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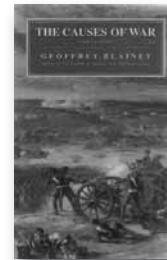


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## ***The causes of war***

by Geoffrey Blainey

*Macmillan Australia: South Melbourne; 3rd edition, 1988; 325 pp.; ISBN 072510550X;  
Ursula Davidson Library call number: 400 BLAI 1988*



First published in 1973, Blainey's further edited and up-dated treatise is a survey of all the international wars fought since 1700 up to and including the nuclear era. The manuscript contains eighteen chapters which are arranged within four books.

A foremost Australian historian, Professor Blainey observes that war is more newsworthy than peace and suggests that this may underpin the relative lack of detailed analysis of the causes of peace.

Unlike the 18<sup>th</sup> century, decisive wars were characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and this is the background factor comparing a war-torn 18<sup>th</sup> century with the relative peacefulness of the 19<sup>th</sup>. After 1815, wars were often short and decisive and followed by long periods of peace. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were two long periods of peace. Both lack accepted names. One peace ran from the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815 to the Crimean War of 1853; and the other ran from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the close of the century. Yet these peaceful periods were not devoid of war – their wars were fewer and, importantly, rarely between major powers.

In the forty years after Waterloo, there were far more revolutions than wars, yet, in the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was astonishingly free of revolutions. No satisfactory analysis for this paradox is offered other than the influence of powerful statesmen – Palmerston of England and Bismarck of Germany – as peacemakers.

Blainey considers the effect of treaties on the establishment of a lasting peace. He suggests that a war terminated with lenient terms – which may follow where a victor is weakened by conflict and thereby unable to demand harsh imposts – is usually followed by a relatively short peace. He further suggests that a severe peace treaty was more likely to prolong that peace. Such a harsh treaty was the usual outcome where a war ended in a decisive victory – best exemplified by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

Mention is made of Alfred Nobel's contribution to world peace with the establishment, after 1896, of five permanent prizes for international achievements, reflecting the philosophy that new knowledge and peaceful cooperation were strongly linked. This relationship, however, was completely overshadowed by the developing deluded optimism expressed by world political leaders during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The delusion was the way national

leaders thought about military power and how they attempted an objective measurement of that power. If this mismatch should coincide with a nation experiencing a fusion of prosperity, confidence and a sense of national destiny, then an exaggeration of their power might ensue. For example, the favourable season in August 1914 provided the stage to begin a war which, Blainey posits, had already been decided upon. The resulting war provided the most reliable and the most objective test of which nation or alliance was the most powerful.

Professor Blainey concludes his work by summarising the flaws in current theories of war and peace. Amongst other views, he comments that, in their origins, war and peace are not polar opposites; that breakdown of diplomacy leads to war, whereas the breakdown of war leads to diplomacy; and that neutrality, like war and peace, depends on agreement with governments.

The penultimate chapter deals with the myths and perils of the nuclear age stressing that "the peace movement is a double-edged sword and is capable, even with the noblest intentions, of promoting war as well as peace".

The prose style is crisp and clear. The research is extensive and the analyses are persuasive. It is an evidence-based politico-military historiography. Whilst Blainey offers many mechanisms for the development of war and peace, there are few data presented that would enable a unifying theory to be constructed. The book is not a litany of unimportant wars and side-shows, nor is it an exhaustive account of every skirmish that occurred in the 250-year period covered. The book is informative, challenging and avoids the inclusion of any unproven or unjustified personal convictions and opinions. It might well be re-titled *The Causes of War and Peace* since Blainey devotes many pages to the factors promoting peace and proposes that war and peace share the same framework of causes.

The book contains an occasional tabulation of data but no photographs, diagrams or maps. It is well indexed, has a useful selected bibliography and brief notations. For the military-minded reader, for the student of military history and of the discipline of peace and conflict studies, and the interested general reader, this book is a seminal discourse on the causes of war and peace.

**Bruce Short**