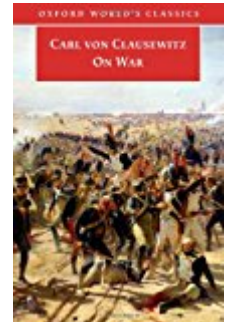


Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xli + 284 pp.
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Reviewed by Eliah Bures

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All reading, we are still sometimes told, is misreading. Whatever the truth of this assertion, little doubt remains that some works are more prone to confusions and tendentious distortions than others. Among these is the assemblage of notes, fragments, and chapters, most in various stages of incompleteness, which a relatively obscure Prussian general bequeathed to his wife in 1831, and which subsequent generations have known simply as *On War*. This past year marked the 175th anniversary of its initial publication. Given the wide influence and enduring appeal that Carl von Clausewitz's masterpiece has enjoyed in the interim, an abridged and annotated paperback edition, one aimed at making *On War* accessible to students and the general public alike, has long been overdue.

The overall quality of this volume is very high, and Beatrice Heuser, a Clausewitz scholar and professor of international history and strategic studies in Munich, has assembled a mostly balanced and illuminating introduction to Clausewitz's life and thought. Explanatory notes and a chronology of major events (both military and bi-

ographical) are provided, as is a brief bibliography of works in English, French, and German. Heuser has wisely opted for the 1976 translation by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, which transformed the occasional inscrutability of earlier translations into manageable difficulty. The selections are likewise judicious. Books 1 and 2--in which appear such central Clausewitzian themes as "friction," the primacy of politics, the importance of "moral forces," military genius, "violent resolution" as the "supreme law" of war, the fluidity of dialectical interaction, the gulf between "actual war" and "war in theory," and above all the "paradoxical trinity" of enmity, chance, and reason--are included in their entirety. Books 7 and 8 are provided in large part, and Heuser, in her introduction, stresses the turn in these later books away from a conception of war as massive geopolitical struggle (clearly drawn from Clausewitz's experience in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars) toward an interest in wars of "limited aim." The bulk of the excisions--Heuser has trimmed the text to roughly a third of its original length--have been taken from Books 3 through 6. In general, the principle of selection, as

Heuser frankly states, has been to include those portions of the work that have proved of most lasting significance, leaving behind the textbook-like instructions on billeting, the defense of swamps, and other matters which were no doubt of greater interest to the officer corps of Clausewitz's day than they are to the majority of his readers in our own. One can hardly quarrel with such a choice.

If the task of an edition of this sort is to introduce a complex work to the uninitiated, and in doing so to anticipate and head off the most likely misunderstandings without imposing an exegetical straightjacket on the reader, then I suspect Heuser has largely succeeded. Her introduction to the volume has three general aims, all of which rely on the claim (by no means new) that Clausewitz represents a "Copernican leap in our thinking about war" (p. x). First, Heuser emphasizes the radical originality of *On War*. In contrast to the tradition of philosophical and legal discussions of war on the one hand, and, on the other, the eminently practical handbooks of tactical maneuver and battlefield "rules," Clausewitz set out to investigate war as a political, social, and psychological phenomenon and to uncover the principles governing the complex and reciprocal interactions among its various dimensions. Heuser's discussion of Clausewitz's military education and the limitations of earlier treatments of war should be useful to all but the most expert of military historians. Second, she examines the role that Clausewitz's own experience as a soldier played in the genesis of his thought, stressing his desire to remain true to the reality (and thus unpredictability) of war while at the same time rendering war subject to rigorous "scientific" investigation. Finally, Heuser asks about the applicability of these ideas as an analytical framework in our own day. Clausewitz, of course, is still very much a live figure. His work continues to be assigned in military academies worldwide, and the past thirty years have witnessed something of a renaissance in Clausewitz studies in the United States and Eu-

rope, in part as a consequence of what were seen as the strategic blunders of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. At the same time, movements are perpetually afoot to hand Clausewitz over to the historians, challenging the relevance of his thinking in an age of genocide, asymmetrical warfare, and nuclear deterrence. Such debates have become particularly heated of late, for obvious reasons.[1] Heuser, while convinced that Clausewitz continues to provide "brilliant analytical tools," steers clear of polemics (p. xxix). She rightly notes the contradictions and ambiguities that plague the work, as well its inevitable shortcomings as the product of a particular time and place.

I wonder, however, whether Heuser might have gone further toward preventing the misunderstandings to which *On War* has so often succumbed, and which she is clearly eager to avoid. Much as several generations of scholars have worked to rescue Johann Gottfried Herder, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others from trajectories culminating in Adolf Hitler or Prussian militarism, so have Clausewitz scholars labored with success to reverse earlier efforts to tar his work. Two of the most common charges have been that Clausewitz valorizes violence and that he elevates will, determination, and boldness to ends in themselves. Neither of these claims is supported by a careful reading of the text, but a haphazard reader, especially one under the sway of any of a host of prior (or current) misrepresentations, will find ample opportunity for selective quotation. Passages abound which assert that "war consists of single, great, decisive actions" (p. 104), or that "of all the possible aims in war, the destruction of the enemy's armed forces always appears as the highest" (p. 43), or that "willpower ... is always both an element in and the product of strength" (p. 25). Even as sensitive a historian as B. H. Liddell Hart could manage to misread Clausewitz as proclaiming "the sovereign virtues of the will to conquer, the unique value of the offensive carried out with unlimited violence by a nation in arms and the power of mili-

tary action to override everything else." [2] Heuser's introduction certainly does not encourage such a reading, but neither does it explicitly acknowledge its tendency to crop up among those who have not given the text their full attention. To the extent that she does address past misinterpretations, her dispute is with Clausewitz's Cold War critics.

That Heuser largely neglects to discuss Clausewitz's place in twentieth-century German history is connected to a more basic slant in her presentation of his thought. As a scholar of international relations and strategic studies, she situates Clausewitz almost exclusively within the history of these two fields. Her treatment of Clausewitz's intellectual influences, to the extent that it goes beyond his military education, mentions the mathematician Leonard Euler, but fails to point out that Clausewitz came of age in, and was deeply influenced by, one of the most vibrant and creative intellectual milieus in European history. A short list of Clausewitz's more famous acquaintances would include Clemens Brentano, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Heinrich von Kleist, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, Friedrich Schlegel, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Nor is Clausewitz's place in intellectual history restricted to his own day and age. Twentieth-century thinkers as formidable--and antipathetic--as Vladimir Lenin, Raymond Aron, and Carl Schmitt have found much to contemplate in his work. [3]

But these are quibbles, and no introduction can accomplish all things. Overall, Heuser has put together an admirably clear, judiciously edited, and reasonably balanced introduction to Clausewitz's thought. Writing in a review of the 1976 translation of *On War*, T. C. W. Blanning remarked that it "ought to represent a turning-point in Clausewitz studies, a point after which ... knowledge of that work proceeds beyond the maxim 'war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means.'" [4] Clausewitz has certainly received the attention Blanning called for, and

Heuser, by introducing a new generation of students to him, seems likely to continue the revival.

Notes

[1]. See, for instance, Tony Corn's recent "Clausewitz in Wonderland," which bemoans the "sterilizing effect" of "Clausewitzology" on the American military mind, in *Hoover Policy Review* 147 (February/March 2008), web special, at URL: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/4268401.html>.

[2]. Michael Howard, "The Influence of Clausewitz," in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 39. This and other introductory essays published with the translation, including a lengthy reading guide by Bernard Brodie, still provide excellent introductions to the text and fill out some of the gaps in Heuser's introduction.

[3]. The first port of call for those wanting to redress this balance is Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). The book has recently been reissued in paperback by Princeton University Press. See also Carl Schmitt, "Clausewitz als politischer Denker: Bemerkungen und Hinweise," *Der Staat* 6 (1978): 479-502; Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan* (New York: Telos Press, 2007), 40-54; Bernard Semmel, *Marxism and the Science of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War*, trans. Christine Booker and Norman Stone (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1976). Heuser does list Aron's work in the bibliography.

[4]. T. C. W. Blanning, "Review of *Clausewitz and the State*, by Peter Paret, and *On War*, by Carl von Clausewitz, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret," *English Historical Review* 93 (January 1978): 135.

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