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Jomini and Clausewitz: Some Myths that Need to Go Away

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The other day I chanced to have a short discussion with a student (not one of mine but someone else's at the college I work at). He was a US Navy officer, but he could have been any number of types of officers at the college because what he said I'd heard many times before, from marines, airmen, soldiers, and international officers (not just sailors).

"I like Jomini, he was always on the winning side, not like Clausewitz, who always lost."

Yes that was what he said, and I cringed. Then I smiled and said in as neutral a voice as I could muster, "That is one of those myths that won't go away, will it?" I then explained to him why I felt this particular myth so misguided and misinformed (although the four hours of military history classes on the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars he'd just had should have obviated our discussion).

First, Jomini did NOT always win. Second, Clausewitz did NOT always lose. Baron Antoine de Jomini was in failed campaigns in Spain, most famously Massena's failed invasion and nearly catastrophic retreat from Portugal in 1810-1811 as chief of staff to Marshal Ney's corps, which conducted most of the rearguard actions during that retreat. He was also part of the catastrophic campaign in 1812 in Russia, on a much larger scale, again as chief of staff to Ney, getting almost cut off and annihilated after the retreat through Smolensk and Krasny. Although Jomini's last campaign with the French (in Spring 1813) was nominally that of a winner, his performance as chief of staff to Ney's wing of the army at Bautzen caused Marshal Berthier to bring charges against him that caused his defection to the Russian Army where he became an aide to the Tsar. Even then, he still had one more loss coming his way, with the Tsar at Dresden in 1813, one of the few battles Napoleon won in the Fall of that year.

So much for Jomini.

Now good old Carl. True, his military career had been for a nation that withdrew, without either victory or defeat, from war in 1795 and then for the next 11 years Clausewitz got no chances to win or lose on any battlefield (except perhaps at court where he met his future wife Maria). This period was also when his mentor, Gerhard Scharnhorst, helped develop the young prodigy's ideas about war. True, the Prussians were soundly defeated in 1806-1807 and Clausewitz captured and interred in France. But his next military action was in the same campaign that proved so hellish for Jomini, the 1812 victory in Russia, where Clausewitz served as an aide to the Russians, although not so much to the Tsar as to General Barclay de Tolly, the Russian commander of the First Army and minister of war. Significantly, Clausewitz was instrumental in negotiating the defection of an entire Prussian Corps from the French side at Taurrogen (in modern Lithuania) near the end of the disastrous French retreat. He was on the winning side from then on, for the rest of his career, all the way to the triumph at Waterloo, where he served as the able chief of staff to the Prussian corps that tied down Marshal Grouchy's wing of Napoleon's army, preventing it from reinforcing Napoleon at Waterloo and allowing Blücher's army to have its decisive effect on Napoleon's flank.

So much for the winning-losing side of the myth. As for the notion that Clausewitz's ideas, or the ideas of anyone, who might have been on the losing side, being less valuable than the ideas of the winners—take for example the German losers after World War I. They did a pretty good job of learning from defeat to win in 1940, to say nothing of the Soviets learning pretty well from defeat to defeat at the hands of these same Germans. It is superficial and specious to judge someone's ideas on this basis—they won or they lost. Carl himself wrote that victory or defeat sometimes hinges on the smallest detail, which itself might be an accident.

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I will continue to search for these unhelpful myths, which I have found litter the playing field of military history in particular.

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