

War

by Gwynne Dyer

Periscope: Reading, UK; 2017; 488 pp.; ISBN 9781902932415; RRP \$29.99 (softcover)



This modern classic, by journalist and military historian Gwynne Dyer, is a most compelling analysis of the history and psychology of armed conflict through the ages. Why do humans fight wars? Is it even possible to tame the impulse? Is this 'lethal custom' innate, or culturally determined? How might we change? *War* is essential reading on the way to considering these eternal questions.

War was first published in 1985 following a 1983 seven-part Canadian television miniseries produced by Dyer. A second edition, titled *War: The Lethal Custom*, was published in 2006. This book is a third edition which has been revised and updated from the second.

Dyer traces the growth of organised warfare from the earliest days of humankind, as well as the psychology of individual soldiers, to the workings of whole armies. Using analogies with other animal species, he seeks insights into the social and biological aspects of organised violence. He argues that war, as an act of mass violence, has remained unchanged. The only real change has been in the technological means of waging war. He suggests that the international system, whereby each polity is responsible for its own defence, encourages war to settle disputes about status and influence.

Dyer argues that use of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons would threaten the existence of life on earth. Noting the expansion of the 'nuclear weapon club' to include India and Pakistan, Dyer queries whether they will come to adopt the logic of mutually assured destruction that came to define the nuclear-weapon relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. At a time when North Korea has recently joined the nuclear weapon club, and Iran continues to work towards that goal, it is certainly worth reconsidering the strategic calculus of nuclear weapons. He makes the point that, even though the Cold War has ended, the United States and Russia still maintain very large nuclear arsenals and the number of weapons around the world is slowly growing.

This edition, coming 15 years after '9/11', includes a chapter titled 'Guerillas and Terrorism'. It focuses on war

in the greater Middle East since 9/11. His analysis of the motives and fighting is insightful, but I was surprised he did not address the Sunni-Shia divide/contest which has fuelled a good amount of the killing. Dyer concludes that the al-Qaeda/Islamic State groups are merely revolutionary movements and, while they have enjoyed some successes, they will ultimately be defeated. He implores the reader to maintain perspective on the threat and consequences of nuclear war *versus* international terrorism.

Dyer is silent on women serving in the military, a recent and significant break from the historical norm. The psychology and social science behind this shift would be worth exploring.

While there can never be one definitive volume on a topic as vast and varied as 'war', Dyer has done a very good job of writing a book about the custom of war, placing it within the historical and cultural contexts wherein it resides. Writing in clear, intelligent and eminently accessible prose, he does not submit to resignation or false optimism; but it is clear that Dyer is a pacifist and hopes that somehow humanity can figure out a way to eradicate war.

The book includes several black-and-white images, footnotes for each chapter and an index, but no bibliography. Annoyingly, there are some passages concerning geo-political developments that have not been updated since the second edition and are factually incorrect. And curiously, the 'Acknowledgements' are from the second edition. Progressively revising and updating a book over 30 years clearly is a challenging process.

This is a large book, brimming with critical thinking and analysis, not all of which will be absorbed on first reading. But it is well worth the effort, being one of the best books currently available on the subject – and immeasurably more relevant than Clausewitz or Sun Tzu. Not only readers and researchers of military topics should read *War* – historians, sociologists, and those who wonder why society is the way it is today, should take the time to read what Dyer has to say.

Marcus Fielding