

PREFACE

The Study of War

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Starting with Thucydides during the last decades of the fifth century B.C. and reaching all the way to the present, there have been many excellent military historians. Their contribution to our understanding of war is immense and growing still. Yet history and theory are not the same. History focuses on the specific, the non-repeatable, and the ephemeral. Its objective is to record what events took place, understand why they took place, and, perhaps where they may be leading. Theory, on which more later, seeks to understand patterns and, if possible, use them to draw generalisations that will be valid for more than one time and one place. It both describes and, at times, prescribes the nature of the subject matter; what its causes and purpose are; into what parts it should be divided; how it relates to all sorts of other things; and how to cope with it and manage it.

In almost every field of human thought and action, good philosophers abound. They examined their subjects, be they ethics, aesthetics, logic, or the existence of God; dissected them into their component parts; and re-assembled them, often in new and surprising ways that helped their readers gain understanding. Not seldom, they masticated them half to death. Yet in two and a half millennia there have only been two really important military theoreticians. All the rest, including some who were famous in their own time, have been more or less forgotten.

Names such as Frontinus (ca. 40–103 A.D.), Vegetius (first half of the fifth century A.D), the Emperor Maurice (539–602), Antoine-Henry Jomini (1779–1869), Basil Liddell Hart (1895–1970), and many others matter, if at all, only to specialists in the field. The same is only slightly less true of those who did their work in the post-1945 period. That even applies to Niccoló Machiavelli's *Arte de la guerra* (1521), which gave its title to a whole bevvv of other volumes in several languages. Yet now he

is remembered almost exclusively because of his political thought rather than for anything he said about war and armies.

The reasons why these and so many other theorists were forgotten are close at hand. War is a practical business above all. In this respect it has much in common with playing an instrument or conducting an orchestra. Those who wage war, do so in order to gain victory, not to come up with all sorts of abstract insights. In themselves, not even the best theories can save us from the enemy's sharp sword. This fact made most theorists, who were hoping to proffer practical advice to practically-minded commanders, focus on how to organise for war, wage war, fight in a war, and so on.

As they did so, however, they often overlooked the fact that war is forever changing and will continue to change. Many, including some of the greatest, were unable to rise above their own times and places. This made them go into the kind of detail that has long become irrelevant. Others, by seeking to be as up to date as they could, all but guaranteed that they would be out of date sooner rather than later. Never has the problem been more acute than during the last few decades. As change proceeded at a tumultuous pace, repeatedly it seemed to render everything that came before irrelevant.

To this rule there have only been two exceptions. The first was the Chinese commander and sage Sun Tzu (ca. 544–496 B.C); the second, the Prussian soldier-philosopher Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831). Over the centuries since they first entered the military stage both have had their exits and their entries. At times they were read, or were supposed to be read, by everybody with an interest in the subject. At others they were dismissed as too old, too limited, too philosophical, or all of these. Clausewitz in particular has been more often quoted than read, let alone studied, understood, and digested. Yet that does not change the fact that both authors stand head and shoulders above the rest. In one form or another they will endure as long as war itself does. If those who claim that the latter is in terminal decline are right, perhaps longer.

That is not to say that either volume is without problems—especially *On War* which, at the time of its author's death, was mostly a mass of confused and confusing papers. First, neither Sun Tzu nor Clausewitz has anything to say about either the causes of war or the purposes for which

it is fought. In the case of Sun Tzu, that is because he opens by saying that war is “a matter of vital importance of the state, the province of life or death, the road to survival or ruin. [Therefore] it is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.” From there, while not blaming it on anybody or anything, he proceeds straight to its preparation and conduct.

The case of Clausewitz is different. Famously, *On War* defines war as the continuation of politics by other means. What the objective of the politics might be is irrelevant. Orders are orders; the author never doubted that, once they have been issued, commanders and soldiers would swing into action. Clausewitz was a member of the Prussian Reform Movement of 1807–1813 whose goal was to close the gap between government and people. He was well aware of the role popular morale could play. But this awareness did not make its way into *On War*. Describing war as an instrument, the latter allowed little or no room for asking “why.” That question it explicitly leaves to “the philosophers.”

Second, neither Sun Tzu nor Clausewitz have much to say about the relationship between economics and war. Sun Tzu at any rate notes how enormously expensive waging war is. Clausewitz does not even do that; had he been asked why, no doubt he would have answered that economics, while undoubtedly very important, do not form part of war proper. Strictly speaking, he may well have been right. Still, so important are economics, “the dismal science,” to the conduct of war that leaving them out can only be called a grave shortcoming.

Third, both writers tend to take the point of view of those who launch and wage war at the top; the politician, the commander in chief, and his principal subordinates. The examples they use reflect that fact. So does their readership; one does not expect every Tom, Dick and Harry—nowadays, every Mary too—to concern him or herself with theory. *The Art of War*, like similar Chinese treatises, was never meant for publication. Instead it was kept secret in the archives where only a few people had access to it. Indeed it is probably no accident that the earliest known text was found in a royal grave dating from the second century B.C. *On War*, on its part, was initially sold by subscription among Prussian officers.

Proceeding from the top to the bottom as they do, both books probably make war, especially war as understood and experienced by the com-

mon soldier and by society at large, appear more rational and more subject to control than it really is. The problem is particularly acute with Sun Tzu. Like his rough contemporary Confucius, Sun Tzu tends to focus on the elite. He sees ordinary people as mere human material to be moulded, shaped and directed towards this or that objective. When he says that, on the battlefield, everything looks like confusion, he omits to add that, to countless combatants of all times and places, it *is* nothing but confusion. The possibility that combatants (and non-combatants) may have their own ideas and that these ideas may influence the conduct of war at all levels does not even occur to him.

Nor do the two theorists have much to say about the most important methods for coping with these problems, i.e. training, organisation, and leadership. In respect to organisation some of what they do say is badly dated; such as Clausewitz's reflections about the optimal number of army corps and the best way to coordinate infantry, cavalry and artillery. Yet it is only factors such as training, organisation, and leadership that turn a mere mob into an army and enable it to function.

Fourth, both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz come close to ignoring the implements with which war is fought, i.e. the field broadly known as military technology. Sun Tzu only has a few words to say about it. Clausewitz on his part does mention it, but only to add that it relates to war as the art of the swordsmith relates to fencing. Both authors knew very well that wars were fought with swords, spears, bows, muskets, cannon, and whatever. Both must also have understood that these and other weapons, as well as technology in general, play a cardinal role in shaping the way every war is waged and fought. Equally obvious, though, they did not see technology as a fundamental factor deserving profound consideration. This fact is surprising. Certainly the subject deserves some reflection and discussion at greater length.

Fifth, neither Sun Tzu nor Clausewitz has much to say about logistics and intelligence. Logistics, however, are the building blocks of war; without which no armed force can exist, let alone operate. To paraphrase the World War II British Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell (1883–1950), the combinations of strategy are, in the end, simple enough for any amateur to grasp. It is by looking after the logistics, defined as the practical

art of moving armies and keeping them supplied, that the professional proves himself. Looking at a globe, an armchair strategist may not find it too hard to decide where he or she wants to deploy one's carriers. But taking charge of loading a 90,000-ton vessel with all the tens of thousands of different items it must take aboard before leaving port certainly *is* hard.

As to intelligence, both authors, each in their own way, only refer to certain aspects of it. Sun Tzu focuses on the various kinds of spies a commander may use to obtain intelligence. However, he has almost nothing to say on the way it is or should be interpreted. Clausewitz discusses the nature of military intelligence and the role it plays in war. However, he has barely a word to say about the way it is obtained. Their discourses are valuable, but they stand in urgent need of being expanded and updated.

Sixth, neither has anything to say about war at sea. Possibly this fact reflects the fact that, at the times they wrote, neither China nor Prussia were maritime powers. Or else it is based on the way warfare used to be organised until World War II; a period when armies and navies were managed by separate offices or ministries. Yet war at sea, while probably not as old as war on land, has now been practiced for at least three millennia. Ancient Chinese and Egyptian reliefs show it. Starting with the Battle of Aegospotami in 405 BC, which led directly to the Athenian surrender to Sparta, and ending with the great battles in the Pacific in 1944–1945, on occasion it has been as decisive as any of its land-bound equivalents. But for their command of the sea, the British in 1982 would never have been able to reach, let alone recover, the Falkland Islands.

Other forms of war that, for obvious reasons, neither Sun Tzu nor Clausewitz addresses are air war, space war and cyberwar. And yet, and if only because budgets are going down, as of the opening years of the twenty-first century, no call is heard more often than the one for “jointness.” Thus a volume that does address these subjects, linking them both to ground warfare and to each other, is urgently needed.

Seventh, and again for obvious reasons, both authors have nothing to say about what, since 1945, has become by far the most important form of “war.” This refers to nuclear war which, though it has not yet taken place, casts a giant shadow over everything else. Whether space war, cyberwarfare, and a host of other kinds of war constantly being dreamt up by

defence officials, officers, and academics around the world are really as revolutionary as they claim to be is moot. What is not, or at any rate ought not to be moot, is that nuclear weapons caused the greatest revolution in military history, and perhaps not only military history, ever seen. Works that, whether because they were written earlier or through the authors' own fault pass over that fact, do so at their peril.

Eighth, neither has much to say about the law of war. In the case of Sun Tzu that may be because such a thing barely existed, or so scholars who have studied the matter claim; in that of Clausewitz, because he dismisses it in a sentence or two. He justifies himself by saying that the law in question hardly diminishes the elementary violence of war. As we shall see, the claim is understandable and, in some ways, quite correct. As we shall also see, this does not mean that law does not play a role in shaping war, as it does any other social phenomenon and can simply be ignored. Some would even say that, since 1945 or so, its importance has been growing – to the point that, in some cases, it threatens (or promises, depending on one's point of view) to choke war to death.

Ninth, neither is much interested in war between asymmetric belligerents. In this context the word “asymmetric” has two different meanings. First, it may mean war between communities, or organisations, each of which forms part of a different civilisation. In the case of Sun Tzu, this lack of interest rests on the fact that he lived, commanded and wrote (if he did) during the so-called Period of the Warring States (ca. 453–221 B.C). His career unfolded against the background of constant warfare among very similar polities in what the Chinese themselves used to call “all under heaven” (*Ti'an*). He may also have been too contemptuous of the “barbarians” to devote a special chapter to them. Clausewitz's focus on intra-civilizational war is brought out by his insistence that European armies were growing more and more alike so that quantity was becoming more important than quality. At the time he wrote, the military gap between Europe and the rest of the world was increasing day by day; and in any case Prussia was not a colonial power.

However, “asymmetric” may also have another meaning. It may refer to a situation where, instead of armies confronting one another, advancing against each other, fighting each other, etc., the belligerents on both

sides are of completely different kinds. Irregulars, broadly known as freedom fighters (partisans), insurgents, rebels, guerrillas, bandits, and, last but not least, terrorists, may face armies that are, initially at least, much stronger than them. Armies may face irregulars who, initially at least, are much weaker than them. Clausewitz in *On War* at any rate pays some attention to this problem. Sun Tzu does not.

None of the above should be construed as attacks on Sun Tzu or on Clausewitz. To seek to equal, let alone replace, their respective tomes would be presumptuous. The objective of this volume, standing as it does on the shoulders of these and other giants, sometimes even repeating what they said, is much more modest. It will try to reach beyond their limitations, both those that are self-imposed and those originating in the times and places in which they did their work; expand on themes which, for one reason or another, they neglected or left untouched; and bring their works up to date wherever doing so seems possible and worthwhile. All this, in the hope of coming up with a framework that will be as systematic, as comprehensive, and, yes, as elegant as possible.