Definition: War from Philip's Encyclopedia

Military combat between large communities, nations, and/or groups of nations. All-out (nuclear) war between major powers using modern weapons would undoubtedly result in what is known as 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD). Other forms of war include civil war, in which factions within one state or community struggle between themselves for supremacy, and guerrilla war, in which partisan forces harass occupying or government troops by surprise attacks. See also disarmament

Summary Article: War
From Encyclopedia of Social Problems

War is a form of social conflict between two or more collective political actors, involving the organized use of physical violence, with the central aim of coercing one political actor to comply with the will of another. In broader terms, war is a complex and highly contingent set of events and processes requiring the mobilization of power, human beings, resources, and technologies of production and communication, which dramatically interrupts routine social life and generates a new social dynamic. When political disputes over territory, resources, sovereignty, or ideology cannot be settled by negotiations, threat, hegemony, or compromise, they often lead to violent attempts to establish political will—that is, in warfare. At the most general level, war is a socially recognized violent intergroup conflict that profoundly transforms social life.

Anthropological research corroborates that, with the possible exceptions of a few tribal groupings such as the Semai of Malaysia, Andaman Islanders of India, Copper Eskimos of north Canada, and Mbutis of Congo, all known societies have been involved in warfare. Although war is a near-universal process, a consensus exists among most sociologists and anthropologists that this has little to do with the biological or psychological makeup of human beings and a great deal to do with their social and political relations. Although some primates seem capable of engaging in organized and protracted lethal conflicts, they lack collective intentionality, systematic use of weapons, sophisticated linguistic coordination, and the ritualism that characterizes human warfare. In this respect war is a distinctly human activity.

Such a view was already familiar to classical philosophers of warfare such as Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz, for whom war was a predominantly political instrument, by which distinctly human-made, political goals could be pursued. These early studies focused on strategic and logistical matters—the ability of leaders to be successful on the battlefield and the practical arts of combat—without questioning the logic or necessity of war. In contrast, contemporary social science examines war as a particular social and sociological problem, attempting to explain its social origins, political functions, and historical transformations. Above all, this research focuses on the intrinsic relationships between war, state, and modernity.

The Transformation of Warfare

With modern history of warfare so tightly bound up with the development of the state, it is no accident that some researchers argue that small tribal societies were unable to fight real wars, as this allegedly requires large-scale organization and pitched battles with more than 1,000 fatal casualties. Furthermore,
influenced by Rousseau’s myth of the noble peaceful savage, traditional views tended to agree that primitive warfare was sporadic, mostly ritualistic, rarely lethal, and limited to small groups of tribesmen. However, recent research challenges such perceptions, demonstrating not only that primitive warfare was extremely frequent but also that it was highly violent and particularly homicidal, entailing the recruitment of proportionally more combatants than most mobilized modern states such as Germany in World War II or France in World War I. What distinguishes primitive war from its modern counterpart is the birth of the state and its gradual monopolization of violence, which radically transformed the nature and scale of warfare.

As the availability of food set limits on military expansion—both the size of the armed population and the maintenance of substantial army—war in antiquity was dependent on periodic pillages and hence was often no more than organized robbery. In this context, a small technological discovery, such as the invention of war chariots, or an organizational innovation, such as the emergence of an orderly and loyal cavalry, as in the case of the nomadic tribes led by Genghis Khan, provided an overwhelming advantage in conquering large swaths of land. Notwithstanding military inventions such as crossbows and heavy armored cavalry, medieval warfare remained technologically static, essentially continuous since the time of ancient Greece or Rome. However, the newly found strength of ideology compensated for the lack of technology, as common religious beliefs became a potent source of group mobilization for Christian and Muslim warlords. Whereas Islam provided unity and social discipline for Arabian tribes, the Roman Church granted spiritual legitimacy to the European warrior caste to fight the crusades. However, in both cases war remained the preserve of a wealthy, hereditary nobility and involved lifelong specialist training.

The radical transformation of warfare began with the gunpowder revolution in the 16th century, which gave a clear advantage to the armed infantry over cavalry, as improved cannons and newly invented muskets easily overpowered pikes, swords, and crossbows. More importantly, these military changes significantly increased the cost of war, which in turn led to the centralization of power by giving birth to the modern sovereign territorial state. The gradual development of fiscal systems of effective taxation and the growth and professionalization of state bureaucracy, together with the 1648 Westphalian principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of other states, brought the military under the control of a centralized authority. In Charles Tilly's famous phrase, this was the period when states made war and war made states. The 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries saw the state thoroughly transformed from being the sole property of royal dynasties with little popular support to acquiring a semi-divine status for the great majority of its inhabitants. It was nationalism that proved the most potent glue of state legitimacy, and it was nationalism that mobilized large armies of conscripts to confront the remnants of aristocratic militias. Though the armies of Napoleon and Frederick the Great had almost identical armaments, it was the nationalist zeal of France’s revolutionary army that proved to be the tipping point that ultimately won the war between them that ended with the Treaty of Basel in 1795.

**War and Modernity**

Beginning in the mid-19th century, the second military revolution industrialized warfare and cemented its institutional bond with the nation-state, thus penetrating even further into society. The rapid development of science, technology, and industry radically transformed the conditions of warfare. The invention and mass production of steamships, telegraphs, canned food, railways, and automatic weapons made armies well fed, well equipped, well organized, and highly mobile. The nation-state
emerged as a powerful territorially compact machine, reinforced by technological and industrial developments and capable of sustaining massive conscript armies. World Wars I and II were the epitome of industrialized total wars where the resources of the nation-state, including all healthy men and women, transport, trade, industrial production, and communications, were at the disposal of the nation-state at war. The war became a conflict not just between two armies but between entire populations. Mass production, mass politics, and mass communications mobilized for mass destruction, as total war eliminated the distinction between state and society, military and civilian, and public and private spheres. Nevertheless, not only did the nation-state and mass armies appear together but also mass participation in total wars had a direct impact on the development of citizenship rights. It is no accident that a more inclusive society, together with the extension of suffrage and the development of the welfare state, emerged after two total wars, with military obligations intrinsically linked to citizenship rights.

Although nuclear weapons and the Soviet and American hegemonic geopolitical balance made war more or less safely cold for most of the latter half of the 20th century, the collapse of communism triggered structural instability, creating conditions for the new forms of warfare. These new wars, linked to the processes of globalization, are two dominant types: predatory warfare and risk transfer war. Predatory war emerges in the context of failing post–cold war nation-states where new political elites rely on identity politics to mobilize ethnic and religious sentiments among the population. Employing paramilitaries and remnants of the collapsing state structure, these nation-states politicize cultural difference and wage genocidal wars on civilians while at the same time acquiring personal wealth and maintaining a hold on power. Wars based on the transfer of risk are waged by the most technologically advanced countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Their focus is on minimizing life risks to Western military personnel and consequently on minimizing electoral and political risks to the state leadership by transferring these risks directly to the weaker enemy. From the Falkland war of 1982, to the Gulf, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars, the reliance on technologically sophisticated weapons helps create the systematic transfer of risks from elected politicians to the military personnel and from them to the enemy combatants and their civilians. When the choice is between (foreign) civilian lives and the lives of Western soldiers, soldiers always have priority. These two forms of warfare are deeply interlinked by the forces of globalization as they erupt in the empty space that separates the coordinated machinery of global markets from the incoherent and disconnected forms of localized politics.

See also
Arms Control; Citizenship; Militarism; Social Revolutions; War Crimes

Further Readings

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