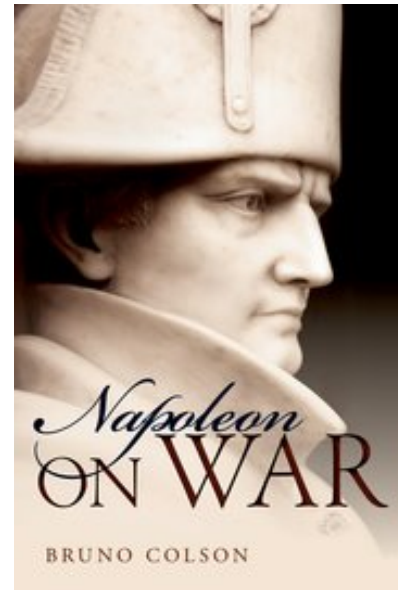


Bruno COLSON (ed.): *Napoleon: On War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, 496 pp. ISBN: 9780199685561.

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Fitting Napoleon's life into Clausewitz's mould

Searching for a work written by Napoleon, a man of speeches, proclamations, extensive correspondence, and dictated memoirs that synthesizes his ideas on a singular topic like war is comparable to the hunt pursued by his devotees for relics made from his hair; seekers find, at best, incomplete artefacts. Colson has impressively mined print and manuscript sources from Napoleon's canon of writing to reconstruct what could have been Napoleon's treatise on war, had he written one. Some of these manuscript materials have only recently been uncovered, making the work of value even to specialists. Napoleon's writings might be fragmented, but they were also bountiful, showing the ambition behind attempts to anthologize his statements.



Colson has chosen the methodic work, *Vom Kriege* (1832), by Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz as the model by which to dissect and reconstitute Napoleon's thoughts on war. This is not the first attempt to anthologize Napoleon's ideas by mirroring another famous military strategist—in 1999 Jay Luvaas referenced Sun Tzu in making his own anthology of Napoleonic quotes *Napoleon on the Art of War*.⁸¹⁶ Colson, however, has gone further than appropriating Clausewitz's title. Colson has mapped Napoleon's statements onto *Vom Kriege's* thematic chapter divisions, so that the subject of Clausewitz's Book I, Chapter I is mirrored by Colson's Book I, Chapter I, and so on, through Clausewitz's eight book structure. Additionally, at the end of each book, Colson provides summary statements regarding Napoleon's ideas on the covered subject with direct comparison to Clausewitz.

Napoleon is listed as the author of the French original, *De la guerre* (2011), where Colson is described as the work's presenter and annotator; in the English, Colson is the editor. If we read this as Colson's representational wishes, we may come to see that both *Vom Kriege* (1832) and *De la guerre* (2011)/*On War* (2015) are, albeit in quite different ways, posthumous publications. Clausewitz's book only saw print thanks to the tireless efforts of his wife, Marie; Napoleon's own ideas, too, required Colson as a proxy.⁸¹⁷ Both labours have provided meaningful contributions to military history.

⁸¹⁶ Jay LUVAAS: *Napoleon the Art of War*, New York, Free Press, 1999.

⁸¹⁷ Vanya EFTIMOVA BELLINGER: *Marie von Clausewitz*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Colson's decision to order Napoleon's thoughts through Clausewitz's pre-set thematic categories reads like a dialogue between Clausewitz and Napoleon. Clausewitz has posited his own ideas about 'Boldness', 'Fortresses', and 'Retreat', and Napoleon responds. It is an exercise in understanding Napoleon through Clausewitz. In this respect, Colson's style diverges substantially from traditional compendiums of a famous person's quotes, which might shape the themes through the anthologized author's own biography. Colson's project convincingly imparts the benefit of linking these historical figures.

Colson is the first to note that there are many requisite caveats to a project like this, and there is no point in belabouring them here as methodological weaknesses. His preface frankly addresses the limits of the near-impossible task of deducing a man's definitive position on a subject by mining a lifetime of words. As David Jordan has said, «impos[ing] coherence» on Napoleon's writing is more likely to reveal the gaps in his thinking than the connections.⁸¹⁸ Colson, while employing Clausewitz's coherent structure, has annotated and narrated inconsistencies, placing them front and centre. In some cases, Colson reveals that Napoleon's ideas have changed over time, in others Colson exposes how Napoleon's rhetorical flare may obfuscate his actual beliefs; this rhetorical study is a small, but important part of the work, providing an excellent starting ground for further work at the intersections of military and intellectual history.

Colson claims that his work intervenes on the mythology of Napoleon, and its structure suggests that a careful study of Napoleon's words and actions can be used to re-evaluate Napoleon's idolization.⁸¹⁹ The work emphasizes curation of primary sources over analysis, allowing Napoleon to speak for himself. For example, one reads several passages in which Napoleon refers to himself in third person before Colson contextualizes this as one of Napoleon's syntactic strategies in Book V, and, even then, studying such rhetoric exceeds the scope of the work.⁸²⁰ This means that the book often shows many times before telling, but also that a meticulous reader can observe Napoleon's repetition of linguistic tools across the thematic sections.

Beyond textual analysis, Colson displays a clear interest in biography. The connections between life experience, excerpted passages, and his own summary conclusions, however, are not always as clear. For example, he suggests that Napoleon's heightened interest in attacking fortified places was influenced by Napoleon's superior age,⁸²¹ but both men died in their early fifties, and Clausewitz began writing *Vom Kriege* after the Napoleonic Wars ended and is believed to have worked on it until near his death (1831). No small amount of ink has been spilt on how Clausewitz changed his thoughts from his late thirties until his death, but where Colson lands in such debates is only implicitly gestured toward.⁸²² Colson's nods to

⁸¹⁸ David P. JORDAN: *Napoleon and the Revolution*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, p. 233.

⁸¹⁹ For Colson's statement on mythology and idolatry Eng. p. 379; Fr. 441. For alternative methodological approaches of understanding mythmaking (including cultural history, material culture studies, and art history) see: Natalie PETITEAU: *Napoléon, de la mythologie à l'histoire*, Paris, Éditions de Seuil, 1999; Odile NOUVEL-KAMMERER: *Symbols of Power: Napoleon and the Art of the Empire Style, 1800-1815*, New York, Abrams, 2007; Todd Porterfield and Susan S. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

⁸²⁰ Eng. p. 248; Fr. p. 294.

⁸²¹ Eng. p. 349; Fr. p. 407.

⁸²² Hew STRACHAN: *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography*, New York, Grove, 2007.

biography situate Napoleon's and Clausewitz's writings in particular historical, political, and cultural contexts, but their direct impact on the writing is more often stated than explained or proven. Colson has since continued writing on Napoleon and Clausewitz conjointly, moving away from their texts and deeper into their life histories in his book *Clausewitz*.⁸²³ If one is looking for biographic comparison, one would do better looking there. The work further emphasizes the richness of thinking of these men together.

Colson's curatorial model, one that relies on juxtaposition rather than argument, is inconsistently persuasive. Colson reveals, for example, that 'in [a] little known passage, Napoleon used the adjective "strategistic" positively to compare his Russian campaign with Charles XII of Sweden's'.⁸²⁴ The «little known passage» to which Colson refers is an expository footnote in the *Mémoires*, which were dictated by Napoleon on Saint Helena.⁸²⁵ The *Mémoires* are widely accepted as reflecting Napoleon's views, but whether the same can be said for each footnote is another matter. Heretofore-ignored and out-of-character diction from an expository footnote carries little weight without further explanation and context. That Colson noticed it at all is a testament to his thorough study of Napoleon's written works, but its significance, as argued, is overstated. Even if we imagine Napoleon laying in bed dictating bullet-point lists of his actions to clarify his relationship to the text, this is no smoking Charleville musket.

Weak copyediting unfortunately mars the execution of some parts of the English translation by Gregory Elliott. There are, for instance, slippages between references to Charles XII and Charles II, and curious translation choices occasionally hinder readability. Elliott's translation of "stratégiste" as «strategistic» is awkward, and the ordinalization in the evidentiary passage has been stripped of useful punctuation.⁸²⁶ I found myself increasingly reliant on Colson's French original to understand what Napoleon had said and how Colson was studying it. Translation is an imperfect and interpretive art, as anyone translating Clausewitz well knows, but the English edition could have given some justification for re-translating the original passages by Napoleon that have already appeared in English elsewhere, especially in the case of the *Mémoires*.⁸²⁷

Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* is useful for what it teaches us about war and also for the ways in which it reflects the cultural and political context that produced it. What then might Colson's work teach us about the intellectual traditions that have shaped it? Only one work by a woman, Nada Tomiche's 1952 *Napoléon écrivain*, made it to his bibliography of critical works on Napoleon, and Colson elected not to break with Napoleon's nineteenth-century voice in his annotations, uncritically referring to Napoleon's «experience of war with the Orientals // expérience de la guerre avec des Orientaux», «civilized peoples//peuples civilisés», and

⁸²³ Bruno COLSON: *Clausewitz*, Paris, Perrin, 2016.

⁸²⁴ Eng. p. 122; Fr. p. 148.

⁸²⁵ *Memoirs of the History of France during the Reign of Napoleon Dictated by the Emperor at Saint-Helena*, Montholon, t. II, London, Henry Colburn, 1823, p. 99; *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France, sous Napoléon, écrits à Sainte-Hélène*, Montholon, t. II, Paris, Firmin, 1823, p. 101.

⁸²⁶ Eng. pp. 122-123; Fr. p. 148.

⁸²⁷ For a particularly relevant translation debate on Clausewitz's beliefs about diction, see the work on the passage "es ist aber klar, daß man wenig mehr als eine pedantische Unterscheidung gewinnen würde, wenn man sich streng an die Worte halten wollte" in Jan Willem HONIG: "Clausewitz's *On War*: Problems of Text and Translation", in Hew STRACHAN and Andreas HERBERG-ROTHE (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 57-74, p. 64.

‘oriental customs // mœurs orientales». ⁸²⁸The content is steeped within disciplinary traditions that are more interested in studying the successful execution of force than understanding systems of power.

The form of Colson’s work remains, however, laudable, and I believe productively creative. His project avails to other scholars the fruits of his intensive research labours. In and of itself, this is already a significant contribution to the field. By trying to fit Napoleon’s life into Clausewitz’s mould, Colson provokes significant questions about the connections and divergences between these two military thinkers in life and in text.

⁸²⁸ Eng. p. 21, p. 98, p. 341; Fr. p. 32, p. 120, p. 399.