

Harsanyi on Colson (2015)

Colson, Bruno. *Napoleon on War*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 484. ISBN: 978-0-1996-8556-1

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For all the thousands of studies written on Napoleon and his deeds, there are still gaps in Napoleonic scholarship. A systematic collection of Napoleon's thoughts on war was one of these gaps. No longer: Bruno Colson, Napoleonic scholar as well as specialist in strategic studies and international relations, published in 2011 *De la guerre*; the English version, in Gregory Elliott's excellent translation, came out four years later.

The title *On War* calls to mind Carl von Clausewitz's famous work and indeed Colson uses Clausewitz's statements to structure Napoleon's thinking. This is a welcome analytical device, considering that Napoleon preferred the practice of war to theory and never wrote a comprehensive treatise. Certainly, war was on his mind at all times and his correspondence is replete with reports, announcements, and analytical statements. During the Directory, he wrote reports to the government that described the war in Italy in ways meant to enhance his own conduct; as emperor, he gave orders and advice to his subordinates, wrapping them in wider-ranging philosophical or moral considerations when he saw fit. The challenge for this book, therefore, was to extract a general theory of war from myriad particular statements. Colson more than meets this challenge by using creatively and critically a large variety of sources. Napoleon's writings as well as pronouncements reported by close companions, especially those who shared his final years in Saint Helena, are discussed side by side, without, however, being taken at face value. Colson examines Napoleon's own words against his pragmatism and careful image building. The relationship with the emperor and the timing of writings come under scrutiny in the case of second-hand reported statements. Thus, Napoleon's determination to shape his place in history is paramount in analyzing the dictations on Saint Helena (*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France*) along with Las Cases's famous *Mémorial* and other "Saint-Helenian" accounts. For this reason, Colson finds Napoleon's general remarks more pertinent than comments on specific campaigns where he was more likely to project a certain image of himself and his decision-making process.

The work is organized in eight books that survey all aspects of war: logistical concerns (supplies, lines of communication); general strategy; tactical approaches for different kinds of engagement; moral factors; the theory and art of war. Each book is grounded in Clausewitz's general principles on the topic and broken down in subsequent chapters dealing with specifics. Colson's ability to chart one theme at a time through so many sources and apparently disconnected events helps the reader follow Napoleon's reasoning, even participate in the reflections, hesitations, insights, and convictions that ultimately resulted in the general outlook presented here. Using Clausewitz as a cicerone to the vast, complex universe of war brings consistency to Napoleon's disparate statements, even though—like Clausewitz—Napoleon paid a lot of attention to the friction of war, which convinced him that general principles should be overruled when circumstances called for unorthodox methods. Principles, for Napoleon, remained guides to action, not iron clad imperatives and were not to impede flexibility on the battle field or the great commander's flashes of genius; in his view, what truly mattered was perfect execution of plans adapted to the situation, an approach he articulated at Vitebsk in 1812 while planning the invasion of Russia: "If one always awaited a complete conjunction of favorable circumstances, one would never finish anything. In short, my plan for campaign is a battle and my whole policy is success" (373). Yet, overarching principles emerge, of a moral kind, most notably: troop morale, the commanders' aptitudes, their ability to motivate the troops, exploiting the enemy's fear—a point where Napoleon excelled. There are also the virtues of discipline, honor, emulation, and esprit de corps without which an army cannot function (133). Like Clausewitz again, Napoleon considers war to be not a science but an art, hence inherently bound with human qualities. Officers should study the likes of Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar, or the more recent Turenne and Frederick the Great, even though gunpowder and artillery changed the way of waging war. But men are the same: they must find inspiration in historical examples and in turn inspire those under their command. It is in the same way that Napoleon must be studied by military men of our times and in the future, Colson suggests, because Napoleon's greatness "consisted in the exceptional adaptation of a personality to the vicissitudes of war" (380).

In concluding, Colson insists on Napoleon's profound humanity, vast historical knowledge, and constant, if scattered, musings on the meaning of war. This book is a magnificent contribution to our knowledge of Napoleon as war leader and as exceptional historical figure.

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