Why do wars begin?

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Why do wars begin? The simple answer is they never end. Peace is an illusion conjured up by a version of the old Roman magic trick: 'Where they make a desolation, they call it peace.' The full implications of Tacitus's oft-quoted observation can be translated like this: 'Use your advanced military technology and overwhelming superiority in human and natural resources to create a wasteland. Call it peace. The people back home will believe you. They want to believe in their own benignity.'

Do you doubt this? Then notice that peace always comes with qualifiers. Take A. J. P. Taylor's explanation of the widespread romantic innocence that the 'war to end all wars' shattered: '(T)here had been no war between the Great Powers since 1871. No man in the prime of life knew what war was like.' In August 1914, the nearly 22,000 British soldiers who died in South Africa between 1899 and 1902 were not around to tell stories. Those among the 425,000 Boer War veterans who were still alive were past their prime. And South Africa was not a great power – nor were the Zulus, Ashanti, Afghanis or other peoples butchered in colonial wars throughout this period of European peace.

War is endless. As Paul Fussell remarks in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975): 'The idea of endless war as an inevitable condition of modern life would seem to have become seriously available to the imagination around 1916.' He catalogues the wars that have made the imagined real: the Spanish civil war, the Second World War, the Greek civil war, the Korean War,

the Arab-Israeli war and the Vietnam War. Orwell published the canonical modern myth of eternal war in 1948. Events have proved him prescient and timeless. Ancient Greek history had already proved him right.

Among recent students of war, Philip Bobbitt, in *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (2002), comes closest to seeing war for what it is. He thinks and writes from the perspective of modern nation states and international diplomacy, but his title alludes to Homer's *Iliad*, and he begins by considering Thucydides' reassessment of the stops and starts in what the Athenian general-in-exile eventually identified as a continuous war that ravaged the entire known world. We now call it the Peloponnesian War and place it at 431–404 BC, thereby creating the comforting illusion that the founders of our Western cultural tradition unwisely let war out of its cage for a nearly disastrously long time, but eventually forced it back inside. However, endless war was an inevitable condition of ancient Greek life.

Thucydides, like other Greeks, distinguished between periods of formally declared war and periods of official peace. But he also knew the primary texts of Hesiod and Homer and enough about contemporary diplomatic and strategic affairs, and human nature, to grasp that *eris*, 'strife, contention, political discord', was a constant force within and among the ancient Greek *poleis*, or city states, and that competing elements within most *poleis* or the controlling powers within individual *poleis* would find, with terrible regularity, true causes (*aitiai*) or pretexts (*prophaseis*) for open civil or interstate warfare. Thucydides took for granted that they would do so single-mindedly in their own interests.

Bobbitt similarly argues that the major armed conflicts of the twentieth century make up a single epochal war, the 'long war of the nation state' and that between 1914 and 1990, 'despite often lengthy periods in which there [was] no armed conflict, the various

engagements of the war never decisively settle[d] the issues that manage[d] to reassert themselves through conflict'. If they were alive today, Thucydides and Herodotus would agree with Bobbitt that the periods of so-called peace were intervals when the competing nation states were inevitably preparing for the next phase of open war, even if citizens and leaders of these nation states believed peace had really come.

For the 'long war' view, read Herodotus' prose *Iliad* about the fifth-century war that defined his times. Herodotus wrote about the millennium-long aggressive dance between Greeks and non-Greeks that culminated in the two Persian wars between 490 and 479 BC. Everything in his sprawling nine-book amalgamation of geography, ethnography, anthropology, journalism, history and field recordings of folk tradition relates to the growth of power, the intricate thread of causation and the fundamental differences in defining cultural attitudes that brought allied Greek and Persian forces into confrontation at Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea.

Herodotus would recognise the continuation of his long war between East and West in the current conflicts and tensions involving Israelis and Palestinians, the US and terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda, the Greeks and Turks on Cyprus, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman was being Herodotean in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (1995) when he observed that Arabs, Jews and Christians in Lebanon and Israel were 'caught in a struggle between the new ideas, the new relationships, the new nations they were trying to build for the future, and the ancient memories, the ancient passions and ancient feuds that kept dragging them back into the past'. And the past means war.

Thucydides tracks how a new strain of war virus, Athenian imperial aggression, develops and spreads in a 'long war' between superpower-dominated city-state coalitions that, like Bobbitt's twentieth-century war,

lasts nearly eighty years. Thucydides' 'long war' begins with a fifty-year cold war between an established superpower necessarily conservative in foreign policy (Sparta) and an emerging superpower addicted to its own superabundant interventionist energies (Athens). The Athenian virus eventually drives Athens and Sparta and their allies into a twenty-seven-year world war.

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* does not so much analyse why war begins as study how and why war, as an assumed near-constant, reaches new levels of violence, what forms it takes and why human beings aid war.

The best way to see what Thucydides has to say about why wars start is to read Paul Woodruff's annotated 1993 translation with commentary, *On Justice, Power and Human Nature: The Essence of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War*. By far the most important of these subjects is 'power'.

Thucydides compresses Herodotus' nine books into a twenty-five-paragraph analysis of the growth of power in Greek prehistory and history. He demonstrates that human communities are organised for Darwinian competitive purposes, to acquire and then exploit and defend the limited natural resources available to them. The more successful will convert the energies they have mobilised to ensure their survival into aggressive acquisition of resources, and subjugation of rival communities, to improve the security and material well-being of their own citizens. Dominant states will develop high cultures and use high-minded concepts and ideals to disguise their aggressions.

Like fifth-century BC Athenians, modern Europeans and Americans can afford to be concerned about abstract concepts such as justice. Because of our successful use of force in the past and present, we control and consume an imperial share of the world's resources and believe in the illusion of peace. Thucydides concentrates on resources, power and state self-

sufficiency (*autarkeia*). He juxtaposes his analyses of Pericles' funeral oration, the plague in Athens and Pericles' last speech to tell us all we need to know about imperial self-conceptions promulgated as self-justifying political spin, the fragile nature of codes of civilised human behaviour, and the need for unflinching use of military power to gain and secure empire.

If war is a stern teacher, the Greeks were very sternly taught. Lincoln MacVeagh, US ambassador to Greece, observed in a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt on Christmas Day 1940, 'The history of Greece is at least 50 per cent discord.' A.G. Woodhead, author of the standard guide to Greek historical inscriptions, quotes MacVeagh to correct him: 'Ninety-five per cent, on the record as we have it, would be nearer the mark.' War was reality in ancient Greece. I doubt whether many families during any of the four generations of fifth-century Athens were without the experience of a father, husband, brother, son or close male relative risking or losing his life in battle. The city itself was under virtual siege conditions for much of the final three decades of its one truly great century. In a single six-year operation in Egypt mid-century, the Athenians lost an estimated 8,000 men, roughly 18 to 25 per cent of their adult male population. And, according to conservative estimates, the Athenians would have had their own 'lost generation' during the Peloponnesian War, in which at least 30,000 adult male citizens died.

The Greeks would have had no illusions about war and peace of the sort that prompted Freud at the outset of the First World War to write his essay 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death: I. The Disillusionment of the War'. Freud attributes the trauma caused by the Great War to the enormous chasm between the artificial morality of modern civilised society and human behaviour in times of war. No such chasm existed in the fifth century BC. Young men learned about war from the *Iliad*. Homer's epic showed

them the true costs of war and it portrayed the many contradictions in human behaviour within an army on active campaign and within a city state under siege.

No Greek would ever have forgotten that his community was constantly under threat from rival communities. The plays of Aristophanes convey an appreciation of the benefits for common citizens of a cessation of armed conflict. But an Athenian farmer would never have mistaken the absence of active campaigning for what we call peace, and he would be perplexed that we have to ask why wars begin.

Further reading

Philip Bobbitt: *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002)

S. Freud: 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death: I. The Disillusionment of the War', in E. Jones (ed.), *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers* (Basic Books, 1959), vol. 4, pp. 288–304.

Paul Fussell: *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975)

J. Rich and G. Shipley (eds): *War and Society in the Greek World* (Routledge, 1993)

R.B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides* (Simon & Schuster, 1996)

L. Tritle: *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival* (Routledge, 2000)

P. Woodruff (ed. and trans.): *On Justice, Power and Human Nature: The Essence of Thucydides' History of the Peleponnesian War* (Hackett, 1993).

Commentary by Peter Furtado
Editor of History Today

New Zealander David Low summed it up perfectly. In a cartoon for the *Evening Standard* in May 1943, he depicted a herd of sheep gathered outside an imposing government building to hear the crocodiles, snakes and vultures on the podium announce: 'My friends, we have failed. We just couldn't control your warlike passions.' Here, ironically counterpointed, are two of the traditional explanations for the outbreak of war: popular (sometimes nationalist) passion and elite calculation, the former tragically compounded by gullibility and the latter brutally by cynicism.

The word 'war' claims a certain dignity to its operations and obviously means more than 'absence of peace', but it is not easy to define. Only a small proportion of history's large-scale outbreaks of violence began with some kind of formal declaration or even at an identifiable moment. Exactly when a raid, a vendetta, a rebellion – or a police operation – becomes a war often depends on who is doing the defining, and why. Some, like historian John Keegan, see the 'Western way of warfare', with two clearly defined armies locked together in a killing spree, as normative, but there are many other forms.

Some wars are exercises in grabbing loot or land, pure and simple – and many cultures have made no apologies about this: the Germanic tribes that took over the Roman Empire, and the Mongol hordes that built up the largest land empire the world has ever known, sought no further justification for their actions. But others – and this is particularly true in the case of wars fought by settled civilisations with developed moral codes – in a tradition dating back at least to the writings of St Augustine in late antiquity, felt it imperative to define a 'just war' and assert the justice of the cause of the day before urging others to die for it.

Just as it takes two to argue, so it takes two to make a war. Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938 – however immoral – did not involve war, whereas the invasion of Poland the next year did because it was actively resisted, first by the Poles and then by their allies, France and Britain. The fact that both sides have to opt to fight explains why so often both sides can claim they are fighting defensively.

There has long been a pessimistic argument that conflict between humans is a natural condition. A variation of this is the Marxist belief in the inevitability of conflict between classes, and between the states that represent class interests. Such arguments pass the question of the origin of war back to the philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, psychologists and biologists. But it is historians who can account for particular outbreaks at particular times. For if these disciplines tell us it is somehow inevitable for humans to show a propensity for war, then they throw up further questions: why is warfare not permanent and universal? why and how do wars end? why and how do people strive to prevent them or organise affairs so that they can be avoided altogether?

One explanation is that if, as nineteenth-century military strategist Carl von Clausewitz proposed, warfare is an extension of politics by other means, then logically politics is also a substitute for warfare, and so the profession of diplomacy aims to manage conflict without resort to violence. Diplomats have a stake in maintaining the status quo, or allowing change in small, manageable steps, whereas warriors look for cataclysmic and sudden change. Wars occur when diplomacy fails to allow for the necessary steps to occur smoothly or quickly enough – and the reasons can be varied. A.J.P.Taylor, in his work on the origins of war in the twentieth century, argued – to the dismay of many – that it might occur without any party having responsibility for the breakdown in order.

Not all breakdowns in international relations occur as a result of the decisions of the elite: some conflicts are simply too visceral to be managed rationally through diplomatic channels, perhaps the results of ideological, religious, nationalist or racist hatreds arising from popular feeling. Here, there may indeed be a popular clamour for war, though it may be manipulated by those who stand to gain from the conflict. The balance between popular demand and internal politics is often debated: Fritz Fischer's study of the origins of the First World War, for example, saw the bellicosity of the Kaiser as primarily a matter of the internal management of German public opinion in the years up to 1914.

The *casus belli* may mask underlying causes that reflect long-term shifts in the relative power of the opposing forces, perhaps as one develops economically or technologically more quickly than the other. Another way of looking at this is to claim that the wars are

actually stimulated by economic conflict (the old Marxist approach) or technological conflict – whether a race to control resources or the opportunity given to one party by its overwhelming superiority. But the decline of historical determinism makes it clear that such factors cannot be considered alone, irrespective of the choices made by political and military elites.

The fact is, the outbreak of a war cannot be explained purely in terms of the strategic needs of generals, or the desires of politicians, or the demands of bankers, or the allure of armaments, or the hypocrisy of the priesthood, or the blindness of the people, or even the wickedness of human nature, important though all those may be. As Jeremy Black emphasises later in this book, full historical explanation also requires consideration of the cultural context, in particular the mindset and value systems of the leaderships of both parties. Some political systems are more likely to opt for war than others. The religious system that sustained the Aztec Empire in the 1500s saw war and sacrifice as a path to honour, and the entire Aztec social and economic system was built on the fighting of regular wars which would supply the prisoners whose blood sacrifice could feed the gods. Some interpretations of Islam promise paradise to those who sacrifice themselves in a holy war – bellicose policy is more likely to be found in a state where such interpretations predominate. Conversely, democracies like to believe they are notoriously reluctant to go to war, at least with one another.

No single explanation of war-making can embrace Aztec and Panzer, Mongol horde and Wellingtonian regiment. It is more fruitful to consider the circumstances that make rational men and women consider fighting to be a worthwhile option. Using hindsight to explain this can only diminish the weight of the original moment of decision.

Historians have always been fascinated by wars. Thucydides and Xenophon saw war as the result of political calculation and shifts in the balance of power, although both considered the wars they described as cultural clashes between two distinct and ultimately antagonistic world views – to Thucydides between the democratic Athenians and the conservative and oligarchic Spartans; to Xenophon between the imperial, oriental, tyrannical Persians and the federal, freedom-loving, nationalistic and decent Greeks.

To Roman historians Livy and Caesar, war was a natural

function of the state, something justified by the very successes in Roman arms that they chronicled. The historians and chroniclers of the Christian Middle Ages, led by the Venerable Bede, saw history as having a didactic meaning, tending to see the suffering caused by war as God's punishment for wickedness, and success in war as a sign of divine favour.

These two approaches, the realistic and the moralistic – supplemented by the structuralist approach that argues that wars are an inevitable result of fundamental contradictions in the system of power – have dominated discussion up to our own day. Plus, perhaps, the cock-up theory. While long-term causes were popular in the Marxist 1960s and 1970s, they have since fallen prey to revisionism: for example, the English Civil War was seen by Marxist historian Christopher Hill in the 1960s to have had long-term economic causes and deep intellectual roots in the transition from a feudal society to a commercial one, whereas today most historians, led by Conrad Russell, prefer to see the war as the result of short-term miscalculations and point out that no one foresaw it, even twelve months before hostilities broke out.

Not surprisingly, the wars that have seen the most debate over their outbreak are the two world wars of the twentieth century. While Fischer blamed the German high command for challenging British supremacy and destabilising the balance of power in Europe, others saw the First World War as resulting from a calculated risk by Germany that got out of hand; a third approach takes the focus away from Germany and blames the intellectual and cultural environment of Europe, while a fourth (recently argued by British historian Niall Ferguson) suggests the entire thing could have been avoided if the British foreign secretary had played his hand more subtly in the summer of 1914. Of course, these do not have to be mutually exclusive.

These arguments have a direct bearing on attitudes to the Treaty of Versailles, which itself is often seen as the contributory cause of the rise of Hitler and the return of war in 1939. Indeed, some historians (such as Michael Howard) prefer to consider the two wars part of a single conflict interrupted by a twenty-year truce. But the fact that the two major wars of the twentieth century were started by Germany led some to seek their origins in the bellicose character of the German nation – an approach adapted by Daniel

Goldhagen for his *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, a study of the place of anti-Semitism in German culture. For most, the Second World War was fought to end Hitler's plan of Continental domination and to avert the consequences of the Nazi–Soviet pact.

Fresh life has been breathed into all these questions by the war in Iraq, and historians have been as divided as any other group on its rights and wrongs. But they have probably been less noisy than in the debate on the 'war on terror' in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, when they debated the question of a historic 'clash of civilisations' between Islam and the West, as Samuel P. Huntington had argued. The typical historian's counter to Huntington's assertions was a sceptical one, with an appeal to caution and complexity, and attention to the specifics of when, where, who and how.