



2010---022 [2010.06.01]

Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007. Pp. x + 22. ISBN 978---0---87113---956---6.

Review by John Shy, The University of Michigan (johnshy@umich.edu).

Books abound on Carl von Clausewitz (1780---1831) and his masterwork, *On War* (1832), and they keep coming. German scholars have labored to gather and publish every scrap of a large, scattered body of evidence, but rarely does a new scrap turn up. For years we have had a solid documentary basis for his work and thought, so almost all of the new work seeks to offer fresh perspectives on or critiques of Clausewitz and his many interpreters.

Hew Strachan, Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford University, has contributed a biographical study of Clausewitz's *On War* to the series "Books That Changed the World," one more volume in the spate of recent works on Clausewitz. At less than two hundred pages of text, it is based on close study of the very large but incomplete body of extant evidence in German, offering a provocative and original picture of the great book and its author.

In 1976, Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret published the definitive English translation of *On War*.^{1} Strachan admires their work, but takes issue with it in important ways. The nub of his critique concerns the degree to which Clausewitz changed his mind over two decades. Strachan believes that Howard and Paret, by the very consistency of their translation, have exaggerated the continuity of his thought, and that Paret as biographer has done the same, finding traces of every major idea in *On War* as early as Clausewitz's writings of 1806. Strachan instead emphasizes that the scope of Clausewitz's theoretical inquiry shifted with time from an overriding concern with the strategy of near-absolute war as waged by Napoleon to a broader search for a general theory of war. This search culminated late in the author's life with a unifying stress on policy, *Politik*, the guiding intention of war itself, whatever particular form the war might take, whether the limited warfare of the eighteenth century or wars of national resistance---the guerrilla war as waged in Spain and as explored for Prussia against France by the younger Clausewitz in a series of lectures in 1810 at the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* in Berlin.

In making his case for change, Strachan highlights the evolution of Clausewitz's thinking over many years of study and questions what he considers to be Howard and Paret's too rigid translation of certain key words---"Geist," "Ziel," "Zweck," and others---which have multiple meanings in English and are crucial to his own interpretation of Clausewitz's evolving thought. In other words, Strachan finds their translation to be insensitive to important nuances in the original German. Restated in the simplest language, he argues that young Clausewitz, himself a participant (and POW) in the catastrophic Prussian defeat at Jena in 1806, was understandably fixated on explaining the revolutionary phenomenon of Napoleonic warfare, but, in the ensuing decades of his short life, his thinking and ambition were tending toward a general theory of war itself. The shifts Strachan detects in the use of certain key terms provide our principal evidence for the progression of Clausewitz's thinking between 1806 and 1831. This reviewer's grasp of the German language is insufficient to judge the semantic argument, and most readers of Strachan and this review will be in the same boat. But Strachan's case for the evolving and expanding scope of Clausewitz's masterwork is certainly plausible, and one that Howard and Paret might even in principle be willing to accept.

Strachan also takes a side in an argument about the last years of Clausewitz's life, when he left the peace and security of the *Kriegsschule* to return to active duty. The argument hinges on an undated prefatory note that Clausewitz left with the manuscript of *On War*, which says in part: "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.... The first chapter of Book One alone I regard as finished."{2}

The note then describes Clausewitz's ideas for revision. Strachan claims this note must actually precede another prefatory note, dated 1827, because its list of planned revisions appears to have been completed, but Howard and Paret date it as "presumably written in 1830."{3} Their position rests on the words of Marie, Clausewitz's widow, who published his works posthumously and said the undated note appeared to be quite recent ("von sehr neuem Datum"). In her own preface to her husband's work, she placed it *after* the 1827 note. Why does this matter? Because Strachan and others insist that Clausewitz completed his planned revisions *before* 1830, and that, by his death in 1831, *On War* was very close to being what its author intended, a general theory of war. In my own effort to resolve this argument, I cannot ignore the evidence of Marie, who had been closely involved in his work, and I am also struck by the depressed and even defeated tone of the undated note, where he speaks of both the unsatisfactory nature of the work done so far and of his own death. Whatever the true date of the disputed note or the accuracy of Clausewitz's account of his theoretical work, the years after 1827 were richly productive: he wrote three major historical works---on the campaigns of 1796, 1799, and 1815---which ran to almost fifteen hundred printed pages. Whether in the same years he could have carried out a major revision of *On War* remains a question.

Candor in reviewing obliges me to say that both Howard and Paret are friends, Paret of very long standing. Howard is the eminent senior of the pair, and Strachan says of him, "Howard had fought with distinction in the Second World War" (1). Of Paret, Strachan says in the notes for further reading that his is "the best biography of Clausewitz in any language" (217). But let the record show that Paret served as an NCO in a battalion of the 1st U.S. Infantry (6th Division) in New Guinea and Luzon during World War II, so neither of the pair is a chairborne academic warrior. While Strachan appears to have an excellent command of German as well as of the German-language evidence, Paret was born in Berlin and left only when his Jewish mother and stepfather decided it was time to leave; Howard's mother was Austrian, but his first language is English.

The disagreement over continuity and change in Clausewitz's thinking is classic, and Strachan conducts his side of the argument seriously and generously. He agrees with Howard and Paret that translation necessarily entails interpretation, especially in the case of an author who devoted most of his life to the book in question and whose view of his intractable subject evolved as he wrote and revised. After making his own best case for change, Strachan concedes that "the assumption which guided Michael Howard and Peter Paret in their translation was well founded: Clausewitz's mind, and especially his philosophical method, provide enough underlying unity and continuity for it to be right to treat the text as a whole, and so to acknowledge that the sum is even greater than the parts" (105).

It is indeed difficult to imagine Howard and Paret a generation ago seeing the same shifts in language that Strachan now argues are present, then deciding to alter their translation to reflect that vision. They would have been injecting a questionable interpretation into a text scholars would depend upon for many years. Translation may be only an approximation, but we at least expect translators to be neutral as well as accurate.

1 Princeton: Princeton U Pr; rpt. NY: Knopf [Everyman's Library], 1993.

2 Page 79 in the Everyman Library edition (see note 1).

3 Ibid.