

Dimensions of war and reasons for its decline. Alan Macfarlane

Perennial warfare is the basis of many tribal societies. This is a world where it is difficult for 'civilization' to emerge. As Sahlins put it, 'The social complexity and cultural richness of civilization depends on institutional guarantees of peace. Lacking these institutional means and guarantees, tribesmen live in a condition of war and war limits the scale, complexity and all-round richness of their culture...'¹

When the civilizations based on writing, cities, and settled agriculture arose, war was partially controlled, but when it occurred, its effects were far more devastating. We can see this, for instance, in relation to the massive destructions caused by wars in Egypt, India and China. The population history of Egypt shows that of the seven events which are believed to have led to massive declines in the Egyptian population between 664 B.C. and 1966, five were thought to be the result of the Persian, Macedonian, Roman, Arab and Turkish conquests. The other two were plagues.²

In India and the Middle East, 'the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century were followed in the late fourteenth century by the conquests of Timur, who ranged from Anatolia in the West to India in the East and marked his victories with minarets and pyramids of skulls.'³ Landes gives a vivid picture of the area: 'nomads from the steppe, Russians spreading southward and eastward, the Afghan tribes and Mogul emperors to the east, the nations of Christian Europe in the Danube valley and the Mediterranean. The land was forever criss-crossed with armies; siege followed siege, massacre followed massacre. Even the ghastliest carnages of the Thirty Years' War...pale alongside the bloodbaths of Delhi.'⁴

In China, there were eras of peace, but when these ended the numbers killed and the destruction was on an even more massive scale. For instance, the invasions and devastations of the Mongols are thought to have reduced the Chinese population to half of its former level within fifty years, over 60 million people dying or failing to be replaced.⁵ Another immense catastrophe occurred with the Manchu invasion in the 1660s which Jones believed 'cost that vast land seventeen per cent of its population. That

¹ Sahlins, Tribesmen XXX

² Hollingsworth, diag. p.311

³ Landes, Prometheus, 34

⁴ Landes, Prometheus, 34

⁵ Clark, Population Growth, 72

was a loss of twenty-five million people...⁶ Again in the nineteenth century, the Taiping Rebellion 'was the bloodiest war of the nineteenth century. It lasted from 1850 to 1864, causing 20 million deaths...'⁷ Ho puts it at nearly 30 million.⁸

The control of war in Europe.

Against this background, where massive destruction continued until the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, western Europe from the sixteenth century onwards appears relatively secure. By the sixteenth century, 'the only enemy that Europeans had to fear was other Europeans;...the virulence of fighting diminished, particularly in that north-western corner of Europe...'⁹ Jones agrees that 'Europe probably lost fewer men per 1,000 to warfare than did Asia, but it is likely that the ratio of capital equipment she lost was much less still.'¹⁰ He gives details of the relative destruction, noting in particular that the water-irrigated rice cultivation of much of Asia was much more likely to be deeply damaged by warfare. The consequence was often that famine ensued after war and then there were epidemics. He thus concludes that 'Europe's overall losses seem markedly less serious than those of Asia.'¹¹ Indeed, as Mokyr points out, following Jones, 'Only those parts of Eurasia that were spared the conquests of Mongols - Japan and western Europe - were able to generate sustained technological progress.'¹²

Yet we should not forget that all this is relative. The constant wars and battles over Europe until the twentieth century are familiar in outline to most of us. There was a state of periodic warfare that beset much of western Europe from the fall of Rome through to the nineteenth century. The Hundred Years War, the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century and, worst of all, the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century were only the most serious and long-term of the wars which occurred.

⁶ Jones, 36

⁷ Wright, 'War' in Int. Enc. Soci. Sci., 458

⁸ cited in Dumond, Population Growth, 304

⁹ Landes, Prometheus, 34

¹⁰ Jones, 37

¹¹ Jones, Miracle, 38

¹² Mokyr, Lever, 186

In the case of the Thirty Years War, for example, on one estimate the consequences of the war is reckoned to have lowered the population of Germany from 21 to 13.5 million.¹³ Kamen comes to the general conclusion 'that over the German lands as a whole the urban centres lost one-third of their population and the rural areas lost about forty per cent.'¹⁴ The effects of these wars are obvious. As Mokyr notes, wars 'destroyed some of the most active centres of technological change in Europe, especially in the southern Netherlands (1568-90) and most of Germany (1616-48).'¹⁵ Likewise, wars had earlier destroyed the rich potential of the Italian cities in the fifteenth century, and would be one of the major factor in the relative decline of Holland in the eighteenth. As Cipolla concludes, 'From a purely economic point of view, war was a much greater evil than the plague...War...hit capital above all, and those who survived found themselves in conditions of the most abject misery.'¹⁶ Writing of another of the regional conflicts, Parker concludes that '...it seems clear that the prolonged conflict generated by the Revolt of the Netherlands served to retard the growth of the northern republic (and particularly of its landward provinces), to inflict permanent damage on the economy of large areas of the Spanish empire, and to ruin for two centuries the prosperity of 'Belgium'.¹⁷

There are some grounds for believing that devastating and destructive war was partially brought under control in much of Europe from about 1660 onwards. As Malthus was to note towards the end of the next century, 'The destruction occasioned by war has unquestionably abated, both on account of its occurring, on the whole, less frequently, and its ravages not being so fatal, either to man or the means of his support, as they were formerly.'¹⁸ Sorokin was to develop this theme. He showed that warfare increased in Europe between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, 'then by the seventeenth century Europe had attained a new integrated system of ultimate values... Consequently there occurred the decline of the curve of war-magnitude during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.'¹⁹

¹³ Russell, *Violence*, 182

¹⁴ Kamen, *Iron Century*, 43

¹⁵ Mokyr, *Lever*, 76

¹⁶ Cipolla, *Before*, 133-4

¹⁷ Parker in ed. Winter, *War*, 66

¹⁸ Malthus, *Summary*, 254; cf also Malthus, *Population* i, 315

¹⁹ Sorokin, *Society, Culture*, p.512.

Nef was one of those who suggested that war in Europe went through three phases in the early modern period; medieval warfare, which was moderately destructive, then a period of increased destruction with the introduction of guns and the religious disputes in the sixteenth century, and then a tempering of war from the middle of the seventeenth century. The rising tempo of war in the sixteenth century was obvious: 'With religious zeal so little relieved by the supreme Christian virtue of charity, and armed on all sides with weapons unknown to the violent of earlier ages, an almost universal slaughter became possible.'²⁰ Yet even in this period, there were restraints: '...terrible as warfare on the Continent became, especially from 1562 to 1648, the devastation and the destruction of life might have been much greater than they were. It was restraints upon war which prevented a general collapse of European civilization following the Reformation, a collapse which....would have prevented the genesis of industrial civilization in the north of Europe.'²¹

This control over war, a necessary platform for later industrialism, became stronger from the middle of the seventeenth century. The next hundred years was 'an age during which, in spite of occasional setbacks, the tendency was continuously toward more pacific conditions.'²² Nef is certain that this crucial development occurred. He also notes that the control occurred despite increasingly sophisticated weaponry and a build up of weapons. 'The increasing moderation of warfare from 1660 to 1740 was not brought about by a reduction in the armaments of the European states. This was the period during which the leading powers first came to maintain large concentrations of troops in peace as well as in time of war, in winter as well as in summer.'²³ How was war brought under control?

Nef has several theories. Three of these he summarizes thus. 'Economic development...tended to discredit the military calling as led by the rank and file. It was not sufficiently rapid to provide the means for wars without stint. It encouraged producers of many objects, including weapons, to retain the ancient concern with fashioning matter into forms designed primarily to give delight and, partly on that account, caused the weapons to provide ineffective instruments of destruction.'²⁴ Elsewhere he puts forward other arguments, for instance human tenderness and politeness. 'Out of such traditional pageantry as that, and with the help of a polite etiquette and a human tenderness that evolved during the

²⁰ Nef, War, 115

²¹ Nef, War, 117

²² Nef, War, 135

²³ Nef, War, 202

²⁴Nef, War, 228

seventeenth century, a code of honour was forged. It was destined to have a pacific influence upon history.²⁵

At other times, the control of war is due to the conscience of scientists such as Leonardo or Napier, who refused to let their destructive weapons become known.²⁶ Or again it is increasing opulence itself and the desire for material wealth which is important. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries what the cultured Europeans sought was beauty, substance, and permanence in their country estates, in their cities and towns, in their public buildings and homes, and in the objects of polite living with which they surrounded themselves.²⁷ At other times, Nef suggests that it was the influence of the increasingly powerful nation states which controlled war, monopolizing, as states must, the use of violence. 'But as the sovereign states of Europe assumed more responsibility for clothing, lodging, and feeding soldiers as well as sailors, lawless pillaging and plundering became less rampant.'²⁸ Undoubtedly his favourite argument, however, is the 'economy of delight' thesis, namely that "What was of primary importance in restraining war was the persistence of aesthetic principles even among makers of the new weapons of attack."²⁹

While there can be little doubt that Nef is right that warfare was controlled, and increasingly so after about 1660, and that this is a fundamentally important feature of the build up towards the industrial revolution, his various theories to explain what happened are all somewhat unconvincing. We are left in the position of knowing that something important changed, but not why. Perhaps the most significant underlying conclusion we can draw from his account is that Europe began to enter a virtuous, instead of vicious, circle. Up to the seventeenth century, as wealth and population accumulated, so did the negative feed-back of predatory warfare. From that date, the balance shifted; enough surplus was fed back into the forces controlling violence and there was enough desire to make money by means other than open violence. The violence of market capitalism, the Mandevillian world of concealed warfare through the war of all against all in trade and production, began to take over from the ethos of earlier centuries where it was destruction and predation which were the paths to wealth.³⁰ This theme has been

²⁵Nef, War, 140

²⁶e.g. 117ff

²⁷Nef, War, 248

²⁸Nef, War, 226

²⁹Nef, War, 128-9

³⁰cf Hirschman, Passions and Interests

interestingly developed more recently by William McNeill.

McNeill notes how the ravaging mercenary armies of the fourteenth century gave way to better paid and organized armies from the seventeenth century. It became possible to 'support professional standing armies on tax income without straining the economic resources of the population too severely.'³¹ These armies also managed, on the whole, to keep the peace, at least within countries, so that civil wars decreased. 'Such armies could and did establish a superior level of public peace within all the principal European states.' This, he argues, started a positive feed-back loop. Peace 'allowed agriculture, commerce, and industry to flourish' and hence raised the taxable wealth, which kept the armed forces in being. 'A self-sustaining feedback loop thus arose that raised Europe's power and wealth above levels other civilizations had attained.'³²

³¹Pursuit, 139

³²Pursuit, 117