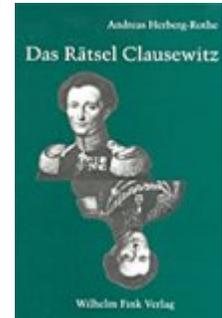


**Andreas Herberg-Rothe.** *Das Rätsel Clausewitz: Politische Theorie des Krieges im Widerstreit.* München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001. 254 S. EUR 30.00, gebunden, ISBN 978-3-7705-3612-2.



**Reviewed by** Joe McCoy

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### The Dual Nature of Clausewitz

The legacy of Clausewitz's thought has been ambivalent to say the least: at one extreme is the Clausewitz who argued for the thorough integration of war into the political realm, who advocated a rational approach to warfare, and who sought to civilize (or at least to restrain) its tendency to veer into barbarity and chaos. At the other extreme is the Machiavellian or Hobbesian Clausewitz, who viewed human nature as deeply disposed toward violence and violent acquisition, and who coldly advocated the use of violence by the state—with moral limitations minimized—so as to allow for the most effective discharge of force. The one Clausewitz sought to elevate war to the level of politics, diplomacy, and negotiation; the other sought to draw politics down to the brutal and pitiless world of war. Indeed, Clausewitz's famous dictum that "war is merely a continuation of politics through other means" admits to this ambiguity—a fact that allows for particular schools of thought and even governments to appropriate this dictum in order to lend legitimacy to their own policies. Likewise, it has been a con-

venient point of reference for critics of Clausewitz. Clearly then, this dictum is not a formula by which one can orient oneself in the study of Clausewitz's thought.

In *Das Raetsel Clausewitz*, Andreas Herberg-Rothe approaches the study of Clausewitz by confronting such ambiguities directly and by tracing them back to a more basic level. In my estimation, he has been largely successful in this task, and *Das Raetsel Clausewitz* is deserving of praise on a number of grounds: it relates significant episodes in Clausewitz's personal history and professional experience during the Napoleonic wars. Moreover, it provides in-depth conceptual analysis of key concepts and formulations from Clausewitz's thought and methodology—such as "the dual-nature of war" ("die doppelte Art des Krieges"), "the reciprocal tendencies to the extreme" ("die Wechselwirkungen zum Aeussersten"), and "the primacy of politics" ("der Primat der Politik"). This analysis allows for a more nuanced and complete exposition of Clausewitz's thought as a whole, particularly in regard to how his famous dictum is to be understood. Furthermore, the book integrates

extensive discussions of secondary literature on Clausewitz as well as an interesting discussion of the application and viability of Clausewitz's doctrines to modern warfare.

To do justice to *Das Raetsel Clausewitz* would require the same perspicuous and detailed grasp of the literature that is evidenced in the work itself.[1] Here I shall limit myself to a discussion of Herberg-Rothe's conceptual analysis of Clausewitz's thought and the basic points of tension therein, which I take to be the heart of the book. Clausewitz's classic treatise, *Vom Kriege*, aims to specify the nature of war, its chief purposes and occasions, its characteristic properties, and its causes and effects. Yet even apart from its complexity, this task is more elusive than one might initially suppose. As Herberg-Rothe emphasizes, Clausewitz held that war was a "true chameleon," whose properties and internal laws seem to vary from nation to nation and age to age. War is deeply embedded in the social and political world in which it occurs, and more broadly in the web of human purposes, motivations, and perceptions of the world. Hence, a treatise that aims to formulate general principles about war would need to conduct its investigation of war in the abstract. As Herberg-Rothe points out, Clausewitz thought this abstract, or "geometrical," study of war could only be carried out at the expense of falsifying the phenomenon of war.

The concept of "the dual nature of war" is one of the fundamental principles Clausewitz employed to account for war's variable nature. The essence of war is violence and the application thereof; as such, war has no internal features that would serve to limit or moderate its exercise. Violence and its attendant states--fear, hatred, pride, the desire for domination and acquisition, and others--lead to their own increase and augmentation. Hence, considered in its essence, war constitutes a kind of positive feedback loop in which each opponent is required to use more and more force to counter and overcome the other. Theoret-

ically, this process continues to the point where hatred of the opponent and the will to annihilate him consume and replace the initial aims of the war. Violence comes to be exercised for the sake of violence, and war becomes its own purpose. Yet war considered in its pure state does not always, or even usually, correspond to the reality, which is refracted through the complex prism of human history, a society's political and economic organization, the limitations of a people's understanding of its time, and through the mechanisms of human nature, which allow us to calculate our self-interest and to modify our behavior accordingly. The essence of war, therefore, is an ideal type that corresponds to no real situation, but only indicates the basic potentials and tendencies in the nature of warfare--tendencies that can be suppressed, redirected, overcome, or otherwise modified within the scope of political life.

Herberg-Rothe devotes considerable space to an exposition of the principles by which Clausewitz illustrates the varying nature of warfare--the so-called "reciprocal tendencies to the extreme." These are the extreme employment of violence (*Aeusserste Anwendung der Gewalt*), the making defenseless of the opponent (*den Feind wehrlos zu machen*), and the extreme exertion of powers (*Aeusserste Anstrengung der Kraefte*)--all of which have as their goal the defeat of the enemy. Yet each of them, when employed fully and consistently for this goal, may result in the opposite effect, namely, the relative strengthening of the enemy and the reduced possibilities for defeating him. Herberg-Rothe gives many examples of how this transformation might occur. To take a simple case with regard to the first tendency: on the one hand, the extreme employment of violence may have the effect of rapidly destroying the enemy's capacity to wage war and to erode his confidence in his chances for success.

Thus, the application of this principle may have the effect of a relatively quick capitulation and cessation of hostilities. However, the same

strategy may lead the opponent to believe that his very survival is at stake and that no acceptable negotiation or settlement is possible. Also, the extreme use of violence may so outrage his sensibilities as to alter the very terms over which the war was initially conducted, and eliminate the chances for a reasonable outcome. Hence, the use of extreme violence in the pursuit of war aims leads to a limitation in the total amount of violence in one situation, and to increased violence and the unbounding of force, in another.

As I understand Herberg-Rothe's presentation of Clausewitz's thought, there is no science of war in the strict sense. Instead, what the dual-nature of war suggests, and the tendency toward extremes illustrates, is that the pure essence of war is modified through its appropriation by human agents in actual circumstances. Any purely theoretical understanding of war is a chimera that necessarily fails to capture the dynamics of war, since such a view cannot encompass the self-understanding and psychological dynamics of those who wage it. The reciprocal tendencies to the extreme are principles of Clausewitz's dialectical formulation of the nature of war, and they aim to elucidate the various preconditions and presuppositions of warfare, which ultimately lie in human nature, from within the scope of warfare itself.

The core of Herberg-Rothe's conceptual analysis of Clausewitz's thought is found in Chapter Two, "Gewalt, Furcht, Macht--Entgrenzung und Begrenzung des Kriegs." Of particular importance is the discussion beginning in Section D, Part A, "Begrenzung des Kriegs durch die zeitliche Dauer." Here Herberg-Rothe discusses the relationship between the pure and timeless essence of war (with its inherent tendency toward increased violence), and the external conditions (e.g. history, political structure, economic capacity, et al.) that are located within the dimension of time:

"[Die] Position [von Clausewitz] bedeutet, dass der Krieg zu einem Aeussersten fuehren

wuerde, wenn er nur abhaengig waere von seinen eigenen, immanenten Gesetzen. Demgegenueber ermaessigen die auesseren, gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen diese Tendenz zur Eskalation [...]. Die zeitliche Dimension ist das Bindeglied zwischen inneren Gesetzmassigkeiten und auesseren Gegebenheiten. Durch die Einfuehrung der zeitlichen Dimension verlaesst Clausewitz die reine, innere Betrachtung des Krieges und bringt ihn in Zusammenhang mit auesseren Bestimmungen. Als solche begreift er vor allem das fruehere Staatsleben und den zukuenftigen Zustand" (p. 65).

The true nature of war is therefore the interplay between the ideal, timeless essence, and the dimension of time in which all instances of war are enacted. It is within this interplay that the reciprocal tendencies to the extreme are formulated.

The remainder of Chapter Two and much of the rest of the book consists of an elaboration and application of Clausewitz's basic principles so understood. The implications of Herberg-Rothe's analysis require an expansive definition of politics as the entirety of social life and not narrowly construed as the particular policies of a particular government. Accordingly, Clausewitz's view recognizes war to be part of the fabric of human society. The question as to whether war will be waged is not a question for statecraft, but rather only the question as to when, why, and how best to prepare for it. Nevertheless, the essence of war is such that its tendency is always toward the fraying and rending of the social institutions that war ought to serve. Consequently, the "other means" clause of Clausewitz's dictum suggests that war cannot unproblematically be regarded as of a kind with the other instruments of policy. Yet statecraft can employ war for political ends and thereby effect a degree of reconciliation with the political realm.

The above account of Clausewitz's thought implies a distinction between the art of warfare

and statecraft, or alternatively, between the general and the statesman. This distinction directly bears upon Clausewitz's analysis of the goal (*Ziel*) of warfare, namely, the defeat of the enemy, and the purpose (*Zweck*) of warfare, broadly speaking, the cessation of hostilities and the attainment of the war objectives, the latter of which are political in nature. Clearly, the fact that *Ziel* and *Zweck* are not in principle identical effects the manner in which the war is prosecuted and how force is applied. In other words, the interplay of *Ziel* and *Zweck* determines the means (*Mittel*) of warfare. Thus, for example, the most efficient attainment of the *Ziel* is not necessarily the most salutary means of attaining the war's political *Zweck*. This in turn implies a point of tension between the statesman, who oversees the broad political aims of the war and who balances the relative benefits of attaining them against the costs of achieving those strategic aims for which the war leader is responsible.

Clausewitz's emphasis on strong and effective leadership in war--the will of the war leader that is able to overcome the obstacles to victory and push through the war aims--becomes somewhat problematic in the broader political context in which he situates his discussion of war. Herberg-Rothe's analysis therefore creates a conceptual space for a discussion of this distinction between the statesman and general, and indeed, my only criticism of *Das Raetsel Clausewitz* is that it does not discuss this problem at any length. The absence of this theme is all the more curious given Clausewitz's own teaching concerning the role of war in modern democratic societies in which the role of chief executive and war leader (and, more generally, between citizen and soldier) are less clearly defined as they were, for example, in medieval society. Yet all in all, *Das Raetsel Clausewitz* is an admirable and comprehensive treatment of Clausewitz's life and thought.

Note

[1]. For a chapter-by-chapter account of the content of the book, one can refer to Christian Mueller's review in HSK (June 2003). <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/id=1139&type=rezbuecher&sort=datum&order=down&search=herberg%2Drothe>

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