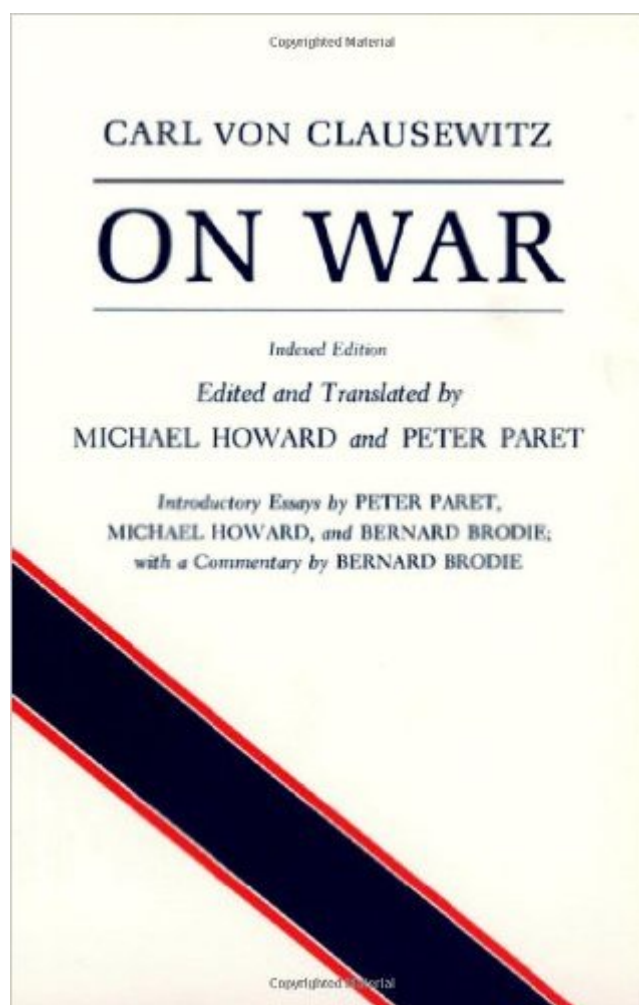


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On War, Indexed Edition



Synopsis

On War is the most significant attempt in Western history to understand war, both in its internal dynamics and as an instrument of policy. Since the work's first appearance in 1832, it has been read throughout the world, and has stimulated generations of soldiers, statesmen, and intellectuals.

Book Information

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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.

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.

Clausewitz's *ON WAR* is certainly the greatest exploration of the subject, but we are often misled by sloppy or hostile summaries--especially those by British military historians, who have evolved a truly sophisticated culture of misrepresenting it. E.g., Clausewitz supposedly preaches "total war." In fact, that phrase appears only twice in the book, once while discussing the "total war area," i.e., the geographic theater of war, and once noting that "total war, the pure element of enmity unleashed," would be "pointless and devoid of sense." Most such misconceptions would be cleared up if writers would bother to read past the abstract first half of the first chapter to see what Clausewitz, an immensely experienced practical soldier, really thought. And forget the absurd distinctions between Jomini's "chivalrous" wars and Clausewitz's alleged war on civilians--the two men experienced and described exactly the same wars. Likewise, to say that Asian warfare differs in some fundamental way from Western war, or from war in general, is nonsense, as is the idea that Sun Tzu--whose all-knowing general controls events far more than either Clausewitz or historical experience would suggest is possible--somehow represents a "decentralized" approach. Sun Tzu is extremely

valuable, but he and Clausewitz are best understood together. Read Michael Handel on that. There are several English translations of ON WAR, in many editions, and these vary greatly in value. 's listings often confuse the different versions, so be careful. The version edited by biologist/musician Anatol Rapoport is particularly worthless. His lengthy, lunatic, 1968 introduction is actually about Kissinger, not Clausewitz.

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