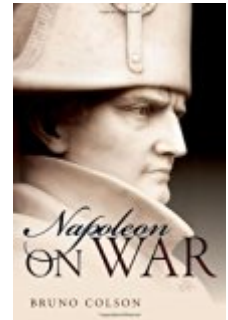


**Bruno Colson.** *Napoleon: On War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 560 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-968556-1.



**Reviewed by** Bundy Potter

**Published on** H-War (August, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In the more than two centuries since his rise to power during the French Revolution, the world at large has been fascinated with Napoleon Bonaparte, justly considering him as one of the great geniuses of all time. In particular, his military successes have led numerous authors, after his defeat and fall from power in 1815, to attempt to distill his writings into a series of maxims that could be studied and applied to current events. This concept has proven difficult. While exiled on Saint Helena, Napoleon himself considered writing about the art of war, but before his death in 1821 he ordered his efforts to be destroyed. Since the third decade of the nineteenth century, a number of scholars have sought to synthesize and recreate this material, with varying degrees of detail and accuracy, using the emperor's correspondence, official records, observations by his associates, and other sources.

Bruno Colson, the latest of these authors, is a recognized authority on military history, who is well aware of the difficulties of the task. In his useful and detailed introduction, Colson critiques

previous publications on Napoleon's maxims. He then explains his organization of the vast array of Napoleonic sources, using as a framework the emperor's Prussian contemporary Carl von Clausewitz's seminal *Vom Kriege* (*On War*) (1832).

An engaging but densely written work with extensive notes and bibliography, *Napoleon: On War* is constructed to follow Clausewitz's organizational method of chapters and subheadings. In eight "books," each subdivided into from five to seventeen categories, and with a short conclusion to each chapter, Colson examines Napoleon's professed opinions on the nature of war, the theory of war, strategy in general, engagement, military forces, defense, attack, and war plans. He sums up his observations in a final conclusion. From time to time, he references Clausewitz as contrast or counterpoint, creating an interesting dynamic between these two adversaries.

This is not a book for the casual reader but rather for specialists who have a strong Napoleonic focus. Colson assumes a knowledge of

both Napoleon and Clausewitz on the part of his readers. While an authority on Clausewitz, Colson presents measured and balanced views on Napoleon. He is not interested in praising or damning Napoleon but in presenting facts specific to military matters. Colson's layout of his methods in his introduction and final conclusion is helpful, but his overuse of "I" and "we" in explaining his purposes can be distracting. *Napoleon: On War* could easily be used as a text for an upper-level college class in military history or as a reference work in a graduate-level course.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Bundy Potter. Review of Colson, Bruno. *Napoleon: On War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46865>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.