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War

The Necessary Reassembly of a Fragmented Research Object

Luca Baldissara

Introduction

On 27 November 2015, two days after the attacks near the *Stade de France* and at the *Bataclan* Theatre in Paris, an article appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde* calling for an interdisciplinary revival of war studies, on the grounds that this field was not receiving sufficient official and academic recognition. The article was signed by several scholars, almost all of them professors of political science, who noted critically that 'the study of war in France is so fragmented into multiple disciplines (history, law, political science, geography, sociology, etc.) as, by definition, the phenomenon of war is a 'total social fact' that connects all sectors of human action: the object 'war' requires a global and wide-ranging approach'[1].

This article was undoubtedly influenced by the sense of urgency and strong feelings aroused by the terrorist act, and with the primary aim of soliciting funding and strengthening research institutions. However, it focused on a real issue, identifying a specific connotation of war studies, extending well beyond the French borders: the lamented fragmentation of war studies was nothing more than a snapshot of the specialised fragmentation of research, of the difficulty of bringing different disciplines into dialogue, of the conviction, still held by large sectors of the humanities, that war is a fact in itself – a residual one for some – rather than a 'total social fact'.

Confirming that the question posed in the pages of *Le Monde* was not exclusive to France, in the concluding reflections of a collected volume published as part of an interdisciplinary research programme developed at Oxford between 2003 and 2009, Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton wondered: 'why, despite its historical omnipresence and vital importance in processes of historical change, has war never become the primary subject of an academic discipline? Why does the Anglo-American academy lack a discipline of 'war studies'?'. Observing that most studies on war were not really focused on war itself, and that 'inquiry tends to apprehend war through other domains of life, be it economy, society, culture, ethics, law' (a trend that these scholars call the 'decentring of war'), they claimed 'that the nature of war poses special epistemological difficulties that, among

other effects, deprive war studies of the kinds of foundational problematics and objects of inquiry around which scholarly disciplines and projects develop' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 524–525). Barkawi and Brighton showed the existence of a 'conceptual black hole surrounding the notion of war': despite the wide range of monographic studies, there is an almost total absence of reflections on the ontological significance of war for society and politics. By assuming 'the vital centrality of war in the making and unmaking of politics and society', these authors therefore noted that 'it [the war] is the absent centre of a dissipated body of inquiry concerned almost exclusively with war in the particular'.

War, wars

Between *war* and *wars*, scholars have primarily turned their attention to the latter, atomised into a thousand and one case studies pertaining to individual conflicts or specific aspects of war mobilisation, relegating conceptual reflection on the nature of war to the background. War is not merely the outcome of political-strategic and rational evaluation, nor does it simply coincide with the annihilation of one's enemy:

> it is also an event or process with the ability to draw in and disrupt wider certitudes and coordinates of human life, to shape and accelerate the transitory and mutable in human affairs: [...] This transformative power, the capacity to rework the reality of social and political existence is, of course, the objective of waging war.
>
> (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 532)

It is precisely this transformative power that also gives war the status of an ontological event, a product of the indissoluble interweaving between the historicity and immediacy of combat violence and that which exceeds this immediacy, 'the capacity of organised violence [...] to be generative – to 'cast into motion' subjects who are then alienated from themselves and come to know themselves and the world in new ways' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 532–533). This generative feature, this shadow of war stretching over human society, produces uncertainty – the uncertainty of combat emphasised by Clausewitz. 'The essential nature of war is thus the actual and potential undoing of all that stands as essential': this is where its ontological significance lies, since

> the enframing certainties of pacific order, of identity, continuity, and certainty always exist subject to war's undoing, to the threat that the composition of our objective order of social and political truth might be unmade in ways that cannot be fully seen in advance, or necessarily understood afterwards.
>
> (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 536)

The ontology of war thus takes on an intrinsically political value: 'To analyse the nature of war and trace its effects in reference to an unknowable, never quite controllable field of contingency is to question the basic presumptions of competence on which political authority rests' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 538). If 'the final element of war's ontology is its power to remake what is unmade', then

> there is little in the social order that is not in some way related to war. There is little exterior to the orders war creates. But scholars in the social sciences and humanities operate in a mostly pacific universe. The result is that we misname and misconceive that around us as belonging to the order of peace and not that of war.
>
> (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 538–539)

A clear distinction is drawn between war and peace by associating the latter with the sphere of rationality, progress and civilisation, and the former with the dimension of irrationality and the destructive ferocity of the violence inherent in human nature. This distinction is one of the factors at the origin of the apparent paradox whereby we have a wide range of studies on wars but a substantial absence of conceptual reflections on war. This is, after all, what Michael Mann suggested when he stated that

> from the Enlightenment to Durkheim most major sociologists omitted war from their central problematic. This was not neglect; it was quite deliberate. They believed the future society would be pacific and transnational. Industrial, or capitalist, or 'modern' society would be unlike the preceding feudal, or theocratic, or militant society. Power could now operate pacifically, without physical force.

In this way, sociologists rendered opaque 'much of the history of the relationship between war, classes, nations and states' (Mann 1988, 147, 149).

The conceptual polarisation between war and peace more or less explicitly refers to a series of opposing and antithetical elements – e.g. rational/irrational, certainty/uncertainty, stability/instability, creative/destructive, regularity/emergency – which relegate war to the negative sphere of anachronism. In other words, history would be proceeding towards the progressive purification of society from violence, and every manifestation of it would be a residue on the road to civilisation. In Michel Foucault's view, it was Greek philosophy that laid the foundations for an abstract progressive rationality seeking to silence war – the rationality 'of calculations, strategies, stratagems; of technical procedures to preserve victory [...] to preserve or overturn the relations of force' – by developing a philosophical-legal discourse that envisaged a pacified universality, thus distorting reality. A historical-political conception of 'truth' therefore became necessary, capable of 'establishing a discourse marked by dissymmetry, of founding a truth

linked to a relationship of force, of establishing a truth-weapon and a singular right', of 'giving an explanation through what is most confused, most obscure, most disordered, most linked to chance'. For the French philosopher, the deciphering of society requires a discourse that recognises and deals with

> the confusion of violence, of passions, of hatreds, of anger, of resentments, of bitterness; [...] the obscurity of cases, of contingencies, of minute circumstances that generate defeats and ensure victories. [...] what this discourse asks of the elliptical god of battles is to illuminate the long days of order, work, peace and justice. It is the task of fury to account for calm and order.
>
> (Foucault 1997, 52)

The scientific literature on war is currently immense. It is characterised by a remarkable wealth of views and variety of studies, but these are not distributed within real disciplinary traditions, whether in the historiographical field or in the social sciences. The historiography is parcelled out into a myriad of research focuses on the individual wars that have dotted history, producing specialist subfields for each of them and only rarely entailing comparative approaches. We have practically no critical review or overview of historical studies on war as a general social phenomenon. Nor is the situation in the social sciences very different. In the opinion of Jean-Claude Ruano-Borbalan, the two 'queen' disciplines within the humanities in the 20th century, history and sociology, have 'dumped' war, by refusing to include it among their top research interests. The reason for this is twofold: on the one hand, the affirmation of history as a human science has filtered through the contrast with political history, and more generally with *histoire bataille* (an evocative definition in itself); on the other hand, sociology, which is mainly interested in social ties and collective action, has never ranked war among its canonical topics, thereby engendering a lack of adequate critical reflection, despite the numerous specific studies (Ruano-Borbalan 1999).

Separate analyses should be reserved for military history (especially as it is traditionally practised – by combining specialist research with popular history – in the Anglo-Saxon world), strategic studies and also political science, with particular reference to studies on international relations and geopolitics, which by now make up a vast literature. In this regard, however, it cannot be ignored that these last two fields of study are often driven by instrumental and functional approaches, frequently promoted by agencies and institutes with the specific and institutionally recognised objective of producing 'technical' knowledge for insiders (diplomatic personnel, the military, government officials, sections of the governing class, etc.). Undoubtedly, most of these studies are also of great interest and usefulness, but they are almost always devoted to addressing highly specialist

topics and issues in politically strategic sectors, sometimes for political decision-making purposes. It may be said that in this case war itself shapes the institutionalisation of one's own field of study, producing knowledge centred on the set of skills and practices on which the satisfactory resolution of concrete problems depends (e.g. the prominence of strategic studies promoted by US think tanks, which often goes hand in hand with the actual unfolding of armed conflicts). One can therefore look at these studies to broaden one's knowledge of certain aspects of war. However, these studies can also be examined to grasp the development of a specialist language aimed at political decision-making, to deconstruct the ways in which 'special knowledge' on war (i.e., warfare expertise) is generated and to verify the ideological uses that institutional and military apparatuses make of concepts linked to the phenomenon of war. In other words, these investigations mark out disciplinary fields within war studies that could become objects of analysis in themselves.

A first, partial observation reveals that the study of war is still fragmented: it is divided among many specialist areas and the social sciences do not show any particular interest in the subject (Meleševic 2010; Rutigliano 2011; Guareschi 2015); therefore the investigations conducted struggle to reach an overall conceptual dimension. Moreover, there is no doubt that since the 1990s – which witnessed a return of warfare and violence (from the Gulf wars to the ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, from the war in Afghanistan to those in Libya and Syria) – a new attention to the dimension of war has made its way among scholars: new questions have been asked and a new sensitivity has emerged. Once again, the present has conditioned and oriented researchers' gaze, which has come to be guided by the questions – as well as the anxieties – generated by what they are observing and experiencing first-hand[2]. On the one hand, there has been a proliferation of essays and books devoted to individual wars and their specific aspects. On the other hand, the idea is emerging – if only in still uncertain terms – that the peace which seemed to have been labouriously established as a shared universal value after 1945 (after Nuremberg) – continued to conceal the reality of war. In other words, the two dimensions – war and peace – are constitutively intertwined, and connected to changing internal and international power relations. War appears to be intimately linked to the mechanisms of power, to the configuration of institutions and to the definition of order between and within states. As early as September 1932, in response to Einstein's question 'Why war?', Freud observed:

> In right and violence we have today an obvious antinomy. It is easy to prove that one has evolved from the other [...] we may define 'right' (i.e. law) as the might of a community. Yet it, too, is nothing else than violence, quick to attack whatever individual stands in its path, and it employs the selfsame methods, follows like ends, with but one

difference; it is the communal, not individual violence that has its way. [...] Our logic is at fault if we ignore the fact that right is founded on brute force and even today needs violence maintain it.

(Einstein and Freud 1933 25, 29, 41)

New wars, the end of war?

In 1991, there were 51 armed conflicts taking place around the world. This was the statistical peak following the fall of the Berlin Wall, after which the number slowly declined to 31 in 2010, the year with the lowest number of violent events since the end of the Cold War. Since then, the trend has reversed, rising again to 54 interstate conflicts in 2019, the highest number since 1946. One may also add that from 1989 to 2019, 763 non-state conflicts were recorded, with an annual average of 41 episodes. A watershed was reached in 2012: while during the period 1989–2011 the annual average was 31 conflicts, it rose to 70 in the period 2012–19 (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015; Strand et al. 2019; Pettersson and Öberg 2020)[3]. These figures remind us not only that organised violence did not at all disappear with the end of the Cold War, as some had hastily predicted, but that it has come back into the limelight as an instrument of power politics. Moreover, alongside warfare waged by states, we have witnessed the gradual rise in violence at the hands of non-state actors: ethnic militias, terrorist groups, foreign fighters, private armies, contractors, bands of adventurers fighting for control over territories and resources or for nationalistic, racial or political-religious reasons.

War and violence were most certainly not banished from the international stage after 1945. In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, the legal condemnation and political delegitimisation of recourse to aggressive warfare seemed irreversible – nourishing the illusion that war was merely a residual phenomenon. The Cold War balance, however precarious, seemed to guarantee effective and extensive control over the use of military force. After 1989, when the disappearance of the US-USSR bipolarity led to the illusion of the 'end of history' (and perhaps also of the disappearance of war), the wide-scale return of violence in all its forms led scholars to pay new attention to the phenomenon of warfare. Numerous questions were raised by what was unfolding before researchers' eyes, first of all concerning the legitimacy of the new conflicts. Since the 1990s, we have witnessed a renewed democratic interventionism motivated by alleged humanitarian concerns (Somalia, 1992–93; Haiti, 1994; Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1994–95; Kosovo and East Timor, 1999; Libya, 2011; partly in Syria, 2014), or by strategic and 'defence' considerations (in Iraq as early as 1991, in Afghanistan in 2003 and also in Syria itself – these being three countries closely associated with the concept of a 'global war on terrorism'). Such interventions have sometimes been part of a multilateral framework, while on other occasions they have been the product of unilateral initiatives; in

some cases they have been authorised by the United Nations, while in others the contribution of international actors such as NATO has raised serious doubts about their formal legality; sometimes the interventions have been motivated by the collapse of the target state (Somalia), while at other times they have brought about a collapse (Iraq) with the aim of replacing a ruling political regime. In other words, in the space of 30 years, from 1991 to 2021, we have witnessed a marked crisis in the forms of legitimisation of armed conflicts, and hence of the rules governing the international order. This has basically eroded the very distinction between peace and war, which currently is increasingly replaced with euphemistic phrases such as 'international police operations', 'global war', 'infinite war', 'hybrid war', 'peace enforcing', 'peace making' and 'peace building' – not to mention the evocative and propagandistic code names attributed to individual operations (*Restore Hope, Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom, Odyssey Dawn, Inherent Resolve, etc.*).

Indeed, war is regarded as an ethically and politically obscene term in Western democratic societies, which rest on the illusion of its removal from the horizon of permitted state practices and which cannot accept deaths in battle but only deaths in the fulfillment of the duty to maintain order. But with war gradually disappearing as the juridical-institutional definition of a specific status, the meaning of the term peace is inevitably becoming blurred as well: in the 21st century peace – at least in Europe, and more generally in a West faced by international terrorism – increasingly appears to be a permanent state of emergency (i.e., of non-war and non-peace), established to deal with a potential, latent yet persistent threat. In this way, the different conventional procedures regulating international coexistence become confused, the boundaries between what is 'internal' and what is 'external' to the life of the nation-state are eroded, the need for extraordinary security measures becomes ordinary, the scope of deterrence and preventive control is emphasised and conflict itself becomes an endemic situation, an 'infinite war'. As Alessandro Colombo wrote in one of the most insightful books on war and international relations,

> in this new situation, if it is true that war no longer has a place in international society, it is because, paradoxically, its place is everywhere. [...] In the crisis of the institutional mediations of the modern political space, the lack of a formal distinction with peace imprints on contemporary war the true seal of its novelty: the fact that, precisely, it never begins and never ends.
>
> (Colombo 2006, 277)

If war is everywhere and infinite (is this the war of the age of globalisation? – Barkawi 2005; Kaldor 2012; Ramel 2018), then the violence that inexorably accompanies it will in turn become increasingly widespread. This phenomenon prominently emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries'

through the weakening of the Weberian state monopoly on violence: the asymmetry of the forces in the field, the wide availability and accessibility of armaments, the very transformation of the concept of weapon (whereby a civil airliner or a lorry in the street can become a destructive and lethal instrument) and the lack of mutual recognition of legitimacy between contenders have produced the highest concentration of military power and the greatest spread of violence. On the one hand, the great powers have the means to make any real confrontation on the military front impossible; on the other, the opponents of these powers can resort to the spread of 'terror' through both actual violence and threatened violence. Whichever way one looks at the problem, it is extremely difficult to limit violence, because

> the unequal war is the expression of unipolarity in the dimension of violence [...] Starting from here the morphology of the unequal war overturns also the most striking characteristic of the wars of the 20th century. [...] the Total and Reciprocal Mobilisation of twentieth-century wars has been succeeded by a contrary movement of 'Total Demobilisation' and asymmetrical, in that it is reserved for only one of the parties to the conflict.
>
> (Colombo 2006, 287, 290)

The effects of this 'demobilisation' are numerous and can be realised on several levels. First of all, the armies of Western countries have become more professionalised, reducing the number of soldiers to those who wish to practise 'the profession of arms'. This has increased the distance between military and civilian institutions and increasingly turned soldiers into professionals with an expertise in the use of force (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960; Sarkesian and Connor, 1999; Wetts 2004; Roennfeldt 2019; Brooks 2021). The distance between the military and the civilian sphere, however, does not seem to have produced a new form of militarism, as in other eras; rather, it has engendered a professional awareness of the difficulties and limits of the use of force by armies. Consequently, in recent decades military personnel have often been among the most lucid critics of the interventions planned by politicians (Sechser 2004; Weeks 2012; Rapp 2015; White 2021). The abolition of conscript armies has also accentuated not only the separation between the military and civilians, but also the detachment of a large part of the population from the experience of risk and death on a mission, an experience to which only a small segment of society is now exposed – namely, 'specialists' and their families. On the one hand, this has made public management of the return home of the bodies of those killed in military operations more difficult and complicated;[4] on the other, it has dampened political and social awareness of the risks to which military interventions expose those involved and reduced resistance to the use of force and violence. This is often perceived as an abstract dimension in public discourse, which does not directly concern the citizen-spectator,

who is far removed from war scenarios. Conversely, those who do experience such scenarios are totally immersed in the daily dimension of fear and risk, violence and death. The gulf between the two experiences of war could not be more absolute: the maximum vulnerability of one side corresponds to the virtual absence of risk for the other; the omnipresence of violence to the ordinary representation of peace. These two life conditions are at the antipodes of each other – they are totally asymmetrical. Among other things, this contributes to the limitlessness of today's warfare: there is no equal chance of victory for both sides, no mutual legitimisation, no similar experience of the constant uncertainty of war. In the new kind of war, the unequal war, it therefore seems very difficult, if not impossible, to contain and limit violence, as well as to restore the role of law as a check on the behaviour of the various players on the battlefield.

According to Herfried Münkler, the new wars may even be compared[5] to those – wars of religion and power – included in the all-encompassing definition of the 'Thirty Years' War' (1618–48), which, not least because of the political and social trauma caused by the extension and radicalisation of violence and destructiveness, led to the Peace of Westphalia. The latter has been conventionally regarded as the origin of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Schmitt 1950), of stable, legally regulated relations between sovereign states – the only actors lawfully entitled to decide whether to resort to war (*ius ad bellum*) and to regulate the behaviour of combatants (*jus in bello*). The frequent reference made to the concepts of 'just war' and 'holy war' since the 1990s would therefore be proof of the disappearance of the foundations of legitimacy and mutual recognition that followed Westphalia:

> Whoever claims to be waging a *just* war already believes that the legal entitlements of the two adversaries are symmetrical: one has all the right on his side, the other all the wrong. The model is that of the criminal who must be rendered harmless by police action and, once arrested, taken the courts. Or else, in a kind of ratcheting up of penal conceptions, the adversary becomes an incarnation of evil who must be wiped off the face of the earth. Such notions are especially present where religious fundamentalism has made its way into politics. Just war and holy war stand opposed to each other as mirror images. They constitute a symmetry of asymmetries, as it were.
>
> (Münkler 2005, 30)

Like Münkler, most social scientists measure the novelty of current conflicts by comparison with previous wars, or at least by comparison with what they consider to be the Westphalian 'model' of interstate warfare as it came to be defined between the 18th and 20th centuries – namely, as 'a construction of the centralised, 'rationalized', hierarchically ordered, territorialised modern state'. War – like the state – has been historicised by focusing on its development over time, since 'every society has its own characteristic

form of war'. This is true even when social scientists' gaze is fixed on the present, leading Mary Kaldor to conclude that 'as the modern centralised and territorialised state gives way to new kinds of polarity emerging from new global processes, so war, as we currently conceive it, is becoming an anachronism' (Kaldor 2012, 15, 17).

Along much the same lines, Rupert Smith opened his book with a clear and decisive statement: 'War no longer exists', 'war as a battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs' no longer exists (Smith 2007, 25). What Smith calls 'industrial interstate war' has been replaced – through a long politico-military transition between 1945 and 1991 – by 'war between peoples'. This is a real paradigm shift: armies set up for the battlefield are obsolete, because in modern wars the confrontation is between a great variety of contenders, and the battlefield is 'all the people, anywhere':

> we conduct operations amongst the people. The people in the cities, towns, streets and their houses – all the people, anywhere – can be on the battlefield. Military engagements can take place against formed and recognizable groups of enemies moving amongst civilians, against enemies disguised as civilians, and unintentionally and intentionally against civilians. Civilians can be the targets as much as the opposing force. In the first instance this is because they are mistaken for the enemy or are in close proximity to the enemy, and in the second to terrorize them. This occurs because moving amongst the people is the guerrilla fighter's proven method of neutralizing the strength of his stronger opponent. Secondly, civilians can be targeted because the will of the people is the objective, and the direct attack on the people is thought to assail that will. And finally, there are the media that bring the conflict into the homes of millions of people: people who vote and whose opinions influence their politicians – those who make the decision on using force.
>
> (Smith 2007, 641–642)

The aim of armed conflict has changed: it is no longer the occupation of territories, or the achievement of major strategic objectives to bend the enemy's will, but rather 'to establish a condition in which the political objective can be achieved by other means and in other ways' (Smith 2007, 623). War is about creating a 'conceptual space' in order to attain a political objective. To this end, violence and terror are fundamental factors: on the battlefield, they help to break down and annihilate the enemy; outside the physical space of the battle, they serve to frighten, threaten or strike those not directly involved in the conflict. In one case it is a matter of weakening the enemy militarily, of subduing his will; in the other, of forcing him to behave in a certain way or compelling him to do something. 'The power to wound is a negotiating power. Exploiting it is diplomacy': in this 'diplomacy of violence', as Thomas Schelling called it (Schelling 1966), the

latency of the threat is at least as important as its concrete manifestation, which in any case must sometimes take place if the threat is to be credible and a source of fear (Robin 2004).

Cultures of war, forms of violence

Social scientists have therefore focused on the characteristics of current wars, first of all by measuring their degree of innovation with respect to the conflicts of the 20th century, whose profile has been drawn according to the 'total war' model. This has contributed to placing the phenomenon of war in a perspective of change over time that nonetheless tends to hypostatise the forms of mobilisation and confrontation between armies distinguishing the two World Wars. Historiography can be usefully inserted into social scientists' rich debate on the topic by exploiting its methodology: the reconstruction of the past according to a dialectical process of continuities and breaks, which does not focus on the point of arrival – in this case, the war between states that legitimised each other according to the Westphalian logic – but rather retraces how this point was reached. It is a matter of reconstructing to what extent, from a long-term perspective, each phase of warfare has been overcome and consigned to the past, and to what extent it has instead endured, it has done so by conforming to the needs of the present. It is also a matter of reconstructing how much sank into the folds of history and was apparently forgotten, only to be suddenly recalled onto the scene by a combination of historical events, and recovered within social and cultural frameworks capable of reactivating what seemed to have been defused. Complex genealogies and tortuous historical processes in the dialectic between long duration and short time are what historians can profitably contribute to the effort of understanding the phenomenon of war. By engaging with the useful contributions provided by the social sciences and with the phenomenon of the 'new wars', historians can seek to grasp latent links with the past – hidden traces of the permanence of certain cultures and practices of violence – and to formulate new questions and suggestions that might help reinterpret the history of 19th- and 20th-century wars.

Moreover, the 'new wars' bring back images of wars from the past: the bombings of Baghdad and Serbia, their collateral damage (read: civilian casualties), the fences behind which skinny prisoners stood in the Balkans, rapes and tortures, the cruel excesses marking ethnic-civil conflicts in lands as far apart as the Caucasus and Rwanda – all this triggers a play of mirrors and references with the imagery of warfare in the contemporary age, particularly 20th-century wars, which has become entrenched through scholarly research and collective memory. The forms of violence and brutality, destruction and mass death in the present overlap and intertwine with those of the past – the trenches and battlefields of the First World War, the surplus of savageness of the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi prison and extermination camps, the rubble of London and Dresden, the ferocious ways of

killing civilians on the Eastern Front in the Second World War, the terrorist actions and brutal repression of guerrilla warfare in decolonisation conflicts, etc. During the conflicts of the 1990s, a patrimony of reflections and historical knowledge on political, racial and war violence was reactivated and revitalised by the outbreak of profound psychological traumas in the military and by the spread and extension of acts of brutality, particularly to the detriment of civilians. It could even be argued that in some ways it seemed as though historians sought to search for the roots of this surplus of violence in the past, in an effort to make it more intelligible.

In short, this renewed effort to understand war was favoured – and also conditioned – by the original accumulation of materials developed by the European memory of the two World Wars: it was a memory that sometimes became a kind of obsession in the form of public remembrance and private testimony, onto which a pedagogical memory of the Jewish deportation had been grafted (based on the assumption that we ought to remember certain events so that they will not happen again). Both memories – the memories of the two wars and that of the deportations – constituted the base upon which the anti-fascist, democratic and no longer warlike identity of Western Europe was created. With the rapprochement of the two Europes, West and East, following the watershed of 1989–91, these memorial and conceptual resources were used to deal with the need to contribute to the development of a new European identity, encompassing two different and divided historical paths between 1945 and 1989. The anti-fascist identity was quickly replaced by the anti-totalitarian one, favouring – both on a political-cultural level and on a more strictly historical one – a comparison and analogy between the experience of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism (Traverso 2001). This process shows how common sense and public discourse sometimes come into contact with historiographical reflection, to the point of overflowing into the rash celebration of the 'end of ideologies' (Baldissara 2018).

Within this composite political and cultural climate, the renewed attention to war has taken the form of a specific interest in the living conditions of civilian populations in conflict areas. This interest is based on an incontrovertible fact: contemporary wars have seen a constant increase in civilian victims. In the 1914–18 war, civilians accounted for about 14% of the total number of victims, in the 1939–45 war the proportion rose to 67%, in 1950 in Korea to 84% and in the 1960s in Vietnam to 90%; in the 1990s (in the wars in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Chechnya) the percentage remained constant between 80% and 90%. But civilians are not only victims[6]: they are affected at every level by the kind of warfare waged by the nation-state in the industrial age (Mann 1988; Wimmer, Min 2006; Latin 2007; Wimmer 2013), what we conventionally call total war (Chickering 1999; Black 2006; van Creveld 2008).

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, through mass conscription, armies became massive and industrial production guaranteed an enormous amount of weaponry, the destructiveness of which was continuously

increased by technological progress. The integral dimension of the clash between nations required total mobilisation in the framework of a total war, where the home front – including civilians – was an integral part of the ongoing conflict. The Great War was a turning point in this widespread involvement of civilians in warfare. It combined factors that had been observed in previous conflicts, but which between 1914 and 1918 appeared simultaneously on the scene, with an unprecedented degree of violence. The First World War concluded and summed up the 'long' 19th century – it was, after all, the last war of the 19th century – but at the same time it foreshadowed the further escalation that was to come with the Second World War (Chickering, Förster 2000; Audoin-Rouzeau et al. 2002; Chickering, Förster, Greiner 2005; Traverso 2007; Procacci 2013). Never had so many men been sent to the front; never had death in battle acquired such massive proportions. Never had so many deadly weapons, from machine guns to cannon batteries, been deployed on the battlefield. For the first time, whole nations were mobilised, penetrating deeply into every sphere of collective life to support the immense war effort. Georges Clemenceau compellingly summed it up on 20 November 1917, when – in his investiture speech to the Senate – he declared: 'Nous nous présentons devant vous dans l'unique pensée d'une guerre intégrale' (integral warfare). From this moment onwards, the civilian population would become the main protagonist of this type of war: it would play an active role as the driving force behind the nation's mobilisation; a passive one, because it could not avoid becoming a primary target for military actions. The full participation of civilians in the 1914–18 mobilisation made them strategic targets, exposing them to the violence of war in their naked vulnerability:

> The enemy presents us with his well-organised, well-fought, well-disciplined army: we neglect it to attack his disorganised, peaceful, undisciplined populations. [...] The war to come, by its very terrible and atrocious form, will be such a formidable producer of terror and disorganisation, and such a great dissolver of the social life of the warring nations that, with relatively minimal material losses, it will rapidly produce that rupture of equilibrium which determines victory on the one hand and defeat on the other. But they will be neither half-wins nor half-defeats. They will be definitive and absolute victories or defeats, because the equilibrium breaks will be extremely violent.
>
> (Douhet 1936, 36–37; see Hippler 2011)

This process reached completion in the 20th century, yet its origins have been traced as far back as the wars of revolutionary and Napoleonic France (Guiomar 2004; Bell 2008; Charters et al. 2012). The period from 1792 to 1815 delivered a new way of conceiving of and practising warfare, which encapsulated most of the constitutive factors of 20th-century total war: the creation of an army of soldier-citizens that profoundly transformed the idea

of the military and affirmed the sheer power of numbers; the intertwining of political leadership and military command; the depiction of war as an ideological crusade that combines in itself a social conception, a form of institutional violence and a project of imperialist domination; the willingness to go beyond all limits in resorting to violence in what is envisaged as a war of annihilation; finally, the strict relationship between internal and external enemy.

In this regard, it should also be recalled that the French Revolution contributed to introducing a process of internationalisation of civil war onto the European political stage, making the inside and outside of each country, domestic policy and foreign policy, relational dimensions of politics. The polarisation between revolution and counter-revolution closely intertwines war outside with war inside, with the result that war, revolution and civil war in history hardly constitute distinct forms of violence – on the contrary, they often overlap and intertwine. After all, like civil war, revolution is a struggle for the appropriation of power that is not regulated by law. 'Civil war' and 'revolution' in historical reality appear as the two sides of the same process of change: revolution – considered as a revolutionary cycle – is a social phenomenon and a long-term structural transformation, which includes civil war, within the framework of a violent shattering of political equilibrium whereby two parties oppose each other through a prolonged armed conflict for the conquest of the state. The violence here becomes extreme, radical and extended over time, and it is aimed at the destruction of the enemy (Schnur 1983; Kalyvas 2006, 2011; Newman 2014; Colombo 2021).

The encounter between politics and war in the age of mass society decisively contributed to changing the face of war. It was in the 1860s that the consequences of the changes initiated by the campaigns in revolutionary and Napoleonic France became fully evident:

> Yet for decades after Waterloo, the implications of the military revolution stayed somewhat dormant […] The big turning point came in the 1860s. The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification […] carried all the elements of people s war in them. This time, however, in contrast to the wars before 1815, people's war was conducted in an age of beginning industrialization. The parameters of modern warfare had been widened to such an extent that the conflict between state and society […] assumed a new quality.
>
> (Förster, Nagler 1997, 6–7)

These changes concern several aspects: the importance of the ideological and propaganda apparatuses feeding nationalism, the importance assigned to public consensus with regard to the reasons for engaging in war, mass conscription, the integral mobilisation of societies in war, the introduction of automatic weapons and the bombing of urban areas, the use of the

railway for the swift transportation of large masses of men, the spread of irregular and guerrilla warfare and the designing of war strategies to target civilian populations – which are also subjected to heavy and bloody repression when they oppose the foreign occupation of their territory. With regard to this last point, it is worth recalling that the Prussian artillery bombardment of Paris in 1871 marked a significant change in the understanding of war in the age of nationalism. In this case, the military target was the civilian population: the conflict was not merely between two armies, but between two nations and peoples; and the French civilians, who had shown their determination to oppose the Prussian regular army (there were about seventy thousand *franc-tireurs*), came to be regarded as enemies in all respects, thereby becoming targets to be attacked in order to weaken their spirit of resistance and force the government to seek peace.

For the Prussians, the *franc-tireurs* evoked the subversive ghost of the 'people's war' of the French Revolution, a serious threat to the foundations of the culture of war and militarism, which saw the army – with its regular form of warfare – as the defensive bastion of the state order, against a society constantly falling victim to passions and divisions, and hence disorder. In the autumn of 1870, the Prussian authorities responded to the unexpected mobilisation of the people with harsh repressive measures against the population, such as reprisals, the taking of hostages, the destruction of houses and villages, and executions. Thirty years later, in 1902, a book on *jus in bello* for the German military drew on the methods of 1870–71 to justify the killing of civilians responsible for taking up arms against the occupier and sabotaging the war effort, and to authorise the taking of hostages and forced labour (Hull 2005)[7].

The deep-seated 'trauma' of 1870 was destined to linger long in German military memory. 44 years later, on 12 August 1914, Marshal von Moltke accused Belgian civilians of treacherously attacking German soldiers and warned them that anyone taking part in the fighting without a uniform would be considered an outlaw: he would be 'treated as a *franc-tireur* and killed immediately'. John Horne and Alan Kramer have brilliantly demonstrated that the ensuing violence was due to a process of collective autosuggestion based precisely on the mythical complex of the *franc-tireur*, a memory of the Franco-Prussian war (Horne, Kramer 2001). The representation of the defensive function of the partisan – who guards and defends a territory as a 'sentinel of the earth' (Schmitt 1963) – and the representation of the offensive dimension of guerrilla warfare, understood as a popular war of insurrection, as a partisan war for the subversion of the established order, became progressively intertwined. The political and military memory of Germany merged and became conflated with the images of 1789, 1870 and 1914, to the point of fostering the notion of a (national or insurrectional) 'people's war' that makes the policy of terror a military necessity and repression – including the harshest forms of reprisal against civilians – a response to irregular warfare (Hull 2005).

The long-standing nature of this view of irregular warfare is clearly illustrated by the statement made by Field Marshal Albert Kesselring in a voluntary deposition on 18 October 1946. Kesselring, who had commanded the German troops in Italy and was accused of war crimes in relation to their conduct, declared:

> In my youth, the francs-tireurs' war during the Franco-German conflict was presented to me as the most evident crime among all war events. Similarly, as a soldier, I considered the partisan war to be a degeneration of military behavior.
>
> (Baldissara and Pezzino 2009, 318)

It is not only the difficulty – or even impossibility – of distinguishing between civilians and combatants that allows the ever-closer interweaving of violence against the population and counter-guerrilla warfare, but also the glue represented by the political dimension of guerrilla warfare. The partisan is not merely the defender of a social and living space: since the beginning of the 20th century he has also been the leading actor in an attempt to overthrow the established order, or at least to profoundly change the existing social and power structures. The partisan is not only a guerrilla fighter, but also a revolutionary. He combines the 'telluric' dimension of guerrilla warfare – its indissoluble link with a given territory and physical space (the valley, the village, the nation itself) – with the immaterial sphere of ideas – the transformation of social and political relations in the name of an ideal, be it nationalism, anti-fascism, communism or anti-colonialism. The physical space of armed struggle and the political space of insurrection intertwine and legitimise each other. As a consequence, partisan warfare – irregular and subversive warfare – makes systematic use of extreme violence against civilians. Guerrilla warfare is an eminently political issue: recognising an irregular fighter rising up against the state, admitting the possibility of a 'people in arms', of resistance and insurrection, would mean accepting the legality of revolutionary subversion, questioning the state itself. It is this, after all, that makes it possible for partisans to call themselves an army, even when their numbers would seem to contradict the use of this term. And it is for this reason that the law seems incapable of providing an adequate juridical definition of guerrilla warfare and the partisan, if not in the form of abstract formulations of value – currently the law still struggles to distinguish between legitimate acts of resistance and terrorism. Regular and irregular, legitimate and illegitimate, can only be defined in relation to subjects who recognise each other, or who represent mutually legitimising transnational organisations, be they the 19th- and 20th-century nation-states or the supranational and interstate institutions currently in place.

If these hypotheses have any foundation, guerrilla warfare should be taken as an indicator of the changing functions of states and armies, as

well as of the changing role of politics and the law. It is the birth of the modern state (and of the army that is its expression), which defines the framework for the rules governing warfare between states and the legitimate ways of fighting between their armies. The definition of what is 'regular' (the soldier) conversely dictates what is 'irregular' (the partisan), thus offering a vast and rich field of research: that of the specific cultures of war and violence developed over time. How do individuals, groups and nations experience, perpetrate and suffer violence? How is the representation of the enemy constructed and how is it possible to dehumanise the enemy to the point of making it easier to subject him to brutal forms of violence? How does a soldier deal with the risk of death and the possibility of killing? How does a soldier view hostile civilians? What typology of war violence can be developed to understand the different matrices that generate it? What kind and degree of violence is acceptable at any given time for a government, a country, a group or an individual? What memory does a society have of past acts of violence and how are practices hitherto thought to have disappeared suddenly reactivated? The list of open questions is almost endless. If we had to find a concept to at least partly sum up and encompass most of them, we might point to the mental universe of the individual (the combatant and the civilian, the soldier and the victim, the refugee and the prisoner, men and women, those who perpetrate the violence and those who suffer it, etc.). This mental universe stands in a dialectical relationship with the shared social values that dominate the social-political space in which people live, and which constitute a vast terrain to be dissected through the various methods and approaches available, in light of the results and knowledge already acquired. It is a matter of proceeding genealogically so as to identify and distinguish those elements that intertwine and come together to create specific forms of behaviour and violence, by focusing on each specific constituent factor in the transformation of the phenomenon of war and in the definition of a culture of war that is becoming uniform over time (Lynn 2003; Traverso 2003; Le Cour Grandmaison 2005; Welzer 2005; Audoin-Rouzeau 2008; Rodrigo 2014). This appears to be a possible and fruitful meeting ground for scholars in the humanities, historians and social scientists, from the perspective mentioned at the beginning: the study of war as a total social fact based on a cross-disciplinary, comparative and global approach.

Notes

1. *Penser la guerre*, 'Le Monde', November 27, 2015, was signed by Thierry Balzacq, Frédéric Charillon, Jean-Vincent Holeindre, Jean-Jacques Roche, Frédéric Ramel, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, Hugo Meijer, Alice Pannier, Olivier Schmitt.
2. An interesting case is that of the Italian scholar Gastone Breccia, historian of Byzantine civilisation at the University of Pavia, who has published a history of guerrilla warfare (Breccia 2013), then a travelogue in Kurdistan, among Peshmerga

fighters and Italian paratroopers who trained them in today's combat techniques (Breccia 2016). A historical boots-on-the-ground, so to speak.

3. The data come from the *Uppsala Conflict Data Program*, a data collection programme on organised violence based at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research of Uppsala University in Sweden. They should be understood above all as indicative of an overall trend, since macro-classifications can be discussed at length.
4. Rupert Smith wrote about the 'body bag effect': 'democratic governments conducting operations for 'soft' objectives are uncertain of the support of those at home, and […] every state and military must maintain the support of their people. The extent of the leaders' 'uncertainty is measured approximately but accurately in their degree of casualty aversion' (Smith 2007:674–675).
5. The comparability between the wars of the seventeenth century and those of today would be based on at least three essential profiles: the de-statalisation and privatisation of military force, its asymmetry, the autonomisation of forms of violence, which, from being a tactical instrument of military strategy, would today have become a strategic form in itself.
6. Focusing exclusively on the victims raises the question of the risks of creating a 'historiography of victims' that is incapable of accounting for the perpetrators' own training and literacy in violence. There is also the risk of uncritically accepting that the victims are 'innocent' in not taking an active part in the conflict, in being nakedly exposed to power, in being at the mercy of the ideological conflict, in being helplessly placed within the clashes and widespread violence. It is a representation that is difficult to unhinge, despite the fact that numerous contributions have appeared that have reasoned about the ambiguities – social, political, economic, military – of the very definition of civilian. (Slim 2007). The distinction between combatant and civilian must be removed from the guilt/innocence dichotomy, which is only applicable if the dialectic logic between just and unjust war is accepted, despite the fact that 'the concepts of guilt and innocence cannot justify war and at the same time limit it'. (McKeogh 2002:8; see also Primoratz 2007).
7. Violent repressive actions motivated by war necessity are not the exclusive prerogative of the Germans. In the context of the war in South Africa, for example, British officers explicitly referred to the precedents of 1870–71 to fight the Boer guerrillas. In different eras and contexts, but faced with similar situations, a culture of war operates that is becoming homogenised in Europe between the two centuries. In addition to the acute reflections of Isabel Hull, see Wessels 2011.

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