

Michael Howard

CLAUSEWITZ

A Very Short Introduction

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hardly be faulted.’
English Historical Review

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Note on quotations

Bracketed arabic numerals refer to the pages of Karl von Clausewitz *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Copyright © 1976 by Princeton University Press. Excerpts reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. The quotations on p. 16 and on p. 36 line 19 are translated from *Bemerkungen über die reine und angewandte Strategie des Herrn von Bülow*, 1805, reprinted in *Verstreute Kleine Schriften*, 68, 77 and 69, and from *Strategie aus dem Jahre 1804*, *ibid.* 20. The quotation from a letter given on p. 18 is taken from Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, 129. The definition on p. 36 is translated from *Strategie aus dem Jahre 1804* in *Verstreute Kleine Schriften*, 33. Bibliographical details of all these works are given in the Further Reading section at the end of the book.



Karl von Clausewitz, engraving c.1800. *Hulton Archive*.

Introduction

About Karl von Clausewitz's study *On War* the American strategic thinker Bernard Brodie has made the bold statement 'His is not simply the greatest, but the only great book about war.' It is difficult to disagree. Anyone trying to put together a collection of texts on military theory comparable to anthologies on social, political, or economic thought will find it hard to match Clausewitz. Few if any other writers on war have succeeded as he did in transcending the limitations imposed on their insights by the political or the technological circumstances of their times. We can find many whose writings illustrate how successive generations have thought about war, but there are remarkably few who can help us to think about it; who have penetrated below the ephemeral phenomena of their own times and considered war, not just as a craft, but as a great socio-political activity, distinguished from all other activities by the reciprocal and legitimized use of purposeful violence to attain political objectives. There is certainly the magisterial study by Sun Tzu: *The Art of War*, probably written in the fourth century BC. There are a few chapters in the works of Clausewitz's contemporary Jomini; there are passages scattered among the works of Liddell Hart and his eccentric contemporary J. F. C. Fuller; and there are many interesting insights to be excavated from the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. Among earlier writers one can glean much bleak wisdom from the *obiter dicta* of Thucydides and Machiavelli. But there is no systematic study comparable to that of Clausewitz. Military analysts are usually concerned rather to advise their own generations and their own societies than to distil lasting wisdom for posterity.

Clausewitz expressed the modest hope that his book would not be forgotten after two or three years, and 'might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject' (p. 63). But his main concern was to help his countrymen and his contemporaries. He was a member of the Prussian officer corps, loyal to the Hohenzollern dynasty though more conscious than most of the problems it faced in coming to terms with the political currents set in motion by the French Revolution. He believed that the menace of French aggression had been checked by the European powers in 1814–15 but by no means destroyed, and if he sought to understand war in the abstract it was only to ensure that in future Prussia and her allies would be able to wage it more swiftly and effectively against the hereditary foe. Above all he was a professional soldier writing for his professional colleagues, not an academic lecturing in a political science faculty. He quite deliberately limited his analysis to what was likely to be of immediate utility to a commander planning a campaign. He had the practical man's horror of abstractions that could not be directly related to the facts of the situation, of propositions that could not be illustrated by examples, of material that was not relevant to the problem in hand. Certainly as a thinker he sought to penetrate to the essence of his subject-matter. But he was always concerned to link theory to

action, and he deliberately ignored all aspects of his subject that were not of immediate relevance to the conduct of the kind of war with which he himself was familiar.

The conduct of war [*he wrote*] has nothing to do with making guns and powder out of coal, sulphur, saltpetre, copper and tin; its given quantities are weapons that are ready for use and their effectiveness. Strategy uses maps without worrying about trigonometrical surveys; it does not enquire how a country should be organised and a people trained and ruled in order to produce the best military results. It takes these matters as it finds them in the European community of nations ... (p. 144)

To that extent, therefore, Clausewitz deliberately sacrificed universality to pragmatism and simplicity. It may however be doubted whether he was conscious of quite how much he was sacrificing. It is easy enough, after two World Wars, to criticize a theory of war that excluded all consideration of the economic base that makes the fighting of war possible at all, but to do this is not just to evoke the wisdom of hindsight. It demanded a very narrow view of the nature of war to study the Napoleonic period so intensively as did Clausewitz without taking into account the part played in Napoleon's strategy, and perhaps in his downfall, by the Continental System – his attempt to use economic as well as military instruments to consolidate and extend his conquests. Clausewitz's ignorance of the whole maritime dimension of warfare is striking but not surprising. The oceans lay beyond his cultural horizons. It is more curious that a Prussian specialist on military questions, whose country had been established as a major military power as much through skill in economic management as by military victories, should virtually ignore a dimension of military affairs that had occupied the fore-front of the mind of every Prussian soldier, statesman and bourgeois since the days of Frederick William I. Perhaps this onesidedness reflected the limitations of Clausewitz's own personality and interests. More probably it was the impact of the great Napoleonic campaigns that shaped his career and dominated his thinking – campaigns whose dramatic course and cataclysmic results overshadowed the humdrum concerns of military budgeting and administration that had so obsessed the old Prussian army. When it came to the point, it was the successful conduct of operations that mattered, and the events of Clausewitz's lifetime had made it clear that it was to this, and not to the deeper questions relating to military financing, budgeting, procurement, and administration, that attention had most urgently to be given.

Clausewitz's ignoring of the economic dimension of war was thus, at least in part, deliberate. His ignoring of another dimension, the technological, was unconscious, and more easily understandable. Like most of his intelligent contemporaries he realized very well that he had been born into a revolutionary era likely to transform, for better or worse, the entire political structure of European society. But no more than anyone else could he appreciate that he was living on the eve of a technological transformation of yet vaster scope. The conduct of war is determined above all by two factors: the nature of the weapons available and the modes of transportation. The first had remained stable for a hundred years, the second for a thousand. In Clausewitz's day as in Caesar's, logistics were determined by the speed and endurance of marching men and of draught animals. Tactics were determined, as they had been in the age of

Marlborough, by firearms whose effective range was 50 yards and cannon with a range of 300; and although there had been significant incremental developments during the past century, developments whose significance Clausewitz analyses most interestingly in the course of *On War*, there was no reason to expect the transformation, both in transportation and in armaments, that began in the decade following Clausewitz's death in 1831 with the development of railways and the introduction of breechloading rifled firearms.

Much of *On War* is therefore of interest only to military historians, dealing as it does with detailed questions of tactics and logistics that were to be out of date within a few decades of Clausewitz's death. What is remarkable, however, is how much of what Clausewitz had to say did outlast his time and remain relevant, not only under military circumstances transformed out of all recognition, but for a readership far broader than the officers of the Prussian Army whose education he primarily had in mind. Why this should be so it will be the purpose of this volume to explain.

Chapter 1

Clausewitz in his time

The active career of Karl von Clausewitz exactly spanned the course of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars between 1792 and 1815. He was born in 1780, the son of a half-pay lieutenant in the Prussian Army, and at the age of 12 obtained a commission in the 34th Infantry Regiment, which was at the time commanded by a distant relative. But his family was not a military, much less an aristocratic one. His father, whose own forebears had been bourgeois and academic, had been commissioned by Frederick the Great only during the crisis period of the Seven Years War when the exclusive barriers of the Prussian officer corps had been reluctantly lowered to admit members of the middle classes; and he had been retired after that war not, as he and his family gave out, as a result of wounds received on active service, but in consequence of Frederick's reduction of the officer corps to its original nucleus of well-born landed gentry (*Junkers*). Thus although Clausewitz passed his life as a member of that exclusive body, and was even to gain entry into the entourage of the royal family, he was temperamentally an outsider; and the way in which he was ultimately treated by Frederick William III and his court suggests that he was seen as such.

Clausewitz was always something of an introvert; solitary, bookish, shy, intellectually arrogant. An autodidact, he devoured literature on any available topic, not only military affairs but philosophy, politics, art, and education. He was a prolific, almost a compulsive writer on all these matters; from the age of 20 until his death in 1831, his writing was only briefly interrupted by the demands of military campaigning, and no complete edition of his work has ever been compiled. But beneath the scholarly, withdrawn exterior there burned an ambition for military glory worthy of Stendhal's Julien Sorel: an ambition deeply repressed, given vent only in his letters to his wife; never to be fulfilled in the series of staff appointments for which his superiors considered, probably rightly, that his intellectual talents best fitted him; but one that gave a peculiar intensity to his analyses of the qualities demanded of a commander in the field, of the intense moral pressures that commanders must learn to withstand, and of the bloody drama of battle that was the natural, indeed the desirable, climax of all his endeavours. All Clausewitz's writings bear the stamp of a passionate temperament, as often at war with as in the service of a powerful analytic mind.

Clausewitz was no desk soldier. He received his baptism of fire at the age of 13, when the Prussian Army, on the left wing of the forces of the First Coalition containing and driving back the armies of the First French Republic, was campaigning first on the Rhine, then in the Vosges. Advancing across that broad valley, trudging up and down those steep, wooded mountain tracks, he acquired that infantryman's familiarity with

terrain that was to inspire so many of the pages of *On War*.

The campaign ended with the Treaty of Basel in 1795, and Prussia withdrew into a precarious and self-deluding state of 'non-alignment' from which she was to be cruelly aroused eleven years later. The first five years of this period was spent by Clausewitz on garrison duty in the small town of Neuruppin. Intelligent soldiers never waste the long periods of leisure that characterize peacetime service. Clausewitz made good use of the excellent library of Frederick the Great's brother Prince Henry, which was open to the officers of his regiment, and he acquired a deep practical interest in educational activities, it may be assumed, that did not engage the interests of his fellow subalterns quite so profoundly. It must nevertheless have come as something of a relief when in 1801 he was transferred to Berlin to attend the newly opened War College under the direction of Gerd von Scharnhorst. It was now, at the age of 19, that his career really began.

Scharnhorst is rightly revered as one of the giants in the creation of Germany, a man as distinguished as a thinker and a statesman as he was as a soldier. A Hanoverian by birth and an artilleryman by training – two characteristics that set him apart from the *junker* cavalry and infantry officers who dominated the Prussian Army - his brilliant performance in the War of the First Coalition gained for him universal respect, and his appointment as director of the first Prussian staff college was remarkably wise. From the beginning of the wars he had been puzzling over the performance of the French revolutionary armies. How was it that this rabble, untrained, undisciplined, under-officered, its generals as often as not jumped-up NCOs, with no adequate supply system let alone any serious administrative structure, how did it come about that these remarkable forces could not only hold their own against the professional soldiers of the European powers but actually defeat them? It was true that the French made ingenious use of the new flexible and dispersed infantry formations which the Royal Army had been developing before the revolution, and that in the *matériel*, the tactics, and the training of their artillery they were second to none. But the reasons for their military success lay deeper than that. The success of the French armies, Scharnhorst discerned, was closely connected with the transformation of the society that lay behind them, with the emergence of the idea of a French Nation. To learn how to defeat the French it was not enough just to study their military techniques, essential though this might be. One had to consider the political context as well, and the historical background against which these techniques had emerged. The syllabus of the Kriegsakademie was thus liberal as well as technical, and Scharnhorst supplemented it with a discussion group, the Militärische Gesellschaft, where no limit was observed in considering the implications of the military revolution of the time.

This was the setting in which the young Clausewitz now found himself, and he quickly attached himself to Scharnhorst as a deeply admiring disciple, his own ideas germinating and sprouting in the rays of that genial sun. Scharnhorst reciprocated with an equal affection for the brilliant and receptive young man. The foundation was laid for a partnership that was to end only with Scharnhorst's premature death in 1813 and was to bring Clausewitz into the heart of the group of military reformers - Grolman, Boyen, Gneisenau among others - who were to remould the Prussian army and work towards the remaking of the Prussian state. But the opportunity for this still lay in the future, and Clausewitz's immediate prospects, though glittering, were more orthodox.

Graduating at the head of his class in 1803, he was appointed adjutant to Prince August, the son of his regiment's colonel-in-chief Prince Ferdinand, and at the end of the year, in the house of his patron, he met and fell in love with Marie, daughter of the Count von Brühl, a lively and well-educated girl high in the favour of Queen Louise. The family's resistance to this unsuitable match and the demands of military service delayed the marriage for seven years, which made possible the long, passionate, self-revealing correspondence in which Clausewitz developed many of his ideas. Once married, Marie was to identify herself wholeheartedly with her husband's work, act as his amanuensis and after his death as his editor, and preside over what still remains the most complete edition of his works which she published in 1832–4.

During the next two years, 1803–5, Clausewitz wrote prolifically, developing ideas that were to receive their final form twenty years later when he came to write *On War*. Then in 1806 came the war with France that the cautious King Frederick William III had done his best to avoid, but to which Clausewitz, like most other patriotic young officers, looked forward with impatient enthusiasm. His master Prince August was given command of a battalion, and Clausewitz accompanied him to the battlefield of Auerstadt. There he participated in his first great Napoleonic battle and in the catastrophic retreat that followed; an experience so shatteringly different from the tedious marches and manoeuvres of his boyhood that it was hard for him to comprehend them both as belonging to the single activity, war. He and Prince August were eventually cut off and taken prisoner. While Scharnhorst and his colleagues were retrieving the reputation of the Prussian Army in the Eylau campaign the following year, Clausewitz languished in bitter if not uncomfortable exile with his royal master in France, until they were repatriated after the Peace of Tilsit in 1808. It was a humiliating experience that stoked the fires of Clausewitz's patriotic zeal and gave him a lifelong dislike for all things French.

Released from captivity, Clausewitz rejoined Scharnhorst, who was now in Königsberg, remote from the French-dominated capital of Berlin, working to reorganize the Prussian Army. For the next four years he helped with the task of reshaping the structure of Prussian military institutions, simultaneously writing on every conceivable aspect of his subject, from the details of minor tactics to the problems of political loyalty. The latter became insoluble for him when in the spring of 1812 the king whose uniform he wore and whose claims on his loyalty he had never questioned concluded an alliance with the French enemy Clausewitz so detested. It was too much. In company with some thirty other officers Clausewitz resigned his commission, parted again from his wife, and took service with Emperor Alexander I of Russia, just as the French and their satellite armies were invading that Empire.

Although Clausewitz spoke no Russian, employment was found for him in various advisory positions on the staff. He took part in his second great battle at Borodino. He witnessed the disastrous crossing of the Beresina by the retreating French army and wrote a horrifying account of it. Finally he acted as an intermediary when in December 1812 the commander of the Prussian corps serving under Napoleon's command, Yorck von Wartenberg, took his historic decision to capitulate at Tauroggen and go over with his forces to the side of the Russians. When Yorck established a centre of Prussian national resistance at Königsberg Clausewitz organized the arming of the population; and when in the spring of 1813 the King of Prussia himself at last