



THINKER
IN
BOXES

CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

Team: Prussian Generals

Position: Extra cover

Status: Dead as

It can be interesting to debate whether Carl von Clausewitz (Stardate –543000 to –492000) defined the modern Western conceptualization of war or if he simply documented it. The best answer is probably that he did a little of both. As you read through *On War*,^a you will be struck by three things. First, the nineteenth-century German of a general does not translate into English very well at all. It often reads like a dyslexic's cookbook. Second, if the 500-page doorstop you are reading is the abridged and edited version, how freakin' big was the original? And third, for all the discussion of military detail and strategy, *On War* is a very political book.

Clausewitz wrote at the end of what might be called the Age of Kings in Europe. It was the end of a century in which war was like a chess match between a king's generals and was often fought by marching to maneuver for advantage as much as by engaging in battle. Outmaneuvered generals would often concede a battle with little or no fighting, and the peasantry—raped and pillaged by armies on both sides—suffered most of the horror of war. Armies at that time generally received little pay from their kings and instead were permitted to loot, plunder, and ransom. At the end of the 1700s, Napoleon ended this era of war with the massive, populist armies of the French Empire, and Clausewitz wrote about the Napoleonic Wars, both recording the lessons learned from fighting against the little French dictator and synthesizing those lessons into a set of broader commentaries on war and politics.

In terms of international politics, two of Clausewitz's arguments are particularly germane. First was the need to separate fighting the war from the political objectives of war. Essentially Clausewitz said that kings, princes, and emperors should just keep their grubby little manicured fingers out of fighting the war. The leader should set the objective, communicate that objective clearly to his generals, and then let the generals fight the war. Second, war was not about scoring points, demonstrating superiority over an opponent, or maneuvering an opponent into making a concession. War was about destroying an enemy's ability to fight, and stopping short of that objective or trying to accomplish anything other than that objective was ill-advised. The argument in favor of total destruction of an enemy's ability to fight was clearly a reaction to the way that Napoleon's ruthless destruction of the European armies exposed the folly of trying to win partial victories or concessions without thoroughly defeating the French armies. The echoes of that argument continue to be influential today. Most Western democracies have difficulty fighting wars on any terms other than pursuing the annihilation of the opponent's military capability.

^a Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1832).