

## **Is 'War Studies' a legitimate focus of academic enquiry, or merely an eclectic collection of divergent issues and ideas?**

### **Introduction**

In order to answer the question stated in the heading, I will argue that 'War Studies' has yet to find its proper area of academic enquiry that is distinct of other areas of social science such as International Relation or Peace Research. International Relation and Peace Research exclude war in its proper sense from their academic enquiry. I will argue that 'War Studies' ought to focus on war proper. In doing so, 'War Studies' will focus on traditional areas such as strategy, operational art, tactics, and their related institutions. Furthermore I will argue that 'War Studies' will ultimately evolve its own inter-disciplinary structure.

I will structure my essay as follows: Firstly, I will give several reasons why war may be worth studying; secondly, I will summarise what the content of 'War Studies' might be; and thirdly, I will describe how one might study war.

### **Why to study war?**

Michael Howard observes that 'throughout human history mankind has been divided between those who believe that peace must be preserved, and those who believe that it must be attained.'<sup>1</sup> For that end, mankind has never hesitated to resort to armed struggle at a point when deemed necessary. The art of war with the aim 'to compel our enemy to do our will' is possibly older than recorded history.<sup>2</sup> With the wish to excel and prevail in war, the knowledge of warring has been passed on from one warrior caste to another, first by experience and orally, later in written form. In a time of general awakening, the Enlightenment sparked the search for unchanging principles, theories and systems in the art of war. Thus, the motive to prepare to fight more efficiently is the most long-standing purpose in studying war.<sup>3</sup>

Lawrence Freedman states a second reason for studying war: 'Anyone who is curious about how people, organizations, and states adjust to great changes in their environment,

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<sup>1</sup> Howard (2000), p. 6

<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 75; Jomini (1994), p. 12; Delbrück (2000), p. 1-2

<sup>3</sup> Freedman (1994), p. 5

cope with severe stress, and respond to fundamental challenges, finds in war their case studies.<sup>4</sup>

However, the development and proliferation of the apocalyptic atomic bomb, gave birth to a new focus and thereby new purpose in studying war. Civilian students strive in their scientific endeavour to understand what causes war and how war could be abolished. However, in analogy to John W. Burton's statement on the purpose of International Relation, one ought to consider that in War Studies, there may be the presumption that there is a universal desire or need or wisdom to be satisfied in determining means by which relations between political entities might be peaceful. In this limited respect students of war have the goal of peace. This does not prevent War Studies from being employed by those who have a different order of priorities.<sup>5</sup>

### **What to study?**

According to Lawrence LeShan, two reasons are usually forwarded by social scientists why the question of war's causes is not a legitimate area for research. The first reason is that the answer is presumably already known, and amounts to some simple, single factor. The second reason is that the problem is too complex to answer at all. However, LeShan notices that both groups agree that the problem of war is not amenable to social science research.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, so LeShan, 'there is wide disagreement among researchers in the social sciences on the subject of war and its causes; even within the individual disciplines, scholars who study war disagree with each other.'<sup>7</sup> He states that

Any serious approach to the problem of war must concentrate on two areas: why war is so attractive to human beings, and why governments so often act against their own interests in moving away from peace. Governments alone cannot fight war; the people must also be involved. .... Individuals can kill alone, but they cannot go to war alone. For this they need the large, complex social organization of government.<sup>8</sup>

LeShan remarks that

When we go to war, our perception of reality ... is quite different from that which we commonly use in peacetime. This shift, when it occurs, makes war much more difficult to prevent, or to stop once it has started. But

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<sup>4</sup> Freedman (1994), p. 5

<sup>5</sup> Burton (1965), p. 6

<sup>6</sup> LeShan (2002), p. 59

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 124

understanding how and why this shift comes about allows us to see the signs that indicate a society is moving towards war, and to understand what has to be done to stop this movement.<sup>9</sup>

However, traditionally, the focus of studying war was upon warring proper. In this, the science of war studies the ways that political aims permeate military matters on the strategic, operational, and tactical levels in varying circumstances of armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, 'War Studies' is not merely a science in the sense of furthering knowledge but an art in the sense of application as well. Astonishingly enough, whatever the known lethality in battle and the extraordinary sight of mutilation, sufferance, agony, and despair during battle – which at times disgust soldiers to such an extent that it dissuades them, for a longer or shorter period, from wanting to fight any more, or, as time drags on, almost all exposed to it, break down – one always finds volunteers for this particular profession.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, from the military point of view, the studying of strategy, operational art and tactics and their related institutions<sup>12</sup> – spanning the whole range of intensity in armed struggle and their inter-related issues – is the main focus of scientific endeavour.

Whatever the main focus of scientific study of war may be, all try to answer similar questions in order to further the understanding of war: Why do human beings so universally and so frequently fight wars? Why do governments resort to armed struggle to coerce an opponent? How does it come about that a population supports armed struggle – ready to sustain it financially, with man-power or both? Why does support waver or even disappear? How can the armed forces in different scenarios of intensity of armed struggle appropriately be used and prepared for? What makes a soldier face mutilation and risk death in exposing himself in order to reach a given objective during a fire-fight? How can one be mentally prepared for the horrific spectacle that awaits one in the baptism of fire? Once an armed struggle is ignited, how can one master it and bring it to a favourable end? How can one

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<sup>9</sup> LeShan (2002), p. 3

<sup>10</sup> The strategic level in a clash of interest includes policy and strategy. Policy sets the aims that are to be attained. Strategy, however, defines the ways how to impose one's own will upon the opponent. For that end, strategy uses a combination of different means of power such as diplomacy, economy, culture, ideology, information technology and armed forces as it sees fit.

The operational level translates allotted strategic aims into practise. The operational planning portions its assigned aims into military objectives. In doing so, the operational planning tunes all objectives with the military means at its disposal. At the same time it makes sure that these objectives are reached in a way that harmonizes with the given strategic aim. Consequently, the operational level functions as a hinge between the strategic and tactical level.

The tactical level attains objectives through actual employment of armed forces. The ensuing effects may be called tactical, operational, or even strategic depending on the resulting support or attainment of the strategic aim.

<sup>11</sup> Keegan (1991), p. 328, 335

<sup>12</sup> Areas such as the organisation and administration of the armed forces and its associated services (e.g. intelligence), recruitment, training and education, career development, re-integration of military personnel into civilian jobs, retirement and welfare, procurement.

prevent escalation? How can one keep peace once the armed struggle has been decided? In what ways and to what extent does armed struggle influence other human affairs?

To indulge in these questions and to try to find answers is the purpose of pure academic curiosity.

### How to study?

Azar Gat remarks that

Geographical and economical conditions, social structure, legal and political systems, religious faith and institutions, and cultural forms were intertwined in a diversity of particular manifestations. This highly influential idea left its mark on the military thinkers of the Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

This inter-disciplinary approach was the step in the right direction.

Additionally, Leo Tolstoy writes:

The highest wisdom is not founded on reason alone, not on those worldly sciences of physics, history, chemistry, and the like, into which intellectual knowledge is divided. The highest wisdom is one. The highest wisdom has but one science – the science of the whole ....<sup>14</sup>

In his writings, Antoine H. Jomini discloses some principles of war. According to Jomini, their application through critical analysis of military history, combined with practical experience, would train officers and their analytical skills to such an extent that knowledge would be transformed into capability.<sup>15</sup> Julian S. Corbett underlines the fact that even though theoretical study is of great use for essential preparation, 'it is necessary to guard oneself against over-valuation.'<sup>16</sup> Carl von Clausewitz admits that 'no activity for the human mind is possible without a certain stock of ideas; for the most part these are not innate but acquired, and constitute a man's knowledge.'<sup>17</sup> He rejects, however, any prescribed theories, principles or systems. A commander has to discover his own theory through deliberate and objective analysis.<sup>18</sup> Once its meaning is absorbed into one's own way of thinking, it becomes one's second nature. In this way, every commander finds and improves his own, particular theory that 'helps the study of the conduct of war, and educates the mind and judgement....'<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> Gat (1989), p. 215

<sup>14</sup> Tolstoy (1998), p. 373

<sup>15</sup> Jomini (1994), p. 12, 14, 371

<sup>16</sup> Corbett (1988), p. 8

<sup>17</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 145

<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz (1992), p. 104

<sup>19</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 154

main focus of scientific approach for students of war still lies upon this critical analysis of principles and theories on the background of events.

However, as other sciences and their research methods have been progressing, different approaches have been applied to study war. The scientific research of war was no longer a sole military area of interest but also one of civilian academics from other sciences.

John A. Vasquez states that

Despite this long intellectual history of inquiry, it has been only relatively recently that a group of scholars has come together to study the factors related to the onset of war through the application of the scientific method<sup>20</sup> and the use of data analysis to delineate patterns.<sup>21</sup>

In 1964, dedicated to the use of scientific analysis to study war and the conditions of peace, the Correlates of War project was founded, producing data ever since.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the scientific method has not only been applied in search for peace but also for the purpose of enhancing military performance in such areas as decision-making (game-theory, war-gaming) and operational research (computer-simulation).

Certainly, the scientific method obviously has its drawbacks. In order to be manageable for scientific formula, one is forced to isolate interrelated factors from all others based on hypotheses. Quincy Wright remarks that the application of scientific method is particularly difficult in the social sciences because of the contingency of events, the universal interrelatedness of factors, human purposes, and the resistance of the materials to manipulation and exact measurement because of the lack of constant factors or conditions.<sup>23</sup> Even though the quantitative approach has not produced the kind of knowledge found in the physical sciences, still, it sheds useful insight not only on possible causes of war, but also on possible outcomes and costs of war.

However, Burton warns of apparently scientific methods in International Relations – say social sciences – based on historical data or current affairs:

The reference has value only if, first, the record of events is exact, and, second, there is agreement on the interpretation of the record.

.... It is not difficult to give examples in support of a preconceived theory, no matter how improbable, and it is easy to extract from the record sufficient evidence on which to build any theory.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Wright (1965), p. 1355: For the purpose of science the roles of imaginative hypothesis, logical analysis, observation, experiment, measurement, and mathematical formulation vary according to the subject matter dealt with. A particular configuration of these procedures constitutes a scientific method.

<sup>21</sup> Vasquez (2000), p. xiii

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. xiii

<sup>23</sup> Wright (1965), p. 1355

<sup>24</sup> Burton (1965), p. 10

The same applies to assumed lethality-coefficients of weapons and weapon-systems in computer simulation.

In spite of the need for common reference points in War Studies, there are still few common concepts which have been demonstrated in international scientific discussions. Even a shared understanding in terminology is partially missing.

So far, however, neither the quantitative approach of the scientific method nor all the diverse approaches to war by other areas of social sciences have helped to put a stop to war.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of war in its entirety is of such complexity that it is impossible to reduce it to a simple scientific formula.<sup>26</sup> The different approaches on how to look at war, in the form of ideas and theories borrowed from different scientific areas, try to shed some light on aspects of every facet of war. In isolating manageable parts of the single whole, that 'war' represents, and in interrelating them with each other, one gains different insights about the possible causes and resulting effects in order to explain what the fundamental nature of war is; why, how and for what purpose war is fought; how peace can be brought about and finally, how war can be prevented. To be a legitimate focus of academic enquiry, War Studies has to give answers to these questions.

Without any doubt, to understand the fundamental nature of war, an inter-disciplinary approach is necessary and beneficial. Burton states that 'a philosophical phase in any science is likely to be also an interdisciplinary one.'<sup>27</sup> However, in the end, in order to stake out its own distinct academic area, War Studies will evolve its own interdisciplinary structure and ought to concentrate its research and development in such areas as strategy, operational art, tactics and their related institutions.

In analogy to Burton's reasoning about International Relation as a science, War Studies 'as a science is concerned with observation and analysis, and with theorizing in order to explain and to predict.'<sup>28</sup> As in other areas of social science, in War Studies, it is difficult to distinguish the pure from the applied sciences as it is done in the physical sciences.<sup>29</sup> Wright explains that

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<sup>25</sup> LeShan (2002), p. 4

<sup>26</sup> Jomini (1994), p. 13, 377, 390

<sup>27</sup> Burton (1965), p. 12

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>29</sup> Wright (1965), p. 16

[In its pure form, science] organizes knowledge to facilitate the discovery of new relationships and the prediction of events without human intervention. [In its applied form, science] organizes knowledge to facilitate the control of events by human intervention and may have the effect of creating vested interests opposed to discovery. .... There can be no human society without human intervention. Thus, to state social conditions which cause phenomena deemed undesirable is to direct attention to a program of reform.<sup>30</sup>

In other words in social science, prescription is inherent to prediction. Whether a suggested course of action is taken or not, is a question of policy in accordance with an adopted strategy. However, in the confusion between analysis and policy Burton sees the cause for 'unscientific excursions into policy, and the advocacy of single solutions.'<sup>31</sup> Additionally, LeShan points out that human beings employ different ways to conceptualise reality that has great effect on one's feelings and behaviour.<sup>32</sup> In other words, a specific world-view prompts a specific adapted behaviour. Consequently, one's action may have such resulting effects that they confirm one's own preconceptions and therefore harden one's preconceived world-view. In this self-fulfilling prophecy lies the danger of adapting simplistic ways for remedy against war.

Be it as it may, the purpose in studying war is manifold. Besides furthering one's understanding of the fundamental nature of war, a student of war might be interested in its causes and how war could be abolished. This area of research – blotting warring itself out – has become known as Peace Research.<sup>33</sup> Traditionally, however, the student of war is engaged in his professional research with the aim to prepare a given political entity – understood as Clausewitz's conception of Trinity<sup>34</sup> – in the best way possible in order to prevail in a future armed struggle.

Vasquez is right in stating that

Studying war, for many, has been a way to peace, not a way to perfect the *ultima ratio regum* of coercion .... Even though knowledge does not guarantee a political solution to public problems, without knowledge there can be little reasonable expectation for the amelioration of perennial problems such as war.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>31</sup> Burton (1965), p. 5

<sup>32</sup> LeShan (2002), p. 19

<sup>33</sup> Coutau-Bégarie (1999), p. 51; Deutsch (1965), p. xi-xii

<sup>34</sup> Clausewitz (1989), p. 89; see also my essay 'How universally applicable is Clausewitz's conception of Trinitarian warfare?', 1st term 2002

<sup>35</sup> Vasquez (2000), p. ix

LeShan remarks that 'no simple answer to the problem of preventing war is sufficient. But answers that are too complex will not be helpful in our search for useful ways to curb a prospective war.'<sup>36</sup>

Given the impact that armed struggle has had on the development of societies, and given the international repercussions conflicts have, however localised their roots may be, studying war is not only justified by mere academic curiosity, but it is a legitimate focus of academic enquiry by necessity. Only a specific scientific focus on war will assure steady growth in our understanding of every subtleties of the phenomenon 'war' and its interrelated issues in human affairs.

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<sup>36</sup> LeShan (2002), p. 59



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