

Introduction: Why Study War?

*Of all the common enterprises and of all the collective actions that men have undertaken, war is undoubtedly the most imposing in the amount and quality of the effort men put forth, the most devastating and revolutionary in its consequences. Into war . . . man puts all that he has: his wealth, his science, his indomitable will, and eventually his very existence.*¹ Robert E. Park

*You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.*² Leon Trotsky

According to Peter Paret, we study war “because wars, the institutions that make them possible, and the ideas that guide their conduct form an important part of the human experience.”³ In other words, why would we *not* study war, this amazing, horrible spectacle that has affected every person on Earth? “Its essential character,” writes Bernard Brodie, “remains distinct from every other pursuit of man.”⁴ “War is a phenomenon,” adds military historian John Keegan, “which, however repugnant to all that is sensitive and generous in human nature, is nevertheless universal in the life of mankind.”⁵

War invites controversy and raises difficult questions. Is it rational or irrational? For what *reasons* would we fight and kill one another with such regularity and fervor? Philosopher David Hume writes, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions,” implying that war satisfies the dictates of emotion rather than logic.⁶ On the other hand, Hegel says, “The cunning of reason . . . sets the passions to work for itself,” suggesting that wars ultimately rest upon a rational foundation.⁷ Perhaps both are right, for war often seems poised on a knife’s edge between reason and emotion, order and chaos. War, writes Liddell Hart, “is horrible and ghastly beyond all imagination . . . nevertheless, it has an awe-inspiring grandeur of its own.”⁸ As Liddell Hart’s sentiment affirms, war is enigmatic, replete with contradictions. It repels and attracts. War can involve millions of people and span the globe yet remain intensely personal. It can be waged with modern technology or primitive instruments, and it can be fueled by sophisticated reasoning or primal instincts. “In war,” adds philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, “there intersect the limits of the extreme, and the diabolical darkness is interwoven with Divine light . . . we both accept and yet reject war.”⁹ Indeed, war’s complexity and violence conceal metaphysical and ethical intricacies that make it resemble

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a Rorschach test. Everyone who looks at war sees something different, which complicates our ability to reach consensus regarding war's true nature.

War Is Evil

*War always brings about the wreck of everything that is good, and the tide of war overflows with everything that is worst; what is more, there is no evil that persists so stubbornly.*¹⁰

Erasmus of Rotterdam (1516)

War has claimed millions of lives, innocent and wicked, soldier and civilian, young and old, rich and poor. Even those who survive are often scarred in mind, soul, and limb. "War means destruction," says British author and political administrator H. Fielding Hall, "first of laws, conventions, institutions, morality, and next the destruction of life and property."¹¹ All is fair in war, thus nothing about war is fair. For most of human existence, rape and pillage were war's rewards and atrocity and terror its means. As Shakespeare's Henry V warns the people of Harfleur,

The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
 And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,
 In liberty of bloody hand shall range
 With conscience wide as hell,
 Mowing like grass
 Your fresh fair virgins and your flow'ring infants. (*King Henry V* 3.3.10–14)

War strips away civilization's veneer, spreading an insidious psychic malignance that numbs us to its horrors and goads us into unleashing our foulest demons upon inhuman enemies. Indeed, "Man is 'predisposed to slide into deep, irrational hostility under certain definable conditions,'" writes pioneering sociobiologist Edward Wilson, conditions invariably present during wartime.¹² As Machiavelli writes of early medieval warfare:

All who were vanquished in battle were either put to death or carried in perpetual slavery . . . where they spent the remainder of their lives in labor and misery. If a town was taken, it was demolished or its inhabitants were stripped of their goods, dispersed all over the world, and reduced to the ultimate degree of poverty and wretchedness.¹³

The weapons of modern warfare have not assuaged this effect, for, according to foreign policy experts Angelo Codevilla and Paul Seabury, "the destructiveness, the justice or injustice, the relative mercilessness of any war never depended on the weapons available to the warriors. Rather, it depended on what was on the warriors' minds."¹⁴ Human belligerence has produced a bloody hit list that includes Carthage, Cannae, Antietam, Verdun, Nanking, Dresden, Hiroshima, and countless unrecorded battles and massacres. Consider this gruesome World War II statistic: by June of 1944, 90 percent of Russian men aged eighteen to twenty-one had been killed in battle!¹⁵ As William

Tecumseh Sherman famously opined, “It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks . . . of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell.”¹⁶

War Is Good

*One social reason for the existence of war is that peace is sometimes too costly. There are situations when it is better to send men to die on their feet than have everyone live on their knees.*¹⁷

Lawrence Keeley

And yet, there is another side to war. Ironically, it is against the backdrop of war’s chaos and carnage that many of humanity’s greatest attributes emerge. “War is part of God’s world-order,” writes Prussian general Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder), for “within it unfold the noblest virtues of men, courage and renunciation, loyalty to duty and readiness for sacrifice.”¹⁸ War is destructive, but it has also encouraged the discipline, industry, and creative energies responsible for nonviolent, life-enhancing innovations like mining, railroads, stainless steel, the Internet, weather radar, digital cameras, computers, penicillin, synthetic rubber, jet engines, canned food, blood transfusions, spacecraft, and nuclear energy. Furthermore, war is an engine of history and often a catalyst for needed change. “The belief . . . that war never solves anything,” writes Colin Gray, “soon collapses under the weight of strategic history.”¹⁹ In *War! What Is It Good For?* (2014), Stanford archaeologist Ian Morris argues that, “although war is the worst imaginable way to create larger more peaceful societies, it is pretty much the only way humans have found.”²⁰ His research indicates that “10 to 20 percent of all the people who lived in Stone Age societies died at the hands of other humans.”²¹ However, by 8000 BCE, wars had begun to consolidate humanity into larger, more stable and peaceful societies, which reduced violent death rates by an order of magnitude. “If it had been possible for men to sit still in peace without civilization,” writes famed sociologist William Graham Sumner, “they never would have achieved civilization.”²² Hence, Keegan’s claim that, “all civilisations owe their origins to the warrior.”²³

War is Darwinian, selecting for survival those with the most powerful ideas, the means to implement them, and the intellect and will to adapt and persevere over competitors. When cultures or leaders become stagnant, corrupt, or malignant, war offers a correcting mechanism. War destroys, but like a forest wildfire, it can burn away decay, leaving a better peace behind. In the right hands, war is a force *against* evil, deterring and defeating those who would employ tyranny and violence. “Greater evils would result,” writes theologian Francisco Suárez, “if war were never allowed.”²⁴ Indeed, “War is an ugly thing,” adds philosopher John Stuart Mill,

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but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing worth a war, is worse. A war to protect other human beings against tyrannical injustice; a war to give victory to their own ideas of right and good . . . is often the means of their regeneration.²⁵

Of course, judgments regarding what is right, good, or evil vary, especially between opposing sides in a war, and the ultimate arbiter is war itself; for “in war,” writes Austrian legal philosopher Hans Kelsen, “not he who is in the ‘right’ is victorious, but he who is the strongest.”²⁶

Seeking Truth

*Nowadays, anyone reflecting on war and strategy raises a barrier between his intelligence and his humanity.*²⁷

Raymond Aron

It is aptly said that truth is war’s first casualty, a fact that calls into question everything we think we know of war. As a Bedouin poet once wrote, “The sword is truer than what is told in books. In its edge is the separation between truth and falsehood.”²⁸ To find the truth, we cannot avert our gaze when war demands attention. We cannot change the subject because war seems frightening or distasteful. In fact, we should do the opposite. After all, cancer, hurricanes, and pathogens are not studied because we delight in them. Unfortunately, we too often abjure this responsibility. “War is an activity,” writes Keegan, “that modern Western man prefers to banish to the remotest corner of his consciousness.”²⁹ Perhaps this reluctance stems from fear that war, unlike other calamities, is *not* an aberration, but rather a window into dark recesses of the human psyche we would prefer to disavow. “In the intellectual and popular culture,” writes anthropologist Lawrence Keeley, “war has come to be regarded . . . as a peculiar psychosis of Western civilization.”³⁰ But is this “psychosis” a natural consequence of human interaction or an anomaly catalyzed by modernity? Does admitting our relationship to war create a self-fulfilling prophesy of unending conflict? In *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), H. G. Wells says, “The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature.”³¹ Does studying war make humanity as remorseless as war?

Though some may believe that ignoring war or embracing pre-civilizational paradigms will drive it away, self-imposed ignorance and societal regression are hardly proven methods for solving anything. No, finding practical answers to life’s challenges requires the intellectual honesty and courage to face our demons, for the “peril is not in accepting that the innate nature of war lies in the dark hearts of us all,” writes historian Victor Davis Hanson, “but rather in denying it.”³² Ultimately, if we are to gain any mastery at all over war, or any other phenomenon, we must continue to probe its mysteries. Liddell Hart once blamed statesmen, “dangerously ignorant of war,” for making “war more

difficult to avoid, more difficult to conduct successfully, and more difficult to terminate.”³³ This implies that understanding war is the key to avoiding it, reducing its intensity and duration, and winning when necessary. Indeed, Mao Tse-tung believed that comprehending war’s “peculiar laws” rendered it “predictable” and improved the probability of preventing, controlling, or even eradicating war forever.³⁴ Although predictability and eradication will likely remain aspirational, studying war will undeniably improve the *odds* of prevention, mitigation, and even control, and these are goals no rational species should reject.