

War in the Modern Age

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The absence of large-scale conflict in Europe since 1945, the extent to which expeditionary warfare had only limited consequences for metropole societies, especially after 1975, combined with the argument that nuclear weaponry has made war obsolescent, have all led to a failure among part of the Western public to appreciate the centrality of war and conflict to the modern condition. As a consequence, societies have been, indeed are, on the eve of war to a degree greater than they appreciate. This suggestion is also grounded in another observation, namely that wars at a distance, geographically or chronologically, are very important for modern culture and of repeated relevance for collective experience and identity. The centrality in post-1945 public memory of issues/episodes such as the Holocaust, the Algerian War, Vietnam, and the Gulf Wars, underline this psychological point and emphasise the significance of the conference.

Cultural references and the cultural perspective are significant. Specific conflicts are anticipated or predicted as part of a more general psychology of conflict, just as bellicosity leads to war. This is a situation seen within the experience of those present, with the Cold War, and then with the supposed War on Terror/ Clash of Civilisations. It was also seen with earlier confrontations and conflicts, particularly leading up to the beginning of World War One in 1914, as well as with the pre-1939 confrontations between ideologies and states. War-planning

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thus rested on a political mobilisation in which significant levels of resource were devoted to preparations for conflict, a political mobilisation that, in turn, looked to cultural preconditions.

This approach plays through historical debates in a number of ways. The most important is directly relevant to the current debate on the origins of World War One. For this, as well as for many other wars, there is, alongside the emphasis on the actions of a small number of leading figures, a discussion in terms of the supposed structure of the international system; but with this structure considered in a cultural light as much, or more, than with regard to the systemic interaction of state actors.

Such an assumption underlines the extent to which history, including the history of war, relates not only to what happened in the past, but also to how we today make sense of the past in terms of the suppositions of the present. In short, an emphasis on cultural approaches to the background of conflict serves, like the earlier and still current “war and society” approach to military history, to offer an account suitable for a democratic age and one in which there is concern with and for the activism of the public.

The cultural approach offers much because it helps explain the context within which decisions are taken. To a historian, the cultural approach to conflict is particularly valuable because it explicitly seeks an engagement with the content and means of history, and is fully engaged with conceptual and methodological approaches. The cultural approach thus makes sense of the eve of war in terms of a total culture. In part, this approach will relate to the strains within this culture, but there is also the issue of its very drive and dynamism. The two can be related, not least by thinking of cultural factors not as free-floating variables but as responses to particular problems.

In this context, the last century and a half can be presented as posing specific problems in terms of the response to population growth, industrialisation, urbanisation, and related social changes. There was pronounced unease among conservatives about the extent and consequences of change, and on the Left about the dire and demeaning, indeed denaturing conditions of the bulk of the population. Religious commentators were worried about atheism and doubt.

As a result of these and related concerns, there was unease at the process and consequences of a volatility that appeared increasingly systemic. This cultural angst played out in policy terms in a number of results, not least in encouraging the idea that action was required by individual states in order to prevent the collapse of their relative situation, a position that was very much to be taken by the German leadership in the early 1910s, but also by others.

The resort to war as the product of concern about the general situation links the specificities of particular political circumstances to the more general issue of pre-war circumstances. In doing so, there is a turn to systemic background features, both cultural and structural. Conflict and strife as a measure and product of strength was a supposition that was culturally significant. As a reminder, however, of the complexities and ambiguities of cultural drive, this supposition had a variety of bases. These included the assumption that struggle expressed and secured masculinity, and thus kept both society and civilisation vital, a view, for example, that both the nationalists and the futurists could share in Italy. There was also the intellectual and political conviction that such struggle was a central feature of natural and human existence and development. These beliefs might seem optimistic because dynamic, but there was a sense of anxiety based on the belief that the present situation was necessarily unstable and also prone to decline, decay and degeneration. Such a fate apparently could only be avoided by vigilance, effort and sacrifice.

This cultural anxiety was accentuated by concerns about the alleged consequences of industrial society, urban living and democratic populism. Doubts about the strength of masculinity in the face of cultural and social changes were related to worries about national degeneration in the context of a belief in a Darwinian competition between nations and races, a competition that was seen as inherently violent. This approach rested on a false understanding and a corruption of Darwinian theory from “survival of the fittest”, which, as originally conceived, did not apply to states or peoples or groups within society, but to species and adaptations within species, for which the dynamics were different. Thus, Darwin’s arguments were misused to justify aggression and domination.

These factors were accentuated by the apparent exigencies of an international system in which the only choice seemed to be between growth and decay, empire and impotence. To fail to act was, allegedly, to be doomed to failure. These factors encouraged bellicosity, or at least an acceptance that war might be noble and strengthening, as well as necessary.

Cultural factors helped support the willingness of governments to declare war. Fatalism encouraged the resort to conflict, as did the potent cult of honour of the period, and a degree of militarism far greater than in the early twenty-first century. The situation on the eve of World War Two was different to that a quarter-century earlier in that there was a greater reluctance to turn to conflict, a reluctance seen in the character and extent of British and French popular support for Appeasement. The adventurism and conceit of the dictators rested on more than their warped personalities; it was also the product of a political-ideologi-

cal system in which conflict and hatred appeared natural, and violence against civilians all too possible. In contrast, Britain and France came into the war as guarantors of a state, Poland, and not as members of an aggressive pact. The same was even more apparent in the case of America which, in December 1939, was attacked by Japan, without any prior declaration of war, and then had Germany declare war.

Revisionism can and will chip away, but the overwhelming picture was cultural: the democratic powers lacked the aggressive ethos, ideology, methods and alliance systems of their dictatorial counterparts. Thus, there was considerable weight behind their propaganda claims. Ironically, in the Fascist ideology, this very lack of aggression constituted a pathology of weakness that was linked to democracy and to racial stereotyping. This crude categorisation of “otherness” was central to the cultural language of the dictatorial powers, notably Nazi Germany. Violence was at the heart of Nazism. Indeed, it was a creed that required the destruction of alleged enemies. All were linked: domestic dissidence, the Nazis claimed, had to be prevented in order to strengthen Germany for war. As a consequence, the cultural frame was transformed. For example, the Third Reich’s “state bishops” recast the Bible and produced a grotesquely distorted “official” version of the Sermon on the Mount.

In turn, the war was recorded in light of this culture of conflict. For example, Allied failure in 1940 was presented in terms of an entire military and political culture that was supposedly weak and defective, a charge that was of great significance at the time and that has been important subsequently. This vitalist argument about cultural weakness was employed by the Germans as well as by French collaborators keen to discredit the Third Republic. In practice, there were more specific military and political factors at play in German success and French defeat.

Political violence was a key element in Hitler’s decision to attack the Soviet Union in 1941, transforming an alliance negotiated in 1939 into the largest land conflict of World War Two. Hitler was convinced that a clash with Communism was inevitable, as well as necessary, and shaped the reading of intelligence reports and the planning of the war accordingly. Moreover, this war was linked to the existential struggle he launched with Jews. To Hitler and his supporters, “International Jewry” was responsible for Germany’s plight and therefore had to be destroyed in order to advance the German cause. His meta-historical goal of racial superiority, especially over Slavs, and of the slaughter of all Jews, was not possible without total victory.

A lack of any real understanding of the values of other societies also characterised Japan, both as far as China was concerned, and also in encouraging the

attack on Britain and the USA in 1941. A misleading conviction of the internal weakness of the opposing systems led the Japanese to a failure to judge resolve accurately. In particular, there was a conviction that Britain and the USA lacked the willpower of Japan and its ally Germany. The British and Americans were believed to be weakened by democracy and consumerism, an extrapolation of authoritarian views within Japanese politics onto other states. In the event, the initial Japanese ability to mount successful attacks, to gain great swathes of territory, and to establish an apparent stranglehold on the Far East and the Western Pacific behind a defensive perimeter, did not deter the Americans from the long-term effort of driving back and destroying Japanese power.

Thus, decisions for war represented assessments of need and risk that reflected cultural factors. Ideas were located in a context of suspicion and hatred that cannot be adequately discussed in an alternative context of state actors understood as optimal rational actors.