

# H-Net Reviews

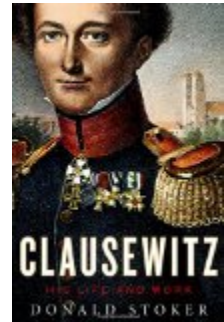
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald J. Stoker. *Clausewitz: His Life and Work*. New York: Oxford, 2014. 376 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-935794-9.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



“If I should die, dear Marie,” Carl von Clausewitz wrote to his wife, “that is simply how things are in my profession. Do not grieve too much for a life that had little left to undertake in any event.... I cannot say how great is my contempt for human judgment in leaving this world” (p. 1). Written on July 29, 1831, from Posen, Prussia (now Poznan, Poland), these words open Donald Stoker’s work on the life of Clausewitz. They reveal immediately the intent and scope of the path he places the reader upon with powerful clarity. This is a study of Clausewitz’s military, personal, and political life, and the influences that formed and guided him. It is the unfolding of that life in the context of the work for which he is justly and famously remembered, *On War* (1832), which anchors this work. How did *On War* come to be written? What inspired the depth and breadth of the text? Why has it remained such an enduring and useful explanation for war in the modern world?

Four critical facets of Clausewitz’s life are brought to life in Stoker’s presentation, including the most important, the relationship between Carl and his wife, Marie, the Countess von Brühl; the influence of friends and mentors Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August Neidhardt von Gneisenau; the politics that impacted his service during the period following the disaster at Jena and Auerstadt in 1806 to the end of his life; and the importance Clausewitz attached to the completion of *On War* itself. The final section of the work establishes the connection between his life and the theory of war and warfare in *On War*. Stoker effectively places Clausewitz into his times and context, entering the Prussian army at the age of eleven as an officer cadet in the spring of 1792, just in time for the beginning of the Revolutionary Wars with France. His life as an officer was not one spent in tours of duty in staffs

away from battle; Stoker documents thirty-six known incidents between 1793 and 1815 in which he, or his unit, came under fire in battle. It was this battlefield experience combined with a perceptive and open mind that Clausewitz brought to bear in *On War*, and that resonates within the work’s well-known passages and concepts.

Clausewitz comes down to us, especially in the context of the letter exchanges with his wife and the comments of his superiors, as a forcefully intelligent, perspicacious, and experienced leader and officer, intensely in love with Marie, and yet possessing a certain uncertainty and melancholy about his life, ambitions, and achievements. This impression is reinforced by the content of the letter written by Marie shortly after his death, in which she highlighted his frustrated desire for high battle command and the lack of recognition for higher tasks (p. 280). His uncertainty over the von Clausewitz claim to nobility was only put to rest in 1827. And yet Clausewitz persevered in both his ambition to higher command, achieving the rank of general major, and his pursuit (encouraged by Marie) of a wife from the highest circles of Prussian nobility. His mentors included the strongest members of the Reform Movement that sought to change Prussian society and its army in the wake of the disastrous defeat by Napoleon at Jena and Auerstadt in 1806. Men such as Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August von Gneisenau were his key military and personal friends and supports, while through them he attracted the political attention of men such as Hermann von Boyen and Ludwig von York, the leaders of the political movement for reform. All noticed his extraordinary intelligence and forwarded his case for assignments throughout their associations with him until his death. He reached the highest levels of Prussia’s ruling family, based on Scharnhorst’s recom-

mentation, when he became the adjutant to Prince August von Preußen, “the twenty-four-year-old son of the head of Clausewitz’s regiment, and a cousin to the king” in 1805 (p. 37). Clausewitz considered Scharnhorst to be the “father and friend of my spirit” and perhaps the person most responsible for the flowering of his education and intellect (p. 28). Upon Scharnhorst’s death in 1813, Gneisenau became that figure.

It was his relationship with Marie which was the closest and dearest of his life. Not only was Marie connected by birth and active by inclination with the families of the most prominent of Prussian nobility, but she used those connections to assist his career wherever possible. She was not only his physical and emotional partner. She was his sounding board and intimately familiar with his writings as one who listened, edited, and encouraged him. Recently a cache of 268 unpublished letters between the couple has surfaced.[1] The text of these letters only reinforces the centrality of Marie to his life and work that Stoker brings to light, highlighting in particular the nature of her knowledge and her role in the publication of *On War* following Carl’s death from cholera in 1831.

If Marie was the political member of the family, the events following the destruction of the Prussian army of 1806 and Clausewitz’s intense involvement in the Prussian Reform Movement, led to his being labeled a radical or at least one who sympathized with republican ideas. His disdain for Napoleon and all things French led to his resignation from Prussian service in 1812 to serve with the Russians when Napoleon called on Prussia to provide forces for the invasion of that nation. Unfortunately, he failed to ask the king for permission to resign and go into Russian military service, and compounded the error by writing a 20,00-word political call to arms and vilification of the Prussian nobility, (much less the king) for bending the knee to Napoleon. The king did not forgive him. Only in March 1815 was he again allowed to rejoin the army and wear Prussian blue, long after others in Russian service had been returned to Prussian colors. One of Stoker’s greatest contributions to the literature lies in his demonstration of how these political troubles profoundly affected not only Clausewitz’s future service, effectively preventing him from achieving his greatest ambition of high-level command in war, but also the personal insecurity and melancholy generated by his actions and concerns for his advancement.

Stoker’s interpretation of *On War* is sound. His discussion of the terms *absolute war* and *total war*, however, adds to a minor controversy concerning whether Clause-

witz confuses the reader through his use of these terms in the text. The classic English version used by all of us who teach *On War* was translated by Peter Paret and Michael Howard and published by Princeton University Press in 1984. Because it is the gold standard, we rarely question this translation or go back to the original German text when confusion arises, and generally tend to place the problem of a lack of clarity at the feet of Clausewitz himself. Stoker attributes this confusion to Clausewitz’s text, noting that he “clouds the picture” of absolute war, “meaning that war has an ‘absolute,’ or ‘pure,’ or theoretical state, as opposed to war in reality” (p. 265). He also highlights the quote, “absolute war has never in fact been achieved” (p. 266) and the Paret translation of the words *wenn der Krieg ganz Krieg* as “even if war were total war” (p. 265). In these cases the confusion appears to be generated not by Clausewitz, but by a series of rather more ecumenical than direct translations in the Paret text. Clausewitz has no confusion with respect to either his definition of absolute war or when it appeared in history: he refers to the arrival of absolute war in the real world by the manner of warfare instituted by Napoleon in 1805 and 1806.[2] The words “absolute war has never in fact been achieved” do not appear in the German text.[3] In the case of the reference to total war, again a less ecumenical translation would likely be “even if war were nothing but war.”[4] The epistemology of the word *ganz* as used throughout *On War* nowhere correlates to the word *total*. This is not to say that there are not inconsistencies in the German text of *On War*, but to recommend review of the original when such confusion arises.

Stoker has written a remarkable and engaging look into the life and influences that produced *On War*. Superbly sourced through archival materials, it is both accessible and profound scholarship. While the direct connection from a battle or staff experience to the words of *On War*, cannot often be made directly attributable, the resonance of Clausewitz’s experience of active service in war is unmistakable. New sources and Stoker’s experience in teaching Clausewitz, form a powerful combination that informs and enlightens the reader’s understanding as well as filling in the blanks in that life. This is perhaps Stoker’s greatest contribution to the scholarship surrounding *On War*. Clausewitz was not “merely a staff officer,” but an accomplished combat leader, even if he never attained the high-level command he longed for. Stoker succeeds brilliantly in his intent to provide a basic introduction to Clausewitz’s life, and much more. It is a book well worth reading.

Notes

[1]. Vanya E. Bellinger, "The Other Clausewitz: Findings from the Newly Discovered Correspondence between Marie and Carl von Clausewitz," *The Journal of Military History* 79 (April 2015): 345-367.

[2]. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Bonn: Ferdinand Dümmlers Verlag, 1966), 852; and Carl

von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. by Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

Press, 1984).

[3]. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 855; and Clausewitz, *On War*, 582.

[4]. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 889; and Clausewitz, *On War*, 605. The reviewer wishes to recognize Colonel Holger Draber, Deutsches Heer, Deutsches Bundeswehr, for his assistance in confirming the direct translations for the passages of *On War* referenced here.

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