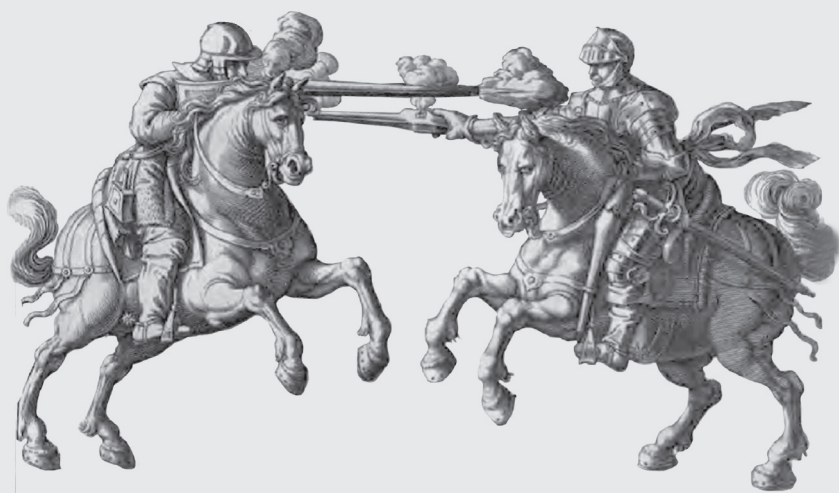


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VIRGILIO ILARI,

*Clausewitz in Italia e altri scritti di storia militare
(Clausewitz in Italy and other essays of military history)*

Roma, Aracne Editrice, 2019.



This collection of essays published, over the last nine years, by Virgilio Ilari, is the first book of a new series “*La Fucina di Marte*” (“*The Forge of Mars*”) taking his name from a collection of military essays published in Venice in 1641. The book is not only a collection of insightful and highly interesting essays of military history but is also a testimony to Virgilio Ilari’s longstanding struggle, as chairman of the Italian Society of Military History, to raise the dignity and quality of Military History in Italy (“*Combat pour l’histoire militaire dans un pays réfractaire*”).

The introduction is appropriately dubbed “*Ermattung*”, which should have been the original title of the book. It is by no chance that the first essay is dedicated to Carl von Clausewitz and his reception in Italy. It was originally

published in English in 2010 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Clausewitz Gesellschaft. The Clausewitzian tune is the leitmotiv of the whole collection as Ilari has been, over 40 years, one of the supporters of the “Clausewitz Renaissance” in Italy. During the XIX Century, Clausewitz was, by and large, ignored by Italian military writers, who drew inspiration from the more palatable Jomini, as well as by the General Staff, even in its most Prussianized era starting from 1872. At the turn of the Century, notwithstanding the endorsement by Italy’s most prominent philosopher, Benedetto Croce, Clausewitz did not attract the attention either of philosophers or of political thinkers. The General Staff translated “On War” as kind of token homage to the fateful alliance with Nazi Germany in the 40’s. The revival of Strategic Studies in Italy during the eighties, thanks also to the efforts of Virgilio Ilari and Carlo Jean, rekindled interest, both in the General Staff and in the academia, for Carl von Clausewitz and “On War”. At the turn of the XXI Century, a number of scholars, notably among them Gian Enrico Rusconi, the author of a biography of Clausewitz and of a new translation of “On War”, contributed to Clausewitzian studies. Nonetheless, another Jomini was at the gates. The re-discovery of the more palatable Sun Tzi as well as the fascination for Chinese strategic thought made once again life miserable for the followers of the Prussian philosopher of war.

Particularly interesting for the American public is the essay on “Thucydides’s traps”. We find out that not only the Founding Fathers, like John Adams, were affectionate readers, but that English translations of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian war* were among the books read by British officers during the War of Independence. Thucydides was also highly reputed among the Confederate elites with Southern philologist Basil Gildersleeve identifying the land power of the Confederacy with Sparta and the sea power of the Union with Athens. The *Influence of Sea Power upon history* of Alfred Thayer Mahan and the addition, in 1884, of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* to the reading list of the Naval War College by Admiral Stephen Luce, made of Thucydides a mandatory point of reference for US Naval strategists. The real fortune of Thucydides, however, came with the Cold War. Secretary of State George Marshall’s speech at Princeton of February 22nd 1947 drew a parallel of the increasing bipolar world with the war between Athens and Sparta with an ominous hint to the “Fall of Athens”, i.e. the risk that American

Athens might succumb to Soviet Sparta. The Vietnam War witnessed a revival of Thucydides by neo-realists such as Louis Halle, Peter Fliess and Henry Kissinger while Donald Kagan, in 1969, published the first volume of its *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*. Subsequently, Kenneth Waltz in its *Theory of International Politics* (1979) put Thucydides at the centre of its neorealist system of International Relations, Robert Gilpin developed, starting from Thucydides, its concept of “Hegemonic War” (1981) and John Mearsheimer followed in 2001 with his *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

Another example of the “embedment” of Thucydides in the American naval culture was Admiral Stansfield Turner’s strong endorsement of the Greek historian at the Naval War College. Kagan’s tradition of Thucydidian studies has been carried out by Victor Davis Hanson, whose *A War like no other: how the Athenians and Spartans fought the Peloponnesian War* remains a modern seminal work on the Peloponnesian War. Hanson, a classical scholar and philologist, with his previous *The Western Way of War* had continued the tradition of historical parallels between the Ancient World and the contemporary world, this time with reference to “The Long War on Terrorism”. Finally, Graham Allison’s widely publicized “Thucydides’s trap” (*Destined for War. Can America and China escape Thucydides’s trap?*) draws the ultimate historical parallel inspired by the Greek historian (“What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.”) with the US playing the role of Sparta, the status quo power, vs China, in the unusual role of Athens, the rising power. In his best-selling essay, Allison highlights the risk of a slippery slope from a new cold war based “on the balance of financial terror” down to actual, catastrophic war.

“To lead and to understand” is another telling essay on the roots of western strategic thought since the renaissance, with an emphasis on the origins and evolution of the concept of strategy and its meaning. Ilari reminds us of the origins of the term strategy - understood as military strategy - in the works of Paul Gédéon Joly de Maizeroy in the XVIII Century. More generally, strategic thinkers of the age of the enlightenment started to define the differences between the “art of the commander”, i.e. strategy, and tactics, between “sublime” and “geometry”, the qualitative and the quantitative dimensions of the art of war.

Strategy in Clausewitz lies at the juncture between politics and tactics and defines the relationship between the political goal (“Zweck”) and the military objective (“Ziel”). Hence the development of the “operational level of war”, starting from Helmuth von Moltke and, going through the Russian and Soviet School (Svechin, Varfolomeev, Tukachevsky, Isserson), right up to US Army doctrine as defined in, 1976, in Field Manual *FM 100-5 Operations*. Ilari actually points out at the increasing gap between politics and the conduct of war which the introduction of the operational level seems to imply. Strategy in the Information Age is characterized by the development of Network Centric Warfare, which, through the achievement of information superiority, should have dispersed the Clausewitzian “fog of war”. The process of continuous “transformation” of the US and Western military should have guaranteed “full spectrum dominance”. Nonetheless, the world after 9/11 witnessed the return of non conventional, low intensity conflict (as described by FM 100-200, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*). Asymmetry, Low Intensity, 4th Generation Warfare, all terms that define the old-new challenge of “Petite Guerre, Klein Krieg, Small War” for western strategy. Less operations, more politics, a combination of military and non military means to pursue the overall political goals, the old new dimension of political and economic warfare are all elements of the new western strategic landscape confronted with Chinese *Unrestricted Warfare*, the title of a well known book by two PLA colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xinsui, published in 1999.

The above mentioned examples are just an arbitrary selection of the thought provoking essays of Virgilio Ilari, whose juridical and classical background - he lectured Roman Law for many years before becoming one of the pillars of Military History in Italy - is particularly useful in accompanying the reader along the somewhat convoluted path of the History of Strategy or of the “Strategy of History”.