Why Study War?

Introduction

Why study war? Few subjects are less appealing: it is costly, destructive, and deeply human. Yet ignoring it risks misunderstanding one of history's most persistent forces.

Britain's recent wars in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and Iraq (2003) make the case. In Afghanistan, over 450 British personnel died, at a cost exceeding £23 billion, only for the Taliban to return to power.

In Iraq, fought on dubious claims of Weapons of Mass Destruction, 179 British troops were killed and billions spent, while hundreds of thousands of Iraqis perished. Across both campaigns Britain lost 636 lives, spent some £33 billion, and took part in conflicts that together claimed over 600,000 local deaths. Such figures demand far more rigorous, multidisciplinary study than they usually receive.

The answer is stark: without understanding war, peace cannot be sustained. War is not an inexplicable eruption but a deliberate political act, rooted in human agency. To treat it as peripheral is to ignore the very forces that have shaped civilisation -from Jericho's walls to Ukraine's defiance. To study war is therefore to study humanity itself: our choices, ambitions, and failures.

Let's start with Military History

Military history is a popular subject. Any new book by an established author, such as Max Hastings, Anthony Beevor or Carlo d'Este is almost guaranteed sales in the thousands. There are many more, and a vast canon of books, both popular and academic, articles and monographs, on almost every campaign, every war and every battle throughout history.

Yet the more military history you read, the more you might wonder what soldiers, sailors or airmen were doing in that particular location at that particular time, other than facing the enemy.
You might also wonder what the overall military objectives were, and thereby what the political context was. There are two

dangers. First, we might forget to recognise that War is a political act, first, last and always. It is not, as Clausewitz did not say, "politics by other means". What Clausewitz did say is that "War is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means". And, most importantly, "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their (political) purpose."

Unless we recognise this, and unless this informs all our thinking about war, we might be in danger of confusing war and warfare.

Of course, there is considerable overlap.

This is fully covered in the first book of my trilogy *Making Sense of War, About War*:

War *is a hostile act of organised violence designed to change the political balance between polities. A polity is a social organisation which is coherent and largely supported by its members. Such a polity must be capable of providing security and other social goods such as governance and justice. The obvious example is the nation–state.*

Warfare *is the practice of planning for, managing and using organised violence, be that military force or any overt hostile action (such as a cyber-attack). It has many dimensions: doctrine, 'operational art', tactics, but it is essentially subordinate to the (political) essence of war….*

This gives rise to the most egregious problem with all military endeavours: of seeing war through the prism of warfare: a serious mistake. Surely, such a banal reflection cannot be true! Yet to quote *About War*…

In 2013, David Miliband gave a speech at Ditchley Park. He recounted how he attended Cabinet in 2005–2006 as a Minister. During discussions on the impending deployment of British troops to Afghanistan, he recalled arguments about money, equipment, drugs, and governance. But not mentioned was the main point – politics not troops. That is, the politics of 40,000 villages and valleys; of a society where the state has no monopoly

on violence; of complex tribal structures that cross-national boundaries one hundred years after their creation. Warfare as logistics, not politics.

On the same deployment to Afghanistan" Paddy Ashdown (1941–2018, a British politician and diplomat who served as a Marine and Leader of the Liberal Democrats) warned that Western ambitions were fundamentally unrealistic: "We do not have enough troops, aid or international will to make Afghanistan much different from what it has been for the last 1,000 years – a society built around the gun, drugs and tribalism. And even if we had all of these in sufficient quantities, we would not have them for sufficient time – about 25 years or so – to make the aim of fundamentally altering the nature of Afghanistan." Warfare as military action, not politics.

All military deployments should be seen through a political lens. This applies as much to Rome's relationship with Carthage, to the Battle of Hastings, to the Napoleonic wars, to the 1812 British–American war and the First and Second World Wars, Operation Market Garden (more frequently known as the Battle of Arnhem in September 1944) and every (counterinsurgent) deployment since then. It's all about the politics: national, international and between allies.

And to study politics is to study almost every aspect of human endeavour, plus a few more thrown in. It is these factors that have driven human history, with constant change and flux, always interacting. There are inputs (for example, human nature, ideology, geography) and outputs, which for our purpose here is war.

As an output, war is not simply one subject among many in human history: it is its recurrent rhythm. From the fortified settlements of the Neolithic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, war has shaped political orders, redrawn maps, and driven innovation as much as it has wrought destruction. Yet unlike other foundations -law, markets, or religion -war has no clear point of origin, nor any sign of receding. It is, as Sir Michael Howard once remarked, too often taken for granted rather than the deliberate consequence of political decision.

Sir Michael Howard's *The Invention of Peace* offered a double warning. He lamented that war has not been studied deeply enough across disciplines, too often treated as peripheral, as if wars simply "broke out" without human agency. He also argued that peace is a modern creation: for most of history war was the norm, with peace only institutionalised after the Napoleonic Wars through the Concert of Europe. His conclusion was stark: peace is not natural but fragile, requiring constant upkeep through law, diplomacy, and balance of power. To neglect the study of war is to hazard peace itself.

But why study war in history? More importantly, why study its development into modern intrastate and interstate conflict? Is there a continuous line to be traced, or only an enduring paradox? War has been with us so long that it is built into historical and current thinking. The familiar phrase, "the world is an increasingly dangerous place", is misleading. The world has always been dangerous, as any serious study of history will show.

Yet every factor we can identify as causing or at least contributing to war is subject to change, both on a time basis and geographically and ideologically.

The emphasis must be on war itself, its provenance, its progress and its resolution as objects of study: why it must be analysed across many disciplines, such as history, politics, philosophy, economics and social psychology. War is as much a part of the human condition as civilisation.

The Drivers of Human History, and War

Historians, anthropologists, and political scientists have long sought to identify the forces that propel human history. Cooperation, labour specialisation, migration, and technology are the obvious candidates. Yet, with regards to war over the years, academics, writers and other commentators have struggled to achieve any consensus or even any common ground for study. Some identify the structure of the International System (Kenneth Waltz' "*Man, the State, and War*", some are more psychological (Richard Overy *"Why War"*). Yet all these studies alone cannot explain the persistence of violence. Before advancing any central thesis, it is useful to outline the conventional but indisputable drivers of human history. There are many…

Civilisation
Civilisation rests on many foundations. Richard Miles, an archaeologist calls it “mankind’s greatest experiment”

In early times, agricultural surpluses and the division of labour were fundamental. But almost immediately, other dynamics emerged. One can imagine small agglomerations of tribes building houses and grain stores near water sources and timber. These early villages (Richard Miles often calls them “cities”) soon attracted the attention of roving bands of hunter–gatherers. The need for defence was obvious: fortifications, weaponry, and the training of soldiers, usually citizen militias.

Even before that, archaeological evidence suggests that conflict was endemic even among hunter–gatherers. Raids over hunting grounds or water supplies are not far removed from the wars later fought between city-states, kingdoms, and empires, though there are important differences. Raiding lacked the political and strategic dimensions of war, but it laid the foundations of organised violence.

Geography
Geography is fundamental. Mountain barriers, fertile plains, navigable rivers, and coastlines shape choices and opportunities for both attacker and defender. The struggle for resources - especially water, arable land, and timber -has driven conflict from the Nile to the Indus, and from Crimea to the Himalayas. Geography remains decisive even in the missile age.

As Tim Marshall (2015) argues (his books on Geography are classics) Russia’s historic vulnerability arises from the flatlands of the North European Plain, repeatedly exploited by invaders. By contrast, China’s vast deserts and high mountains mean that any serious invasion must come by sea.

Inequality
Inequality has also shaped outcomes. Today’s concern with migration across the English Channel is only the latest chapter in the long history of movement. Migration has always been driven by disparities in wealth and resources. Population surges generate growth but also tension; extreme inequality produces

civil unrest and revolution. The French Revolution, the American Civil War, the upheavals of the twentieth century, and the instability of fragile states today all illustrate the link between inequality and violence.

Diplomacy
Diplomacy is often celebrated as the antidote to war, yet its record is mixed. Diplomatic manoeuvres before 1914 were frequently ill-informed, short-sighted, and strategically maladroit, magnifying miscalculation and hastening the descent into catastrophe. There are successful examples -Westphalia, the Concert of Europe, the European Union -where diplomacy transformed rivals into partners. But when it fails, as before Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the consequences are disastrous.

Ideology
Religion, nationalism, communism, fascism: each has mobilised millions and legitimised (in their own minds) violence in pursuit of idealist ends. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) is often remembered as a clash of faiths. Yet beneath its rhetoric, it was above all a contest for power, particularly between Bourbon France and the Habsburgs. Religion provided justification, but power defined outcomes.

Trade and Economic Forces
Trade both integrates and divides. Wealth builds armies, fuels innovation, and provokes envy. Globalised finance stabilises and destabilises in equal measure. China's Belt and Road Initiative extends influence through infrastructure and debt; the United States' economic dominance has inspired admiration and resentment. Thucydides, two and a half millennia ago, captured the dynamic: "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

Human Agency and Leadership
Structural forces explain much, but not all. Leadership and human agency remain decisive. Would there have been a Peloponnesian War without Pericles? A Roman Civil War without Julius Caesar? Could Napoleon's ambitions, or Bismarck's diplomacy, be detached from the wars they produced? Hitler's resentment and ideology drove one of history's most murderous

conflicts. Personal ambition, hubris, and miscalculation have repeatedly altered the fate of nations.

Technology

Optimists often argue that technology transforms war. From railways and telegraphs to tanks, nuclear weapons, and drones, innovations have certainly altered the character of warfare. Yet, technology does not change the essence of war: the use of organised violence for political ends. New weapons modify tactics, but politics decides outcomes. Nuclear deterrence curbed superpower confrontation yet encouraged proxy wars; drones expand reach but cannot resolve political grievances. The lesson is clear: while machines shape how wars are fought, they never determine why wars occur.

War and Human History

Taken together, these forces demonstrate that human history is shaped not only by material progress but also by insecurity and violence. Geography, demography, ideology, economics, and leadership all converge in war. To make sense of the past, our present, and to anticipate the future, we must understand how these factors combine in a dynamic way.

Dynamic is often misused as a synonym for energetic or fast-moving. In its proper sense, it describes the continuous interaction of multiple factors. A dynamic is not a single cause producing a linear effect, but a process shaped by reciprocal influences, feedback loops, and adaptation over time. No single factor can be considered in isolation; each affects and is affected by the others. Economic, political, social, and technological factors, for example, form a dynamic whole, both inside the state and the state's relationship with other states. Small changes can resonate widely. Only then can war, politics, and society be seen not as isolated episodes but as parts of a continuous human story.

So much for the various factors which have to be considered when we study war. What of the empirical evidence?

Empirical evidence

It is tempting to hope that leaders learn from the past. Yet history suggests otherwise: There is almost a deliberate refusal to learn. The Soviet Union's experience in Afghanistan did not prevent the

United States from embarking on its own costly failure. Lessons from Iraq or Libya appear similarly neglected. Winston Churchill once observed that the key to international relations was “history, history, history”. Too often, leaders proceed as though history is irrelevant.

The conventional view…
…holds that generals fight the last war. In reality, it is often politicians who impose outdated constraints. The prism of the Second World War -global conflict, moral clarity, and decisive victory -continues to distort Western understanding of contemporary conflict. Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have all demonstrated that most wars end not in victory but in stalemate or fragile settlement.

On a similar note, **half of wars never attain their original *political* objective**. This is not just anecdotal: it reflects a body of political science scholarship that has measures war outcomes against declared aims. Geoffrey Blainey, in The Causes of War (1973), argued that wars often end without a decisive political settlement, leaving grievances unresolved. Dan Reiter and Allan Stam (Democracies at War, 2002) showed that while democracies win more often, even they frequently fall short of the political goals set at the outset. Robert Gilpin (War and Change in World Politics, 1981) and later John Mearsheimer (The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, 2001) both emphasised that states regularly miscalculate costs, escalation risks, and adversary resilience - with results far removed from their original designs. Here, there is ample evidence, and the empirical record is consistent:

- The U.S. sought to build a viable South Vietnam; it did not.
- The 2003 Iraq War toppled Saddam Hussein but failed to deliver the promised liberal democracy.
- Britain and France aimed to reassert control at Suez (1956) but emerged diminished.
- Even “victories” -such as 1918 -left political problems unresolved, creating the conditions for worse conflict.

So while “half” is a rough measure, the core truth is robust: war is an unreliable political instrument, and success on the battlefield rarely translates cleanly into the political outcomes its architects intended.
One can almost hear politicians claiming that “things are different now”, or “we have better intelligence”; or the final tragic assertion that “our firepower is so much more powerful than the enemy, but we're bound to win”. Recall that The Taliban beat first the USSR and then the United States AND NATO in Afghanistan, clad in pyjamas, often wearing flip-flops and sporting rifles the British had left behind in the 19th century.

Conclusion
War is too enduring, too destructive, and too central to human affairs to be left to soldiers or historians alone. To neglect its study is to leave peace undefended. As Clausewitz insisted, war is a political act; as Michael Howard warned, peace is an invention - fragile, reversible, and always in need of protection. Across centuries, from Pericles and Caesar to Napoleon, Hitler, and Putin, leaders have turned political rivalry into violence. Each war has been justified in the name of survival or honour, yet too often it has ended without justice or durable settlement. As Sir Michael Howard wrote:

“After all allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity. All are fought, as Clausewitz insisted, in a special element of danger and fear and confusion. In all, large bodies of men are trying to impose their will on one another by violence; and in all, events occur which are inconceivable in any other field of experience.”

Today’s technology -drones, artificial intelligence, cyberwarfare, and hypersonic missiles -accelerates the tempo of conflict, but it does not change war’s essence. Weapons extend reach and magnify consequences; they do not alter the political decisions that bring wars about.

This essay has shown why war must be studied in its full political, social, and strategic context. For those who seek a deeper understanding, my trilogy *Making Sense of War* (*About War*, *War in Context*, *War after Ukraine*) provides that framework.

Only by confronting war directly can we hope to imagine -and sustain -something better.