

Bruno Tertrais, *La guerre*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, Coll. "Que Sais-Je?", 2010, 127 pp.

Reviewed by Alexandre Delaigue

A hard-to-beat prowess: author Bruno Tertrais offers a synthesis on war in less than 130 pages – a defining characteristic of the "Que Sais-Je?" series in which he chose to publish it. A difficult exercise as limited space, one can surmise, constantly obliges him to arbitrate between economy and fear of leaving out key issues or important points, as well as between the two audiences he addresses: social scientists specializing in war and military issues (his colleagues for whom this short volume provides a useful overview), and the educated layperson wishing to be enlightened on the subject.

This synthetic treatment first strikes the reader by its strict adherence to the norm of value-neutrality. Studying war dispassionately, as a social fact of life, and avoiding *a priori* normative judgements for or against it, is not so frequent in the vast literature it has elicited. This is a serious social science book.

The author opens with a paradox: while our age is characterized by a declining number of wars, the existence of vast (mostly Western) zones of sustained peace unheard of in previous eras, and war victims at an all-time low on a global scale,¹ all the talk is of a return to the state of war. Resolving that paradox requires historical depth, an analysis of the morphology and possible causes of war, an enumeration of the various types of explanation to be found in the literature, an examination of the factors affecting how it can be prevented or (more or less successfully) kept under control, as well as some sort of answer, derived from experience and research findings, to the question of its future.

His approach may come as a surprise since most treatments of war proceed in terms of a description of real war processes, strategies and tactics, forms of combat, technology, and so forth, here dealt with at some length for the post-1945 period, but only in chapter 3. The educated layperson will probably find it odd, however, that classics of the philosophy of war and strategic theory from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz to de Gaulle occupy hardly more than a single page.

Likewise, Tertrais places quantification at the centre of his definitions: war is "*a large-scale armed conflict opposing at least two human groups*"; defining 'large-scale' is then crucial: if the combat death toll is between 25 and 1,000 a year, the fighting deserves no more than a 'minor conflict' label; 'war', or 'major conflict', starts at 1,000 dead annually. Such emphasis on numbers follows standard practice among (mostly US) scholars specialized in, and (Canadian, Scandinavian) institutes dedicated to, compiling armed conflict data and assessing the 'correlates of war'. The value of theories thus seems to depend on whether or not they can give rise to statistical treatment. But what about the "human groups" such a definition refers to?

¹ For quantified historical comparisons, see Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

The author's approach manifests all the benefits and some of the limitations of such objectivist treatments. On the plus side, it guards against the ever-present possibility of less than objective judgements in a field replete with rules of thumb, moral sentiments, normative pronouncements, implicit metaphors, clichés, and the like. All too often, public debate is rife with pop theories ascribing war to "ethnic conflict" opposing peoples or communities whose mutual hostility stems from divergent (religious, cultural) identities,² or to strenuous competition for a precious natural resource (oil, water, etc.). In a few trenchant paragraphs, through quantitative empirical tests where such are available, on the basis of historical evidence elsewhere, Tertrais mercilessly exposes received but flawed ideas on recent wars (notably in the Middle East, where they are frequently referred to a hidden agenda – securing oil fields at the expense of others). He subjects macroscopic explanations (war and demographic trends, and democracy, and world trade, and institutional norms, etc.) to close scrutiny in the same manner, and to good effect. Flawed perceptions of enemy intent and capabilities leading to war or wrong-headed offensives are examined, and a list of historical illustrations provided.

On the minus side, Tertrais does tend to derive from the use of quantitative methods a level of subjective certainty (*cf.* his repeated use of the verb 'démontrer') that is mostly unwarranted. 'Demonstration' has definite meaning in mathematics, but less so in the social sciences (especially in economics: practitioners of the dismal science do not fear to use the word even where it is logically hard to justify). The use of statistical treatments does not *per se* guarantee theoretical value. What, for instance, does a correlation between GDP per capita and political violence mean? In many countries, official statistics is not reliable (especially where strong political dissensus is a factor), which often leads economists to assessments from which accuracy is generally absent. There is no way of deciding whether such a correlation suggests that poverty increases the risk of political violence, or whether the latter, where it erupts, should bring economists to conclude, reasonably enough, that GDP per capita has decreased.³ Fortunately, the author is aware of the perils of exaggerating the virtues of such a stance: he acknowledges that correlations do not necessarily translate into causality, determinism cannot fully apply when contextual factors are so numerous that most cannot be controlled, qualitative factors do play a role, etc. His comparison (borrowed from Alan Taylor) of wars with traffic accidents usefully drives the point home: a number of quantifiable factors are apt to increase or decrease the risk, but individual traits (driver's personality, attitude/behaviour on a given day) and sheer chance are often more decisive. His critique on that basis of fashionable concepts ("clash of civilizations", "climate wars", etc.) is particularly welcome.

In total, the book delivers: its objective of presenting a state-of-the-art synthesis of war studies is fulfilled. Each paragraph on the sources, processes, consequences, future prospects of war, and how to prevent it, is informative, and brings nuance to what we

² On the concept of identity, see Amartya Sen, *Identité et violence*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2010 [*Identity and Violence : The Illusion of Destiny*, New York, Norton, 2006].

³ The limitations of statistical reasoning have been pointed out in countless works. For instance, where economics is concerned, see Ed Leamer, "Let's Take the Con Out of Econometrics", *American Economic Review*, vol.73, n°1, March 1973, pp.31.43.

know (or think we know) about it. The references and data it supplies make it a precious tool for anyone who wishes to study war in earnest. The balance it achieves in terms of contents and volume is indeed hard to beat.

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