

WAR

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“Human Nature” Analysis of whether people are naturally warlike or not is not as straightforward as might be expected. There does seem, in the archeological record of early societies, a common proclivity to some individual violence – murder or assault, which skeletal evidence reveals. But mass violence is less established. The first war that leaves any record is quite late—around 9000 BCE in northeastern Africa, featuring lots of human remains with heads bashed in. This may reflect the kind of overcrowding that was helping to bring the dependence on hunting and gathering to an end. Prior to that point, gift exchange and other rituals were used to reduce the chance for collective violence among groups, and even more groups threatened with conflict may simply have moved on.

Agriculture Agriculture unquestionably generated more proclivities for war. There were now settled societies with surpluses that might attract raiders, and agricultural peoples could not easily pick up stakes and move away. Tensions between agricultural societies, with peasants who were not particularly warlike, and nomadic societies clearly on occasion generated war. The rise of formal governments, from 3500 BCE onward, included a small professional military contingent, probably designed for defense but easy to convert into an offensive force; offense might help content and compensate the military itself, and bring further glory to often vainglorious new rulers. Many Mesopotamian rulers clearly became entranced with war and conquest as signs of success; but there was variety here, Egyptian rulers for example less dependent on this criterion. It was early in the agricultural period that humans began to fashion equipment that was just useful in war, the first example being a stone mace. It’s still wise to be cautious. Too much war was terrible for agriculture, and early wars often saw the combatants simply call a halt during planting and harvest seasons. Early religions, among agricultural peoples, probably accentuated gods of war, but they also sometimes peace figures in the pantheon as well. Many agricultural communities began to use some of the surplus to build walls around villages or cities, a sign of the problem of war but also a means of encouraging some periods of peace.

Weaponry Several agricultural societies, but also some nomadic groups from central Asia, began introducing additional weaponry, based often on increased metal use and domestication of animals. Use of horses was sometimes combined with wheeled, sword-bearing chariots. Metal began to replace leather and wood in shields. Knowledge of bows and arrows spread. From nomadic groups came devices like the stirrup, that improved the ability to fight from horseback. Formal governments devised new tactics, like the tight-knit legions of the Roman Empire, and also expanded the capacity for military recruitment, raising larger armies. Innovation extended of course to the introduction of explosive powder, in postclassical China, and then its incorporation with the production of guns in 14th-century Europe.

Regional Variation Wars dot the history of virtually every agricultural civilization, but some were more war-like than others. As noted, Egypt was less focused on war than Mesopotamia was, preferring negotiation. Mesopotamia, more open to invasion from central Asia, saw far more conflict and more regimes bent on territorial expansion. The Roman Empire, the result of conquest, became dependent on expansion to help reward troops and generals, and also to provide captive slaves. Victory columns in Rome celebrated the military achievements of key leaders. The Chinese empire, though expansionist, was less focused on war, and military success was less celebrated than bureaucratic competence and scholarship. The great classical Chinese treatise on war, by Sun Tzu, urged that military action should be a last resort, undertaken very reluctantly. Warfare within India was not uncommon – the warrior caste stood second to the priests in the hierarchy—but it did not spill beyond the subcontinent. Variation continued in the postclassical period and beyond. Feudal societies, in Western Europe and Japan, both reflected and encouraged strong emphasis on military qualities for the aristocracy. African kingdoms generated frequent wars, in part in the quest for slaves. Russia, pushing out the Mongol overlords in the 15th century, launched a tradition of military expansion that would extend into the 20th century. But some regions were less committed, and there was always a possibility for change. Thus Japan, encountering European guns in the 16th century, ultimately decided on a policy of substantial isolation in order to reduce the possibility of invasion; this included strict controls over the number of guns made annually (sometimes as few as seven) as well as new shogunate limitation of internal warfare.

The Early Modern Period Not surprisingly, a period sometimes called the “age of the gunpowder empires” saw a heightened reliance on war in several societies. The Ottoman Empire launched a series of expansion efforts that

ended only in the late 17th century with the failure to capture Vienna. As with Rome earlier, conquests long seemed vital to reward military leaders. Many African rulers participated in the slave trade mainly in exchange for access to European guns, to be used in regional warfare. Russia's recurrent wars continued the process of recurrent expansion. Topping the list were West Europeans themselves, who used guns and seapower to gain increasingly, though not total, over major commercial routes as well as to develop their overseas colonies. Within Europe itself, Hapsburg expansionism (combining the resources of Austria and Spain) was replaced in the 17th century with French expansionism, both promoting a series of recurrent wars. The Seven Years War (1756-63) primarily pitted the French against the British for colonial dominance, with battles in India, North America, on the seas as well as within Europe and ultimately leading to more than a century of British imperial dominance. While other wars occurred, increasingly global military activity depended particularly on European rivalries and European militarism, into the early 20th century. Finally, European military activity, particularly from the 17th century onward, was marked by improved organization: better training for officers, clearer hierarchies within the army, and other innovations such as formal uniforms, some effort at medical care for troops, and systems of supply that did not require armies to live off the land.

The Long 19th Century European military rivalries obviously revived during the revolutionary-Napoleonic period, the last expression of French military expansionism that finally ended in defeat. But in terms of the history of war the period as a whole was defined primarily first, by the huge increase in military capacity associated with industrialization, and second, by its expression in the new wave of imperialism that pitted modern military forces against larger but more traditional resistance. Industrialization accelerated the production of guns. Particularly important was the development of standardization of parts, which allowed mechanization to replace craft production. At the same time new weaponry included both more mobile and larger cannon, the introduction of the repeating rifle, and a bit later the first versions of the machine gun. Industrial transportation – steamships and railroads – accelerated the movement of troops and supplies, making it easier for European forces to move around the world but also upstream in places like China and Africa. Military organization and training continued to evolve, and Europeans also introduced the concept of mass conscription, beginning with the French revolution, that generalized military service in a number of European countries. The result of these various changes – but particularly the revolution in military output and technology – was a series of invasions that brought European control of virtually the whole of Africa and additional parts of Asia and Oceania, often pitting very small forces against tens of thousands of local troops. Only occasionally did Europe lose, aside from temporary setbacks: notably, the Italians in Ethiopia (in 1896) and the British in Afghanistan. The process of European military activity led countries like Russia and, particularly, Japan to “modernize” their military apparatus, both in organizational structure and in technology, and to begin to imitate the implicit European assumption that military expansion was a logical and legitimate expression of state power. Finally, though the decades between 1815 and 1914 did not see any all-out wars among the industrial powers, the United States Civil War served as an early example of the devastation of conflict involving two sides with access to the new kinds of weaponry; German and particularly Italian unifications generated substantial casualties; and there were also two episodes of major violence in southern Africa, the first involving Zulu initiative early in the century, the second pitting British against Afrikaaner settlers in the Boer War. Several of these conflicts rate in the top 30 in history in terms of bloodshed.

The Contemporary Period The World Wars and the development of military aviation and rocketry, including new bombs and new modes of transmission, constitute the leading developments during the past century. World War I was a horrible war, against some blithe nationalistic optimism among the combatants in 1914. Millions were killed (17 million, to be more exact) or maimed, and while the most bitter fighting occurred in various parts of Europe and the Ottoman Empire, there was also conflict in the Pacific and in Africa. The war introduced tanks, poison gas, long distance cannon bombardments, and the first military uses of airplanes, along with bitter trench warfare that could reward any offensive effort with literally hundreds of thousands of deaths in a few days. The interwar period was marked by Japanese military activity in China, featuring several offensives against civilian targets, and bitter fighting in Spain including Italian and German participation. Italian invasion of Ethiopia was essentially a final example of earlier types of imperialist conquest. World War II, bloodier and more global still, was particularly noteworthy for extensive bombing of civilian targets, by virtually all the combatants; and of course, at the end, with the first and thus far only use of nuclear weaponry. The Cold War, with the United States taking a superpower role for the first time, saw unprecedented escalation in the size and sophistication of military forces in what was, usually, technically peacetime, along with several fierce regional conflicts. At least as important, along with decolonization, was the acquisition of new military capacity by a number of middle-size states, including several in the Middle East, that could lead to new regional wars – Iran-Iraq was the most devastating – and to more complex

relationships with the two “superpowers”. The period of easy invasion of “nonwestern” regions was over, though several conflicts in the early 21st century highlighted a disparity between the capacity to bomb and an ability to achieve decisive military outcome. Additionally, reliance on guerrilla warfare and terrorism showed other paths for military effort, the first sometimes successful against conventional military forces, the second unsettling but thus far unsuccessful.

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Suggested Reading:

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The First World War: A Concise Global History. By William Kelleher Storey (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II. By Gerhard L. Weinberg (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Waging War: Conflict, Culture, and Innovation in World History. By Wayne E. Lee (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Discussion

1. How and why did war change with the rise of agriculture?
2. What caused the Peloponnesian Wars? How did these wars contribute to the beginnings of international relations theory?
3. What role has military technology played in the formation of empires? Compare the military role in empire in the classical period to that in the early modern centuries,
4. How and why did Western Europe become an unusually warlike society?
5. What was the early modern “military revolution”? Where did it start? Did other regions experience similar changes?
6. How did societies acquire new military technology? As an example, how did the diffusion of military technology impact the Ottoman Empire in the early modern period?
7. What is the concept of total war, and how useful is it in describing changes in the nature of 20th century war?