

CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

On War

To an Unpublished Manuscript on the Theory of War,
Written between 1816 and 1818

There is no need today to labor the point that a scientific approach does not consist solely, or even mainly, in a complete system and a comprehensive doctrine. In the formal sense the present work contains no such system; instead of a complete theory it offers only material for one.

Its scientific character consists in an attempt to investigate the essence of the phenomena of war and to indicate the links between these phenomena and the nature of their component parts. No logical conclusion has been avoided; but whenever the thread became too thin I have preferred to break it off and go back to the relevant phenomena of experience. Just as some plants bear fruit only if they don't shoot up too high, so in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned and the plant kept close to its proper soil—experience.

It would obviously be a mistake to determine the form of an ear of wheat by analyzing the chemical elements of its kernel, since all one needs to do is to go to a wheat field to see the grown ears. Analysis and observation, theory and experience must never disdain or exclude each other; on the contrary, they support each other. The propositions of this book therefore, like short spans of an arch, base their axioms on the secure foundation either of experience or the nature of war as such, and are thus adequately buttressed.¹

Perhaps it would not be impossible to write a systematic theory of war, full of intelligence and substance; but the theories we presently possess are very different. Quite apart from their unscientific spirit, they try so hard to make their systems coherent and complete that they are stuffed with commonplaces, truisms, and nonsense of every kind. An accurate impression of their character can be gained by reading Lichtenberg's "Extract from a Fire Regulation":

"If a house is on fire, one must above all seek to save the right wall of the house on the left, and on the other hand the left wall of the house on the right. For if, for example, one were to try and protect the left wall of the house on the left, one must remember that the right wall of the house is on the right of its left wall, and thus, since the fire is also to the right of this wall and of the right wall (for we have assumed that the house is on

¹ That this is not the case with many military writers, particularly those who have tried to deal with war scientifically, is shown by the many instances when the pros and cons of their reasoning dispose of one another so completely that, unlike the two lions in the fable, not even their tails are left. Clausewitz, hereafter cited Cl.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

the left of the fire) the right wall is closer to the fire than the left, and the right wall of the house could burn down if it were not protected before the fire would reach the left, protected wall; consequently something could burn down that was not protected, and sooner than something else, even if this something else was also unprotected; consequently the latter must be left alone and the former must be protected. To fix the point firmly in mind, one need only remember: if the house is to the right of the fire, it is the left wall that matters; and if the house is on the left, it is the right wall."

The author does not want to put off the intelligent reader with such trite wisdom, or spoil the taste of the little good he has to offer by watering it down. Years of thinking about war, much association with able men who knew war, and a good deal of personal experience with it, have left him with certain ideas and convictions, and these he has preferred to present in compressed form, like small nuggets of pure metal. That is how the chapters of this book took shape, only tentatively linked on the surface, but I hope not without internal consistency. Perhaps a greater mind will soon appear to replace these individual nuggets with a single whole, cast of solid metal, free from all impurity.

On the Genesis of his Early Manuscript on the Theory of War, Written around 1818¹

The statements set down here deal with what in my opinion are the major elements of strategy. I regarded them as early drafts, and had more or less reached the point of fusing them into a single work.

These drafts did not follow any preliminary plan. My original intention was to set down my conclusions on the principal elements of this topic in short, precise, compact statements, without concern for system or formal connection. The manner in which Montesquieu dealt with his subject was vaguely in my mind. I thought that such concise, aphoristic chapters, which at the outset I simply wanted to call kernels, would attract the intelligent reader by what they suggested as much as by what they expressed; in other words, I had an intelligent reader in mind, who was already familiar with the subject. But my nature, which always drives me to develop and systematize, at last asserted itself here as well. From the studies I wrote on various topics in order to gain a clear and complete understanding of them, I managed for a time to lift only the most important conclusions and thus concentrate their essence in smaller compass. But eventually my tendency completely ran away with me; I elaborated as much as I could, and of course now had in mind a reader who was not yet acquainted with the subject.

The more I wrote and surrendered to the spirit of analysis, the more I reverted to a systematic approach, and so one chapter after another was added.

In the end I intended to revise it all again, strengthen the causal connections in the earlier essays, perhaps in the later ones draw together several analyses into a single conclusion, and thus produce a reasonable whole, which would form a small volume in octavo. But here too, I wanted at all costs to avoid every commonplace, everything obvious that has been stated a hundred times and is generally believed. It was my ambition to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject.

¹ See the Preface by Marie von Clausewitz on p. 66 below. Editors, hereafter cited Eds.

By Marie von Clausewitz to the Posthumous Edition of Her Husband's Works, Including *On War*

Readers will be rightly surprised that a woman should dare to write a preface for such a work as this. My friends will need no explanation; but I hope that a simple account of the circumstances that caused me to take this step will remove any impression of presumptuousness in the minds of those who do not know me.

The work which these lines precede occupied my inexpressively beloved husband almost completely for the last twelve years of his life. His fatherland and I unfortunately lost him far too early. To complete his work was his dearest wish, but it was not his intention to communicate it to the world during his lifetime. When I would try to dissuade him from this decision, he often responded, half jokingly, but perhaps also with a presentiment of his early death: "You shall publish it." These words (which in happier days often caused me tears, even though I scarcely took them seriously) oblige me in the view of my friends to introduce the posthumous works of my beloved husband with a few lines. Even though readers may have differing opinions on this point, they will surely not misinterpret the emotion that has caused me to overcome the timidity which makes it so difficult for a woman to appear before the reading public even in the most subordinate manner.

It goes without saying that I have no intention whatever of regarding myself as the true editor of a work that is far beyond my intellectual horizon. Only as a sympathetic companion do I want to help its entry into the world. I may claim this role since I was granted a similar function in the creation and development of the work. Those who knew of our happy marriage and knew that we shared *everything*, not only joy and pain but also every occupation, every concern of daily life, will realize that a task of this kind could not occupy my beloved husband without at the same time becoming thoroughly familiar to me. For the same reason no one can testify as well as I to the energy and love with which he dedicated himself to the task, the hopes he associated with it, and the manner and time of its creation. From early youth his richly endowed mind had felt the need for light and truth, and while he was broadly educated, his reflections were directed primarily toward military affairs, which are of such great importance to the well-being of nations and which constituted his profession. Scharnhorst first showed him the right course; his appointment as teacher at the General War College, as well as the simultaneous honor of being chosen to introduce His

Royal Highness the Crown Prince to the study of war, gave him additional reasons for directing his research and efforts toward these matters, as well as to set down his findings in writing. An essay with which he concluded the instruction of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince in 1812 already contains the seeds of his later works. But it was not until 1816, in Coblenz, that he again took up his scholarly work and began to gather the fruit that had ripened in the course of his rich experiences during four significant years of warfare. To begin with he developed his views in brief essays only loosely connected with each other. The following undated note, which was among his papers, seems to belong to that early stage: [See "Author's Comment," p. 63 above].

In Coblenz, where he had many duties, he could devote only a few hours now and then to his private studies. Not until 1818 when he was appointed Director of the General War College in Berlin did he acquire enough time to expand his work, and further enrich it with the historical interpretation of the more recent wars. This new leisure also reconciled him to his assignment, which in other respects could not quite satisfy him, since under the present arrangements of the college its educational program is not the Director's responsibility but is guided by a separate commission of studies. Free as he was of any petty vanity, of restless egotism and ambition, he nevertheless felt the need to be truly useful, and not let his God-given abilities go to waste. In his professional life he did not occupy a position that could satisfy this need, and he had little hope that he would ever reach such a position. Consequently, all his efforts were directed toward the realm of scientific understanding, and the benefits that he hoped would result from his work became his purpose in life. If in spite of this he was ever more determined not to have his work published until after his death, it must be the best proof that no vain desire for praise and recognition, no trace of egotistic motive, mingled with this noble urge for great and lasting influence.

He continued to work intensively until the spring of 1830, when he was transferred to the artillery. His energies were now taken up for a different purpose, and to such an extent that at least for the moment he had to renounce all literary work. He arranged his papers, sealed and labeled the individual packages, and sadly bade farewell to an activity that had come to mean so much to him. In August of that year he was transferred to Breslau, where he was assigned to head the 2d Artillery Inspection; but already in December he was recalled to Berlin and appointed chief of staff to Field Marshal Count Gneisenau (for the duration of the latter's command [in the East]). In March 1831 he accompanied his admired commander-in-chief to Posen. When he returned to Breslau in November, having suffered the most painful loss [in Gneisenau's death], he was cheered by the hope of resuming his work, and possibly completing it in the course of the winter. God decided otherwise. He returned to Breslau on 7 November, on the sixteenth he died, and the packages that his hand had sealed were not opened until after his death!

PREFACE

These literary remains are published in the following volumes, exactly as they were found, without one word being added or deleted. Nevertheless their publication called for a good deal of work, arranging of material, and consultation, and I am profoundly grateful to several loyal friends for their assistance in these tasks. Above all I must name Major O'Etzel, who was kind enough to read the proofs and to draw the maps that will accompany the historical sections of the edition. I also take the liberty of mentioning my beloved brother, my support in times of trial, who rendered so many different services in preparing the manuscripts for publication. Among others, in the course of careful checking and sorting the material he found the beginnings of the revision that my beloved husband mentions as a future project in the *Note of 1827*, printed below. The revisions have been inserted in those parts of Book I for which they were intended (they did not go further).

I want to thank many other friends for their advice and for the sympathy and affection they have shown me; though I cannot name them all, they will surely not doubt my warmest gratitude. This gratitude is the greater since I am firmly convinced that everything they have done was done not only for me but also for the friend whom God took from them so prematurely.

For twenty-one years I was profoundly happy at the side of *such* a man. Treasured memories, hopes, the rich inheritance of sympathy and friendship that I owe to the beloved departed, and the elevating sense that his rare distinction is so generally and nobly recognized sustain this happiness despite my irreplaceable loss.

The trust that led a noble prince and princess to call me to their side is a new favor for which I thank God.¹ It has given me a new and valued task, to which I dedicate myself gladly. May this task be blessed, and may the cherished little prince, who is presently entrusted to my care, someday read this book, and be inspired by it to deeds similar to the deeds of his glorious ancestors!

Written in the Marble Palace at Potsdam, 30 June 1832.

MARIE VON CLAUSEWITZ
Born Countess Brühl

First Lady in Waiting
of Her Royal Highness
Princess Wilhelm

¹ Marie von Clausewitz had been appointed Governess of Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, the later Emperor Frederick III. Eds.

Two Notes by the Author on His Plans for Revising *On War*

NOTE OF 10 JULY 1827

I regard the first six books, which are already in a clean copy, merely as a rather formless mass that must be thoroughly reworked once more. The revision will bring out the two types of war with greater clarity at every point. All ideas will then become plainer, their general trend will be more clearly marked, their application shown in greater detail.

War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy*—to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations. Transitions from one type to the other will of course recur in my treatment; but the fact that the aims of the two types are quite different must be clear at all times, and their points of irreconcilability brought out.

This distinction between the two kinds of war is a matter of actual fact. But no less practical is the importance of another point that must be made absolutely clear, namely that *war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means*. If this is firmly kept in mind throughout it will greatly facilitate the study of the subject and the whole will be easier to analyze. Although the main application of this point will not be made until Book Eight, it must be developed in Book One and will play its part in the revision of the first six books. That revision will also rid the first six books of a good deal of superfluous material, fill in various gaps, large and small, and make a number of generalities more precise in thought and form.

Book Seven, "On Attack" (various chapters of which are already in rough draft) should be regarded as the counterpart of Book Six, "On Defense," and is the next to be revised in accordance with the clear insights indicated above. Thereafter it will need no further revision; indeed, it will then provide a standard for revising the first six books.

Book Eight, "War-Plans," will deal with the organization of a war as a whole. Several chapters of it have already been drafted, but they must not in any sense be taken as being in final form. They are really no more than a rough working over of the raw material, done with the idea that the labor itself would show what the real problems were. That in fact is what happened, and when I have finished Book Seven I shall go on at once and work

out Book Eight in full. My main concern will be to apply the two principles mentioned above, with the idea of refining and simplifying everything. In Book Eight I also hope to iron out a good many kinks in the minds of strategists and statesmen and at all events to show what the whole thing is about and what the real problems are that have to be taken into account in actual warfare.

If the working out of Book Eight results in clearing my own mind and in really establishing the main features of war it will be all the easier for me to apply the same criteria to the first six books and make those features evident throughout them. Only when I have reached that point, therefore, shall I take the revision of the first six books in hand.

If an early death should terminate my work, what I have written so far would, of course only deserve to be called a shapeless mass of ideas. Being liable to endless misinterpretation it would be the target of much half-baked criticism, for in matters of this kind everyone feels he is justified in writing and publishing the first thing that comes into his head when he picks up a pen, and thinks his own ideas as axiomatic as the fact that two and two make four. If critics would go to the trouble of thinking about the subject for years on end and testing each conclusion against the actual history of war, as I have done, they would undoubtedly be more careful of what they said.

Nonetheless, I believe an unprejudiced reader in search of truth and understanding will recognize the fact that the first six books, for all their imperfection of form, contain the fruit of years of reflection on war and diligent study of it. He may even find they contain the basic ideas that might bring about a revolution in the theory of war.

UNFINISHED NOTE, PRESUMABLY WRITTEN IN 1830

The manuscript on the conduct of major operations that will be found after my death can, in its present state, be regarded as nothing but a collection of materials from which a theory of war was to have been distilled. I am still dissatisfied with most of it, and can call Book Six only a sketch. I intended to rewrite it entirely and to try and find a solution along other lines.

Nevertheless I believe the main ideas which will be seen to govern this material are the right ones, looked at in the light of actual warfare. They are the outcome of wide-ranging study: I have thoroughly checked them against real life and have constantly kept in mind the lessons derived from my experience and from association with distinguished soldiers.

Book Seven, which I have sketched in outline, was meant to deal with "Attack," and Book Eight with "War-Plans," in which I intended to concern myself particularly with war in its political and human aspects.

The first chapter of Book One alone I regard as finished. It will at least serve the whole by indicating the direction I meant to follow everywhere.

The theory of major operations (strategy, as it is called) presents extraordinary difficulties, and it is fair to say that very few people have clear ideas about its details—that is, ideas which logically derive from basic necessities.

Most men merely act on instinct, and the amount of success they achieve depends on the amount of talent they were born with.

All great commanders have acted on instinct, and the fact that their instinct was always sound is partly the measure of their innate greatness and genius. So far as action is concerned this will always be the case and nothing more is needed. Yet when it is not a question of acting oneself but of persuading others in discussion, the need is for clear ideas and the ability to show their connection with each other. So few people have yet acquired the necessary skill at this that most discussions are a futile bandying of words; either they leave each man sticking to his own ideas or they end with everyone agreeing, for the sake of agreement, on a compromise with nothing to be said for it.

Clear ideas on these matters do, therefore, have some practical value. The human mind, moreover, has a universal thirst for clarity, and longs to feel itself part of an orderly scheme of things.

It is a very difficult task to construct a scientific theory for the art of war, and so many attempts have failed that most people say it is impossible, since it deals with matters that no permanent law can provide for. One would agree, and abandon the attempt, were it not for the obvious fact that a whole range of propositions can be demonstrated without difficulty: that defense is the stronger form of fighting with the negative purpose, attack the weaker form with the positive purpose; that major successes help bring about minor ones, so that strategic results can be traced back to certain turning-points; that a demonstration is a weaker use of force than a real attack, and that it must therefore be clearly justified; that victory consists not only in the occupation of the battlefield, but in the destruction of the enemy's physical and psychic forces, which is usually not attained until the enemy is pursued after a victorious battle; that success is always greatest at the point where the victory was gained, and that consequently changing from one line of operations, one direction, to another can at best be regarded as a necessary evil; that a turning movement can only be justified by general superiority or by having better lines of communication or retreat than the enemy's; that flank-positions are governed by the same consideration; that every attack loses impetus as it progresses.