!"<sup>4</sup> Predicated upon his belief that the civil state corrupts the individual, he argues that civil institutions create war, perpetuate it, and legitimize it as a viable means of interaction between nations. Writing against Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau nevertheless continues a tradition that conceives of the state of war from a juridical and political point of view. The "condition of Warre" that must be eliminated by subjection to an absolute sovereign in *Leviathan*, as well as the "State of War" that forms an aberration from the state of nature in John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, form integral parts of theories of statecraft.<sup>5</sup> Rousseau's injunction against philosophizing about war is articulated from within this tradition. To make his point he too invents a fictive scenario that offers a graphic description of the savage violence of war. In Rousseau's fiction the pristine order of

legal books and political treatises concocted in the calmness of the writer's study meets the brutal realities of war. For Rousseau the state of war as a political concept promotes another state of war, one conceived as butchery and suffering.<sup>6</sup>

With the Napoleonic Wars, however, a different understanding of war appears. While legal and political aspects as well as the human costs continue to be debated, around 1800 one can detect the emergence of a discourse on war as a problem of knowledge. What can be known, what is the status of information, what operational logic governs the war matrix? What epistemic order can make sense of it? What is the role of chance, and how is chance represented, how is it controlled and managed? These are some of the questions that begin to guide the discourse on war. The Napoleonic Wars not only instituted "a new order of things," as Heinrich von Kleist put it, at the political level.<sup>7</sup> War itself constituted a new and distinct order, an order that did not form a temporary exception in the lives of many of these thinkers but that organized the world in which they moved and breathed.<sup>8</sup> It was the environment in which they were immersed. As Clausewitz's statement indicates, war was now conceived as a prism that splintered the makeup of the world, that reconfigured fundamental spatiotemporal categories, and whose deflection of traditional modes of thought revealed an elusive phenomenon that called for a new theory of knowledge. Contrary to Rousseau's division of labor, in which philosophers had sequestered themselves from the realities on the ground, the returning soldiers sought to describe the state of war as they themselves had experienced it inside the war matrix, in the thick of things on the battlefield.

The inquiry into the state of war takes place not only and not primarily in works of philosophy as traditionally conceived. Since the beginning of Western thought, the preferred site for the articulation and establishment of knowledge and truth has been peace and order, while war has frequently been excluded from the realm of knowledge as a disturbance or an anomaly.<sup>9</sup> The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars do leave traces in works of philosophy around 1800, but one must look to adjacent, paraphilosophical fields for a deeper engagement with the question of war and knowledge, first and foremost to military theory and literature. In the midst of the larger intellectual movement of German Idealism another strand of thought develops, a countercurrent that builds a new model of knowledge as a response to the experience of war. Abandoning the quest for universals, for certainty, and the transcendental mapping of the permanent fixtures of the cognitive machinery within speculative



philosophy, military minds turn their attention outward, to the temporary, the local, the unstable, the fluid—to the concreta of the empirical world in a state of war. Given the vast expansion of military operations around 1800, war had grown to such complexity that one military officer calls it *l'empire du hazard*, a hazardous empire or, simply, the empire of chance.<sup>10</sup> On the battlefield epistemic conditions came to be regarded not only as inherently deficient; the fundamental state of knowledge was seen as contingent. In the eighteenth century military theory was guided by geometry, on mathematical calculations morphed into crystalline forms of star-shaped fortifications and a disciplined choreography of troops. Now, however, war emerges as a realm of radical contingency, a realm shot through with chance events, replete with errors and uncertainties. And yet, in between absolute certainty and pure randomness, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars make visible a middle realm of knowledge, a tremendously complex epistemic field of probabilities, possibilities, conjectures, averages, modalities. The wars function as a catalyst for a more worldly thought that looks squarely at this middle realm in order to understand it and to ground a new practical knowledge. For the problem of how to manage this complex field became a question of the utmost importance, a question that has persisted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century and up until today.

The present study does not pretend to comprehensiveness. I offer an outline of the state of war on the basis of an examination of key texts preceding, during, and after the wars. At the same time I situate these texts within the larger archive of symbolic practices around 1800. Comparing sources from primarily Prussia, France, England, and Russia, I thereby seek to uncover a larger development that manifests itself across various national and disciplinary boundaries. Together they suggest a shift within the discourse on war at the beginning of the nineteenth century—a transformation of the kind identified by Michel Foucault across the fields of political economy, natural history, and general grammar. In Foucault's archaeological analysis, the "universal mathesis" that structured the order of things in Classical thought fractures on the threshold between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century and gives way to the new paradigm of history as the fundamental mode of being of all things. For Foucault this shift marks nothing less than the demise of metaphysics and the birthplace of the empirical.<sup>11</sup> But his methodological approach leaves little room for the causes of this major

transformation. The “demiurge of knowledge” intentionally remains nameless.<sup>12</sup> Within the more limited scope of my inquiry, however, the immediate event that provoked a shift in the military discourse can be assigned a clear name: the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Epistemology suffered a concussion at Austerlitz, at Wagram, at Borodino, and the effects of the impact can be measured in the texts that subsequently tried to make sense of the situation. Here one should not expect to find a clean line of division, though. Older models of knowledge reappear and jostle with the new one during the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Attempts to establish eternal rules of strategy and to treat warfare as a science still appear, but now they vie with the theories of empirico-practical knowledge that grew out of the wars. Moreover the discourse on the state of war explicitly formulates its military world picture as a paradigm in competition with the speculative philosophical discourse at the time. In the intellectual landscape around 1800, war emerges as a parallel world so out of joint that it cannot be grasped by a transcendental philosophy whose primary focus is the subject. The military theorists, literary authors, pedagogues, and inventors who try to comprehend the state of war therefore formulate their ideas both against the Classical thought of the eighteenth century and in competition with the reigning philosophical discourse around 1800.

Another point on which my line of inquiry differs from that of traditional discourse analysis is my focus on what has been called the poetics of knowledge, that is, the ways the production of knowledge is bound up with aesthetic choices and techniques.<sup>14</sup> In *The Names of History*, for example, Jacques Rancière shows how the change of narrative tense in historiography cannot be reduced to mere style, to a rhetorical turn of phrase. Rather the linguistic change has epistemological significance as it ushers in a “new regime of truth.”<sup>15</sup> But clearly this is not restricted to historiography. In the words of Joseph Vogl, “Every epistemological clarification is linked to an aesthetic decision.”<sup>16</sup> In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the relation between the representational forms and their referents becomes a particularly critical issue, for the state of war could not be adequately described with the concepts, categories, and images inherited from the eighteenth century. While clearly marked as a historical event, war was nevertheless not a historical fact but an elusive phenomenon, a blurry object that required a new aesthetics, a new set of forms, new morphologies. The discourse on the state of war is thus inextricably linked to a reconfiguration of the poetics of war. Across traditional genre boundaries, in treatises, in novellas and novels but also on sketches, on maps, and in games,

war is equally an epistemic problem and a problem of poetics. Having to reconstruct the state of war from scratch, authors, inventors, and theorists created symbolic worlds in which the particular figurations—be it the operational logic of war games, the topographical image of the military map, or the structure of a text—all reveal so many conceptions of war.

The state of war therefore appears in a field that comprises both history and poetics. Even as war provides the impetus for the development of new media, as Friedrich Kittler stressed for decades,<sup>17</sup> the state of war is as much a product of media as the media are a product of war. Generated by media poetics, the state of war is a second-order phenomenon that manifests itself in the concrete configurations of texts, maps, and games. If war is indeed “the father of all media,”<sup>18</sup> media, in an admittedly odd genealogy, give birth to their father. One must therefore attend not just to historical circumstances but also to the idiosyncrasies of narrative, cartographic, and ludic grammars. They form the symbolic prisms that, each in their own way, manifest the state of war. As part of a historical epistemology that charts the transformations of poetics, literature therefore plays a somewhat unusual role. Placing novellas, dramas, and novels next to philosophy, military theory, and cartography, I not only examine these works as metareflections on the knowledge claims made in the adjacent fields; I also read literature *as* epistemology. I therefore focus on the operational logic that structures each fictional world and on the ways they challenge traditional conceptions of knowledge. In this approach literature is read as a way of dealing with the complex epistemic regime of war. By doing so I seek to redirect attention to the text itself as a medium. In its excitement over the development of new media, media studies has frequently made literature, broadly conceived, into its favored *prügelknabe*. The written text has often either been reduced to a symptom of its media-technological conditions, or it has been useful as an artifact that could demonstratively be tossed into history’s junkyard for obsolete media.<sup>19</sup> As much as the operating systems and data processes of a diverse array of objects such as typewriters, computers, radios, rockets, and radars have been studied in detail, the internal mechanisms by which a literary work operates have been neglected in the analysis of war even within more traditional literary studies.<sup>20</sup> This is particularly unfortunate because several literary works, faced with the problem of war, begin to reflect not just on other media, such as two-dimensional maps and three-dimensional models, but also on literature’s own conditions of possibility as a medium. Examining the state of war through poetics, I transpose the ques-

tions of how data are processed, how systems operate, how simulations are constructed from the purely material level of signals and letters to the internal mechanisms of the text. These questions are central to the literary conception of war, and in this way media studies might also be made more productive for the field it has perhaps been overly anxious to leave behind: literature.

The first chapter sets the stage for the later developments with an examination of the discourse on war in the eighteenth century. Here I consider the character and fate of the geometrical order. More specifically I trace the connections between geometry, fortification, and literature and show how the flat media inscriptions of the space of war in military treatises such as those of Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban are critically refracted in *Tristram Shandy*. In Sterne's novel warped geometries, three-dimensional simulations, and excessive symbolic growth not only dismantle and drive ad absurdum the geometrical order of war; they also make visible the nexus of space, knowledge, and representation that structures the discourse on war. The chapter concludes with a preview of things to come by way of an analysis of a forged continuation of *Tristram Shandy* published in 1818. Based on the new order of war, the forgery brings out the profound transformation in the understanding of war that takes place around 1800.

The second chapter develops the concept of the state of war. Against the background of the changed spatial order of the Napoleonic Wars, the *grandes opérations*, and in particular the appearance of the third dimension in the form of the terrain, I examine the disappearance of the geometrical order and the attempts to describe the paradigm that takes its place. In a variety of mostly Prussian writers of military, philosophical, and mathematical bent (Berenhorst, Clausewitz, Rühle von Lilienstern, Hegel, Laplace) I chart the emergence of the state of war conceived as a variegated epistemic field of chance, contingencies, and probabilities.

The pressing question, however, was not merely what could be known but how to act efficiently in a destabilized world. Chapter 3 centers on the various attempts to fuse epistemology and praxis. Not merely descriptive, the knowledge of war is inherently operational, its ultimate goals lying outside of the mind. Alternative and superior methods of thinking that work under conditions of uncertainty become essential. In opposition to rational deliberation, thinkers catalogue fast and dirty forms of cognition that are more efficient in dealing with a multitude of contingent events. Know-how, judgment, habit,

and tact are some of the concepts they develop to create a new model of knowledge in which knowing and acting coalesce.

In Chapter 4 I examine different methods for training judgment. Obtained not on the school bench but amid the dangers on the field, experience becomes a central but problematic desideratum. Various *technologies of experience* are therefore developed as training devices that generate artificially, in virtual scenarios, the experience of the state of war. Primary among these technologies of experience is the textual medium. As an alternative to the direct exposure to contingency in actual combat, the somewhat safer method was suggested of immersing individuals in texts. Texts are crafted into simulations that seek not only to reproduce the operational logic of war but also to create a three-dimensional illusion of battle that implicates the reader. No longer observers, readers become situated participants, and experience is imparted directly into their bodies.

Concurrently another medium for the management of war undergoes a tremendous development during the Napoleonic Wars: the topographical map. Given the importance of the terrain, maps come to constitute a media a priori for the planning and execution of large-scale military operations. Chapter 5 explores how the management of a military empire becomes dependent on its symbolic double, on the production and organization of an empire of paper. Here science, statecraft, bureaucracy, and military theory collude to form a cartographic apparatus that extends a mobile network across Europe—a network in which maps of various kinds circulate, from luxurious, hand-colored anniversary maps of conquest to hastily drawn sketches of the enemy's position. The outline of the cartographic apparatus is complemented by an analysis of the multiform cartographic images of war on which one can detect the impact of the state of war, as well as the attempt to control the perception of war through techno-aesthetics.

This kind of distance management forms the perspectival opposite to the textual simulations that locate the reader in the thick of things. The cartographic apparatus that emerges around 1800 thus installs a perspective at odds with the textual method of managing war. As a media event, the Napoleonic Wars give rise to conflicting technologies whose fraught relationship comes to inform the discussion of warfare throughout the century, for the development of the realist novel is bound up with a metadiscourse on the representability of the Napoleonic Wars. The final chapter examines the long-ranging media effects of the wars, where the map, as a medium within a medium, is

transformed into a discursive object, and warfare into a struggle between maps and narratives. Faced with the representational problem of war, the novel is forced to reflect on its own conditions of possibility, and this reflection rehearses at the media level the opposition that emerged at the beginning of the century between the quest for certainty and universality independent of change and the more world-oriented empiricism of military thinkers. Epistemically marked, the map is the foil against which the novel develops its poetics and its own conception of the state of war.

It is a distinctly modern outlook that issues from the Napoleonic Wars. In the twentieth century a number of thinkers return to the military discourse of 1800, adopt several concepts that were developed at that time, and deploy them as metaphors for an analysis of the societal order. Thus in the 1970s and 1980s the military world picture that grew out of the Napoleonic Wars comes to serve as a prism for the general state of affairs. In this, its latest permutation, the state of war is transformed from a state of exception into a cipher of modernity. In various ways the ideas that grew out of the Napoleonic Wars came to shape a view of modernity that still holds. In this book I seek to lay bare the origins of this outlook, to show how it emerged out of the poetics of war.

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# I



## The Geometry of War

### *Siege Architecture and Narrative Form*

It begins with an accident in the archive. On a small table piled with heaps of papers and stacks of books is a comprehensive library of war: treatises on fortification by Cataneo and Ramelli are crowded by the works of Stevin and Coehoorn, Sheeter and Pagan, Blondel and Vauban. Additional volumes on the theory of ballistics by Tartaglia, Torricelli, and Galileo are scattered among them. Together they form a small but comprehensive library of military thought from its early Italian origins in the fifteenth century through its Dutch and French developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—an archive of the science of war. But an inattentive movement makes the archive come tumbling down: a volume is knocked off the table; another follows. Eventually the entire archive is abandoned.

The incident, which appears early in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*,<sup>1</sup> is indicative of a larger shift within the intellectual history of war. Uncle Toby, obsessed with the science of fortification, has difficulties navigating the complex discourse on war, following the mathematics behind the trajectories of projectiles, and, in particular, making sense of the geometry and the variegated vocabulary of fortification. As if to mark the unwieldiness of the texts, the discourse itself has accrued such density that it has become unmanage-

able in its pure materiality: the archive is knocked to the ground. The falling books, following no calculated trajectory but the random course of the accidental, present a vivid image of the interrogation of the discourse on war in the middle of the eighteenth century. Tumbling to the floor, an entire discourse falls victim to an accident, to the very element that the treatises on fortification have sought to exclude by the forms of geometry. The fictional scene thus sets the stage for an examination of the ways in which geometry, military theory, and the media of war in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century are entangled with questions of epistemology and representation. In this chapter I relate these different fields to one another in order to make clear how the science of fortification came to inform literature and shape the cultural imagination of war and to show how Sterne's fiction serves as a gauge of a shift in the history of war media. It is thus a matter of delineating an intellectual history of war in the long eighteenth century within a composite and more complex field than any single discipline can encompass. This field comprises not only discursive forms but also various material forms. I will therefore discuss the treatises of Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban in addition to *Tristram Shandy* and a literary forgery of the novel, but I will also relate these texts to maps, games, and three-dimensional models. *Tristram Shandy* forms the focal point of the investigation, but before we return to Uncle Toby and the accident that sets everything in motion, let us take a closer look at the contents of the books he knocks to the ground.

### *Graphics*

When Vauban published *Nouveau traité de géométrie et fortification* (New Treatise on Geometry and Fortification) in 1695 it marked the apex of a development that had begun two hundred years earlier. With the importation of gunpowder into Europe, military architecture was restructured to counter the increased firepower of cannons. The high walls that had provided protection now became a liability as they would easily crumble under cannon fire. Verticality was therefore replaced by a horizontal design with protruding bastions.<sup>2</sup> This directional shift paved the way for the construction of a carefully calculated geometrical space that was the product of the joint venture of science, architecture, and art. Albrecht Dürer's treatise on fortification from 1527, *Etliche vnderricht zu befestigung der Stett, Schloß vnd flecken* (Several Instructions for Fortifying Towns, Cities, Castles, and Small Cities), opens with an indication of the new importance of architectural forms: "Since today in our time many



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