

The Causes and Aims of War

It has not been given to mankind to live in perpetual peace

(B.J. Feist, cited by Coleman Phillipson)

Causes and aims

It seems that men can be motivated by a straightforward love of fighting and killing; we might call this the mark of Cain.

The prophet Isaiah, who proclaimed that peace is a wonderful state in which swords are beaten into ploughshares and prosperity envelops the people, also decided that war is inevitable if the chosen race behaves in ways that offend Almighty God. War is evil and also a punishment for evil. Isaiah says Jehovah forsook Judah and Jerusalem, leaving only a remnant, the cause being evil deeds that offended the Lord (Isaiah, 34–2). On the other hand it seems that in the long run their enemies, Babylon, Moab, Damascus and Egypt, were not to escape.

After the conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries the idea of admiring war for its own sake can strike one as obscure or even downright horrible. But of course that was not always so. Shakespeare gives Henry V a speech in which he proclaims that those who miss the forthcoming battle of St. Crispian's Day will later bemoan their sad fate. Napoleon, viewing the French dead on the field after one of his victories said: '... a noble way to die.'

Hundreds of pages have been published in attempts to explain the forward-looking aims and backward looking causes of the first world war. School children were once told that the conflict was brought about by the assassination of the Archduke of Austria but nowadays a reference to that event is not thought of as a genuine explanation. The assassination was either a trigger setting off a pre-existing cause or an excuse for an unacknowledged aim—not the supposed political aim ('a war to end war') later ascribed to Britain,

France and America—an outcome which of course was not achieved.

What were the real causes and the real aims? Fear was possibly one cause, though, as argued later in this book, the fear that other countries are plotting against 'us' is sometimes delusional.

In 1939–40 revenge, punishment and lasting power were Nazi Germany's stated war aims. German citizens supported or silently agreed to Hitler's attacks on Belgium, Holland, Poland and Norway because they believed or perhaps half-believed his promise of a thousand-year Reich. They supported the attacks on France and England because he had persuaded them that it would be right to avenge the humiliating terms of the 1918 Armistice and the suffering caused by the allies' vengeful post-war blockade.

Aims in history

The aims of war in the ancient world generally included plunder and booty (cattle, gold, women). The Vikings fought first for booty and subsequently for land. In colonial times in Africa Masai warriors used to attack Kikuyu villages, stealing women as well as food because many of their own women had become sterile as a result of venereal diseases imported from Europe (Blixen, 1989).

Aggressive wars have often been waged for religious reasons and still are today. In the 7th century the followers of Mahomet were urged to make war against infidels. The aim of their aggression can be inferred from teachings concerning the treatment of prisoners: conquered or captured males were to be offered an immediate choice between conversion and death and captured women a delayed choice. In the 11th, 12th and thirteenth centuries crusaders from all over Europe traveled thousands of miles on horseback or on foot because they wanted to capture Jerusalem from non-Christian rulers.

In more recent times European nations have waged war in South America, India, Asia and Africa in order to acquire Empires from which to extract wealth. It could be argued that a desire to export some particular political or economic system has taken the place of religion as a motive for aggressive war.

Clausewitz on war

Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), a son of a retired Lieutenant, joined the Prussian army at the age of 12. In 1793–5 he was promoted

to lance corporal then to subaltern during the Rhine campaign against revolutionary France. Between 1801 and 1803 he studied military history at the Prussian War College and in 1805 began publishing papers in military journals. After Napoleon won the battle of Jena von Clausewitz was captured by the French and spent two years as a prisoner of war. Between 1807 and 1812 he held a variety of posts including a job as tutor to the Crown Prince of Prussia. In 1812 he resigned his Prussian commission and joined the Russian army on the eve of Napoleon's invasion, rejoining the Prussian service in 1814. At the battle of Waterloo he was chief of staff of one of the Prussian corps. In 1819, after promotion to Major General in 1818, he began working on his celebrated book *Vom Kriege* (*On War*). It was published posthumously in 1832.

Clausewitz began the book by defining war as a duel on a larger scale and went on to say that it also resembles wrestling. In a wrestling match the aim of each opponent is to force the other to submit to his will by 'throwing' him. An act of war is an act of force to compel an enemy to do one's will. It would seem to follow from his account that the enemy is an enemy before the first act of war takes place.

Clausewitz regarded the laws and customs of war with a certain degree of contempt.

Attached to force are certain self-imposed imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning, known as international law and custom, but they scarcely weaken it ... Force—that is physical force, for moral force has no existence save as expressed in the state and the law—is thus the *means* of war; to impose our will on the enemy is its object ... the true aim of war is to render the enemy powerless ... The maximum use of force, force without compunction, while the other side refrains, means that the first will gain the upper hand (von Clausewitz, 1983, p. 83).

In spite of these words it is unlikely that Clausewitz would have thought well of the methods of war employed between 1914 and the present day. The historians and scholarly soldiers of 1819 could not have predicted the 'all-out' wars perpetrated by the nations of Europe, Asia and America during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Although Clausewitz seemed unwilling to accept the idea that law and custom can influence the conduct of warfare his comments on the superior intelligence of certain nations suggests a different view. He said that wars between civilised nations are less cruel and destructive than wars between savages. He believed that civilised nations do not devastate cities—which was probably true in his time

— because intelligence plays a larger part in their methods of warfare and has taught them more effective ways of using force. He also said that differences between ways of waging war reflect the internal social conditions of different nations. What we might call moral standards Clausewitz described as social conditions but the lesson seems the same. As to the uncivilised, the nations that are cruel and destructive, he was thinking, perhaps, of certain Native tribes in North America whose warriors had a custom of collecting the scalps of prisoners as proofs and emblems of their courage and manhood. Some tribes tortured enemy captives, possibly in order to show their own young lads how *not* to react to pain. For in the thinking of those peoples to cry out in pain was deemed unmanly.

Clausewitz distinguished between two different motives for war, hostile intentions and hostile feelings. Hostile intentions are the fundamental motives because they can exist, and be acted on, in the absence of any hostile feelings. Yet even civilised nations sometimes develop passionate hatreds for their opponents since war, after all, is not a rational non-hating activity. Conflicting interests lead to war but war itself, or the threat of war, leads to hatred.

Lenin on war

In the latter part of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th the words 'Imperialism' and 'Imperialist' were not terms of abuse but of praise, moreover capitalism as such was not condemned except by the followers of Karl Marx.

According to V.I. Lenin free competition between capitalist firms in one country gives way to national monopolies. Monopolies then generate government interest in international adventures designed to find new markets and new exploitable workers. Because of this interest attacks are launched on under-developed countries and also on rival capitalist states.

Lenin refers to European coercion of the populations of India, Africa (including Egypt) and China, and also to President McKinley's successful wars against the Spanish colonies on the West Coast of North America. He asks: What drives imperialism? And answers: Not morality but capitalism and the profit motive. What drives men to war? Imperialism, he suggests, has always been a cause but by the 20th century it had become the main cause (Lenin, 1996).

After the first world war left-wing opinion rejected the claim that European and white American invasions of undeveloped countries were motivated by any desire to improve the lot of the native

peoples. However it was not only on the left that hostility to imperialism appeared. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Principles included the right to self-determination.

Speculation: George Orwell and Aldous Huxley

George Orwell's famous last novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published shortly after his death, extrapolates from the early years of the Cold War and describes what might turn out to be the aim, the point, of war in the future. Aldous Huxley, in a now forgotten story, *Ape and Essence*, gives an account of the likely aims and causes of a possible future nuclear catastrophe.

Human beings, especially young ones, are very vulnerable to propaganda, as the advertising industry knows quite well. This vulnerability is probably related to the instinctual traits, whatever they are, that underlie gregarious behaviour. George Orwell was probably the first author to describe the effects of propaganda as disseminated through television. His novel postulates three huge future nations, Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, between which there obtains a persisting low-level state of war so that two of the three are always at war with a third, though not always the same two. Towns all over the world undergo unceasing but almost casual bomb attacks launched from military aircraft while every human being on the planet is subjected to unceasing propaganda directed against the current enemy. The identity of the enemy changes every few years, the warring groups make new alliances and overnight the propaganda changes.

On Orwell's account the preservation of an all-encompassing tyranny will be the real aim of warfare in the future. The point of making war will be to induce fear in the populace and thereby increase and deepen tyranny and make it more efficient. The lives led by the inhabitants of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are directly affected by dictatorial systems of government but only indirectly affected by war so that the worst things about life in Orwell's horrible imaginary world result from the power of the state and its lying propaganda. In the year 1984 England is ruled by Big Brother and his minions, mysterious individuals who address the nation, not directly but through television broadcasts, and who arrange for the punishment or disappearance of anyone who tries to think for himself or herself (Orwell, 1949).

When *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was first published readers assumed that the author had intended it as a satire on the Soviet Union.

Orwell, partly I think in playfulness, denied that that was so; he claimed to be satirizing the BBC, an organisation he had worked for during the second world war. Partly but not entirely as a result of his experiences in the Spanish civil war he held a very low opinion of Soviet communism, but, on the other hand, he apparently thought it possible that the growth of mass-circulation newspapers and the increasing availability of television would tempt Western leaders to increase their control over ordinary citizens by instilling fears of external and internal enemies and fears of stepping out of line.

Orwell invented a special terminology to describe the world of the future. In his dystopia people are taught *Newspeak*, a language designed to replace English. The reason is that those who possess a natural language are capable of critical thinking which is condemned as *thoughtcrime*. Perpetrators of thoughtcrime are tracked down by Thought Police and subjected to rehabilitation (torture) or vapourisation (a bullet in the back of the neck). Orwell probably believed that fear of thoughtcrime is part of the human condition and explains why it is easy for rulers to lead people into aggressive wars.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is unrealistic in that its perpetually ongoing air war is a pretty low level affair. Atom bombs are left out of the story because the author wanted to attack government tyranny rather than military science. Aldous Huxley's novel, *Ape and Essence*, is more realistic in that it describes a possible future world devastated by nuclear bombs and chemical warfare.

Huxley considers both the aims of war and its cause: 'Surely it's obvious? Doesn't every schoolboy know it? Ends are ape-chosen; only the means are man's.' (Huxley, 1949, p. 32). In other words, human beings have high intelligence when thinking about techniques but like the beasts have very restricted ideas about the future and therefore cannot foresee any but the most immediate consequences of their own actions.

Aldous Huxley depicts the initiation of the third world war by baboonish military men launching chemical and nuclear weapons across the oceans with the help of scientists—Faraday, Pasteur and Einstein—who are dragged about on leashes. He believed, no doubt correctly, that chemical weapons, and the radiation emitted by atomic weapons, could cause diseases in the living and deformities in the unborn.

Ape and Essence describes Los Angeles as it might be in the 22nd century, three generations after the dropping of what the survivors

in California call The Thing. In the year 2108 Los Angeles, formerly the home of millions of people, has only a few hundred human inhabitants, the descendants of those who survived a nuclear bombardment. The Thing was not a low level atomic weapon but the most deadly nuclear device that mankind could devise. The city is ruled by castrated priests who worship Belial. Belial has to be propitiated because it was he who sent The Thing. After The Thing the millions of dead could not be buried so the streets of Los Angeles are littered not only with the debris of smashed buildings but with huge quantities of human bones which the new Californians make into simple artifacts. A cohort of cemetery workers has the task of digging up pre-war coffins and undressing the corpses in order to provide clothing for important people.

Sex is forbidden except for a special two-week orgy held annually. After the orgy all the 3-month-old infants born as the outcome of the previous year's orgy are ceremoniously examined by the priests of Belial. Most infants are deformed: those with minor deformities are permitted to live, the rest are knifed by the priests. Then their mothers are whipped with bulls' pizzlies. Women are referred to as 'vessels', short for 'vessels of deformity and enemies of the race.' The priests explain to a visitor that the number and the severity of the infantile deformities increase each year so that the population will eventually disappear altogether.

It is possible that the effects of a future nuclear war could be just as unfortunate as Huxley predicted. Although the 1945 atomic bomb attacks on Japan have not been repeated anywhere else the major powers still hold huge stockpiles of much more powerful weapons and have not been able to prevent the spread of nuclear technology to other nations. By 1987 Robert McNamara, once a very belligerent American Secretary of State for Defense, had come to believe that if a third world war were to be waged with nuclear weapons it would destroy all life on the planet.

Speculation: Sigmund Freud

Freud wrote about war more than once. One source is a 1915 paper 'Thoughts for Our Times' in which he tried to explain the origins of warfare. Another source is a letter he wrote to Albert Einstein in the 1920s. Einstein had been asked by the League of Nations to enter into correspondence with anyone he chose about any topic he chose. Einstein chose Freud and asked him whether he thought mankind could be delivered from the menace of war. Freud's reply is entitled

'Why War?'. The two essays are published together in a slim book (Freud, 1953).

Einstein had mentioned the difference between might and right. Freud substituted the idea of violence for the idea of might, and claimed that it is easy to prove that right evolves from violence. His so-called proof simply states that all conflicts of interest between man and man are resolved, in principle, by recourse to violence. This supposed proof merely restates the thesis waiting to be proved and the reference to principle fails to say what the principle *is*. I believe the founder of psychoanalytic theory, or rather his unconscious mind, was relying, not on any statistical or other empirical evidence, but on the old German proverb '*Gewalt geht vor Recht*' ('might precedes right').

Freud says that civilisation, in other words the community, the State, demands that the citizen renounces many instinctual gratifications. National leaders forbid individuals to engage in wrong-doing, not because States wish to abolish the practice but because they want to monopolise it in the same way that they monopolise taxes on tobacco and salt.

Another Freudian thesis is that every living thing has an impulse towards destruction, the Death Instinct. It is not clear whether he meant to refer only to animals or whether cabbages and parsley were covered by his generalisation, but be that as it may, the Death Instinct, he said, is quite a healthy thing—though only when it is turned outward as the instinct to kill, being morbid and unhealthy when turned inward, as in suicide. In the papers under discussion Freud maintains that the morbid unhealthy version of the Death Instinct is the origin of conscience thus suggesting that he thought of conscience either as a kind of illness or as an illusion or as both. He also said that right is simply the violence of the community and that law emerges when brute force is transferred from individuals to governments.

Well, is war caused by the destructive instincts or intentions of rulers? If so how do those relate to the motives of ordinary individual citizens? Does the larger entity, the community, the State, have instincts of its own, over and above those of individual rulers and subjects? How can that be? Or is the State somehow motivated by the instincts of those it is supposed to govern?

Freud is not worried about ambiguity and contradiction, hence he first implies that the State declares war at the urging of its citizens' instincts and then says that the relaxation of moral ties between

different national communities during war affects the morality of individuals—all in the same book.

Some supporters of Freud, more logical than he, might here point out that individual rulers, individual heads of States, have often fought in wars. Once upon a time kings and princes were real soldiers who led their forces into battle. Even nowadays hereditary monarchs and their kin serve in armies and navies, for example three of Queen Elizabeth II's four children have served in the armed forces, two in peace time and one (the Duke of York) in a war zone during a war. In early 2006 both her grandsons were in training at Sandhurst. On the other hand Western monarchs today are merely nominal rulers, the real rulers—for example members of Parliament in Britain, Senators and Congressmen in the United States—do not join the military in time of war and rarely, if ever, encourage their children to serve in the armed forces.

Freud gives what he calls 'the illusion' of conscience two different explanations. In one explanation he says conscience originates in a morbid, that is, a suicidal, version of the Death Instinct. In the other he says conscience is nothing but fear of the community. Can conscience be both those things? He also suggests that the impulses of philanthropy and the impulses of kindness to animals are not genuine but really cloak quite different feelings. All the supposed friends of humanity, all the supposed champions of animals were as little children sadistic tormenters of their pet dogs and cats. There is no such thing as heroism, no such thing as genuine self-sacrifice. The real explanation of supposedly heroic acts is that no-one believes in his own death. Moreover the supposed dread of death is not real; it is caused by unconscious guilt. There is no such thing as genuine grieving. When anyone seems to grieve for the death of a loved person his real feelings are a mixture of hatred and gratification. There is no such thing as chivalry; it is a figment of the imagination. Enslaving an enemy is very gratifying and that fact explains the supposedly chivalrous practice of giving quarter.

It might be possible to agree with Freud about some things but nevertheless question his thesis that all human feelings, motives and actions are selfish and violent and cruel. His account of humanity, a gregarious species, is hostile and one-sided.

The beliefs expressed by Freud in these two papers evidently look plausible to his followers. But superficial plausibility cannot overcome the brute fact that Dr Freud never supports his theories with any evidence. He insists, repeatedly, that he is a scientist; he even

compares his 'discovery' of psychoanalysis with Einstein's work on relativity. Yet in these essays he at no point alludes to history or anthropology or ethology or any other empirical enquiry. In other words his theories are unsupported.

A good example of an unsupported thesis is his claim that what is true of human violence is also true in the whole animal kingdom. That is simply false. For example the males of our nearest cousins, the apes, do not fight to the death as human beings do, they fight to establish dominance. Once the Alpha male ape is recognised as such the fighting ends. The Beta and Gamma males rarely get killed because they know it is better to submit or if need be to run away. The big cats occasionally kill one another but that is not their ordinary way of resolving conflicts of interest. It only happens when things get out of hand, out of paw. Male crocodiles eat crocodile eggs and young crocs but that is not a way of resolving saurian conflicts. It seems more like a species-related eating disorder.

Parent birds protect their young by pretending to be wounded so that predators will be led away from the nestlings. They place their own lives at risk, just as chivalrous human beings do. Penguins of both sexes protect their young under their feet all through the Antarctic winter.

As with ethology so too with history and anthropology. None of Freud's amoral or anti-moral propositions are supported by empirical evidence apart from the obvious fact that mankind does indeed go in for killing members of its own species on a grand scale. Freud's attempts to explain war do not rest on genuine enquiries into causes. He ignores the fact that anthropology, like history, teaches that levels of violence vary a lot between different times, different places, different groups.

When Freud said that Eros and the death wish are both 'indispensable' was he talking only about males? Do women and female animals have the death wish, the desire to kill? Whatever other psychologists might teach Freud himself was not in a position to assert that women have a death wish because he, on his own say-so, was not in a position to apply any of his theories to women. In his well-known letter to Marie Bonaparte he said that in spite of all his years as a psychoanalyst he still did not know what women want. The confession surely shows that Freud's big generalisations have to do only with males. The remark to Marie Bonaparte is also a manifestation of his usual refusal to look at any kind of ordinary evidence. He had many women patients and could have at least made a statis-

tical study of what they said they wanted in life. If the answers seemed insincere he could have tried hypnotism, one of his earlier tools of trade.

It is quite apparent that Freud actually had a real aversion to seeking evidence. That would explain some of his reckless generalisations: for example in the little volume under discussion he writes that after a war the soldier returns to his wife and children 'joyous, fulfilled and unconcerned'. Well, it is true that many men like to fight and it is quite probable that young inexperienced soldiers look forward to war. When they return — and of course not all do, people get killed in wars! — some will have been blinded, some will have lost limbs, some will have had their lungs or other organs damaged by chemicals and virtually all will have lost comrades. Soldiers returning from Japanese prisoner of war camps after the second world war felt anything but joyous.

Had Freud ever met any returning soldiers? Or was he simply obtuse? D.H. Lawrence said that pornography does the dirt on sex. In his essays on war Sigmund Freud does the dirt on the whole human race. He was a well-read man (for a doctor) and was doubtless familiar with the writings of Nietzsche and Darwin and Malthus. He seems anyway to have adopted the Nietzschean view that there are no moral facts. (Though Nietzsche, not a consistent thinker, also proposed a new set of 'oughts' and 'ought nots', as embodied in the theory of the Superman.)

Freud's contemptuous rejection of the human traits that you and I and others think of as benign, traits such as generosity, fellow-feeling, heroism, self-sacrifice, grief at the death of loved ones, and kindness to animals, is much worse than the superficially similar teachings of Nietzsche.

Wittgenstein says that Freud's 'science' lacks evidence because there cannot be any evidence for Freudian theories: 'What he gives us is speculation — something prior even to the formation of an hypothesis.' (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 44). He notes that Freud felt that there must be some law explaining this or that human activity and quotes one of the psycho-analysts best-known remarks ('Do you want to say, gentlemen, that changes in mental phenomena are guided by chance?') and remarks that in his opinion the fact that there aren't actually any laws here is important. According to Wittgenstein people are inclined to accept Freud's ideas because they are attractive in the way that myths and stories are attractive.

Freud's reply to Einstein ends with the unoriginal idea that a powerful world government might be able to do away with war. Was Einstein disappointed? Probably.

The most striking thing about Freud's reasoning in the two essays about war is its shockingly muddled and contradictory character. The muddle, and the failure to support conclusions with any evidence, indicate a lack of what one might call scientific morality, or scientific responsibility, or, more generally, the ethics of enquiry.

Ape and Essence and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are works of the imagination. The contributions from Lenin and Freud are also imaginative in that Marxist-Leninism and Freudianism, contrary to the claims of their inventors, are not sciences but pseudo-sciences.

To my mind, however, the two novelists and the two pseudo-scientists have between them correctly located the ultimate causes of war as originating partly in the brains of men and partly in the institutions created by men. Like dragons the causes of war sometimes sleep and sometimes wake but they will not go away unless men can change or modify their institutions and at the same time overcome – somehow! – the natural propensity to aggression lurking inside their heads.