WAR AND THE WEST

By Williamson Murray

No detached observer of 1450 would have picked Western Europe as the most likely group to break out from their isolation and become dominant among the world's civilizations. The Ottoman Empire, China, India, and perhaps even the Mongols all appeared far more promising candidates for world hegemony. The Western Europeans were almost always at war with each other, the only thing they possessed in common being religion--and soon that too would fracture into a Protestant northern Europe and a Catholic southern Europe. The very divisiveness of that community of states provided Western Europe with the competition and combativeness to advance in pursuits ranging from science and technology to political theories, but a key arena of competition remained war.

Today, Westerners tend to believe that peace, not war, is the natural order of things. In fact, historically speaking, peace is not the natural order. As military historian Sir Michael Howard suggested in *The Invention of Peace* (2000), peace "is artificial, intricate and highly volatile." It requires cultural homogeneity, education, and a highly qualified elite.

Few periods have been marked by such characteristics. The *pax Romana* (30 BCE-235 CE) may represent such a period, but the peace of the Mediterranean world rested entirely on the tough Roman legionaries who guarded the empire's frontiers. German tribes and internal dissenters alike could attest to the ferocity of Rome's army.

Rome's military success did not rest on superior technology but on its ability to put highly trained and disciplined forces out on the field of battle. The Romans' advantage looked quite similar to that which U.S. forces enjoyed in Iraq throughout the 2003 campaign (in every picture from that war where U.S. troops are not firing their weapons, their fingers are on the trigger guard, not the trigger). So regularized was the ruthless Roman training system that at the height of the empire the four legions deployed in Britain would have trained, looked, and fought in a fashion similar to the legions stationed in Syria on the Euphrates frontier or in the desert sands of North Africa.

Victor Davis Hanson has argued on a number of occasions that the model the Western militaries have used to obtain their superiority has been that of the Greek phalanx.[1] I would argue that it was the Romans to whom the Western Europeans turned in search of a model of military discipline. But the Roman model would not be recreated for over a millennium.

The period that followed the fall of the Roman Empire suggests how tenuous peace has been in most periods of history. In the third and fourth centuries, the *pax Romana* collapsed. A series of ferocious barbarian invasions followed over the next six centuries, culminating in the Viking raids of the tenth and eleventh centuries. From the seventh century on, the Europeans not only confronted constant pressure from Saracen infidels on the frontiers of the Balkans, Sicily, and particularly Spain, they were also more than willing to wage war against themselves. The medieval world was in unremitting conflict. Internecine wars between and among kings, nobles, and knights and mercenaries fell on the backs of the peasants and emerging towns.

The Hundred Years War between France and England did see truces between the major contestants, and there were only three major battles--Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt-- during that prolonged period of combat. But even during periods of truce, there existed nothing that would resemble peace to us. Bands of marauders, unemployed soldiers, and

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[1] See e.g. *The Western Way of War, Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (Berkeley, CA, 2000).

mercenaries, along with quarreling nobles, kept the countryside in turmoil.

It was in this period that one sees the first connections between technological development and military affairs. The manufacturers of armor and the knights who wore their products moved from mail to plate. The quality of steel improved throughout the period. And in the fourteenth century gunpowder weapons made their appearance. Ironically, it was to meet the requirement of the great cathedrals for bronze bells to bring the faithful to hear mass that smelters developed the techniques that would also make the first effective cannons. That development provided European monarchs with a means to curb the power of the great nobility by taking their castles and thus breaking their hold on the countryside. Since bronze was enormously expensive, only Europe's monarchies could maintain the significant artillery forces that allowed them to destroy the castled walls of the nobility in a matter of days.

If war acquired more centralization at the end of the Middle Ages, however, armies possessed few of the qualities that we would recognize in military organizations today, such as discipline and logistical support. The first move in most wars aimed at placing one's army on the enemy's territory, where its resemblance to a plague of locusts was clear to all. Great campaigns more often than not degenerated into massive plundering expeditions.

MILITARY REVOLUTIONS AND REVOLUTIONS IN MILITARY AFFAIRS

In the seventeenth century a fundamental change in the European states took place. A number of historians have suggested that this was the first of a series of military-social revolutions that would alter the societal, economic, and military context within which wars would take place. The result was the emergence of the modern state. The military-social revolution was much more than simply a military change; now the economic, political, and social structure for military organizations and their relationship to the state fundamentally changed. Militaries were now able to support the state in a symbiotic relationship. The result was armies and navies which we today would recognize in form, culture, and discipline as similar to twenty-first century military organizations.

Accompanying the creation of effective states as the overarching revolution were a series of smaller innovations and changes in the way the West fought its wars. Thus, the impact of the first military-social revolution was to set in motion a series of "revolutions in military affairs." Two of these were the creation of "new-model" armies and navies, which like the legions of the Roman Empire, possessed both civil and military discipline. They were responsive to the dictates of the state in both internal and external matters.

The Roman legion was deliberately reinvented, now equipped with gunpowder weapons. At the end of the sixteenth century Maurice of Orange had the Roman marching commands translated into Dutch so that he could drill his soldiers according to Roman tactical patterns. These innovations and adaptations permitted generals to thin out their battle lines with better disciplined and drilled formations of the new-model armies, which could thus maximize the potential of gunpowder weapons.

The series of revolutions in military affairs stabilized at the end of the seventeenth century, the last technological innovation being the invention of the ring bayonet. The vast changes of the seventeenth century allowed the European powers to contest with each other for control of the globe from the forests of North America to the jungles of India and the spice islands of the Indies. Yet between 1700 and 1815 there were few changes in the weapons with which the Europeans fought. Over a century later, Wellington's troops on the Peninsula were still using the "Brown Bess" musket, a weapon similar to the muskets which Marlborough's troops had used against the French at Blenheim in 1705.

Crucial in terms of world history was that naval developments in technology followed those on land. The first step was the development of oceangoing vessels, initially to pursue the fishing grounds out beyond the North Sea, but then to explore the further seas with the hope of discovering trade routes to China and the Indies. That in turn led to the discovery of the Amerindian civilizations, which a combination of disease and superior military power allowed the Europeans to dispose of in short order.

The competition for power and control over the world's oceans among the major European sea powers--Spain, the Netherlands, France, and Britain--further pushed the technological development of warships and merchant vessels, which further expanded the reach of the first oceanic empires in history. The denouement came in 1759 during the Seven-Years War, the so-called *annus mirabilis*, when British sea and land forces thrashed the French in India, North America, and the Caribbean. One result is that today English is the language of choice across the globe. India, in fact, has more fluent English speakers than any other country in the world.

The innovations and adaptations that took place occurred within the framework of military forces and in how states paid for the wars they fought. In the latter case, the British gained an enormous advantage over the French when they radically altered the financial basis for their conduct of war in the eighteenth century, creating the first modern system of finance. The failure of the French monarchy to create a similar system eventually led to its financial collapse and revolution in 1789.

THE FRENCH AND INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONS

The next truly revolutionary change in the "European way of war" after the creation of the modern state came in the political context within which wars were fought in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Between 1792 and 1815 two separate military-social revolutions occurred which again altered the framework of war. The French Revolution completely upset the social and political framework within which European states had conducted their wars since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and the Industrial Revolution was to have equally profound implications.

When the revolutionaries in Paris faced military defeat in the field, with Prussian and Austrian armies invading northern France, they decreed the *levee en masse*, executing a fundamental adaptation in the very nature of the

relationship between the individual and the state in wartime. The French Revolution's assembly decreed that everyone was now at the service of the nation:

> From this moment, until our enemies have been driven from the territory of the Republic, the entire French nation is permanently called to the colors. The young men will go into battle; married men will forge weapons and transport supplies; women will make tents and uniforms, and serve in the hospitals; children will make old cloth into bandages; old men will have themselves carried to the public squares to rouse the courage of the warriors and preach hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic.[2]

As Clausewitz suggested in *On War*, the French Revolutionaries increased the cost of European wars in resources and lives by an order of magnitude. Thus, the French forced even the most conservative regimes of Europe eventually to adapt their political and military systems to confront new political and social realities: "Not until statesmen had at last perceived the nature of the forces that had emerged in France" could they meet the French on even footing.[3] That adaptation, however, took nearly twenty years, as well as innumerable humiliations and military defeats at the hands of the armies of the French Revolution and Napoleon before France's opponents finally adapted to the political and social realities of a life and death struggle. And these adaptations occurred only at the highest levels of policy and strategy. The British soldiers who met and defeated Napoleon at Waterloo represented in their drill and performance no technological and little tactical improvement over the British soldiers of the War of Spanish Succession more than a century earlier, in battles that were devastating defeats for the armies of Louis XIV.

If technology exercised little influence over the battlefields of this period, it did play a crucial part in the Seventh Coalition's winning the campaign against Napoleon. The Industrial Revolution was at the time changing the way the British economy worked. By revolutionizing the means of production, it altered the basis on which economic activity had rested since the dawn of time--namely, human and animal muscle power. The gains this revolution in economic affairs and technology provided to Britain enabled its government to subsidize the great coalitions against the French, including the last one that destroyed Napoleon's empire.

THE APPEARANCE OF MODERN WAR

The two military revolutions had failed to combine in directly influencing what was happening on the battlefields of the late Napoleonic battlefields. That was to change in mid-century with the American Civil War. The fourth military-social revolution was to combine the French Revolution with the Industrial Revolution, not only in the ability of the state to support the projection of military forces logistically and financially, but now on the battlefield. The American Civil War marked the first modern war, where the state could support the projection of military forces both logistically and financially and on the battlefield.

The Industrial Revolution not only allowed the North to project military forces and then support them over the Continental distances of the American South, but it also changed the technology of the battlefield.

Unfortunately, the European powers failed to heed the warning of the North American battlefield. Too many European generals casually dismissed what was happening in North America. German general Graf Helmut von Moltke commented that the American Civil War was a conflict between ill-trained militias. In terms of the 1861-62 battlefields he was correct, given the extraordinary difficulties involved in creating real military forces in a nation where none had previously existed. However, in terms of Sherman's 1864-1865 campaigns, particularly in the logistical support the Union armies received in the march to Atlanta and then up the southern coast from Savannah to North Carolina, he was dead wrong. The Union had managed to project land forces over continental distances, something European militaries had yet to accomplish.

The 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War turned into a relatively short contest because of the gross incompetence of the French generals in losing virtually the entire Imperial Army in the first two months of the war. Without that catastrophic start, which were exacerbated by Otto von Bismarck's extraordinary strategic and diplomatic skills, the French could have turned the conflict into something far more approximating the American Civil War in both length and the casualties inflicted.

THE WORLD WARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The First World War was the most terrible and influential conflict in human history. Politically, it would not end until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989. From 1871 to 1914, Europe, the U.S. and the self governing dominions of the British Empire had seen a technological and scientific explosion that fundamentally changed the way human beings lived. In this first interaction between technology and military forces, the pace of technological change presented challenges that military organizations had never before confronted.

Until World War I, the European armies had been using their new machine guns and barbed wire against colonial opponents who possessed little technology. Thus it was not readily apparent what the full impact of these weapons might be. The Russo-Japanese War might have served as a warning, but like the American Civil War, it was far away and the reports of European staff officers and observers received little attention.

Even more disastrous for the fate of a whole generation of young European men was the fact that the Industrial Revolution had created societies of great depth and resiliency, capable of paying any price or bearing any burden to win. The combined result of the French and Industrial Revolutions was that both sides were able to assemble immense armies, equipped with the most modern technologies, and then keep them well-supplied in the field with immense quantities of ammunition, weapons, food, and clothing. They could keep doing this on a seemingly endless basis, no matter how much the soldiers and their loved ones

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[2] Quoted in Stanley Chodorow and MacGregor Knox, *The Mainstream of Civilization Since 1660* (Sixth edition, New York, 1994), p. 595.

[3] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p 609.

back home might suffer. In fact, the terrible casualties suffered month after month only made the opposing societies more willing to see the war through to its bloody end to justify the losses they had already suffered.

Generally, historians have seen the First World War as a conflict involving incredible stupidity on the part of the generals and their staffs. In fact, the tactical problems raised for the new battlefield were extraordinarily complex. There was no silver bullet, such as the tank, which might have shortened the conflict, as postwar critics like B.H. Liddell Hart and J.F.C. Fuller suggested in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, both sides were adapting and changing at a rapid rate throughout the conflict. In introducing new technologies and tactics they invariably added to their own problems as well as to those of their opponents. While historians have tended to see World War I as a static, hopeless contest, because there was so little movement of the front lines, it actually saw vast changes on the battlefield.

If one could take a brigade commander off the battlefield of late 1918 and place him on the battlefield of U.S. military operations in March-April 2003, once he absorbed the increasing speed of operations and the flexibility of new technologies, he would quickly have a good appreciation of what was going on. However, if one were to take a regimental commander off the 1914 battlefield and place him on the 1918 battlefield, he would have understood nothing of the complex interaction among weapons systems, tactics, logistics, and operations.

World War I's most terrible contribution was to destroy the Enlightenment belief in progress. That destruction was to lead Europeans and others to search for new paths, two of which were communism and fascism-Nazism. Unlike the liberal worldview of the Anglo-American world in the 1920s and 1930s, which largely believed that war in the modern world was an impossibility, these two ideological monstrosities placed war—class war for communism, racial war for Nazism--at the very heart of their belief systems.

World War I fundamentally altered the balance between civilian and military technologies. From 1914 through to 1989, military technology drove civil technology. During the interwar years, military organizations pushed the development of technologies like the airplane and radio, with spin-offs like radar, all of which had immense significance for civilians. Yet World War II largely reflected the developments that had occurred in the last conflict. Admittedly the pace of weapons technology development rapidly increased, but for the most part World War II simply expanded capabilities and the tactical framework. The sustained efforts to marry technological developments with tactical and operational concepts was, however, crucial. The study of what had happened in World War I permitted revolutions in military affairs: modern combined arms warfare, carrier warfare, amphibious warfare, modern logistics, strategic defense, and air defense systems.

One of the great myths of the historical profession is that military organizations study the last war and that is why they do badly in the next. In fact, it was because the Germans rigorously and honestly studied what had happened on the battlefields of 1918 that they gained tactical and operational superiority in 1939-40. However, the RAF and the U.S. Army Air Corps had no interest in studying the last war, which is why they came up with theories of strategic bombing to the exclusion of all the other aspects of air power. As a result, those air forces, with the exception of Hugh Dowding's Fighter Command, contributed far less than they might have to the war's early battles. German airmen had studied the lessons of World War I, and thus the Luftwaffe was far better positioned to support the Wehrmacht. The lesson of innovation in the interwar period was that those who rigorously studied the last war and realistically tested their assumptions proved to be best prepared to fight and adapt to the realities of combat.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Some historians have described World War I as the chemists' war; if that it so, then World War II was the physicists' war. The explosion of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, crucial to preventing what have been a holocaust in the Pacific, ended the bloodiest and most destructive combat in human history. Ironically, not only did the dropping of the bombs bring the war in the Pacific to an end, but it may well have been those bombings and the implied long-term radiation poisoning that began to appear in the early 1950s that dissuaded both the U.S. and Soviet leaderships from employing nuclear weapons throughout the Cold War.

Today, the 1914-89 pattern of military technology driving civilian technology has shifted back to the pre-1914 paradigm: technological developments in the civilian world of computers and communications are now driving military technology.

World War II of course did not mark the end of war. Wars of decolonization subsequently rippled through the collapsing empires of Europe, the last of which--the Soviet war in Afghanistan--helped to bring the Soviet Union to its dismal end. New post-Cold War challenges were raised in the form of fundamentalist Islam, which has found itself torn between the concepts and beliefs of the Middle Ages and those of modernity.

We must hope that today's great powers heed the warning of the twentieth century, that war among them will prove catastrophic for all. However, there is a great gap between them, in realizing this, and the developing world, where war and conflict remain fundamental aspects of the human condition. Unfortunately, the title of political scientist Colin Gray's latest book says it best: *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (2006).

Pretending that war will go away, not studying it or attempting to understand it, will only insure that we will have to fight wars more often, and usually at far higher cost in terms of what we so deeply value: the lives of our young men and women.