

Response Paper One

The nature of conflict is a topic that humans have debated on for thousands of years. Two of the most notable figures to share their thoughts on conflict are Clausewitz and Herodotus. Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general in the early 19th century, sought to explain the social and political motivations behind war. Herodotus was a Greek historian around 420 BCE who wrote about the many conflicts between the Greeks and Persians. While Herodotus is mostly retelling events, the light in which he shines on those events can give us an idea of what he thought about them and conflict as a whole. The two may appear to have differing opinions at first glance, but when you look deeper there are also many similarities. Both Herodotus and Clausewitz share the ideas that conflicts have political and social motives, that conflicts are unpredictable, and that conflicts are extensive events.

Both Herodotus and Clausewitz understand that war is more than two groups fighting, it is an extension of the two groups' social and political workings. Clausewitz brings this up many times in his works, "We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means." (Clausewitz, *On War*, 87). Here Clausewitz is telling us that war is right in line with politics, that when policy fails, war will act as an extension of a group's political motivations. He also addresses the social motivations behind war, that: "War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" (Clausewitz, *On War*, 75). When a group cannot force an enemy to do as they wish, they resort to conflict, "The maximum use of force" (Clausewitz, *On War*, 75). Herodotus also mentions the social motivations of war several times, "for civil strife is as much worse than united war as war is worse than peace." (Herodotus, *Histories* 8.3). While appearing as flavor text, this sentence reveals a lot about Herodotus' thoughts on conflict. The passage is referencing the arguments

that came up between the Spartans and Athenians on who would lead their alliance. Herodotus lets on that this seemingly small argument about who would lead the army could have turned into much worse had the two sides not agreed to come to a compromise. This quote also underlines the political motivations behind the war, as seen here, “However, when the allies resisted, the Athenians waived their claim, considering the safety of Hellas of prime importance and seeing that if they quarrelled over the leadership, Hellas must perish.” (Herodotus, *Histories* 8.3). Herodotus makes sure to emphasize that the Greeks cared more about protecting their land from the Persians than being the ones to lead their united army into battle. At the end of the day the Greeks needed to rely on the Spartans to utilize the “Maximum use of force”, and Herodotus makes sure to highlight that as an important part of the meeting between these two armies.

Another shared understanding of conflict between Clausewitz and Herodotus is its unpredictability. Clausewitz believed chance played a large part in war, “Therefore only the element of chance is needed to make war a gamble, and that element is never absent...
...guesswork and luck come to play a great part in war.” (Clausewitz, *On War*, 85). While Clausewitz was known to put emphasis on strategies, he does not deny the large role chance plays in war. Dr. Potter expanded on Clausewitz’s point, explaining how the rain ruined Napoleon’s cannonballs at Waterloo due to the fact they would not bounce (Potter, Lecture 2, January 2024). Given that this event happened in Clausewitz’s lifetime, there is no doubt he placed heavy emphasis on the element of luck in conflict. Herodotus also leaves hints of his beliefs about his thoughts on chance in conflict. While describing a lengthy dialogue between Xerxes and Artabanus, Herodotus writes the following, “It is better to do everything boldly and suffer half of what you dread than to fear all chances and so never suffer anything... ..Great successes are not won except by great risks.” (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.50). Twice in this dialogue

Herodotus includes the importance of taking risks in conflicts. These quotes directly mirror Clausewitz's words on gambles being necessary during war. It is also important to note that when Artabanus responds to Xerxes, Herodotus ends with the following sentence, "Take to heart the truth of that ancient saying, that the end of every matter is not revealed at its beginning." (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.51). The entire dialogue revolves around the idea of taking a risk to win a conflict and whether or not it is worth taking such an uncertain leap of faith. It is clear through this that both Herodotus and Clausewitz believed chance played a major role in conflict.

Lastly I will explain how Herodotus and Clausewitz shared the idea of conflicts being long and drawn out events. Clausewitz's thoughts on the length of war can be brought together with three points. First is that war is not an isolated act, "War never breaks out wholly unexpectedly, nor can it be spread instantaneously." (Clausewitz, *On War*; 78). Second is that war cannot end in a single short act, "War does not consist of a single short blow... .. the very nature of war impedes the simultaneous concentration of all forces." (Clausewitz, *On War*; 79-80). Third is that a conflict's outcome is not final, "even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil..." (Clausewitz, *On War*; 80). Through these three points it is clear that Clausewitz does not believe war is a short affair. Not only does he believe that war cannot be ended in a single act, but that even when the conflict appears to be finished, its effect on the losing side causes the conflict to resurface in due time. The biggest piece of evidence for Herodotus' thoughts on the longevity of conflict is at the beginning of *Histories* where Herodotus writes the following about a monologue from Cyrus, "No one is so foolish as to choose war over peace. In peace sons bury their fathers, in war fathers bury their sons. But I suppose it was dear to the divinity that this be so." (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.87). The fact that Herodotus mentioned that "it

was dear to divinity” shows how Herodotus believes the longevity of war is inevitable. It is also important to note that *Histories* as a whole covers decades of conflict among multiple figures, it is clear that Herodotus did not ignore that fact when writing this passage. This idea of the inevitability of drawn out conflict is exactly the same as Clausewitz’s remarks on how the results of war are never final. Both men believed that conflict was a long affair and could not be ended by a single battle.

In conclusion, even though Clausewitz and Herodotus were separated by hundreds of years, both men shared strikingly similar understandings of conflict. Despite the difference between the presentations of their respective works, the connections are clear. From Clausewitz’s carefully laid out opinions to Herodotus’ retelling of the Greek and Persian war, both believed that conflicts were extensive events, that conflicts included a heavy element of chance, and that conflict is underlined by social and political motivations. Their similar thoughts not only demonstrate the similarities of war in their own time periods, but show us how constant war truly is and make us wonder if conflict will continue to be a common feature of human existence in the future.

Works Cited

- Herodotus, The Histories (tr. R. Waterfield)(Oxford, 1998)
- von Clausewitz, On War (tr. M. Howard and P. Paret)