

[4]

Victory Through Cruelty

Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors, (not the official surface-courteousness of the Generals, not the few great battles) of the Secession war; and it is best they should not—the real war will never get in the books.

WALT WHITMAN, 'The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up', 1881¹

The concept of the civilian as a distinct category from the military can be traced back to the start of the nineteenth century, but it was not in general use until its end. It was too broad to be of much value in making sense of war. Whole populations might be affected if a war was won or lost, but ordinary people were not supposed to be relevant to its actual conduct. It was true that they occasionally got in the way, even in wars between professional, regular armies. They might be unfortunate enough to be in the path of marauding armies, and see their land plundered and their homes requisitioned. Even worse they could be caught in a city under siege, subject to privations and bombardments, or in a country under naval blockade.

Little attention was paid to this in the laws of war. The key distinction was between those involved in combat and those who were not. The distinction followed naturally from the ideal of war as a specialist activity for military professionals, acting as champions for their respective states. The laws were largely about protecting those who might have been

combatants but were now no longer in a position to be so, either because of their wounds or imprisonment. They had little to say to those with no role in fighting. The interest was in where and how the line between combatancy and non-combatancy might be blurred, and what sort of protections might be expected either side of this line. Lieber spoke of the citizen of a hostile country as an ‘enemy’ to be subjected to the ‘hardships of war’, yet if ‘unarmed’ to be ‘spared person, property, and honor as much as the exigencies of war will admit’.²

The effort to contain war through international agreements depended on shared values. These values, however, were under strain as the inspirations for war became more ideological and nationalist. Greater democracy meant that popular feelings were becoming increasingly influential. Civilians were not really passive bystanders, observing the results of decisions taken by their governments. If they could urge a war could they then expect to be protected from its consequences? If their country faced defeat and they took up arms to resist foreign occupation, had they become part of the military sphere? This question of partisan warfare proved to be especially intractable, as irregular fighters looked to the civilian population for sanctuary and sustenance. The most famous example was the guerrillas of Spain who fought against Napoleon, but there was also the example of Mexicans who continued to fight after the defeat of their armies by the Americans in the war of 1846–8.

Before his code, Lieber had written a treatise on guerrilla warfare which expressed the common disdain among professionals for irregulars, who were assumed to be no better than mobs. The distinction between regular and irregular forces referred to whether or not they were subject to the laws of war. These required keeping up the appearance of military professionalism: wearing uniforms (some men had operated in full uniform behind enemy lines during the Civil War), having a command structure, and being able to cope with prisoners of war. He stressed that those who took up arms ‘do not cease on this account to be moral beings, responsible to one another and to God’ and his code proscribed pillage, rape, and murder of unarmed inhabitants, but ‘military necessity’ still trumped all, and provided a reason why people might be starved or moved from their homes.

THE HYPOTHETICAL WARS FOR WHICH PLANS WERE MADE AND codes of conduct developed were those between great powers, the ones that would involve huge armies with the most modern weapons engaging in climactic battles for the highest political stakes. The wars in which a number of these great powers were actually engaged over the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth were quite different. These were wars of conquest against people without the military technology and organisation enjoyed by the Europeans who found their lands occupied, their people subjugated, and their resources exploited. From 1837 to 1901 Britain fought more than 400 battles in some sixty colonial campaigns.³ Sometimes the indigenous people managed to accommodate and adjust; sometimes they resisted and were suppressed. The Hague Treaties were not extended to colonial conflicts: at both the 1899 and 1907 conferences, all imperial issues were deliberately excluded.⁴

These wars were of a separate type, described as ‘small wars’, with their own logic and character, often exasperating but never requiring the same amount of effort and resource as a conflict with another great power. The term was popularised by Charles Callwell of the British Army, drawing on extensive colonial experience, first in an essay and then in an 1886 book.⁵ Occasionally the colonial forces were embarrassed in an ambush, but in a straight fight their material superiority and, it was assumed, superior culture and intelligence would always win through. ‘The way to deal with Asiatics’, observed Callwell, is ‘to go for them and cow them by sheer force of will.’⁶

In practice the development of military technology from steam ships, which aided supply, to machine guns, which meant firepower that was both superior and portable, made a considerable difference, although this can be exaggerated. Machine guns were not plentiful. Most colonial armies depended on rifles. The view at the time was that the real problem with small wars lay not with the opponents but the need to fight them in such inhospitable places creating problems of supply and movement, and vulnerabilities to disease. This is why Callwell described them as ‘wars against nature’, and why medical progress, including disease control, had often more impact than new military technologies. Over time as the colonialists became more embedded, they drew on the most supportive

elements of the local population to help them deal with the more unruly.

Those who contemplated the future of war considered these small wars to be of little interest. Bloch dismissed the evidence of such campaigns. He expressed no interest in ‘frontier incidents or punitive brawls’, or ‘such trumpery expeditions against semi-barbarous peoples’.⁷ If they were relevant it was as a potential cause of a big war. In an argument later picked up by Lenin, the British liberal theorist John Hobson warned of the combination of unscrupulous arms manufacturers and colonialism. Reflecting on the Boer War, he argued in 1902 that capitalism could not be satisfied by domestic markets and so required the acquisition of new territories to plunder for their resources and as new sources of trade.⁸ Colonialism was thus seen as a potential source of a great-power war but not really a guide to its conduct.

The experience of colonisation was often extremely violent. At times there were battles as local leaders sought to resist conquest by Europeans, but as often resistance was low level, spasmodic, and not very effective. A study of Queensland, Australia over the nineteenth century concluded that over 65,000 Aboriginal Australians were killed from the 1820s until the early 1900s as a result of mass killings that were ‘profligate, furtive and unprosecuted’.⁹ In Tasmania, the native community fought a vicious war with settlers (the ‘Black War’) in the late 1820s. This, coupled with a lack of immunity to diseases brought in by the settlers, led to them being virtually wiped out.

The case of the Tasmanians led Wells to one of his greatest novels. In his 1897 masterpiece *War of the Worlds*, he invited his readers to imagine what it would be like if an alien power came to conquer as it had conquered others. In his story those on Earth had no answer to the superior power of the aliens. This was one step ahead of the invasion literature with which it is naturally compared because of the complete helplessness of the population in the face of the methods used, which included a ‘black smoke’, a form of poison gas. People had no choice but to flee from the devastating methods. In the end the Martians were brought down not by human resistance but by microscopic bacteria against which they had no immunity. Yet while Wells could show sympathy with the fate of colonised people, and often expressed anti-racist sentiments, a passage in *The War in*

the Air from 1908 suggests that what was truly shocking about future war was that so-called civilised people might suffer the same fate as the colonised. He described the bombing of New York's Broadway: 'Below, they left ruins and blazing conflagrations and heaped and scattered dead; men, women and children mixed together as though they had been no more than Moors, or Zulus, or Chinese.'¹⁰

Colonialism established the idea of whole populations as legitimate targets. Such practices as massacring local people, destroying villages, eradicating crops, and slaughtering domesticated animals arose for largely strategic reasons—as the best available means Western armies had 'to defeat elusive, highly mobile peoples who were adept practitioners of guerrilla war'.¹¹ If that was the case when dealing with 'semi-barbarous peoples' then the same strategic logic would suggest that similar methods might work when used against supposedly more 'civilised' people.

This was demonstrated during the American Civil War. In the spring of 1864 the Confederacy was moving closer to defeat. It was pushing old men and young boys into its army. The Union's armies were beginning to move with freedom into its territory. As they did so they adopted a strategy that showed little regard for non-combatants. They had to live off the land which provided a rationale for plundering what they could. Among the troops, hostility towards the rebels ran deep, fortified by stories of maltreatment of slaves or the murder of soldiers when taken prisoners. The people of the Southern states were blamed for attempting secession and doing their best to sustain the war effort. Add to this mix General Sherman, who as a young officer had fought the Seminole Indians by avoiding their fighters and instead attacking crops and food supplies. He was convinced that measures directed against civilian life and property might compel the rebels to abandon the war at last. The scene was set for a punitive campaign.

The opportunity came when Sherman realised that the Confederates had left Georgia undefended. The intent was not to massacre the inhabitants but for them to see their wealth destroyed as they were pushed back to a subsistence economy. Sherman wanted the Confederacy to 'fear and dread' the Union's forces. His explanation showed the shift in focus from a war against armies, which he saw as the common type of European

war, to one against people: ‘we are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as their organized armies.’¹² The destruction of Atlanta, the commercial centre of Georgia, was explained in terms of its role in the war: ‘We have been fighting *Atlanta* all the time in the past: have been capturing guns, wagons, etc., etc., marked “*Atlanta*” and made here, all the time: and now since they have been doing so much to destroy us and our government, we have to destroy them, at least enough to prevent any more of that’. On the burning of Columbia, South Carolina, he observed that though he had neither wished nor ordered it, ‘I have never shed many tears over the event, because I believe that it hastened what we all fought for, the end of the war.’¹³ When all was done he told the people of Atlanta: ‘War is cruelty and you cannot refine it.... You might as well appeal against the thunderstorm as these terrible hardships of war.’ As he ordered their evacuation he urged them to look after their ‘old and feeble’ and wait until ‘the mad passions of men cool down’.¹⁴

The important point about Sherman’s strategy is that it worked. Taking Atlanta raised morale in the North and helped secure President Lincoln’s re-election in 1864. The devastation caused by his troops moved the Confederacy, as its military position became increasingly hopeless, from defiance to surrender. This success influenced German strategy. We have already noted the frustration with French resistance after the 1870 defeat at Sedan. Initially von Moltke was complacent about this resistance, because he did not see it lasting, but the potential of ‘People’s War’ began to make a deep impression on him. Chancellor Bismarck was frustrated from early on because of his anxieties over the French getting help from other countries unless the war was concluded swiftly. He took advice from an American general, Philip Sheridan, then in Berlin, who drew on the Civil War’s merciless conclusion. Sheridan urged the need to cause the people ‘so much suffering that they must long for peace, and force their governments to demand it. The people must be left nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war’. Bismarck was impressed and ordered villages to be raised and male inhabitants hung in areas where there had been guerrilla activity. There must be no ‘laziness in killing’.¹⁵ While von Moltke wanted to mount a traditional siege of Paris, waiting until

exhaustion overtook the city, Bismarck did not want to wait and preferred bombardment. He got his way. His aim was coercion—to force the French into concessions. He then allowed the French government to hold Paris (in doing so they showed little mercy to the Commune) so long as they acceded to other German demands. He was prepared to act ruthlessly where necessary against civilians but then limit his demands on the French for the sake of political order. Von Moltke, by contrast, saw this pattern of warfare recurring, with France always likely to lend it encouragement, so wished to wage what would in effect have been total war against the French population to prevent them ever rising again.¹⁶

One German officer who had participated in this war, Colmar von der Goltz, saw in this the direction of future war as a ‘life and death struggle’ between whole nations, with the war ending with the subjugation of one by the other.¹⁷ He followed Clausewitz explicitly, except that he now saw the ‘absolute’ not as an ideal to which war might tend but a new practical reality. A collision of interests might trigger a war, but it would be the ‘passions of nations’ that would be decisive. Goltz expressed his desire to shift strategy away from the excessive attention that had been given to the idea of ‘generalship in battle’ to future wars that would be decided only through the ‘exhaustion of belligerent nations’. Even once defeated, the population might be so ‘obstinate’ that there could be a need to ‘exert extreme pressure’ upon them for a number of years.

It was away from Europe, in colonial wars, that this ruthless approach was most evident. Any restraints on inflicting suffering on whole populations if they refused to accept defeat were intentionally disregarded. During the Second Philippines War (1899–1902), as the Philippines Republic struggled to win independence from the United States, rebel support was undermined using internment camps, which led to large numbers of civilians dying in insanitary conditions. The United States lost some 4,000 troops and killed some 20,000 insurrectionists, but the war had a generally devastating effect on the local population as a whole, with some 200,000 dying largely because of the spread of disease.¹⁸ At the same time the British were fighting the Second Boer War as the Afrikaner (Boer) South African Republic and the Orange Free State resisted incorporation into the British Empire. The British commander-in-chief,

Herbert Kitchener, described his tactics as being to:

flush out guerrillas in a series of systematic drives, organised like a sporting shoot, with success defined in a weekly “bag” of killed, captured and wounded, and to sweep the country bare of everything that could give sustenance to the guerrillas, including women and children... It was the clearance of civilians—uprooting a whole nation—that would come to dominate the last phase of the war.¹⁹

Some 28,000 women and children died in the British concentration camps, not because of a deliberate policy of extermination but because cramped conditions and poor sanitation, along with inadequate supplies of food and medicines, meant that malnutrition and disease were rife. They were not helped by primitive medical practices. The concept of military necessity was extended to genocide when German troops were sent to suppress the Herero Revolt in south-west Africa from 1904 to 1907, under orders to execute those captured and wounded, whether fighters or women and children, to the point where as many as three quarters of the population may have been killed.²⁰

The enormous brutality shown in colonial territories was disconnected from the common view that any war fought among the European powers could be contained. In the event it was the practices developed in colonial wars that shaped the conduct of European war, just as Sherman’s experience in dealing with the Seminole influenced his approach to the Confederacy. This tolerance of extreme violence in pursuit of the total annihilation of the enemy was taken through to the First World War.

The key principle was that if putting pressure on the population could get a war over quickly then that could be justified as military necessity. Von Moltke expressed this view succinctly in a letter of 1880:

The greatest good deed in war is the speedy ending of the war, and every means to that end, so long as it is not *reprehensible*, must remain open. In no way can I declare myself in agreement with the Declaration of St. Petersburg that the sole justifiable measure in war is “the weakening of the enemy’s military power.” No, all the sources of support for the hostile government must be considered, its finances, railroads, foodstuffs, even its prestige.²¹

The safety and welfare of the army was the priority. At the second Hague Conference a German general observed, without irony, that ‘soldiers also are men, and have a right to be treated with humanity.’ When, exhausted by ‘a long march or a battle’, they ‘come to rest in a village [they] have a right to be sure that the peaceful inhabitants shall not change suddenly into furious enemies.’²² Smaller countries that could imagine needing to fight partisan wars objected. The compromise was that so long as civilians volunteered to serve in units that were essentially organised as if they were regular then their status could be recognised. A further dispensation was made to those who were defending their actual homes.²³

The implications of this trend in thinking were not fully recognised. The idea of war as a sporting contest with rules to ensure fair play had yet to be banished. Ordinary people might be caught up in war, through no fault of their own, and suffer greatly, but the idea that they might be targeted as a deliberate strategy was widely considered repugnant, at least when it came to war between supposedly civilised countries. When Arthur Conan Doyle, known best for the Sherlock Holmes stories, published a story just before the start of the 1914 war in which eight German submarines sank merchant ships to starve Britain into submission, it was dismissed by admirals not so much because of any technical deficiencies but because they were unable to accept a form of warfare based on bringing down civilian ships: ‘I do not think myself that any civilised nation will torpedo unarmed and defenceless merchant ships.’²⁴ Somehow, warfare was to be kept separate from wider social forces, though this begged the question of what civilised nations were doing fighting each other in the first place.

As the First World War began, the Germans remained anxious that every male capable of fighting might decide to do so. From the moment Belgium was invaded in August 1914 German forces were rounding up and executing civilians, as if they were certain to meet civilian resistance. These were pre-emptive reprisals against those not entitled to fight who might be tempted to do so. The fear of being sniped at by franc-tireurs, left hanging over from 1871, led to men of military age being executed for actions they had not taken. As some 5,500 were killed, and homes burnt,

large sections of the Belgian population fled.²⁵

THE COURSE OF THE WAR CONFOUNDED EXPECTATIONS. IT should have been evident that a war between two coalitions ‘approaching equilibrium... would be long and evenly matched.’²⁶ The German war plan sought to escape the logic of this equilibrium by catching out French forces with a quick offensive. It honoured the spirit of 1870, relying on the speed of mobilisation to create an early winning position, but could not match the achievement. The main effect of the rush to mobilise was to impose urgency on the civilian leadership, leaving little time for any strategic discussion about whether the plans would work as advertised and the consequences if they did not, whether diplomacy might be given more time, and how well they related to political objectives. If the politicians had pushed harder they might have become more aware of the misgivings in the military ranks. The German general staff knew that they were engaged in a gamble as they launched their massive offensive to take out France, but they feared that the longer they waited the more of a gamble it would become. In the event the gamble, with its violation of Belgian neutrality, was sufficient to bring Britain into the war but not enough to take France out. The demands the plan placed on German troops and their logistical support turned to be excessive. Whether or not they really expected it to be over by Christmas, none of the belligerents had prepared for a war that would be fought with such intensity for so long. Within months they had almost run out of munitions. The lengthening casualty lists were also far more severe than anticipated. Instead of a decisive battle, the Western Front settled down to trench warfare. Attempted breakthroughs through artillery barrages followed by infantry dashes across ‘no-man’s land’ became synonymous with futile slaughter.

The consequence of a frustrating stalemate was a build-up of social and political pressures, which over time led to mutinies, revolutions, and civil wars. There were unpleasant innovations, such as poisoned gas, bombing from the air and attacks on merchant shipping. These all made their appearance in the spring of 1915 as a result of German frustration with the impasse and a sense that their enemies were better able to cope with a long war.²⁷ The limits of the ‘cult of the offensive’, which was more of a

rhetorical than practical feature of pre-war military plans, had become apparent.²⁸ The naval blockade helped sap German strength and resources. Its attempt to gain some initiative at sea through unrestricted submarine warfare provided another example of bold military moves having larger political consequences, as this was the issue that brought the United States into the war. Yet the classical model of war remained intact. The war concluded with two large offensives, the first by the Germans in the spring of 1918 which left them exhausted and the second that autumn by the Allies which was successful and led to a formal German surrender. In addition, possibilities for new forms of warfare had been opened up, notably involving tanks and aircraft. These kept alive hopes for future wars ending quickly with knockout blows.