

[Russell on Bellinger, 'Marie von Clausewitz: The Woman behind the Making of On War'](#)

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Vanya Eftimova Bellinger. *Marie von Clausewitz: The Woman behind the Making of On War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 312 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-022543-8.

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On Marie

Opening new vistas to military and strategic history's most famous man, in *The Woman behind the Making of On War*, Vanya Eftimova Bellinger uses Marie von Clausewitz's letters and her marital relationship to demonstrate Marie's material role in Carl von Clausewitz's thinking and writing of his foundational work in strategy. As a biography based around the writings of the subject, Bellinger's work compares favorably to Clair Tomalin's *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self* (2002), as the latter imbued the story of the man with substance by way of his own words. In this book, the narrative sustains Bellinger's essential argument of Marie's critical place in this most famous piece of writing on strategy specifically. Along the way, deeper points regarding military and historical scholarship, strategy, and politics emerge. Although many will make *On War* the focus of this biography, that work of strategy figures only as the denouement of the Clausewitzes' lives. Given the biography's importance on two important levels, this review will address Marie's story both on its own written terms and in its comment on and place within military history as well as the practice and scholarship on strategy that have been built on it.

Consider first the text itself. Without intending to minimize it, the aim of this work is simple: to judge the influence of the "mundane" on a historic volume. In this case, for a woman like Marie, who commanded the respect of generals, the mundane became transformative, as her biography in total demonstrates her clear place in *On War*. And it is such attention to the quotidian that both I and Earl Wavell appreciate as a focus of study. Who was Marie? Bellinger sums her up as "a restless spirit and a politically active woman who often challenged societal conventions, spoke her mind, and lived an industrious life often independent of her husband's," even as she was until very recently still thought of as nothing particularly more than his wife (p. 5). The rich narrative that Bellinger crafts from the new correspondence and other contemporary sources sustains this characterization and our recognition of her achievements.

Adapting the chaptered chronology of the biography, this review will address the narrative in larger periods of Marie's life. The first is our introduction to Marie as the sort of woman who would eventually be the perfect match for Carl, the improbable suitor. In the first three chapters, we understand her background and why a man like Carl would have appealed to her. Her early life as part of the Prussian aristocracy and at close proximity to Prussian rule shaped her knowledge and interest in the constituent civilian pieces of war, particularly politics and the ruling elite. Meeting Clausewitz added the military and strategic components to her understandings. Her expertise was

well suited to the military intellectual pursuits of the man she would marry. And, strikingly, the seemingly stern Prussian strategist was the sort of man to appreciate this independent, wise, and thoughtful woman.

The next is their struggle to make an asymmetric match work. Even as the two began to decide their future together, larger events intervened to shape the course of that life. Their engagement was prolonged by the events of the day. First, it was a secret hidden behind the reform and reorganization of the country and army. Then it was the obstacles to recognition by the critical figures in their respective lives. Nevertheless, what is made manifest is that neither Marie nor Carl altered their policy; it was simply the challenge to find a workable strategy. It is here that we fully appreciate what they were to each other. In their relationship, each offered something critical to the other. Unable to participate directly in the politics of the day, in Carl Marie found a man who would bring her as close as possible to a substantial role. To view him in such terms in his own time is nothing short of remarkable. For Carl, it is entirely likely that Marie offered a refinement of his own thinking and purpose, particularly in the early nineteenth-century Prussian reform movement in which she “was a recognised member of the militant patriots’ circle, and Carl strived to belong to it too” (p. 100). Furthermore, in this politically charged and emotionally supported space, Carl’s ideas on politics, strategy, and war developed in his correspondence with her, as in his discourse on genius. In these chapters, it is not hard to conclude that personally, professionally, and intellectually, Marie was a critical arbiter of Carl’s fate. Bellinger also restores to Marie the agency she clearly had in the decision making, whether in moderating the perception of Carl as the pursuer or in assessing Sophie von Bruhl, her mother, as the brake on their progress to marriage.

Marriage and the Napoleonic Wars marked the pivot point in their lives. It meant the culmination of their long courtship and engagement, but events in their larger world quickly ushered in the next phase. Napoleon’s wars in temporary abeyance from 1809 to 1811 marked just enough time for Marie and Carl to enjoy their engagement, wedding, and a brief newlywed period. Consolidating the gains from their long courtship and first years together as an official couple, the Clausewitzes confronted head on the consequences of the outbreak of fresh hostilities. Already weakened by the Peace of Schonbrunn in October 1809, when Napoleon’s war with Russia opened in 1812, Prussia could not act as anything but a reluctant ally to the French march east. Acknowledging the political dynamic that constrained Prussian action, Clausewitz recognized French defeat as his homeland’s only salvation. Service in the army of Napoleon’s next enemy, Russia, was the only means forward, even as it meant short-term “enmity” with his own. Marie, equal in her fervor for Prussian freedom from French dominion, supported this. Carl’s return from Russia with the counteroffensive against Napoleon set up the final struggle to end the French martial-imperial European reign and provided the basis for Marie’s deepening understanding of military affairs at close proximity to her husband and the armies.

The next period followed them in peace. As Napoleon was dispatched to exile in defeat, Carl’s return to Prussian arms set the conditions for the couple’s longest period living together. Alas, the two chapters on this period pass quickly due to an absence of correspondence. Relying on other sources, Bellinger’s narrative at this point, less detailed than before, conveys the importance of their personal contentment to merely live as husband and wife. Nevertheless, taking the broad view, one sees this as a time for intellectual consolidation of all that had just passed in warfare. The period in Coblenz also reminds us of the US Army’s nineteenth-century frontier experience, with military garrison life

colored by the presence of wives and families. Returning to Berlin in 1819, as Carl ascended to the position at the head of the War College, Marie came to be recognized as *die Generalin*, madam general, in the sociopolitical circles of the capital city.

In the last part of the book, what we might consider the requiem for Carl, is the haunting climax to the narrative, defined by the contrast between his death and the birth of his work. Carl's desire to return to the line and growing European political turmoil ended the Clausewitzes' time in Berlin. The administrative job to which he was originally assigned in Breslau, Poland, was quickly overtaken by events. The uprising in Poland and its influence on European politics more broadly largely kept the couple apart, particularly as chaos turned to cholera. The death of his long-time friend and mentor, Gniesenaus, was followed, in time and the text, quickly by Carl's loss to cholera. Covering less than a single page, this narrative approach most assuredly mimics what its experience must have been like for Marie. Leaving little time to mourn, we are witness to her efforts to correctly, according to her understanding, fulfill her husband's wishes and publish his work. And here I might offer a small criticism of Bellinger's conception. Rather than "behind," the typically subordinate role of the wife, however, what Bellinger demonstrates is that Marie was at the heart of *On War*, both figuratively as an intelligent contributor and literally as Carl's closest confidante and deepest love. The relationship between Marie and Carl, so bound up in events political and martial, clearly influenced the writing. One must sincerely wonder whether it remains appropriate to attribute sole authorship of the work to him. The decision to leave responsibility to publish the work to Marie was no thoughtless choice: as Bellinger argues and the correspondence demonstrates, Marie participated fully in the evolution of Carl's understanding and thinking. And as events would have it, Carl's death before the work's completion would make Marie's words earlier in their relationship prophetic to events: "You act, I shall bear it" (p. 5). She was no midwife for *On War*, she bore it. And as like for so many women of her time, this act would also, shortly thereafter, take her life. And perhaps Bellinger believes in Marie's centrality too, for on the front cover Marie is pictured boldly with Carl as a faint impression in the background.

Granting Marie's near co-equal place as author, it is now easier to assess the importance of Bellinger's book to understanding *On War*. First is the important humanization of Carl von Clausewitz. This biography is about Marie and her role in Carl's total life, as well as her final act to see his writing published. Carl is not the focus; he is seen at a side glance, as a part of her life. But in that way it is in fact the full picture of the man, the revelation that no one achieves much singly, particularly in this case where the two were so significantly bound together. It is valuable as a lens through which to view his work and thinking in process, which provides a useful substance to the words in the treatise. On a lighter note, for what this book does tell us about Carl directly, it is enlightening to see a softer, cheerier side to the Prussian strategist. He was a man who wrote "lyrical poems full of deep love and quiet satisfaction" (p. 107). This is a refreshing view of him, as we in fact see more of him this way from her multidimensional perspective, which saw and appreciated his myriad facets.

Second, at a deeper level, Marie's perspective argues for a shift in how we understand and interact with *On War*. The most important line comes in the introduction when Bellinger writes that "the incomplete state of the work also reinforced Clausewitz's central premise that war theory should not be prescriptive" (p. 11). This assertion is supported throughout the text as we are witness to the critical importance of their life's discourse to the development of the work. Too many read it as an

eternal bible, but what Bellinger ultimately demonstrates is that *On War* was a discussion. It was Clausewitz's interrogation of war—with himself, colleagues, and ultimately Marie. Rather than obeying its content, we should follow its form. Martin van Creveld was correct in his “attack” of the book's continued relevance in *On Future War* (1991), wherein he takes the questions the Prussian asked and answers them according to different contexts. I suspect Carl would have agreed with this approach even as he might have debated the specific answers.

This review, however, is less concerned with Clausewitzian primacy, taking neither him nor his work as the most significant achievement of this book. Many will be the microscopic readers and reviews for critical comparison against the standard interpretations of his work. In fact, I was politely declined by one publication for this point explicitly when I pitched a Marie-centric review: “We'll want a Clausewitz expert for this.” But to rework a famous saying, this may be one small step for Clausewitzians, but it is one giant leap for military history. There is also the matter of what the Clausewitzian reviews will do. If all her story becomes is the means to look past her to him, to Carl, to “his” work, then this biography will have been in vain.

Rather, this biography is critical for what it reveals about the content of military history. It has for too long been men writing about other men. As concerns the latter, noting that Carl holds great interest to military historians and strategic thinkers, Bellinger defines the substantive silence on Marie: “this field lags considerably when it comes to studying women's roles and the homefront” (p. 2). It would not be inappropriate to expand that to a more general comment that women in war have been generally overlooked. Thus, while heralded as a significant advance on Clausewitzian scholarship, the importance of Marie's biography is the fact that it reveals a gaping chasm in scholarship. The bodies of military historical and strategic literature have not contemplated sufficiently the extent or significance of Marie specifically, and women generally. This signal failure of critical thought—to question women's roles—is a weakness that must now be reckoned against vast tracts of history. What has not been understood correctly for this blind spot? The looming ignorance within history is both shocking and promising. Interestingly, Carl's view to Marie's value as an intelligent individual, as well as any woman's potential more broadly, draws him in an utterly progressive light.

Finally, as to the second critique, it is a bitter irony that the work of a man so importantly shaped by the mind of a woman, and as reckoned by the mind of another woman, should be so rigidly guarded by male scholarship. The women of strategic studies are relatively sparse, and one must question that state of affairs. It is certainly not for lack of quality. If one questions the value of diversity, all I need do is point to this blind spot in the scholarship and literature, amply demonstrated by the fact that it took a woman to write this book about another woman whom men in military history have critically overlooked. Given the respect he gave to his wife's counsel and activism, Bellinger is correct to assess that “he surely recognised that politics was not, has never been, and would never be a purely male domain” (p. 9). Expanding this comment, neither should the work of military history. Recalling Walter Millis, it is time to reconceptualize the content not only of military history but of military historians as well.

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