Discussion Questions on Clausewitz, pp. 7-69
History 492 / for September 8, 2010

Note: It is not essential that you read the Introduction (vii-xxxii), but you may find it to be helpful. Heuser offers a biographical account of Clausewitz’ life and military service.

You do not need to write out answers to the following questions; but please come to class prepared to discuss them.

1. What does Clausewitz mean by his famous dictum that “war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means”? (p. 7) Does this have a different resonance than another common translation – “politics by other means”?

2. What specifically does Clausewitz intend with the phrase “the destruction of the enemy’s physical and psychic forces”? (p. 10) What about “war of extermination”? (p. 21) Is he advocating genocide?

3. Why is it fruitless to try to limit the spilling of blood in war, according to Clausewitz? Why, instead, do wars tend to gravitate toward extremes? If absolute and unrestrained violence seems to represent a logical outcome of war, at least in the abstract, why don’t real wars actually resemble this?

4. How does Clausewitz use the terms “negative” and “positive” here? Is this different from “offensive” and “defensive” actions? Why does he dispute the “polarity” (i.e., mirroring) quality of offense and defense? What gives the defense the upper hand most of the time?

5. Which is ultimately more significant: destroying an enemy’s forces, or breaking an enemy’s will? What sorts of considerations usually lead the enemy to relent, ultimately? What are some techniques for making war more costly to the enemy?

6. Why is combat so central to warfare, in Clausewitz’ view? Why are risk and reward so closely related?

7. What is “friction” in war, as the author understands it? What factors serve to magnify this friction?

Evaluative Questions

8. Clausewitz refers often to “passions”; yet this is quite a dispassionate, logical analysis. How persuasive do you find his treatment of popular emotions in war?

9. How useful do find consider the author’s taxonomy of character traits best suited for leadership? Why does so much depend upon the commander’s personal traits?

10. Why is Clausewitz so quick to praise “greed for honor” [Ehrgeiz] as a useful ambition that benefits the armed forces as a whole?