

War: A wide-ranging, readable history of armed conflict

Book review: Margaret MacMillan on how wars – past, present and future – impact society



A French soldier's grave, on the battlefield of Verdun: Wars are not part of our past, they are ongoing and are very likely to shape our future.

Robert Gerwarth

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Author:

Margaret MacMillan

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War has been a quintessential part of the human experience throughout history. For better or worse, it has shaped the world we live in. Most borders between countries around the globe are the result of armed conflicts. States and empires have risen and fallen as a consequence of wars. Economies, science, technology, medicine, art and culture have been profoundly transformed by wars, either as unintended consequences of conflict or as engines of accelerated change. Moreover, war is ongoing.

While for most western Europeans wars between states appear to be a thing of the past, a rather different picture emerges if we take a broader view. In large parts of Africa, Asia, South America and eastern Europe, the years since 1945 have been anything but peaceful. There has been a military conflict of one kind or another somewhere on the planet every year since the second World War came to an end.

Yet despite the ubiquity of wars in the past and present, and their fundamental impact on the way we live, there are surprisingly few books that interrogate the changing relationship

between war and human society throughout history. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of books on individual wars, some of them even comparative in scope, but not many reflect on the wider impact of armed conflict from early hunter-gatherer societies to present day drone strikes. This void has now been filled by the eminent Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan, a former Oxford professor and Warden of St Antony's College.

MacMillan begins her book with some valid observations about the importance of studying war, reminding us that public attitudes towards war have always ranged from repulsion to admiration. Certainly before the horrors of the first and second World Wars, many Europeans were attracted to the apparent glamour, masculine adventurism and public recognition associated with being a soldier. Dictators from Mussolini to Hitler and Stalin to Mao were able to mobilise their followers by appealing to the allegedly purifying power of war and violence that would cleanse their respective societies from all that was deemed weak and outdated.

We should also not assume, MacMillan argues, that our post-1945 apprehension over war is universally shared. For terrorist organisations such as Islamic State, to give just one example, video-recorded acts of extreme violence have served as an effective recruitment strategy, while the so-called "war against terror" has its own history of violent retaliation.

Female emancipation

The book is divided into nine chapters that deal, in a remarkably comprehensive way, with a wide array of themes, such as the reasons for conflicts and the ways in which societies commemorate wars. In between, we find out how different societies at different times waged wars and what distinguishes pre-modern wars from modern conflicts. The result is an eminently readable reflection on armed conflict throughout human history.

In each case, we learn about the ways in which war both transforms and reflects changing societies. To give an example: wars created an urgent need for the wider availability of penicillin. Discovered by Alexander Fleming in 1928, it was only during the second World War that penicillin was mass-produced because of the urgent need to fight bacterial infections.

New potential theatres of war also include cyberspace; for example, hackers attacking governments, banks, businesses or military installations that electronically control missiles

The first and second World Wars, and the immense suffering they caused, also triggered a massive growth of humanitarian agencies that have remained with us since. Female emancipation, and notably the right of women to vote, was greatly accelerated by the first World War, during which women in all combatant nations were drafted into the economy to replace their husbands, fathers and brothers fighting at the front. Some of the greatest art – from Homer's Iliad to Beethoven's Eroica symphony, from Tolstoy's War and Peace to Picasso's Guernica – have been inspired by armed conflicts.

As this brief overview of the multiple consequences of war suggests, MacMillan's book is much more than an operational history of military campaigns. The author also poses the complex question of what future wars might look like.

In her well-reasoned view, the potential for future conflicts is considerable given the intensity of our current challenges: the impact of climate change, coupled with growing populations outside the West, has already led to an intensified struggle for resources and a significant increase in migration. There are also signs of growing polarisation within both western and non-western societies, accelerated by the rise of populism. Taken together, these

developments provide plenty of potential for future armed conflicts between and within states.

'Killer robots' could significantly change the way in which wars are fought and won in the future

As MacMillan points out, these future conflicts may well look different from the wars of the past. Symmetric wars between highly developed countries, with large standing armies confronting each other on the battlefields, have become less likely, although not altogether unthinkable given growing tensions between the two remaining superpowers, China and the US. Elsewhere, civil wars have replaced wars between states as the most widespread form of armed conflict, whether in Syria, Ukraine or Yemen.

Where developed countries are involved – and they frequently are – drones have played an increasingly important role in military surveillance and as a means for targeted bombardments. “Killer robots” could significantly change the way in which wars are fought and won in the future. New potential theatres of war also include cyberspace; for example, hackers attacking governments, banks, businesses or military installations that electronically control missiles.

The book ends on a sombre note. Wars are not part of our past: they are ongoing and are very likely to shape our future. Yet despite this note of caution, the book is delightfully readable. The author wears the immense scholarship underpinning the book lightly. Her writing style is crisp and there is an enviable clarity of thought.

This should come as no surprise. MacMillan’s previous books, notably *Peacemakers*, her magisterial account of the 1919 Versailles conference, are critically acclaimed and have won several important awards. *War* is another fine achievement, and should be widely read by those wishing to understand how armed conflict has shaped, and continues to shape, the world in which we live today.