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MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

SUPPLEMENTO
2020

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020



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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma
info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl - Lungotevere degli Anguillara, 11 - 00153 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Supplemento 2020: 978-88-9295-024-5

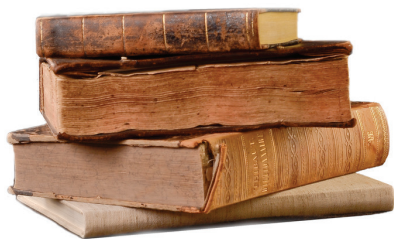
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Storiografia Militare
Military Historiography





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VIRGILIO ILARI,

Clausewitz in Italia
E altri scritti di storia militare

Canterano (RM), Aracne editrice, 2019, pp. 290.



Clausewitz in Italia is a composite volume authored by Virgilio Ilari, former Professor of Roman Law and History of Military Institutions at the Catholic University of Milan. The volume contains 12 essays ranging from Clausewitz' *Vom Kriege* (*On War*) and its reception in Italy, the notions of *histoire-bataille*, Naval History, and Roman sea power, the use of Thucydides in the US military rhetoric, to the modern notion of strategy, the stereotype about the cowardly nature of Italian people, and the need for an epistemology in military history. Some of these essays are published for the first time while the others, already published in the last two decades, have been revised and expanded. Through an extremely rich apparatus of notes and bibliographical references, Ilari's dense writings not only managed to accurately reconstruct themes that are particularly relevant for military history but also to contextualize these themes by linking them with

the cultural and geopolitical changes occurred throughout the centuries in the West. Moreover, Ilari's essays represent an opportunity for the author to discuss his research methodology by focusing on the concept of history and its relationship with military studies and, more in general, with social sciences. *Clausewitz in Italia* inaugurates the series "Fucina di Marte", the new editorial project promoted by the *Società Italiana di storia militare* (SISM), founded in 1984 by Raimondo Luraghi and headed by Ilari since 2004. "Fucina di Marte" aims at gathering contributions on monographs of single authors, proceedings of conferences and PhD thesis focusing on military history, history of war, and strategic studies. SISM publishing activity also includes collective volumes on selected monographic topics, available online on SISM website. Therefore, *Clausewitz in Italia* represents both an opportunity for the readers to familiarize themselves with topics that have been and are at the center of the military history debate and for Ilari and SISM to present their *manifesto* for a renewal and advancement of military studies in Italy.

In the introduction to the volume (pp. 11-16), Ilari compares the status of military studies as scientific discipline in Italy and abroad by denouncing the gap between the scientific quality and consistency of Western military publications, supported by local academia, press and army, and the sporadic, amateur or even superficial nature of the majority of historical-military publications in Italy. From the overview provided in the introduction, it is clear how SISM publishing initiatives aim at filling this gap. Moreover, the introduction title "Ermattung"¹ (German for "fatigue", "weariness" but, in its military use, "harassment") and subtitle "Combat pour l'histoire militaire d'un pays réfractaire" (in French, fighting for the military history in a recalcitrant country) underline Ilari's personal and academic engagement in this "struggle" for an Italian military historiography comparable to those promoted and supported in other Western countries.

The opening essay, "Clausewitz in Italia" (pp. 17-44), is the translation in Italian of Ilari's contribution for a 2010 collective volume celebrating the

1 The *Ermattungsstrategie* ("a strategy of harassment") was a concept introduced by Hans Delbrück stating that "as war is a trial of will, 'the strategy of harassment tends to wear down the will of the enemy' (Joël MOURIC, «'Citizen Clausewitz': Aron's Clausewitz in Defense of Political Freedom», in José COLEN and Elisabeth DUTARTRE-MICHAUT (Eds.) *The Companion to Raymond Aron*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 80).

50th anniversary of the Clausewitz society (Virgilio ILARI, with Luciano BOZZO and Giampiero GIACOMELLO, «Clausewitz in Italy», in Reiner POMMERIN (Ed.), *Clausewitz Goes Global: Carl von Clausewitz in the 21st Century*, Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Clausewitz Gesellschaft, Carola Hartmann Miles Verlag, Berlin, 2011, pp. 173-202). This essay addresses the reception of Clausewitz in Italy (in John Gooch's synthesis, Italy "disregarded" Clausewitz). However, Ilari extends Gooch's observation to the military by comparing the originality of *Vom Kriege* to the uncertainty principle formulated by Heisenberg. Indeed, while Western military literature follows Jomini's concepts by thinking of war in calculable and predictable terms (its concern is warfare, the "art of war", rather than war), *Vom Kriege* is the only book in Western countries trying to define the "nature" of war, including factors that escape calculation and predictability such as, uncertainty, fortune, and genius. On account of its focus on the "nature" of war, *Von Kriege* can be considered the closest attempt made by a Western author to the Chinese concept of strategy, *Zhan lüe xue*. As for the reception of *Von Kriege* in Italy, even though the book was already available in French, it was largely ignored during the *Risorgimento*. Even after the French-Prussian war that triggered its success and despite the Triple Alliance signed by Italy with Austria-Hungary and Germany, the actual first wave of interest toward *Von Kriege* began only before the war in Ethiopia and the alliance with Nazi Germany. During this time period, both Gramsci and Croce mentioned Clausewitz' masterpiece, with Croce agreeing with Paul Roques in acknowledging the influence of Machiavelli. It was a brilliant officer, Emilio Canevari, who was particularly engaged in promoting Clausewitz's work before WWII, even though his approach was not particularly original and more in line with the Nazi propaganda. During the war, Canevari joined the Historical service of the Army Staff ("Ufficio storico") for the first Italian translation of *Von Kriege*. However, the first translation to have a nationwide circulation was published only in 1970 by Mondadori, at the peak of the first wave of the renewed interest toward Clausewitz in postwar Italy. The essay ends with a useful list of the most original Italian contributions to the understanding of Clausewitz's thought (pp. 42-44). Ilari particularly prizes Gian Enrico Rusconi's works — especially his introduction and translation of the most important parts of *Von Kriege* — for underlining "non solo idee e metodi, ma le ragioni storiche della sua fortuna

e del suo fato” (p. 43). Among the authors applying Clausewitzian categories in the study of military history, the author particularly regards Luigi Loreto’s 1993 essay on Caesar in which he employed the concept of friction in order to interpret the sixth book of the *Bellum Gallicum* and the third book of the *Bellum Civile*.

The second essay, *La storia delle battaglie tra storia militare e histoire-bataille* (pp. 45-53), traces the origin and use of an often-misunderstood historiographic concept: the concept of *histoire-bataille*. *Histoire-bataille* is often confused with “military history” and yet, from its first use by the French historian Amans-Alexis Monteil, precursor of the school of the *Annales*, to Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel, *histoire-bataille* was referred to political history. Braudel even used to oppose the *histoire-bataille* to the “puissante histoire de la guerre”. Ilari’s reconstruction of this expression gives the author the opportunity to discuss and define military history. According to Ilari, an history is truly “military” (“realmente militare”, p. 48) on account of its *goal* and *method* rather than its *object*. Indeed, while “war” and “military” are subjects shared with other disciplines (political, law and economic history, etc.), military history studies the battle in relationship with the rational use of force and the decision-making process leading to it, which includes its opposite, the *cunctatio*, i.e. “la non-battaglia”. Moreover, the military history studies the battle in an objective and neutral way, enriched today by other disciplines that are becoming increasingly accurate such as geology, battlefield archeology, forensic medicine etc.

The third essay, *Notre histoire n’est pas notre code. Critica storica e dogmatica strategica* (pp. 55-62), addresses the idea of “history”, the nature of social sciences and the application of their concepts to the study of history. At the beginning of his discourse, Ilari contrasts (and combines) history with “dogmatica”: without a “dogmatica”, a coherent system of concepts, principles and theories, there is no science. However, to properly use this conceptual system, it is necessary to retrieve and, consequently, be aware of the origin and subsequent development of the concepts shaping that system. Using them without this awareness leads to the “anfibia”, the uncertainty about the meaning of terms used ambiguously or inaccurately. Therefore, next to an “internal history” of a particular social science, which Ilari compares to the mapping of its own DNA, there is — or better, it should be — an “external history” able

to recognize the socio-economical conditioning factors behind the scientific knowledge. Unfortunately, Ilari notes a certain reluctance in many representatives of social sciences (including those from strategic and military studies) to practice both histories, being afraid of a healthy (internal and external) “historical criticism” that would corrode the assumed objectivity of the concepts used in their social science. And yet, an historian who really professes “history” is a revolutionary who is able to identify the past within the present, in other words, he is able to see the conditioning factors of the past that prevent the future to come about free from those conditionings. On the contrary, whoever does not profess this idea of history tends to see and study it as if it could provide constant laws and patterns describing all human societies: a risk against which Clausewitz warns us in *Von Kriege* (book II, chapter 6), dedicated to the rhetorical (and not scientific) use of historical examples.

Ilari’s fourth essay, *Le trappole di Tucidide. La guerra del Peloponneso nella retorica politica americana* (pp. 63-86) is about the different rhetoric uses of Thucydides in the US history, from the very beginning with the Founding Fathers who saw in the Greek colonization, being “humane, just and generous” since its colonies were independent from the homeland, a better model than the Roman one. Before the civil war, the South tended to identify itself with Athens, a compassionate pro-slavery democracy, against the Northern oppressor, identified with the Romans. After the civil war (Ilari dedicates an interesting chapter of this essay to Lincoln’s use of the expression “civil war” and its implications, pp. 66-68), the great classicist Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve used the Peloponnesian War in order to shift the memory of the civil war from a clash between opposite values to geopolitical considerations, more specifically from slavery to thalassocracy. According to Gildersleeve, like during the Peloponnesian War there were a naval power represented by Athens (the Northern Union) and a land power, represented by Sparta (Southern Confederacy). The end of the 19th century is also the time period in which Alfred Thayer Mahan published his theory of the Sea-power. However, its application to the Peloponnesian War was conducted by Frederick Thomas Jane in apparent disagreement with Mahan. According to Jane, thalassocracy and Sea-power did not coincide since the former represented a state that did not perceive the strategic value of its fleet (it was used more for logistic purposes than for operations). The actual popularity of Thucydides in the

US began during the cold war and continued during the Vietnam war. Dean Acheson, Vice-secretary of State, compared the bipolarization characterizing the cold war with those of the ancient times: Athens vs. Sparta and Rome vs. Carthage, to overcome American isolationism. Generally speaking, Ilari observes that the discussions on Thucydides contrasted two analyses: a first analysis looking for universal truths in his works, and a second one, characterized by the historical parallels between ancient and contemporary times, a practice criticized for its inconsistency by Clausewitz in *Von Kriege* (Book II, chapter 6). It is Lawrence Tritle who questioned the less accurate analogies with the past, in particular the idea according to which the Peloponnesian War was characterized by a bipolarism and the responsibility of the war was on Sparta because a democracy could be aggressive by definition. Ilari argues that there is a return of the rhetorical use of Thucydides against China, but also against the abuse of unilateral sanctions that are ineffective and even counterproductive (the Athenian embargo against Megara triggering Sparta's invasion).

The fifth essay, *Tra bibliografia, sistematica ed epistemologia militare* (pp. 87-130), is an introduction to the study of military writers from the modern era. This contribution is particularly handy because it provides lists of bibliographical references for each of the reported authors. These lists represent a necessary tool to contextualize the authors and their knowledge of the past but also to understand how "war" was conceived, studied and categorized. The essay that follows, *Lomonaco, Foscolo e Tibell. Storia militare di un suicidio filosofico* (pp. 131-138), is the reconstruction of the suicide of Francesco Lomonaco, journalist, librarian and military doctor. A supporter of the Repubblica Napoletana (1799), he escaped to France first and then to Milano where he met Vincenzo Monti, Ugo Foscolo, and Alessandro Manzoni. In this essay, Ilari examines Lomonaco and Foscolo as military historians, in particular Lomonaco's difficult relationship with Foscolo. Lomonaco's influence on Manzoni is also briefly mentioned. In the same years, however, a "real" military historian sojourned in Milano, Gustaf Wilhelm af Tibell (1778-1832), who founded a military "Accademia" (a cultural gathering) in Sweden. In Italy in-between 1802-03, Tibell started a gathering similar to the Swedish one but also founded the first Italian military journal, *Giornale dell'Accademia militare italiana*. The journal lasted only one year but Tibell published

in it the guidelines for a professional and scientific military history, based on military memoirs and topographic maps, and aimed at providing a detailed account of the military operations to serve the elaboration and the criticism of the military science and doctrine.

The two essays that follow discuss two bordering themes: *Le frontiere della Naval History, 2013-1913* (pp. 139-162), and *Roman Seapower, l'emersione di un tema storiografico* (pp. 163-180). The first contribution analyses the intellectual project inspired by Sir John Knox Laughton, professor of Modern History at the King's College and presented in the first volume of a Cambridge University Press military series. Laughton called for a renovation of the Royal Navy strategy and planning through the collaboration between a science-based naval history and the Naval Intelligence (NID). The volume contained the thirteen contributions to the naval and military section of the 1913 conference organized by the Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS) in London. In his opening essay, Laughton denounced the absence of naval history in British historiography. This was the result of both the lack of understanding of naval factors as well as the misconception reducing naval history to the mere narration of the great naval battles, according to the principle: "where there are no battles, there is no naval history" (quoted by Ilari, p. 143). This volume also included an essay by Julian Stafford Corbett, one of the fathers of naval geopolitics and geostrategy. Corbett's essay focused on the idea of producing a professional military history ("to staff purposes"). Such a reform faced several obstacles, for example the rhetoric and ideological use of historical examples, employed only to support a desired argument instead of going "to history to search for principles, not to prove those which they believe they have already found" (quoted by Ilari, p. 145). A second obstacle was represented by the difficulty in accurately understanding the lesson that could be inferred from the history of wars. Consequently, Corbett stressed the importance of compiling "as soon as possible after a war is fought" the "Official Histories" based upon the official documents to identify potential "mistakes" that could be avoided in the future. Ilari concludes the analysis of this volume by comparing these authors' sincere attempt to save their own world with Scharnhorst and Gneisenau's *Kulturkampf* but also with the interesting observation that it was on account of the ideology of Imperial Defence and Sea-power that Britain opposed German "modeste ambizioni" (p. 151) and,

consequently, became gradually dependent on the financial support of the US. Seen from the sea (“vista dal mare”, p. 151) World War I — usually perceived as the suicide of the old Europe — represented the first step in the Anglo-American succession in the hegemony of the seas. Ilari’s essay concludes with a discussion on the project undertaken by John Brewster Hattendorf, naval officer and Ernest J. King Professor Emeritus of Maritime History at the Naval War College (NWC), and a brief discussion on Mahan’s presidential address delivered before the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1902. As for Hattendorf, Ilari reconstructs Hattendorf’s activities in promoting a “national effort” to revitalize and coordinate the naval studies, “close to extinction”, and the publication of two volumes, *Ubi sumus?* in 1994 and *Doing Naval History* in 1995. Ilari observes how the renewal undertaken by Hattendorf and NWC did not influence Italian naval and maritime historiography. The essay *Roman seapower* addresses another theme particularly interesting for military history: the role of the navy in building the Roman power and assuring its expansion as it was recorded in ancient sources, military treatises included, and reconstructed in modern and contemporary historiography. Rome has often been perceived mainly as a continental power. The limited presence of the Navy in ancient military treatises influenced this perception, magnified during the Renaissance by their translation made by the Venetian publishers. Also the *restitutio* (reconstruction), undertaken by humanists and the military during the so-called “military revolution” — occurred in Europe between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century — to study the Roman military model and adapt it to increase the efficiency of modern warfare, focused mainly on Roman infantry. And yet, some historians such as Pantero Pantera (1568-1626), advisor for the Pontifical Galleys and author of one of the few naval treatises at that time, observed that Roman civil wars ended thanks to the naval battle of Actium in 31 B.C and Rome had control over not only the Mediterranean sea but also the ocean between the Pillars of Hercules and Britain. The geopolitical image of a continental Rome was also shaped by an ideological reading of the Punic wars celebrating the victorious continental power of Rome against the sea power of Carthage. Ilari observes that this interpretation not only was supported by the continental empires that followed the end of the Western Roman Empire: the Holy Roman Empire in the West and Byzantium in the East, but also by the antagonism between the

modern continental (France, Germany and Russia) and the maritime powers (Great Britain and the US). Even the maritime powers based their identification with the Romans on the imperial structure rather than on the sea-power. Therefore, it is interesting to notice that Mahan was actually inspired by the Punic wars for his theory on maritime powers and their structural superiority over continental powers (p. 168). Ilari moves to consider the first historian who applied Mahan's theories to the study of Roman history and challenged that vision, Frederick William Clark (1874-1940), professor of Classics at Manitoba College. Clark argued that the naval activity does not only consist in direct confrontation but also and especially indirectly "by silent pressure" (quoted by Ilari, p. 171). He also argued that Roman maritime power began way before the first Punic war and also influenced the constitutional history of the Roman Republic. However, his work and ideas were completely ignored by the subsequent military literature. Instead, the debate developed in two opposite directions: Chester G. Starr, a specialist of Ancient History, who published an essay rejecting the application of Mahan's theories to the ancient world by arguing that no ancient power had ever reached the economic, political and technological conditions to develop a dominion over the seas comparable to the British sea-power. In response to Starr, James J. Bloom, a self-taught historian, published an article based on his research on the Jewish revolts against Rome. In his article, Bloom also gave a definition of thalassocracy – a term coined by Thucydides: "a state that utilizes its fleet to extend its power and to link its various possessions that are separated by water" (quoted by Ilari, p. 176), a state that would collapse in case of annihilation of its navy. Ilari concludes that Rome was not a thalassocracy but at the same time its fleet was way more capable and effective than how depicted by Starr. Finally, new scientific studies based on archeological and technical evidence (for example Lionel Casson) but also on epistemological research (Loreto) confirmed Clark's ideas.

The ninth essay, *'Condurre' e 'capire'. Sull'utilità e il danno della strategia per la Guerra* (pp. 181-198), addresses the notion of "strategy" and its relatively modern origin which means that it is a product of our "culture" rather than a universal concept applicable to any time period. It is sufficient to recall that in ancient Greek στρατηγία, from which the modern term is borrowed, used to designate a civic office in the Athenian democratic system. Ilari's re-

construction of the origin of the term represents an opportunity for the author to denounce the epistemological issue affecting a relevant part of military and socio-political literature on war: these texts rely on a conceptual frame which is the result of a process of formation and evolution of new concepts. Therefore, it is necessary to study and understand such a process in order to properly use the concepts shaped by it. In particular, the Western perception and understanding of *war* and *warfare* took shape in the last five centuries from the Renaissance *restitutio* of the pre-Cristian literature and the subsequent formation of the modern state to the separation between political and military power occurred with the parallel development of professional and permanent armies. The great number of texts on war — published during the time period that goes from the Renaissance to the end of the *Ancient Régime* — has contributed in building a specific knowledge, separated from politics, to describe war. These authors wrote ‘war’ but what they meant was the ‘art’ of war, writes Ilari. In this ambiguity lies the reason why a classification of the military language is impossible: what are the boundaries between ‘tactics’ and ‘strategy’? Is ‘war’ an ‘art’ or a ‘science’? etc. From the second and third book of *Von Kriege* to the concept of “war after the war”, Ilari shows how the Western conception of war still affects how politics and the military respond to the new challenges represented by and labelled as “low intensity conflicts”, “asymmetric warfare” (Franklin B. Miles), or “unrestricted war” (Liang&Xiansui). The tenth essay, *Strategia della storia*, completes the discourse on strategy (pp. 199-225). In this contribution on strategy and history, Ilari begins by prizing Azar Gat for his history of strategic thought but, at the same time, reminds the reader (as we saw in the previous essay) that the Western strategic thought steams from the institutional autonomy of the military in respect to politics. As a consequence of such an autonomy, Western military thought has privileged a Jominian approach to war interpreted as *warfare* and *the office and art of the General Captain* (the strategy previously mentioned) over a more Clausewitzian one focusing on the objective “nature” of war and, consequently, on the polarity among opponents.² After this important disclaimer, Ilari moves to consider a variety of ways in which

2 Ilari identifies an interesting example describing the polarity among opponents in Caesar’s incidental idea of *ratio vincendi* (“measure”, “relation”, “criteria”).

strategy and history interact. To make some example, in the study of civil history, a strategic perspective tends to focus more on the role of external forces (the international context) to describe a national event such as a national revolution or a war for independence or liberation while an history from a national perspective would emphasize the role of the social or political group leading the change. A strategic vision of history can transform history into a “moral force” (such as, tradition, memory, identity etc.). In this sense, history becomes, as it often happens, one of the causes provoking a war (a “strategic weapon”) but also it can be listed among the conditions making a peace agreement possible.

In the eleventh and second to last essay, *L'ossimoro di Erasmo. I giudizi di Erasmo e Naudé sullo spirito guerriero degli Italiani* (pp. 227-240), Ilari reconstructs a long-lasting *quérelle* that involved Erasmus of Rotterdam and several Italian writers and intellectuals (even after Erasmus' death) on the cowardly nature of the Italians in war. The episode is particularly interesting because it intertwines several aspects of the cultural environment at the beginning of the 16th century: from the cultural debate on the imitation of the Ancients to the delicate relationship between the papacy and Erasmus. This essay also includes the response to Erasmus written one century later by Gabriel Naudé, doctor, atheist, secret admirer of Machiavelli, writer of the first treatise on the *coup d'état* and librarian for the cardinal Mazzarino at the Bibliothèque Mazarine. His response in defense of the “Italic valor” was included in his work on military studies, in the section dedicated to the military virtues of the modern countries.

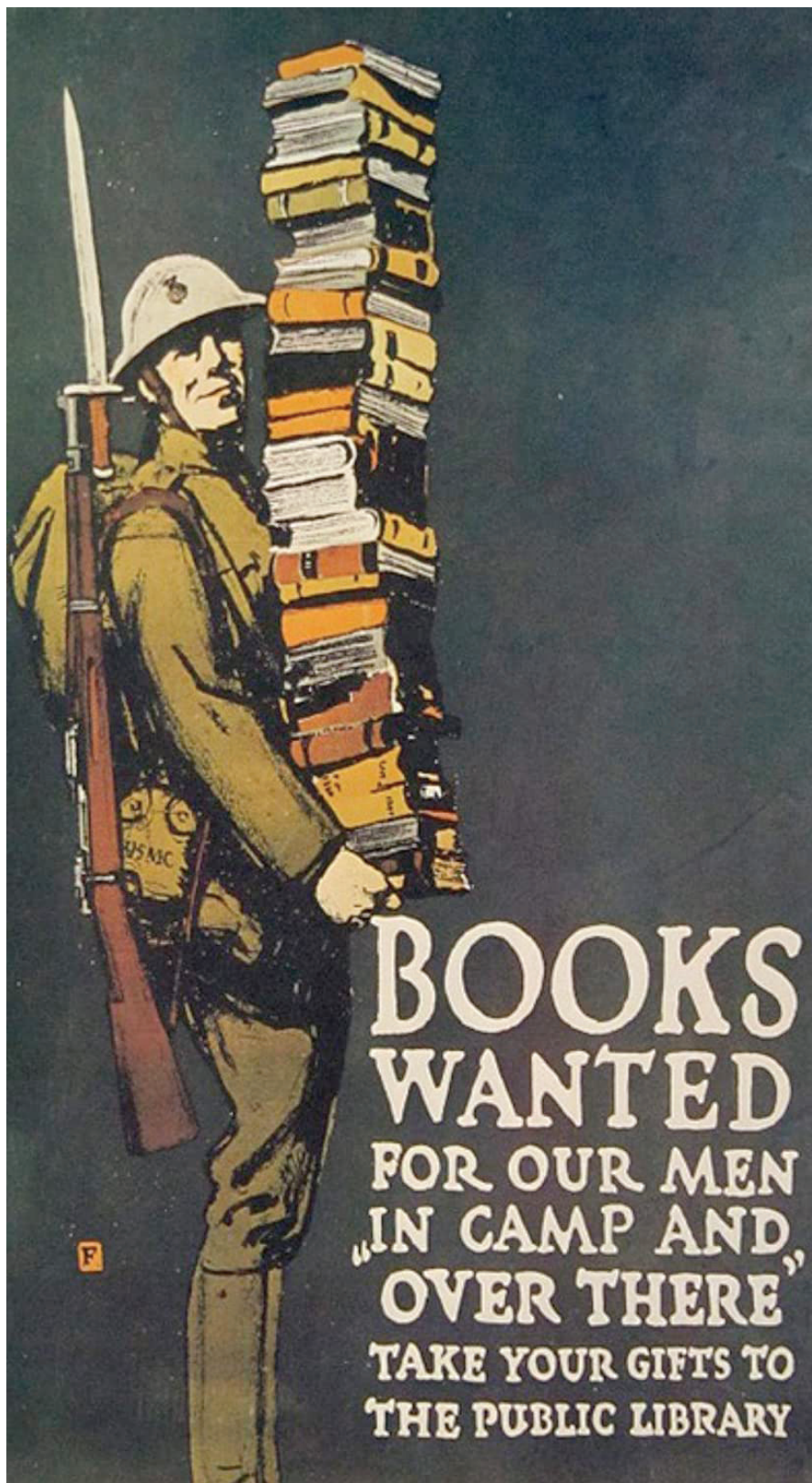
In the last essay, *Per una epistemologia della storia militare* (pp. 241-276), Ilari reconstructs the phases of military history from the revolutionary times represented by the Renaissance and the retrieval of the ancient military model to the history of military operations, with the increasing importance of the intelligence, and the division of the military historiography in subgenres during the 19th century. However, Ilari observes that, in the recent years and contrary to the US and UK, European universities and armies staffs have not initiated any concrete cooperation for the study of military history. As a result, only few European historians can be considered military historians, and, while other disciplines in history have been recognized in their autonomy, this has not happened for military history. It is also true that an epistemology of military

history is particularly complicated to define. Indeed, one of the most complex aspects lies in the term “military” itself since it refers to a noun and an adjective at the same time. Ideally, the military is relatable to any human activity and, vice versa, any human activity can be exploited by the military and for military reasons. Ilari argues that today there is no discipline among the humanities and social sciences that has not started to investigate the history of its military application (“la géographie, ça sert, d’abord, à faire la guerre” stated Lacoste). Thus, if the object of the research is always the “military”, then the difference must consist in the focus: a military history that is truly “military” must have a specific focus and consequently specific sources to work on. That is the reason why the essay ends with a list of relevant texts for the study and understanding of military history.

The essays are followed by a conclusion written by Luigi Loreto, the leading Italian specialist of ancient military history (pp. 277-290). Loreto takes advantage of this conclusion to pinpoint some of aspects related to Ilari’s essays. For example, he points out the common destiny shared by Thucydides and Clausewitz, having both being subject to a variety of interpretations. In this “schizophrenia”, surely it does not help, at least for Clausewitz and *Von Kriege*, the lack of a critical edition for his other works. Moreover, despite the proliferation of studies on Clausewitz, it is striking to notice — as Loreto does — the absence of studies from his own country. Another interesting annotation by Loreto is about Ilari’s “empathy” with Naudé, the curator of the Bibliothèque Mazarine. For Loreto this empathy is not surprising, since Ilari’s works have always been a description of a library: from his father’s library to the virtual ones available on internet.

In conclusions, in less than 300 pages *Clausewitz in Italia* achieved the commendable result of combining together a variety of themes at the center of the debate in military history, a discussion on military history itself as a scientific discipline, and a remarkable series of notes and bibliographic references for the reader who wants to understand the premises (and conditionings) of those debates and to properly contextualize the different voices taking part in them. *Clausewitz in Italia* also represents a *manifesto* for a renewal and advancement of military studies in Italy and in Europe.

ANDREA POLEGATO



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