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The Rise and Decline of the State

The state, which since the middle of the seventeenth century has been the most important and most characteristic of all modern institutions, is in decline. From Western Europe to Africa, many existing states are either combining into larger communities or falling apart. Many of their functions are being taken over by a variety of organizations which, whatever their precise nature, are not states. In this unique volume Martin van Creveld traces the story of the state from its beginnings to the present. Starting with the simplest political organizations that ever existed, he guides the reader through the origins of the state, its development, its apotheosis during the two world wars, and its spread from its original home in Western Europe to cover the globe. In doing so, he provides a fascinating history of government from its origins to the present day.

Martin van Creveld is a Professor in the Department of History at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. His books include *Supplying War* (1978), *Fighting Power* (1982), *Command in War* (1985), *Technology and War* (1988), and *The Transformation of War* (1991).

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Preface

The state, which since the middle of the seventeenth century has been the most important and most characteristic of all modern institutions, is in decline. From Western Europe to Africa, either voluntarily or involuntarily, many existing states are either combining into larger communities or falling apart. Regardless of whether they fall apart or combine, already now many of their functions are being taken over by a variety of organizations which, whatever their precise nature, are not states.

Globally speaking, the international system is moving away from an assembly of distinct, territorial, sovereign, legally equal states toward different, more hierarchical, and in many ways more complicated structures. As far as individual states are concerned, there are good reasons to think that many of them will soon no longer be either willing or able to control and protect the political, military, economic, social, and cultural lives of their citizens to the extent that they used to. Needless to say, these developments affect each and every individual now living on this planet. In some places they will proceed peacefully, but in others they are likely to result in – indeed are already leading to – upheavals as profound, and possibly as bloody, as those that propelled humanity out of the Middle Ages and into the modern world. Whether the direction of change is desirable, as some hope, or undesirable, as others fear, remains to be seen.

In this volume I shall make an attempt to look into the future of the state by examining its past: that is, its prehistory, growth, maturation, and apotheosis, and the way in which it spread all over the world. Chapter 1 deals with the period – in fact, most of recorded and especially unrecorded history – when there were no states and, originally at any rate, not even government in the sense of the organized power that some men exercise over others. Chapter 2 covers the period from approximately 1300 (the *Res Publica Christiana* at its zenith) to 1648 (the Treaty of Westphalia); it shows how the state emerged out of the Middle Ages by fighting, and overcoming, ecclesiastical and imperial universalism on the one hand and feudal and urban particularism on the other. Chapter 3

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continues the story from 1648 to the French Revolution. This period led to the separation of the state from “civil society” and the creation of many of its most characteristic institutions; including its bureaucracy, its statistical infrastructure, its armed forces, its police apparatus, and its prisons. The fourth chapter explains how states, having discovered the forces of nationalism as first proclaimed by the likes of Möser and Herder, transformed themselves from instruments for imposing law and order into secular gods; and how, having increased their strength out of all proportion by invading their citizens’ minds and systematically picking their pockets, they used that strength to fight each other (1914–45) on such a scale, and with such murderous intensity, as almost to put an end to themselves. Chapter 5 describes the spread of the state from its original home in Western Europe to other parts of the globe, including Eastern Europe, the British colonies in North America and Australasia, the Spanish and Portuguese ones in Latin America, and finally the countries of Asia and Africa. Last but not least, chapter 6 deals with the forces which, even now, are undermining states all over the world, and which, in all probability, will cause many of them to collapse (as in Yugoslavia), give up part of their sovereignty and integrate with others (as in Europe), or decentralize and relax their hold over their citizens’ lives (should the Republicans keep their 1994 “Contract with the American People”) within the lifetime of the present generation.

As will readily be appreciated, compressing a subject such as the present one into a single volume represents a very large task. That it could be accomplished at all is due first of all to my comrade in life, Dvora Lewy. As usual, she has suffered from my repeated periods of blackest despair; had it not been for her constant encouragement and untiring devotion the work would never have been completed. I also wish to thank Professor Gabriel Herman and Professor Benjamin Kedar of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, for reading part or all of my work, discussing it with me, making suggestions, and pointing out errors which otherwise might have escaped me. Above all, I want to express my gratitude to my stepchildren, Adi and Jonathan Lewy, for being with me through all these years. It is to them, with all my love, that this book is dedicated.