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On War



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

"On War" is essential reading for the professional military and for historians, and is of great value to those with an interest in public policy. That said, it is not easy to read. There are three primary reasons for this: First, it is unfinished. The first chapter ("book" as Clausewitz called it) is sharp, well-organized and focused, other chapters are so-so, and still others are almost formless collections of notes. Second, Clausewitz is thinking philosophically. Most people, including many or most in his target audience, are unaccustomed to thinking this way, and find it difficult to re-orient themselves. Third, parts of it are firmly locked in a particular time and place. The reader must work to determine what (if any) lessons in those parts are of enduring value and must understand references that, however clear they would have been to his contemporaries, are today obscure. So, given all of the above, it is fair for the reader to ask why he should bother. The reason is the power of Clausewitz's answers to: (1) What is the nature of war itself? (2) What is war's relation to the larger world in which it exists? (3) How can success in war be achieved? Clausewitz's answer to question (1) is that war in itself is a duel on a large scale, which unless acted on from the outside, tends towards the maximum possible amount of violence. This discussion of "pure war" has probably been responsible for more mis-interpretations of Clausewitz than anything else he wrote. He is writing philosophically - trying to understand the nature of the thing, and some readers mis-read him as writing prescriptively - that because "pure war" (or "ideal war") tends towards maximum violence, that those conducting war should employ maximum violence. Clausewitz's answer to question (2) is

one of the major reasons why "pure war" doesn't, can't, and shouldn't exist in the real world. First, real war occurs over time - not as a single event but as a series of events. This provides the opportunity for other forces to act upon it. The most important outside force acting upon it is political - war it is only a means - and the end is the political purposes which the war serves. The means cannot and must not trump the end. This is his famous dictum "War is a continuation of policy by other means". The level of effort is conditioned by the end which the war serves as well as all the other ends the state is pursuing which may or may not be compatible with the war. It is in his answer to (3), how success in war can be achieved, that Clausewitz is at his most period-bound. He draws heavily from examples that would have been as familiar to his contemporaries as the Gulf War is to us, but time has rendered them often obscure. Further, many of his recommendations are completely tied to how war was conducted on land in the early 19th century. Those who say that they got little out of Clausewitz are often referring to this subject area.* There is quite a bit of value here, but it is obtained at effort - the reader must back up to the principals that govern Clausewitz's thinking, and re-apply them to the current technical means. Because of this, there is the irony that Clausewitz would have contributed much more here if he had written much less. Of course, he might have done so if he had finished his manuscript, but on this we can only guess. It is in the sum of (1), (2) and (3) that the value of Clausewitz is felt. The reader who makes the effort will find that he has acquired a systematic approach for thinking about war, a unified framework that includes the public policy perspective of when, whether, and how to employ it, as well as the military perspective of how to fight it.---* For at least topic (3), ideally the modern reader should have read at least short military histories of the Seven Years War (in Europe - not North America) as well as the Napoleonic Wars, as these two conflicts dominate Clausewitz's references. What you want to know is the names of the major battles, the sides, and the outcomes. Maps are invaluable. Having a somewhat more in-depth reference handy can also be beneficial, though not necessary. If I had to recommend in-depth references, I would suggest, for the Napoleonic Wars, David Chandler's "The Campaigns of Napoleon" or Esposito and Elting's "A Military History and Atlas of the Napoleonic Wars". Both are readily available and well worth having. For the Seven Years War, I don't know of anything that is good and in-print, although Christopher Duffy's "The Military Life of Frederick the Great" is just what you want if you can find a copy.

This is not an easy book to understand. It takes sustained attention, several readings of the most important parts, guidance from supplementary articles, time and interest. After the required investment, the diligent reader will come to understand Clausewitz's system and the remarkable

way that it still aids in understanding the phenomenon of war. Readers who know of what I speak will agree that the results of the recent NATO war against Serbia over Kosovo can be explained very accurately in Clausewitzian terms. Much has been made of the fact that Clausewitz died before he could complete the work. We will never know what added insights the Prussian philosopher may have been able to come up with or the additional nuances that he may have added to the framework that he had established. While true, this attitude detracts from what he was able to accomplish. The only finished portion of the book, Part 1 of Book 1 is also the most important. The rest of Book 1, Book 2, Book 3 and Book 8 (the last) are in Bernard Brodie's words, "pure gold". The other books have relevant information for our times too, but one must shift through much which belongs to the past. Clausewitz's theory of war considered war to be "a remarkable trinity" of rational action (policy), irrational action (passion) and the play of chance (friction versus genius). These three points act as poles above which "theory" itself is suspended like a magnet. Alan D. Beyerchen has pointed out that Clausewitz was talking about a non-linear system in that the course the magnet will take as it hovers above and in and out of the three fields of attraction produces an irreproducible trajectory highly sensitive to the initial conditions which set it in motion. In addition we have other important concepts such as the dual nature of war, the importance and uses of theory, friction, war's psychological element, tactical and strategic centers of gravity, and of course the primacy of policy over purely military concerns in strategic planning. All of these are still of interest today. Not bad for a work that was published initially in 1832! One additional note. I recommend the Everyman's Library Edition of On War. First it is the Michael Howard / Peter Paret translation which is the best in English. Second it contains four interesting and enlightening articles by Howard, Paret and Bernard Brodie and last it is a hard cover book printed and bound in Germany and of excellent quality.

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