



## War: Anthropological Aspects, Historical Development of

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This article is a revision of the previous edition article by C.R. Nordstrom, volume 24, pp. 16350–16354, © 2001, Elsevier Ltd.

### Abstract

In defining war, this article explores the origin and historical development of armed aggression from the earliest human societies to the present. The fact that war is a relatively recent invention in the span of human existence, arising with complex societies, suggests war as neither a biological imperative nor integral to the human condition. The many forms war takes, from ethnic conflict through conventional militaries to guerrilla warfare are considered in order to understand the nature and culture of war. The twentieth century has been the bloodiest in history, and this piece examines the relationships between violence, society, and the exercise of power that help explain this. The changing philosophies and practices of war over time and society show war to be a complex constellation of economic, cultural, and existential, as well as political factors. The various theoretical approaches to war, from those characterizing premodern societies and the rise of the modern state to the present are discussed. In concluding, the future of war, and the new directions theory might take in best understanding war in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, are considered.

Sun-tzu, the famous Chinese military expert, began his book *The Art of War* with the words “Warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Way (Tao) to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed.” These words, 2500 years later, still hold true: war has grown more deadly, and more damaging to human existence.

In the twentieth century alone, over 250 formally declared wars took over 100 million lives. Undeclared wars, including political repression, communal violence, and genocide took millions more; for example, between 50 and 100 million people have been killed by forces and citizens of states in the twentieth century because of their sociocultural and ethnic belongings. If we expand the definition of war to include such armed conflicts as gang warfare, ‘the war on drugs’ and, more recently, ‘the war on terror,’ casualties figures rise, though accurate statistics are not available on these forms of violence.

On entering the third millennium, one-third of the world’s countries were engaged in some form of political violence. Whether these conflicts are called war or not often depends more on political rhetoric than on an accepted definition of the term. In addition, approximately two-thirds of the world’s security forces use human rights abuses to control their populations. The victims tend to label this violence war or dirty war, while the state tends to classify this as defense or counterinsurgency.

The world has not always been characterized by such high levels of violent warfare. Wars today are longer in duration, more deadly, with visible as well as invisible linkages crisscrossing the globe, and kill higher numbers of civilians than wars of preceding centuries. The reasons behind war and the ways in which it is waged change across cultures and time, leading anthropological observers to talk about ‘shadows of war’ (Nordstrom, 2004), a cycle of ‘global war’ without any certain ending (e.g., Whitehead and Finnström, 2013), and of globalized ‘war machines’ feeding on an underprivileged but increasingly flexible and truly transnational post-Fordian work force (e.g., Hoffman, 2011). Also, the changing characteristics of war demonstrate that organized violence is not a fixed and

eternal fact of biology, nor an inescapable feature of a Freudian psyche, but a human practice guided by norms of behavior and codes of conduct situated in cultural and economical values.

### Defining War

Neither the two world wars, nor the more recent ‘world war’ raging in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, nor the several hundred local and regional wars since 1900 have brought us closer to a shared understanding of war. Most scholars accept a basic definition of war as the deployment of violence to force opponents to comply with one’s will. Many argue that the number of so-called battle-related deaths is the defining aspect of war, others, especially anthropologists, emphasize the need to include also the consequences of structural violence to the understanding and definition of war. Either way, war is organized, group-level, armed aggression rooted in hierarchies of dominance, which assume winners and losers in a contest over resources, people, and power. Yet war is defined differently by the winners and the losers, by historical perspective, by soldiers and pacifists – and in each case the definitions are more politically charged than factually correct. For example, freedom fighter, terrorist, insurgent, rebel, traitor, soldier, deserter, civilian, perpetrator, and victim are all terms variously applied to the same actors by different groups in different contexts seeking to maximize their own political, economical, and moral justifications. Governments define war in their own interests, and militaries are generally loath to admit strategies that entail civilian or noncombatant casualties, torture, and human rights abuses. In using terms such as ‘collateral damage,’ military powers instead try to trivialize and relativize civilian casualties. As anthropologists often emphasize, the most basic understanding of war is affected by differential and biased reporting; for example, casualty statistics for World War II vary by millions, depending on the nationality and viewpoint of the researcher. Controlling the definitions of war and its consequences is integral to the waging of war (Sluka, 1992).

The ethnographic study of war and peace has added a new dimension in the understanding of political violence. This academic research has demonstrated that war is a far more complex reality than classical definitions positing a violent contest between two or more armed forces seeking a military, and thus political, victory (Warren, 1993; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995). Rather than to settle with any final and universal definition of war, anthropologists have thus come to emphasize the importance of the comparative ethnographic approach with case studies along the war–peace continuum (e.g., Richards, 2005). Soldiers often battle unarmed civilians and not each other – evident from the ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo, or the 2 million deaths in the civil war that led to the independence of South Sudan. Paramilitaries, private militias, death squads, and roving bands of armed predatory gangs patrol war zones. Some operate at the behest of state forces (Sluka, 2000), while others are independent of all sovereign or rebel control, and they may operate in war as well as in peacetimes. Mercenary forces are a global phenomenon today, and range from informal groups such as European mercenaries fighting in Central Africa to the more formal Executive Outcome organization, comprising former apartheid South African soldiers, who broker with governments as well as rebel groups. Battle zones are also home to looters, sex workers, criminals, and profiteers. War zones are a bazaar of international arms and supplies merchants who reap billions of dollars yearly worldwide. International nongovernmental organizations are found in all war zones today, providing services ranging from conflict resolution to humanitarian and development aid (Nordstrom, 2004). Finally, the fronts of wars remain home to the inhabitants. Regardless of formal military regulations mandating the legal role of women, children, and the aged in war, all of these people fight for survival when they find themselves on the frontlines. Armed or unarmed, women defend homes and towns, children are forced to take up arms and fight, and the aged battle forced sieges. The unscrupulous sell out their neighbors for a few coins, and the altruistic set up medical clinics, schools, and trade routes to provide critical resources under bombardment. War, in short, is a social project that sustains the experience of war, making it and its multiple forms of violence routines among other routines in everyday life (Richards, 2005).

### The Development of War

War is a fairly recent invention, in terms of the anthropological expanse of human existence. Humans, as a species, have lived 90% of their history without war. Social hierarchies and concepts of ownership appear necessary for the advent of war. The earliest form of human organization was the band: fluid egalitarian groups of nomads. The archeological record indicates that while interpersonal violence was known in bands – determined by puncture and crushing wounds from weapons – it was limited. It did not reach the level of formalized intergroup violence among contending warriors.

The first indications of organized warfare occur as ownership of animals, goods, and property create divisions within

societies. With the historical development of tribal societies and protostates comes a differentiation in power, and the emergence of organized intergroup violence (Ferguson and Whitehead, 2000). Such societies did not have standing armies and military institutions separate from general society; warrior status tended to be open to all able-bodied men, and, less commonly, to women. These early years of war were not necessarily a dangerously lethal activity. For many ethnic groups, preparations for war constituted an elaborate ritual process. The rules of engagement were often well delineated: contending factions would meet in full battle regalia and hurl challenges and possibly weapons. Casualties generally brought a halt to the aggressions. Here, it is the display and enactment of power, and not violence, that defines war. Among some communities – the archeological record suggests these were later developments – fighting was much more lethal, though the intent was seldom, if ever, genocide. The goal was to force surrender and extend control over people, property, or territory.

Formalized military institutions and standing armies develop with the rise of the ‘state’ as a form of political, economic, and social organization. The term state here is used in its broad anthropological sense – originating some 8000 years ago, and not in the political science definition as developing in the mid-1600s. (The latter will be considered in the next section.) So when chiefdoms are replaced by royal families or other, equally centralized governing bodies, standing armies tend to develop as well, while social, gender, and often ethnic inequalities are increasingly codified in laws of land ownership, labor rights, and inheritance. Dispute resolution becomes formalized into judicial systems, and the legitimate use of force is restricted to state leaders and institutions. Contemporary warfare – fought among contenders for power, privilege, gain, and over identity – emerges. Eventually, as we shall see, such developments find fuel from the context of colonial intervention and annexation.

### The Changing Nature of War

Contemporary warfare itself has changed dramatically over time and circumstance, giving lie to any notion that war is a ‘natural’ social phenomenon or a fixed product of overarching political organization (van Creveld, 1991). The era of the modern state provides a good illustration (Holsti, 1996). In Europe, the end of the Thirty Years War (from 1618 to 1648) coincided with the beginning of the modern state (marked by the Treaty of Westphalia). The Thirty Years War depopulated a large part of Central Europe. It was known for its sheer brutality; writers of the time speak of the wanton killing, torture, plunder, and destruction of anyone and anything who found themselves in the path of the aggressors. The levels of violence are attributed to the enduring impact of religious wars and the Inquisition, to the transformations wrought by urbanization and early industrialization, and to the upheavals marking the shift from kingly rule to the modern state.

Over the following two centuries the nihilism characterizing the Thirty Years War gave way to what has been called the gentlemen’s war of the Enlightenment period. Formal warfare during this era often, though certainly not always, followed strict rules of conduct and engagement: soldiers fought soldiers

in hand-to-hand combat on battlegrounds apart from human habitation. This was not a new era of war for humankind: Buddhist and Hindu scriptures 2000 years BCE outlined similar 'gentlemen's wars' in Asia.

While military texts tend to focus on these formal military engagements between two contending armies, another form of warfare developed during this period: colonial repression of conquered peoples. It is commonplace to read in amateur ethnographic accounts of the colonial administrators, that war was a constant occupation among non-Western peoples before colonization, but the reader is most often left in ignorance as to what the colonial administrators really meant with the word 'war.' Rather, here the term 'war' was deliberately kept vague so that it could be used in legitimizing imperial and allegedly honorable agendas. The message of these early colonial reports was that colonization brought peace. The reality was far more violent and saw the first genocides of the twentieth century; for example, the annihilation of the Herero people of present-day Namibia. In many ways, these actions presaged the dirty war of contemporary times – wars that brutally targeted unarmed people in attempts to instill political acquiescence.

The colonial encounter eventually gave rise to another distinct form of war: the guerrilla war, the mainstay of wars for independence worldwide. Guerrilla warfare was developed by nonstate actors challenging financially and technologically superior state forces. Classical guerrilla philosophy – institutionalized in the mid-twentieth century by military strategists such as Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh – postulates that guerrilla forces, by definition, have the support of the broad population, and it is this that gives them indefatigable strength, crucial resources, and moral political superiority. While in many cases this has proven true, it is by no means always so. Guerrilla or insurgency groups such as the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, Renamo in Mozambique, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, and the Contras in Nicaragua demonstrated that nonstate forces, sometimes even very small, can also use repressive tactics in an effort to control large populations.

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, many politicians came to regard the rules and laws of war as obsolete. A fundamental shift in warfare, with truly global repercussions, took place and torture was sanctioned by the democratically elected US government. Then president George W. Bush declared a 'war on terror' and the US-led invasion of Iraq soon developed into a seemingly permanent yet diffuse state of war and insecurity in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan and along the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands. The militarization of societies under occupation has deepened, with violent developments that cross-breed in all kinds of global yet diffuse directions. Many observers again reference the idea of a 'military–industrial complex,' formulated by US president Dwight D. Eisenhower as well as, from the other end of the political spectrum, the Trotskyist theory of a 'permanent arms economy,' which was forwarded to explain the sustained economic growth that occurred in the decades following World War II. Back then, as today, wartime capitalism reproduces itself despite the inherently contradictory nature of the capitalist growth cycle (see, e.g., [Whitehead and Finnström, 2013](#)).

In the effort to dedramatize the political rhetoric and reclaim the definitional space as well as dislocate global war

from the US homeland, the 'war on terror' was eventually renamed 'overseas contingency operations' by the Obama administration. Again it becomes evident, from an anthropological perspective, that the control over the definitions of war is integral to the waging of war.

## The Twentieth Century

Overall, wars were longer in duration, more lethal in the cost to human lives, and more destructive to societal systems and the environment in the twentieth century than in preceding times. This era saw the advent of world wars, nuclear war, and modern paramilitary warfare. The most dramatic development of war concerns the ethics of who may and may not be targeted in war. Over 80% of the casualties in World War I were soldiers. But eventually also a country's citizens were to be seen part of that country's war effort, given their role in producing the means of war, or just as potential supporters of a war effort. When this philosophy was married with developments in military technologies such as aerial carpet bombings, the number of noncombatant casualties raises even more ([Lindqvist, 2001](#)). Some 50% of all war-related deaths in World War II were noncombatant casualties. This trend escalates in the last half of the twentieth century. The US military intervention in Vietnam resulted in one of the most massive bomb campaigns in history. More than 80% of all casualties in the Vietnam war were noncombatants. At the start of the twenty-first century, civilians account for 90% of all war-related deaths worldwide.

Even if these comparative figures on war casualties can only be estimated in retrospect, and therefore are notoriously uncertain, they certainly indicate that noncombatants rather than only the military enemy are the explicit target in many of today's wars. Not only has the line between combatant and noncombatant grown indistinct, the line between gender and age in soldiering has too. Women die in equal numbers to men, and more children are killed in war today than soldiers. The use of child soldiers has grown in recent years; at the turn of the millennium over 300,000 existed worldwide. If children armed with AK-47s cynically are forced into war because of their effectiveness and loyalty in combat, another truly scary development of global war is the ever-increasing use of deadly high-tech remote-controlled unmanned aerial vehicles or so-called drones.

The serious rise in civilian casualties parallels an increase in the number and sophistication of international organizations (such as the United Nations, the European Union, or the African Union) and international legal bodies (such as the International Criminal Court and the War Crimes Tribunals) seeking to control destructive wars. Today, there are 70 000 protocols protecting human rights. Even if military strategists tend to describe and dehumanize civilian casualties in terms of unintended collateral damage, they also claim the very space of humanitarianism. Military interventions are no longer always clearly distinguishable from humanitarian interventions and vice versa. This, of course, affects global war and how it is perceived on the ground. For example, in the wake of an increasing number of deadly attacks on their personnel, in 2013 Médecins Sans Frontières decided to leave Somalia after more than 20 years there.

## Theorizing War

As the predominate means of waging war changes through time, so too do the definitions and theories of war (Simons, 1999). In premodern times, many, including early Christian and Buddhist societies, saw war as inescapable at times, but not as honorable; the postwar period was crafted as one of atonement. The notion of the honorable war develops in the West with the rise of the 'gentleman's war' of the modern state. Carl von Clausewitz, the famous Prussian military expert, codifies war as 'an extension of politics,' placing war directly in the rational politics of Enlightenment philosophy. Warfare, as rational, became justified. As discussed above, the most dangerous examples of this were seen in colonial conquests, often rationalized under the rubric of the 'evolution of civilization' by scholars.

These Enlightenment philosophies wed with the functionalist and structuralist schools in the early 1900s. Here, theoreticians investigated the 'functions' of war, and placed the causes of war in competition over scarce resources, overpopulation, and the increasing complexity of societies. At the same time, psychological and sociobiological theories were popular. They postulated aggression and self-interest as inherent to humans, and therefore as serving an evolutionary purpose.

One contemporary example of such theories on war and human aggression is anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon's work among the Yanomani people in Venezuela (e.g., 1968). With reference to biology, Chagnon argues that Yanomani men are fierce and warlike and that they wage war over women; that Yanomani men who are killers have more wives and children than men who are not; and that war is the prime mover of cultural and human evolution. Chagnon's thesis on warfare stirred one of the biggest and longest debates in anthropology, with the majority of sociocultural anthropologists vigorously questioning Chagnon's conclusions as well as his research ethics. However, in seeing Chagnon's results as evidence of a universal theory on human nature and war, sociobiologists have generally endorsed his work.

The fact that not all societies engage in war, and that the majority of the people in any society at war do not choose to fight was not addressed by the psychological and sociobiological theories. At the same time, twentieth-century political theory was shaped by the advent of World War I and World War II. After World War I, functionalist theories take an idealist cast that postulates the progress of civilization as one that will finally eschew war. In the wake of the vast destruction of World War II, realist theory replaces idealism as the dominant theory in the social and political sciences. Here, war is seen as a natural effect of competition among sovereign states. In both schools the solution lies in creating strong state and international institutions to wage, and ideally to control, war.

As the period of the World War I and World War II gave way to wars for independence, regional wars, and the Cold War, theories of war underwent another revolution. Critical to this shift is the fact that researchers around the world began to experience political violence directly, whether by intention or by accident. The reigning functionalist theories did not fit their observations (Foster and Rubinstein, 1986). Consequently, by the 1990s the anthropological focus had shifted from such theories on the causes, structures, and functions of war to the

study of lived experiences of war, especially coping mechanisms among allegedly innocent victims caught in cross fire. Eventually, anthropologists saw the importance to account also for the stories of perpetrators as well as the larger sociopolitical structures (Löfving, 2005). Today, most anthropologists again emphasize both cause and effect, both (objective) structure and (subjective) agency. War structures the lived experiences, motifs, strategies, and tactics of all kinds of agents of war – victims, perpetrators, profiteers, or bystanders – but as these social agents 'navigate terrains of war' (Vigh, 2006), they also structure war.

The advent of nuclear war gave lie to ideals of 'victory' in war – for the first time all sides to a conflict could perish. Wars such as those fought by the United States in Vietnam and by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in Afghanistan, the more recent global terrorism of al-Qaeda and other groups, and subsequently, the war on terror laid to rest old notions of the gentleman's war. Dirty wars such as those in Argentina, and genocides such as those conducted by the Nazis in World War II and by Hutu extremists in Rwanda, as well as the Khmer Rouge's immeasurable mass killings in Cambodia challenged notions of the inherent functionality or rationality of war. The increases in noncombatant deaths undermined the claims of sociobiology – it became hard to argue that noncombatant deaths, widespread torture, systematic sexual violence, and the death of children were biologically or socially productive acts (Enloe, 2000). Scholars also began to question Clausewitz's 'truism' that war is (predominately) an extension of politics. Certainly it is political, but the recognition of the vast sums of money made in wildcatting valuable resources in war zones and in selling war supplies worldwide made it necessary to integrate economics with politics in the war equation (Kaldor, 1999). The rise of religious, ethnic, and identity dynamics in contemporary conflicts rendered it necessary to account for social and cultural factors in any politicoeconomic analysis (Rupesinghe and Rubio Correa, 1994). And studies of peaceful societies such as the Semai and the Quakers demonstrated that war is not inevitable, nor basic, to the human condition (Gregor, 1996).

In holistically acknowledging the above-mentioned factors, anthropological theorizing on war and culture tend to emphasize two propositions. First, war and culture cannot be studied as things in themselves, and war is only one among many competing social projects along the war–peace continuum. Second, and following the first proposition, in refuting reductionist explanations of any essence of war (or culture), anthropologists promote globally framed in-depth and historicized ethnographic case studies of both war and peace. Today, these are carried out in specific locations as well as in transnational and virtual spaces, and sometimes, if needed, even from a distance (Richards, 2005; Robben, 2010; Whitehead and Finnström, 2013).

## The Future of War

The dawn of the third millennium is marked by vast differences in war. While the superpowers spend trillions of dollars on high-technology earth- and space-based weapon systems as well as on the software of anthropological intelligence in the form of the highly contested Human Terrain System (Gonzalez,

2009; Price, 2011; Whitehead and Finnström, 2013), the vast majority of today's war casualties are killed by small arms wielded by nonspecialists. The greatest dangers are the most accessible; there are estimated to be 500 million to 1 billion firearms in use today in the world; a lively international black market sells every conceivable implement of war from AK47s to nuclear materials; recipes for chemical weapons and homemade bombs can be found in basic texts; and computer specialists can potentially hack a drone aircraft or wreck nationwide havoc by disrupting a country's basic infrastructural support systems. There is a growing trend among governments to regard and declare cyber-attacks on their state infrastructures as acts of war, as well as for governments themselves to initiate cyber-attacks on infrastructures of proclaimed and nonproclaimed enemies.

All facets of the war industry are set in global interactions (Castells, 1998). Our theories of war must be revised to address these dynamics defining the contemporary world. Theories of war need to address the complexities of war systems that spend fortunes on technological defenses (at the end of the twentieth century military spending worldwide reached 780 billion US dollars per year) while killing with inexpensive conventional weapons – and will delve into the sociocultural factors and economic gains as well as the political quests that underlie these realities. It can also be contended that the killings on the actual battlefields, wherever they are located, are intimately linked to an emerging virtual space created by news and gaming media as well as the technologies of contemporary military violence – such as airborne attack drones, satellite surveillance, stealth airplanes, and the associated use of politically covert assassination operations. This is the character of war today, which has definitively moved beyond the confines of nation-states and through mechanisms such as 'peacekeeping,' terrorist interdiction, 'target killings,' and 'overseas contingency operations,' and now has a global and increasingly permanent character (Whitehead and Finnström, 2013). Consequently, in recent times the anthropological study of war affirms to a renewed interest in the state, state sovereignty, and related questions (e.g., Kapferer and Bertelsen, 2009).

While employing violence in the pursuit of dominance may continue to fuel war, violence may shift from physical killing to a different order of threat and inequality, and dominance might be reckoned along such nonmilitary factors as economics, environmental control and climate change, social viability, or a set of factors as yet unrecognized. In the long term, we should be prepared for the possibility that war, as we used to know it, may not define future conflict. War has not always been a part of the human condition, and perhaps future changes in sociopolitical organization and ethical systems will render war altogether obsolete. Effective research into the lived experiences, causes, and future of war and peace will hone combinations of theoretical inquiry with ethnography – helping to erase arbitrary distinctions between theory and data (Nordstrom, 1997). The greatest advances will be in rethinking the very meanings of war and aggression, going beyond simple biological and rudimentary social explanations to explore the complex interactions of violence and power, capital and resources, economics, survival, and identity both within and across local, regional, and transnational populations.

**See also:** Conflict and War, Archaeology of: Behavior and Social Organization; Conflict: Anthropological Aspects; First World War, The; Militaries and Militarization, Anthropology of; Military Geography; Military History; National Security Studies and War Potential of Nations; Peace and Nonviolence: Overview of Anthropological Aspects; Refugees in Anthropology; Second World War, The; State: Anthropological Aspects; Tribe; Violence in Anthropology; War, Sociology of; Warfare in History; Wars among Nation-States: Patterns and Causes.

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