

Volume 7 Number 1 (2013): 59-65

<http://www.infactispax.org/journal/>

War: The Ultimate Crime Against Humanity

Review of Gwynne Dyer, *War: the Lethal Custom* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005).

By Sam R. Snyder

The institution of war has an improbable history. It is the only human institution that has such a checkered history of short-term gains and long-term losses. It is the ultimate crime against humanity if, and more probably when, the human race successfully destroys the conditions which make human existence on earth possible. Although rooted in our animal past, war as a human institution profoundly connected to civilization and technology.

Gwynne Dyer entitled his book, *War: the Lethal Custom*, signifying in the subtitle that war is a customary activity in human society. Dyer, who holds a Ph.D. in military history from the University of London, has served in the Canadian, British, and American navies. The book, published in 2005, is a completely revised edition of the 1985 edition. In the 1980's a seven-part television series, based upon the original edition, was broadcast in forty-five countries.

In his Introduction, Dyer states that war has been a "more or less" functional institution and it is only in the past century that two trends, one moral and the other practical, have gained strength. After the atrocities of the 20th century, large numbers of people came to the realization that war might simply be wrong. The other factor is that we will almost all die, and our civilization with it, if we continue to practice war.

In his first chapter, the author discusses the nature of war, about how the soldier was one of civilization's first inventions and how little armies have changed over the past five thousand years. The consequences of war, however, can and do change. Once force has been invoked, the only effective response is superior force. The one certainty about battle is its uncertainty, the "fog of war." The author says that everything that army officers know about battle leads them to believe that "it is an environment where nothing works reliably, and no plan or stratagem succeeds for very long." (p. 27)

The second chapter, entitled “Anybody’s Son Will Do,” talks about the process of taking ordinary young men, most of whom have an inhibition against killing, and removing that inhibition by routine psychological conditioning. War has been chronic for about ten thousand years, since we moved into mass civilizations. The author raises the question of whether war is an inevitable part of civilization, or whether it goes even deeper.

In the third chapter, “The Roots of War,” the author turns to the great debate about human nature as characterized by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* was published in 1651, just after the Thirty Years War. The work was a defense of the powerful centralized state in contrast with the chaos and misery of life without it, a life, which Hobbes characterized as being “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” (Quoted on p. 67)

Rousseau, writing a century after Hobbes, made the “Noble Savage” his model, people who Rousseau characterized as living in freedom and equality. He argued that people who lived in “pre-civilization” possessed the freedom and equality that was the original heritage of all mankind.

The evidence we have for the way human beings used to live is the archeological data about long-ago hunter-gatherer bands. What evidence we have indicates that hunter-gatherer bands contained about twenty to fifty people. There was a rough equality among adults with a sharp division of labor between the sexes. However correct Rousseau was about some characteristics of their life, he was incorrect about an absence of warfare. As Hobbes asserted, they did live in “continual fear and danger of violent death” at the hands of their fellow men. (Quoted on p. 69)

Jane Goodall’s discovery in 1973 that chimpanzees in Tanzania waged a kind of war against neighboring tribes was subsequently confirmed other investigators. It was concluded that fighting between rival gangs of chimps is “widespread, chronic, and very serious.” About 98 percent of our genetic material is common to the two species and until about ten or twelve thousand years ago all of our human ancestors made their living in essentially the same way as chimps, by foraging for food in small bands about the same size. (p. 70)

The rest of the chapter is devoted to considering the question of whether the tendency to make war is an inevitable part of our animal heritage. This is a disturbing thought, as the author states, but territory is important, and predators play for keeps. (p. 81)

The “predator” distinction is important: this phenomenon of raiding and waging ‘war’ against other members of the same species occurs only among predators. Moralists will start looking for the mark of Cain, but pragmatists would simply observe that if you are not equipped in some way to kill members of other species, you probably cannot kill members of your own either. Thus, for example, only two species among the great apes, humans and chimpanzees, routinely hunt, and they are also the only two primate species that regularly engage in intra-species killing. *Why* these predators (and some others) make a kind of war is a difficult and contentious question, but *how* is simple: they can do it because both their physiology and their group-living habits make it easy for them to do

so. (pp. 81-82) [*Italics* in original]

In his fourth chapter, “The Rise of Battle,” Dyer associates war, as we know it with the rise of civilization. He states:

[By] 2000 BC or thereabouts, all of the main institutions, values, and behaviors [*sic*] of civilization were in place, and they would not change drastically for another three millennia. By then, at least 90 percent of the human race was making a living from agriculture, and the vast majority of these people lived in states that were social pyramids with semi-divine kings at the top. The old egalitarian values survived only in a few small city-states, and among the relatively small number of people who made their living as pastoralists or as tribal farmers and hunter-gatherers. (p. 144)

The fifth chapter, entitled “The Middle Passage,” describes the period from the second millennium BC to the beginning of the present era four or five centuries ago. It links the rise of battle as the predominant feature of war, as described in the previous chapter, and in the subsequent chapter, “The Road to Mass Warfare.”

Gun power was invented by the Chinese during the Sung dynasty, a period of remarkable technological innovation in China. By 1257 a primitive gun using a bamboo tube, called the “fire lance,” was developed. The Mongols probably transmitted the new weapon to Europe, and the first real metal guns were being cast in Europe by the 1320’s. After that, Europe took the lead in development of firearms.

The old-style medieval castles and town walls could be knocked down by cannon fire, but “by the seventeenth century a new kind of fortification based on deep ditches, sloping walls, and angular bastions was winning the technological race against the cannons of the time.” (pp. 207-208). Cannon fire had its most profound effect at sea, where the ocean-going sailing ships of Western Europe ideal artillery platforms. (p. 208) The author states, however, that firearms did not destroy Feudalism. The whole basis of the feudal nobility’s economic and political power was undermined by the shift from agriculture to commerce as the main source of wealth and by the growing centralization of political power in the monarch.

Within a generation of the introduction of modern European firearms into Japan in, 1542, the Japanese were manufacturing firearms fully comparable to the European. In 1575, Japanese musketry was the best in the world but by 1675 there hardly any guns in Japan and they had disappeared completely from war. “It was one of the most extraordinary about-faces in history: the Japanese looked down the road on which firearms were taking them, decided they did not like the destination, and simply turned back.” (p. 212)

From the mid-sixteenth century on, Europe was increasingly torn by wars of religion arising out of the Protestant Reformation. The Thirty Years War, which ended in 1648, was the first war in which all of the European powers became involved. “Battles had taken on the form they were to retain until a little more than a century ago – and eight million people were dead” (p. 215)

The other great change in war [besides the increase in the number of battles] was

political, not military: for the first time ever, mass societies had found a way to dispense with their autocratic rulers and revive the old human principle of equality. In less than fifteen years, popular revolutions overthrew the monarchs first in the British colonies in America (population three million), and then in France, the biggest state in Europe (population thirty million). (p. 237)

. . . All that was lacking to transform mass warfare into total war was the technology – but the Industrial Revolution was already almost a generation old in 1815, and soon it would begin to fill that last remaining gap. (p. 240)

Dyer’s seventh chapter is entitled “*Reductio ad Absurdum: Total War.*” He begins with the greatest mid-century war of the nineteenth century: the American Civil War. More American soldiers died – 622,000 – in the civil war than in the two World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. This with a population of only ten percent of what it is now.

World War I, the trench war, became a war of artillery; over half the casualties were now caused by shellfire. Because of the trenches, strategy was paralyzed and tactics narrowed to the search for bigger bombardments. The war became simply a matter of attrition. In the five-month battle of the Somme, for example, the British lost 415,000 men and the Germans lost a similar number.

Bombing civilians in cities . . . was the final step in the brutal logic of total war. . . . The first major air raid on London came little more than a year after the war’s outbreak. (pp. 262-263)

Attrition, in the end, was the main factor that decided who won the war. The Entente powers simply had more men and resources than Germany and its allies The scale of losses dwarfed those of any previous war in history. Over eight million soldiers were killed and about twenty million wounded, and it is estimated that around three million civilians also died, mostly from malnutrition and disease. (p. 267)

During the twenty years between the two world wars, theorists worked out how best to use tanks (developed at the end of World War I) in warfare. The Germans developed the “Blitzkrieg” (lightning war) using a large force of tanks to penetrate the enemy’s front, assisted by aircraft and followed by motorized infantry and artillery. Using this method, the Germans destroyed the entire Polish army in three weeks in 1939. (p. 271)

World War II killed at least twice as many soldiers as World War I, but it also killed almost twice as many civilians as soldiers. As the author states:

“At least 97 percent of the forty-five million people who were killed in World War II were *not* killed by air raids on cities, and it is very hard for even the most devoted admirers of ‘strategic bombardment’ to make a convincing argument that it won the war. . . . Bombing is the natural weapon – *the reductio ad absurdum* – of total war, and it was particularly attractive to those theorists between the wars who wished to avoid another bloody struggle in the trenches.” (p. 275, *italics in original*)

In the war against Japan the United States used huge B-29 bombers and more “British” tactics. By 1945 only about three hundred thousand civilians were killed by the bombings, but about twenty-two million were living in temporary shelters amid the burnt-out cities or had fled to the countryside.

On 6 August 1945, Colonel Tibbett’s crew dropped the [atomic] weapon on Hiroshima, and total war came fully into its inheritance: seventy thousand people were killed in less than five minutes by a single aircraft carrying a single bomb. (p. 283)

Colonel Tibbetts is unusual only for what he did. His attitudes toward war are those that still dominate the world, although the weapons of mass destruction have grown still more efficient in the [then] six decades since he dropped his relatively puny bomb on Hiroshima. The disproportion between means and ends in warfare has widened into an unbridgeable chasm: the causes and the various national aims of modern wars are no more profound or complex than those that sent Tuthmose III’s army marching into Palestine three thousand years ago, but the means by which wars can now be fought have placed the whole human race on a permanent notice of extinction. (p. 284)

[But] crisis management, however necessary, is bound to fail sooner or later; only profound institutional change can provide long-term safety, for the technologies of total war cannot be unlearned. That change has not yet been accomplished in practice, but one of the vital preconditions for change had come to pass by 1945. As a result of two world wars, a majority of people everywhere have ceased to see war as an opportunity for personal and national glory, and come to see it instead as a very big and ugly problem. (p. 285)

But are we sure?

In the opening pages of Dyer’s eighth chapter, entitled *A Short History of Nuclear War, 1945-90*, the author states that the assumption that great military strength is the surest guarantee that a country will be left in peace – is demonstrably false. The bigger and more powerful the state, the more frequent its wars.

World War I spread to all the European great powers and Japan, and after two and a half years, the United States. By its end it had involved half the independent states then in existence. World War II involved every great power in just over two years and all but six of the world’s independent countries were at war by 1945.

Since 1945, however, none of the great powers has fought any other great power directly. Wars between middle-rank neighboring countries have occurred regularly. These are now known as conventional (non-nuclear) wars, but they tend to be short. The majority of people killed in war since 1945 have died in new kinds of struggle: guerrilla warfare, “revolutionary war,” counter-insurgencies, and terrorism. These all have one thing in common: military power is becoming less effective in achieving decisive and politically satisfactory results.

After an extended discussion of crises and near-crises from the 1960’s through the 1980’s: Berlin, Cuba, Vietnam, the middle East, the author arrives at the following conclusion:

The problem we face was bound to arrive eventually: war is deeply ingrained in our culture, but it is lethally incompatible with an advanced technological civilization. Six [now nine] decades after Hiroshima we have a clearer grasp of the precise nature of our fate if we fail to solve the problem, but the essence of our dilemma was already obvious to Albert Einstein in 1945: “Everything has changed, except our way of thinking.” (p. 346)

“Keeping the Old Game Alive” is the title of the ninth chapter, the “game” being referred to being, or course, “the game of war, as practiced by great nations. While we normally count only the two great wars of the twentieth century as “world wars,” the author states that a *political* definition of a world war would be one in which “all the great powers of the time are involved. By this criterion, there have been six world wars in modern history: the Thirty Years War of 1618-48, the War of the Spanish Succession in 1702-14, the Seven Years War of 1756-63, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars of 1791-1815, and the two wars that actually bear the name of World War in 1914-18 and 1939-45.” (p. 351)

The author notes that the most striking thing about this list is its cyclical character; the great powers have all gone to war with each other about every fifty years. Dyer says that the reason that great powers all go to war about every fifty years is almost certainly because of the peace treaty that ended the last war. (p. 352) If this is true, and there seems to be a great deal of evidence to support it, a functional definition of the purpose of war is to prepare for the next war.

Chapter 10, the penultimate chapter in Dyer’s book, concerns guerrillas and terrorists. The final paragraph in that chapter is a quotation from September 2002 made by Stella Rimington, former director-general of MI5, the British foreign intelligence agency.

I’m afraid that terrorism didn’t begin on 9/11 and it will be around for a long time. I was very surprised by the announcement of a war on terrorism because terrorism has been around for thirty-five years. . . . [and it] will be around while there are people with grievances. There are things we can do to improve the situation, but there will always be terrorism. One can be misled by talking about war, as though in some way you can defeat it. (p. 416)

The final chapter of Dyer’s book is “The End of War.” The chapter begins with an account of a disaster that struck the Forest Troop of baboons in Kenya. When the alpha males, who ruled the garbage dump of a tourist lodge within their range, ate meat that was infected with bovine tuberculosis at the dump and promptly died, the less aggressive half of the group’s males survived.

Male baboons are so obsessed with status that they routinely bully and terrorize lower-ranking males and even females who are half their size. After the biggest, most aggressive males died, the surviving members relaxed and began treating one another more decently, changing the whole social atmosphere.

All primates are very malleable and adaptive in our cultures. Human beings are less aggressive and more cooperative than baboons or chimpanzees, and infinitely more flexible in

our cultural arrangements. Although war is deeply embedded, given some of the other changes we have already made in the way we live, it seems reasonable to assume that we should be able to wean ourselves away from it.

None of the great powers sees any of the others as a dangerous enemy at the moment. By the end of the Cold War, however, the glorification of national military power had already become part of the political culture in Washington. The full implications of what we have done in the past two centuries – increasing the human population six fold and industrializing most of the planet at the same time – will have huge consequences over the next two or three generations.

According to a long-range economic forecast by Goldman Sachs, the world's largest economy will be China, followed by the United States and India, and then Brazil, Russia, and Japan. Just the proliferation of nuclear weapons alone challenges the stability of the system, so are the environmental crises, which will hit some countries harder than others. The highest priority at the moment, the author states, is to keep the multilateral approach alive and avoid a drift back into alliance systems and arms races. Dyer concludes:

Our task over the next few generations is to transform the world of independent states in which we live into some sort of international community. If we succeed in creating that community, however quarrelsome, discontented, and full of injustice it probably will be, then we shall effectively have abolished the ancient institution of warfare. Good riddance. (p. 446)