On War Study Guide

On War by Carl von Clausewitz

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BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

On War (Vom Kriege) is one of the great works of military strategy and theory in history, standing among such great works as The Art of War. On War was written by the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz following the Napoleonic Wars. Clausewitz had been stunned by how totally Napoleon had dominated Europe and how he had appeared to change the nature of modern warfare, creating a larger scale war than Europe had arguably ever seen. Thus, one purpose of On War is to break war down into its constituent elements so that a comprehensive theory of war can be developed.

Clausewitz wrote during the age of the great imperial Nation-States in the West, prior to widespread democratic government and following the medieval period. Thus On War concerns military conflicts between states. It does not speak to the conflicts of civil wars, rebellion, secession or terrorism. Clausewitz focuses on the classical issues of field combat, army formation, the relationship between battles and wars, the character of military leaders and troops and so on.

On War contains several crucial ideas. From the outset, Clausewitz emphasizes the contrast between the physical and moral aspects of war. The physical aspects are all those elements that are comprised of matter. The moral aspects of war concern the attitudes, character traits and spirit of all human beings involved in a conflict, leaders, soldiers and the state. This distinction is vital for Clausewitz because he argues that moral forces have been ignored by military theorists when they often matter far more than physical forces. Clausewitz therefore focuses on moral forces in great detail, such as the concept of 'boldness' which is more appropriate for soldiers than generals, and the idea of military 'genius' which is required only of commanders.

Clausewitz is well-known for arguing that war is not an end in itself but an extension of politics to open violence as an attempt to force one's will upon the opponent. The reason for this can be understood in light of Clausewitz's emphasis on the moral. For the physical is in the service of the intentional aims and energy of peoples, leaders and armies. If one side can break the will of the other, it can quickly win any war. Despite this, physical force will eventually overwhelm any moral power at a large enough magnitude. Strength of numbers, for instance, can overwhelm any other feature of war in importance if the disproportion between two sides is large enough.

This study guide covers Volume I of Vom Kriege, which contains Books I-IV (there are eight altogether). Book I, On the Nature of War, is the most theoretical, laying out major definitions, technical terms and theoretical concepts. Book II, On the Theory of War, explains how to theorize about war. Book III, Of Strategy In General, explains the idea of strategy, that is, the aim of war as a whole. Book IV, The Combat, explains the structure of the battle, that is, the concrete events that compose a war and that are the key elements of strategy.

Book I, On the Nature of War, Chapters I-II

Book I, On the Nature of War, Chapters I-II Summary and Analysis

Book I discusses the nature of war. Clausewitz places it first because one must always consider the whole whenever one analyzes any of the parts of a thing. War is defined as the event that occurs when at least two sides strive by physical force to compel the other to submit to his will. Violence is the means, submission is the final object and the disarmament of the enemy is the immediate object. For now Clausewitz will focus on disarmament.

In war, force rules; he who has more force and uses it has the advantage. Men are led to war through natural hostility and hostile intentions. War is not based in governments of civilized nations acting intelligently. War is an act of force and belongs to the associated feelings. Intelligence is only restraint. War has three reciprocal actions, or actions that lead to escalation. The first is the use of force, as force incentivizes the other side to use more and vice versa. The second reciprocal action is the attempt to disarm and the third is that attempt to impose one's will. Thus, to win, one side must use the sum of the best available means (force and disarmament) and the strength of his will. These reciprocal actions are only restrained by the other needs of statecraft and are never wholly isolated from other events.

War does not consist in a single blow of power; otherwise it would lead to extreme and instantaneous escalation. Instead, the opponent holds back his power for the future. Further, the result of a war is never absolute. What is absolute in the abstract is tempered by the probabilities of real life. And since in real life there are political aims, war has a political object. The political object is the original motive for the state to make war and will determine the military's goal and how much effort will be behind it.

Initially, suspending war seems mysterious. Clausewitz can only discern a single reason: a force suspends fighting in order to wait for a more favorable moment of action. The continuance of action will lead to a climax. But this climax is rarely annihilation as often both sides have a common interest in survival and cooperation. Further it is usually assumed that commanders have the same goal: to destroy one another. Yet this is not always so. Offense and defense are not the same thing; they differ in force and undermine this 'polarity' of aim. The lack of completely opposing aims can explain a suspension of fighting. Suspension also occurs through imperfect knowledge of circumstances. Frequent suspensions make war a greater matter of real world probabilities. The matter of probabilities makes war a game subjectively-as it appears to us-and objectively. This matter of risk often makes war attractive to the human. Nonetheless, war is the most serious of subjects.

War is not only a political act but an instrument of politics, continuing policy by other means. Again, the political act in question explains the diversity in types of wars. Nonetheless, they are all political acts, which help us to understand all of military history. The elements of war are three: the violence of its elements (which concerns the people), the play of probability and chance (which concerns the general and the army) and its nature as a political instrument (which concerns the government). The theory of war must track all three elements.

Chapter II discusses the ends and means in war. The ends of war are three: (i) to destroy the opponent's military power, (ii) to conquer the country and (iii) to subdue its will. Disarming the enemy is a helpful means towards these ends but is not always required if the will is broken. And when neither side can be disarmed, peace often arises. Political views and aims often change during war as well.

Success involves changing the probabilities of success, looking for advantages and minimizing disadvantages. Often this involves attacking and undermining enterprises only indirectly connected with the army. One side can raise the cost of success through imposing wear and tear on the other's forces and the loss of provinces through invasion. A people may be exhausted by war which can undermine their will. But when a people defends itself, it must simply successfully resist the onslaught, which is often easier.

The only means to any of these major or minor ends is the 'Fight' which manifests itself in many ways in every combination of forces. The Fight is aimed against an organized whole, at which combat is aimed. Thus every part of War is related to combat. The soldier must always be prepared to fight at the right time and place. Soldiers require organization into subordinating and ruling parts. All combat takes place on the assumption that the fight has better odds for success than not fighting. Any enemy can defeat the other through victory on the field. Thus, destroying the armed forces of an enemy is always the surest means to victory, though this need not always be done physically. A great power in an enemy is to choose how the other side will exert its power by choosing the type, time and place of battle. One side must always preserve its forces along with destroying the others. Most often preservation and destruction can only be decided on the bloody field of battle.

Book I, On the Nature of War, Chapters III-VIII

Book I, On the Nature of War, Chapters III-VIII Summary and Analysis

Chapter III describes the idea of military genius. Its essence is the harmonious association of particular powers that Clausewitz analyzes in detail. A high level of civilization is often needed to generate military genius. More than anything, however, courage is required, as is resolution, which is courage extended over many acts. Courage can be both physical and mental and both parts are necessary. Resolution is quite hard to maintain given the danger, physical effort and chance and uncertainty in war. It requires energy, strength of mind and good character. Intelligence cannot be underestimated and it must be intelligence that can function under stressful conditions. Genius requires the presence of sufficient motive to win. Thus military genius is a combination of intelligence and emotion. Presence of mind is another key quality, as war requires a keen degree of awareness. Energy of purpose is required to inspire one's men when their energies are low. Many noble feelings can drive the military genius, such as a desire for honor or love of country. Firmness is required, as is self-control or self-command. Stubbornness, however, is a perversion of resolution, which causes a military leader to make poor decisions.

The military genius should naturally lead and the personal qualities of his subordinates need not and perhaps should not be the same. The soldier should be plain, honest and not full of ideas. The Second in Command must exercise a more limited sphere of independent thought than the general but independent thought is absolutely required for the latter.

Chapter IV discusses the danger of war. There is first the fear and risk of death. It is painful to see others dead and wounded. The danger in war is part of its 'friction'. Chapter V covers bodily exertion in war, which requires enduring frost, heat, thirst, hunger and fatigue, both physically and psychologically. Leaders must exert themselves to act spirited to excite their men. Chapter VI explains the function of information. Information includes all the knowledge of the enemy and his territory and it is upon information that all actions are based. We must consider the nature of this information, about how trustworthy it is and how much it changes. Often information is contradictory and so men must make probabilistic judgments. One should tend to lend more credibility to the bad than to the good but the army must not let this break their spirit cannot break their spirit.

Chapter VII explains the idea of 'friction' in war, which one cannot be familiar with outside of experience. In war, much is simple though difficulties are tied even to the simplest things. These challenges produce a friction between ease and exertion. Friction distinguishes real war from war on paper, as friction consists in the myriad petty

obstacles that one encounters in practice, such as unexpected weather or unexplored territory.

Chapter VIII concludes Book I by reviewing it. The elements of war meet under a certain atmosphere that includes danger, exertion, information and friction, all of which are impediments. Together they comprise the idea of a general sort of friction. Habit is required to avoid all these sources of friction. Habits of body help with exertion, habits of mind fight off danger and habits of judgment fight off challenges in information and specific, petty friction. Thus experienced army fares better than the inexperienced and troops always require training. In times of peace, soldiers can be invited to serve in foreign armies.

Book II, On the Theory of War, Chapters I-III

Book II, On the Theory of War, Chapters I-III Summary and Analysis

Book II explains the theory of war; Chapter I begins by separating the branches of the theory. The first part of the theory of war is the theory of fighting. Another branch is the theory of military technology and inventions. But there are two general branches, of which fighting is one, the other contains everything that exists because of war, such as creating troops, levying them, arming, equipping and exercising them. The former is called the 'conduct of war' and contains the formation and conduct of fighting and their combination. The combination is called strategy, the individual parts include tactics. Thus, tactics focus on battles and strategy on war generally, the use of battles for war. We must also distinguish between the use and maintenance of military force. Fighting includes marches, camps and cantonments, whereas to maintenance belongs subsistence, care of the sick, and supply and repair of arms and equipment. Strategy is composed of the when, where and with what forces a battle will be fought, which includes the march and encampment, all of which require planning. Sometimes these elements must be combined. Many small details can make enormous differences, such as the distance of hospitals, the shape of trenches, etc. All these separations are required in order to be clear and avoid vagueness.

Chapter II continues to discuss the theory of war. The first conception of the "Art of War" covers only how the army is to be prepared. War begins with a siege of some kind and then tactics are applied. The theory of war was once considered a hidden topic but public discussion was required as wars became more critical over time, so many have tried to create a positive theory though they have often focused on material objects, such as superiority of numbers, victualling of troops, one's base and interior lines. The traditional theories exclude the element of genius because they focus only on the material; theory also becomes difficult with the introduction of morality but these elements cannot be excluded because morality is tied to intelligence and influences how people act. Moral forces, for instance, often determine how hostile an army will be, courage will impact an opponent's perception of danger and its extent, to give a few examples. Moral emotions help to understand the character of another opponent's leaders and how they will react.

Creating a positive theory of war faces severe challenges due to the variability of wars. But many concrete details can be theorized about though as theory moves towards the mental, towards leadership and morality, all must be left to intuition, judgment and genius. Theory must derive directly from observation and experience. Theory will help to illuminate the unity of observation and experience. Theory also considers the nature of ends and means in tactics and strategies and the circumstances associated with the

means, such as locality, time of day, weather, and so on. Means in strategy determine means in tactics. Strategy comes only from experience. Often knowledge must be simplified to generate a theory and this explains why generals are often not men of learning. Knowledge must be tailored in the education of a general. The knowledge is simple but not easy. The Commander of the Army must know the higher affairs of State, about its tendencies, interests, and the character of its leaders. He need not understand how technology works, however. Ultimately, however, science grounds out in art.

In Chapter III the art or science of war are be covered. Clausewitz distinguishes art and science as the distinction between knowledge and power when doing and knowledge and power when knowing. However, perception and action and judgment are not easily separated. War is not only confined to battle but is associated with social life generally.

Book II, On the Theory of War, Chapters IV-VI

Book II, On the Theory of War, Chapters IV-VI Summary and Analysis

Chapter IV explains the conception of method that Clausewitz employs. To develop a method of war we must utilize the concept of a law, which is a motive of action that is a command or prohibition. A Principle has less formal definite meaning and shares the spirit and sense of law. When a principle is subjective it is called a maxim. Rules have more freedom of application than law. There are also directions and modes of action. Methodicism is what is determined by method instead of principles and prescriptions. It is founded on average probabilities of cases. The complex phenomena of war are more appropriately understood by method rather than law, such as a generalization to not use cavalry against unbroken infantry. Method also brings theory into war as it is an art of application. Method becomes indispensable the further down rank it is applied. But the opposite holds for higher ranks, where method may constrain the leaders in various respects that are counterproductive.

Chapter V covers criticism. Theory influences life more through criticism than doctrine. So Clausewitz will now fix the point of view for criticism. Criticism first involves the investigation and determining of doubtful facts in history. Second, it involves the tracing of effects to causes, which is the real central element. Finally, the means employed must be tested. The second is also the most difficult given the many causes involves. It is also difficult to discern in testing whether one has correctly connected cause to effect as data is often ambiguous. But sound theory is required for criticism. It is utopian to want a theory that would apply in every circumstance. Instead, criticism settles for near enough. Nonetheless, in War everything is connected as a whole and causes can reverberate through the entire system. The difficulty often continues as we abstract to higher points of view that encompass for phenomena. Clausewitz also maintains that talent is an indispensable part of the art of criticism. We must often compare means across many circumstances; we need to do so in particular when we doubt the effectiveness of our means. We must look for generalizations that apply across many circumstances. However, criticism must also be tailored to the perspective of the person being criticized, though not too much. Criticism also need not imply that the critic would not make the same mistake.

Criticism should be used to apply to the action of war, which is in fact the deliberation that precedes the action in War. The language used in criticism must be similar to that which is used in deliberation. Criticism must educate those who receive it. They must also not apply one-sided systems of formal laws but be flexible. They must avoid technical terms that confuse. One must also be careful not to misuse historical examples and of great learning.

In Chapter VI, Clausewitz discusses examples, which are the best proof within empirical science. They apply more to the Art of War than anything else, despite the fact that theoretical writers use them little. This is foolish. For example, the effects of gunpowder can only be learned through experience and theories of war without empirical backing have no firm ground on which to stand. Examples can also be used in several ways, first as explanations of ideas, then as application of ideas, and finally to prove ideas. It is not hard to make mistakes in each case. Sometimes examples have been used in favor of contradictory circumstances. Nonetheless, teaching the Art of War through examples could be an entire course of military training all on its own, it is so important. Those who wish to lead armies must always to his best to use examples properly.

Book III, Of Strategy In General, Chapters I-VI

Book III, Of Strategy In General, Chapters I-VI Summary and Analysis

For Clausewitz, strategy is the use of battle to achieve the aims of war. It forms the plan of war. It would be silly to say that moral and mental elements can be ignored in strategy but to some extent they are only relevant at the more abstract levels. Strategy is simple but hard to commit to, as the decision of strategy is of great import. Choosing a strategy requires special skills, such as having genius. Execution of strategy is also often difficult as it can be slowed down by the little problems that come up, in say, a march. Strategy is hard to implement for this reason, again, due to 'friction'.

Clausewitz next makes some generalizations about strategy. First, possible combats, depending on their possible results, should be seen as real ones and taken into account. The strategy contains the ultimate end but the combats compose it through their immediate ends. Strategy is absolutely required to make sense of the order and point of battles. Thinking only of combat is severely debilitating.

Chapter II explains the elements of strategy, which are moral, physical, mathematical, geographical and statistical. These elements are hard to treat separately but Clausewitz proceeds to do so nonetheless out of necessity.

Chapter III concerns the moral forces. Morality forms the spirit that fills the whole war and determines the Will that puts the army in motion. It is hard to say anything systematic about them but they are deeply relevant. Even bringing them to mind is better than ignoring them. Chapter IV concerns the chief moral powers, which are the talents of the commander, the military virtue of the army and its national feeling. None must be undervalued. National Spirit is most important in mountain warfare when soldiers are alone, expert training is more important in the open country and the general is most important in hilly country.

Chapter V focuses on the military virtue of an army, which goes beyond bravery, though bravery is part of it. Military virtue involves the ability to make war as a whole, such as in holding to its formation under fire and that is not upset by false fear. Military virtue does for the parts what the military genius of the commander does for the while. The natural qualities of a warlike people are bravery, aptitude, powers of endurance and enthusiasm. When an army lacks these qualities, the operations of war must be simplified as much as possible. The military virtue of an army is among the most important in war. It can only be produces through either through experience and victory or intensity of fighting.

Chapter VI focuses on boldness, which is the noblest of virtues and gives the weapon its power. It is a kind of creative power that powers through hesitation. In a large group, boldness is a force. The higher the rank the more boldness needs a reflective mind. But the bold soldier must be completely obedient. Boldness becomes rarer as one rises in rank. Often boldness arises from the forces of necessity. It is a property of feeling that must often be restrained. The good general is bold through his boldness is restrained.

Book III, Of Strategy in General, Chapters VII-XVIII

Book III, Of Strategy in General, Chapters VII-XVIII Summary and Analysis

The next twelve chapters run in fairly brief succession through the various elements of strategy. Chapter VII concerns perseverance and its necessity in long combat. Chapter VIII covers superiority of numbers. What counts as superiority of numbers is determined by the strategy one picks. Of the more material factors, superiority of numbers is of great importance. In the end, when one's superiority of numbers is great enough, it overwhelms all other factors. One must enter the field with an army as strong as possible. Without superiority of numbers, one must increase the relative strength of one's force per soldier often by changing the setting of battle in time and space. Chapter IX covers the surprise, which is part of gaining relatively superiority. It is also important for its moral effects. It requires both secrecy and rapidity and is easier to pull off in home territory and in a short time frame. There is sometimes surprise in strategy though this is quite difficult and requires great preparation.

Chapter X covers stratagems which are concealed intentions hidden in straightforward negotiation. It is quite close to deceit, letting the opponent commit errors of understanding. But deception often requires costs to pull off, such as placing one's troops in a misleading area. Chapter XI argues that it is crucial to always assemble one's forces very strong in space. Troops must be kept concentrated. However, it is crucial to employ them effectively in time, not using too many up front, which is defended in Chapter XII. Fatigue and exertion are crucial factors in determining the time of assemblage. But these factors must be overcome for it is impossible to be too strong at a decisive point. One must always continuously develop new forces to have a strategic reserve.

Chapter XIII explains that the army reserve both serves to prolong and newer combat and to use in unforeseen events. The troops must also be ready for the moment of 'supreme decision', the decision upon which the war turns. Chapter XIV explains that one must be careful to divide one's forces carefully, that is to be economical and to always use them all in one form or another. Chapter XV explains the geometrical element in War, such as the elements of flank and rear. Geometry is determined almost wholly by the details of time and space.

Chapter XVI explains when warfare should be suspended. Typically suspension is sought by one side when it is best for him and this is rarely when it is best for the other side. Suspension also seems to be something of a contradiction as both sides are still trying to win. In fact, standing still and doing nothing is the standard action in war, not battle, so suspension is just an elongation of the most common activity in war. Suspension can be caused by a want of resolution, by the imperfection of human

judgment and by the greater strength of defensive form. Chapter XVII explains the character of modern war, which was created by the luck and boldness of Napoleon. Now wars involve the whole organization of the people; war has become more totalizing. Chapter XVIII covers tension and rest. Clausewitz thinks there is a certain degree of balance between tension and rest. One can have too much of eight. Too much tension produces fatigue and too much rest produces boredom. A commander must find the right degree of alternation. Often tension and rest between the two sides are in equilibrium.

Book IV, The Combat, Chapters I-VIII

Book IV, The Combat, Chapters I-VIII Summary and Analysis

In Chapter I, Clausewitz proposes to discuss combat and battle tactics. Chapter II explains the character of the modern battle. In a modern battle, soldiers organize in large masses arranged together and behind one another, with a small portion deployed at each one time and engaging in several hours of fire-combat lasting until the night. Chapter III discusses the combat in general; it is the key warlike activity and everything else is subservient to it. Combat is fighting that aims at the destruction or conquest of the enemy in the form of the armed force standing against us. Again, strategies are composed of each unit of combat. Overcoming the enemy means destroying his military force, though it may not always appear that way as it rarely happens. Instead, perhaps it is best to speak of tactical success. We seek to do so simply but often careful planning is required, though experience always throws obstacles in the way.

Chapter IV continues discussion of the combat. Ultimately the destruction of the enemy army is always the chief object of war, but what does this mean? It means a substantial diminution relative to our available force. He then cannot continue combat and will retire after resistance. Often this does not occur, as both sides are significantly diminished. Physical losses and mental and moral losses occur. Ground can be lost, as can fresh reserves. Combats are always the bloody and destructive measuring of physical and moral force. Whoever ends up with the most force wins. The loss of moral force usually ends a battle. The moral effect of victory has a great power for the winning army and increases energy at a progressive ratio. Prisoners and captured guns aid in this increase in moral force. Once the enemy loses sufficient moral and physical force he usually surrenders.

Chapter V describes the signification of combat. It is identifiable when forces amass and clash together in a large shock. It comes in two forms, offensive and defensive. Both aim at the destruction of the enemy's force but offense involves conquest and defense involves defense. Both can be absolute or relative, i.e. lasting only for a brief time. Chapter VI covers the duration of combat. For the winner a battle cannot end soon enough and for the loser it cannot last long enough. Success often lies in weathering the duration of a battle. Duration is made possible by strength, relation of types of arms and position.

Chapter VII explains how battles are decided as they are not decided in a single moment though moments of crisis make a large difference. A loss is a graduate falling of a scale. Partial combats combine into a single force. The moment of decision often comes when the possession of the object of combat is lost, when ground is lost and when the conqueror stops feeling that he is disintegrating. Flank and rear attacks often have more favorable effects on the consequences of a decision. The moral effect of surprise helps as well. A lost battle can become the foundation of a greater victory.

Moments of decision also depend on how far disparate forces of the army are away from one another.

Chapter VIII explains the mutual understanding between two sides in a battle. Battles can only take place by mutual consequent. Sometimes a commander offers battle to another and the latter declines. In one way a battle is a kind of duel. However, in circumstances of modern warfare, often a general with a large enough mass can force battle in any event, such as by surrounding or surprising an enemy.

Book IV, The Combat, Chapters IX-XIV

Book IV, The Combat, Chapters IX-XIV Summary and Analysis

Chapter IX discusses the battle, which is a conflict of the main body aiming to reach decisive victory. The details that a battle determines are the manner of its decision, on the effect of the victory contains in it, and the value which theory is to assign to it as a means to an end. A precision moment of decision in battle is when a formation is broken. The conquest of an essential line of territory is also a turning point. Generals must then make a decision about how to change course in part based on their pure moral power. For instance, when a force is impenetrable by volleys it is usually best to retreat. This can occur in the night as night ends battles, typically.

Chapter X examines the effects of victory, which includes the effect upon the generals and their armies, the effect upon the relevant states and the effects the victory has on the campaign. The magnitude of victory can build upon itself in battle after battle. Grand battles have particularly important effects. Today the moral effect of victory is greater than it once was as many battles are grand. The imagination is often overpowered by various effects, such as the loss of men and ground, the jumbling of troops, the retreat and many other things. Feelings are often akin to panic at this time. Armies in such a mental state are weaker. Even a moderate loss can do so. The nation often loses hope after a loss as well. And future battle is directed against these psychological weaknesses.

Chapter XI discusses the use of the battle. Again, to review, the battle aims at the destruction of the enemy's military force. Only great battles produce great results and the results are greatest when combats form a battle. Only in the great battle does the head general command in person. The destruction of enemy forces should be sought mostly through great battles so as to push closer to annihilation. The battle is war concentrated. In grand battles, at one moment in space and time is the outcome determined (and sometimes of a whole war). For this reason, often statesmen and generals avoid great battles. Experience, however, supports great battles. Generals who claim to want to conquer without bloodshed are fooling themselves. The effectiveness of victory depends on the tactical form adopted as the order of battle, the nature of the country, the relative proportions of the three arms and the relative strength of the two armies. The height of spiritual ability includes the provision of means for the event, the setting of time and place, the direction of troops and the use made of the success.

Chapter XII explains how to use strategy to make the best effect of victory. What use can be made will depend on the battle's culminating point. Pursuing the beaten army often relies on any moment the other army gives ups combat. The pursuit varies depending on whether cavalry is deployed or whether an entire advance-guard including cavalry engages in pursuit or whether the entire army pursues to the best of its

ability. Night almost always ends it. Fighting in the night abandons everything to chance. If the conqueror can continue pursuit into the night, the effect of victory is greatly increased. The energy expended in the first pursuit is the most important. Afterwards one must distinguish the simple pursuit, the hard pursuit and the parallel march aimed at an interception. The arrangement of marches varies depending on the march.

Chapter XIII discusses retreat after a lost battle. When an army is broken, the moral matters more than the physical. A second battle at this time might lead to utter defeat and perhaps destruction, which is certain. Retreat must be pursued often slowly and carefully so as to prevent the utter loss of moral force and make the pursuit more difficult. Quitting a dangerous position must avoid all trivial matters, such as wastes of time. A strong rear-guard is always required and led by the bravest general. Dividing for a retreat is not always advisable.

Chapter XIV discusses night fighting. Night fighting is always a particularly intense form of surprise. While it may appear advantageous it is very risky. It is best pursued when one knows the position and arrangement of the defender. It is important to remember that the defender has more knowledge of the home ground. The larger the body attacked the more difficult the assault is and night fighting can never be aimed at an entire force but in attacking a small fraction of the enemy. Night fighting is well motivated when one is aware of a high degree of careless and audacity (though it is usually backed by high moral force), panic, cutting through an enemy's superior force, and when one's forces are so much smaller that only daring actions can prevail. Night fighting must also be concluded by daylight.

Characters

Carl Von Clausewitz

Clausewitz was born in 1780 in Prussia. His father had been a lieutenant in the Prussian Army and Clausewitz followed him at age twelve. By the time of his death in 1831, he would be a Major-General. Clausewitz served in a wide range of conflicts, from the Rhine Campaigns, the Siege of Mainz and many battles and campaigns in the Napoleonic Wars. He was instrumental in forming the coalition between Prussia, Russia and England that stopped Napoleon. In 1818 Clausewitz was made Major-General and made the director of the Prussian military academy, a position he held until 1830. Clausewitz had started working on Vom Kriege/On War in 1816 and did not finish when he died of cholera in 1831. His wife, Marie von Clausewitz, puts together his writings edited them and then published them in 1832.

Clausewitz was familiar with the German philosophy of his day, in particular the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant. This led him to make Vom Kriege a very philosophical text full of conceptual definitions and refinements of those definitions along with the desire, much like Kant, of breaking a subject down into all of its constituent elements and diagramming the relations between them. Thus Clausewitz produces a particular systematic philosophical method into Western military theory though he relied on his experiences, writings about Napoleon and historical sources. On War is still read today in military academies.

Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon was the military and political leader of France in the early 19th century, taing power following the political instability brought on the by French Revolution. By 1804 Napoleon was Emperor of the French Empire and then began the Napoleonic Wars which drew in every major power. Through the use of the modern draft and the combination of modern military tactics, Napoleon used an army of hundreds of thousands to wage a systematic war of a size and scale that Europe had not known, that is, in terms of the size of forces and battles united under single banners. While Napoleon was a dictator, he had many admirers not only for his Napoleonic Code (admired by legal theorists) his uprooting of local tyrannical aristocrats (admired by many 19th century revolutionaries) and his military strategies (still admired by military theorists).

On War is primarily a work of social theory and social philosophy. It does not truly have 'characters' to speak of. But no one features more prominently in the book than Napoleon. In fact, it was Napoleon's fantastic streak of victories that probably motivated Clausewitz to write the book in the first place. On War's primary examples are drawn from Clausewitz's experiences in the Napoleonic Wars and from studying writings about

Napoleon. Thus many of Napoleon's successes and failures are used to illustrate Clausewitz's main theses and flesh out his military concepts.

King Frederick II of Prussia

The King of Prussia from 1740 to 1786 from the Hohenzollern dynasty. He became known as Frederick the Great. A believer in enlightened despotism, Frederick self-consciously reorganized Prussian society to create modern bureaucratic and military institutions that have their influences in the present day. Frederick was a major influence on Clausewitz and his victories and mistakes are analyzed more than anyone but Napoleon.

The Prince of Hohenlohe

Carl Ludwig, the Prince of Hohenlohe-Langenburg from 1789-1825 is used as an example of military tactics in the book.

Prince Eugene of Wurtemburg

Friderich Eugen of Wurttemberg was a military leader who Clausewitz analyzes in On War.

General Scharnhorst

Gerhard von Scharnhorst was a Prussian General during the Napoleonic Wars; Clausewitz believed that he had written the greatest book of military strategy.

Field-Marshal Daun

Count Leopold Joseph von Daun was an Austrian field marshal who was admired for his careful leadership during the War of the Austrian Succession and is analyzed in On War.

General Laudon

Baron Ernst Gideon von Laudon was also an Austrian field marshal and one of the most talented military leaders of the 18th century and another figure to which Clausewitz's attention is drawn.

The Commander

A general archetype, the commander must, above all, possess military genius, a somewhat ineffable quality and a compound of important character traits.

The Opponent

The opponent is the other side in battle. Clausewitz speaks of the opponent more than any other general class. The object of war is, of course, to defeat the opponent.

The Soldier

Good soldiers must possess military virtue like commanders but of a different sort, being able to be bold but without the need to think creatively.

Objects/Places

Prussia

The major German state that was a world power in the 18th and 19th centuries. Clausewitz was Prussian.

France

The nation which Napoleon led to many fantastic victories in the early 19th century.

The Battlefield

For Clausewitz, it is on the battlefield where every aspect of war is ultimately determined.

Friction

The many obstacles that pop up when applying theory to practice.

Strategy

The means to achieving the aim of war as a whole.

Tactics

The means to achieving victory in battle.

Military Genius

The set of character traits that make up the character of a great military commander.

Moral Powers

The spirit and energy of a leader, soldier or army which determines most of its effectiveness. Strong spirit and moral consciousness makes an army far more effective. With a broken spirit, no army can fight for long.

Battle

The actual, concrete acts of violence that comprise war.

War

The attempt to impose one's will on an opponent by force.

Theory

Military theory is necessary to structure and order experience and draw general lessons from it.

Practice

Nonetheless, the only way that theory can have any content is with the use of many examples. And when theory is applied to practice, friction will inevitably result.

Themes

Moral vs. Physical Force

One of Clausewitz's innovations in On War is to distinguish sharply between moral and physical forces and emphasize the importance of the moral over the physical. Physical forces include all the standard elements in a theory of war, including strength of numbers, position, type and number of arms, territory and timing. But moral forces include factors like moral, military virtue, military genius and so on. While troops certainly need physical nourishment they also need, for instance, a stable balance between tension and rest. Tension and rest illustrates a particularly important feature of the moral force, as it explains how soldiers often can have their spirits broken through excessive stress through constant fighting. On the other hand, too much rest produces its own sort of fatigue through boredom and loss of focus.

Moral forces are much harder to theorize about, in Clausewitz's opinion, as they are more variable and seem to admit of fewer generalizations and principles than physical elements do. The most ineffable of moral forces are the qualities involved in military genius, which includes a certain degree of resolution and creativity that cannot be manufactured. In many cases, moral force is all that keeps an enemy from surrender and all that keeps one's fighting force going forward. Since the purpose of war is to change an enemy's will as one likes, the moral force is absolutely crucial as often a battle can be won simply by demoralizing the enemy, thereby breaking its will.

The Relationship between Theory and Practice

Today many would regard the idea of military theory as running the risk of abstracting too far from historical reality, claiming that theories do not always map onto practice. In Clausewitz's day, during the fall of the philosophical idea of rationalism, he faced the opposite problem. Often military theorists were too abstract, in Clausewitz's view, reasoning about military conflict from pure rational principle. Clausewitz was one of the first to emphasize, following Kant, that principles are empty of content outside of empirical experience and so principles must always have application to the world; otherwise they can tell us nothing about how practice actually works. Theory needs practice. In fact, Clausewitz emphasizes that a good military theory could derive principles almost entirely from experience.

In contrast, practice needs theory. The use of examples is a fine art and requires a great power of judgment. Principles help to organize experience into parts and whole allowing for generalizations that can yield useful recommendations, rules of thumb and principles. Of course, Clausewitz emphasizes, theories always have exceptions and military genius is what is needed to detect those exceptions and respond accordingly. Further, when theory meets practice it also generates 'friction', Clausewitz's technical term for all the factors from which theory abstracts which can make application

unpredictable and challenging. Friction can arise from any number of petty circumstances, from weather changes to unforeseen fatigue. Thus both theory and practice require one another but also require practical wisdom on behalf of the military practitioner to fit them together in a useful way.

Realism

On War is intended to disassemble the practice of war into its constituent elements so that war can be better understood and better practiced. It is both a practical and philosophical work. But one thing it is not is unrealistic or under any illusions about the mechanics and dangers of war. First, Clausewitz is well-known for his claim that war is simply politics carried out by other means. Politics is essentially the attempt to either form a common will or to impose one's will one other. In any case, it involves someone changing the state of someone else's will. War is nothing more, for Clausewitz, save that it uses violence. War is not glorified in Clausewitz; instead, it is simply laid bare.

Conversely, Clausewitz does not focus on the horrors of war just the way that people react to it. He talks about morale, fatigue on the battlefield, how to take advantage of or survive a moral force or spirit that leads to retreat and so on. He makes clear that certain virtues are required to fight a war well and that the side that lacks it tends to lose. He understands that the goals of war vary to some extent, from minor aims to the complete annihilation of the other side. Thus, On War has an undercurrent of stark, unemotional realism that dwells neither on the horrors or glories of war.

Style

Perspective

Carl Phillip Gottlieb von Clausewitz (1780-1831) was a Prussian Major-General and Military Theorist from a middle-class family. As a young man he served as a field soldier and staff officer and fought in a number of different conflicts, including many in the Napoleonic Wars. By achieving the rank of Major-General at age 38, Clausewitz was able to marry into the higher nobility and become a member of the intellectual elite in Berlin at a time when the Prussian Empire was the center of Western philosophical and social thought (Kant and Hegel were major figures around this time). Clausewitz's famous work On War (Vom Kriege) was written at this time and is a model of both social theory and military analysis which has been translated into every major language. His fame is due to the influence of his work which may be the most important work ever written on warfare.

Clausewitz's perspective is that of an early 19th century Prussian military official and a student of the philosophical and social thought of his day. In Germany in the late 18th and early 19th century, systematic philosophy, the sort of philosophy which builds systems of thought with a vast array of conceptual components, was in vogue following the works of Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel. The systems are meant to give a complete picture of their subject matter. Clausewitz follows their example, conceiving of the project of military theory as reducing the elements of war to all of its smallest parts and then describing the relations between them. He also has theories of causation in war and a conception of the relationship between principles and reality that have philosophical subtleties specific to his day. His thought is also conditioned by his conception of war as essentially a conflict between nation-states, an idea which has somewhat broken down with the rise of terrorism and anti-imperial resistance movements.

Tone

The tone of On War/Vom Kriege is best understood as an outcropping of the sort of theoretical work written in Berlin in the early 19th century. Systematic philosophy was taken to be stern and majestic undertaking that requires keen but bold thinking. After all, one is trying to describe reality at its deepest level, or, as some philosophers say, to cut the world at its joints. This aim is applied in microcosm by Clausewitz to On War in order to cut the concept of War 'at its joints', as it were.

Thus, Clausewitz writes in a systematic fashion, dividing his ideas up into discrete units and leaving the reader to comprehend the whole based on its parts and their relations. The tone therefore is not quite scientific but it displays a scientific rigor. The tone is neither literary, as it utterly eschews the flowery. The most narrative of the sections occur when Clausewitz describes as historical battle in order to illustrate his ideas. But,

by and large, there are not rhetorical flourishes and many terms of art meant to refine an idea to a technical concept that can be rigorously applied.

It would be false to describe the tone as boring, but it is dry, unemotional, straightforward, and matter-of-fact. The stern realism of the work may make it seem cold, but it is no such thing. It is a systematic analysis of a concept and a guide as to how to apply that concept to empirical reality.

Structure

Vom Kriege is a long work composed of eight books, each of which possesses a number of chapters. The first volume, which is the concern of the present guide, contains the first four books, On the Nature of War, On the Theory of War, Of Strategy in General, and The Combat, in respective order.

Books I and II are the most well-known from the first volume. Book I contains eight chapters: What is War?, Ends and Means in War, The Genius of War, Of Danger in War, Of Bodily Exertion in War, Information in War, Friction in War and Concluding Remarks. The purpose of the first book is to decompose the nature of war into a range of conceptual components to give an adequate analysis of the conception. Many of Clausewitz's conceptual components are novel in military theory, such as the theory of genius and of friction.

Book II contains six chapters: Branches of the Art of War, On the Theory of War, Art or Science of War, Methodicism, Criticism, On Examples. Book II is meant to outline the branches of the theory of war and to describe the relation between theory and practice. The most novel feature of this book is Clausewitz's push towards a more empiricist perspective than previous military theorists who composed military theory, in his opinion, on the basis of reason alone.

Book III contains eighteen chapters: Strategy, Elements of Strategy, Moral Forces, The Chief Moral Powers, Military Virtue of an Army, Boldness, Perseverance, Superiority of Numbers, The Surprise, Stratagem, Assembly of Forces in Space, Assembly of Forces in Time, Strategic Reserve, Economy of Forces, Geometrical Element, On the Suspension of the Act in War, On the Character of Modern War and Tension and Rest. All of these chapters analyze and element of war, strategy. It also contains a crucial, novel element—the ideal of moral forces in war, which Clausewitz claims has been undertheorized.

Book IV contains fourteen chapters on the nature of combat: Introductory, Character of a Modern Battle, The Combat in General, The Combat in General (continuation), On the Signification of the Combat, Duration of Combat, Decision of the Combat, Mutual Understanding as to a Battle, The Battle, Effects of Victory, The Use of the Battle, Strategic Means of Utilizing Victory, Retreat After a Lost Battle and Night Fighting. Book IV is the decomposition of combat and tactics into their constituent element. Combats are the constituent elements of strategy.

Quotes

"War therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will." (Book I, Chapter I, 2)

"If we desire to defeat the enemy, we must proportion our efforts to his powers of resistance. This is expressed by the product of two factors which cannot be separated, namely, the sum of available means and the strength of the Will." (Book I, Chapter I, 5)

"War is the mere continuation of policy by other means." (Book I, Chapter I, 23)

"Now is there, then, no kind of oil which is capable of diminishing this friction? Only one, and that one is not always available at the will of the Commander or his Army. It is the habituation of an Army to War." (Book I, Chapter III, 81)

"The Art of War is therefore, in its proper sense, the art of making use of the given means in fighting, and we cannot give it a better name than the 'Conduct of War'. On the other hand, in a wider sense all activities which have their existence on account of War, therefore the whole creation of troops, that is levying them, arming, equipping and exercising them, belong to the Art of War." (Book II, Chapter I, 85)

"Tactics is the theory of the use of military forces in combat. Strategy is the theory of the use of combats for the object of war." (Book II, Chapter I, 86)

"The influence of theoretical principles upon real life is produced more through criticism than through doctrine." (Book II, Chapter IV, 123)

"An Army which looks upon all its toils as the means to victory, not as a curse which hovers over its standards, and which is always reminded of its duties and virtues by the short catechism of one idea, namely the honor of its arms; such an army is imbued with the true military spirit." (Book III, Chapter V, 182)

"For there is nothing in War which is of greater importance than obedience." (Book III, Chapter VI, 187)

"It is impossible to be too strong at the decisive point." (Book III, Chapter XII, 214)

"Combat means fighting, and in this the destruction or conquest of the enemy is the object, and the enemy, in the particular combat, is the armed force which stands opposed to us." (Book IV, Chapter III, 238)

"All War supposes human weakness, and against that it is directed." (Book IV, Chapter X, 283)

"The acme of strategic ability is displayed in the provision of means for this great event, in the skillful determination of place and time, and direction of troops, and it's the good use made of success." (Book IV, Chapter XI, 291)

Topics for Discussion

Why does Clausewitz believe that military theory is necessary?

What is Clausewitz's conception of friction? How does it connect theory and practice?

What are moral forces? How do they relate to physical forces? Why does Clausewitz think they are rarely theorized about?

What are the major elements of the theory and art of war? What is the distinction between the theory of war and the art of war for Clausewitz?

What are the most important elements of military strategy? Discuss five such examples.

What are the most important elements of an instance of combat? Discuss five such examples, include the moment of decision.

To what extent do you think Clausewitz's observations on war are relevant today? Can they be applied to military conflicts other than all-out wars between nation-states? If so, how? Be sure to discuss the case of terrorism.

Many have tried to apply Clausewitz's theory of war to other forms of competition, such as business. Do you think his principles can be so applied? If so, how?