

The Causes of War

John Nelson Rickard

Volume 19, numéro 1, spring 1999

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_01re07

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Rickard, J. N. (1999). The Causes of War. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(1), 152–159.

The Causes of War

Holsti, Kalevi J. *The State, War, and the State of War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Black, Jeremy. *Why Wars Happen*. Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1998.

War is as old as human history. Among our first written records, Homer's *Iliad* and Herodotus's *Histories* narrate the events of war. The fear of mankind that warfare is an inevitable and eternal element in our existence is born out in the Hebrew Bible. Christ declared that in the last days "when ye shall hear of wars and commotions, be not terrified: for these things must first come to pass" (Luke 21:9) and only in the last days will a nation "not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4) Indeed, the best efforts of mankind to limit or eradicate war from the human experience have failed miserably. The First World War, "The war to end all wars," did not sow the seeds of eternal peace. The Covenant of the League of Nations, the 1928 General Treaty for the Renunciation of War (Kellogg-Briand Pact) and the modern day United Nations have all failed to prevent wars in all instances. By way of addressing that fundamental question, the two works under discussion, Kalevi J. Holsti's *The State, War, and the State of War* (1996) and Jeremy Black's *Why Wars Happen* (1998) are concerned with the causes of war.

Holsti's *The State, War, and the State of War* represents the authors sequel to his prior study *Peace and War: Armed Conflict and International Order, 1648-1989* (1991). The present study examines the essential characteristics and sources of contemporary and future war. Holsti is a political scientist at the University of British Columbia and political scientists are burdened by elaborate models and the necessity to be precise. Indeed, the definition of "science" as in political "science" is a "Knowledge of facts, phenomenon, laws, and proximate causes, gained and verified by *exact* [emphasis added] observation, organized experiment, and ordered thinking. Thankfully, unlike T. Clifton Morgan's *Untying the Knot of War: A Bargaining Theory of International Crises* (1994),¹ Holsti avoids the temptation to produce excessively complex mathematical models to explain the human and error-ridden experience that is war. Though based primarily on data derivable from the post-1945 period, Holsti's arguments remain historically driven.

Although not characteristic of *all* states, Holsti sees conflict since the end of World War II as being less of a problem between states as within states and specifically to "certain *kinds* of states rather than to the state itself." (p. xiii) This certain kind of state is the new and weak, which is the "primary locale of present and future wars." (p. xi) The corollary to this is that "strong states are an essential ingredient to peace within and between societies," (p. xiii) although later when he asks the question "Are strong states a sufficient condition for peace?," his answer is "Probably not." (p. 141)

"Wars of the third kind" is Holsti's term for wars within states and between communities. (p. 19) Since 1945 these types of conflicts have possessed a specific profile: no single crisis or declaration of war precipitates them, they typically do not start at a particular date, there is no recognizable "season" for campaigning and few end with peace treaties. (p. 20) He suggests that the acquiring of resources is secondary to "the establishment and control of a particular kind of state." (p. 21) Even the capture of territory is not a principal object, although during Operation

"Flash" and "Storm" in 1995, the Bosnian Croats were clearly fighting for land in the Krajina. Holsti's proof that interstate war is on the decline lies in statistics: 77 percent of the 164 wars since 1945 have been of the third kind. (p. 21) In fact, he contends that "the trend of declining interstate wars and increasing internal wars is gaining momentum," (p. 25) and the neo-realist and realist argument that wars must occur with regularity in any system of anarchy "is not borne out by the data" because there has been no war in Europe and North America for over 50 years.² He believes that the "most remarkable datum about war since 1945 is that there has been no great power war," (p. 25) but this seems hardly remarkable in view of the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). However, debate about the importance of nuclear weapons in preventing major war since 1945 probably never will end because, as one scholar has put it, the debate requires "counterfactual speculation about non-events - the dogs that did not bark, the wars that were not waged."³ Still, Holsti fails outright to delve deeply enough into superpower surrogate wars fought under the nuclear umbrella, mentioning them only in passing.

Holsti declares that our understanding of these "third kind" types of conflicts are "not well served by older analytical approaches," (p. xi) because from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 to the Cold War war has been defined as a contest between sovereign states. Even the United Nations was created to provide international peace and security *between* states not *within* them. (p. 5) From a theoretical standpoint Holsti, mimicking Martin van Creveld's argument first put forward in 1991,⁴ notes that the Clausewitzian concept of war as a means of serving state interests continues to form the intellectual and conceptual foundation for international organizations, national military institutions, and the practice of diplomacy, and is the wrong way to look at modern war. Actually, as John Keegan has noted, we have missed the full nuance of Clausewitz's famous politico-military dictum. In proper translation war is the continuation "of political intercourse" (*des politischen Verkehrs*) "with the intermixing of other means" (*mit Einmischung anderer Mittel*).⁵ Nevertheless, Clausewitz conceived political and military problems in terms of states and we continue to do so.

The solutions to war coming out of the realism of Rousseau and the liberalism of Woodrow Wilson were disarmament, judicial settlements, democratization of states, peace education, international organizations and world federalism, all state-centered initiatives. In fact, only Lenin proscribed a solution, world revolution, that was not state centered. (p. 11) Holsti believes our view is too Eurocentric, and the relevance to post-1945 wars of such terms as "balances of power", "alliances", "hegemony", "deterrence", and "power projection," are highly problematic. (p. 14) Ultimately, he feels that in the post-1945 world "the assumption that the problem of war is primarily a problem of the relations *between* states has to be seriously questioned." (p. 15)

In examining "wars of the third kind" since 1945 Holsti advocates a study of state creation, state morphology and even pathology of weak states. His definition of the "strength of states" is important. Strength should not be measured in military terms, but rather in the capacity of the state to command loyalty - the right to rule - to extract the resources necessary to rule and provide services, to maintain that essential element of sovereignty, a monopoly over the legitimate use of force within defined territorial limits, and to operate within the context of a consensus-based political community. (p. 83)

The essential problem then is "legitimacy," which manifests itself through three competing

principles: "popular sovereignty," "religion," and "natural community," i.e. "ethnicity." The last two are exclusive, and the "contradiction between exclusive principles of legitimacy and the demographic and social constitution of most post-colonial and post-Soviet societies creates weak states and, ultimately war." (p. xii) Holsti explores the idea of "legitimacy" further by differentiating between "horizontal" and "vertical" legitimacy. The former is "the attitudes and practices of individuals and groups within the state toward each other and ultimately to the state that encompasses them." (p. 87) This is an interesting concept in that in strong states this means that no group is excluded from seeking political power and enjoying its benefits. (p. 93) Such a definition begs the question of how one rates the strength and legitimacy of the United States where there has been only one catholic president and power is overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of white males. Is the US therefore a weak state because of such discrepancies? "Vertical" legitimacy reflects the established right to rule between society and political institutions and regimes. (p. 97) Neither level of legitimacy existed in most new states created after 1945.

Holsti expands his analysis from single states to groups of weak or strong states for the broader implications of such an approach. His analysis, not surprisingly, reveals that "zones" of weak states are "zones of war" (p. 141) and zones of strong states are zones of peace. Yet his analysis at this point lacks the sophistication of that put forward by John Keegan and Andrew Wheatcroft in *Zones of Conflict: An Atlas of Future Wars* (1986), a geographical study with factors of climate, logistics, economic, military power and political discontent superimposed. Keegan and Wheatcroft conclude that there is a very constricted area of the world where successful conventional warfare can be carried out and that, "It is where real assets, political instability, and the lack of secure borders meet that trouble, present and future, will occur and recur." ⁶ Holsti would say of this approach that it is too state-centered and driven by an improper focus on "national interest."

In explaining why zones of strong states, such as western Europe, equals less war Holsti identifies a number of factors: economic interdependence, respect for international law, mutual empathy and others, but reasons that additional "factors that are difficult to quantify" are important as well. For example, he feels that the self-perception of democratic-liberal states as upholders of democracy, decency and international law work collectively to reduce the frequency of conflict. (p. 146) This may be part of it, but surely the membership of most of the countries in NATO must be the decisive factor because little would be gained, or allowed to be gained, from military confrontation between the member nations.

In concluding his study, Holsti offered the theoretical proposition that "in the years to come it is not so much the state of the international system that matters - as traditional approaches to international politics and war would have it - but rather the state of the state. (p. 209) What Holsti does not do is suggest what will happen once such "wars of the third kind" have been settled. What for example, will happen when the Balkans finally become stabilized along territorial lines with each interest group recognized by the international community as separate entities? Most assuredly, we will return to "inter-state" conflict there.

In *Why Wars Happen*, Jeremy Black, professor of History at Exeter University, argues that to approach the question of why wars happens from an overwhelming emphasis on twentieth-

century, and even nineteenth-century conflicts, "limits the basis for theoretical and general reflections" and truncates the search for continuities and changes from the past. (p. 10) In stressing a chronological approach and striving to incorporate lessons from outside Europe to challenge Eurocentric perspectives he attempts to achieve a broad historical perspective and context. (p. 10) Thus the work is divided into different "ages," from 1450 to the present with chapter titles like "An Age of Limited War," "Wars of Revolution and Nationalism," "Wars of Imperialism," "Total War," and "Cold War and the Wars of Decolonization."

Black represents the interests of the skilled historian who relies more on the surviving documentary evidence than the models of political scientists to explain state policy. (p. 25) He suggests that the model approach has been inspired by post-modernist influences that classify politics as limited and of transient significance. (p. 25) A failure to consult archives leads to a schematic approach which does not reflect reality, and it is more important to study political actors rather than thinkers. (p. 26) Most crucially, however, Black suggests that the search for analytical precision may well be inappropriate if one admits that multi-faceted factors go into making war. (p. 31)

Fundamental to his work is an intimate study of cultural and social factors and their relationship to the origins of war. Specifically, he emphasizes the role of cultural predispositions and focuses on "bellicosity" in different societies. He also recognizes that the difficulty in defining war creates problems in using statistical studies of its origins. (p. 16) For example, there is a crucial distinction between "hostility" and war because "Hostile interests, whether economic, political, religious or ideological, do not have to lead to war." (p. 23) Black believes that the "transformation of disputes into crises, and of crises into war . . . depends not so much on the dispute in question as on how it is perceived. In short, bellicosity creates the severity of a crisis and often ensures how it is handled." (p. 34) Bellicosity does not require militarism in state and society, but it is greatly helped by the strength of militarist ideas and institutions. (p. 240) Black attempts to go beyond the standard method of identifying the crucial issue to recognize "triggers" and "precipitants," "but to do so within a context that notes the degree to which such triggers are best discussed in terms of a cultural world that focuses on conflict - in other words, bellicosity." (p. 19)

Though a reliance on bellicosity lies at the heart of Black's analysis he readily addresses its weakness as a conceptual framework. Indeed, he is fully convinced that "Bellicosity and other domestic factors ensure that relationships between ends and means cannot be comprehensively calculated." (p. 22) Moreover, its multiple nature, being an emotion, an approach to reasoning, and an action (violence), not only makes for ambiguity, but also ensures that the problem of evidence is particularly acute. (p. 35) Additionally, he concedes that there is no easy measure of bellicosity. "To assess it by counting the frequency and, in some way, measuring the intensity of warfare," he states, "is only of limited value, most clearly because it does not consider bellicosity that does not lead to war." (p. 41)

In fact, Black struggles with general propensities to violence as a cause of war. He would probably accept some of Barbara Ehrenreich's conclusions, forwarded in *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (1997), that ancient blood rites are the origin of aggressive propensities.⁷ Black does admit that a willingness to kill is indeed crucial to the causes of war (p.

14) and war helps explain society in an important dimension of its activity. In fact, he utilizes terms such as "warfare societies" and "warfulness," and the "willingness to fight" to explain his view. "Willingness to fight," for example, is brought into focus by comparing the aggressiveness in international relations of Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter. (p. 22) Ultimately, Black concludes, "War has to be understood in terms of ideologies, elite roles, government and social purposes, sports and games." (p. 32) Societal change is important, especially when it is reviewed over the 500 years of the work because such change has affected bellicosity.

Despite the weaknesses of the approach, Black finds bellicosity useful for several reasons. For one, it is important "not only to creating a general context for international relations but also in sustaining the view that war is an instrument of policy, and in determining how disputes between, and within, states were treated." (p. 239) Thus Black relies more on the Clausewitzian approach than Holsti. Bellicosity leads to war not through misunderstandings that produce inaccurate calculations of interest and response, but rather from an acceptance of different interests and a conviction that they can be best resolved through the use of force. This enhances our understanding of "intentionality." Moreover, bellicosity also helps explain the continuation of wars once begun. However, the concepts greatest contribution is that, in part, it helps "overcome the unhelpful distinction between rationality and irrationality in motivation and conduct." While cultural factors act as an enabling force in allowing wars to happen, they do not cause them and that, instead, "politicians have to want to go to war for some perceived benefit to the state." (p. 35) Hence, the causes of some wars are simply in the hands of leaders, and at times unreasonable leaders like Hitler, Mussolini, Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic. (p. 211) This fact cannot be overlooked and the opposite is true; reasonable leaders can help prevent war, but not in any methodical way. Diplomacy is clearly an art.⁸

Black identifies three types of wars: wars across cultures, wars within cultures and civil wars, and breaks down war in the post-1945 period into two often related categories, wars of decolonization and wars between communist and non-communist powers. (p. 201) He believes that "The interaction of decolonization, ideological confrontation and the intervention of the major powers lay behind much of the conflict of the period." (p. 208) Contrary to Holsti, he advocates the realist argument that the collapse of communism led directly to the Balkan wars of the 1990s. (p. 219) This view is shared by Bevin Alexander who committed his own thoughts on the future of warfare in 1995.⁹ In reflecting the argument of Keegan and Wheatcroft about disputes over frontiers, Black suggests that regional rivalries are driven by "the propensity of particular elites to regard such disputes as a crucial aspect of prestige" and cites the Moroccan-Algerian dispute between 1962-63.

Black's discussion of "national interest" is interesting. The "rationalist" calculation of national interests is "overly limited" because it "underplays domestic pressures for war." (p. 31) This is diametrically opposed to Brian Bonds recent thesis in *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (1996) that wars are still fought for national interest. Those who start wars clearly think there is something to gain and warns that wars as an instrument of policy are not yet passéé citing the Falklands and the Gulf War as examples.¹⁰ Indeed, lending further weight to the rational calculation thesis, Henry Kissinger recently asserted that no country in the twentieth century has been "more pragmatic in the day-to-day conduct of its diplomacy" than the United States.¹¹

Black concludes his study by examining the state of war from 1990 to the present and perceives changed international attitudes that have generated less bellicosity. In the case of the United States, he cites the influence of the Weinberger doctrine of the mid-1980s, which advanced six principles for choosing the option to go to war: just cause, determination to win, right intention, proportionality, popular support and last resort. Such attitudes are also reflected in American military doctrine that has recently stressed Operations Other Than War (OOTW), and includes two specific principles, "legitimacy" and "perseverance," designed to focus American efforts.¹² Black suggests quite rightly, that such attitudes do not exist in control societies like Iraq, Syria, China or Indonesia. (p. 217)

His assessment of the West is that it has lost the warrior mentality. Veterans are less influential and TV "does influence patterns of causation and continuance, especially by constraining democratic governments from pursuing campaigns abroad." He refers to the 1968 Viet Cong Tet offensive as illustrative of this point, but other television "snapshots" have also proved decisive in driving policy, such as the destruction on the Basra Road and the dragging of the bodies of US Army Rangers through the streets of Mogadishu. (p. 223) Anti-war attitudes dominate today; war is seen as an aberration when it occurs and capitalism needs peace. (p. 226) He makes the point that when domestic pressures are expressed in terms of demands for more schools then this both detracts from any emphasis on confrontation in international relations and creates a domestic political sphere in which force is not central. (p. 226) Yet Lyndon Johnson's great domestic agenda was his Great Society programs, but that did not prevent him from sending half a million troops halfway around the world to fight a prolonged war.

Black is careful not to speculate on the future in any concrete way because "Looking ahead is dangerous." (p. 229) Indeed, Martin van Creveld fell victim to forecasting. In *The Transformation of War* he declared that the "Iran-Iraq War may well have been among the last [conventional war] the world will see," only to have the Gulf War break out shortly afterwards.¹³ Black goes only as far as to say that the most important trend is the growing reluctance in many societies to fight. (p. 230)

Both *Why Wars Happen* and *The State, War, and the State of War*, are provocative thought pieces on the causes and future of war. Both suffer from overwriting in places and even if one does not agree with the authors' various conclusions, the wealth of information presented and the different approaches advocated cannot but help the reader to reach his own conclusions.

John Nelson Rickard
University of New Brunswick

Endnotes

1. T. Clifton Morgan, *Untying the Knot of War: A Bargaining Theory of International Crises* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[Return to Article](#)

2. Holsti's analysis is a bit thin here. He does, however, recognize the special nature of the North American community and the fact that the limited number of states involved, three, reduces the probability of conflict within his historical model.

[Return to Article](#)

3. Bruce Russett, "Controlling the Soviet-US Enduring Rivalry: What was the Role of Nuclear Weapons?," in Jorn Gjelstad and Olav Njolstad, eds., *Nuclear Rivalry and International Order* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 75.

[Return to Article](#)

4. Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

[Return to Article](#)

5. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993), p. 3.

[Return to Article](#)

6. John Keegan and Andrew Wheatcroft, *Zones of Conflict: An Atlas of Future Wars* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1986), p. 158.

[Return to Article](#)

7. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

[Return to Article](#)

8. See, for example, Michael Howard's assessment of the impact of George Bush's personality in shaping the tumultuous events of 1989-91 in *Foreign Affairs*, 77, no. 6 (November/December 1998), pp. 130-34.

[Return to Article](#)

9. Bevin Alexander, *The Future of Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

[Return to Article](#)

10. Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[Return to Article](#)

11. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 18.

[Return to Article](#)

12. Russell W. Glenn, "No More Principles of War?," *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly*, 28, no. 1 (Spring 1998), p. 58.

[Return to Article](#)

13. Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, p. 18.

[Return to Article](#)