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George Clark

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## WAR AS AN INSTITUTION

THE subject which I have chosen for these lectures has occupied my mind from time to time for many years past, and in various books and articles published at intervals since 1921 I have touched upon it.<sup>1</sup> The invitation to deliver the Wiles Lectures, for which I must express my deep gratitude to the Trustees, gives me an opportunity to review and correct my opinions and to submit them to the judgement of the distinguished company which is assembled here.

The period I have chosen is the seventeenth century, not, of course, the exact hundred years, but the period which historians commonly treat as a unity, including, at the beginning, the earlier stages of affairs which were then in progress and, at the end, the whole of the reign of Louis XIV of France, who died in 1715. I shall try to keep in mind the heritage which the seventeenth century carried along with it from the past; but, except for that, as far as possible I shall keep within the period. Some of the things that I shall say about the seventeenth century are also true of the twentieth; others are not. I shall not mention these identities and differences, and I even wish to exclude them from my argument. The present state of the literature of this subject seems to indicate that we shall positively gain by restricting our

<sup>1</sup> A list of these is given in the Appendix (p. 151 below). In the footnotes to the present work references to these books and articles are given without the titles but with their numbers in this list.

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[More information](#)*War and Society*

attention in this way. There are military and political histories in which wars are treated one at a time; but the historians who have tried to understand war as a social activity or an aspect of civilization have commonly set it in an evolutionary framework. Hegel, Comte, Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx have successively influenced these historians. It is easy, again, to find books which trace the mutual effects of war and capitalism over long periods. There are other books which trace the development of the rules of international law recognized at the time when they were written, and books which present international transactions as steps towards some future summit, perhaps the peaceful settlement of international disputes or perhaps the perfecting of total war. Any one of these interpretations of our period in the light of others before and after it may turn our attention away from some of the characteristics of war as it actually was, and it is the concrete character of the wars of Europe that I wish to examine. For this purpose even a century is a long period, but if we can see it in focus it should provide a firm beginning for comparisons with other periods. If I do not intend to make any such comparisons in these lectures except once or twice to make my meaning clearer, it is not that I underrate their value. Hypotheses about evolutionary or cyclical changes in the relation of society to its wars are fruitful elements in the thought of our time, and, especially during the last eleven years, since the explosion of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima, historians in many countries have studied the nature of war as a social activity with a new sense of urgency. I suspect that some of them have reached their conclusions too hastily, and that in this matter we still need modest inquiries limited in time and

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[More information](#)*War as an Institution*

space.<sup>1</sup> I cannot, indeed, pretend to offer a finished study; in some parts I have attempted to survey or to revise the results of research, but in others I have reached only a programme for further investigation, and a number of disconnected queries. But I hope to establish three definite conclusions and possibly even a fourth.

Perhaps the most natural approach to such a subject is through the writings of the time itself, and in the seventeenth century much was written about wars and about war in all the literatures of Europe. We can hardly expect to learn much from the second-rate and the merely imitative writers; we must beware of the pitfalls of generalizing about a multitude of particulars, and we must not overestimate the adequacy of literature as a report on life; but, with these precautions, we may gather some useful preliminary notions from literature in general, including the uninspired routine writing of every day. There are many simple, and natural, emotional reactions to war, and we find two of them endlessly reiterated, as they are in the writings of so many ages. The first is the response to what is glorious in war, to the feats of courage and endurance and to victory. In Latin and in all the vernacular languages innumerable poets and prose-writers expressed these moods. Little of all this appeals to modern readers; it may be strong and sincere, but we are apt to find the idiom of that age formal and stiff and dull. Seventeenth-century writers were not occupied, for instance, with the individual man and woman as those of the Romantic period were, and so when these works have to do

<sup>1</sup> An example is D. Loenen, 'Polemos', in *Mededelingen der Koninklijke nederlandse Akademie der Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde*, Nieuwe Reeks, Dl. 16, no. 3 (1953), which deals with ancient Greece.

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[More information](#)*War and Society*

with persons it is not with Homeric heroes or Byronic heroes, but with prominent commanders. The odes and panegyrics and inscriptions may still be admired, but they no longer stir emotion. They are like the two great faded tapestries in the old House of Lords in Dublin, representing the relief of Londonderry and the battle of the Boyne. If we feel emotion when we contemplate them it is not they that move us but the knowledge and the memories that we bring to them. Nevertheless, we can be sure that they expressed real pride in real military virtues, just as we can be sure that the second spontaneous reaction to war, the reaction of pity and indignation, was equally authentic. The two were never far apart. Shakespeare expressed them both, and if his patriotic exultation is more commonly remembered, the other reaction fills more space in his works. In the official utterances of court poets and court preachers, in what may be called standard public literature, the proportion is reversed; but both ingredients are there. They are not toned down as they have been in some other periods. The writers did not shrink from the crudity of the contrast which they saw in war, as in all human life, between *grandeur* and *misère*.

It is, however, justifiable to ask whether literary men in the seventeenth century were not notably insensitive to the darker aspects of war. It seems, for instance, that in spite of their allegiance to the classical tradition they did not appreciate the treatment of this side of the human tragedy by the great classical authors. Among all the writings on the miseries of war, one stands alone in its relentless directness, the *Trojan Women* of Euripides. It was accessible by itself or in editions of the works of Euripides, in Greek and in Latin; but I

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[More information](#)*War as an Institution*

cannot find that anyone in the seventeenth century responded to its appeal. The dramatist Nicholas de Pradon published a play on the same theme.<sup>1</sup> It was acted before Louis XIV himself, who honoured it with his particular attention and his applause. Pradon altered the story by making Astyanax and Polyxena take their own lives instead of being killed by Ulysses and Pyrrhus; that was too grim for 'notre théâtre', he wrote, 'Nos mœurs sont trop douces et trop éloignées de ces mœurs sauvages et barbares'. He allowed Ulysses, after remarking that Agamemnon desired Cassandra for his bride, to continue

Je suis Roy, je suis Maistre et vainqueur comme luy,  
Enfin je dois céder à l'amour qui m'entraîne,  
Je sens que malgré moi j'adore Polixène.

Pradon was second-rate, and we shall not find vulgarity like this if we turn to what the great Racine did with the same materials. A few notes of his on the *Trojan Women* survive; we do not know whether he made any others, but these few do not help us to determine what he thought of the play.<sup>2</sup> His *Andromaque* shows that he was interested in its dramatic technique, and he takes situations from it in which his characters are stationed as individuals with passions and duties; but there is not a trace of social criticism or of Euripidean pity.

Other instances could be adduced to show that seventeenth-century writers were not merely swept into eloquence

<sup>1</sup> The Bibliothèque Nationale has an edition of 1679; I have used that in Pradon's *Théâtre* (1695). The passages quoted are in the Preface and Act I, sc. i.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* (s.a., published in 1950). I have to thank Professor Knight for a most interesting letter in which he relates this matter to the quarrel of the ancients and moderns and to seventeenth-century views of monarchy.

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[More information](#)*War and Society*

by the glitter of victory, but convinced that the rights of conquest were ethically unquestionable. Corneille wrote straightforwardly: 'Le peuple est trop heureux quand il meurt pour ses rois.'<sup>1</sup>

These passages and the many others like them do not, however, justify us in supposing that the seventeenth century was insensitive to the sufferings inflicted by war. Corneille's words tell us more about his attitude to monarchy than his attitude to conquest. Racine, to say nothing of Pradon, saw Euripides through the opaque lenses of modern criticism and Senecan stage-craft. Another instance may show that literary forms which are now outmoded dull our apprehension of the feelings that writers tried to express. It comes from the German poetry of the period of the Thirty Years War. This poetry, with its religious phraseology and its classical allusions to Mars and Ceres and their likes, seems flat and conventional to a modern reader; but to appreciate it as it appeared in the princely *Residenzen*, where it found favour, is to recognize that it is sincere and even poignant.<sup>2</sup>

What the drama and poetry do show is that in the seventeenth century war was taken for granted as a fixed necessity of human life. This acceptance was not confined to imaginative literature but was equally characteristic of systematic thought. It is, indeed, as easy to misinterpret the systematic thought as the imaginative literature. It would be an anachronism to read the seventeenth-century writers on war as if they provided answers to the questions which modern

<sup>1</sup> *Oedipe* (1659), II, I.

<sup>2</sup> See Irmgard Weithase, *Die Darstellung von Krieg und Frieden in der deutschen Barockdichtung* (1953), especially pp. 8–9 and 15.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*War as an Institution*

students of society ask. Here also there were traditional precedents to follow. There was the medieval and Biblical teaching that war was a divine punishment for the sins of peoples. There were classical texts which scholars carefully discussed, such as the passage in which Thucydides distinguishes the real motives of wars from the ostensible pretexts.<sup>1</sup> But, whatever we understand by the terms, we shall often find seventeenth-century discussions of them disappointing. The underlying problems of the nature of political power and authority were central to many current controversies; yet when some of the greatest thinkers dealt with the causes of particular wars they were helpless. Thomas Hobbes analysed the causes of the English Civil War like the great thinker he was; yet even he had curious lapses. Both before and after the Civil War there were many disputes between the English and the Dutch, and one of the subjects was a very disputable English claim to the sovereignty of the Narrow Seas. On 14 May 1652 there was a naval battle. Hobbes wrote in the form of dialogue:

B. The war certainly began at this time; but who began it?

A. The Dominion of the Sea belonging to the *English*, there can be no question but the *Dutch* began it.<sup>2</sup>

Hobbes was one of the seventeenth-century thinkers who came nearest to the conception of social science as a study in which the whole should be understood through the interdependence of all its parts. Many others grasped something of this idea, and it had a rudimentary expression in two metaphors, that which compared society with an organism,

<sup>1</sup> See Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis* (1625), bk. II, xxxii, especially in the *Annotata* to the chapter.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of the Civil Wars of England* (ed. of 1679), pp. 246–7.

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[More information](#)*War and Society*

as in the fable of the belly and the members, and that other, congenial to the scientific mind of the later seventeenth century, which compared it with a machine. But few writers followed these ideas consistently and many failed to observe any connexion between the other sociological problems which they discussed and the changes from peace to war and back again. There is an instance of this in the work of the English Board of Trade. The foundation of this board was closely connected with conflicts about shipping losses during the Nine Years War. Its commission was dated 6 July 1696—a year and two months before the peace of Ryswick. One of its first tasks was the preparation of a report on the general state of the trade and manufactures of the kingdom.<sup>1</sup> This includes both an estimate of the existing position and detailed proposals for improving it in every possible direction. It was signed on 23 December 1697, and one of the signatories was John Locke. We should expect such a report in our own day to examine the effect of the war on ‘the economy’, and to pay attention to the special needs of the transition to peace. Instead, in this report we find only two allusions to the war, neither of them implying anything that deserves to be called thought. Nor must we assume that the writers had deeper reflexions in their minds but chose not to refer to them in that context. No seventeenth-century writer had any such developed conception as we normally accept of the organic interconnexions of the different elements of an economy. The French economic writer, Boisguillebert, wrote in so many words that foreign war was no obstacle to the restoration of general happiness; and that ‘la paix ou la guerre étrangère n’ont nulle relation

<sup>1</sup> *Commons’ Journals*, XII, 71 and 432 ff.



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[More information](#)*War as an Institution*

avec ce qui se passe au dedans du royaume à l'égard des tributs'.<sup>1</sup>

In these examples we see economists writing as if the outbreak of a war was like the change in a university town from vacation to term, which alters the flow of goods and services, but does not change the economic structure and in due course will easily be reversed. They took the coming of war for granted; they did not examine it: but our social thought treats it as a subject for economic study. Such a study cannot be content to treat each separate war as a self-contained occurrence, and its beginning as an event in a succession of events. For many writers, identifying a cause meant no more than pointing out that if some act or belief or condition had not been present or had not turned out exactly as it was, then there would have been no war. But they knew that if there had not been war at the exact time and place when it did occur, and between exactly the same parties, there would still have been wars. Milton, without having to explain it, wrote in a mere parenthesis: 'for what can war but endless wars still breed.' Granted certain assumptions, each war might have been avoided; but, so far from indicating how and why wars did come about, this only obscures the overriding truth that there would have been wars in any case. To keep the occasions of particular wars in their proper proportion we must recognize that in the seventeenth century war was not a mere succession of occurrences but an institution, a regular and settled mode of action, for which

<sup>1</sup> Although thus incautiously worded, the passage in question is intended to convey, reasonably enough, that fiscal reform need not wait for the coming of peace: P. le Pesant de Boisguillebert, 'Supplément au détail de la France' (? 1707), in *Économistes financiers du XVIIIe siècle*, ed. E. Daire (1843), p. 263. See also Appendix, no. 11.

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[More information](#)*War and Society*

provision was made throughout the ordering of social life. It was an institution in the sense that it was defined and arranged for by various prevailing systems of law, and also in a wider sense: the structure of society implied that it would recur.

To say this is more than merely saying, what we should be justified in saying after any review of the frequency and severity of its wars, that European civilization in the seventeenth century was a military civilization. It was that, and it was known to be that. Hobbes, like many other seventeenth-century thinkers, held that any society must include elements such as the family, and any civilized society certain higher elements such as religion, commerce and law or justice; he also argued that the relations between separately organized societies, even if these were civilized, would be warlike. There were anti-Hobbesists who rejected his determinist view of human nature, and in their views wars might be occasional or accidental; but it is true of the social theorists in all the main streams of seventeenth-century thought that, like the imaginative writers, they took the institution of war for granted. Their thinking about war, including their thinking about its causes, was for the most part carried on within the framework of the traditional distinction between just and unjust wars. Jurists and theologians applied their learning and their acuteness to the Biblical and classical and medieval texts through which this distinction could be traced. It was not a simple and single distinction. Sometimes a just war meant only a war which conformed in its causes and conduct to what the law required if the legal consequences of a state of war were to ensue. In that case the belligerents could lawfully exercise certain rights over the goods and persons of their enemies as far as these were in