

JEREMY BLACK

A detailed oil painting of a man with dark, wavy hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue military uniform with a high red collar and gold epaulettes. He is adorned with several medals and orders on his chest. The background shows a landscape with a church spire on the left and a building with two towers on the right.

# A SHORT HISTORY OF WAR

Warfare from antiquity to the modern day has always provided a fascination for theorists, but does their study fail to take into account a key component - its participants?

**'If we forbear to fight, it is likely that some great schism will rend and shake the courage of our people till they make friends of the Medes [Persians]; but if we join battle before some at Athens be infected by corruption, then let Heaven but deal fairly with us, and we may well win in this fight.'**

Herodotus' account of Miltiades the Younger outlining in 490 BC what was at stake for Athens when threatened by a Persian invasion, the threatening great power of its day, captured the role of will and the place of divine support in understandings of success in warfare. This remark from the 'Ancient World,' however, is one that in terms of the species is really that of recent history. Humans from the outset were involved in conflict, but not at the scale of that conflict. They had to compete with other animals for food and to prevent them being food for others. They also had to fight for shelter.

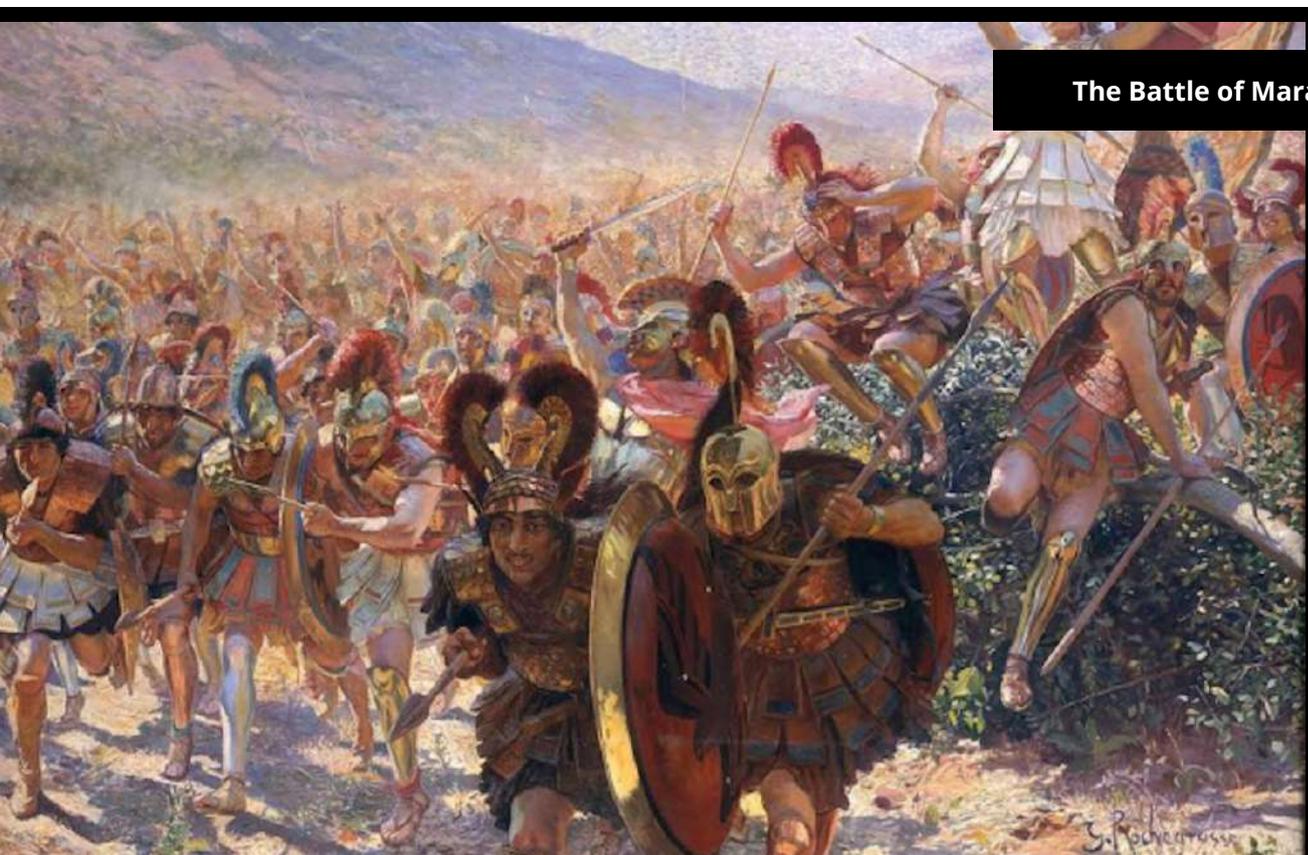
Warfare did not therefore only emerge as some result of the corruption of humankind by society, in the shape of agriculture and related social organisation, as was enthusiastically argued in the 1960s, by commentators who were unconsciously copying Judeo-Christian ideas of the Fall of Man due to Adam's sin. Such an account would have warfare begin about 90 per cent of the way into our history as a species. Instead, fighting is integral to human society, and the pattern for modern hunter-gatherer societies, such as those in Amazonia and New Guinea, reflect a formerly more common practice, notably of conflict between human groups. Fighting with other human groups whether to secure hunting areas, to seize slaves, not least for mates and/or to incorporate into the tribe, or to assert masculinity, was part of a continuum with fighting with animals.

How best should military history be presented, discussed and

explained? One of the standard issues with the subject is the way in which the same old thinkers get mentioned when it is discussed, and frequently with a repetition of past arguments and established problems. Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Jomini and Fuller dominate consideration of war on land, and Mahan and Corbett at sea. Moreover, the standard approach, both academic and popular, to the subject focuses on great commanders, on major wars, and on supposedly decisive battles. Thus, Clausewitz and Jomini had their names made as commentators on warfare in the light of French Revolutionary and Napoleonic conflicts, Fuller as a commentator on World War One and the way to avoid such another costly impasse, and Mahan and Corbett on Britain as the great naval power in the period 1689-1815, and notably its conflict with France. Others have of course been added to the list, including Frunze and Mao Zedong on revolutionary warfare in the twentieth century and Calwall and Galula for counter-insurgency operations; while Sun Tzu and Mao Zedong represent a major effort to engage with the significance of China as a military power. Air power brought in its exponents and analysts (the two overlapping to a damaging effect), notably Douhet.

There are, however, a number of issues with much of the commentary. First, there is a preference for assessing the theories of military thinkers, rather than the thoughts, still less actions, of military actors. The overwhelming majority of the latter do not leave such accounts, and certainly not in any systematic fashion, but the problem with considering military thinkers is that that tells you about ... military thinkers. They do not necessarily get at all close to those who made decisions, nor their reasons for doing so.

Secondly, there is a marked emphasis on conflict between states rather than within them. Indeed, civil wars tend to be



**The Battle of Marathon, 490BC**



**The Fall of the Alamo**

addressed only when both sides have formal military structures, as in the English (1642-8) and American (1861-5) Civil Wars, or quasi-formal structures. Thirdly, the discussion is usually of battle, and not skirmish or 'small war,' and that despite the frequency and significance of the latter.

Fourthly, much of the world is 'primitivised,' with the general simplification and primitivisation of many of the combatants, especially steppe peoples and African polities, and a tendency to present them as less sophisticated (and diverse) than 'settled' states, especially if the latter are reliant on large-scale agriculture and industry, and/or Western (European and North American) or East Asian. This creates an insistent geography of significance with an assumption that best practice is synonymous with 'developed societies,' which also tend to have militaries and military commentary formalised in a 'modern' fashion. Thus, the 'undeveloped' societies only appear to gain relevance if they copy aspects of the best practice.

Stated like that, the standard position is clearly problematic. Effective militaries, such as the Huns in the fifth century, the Mongols in the 13th, the armies of Timur the Lame in the 14th, and the Manchu in the 17th, all of which were non-European cavalry forces, are apt to be underplayed or treated as likely to fail in the long-term. In part, this is due to an emphasis instead on Western infantry forces. This process is taken further if the stress is on a military-industrial nexus or 'complex' as the seedbed of the advanced weaponry of modern warfare.

By their nature, steppe societies do not produce such systems. As a result, they appear inherently redundant. This is so even if the redundancy was frequently not given effect until the 19th century, indeed being both a cause and a consequence of the age of imperialism of that period; which, in reality, was just another such age. However, as so often, there is a teleology at play here, and one that does not

appear so secure from the perspective of the 2020s when, for example, Mexican crime cartels as a whole have more armed men than many European armies.

In this context, the Clausewitz-worship of many lectures appears curiously dated. If applied in order to suggest supposedly timeless and universal lessons, the ideas or supposed maxims of Clausewitz are often somewhat trite and, separately, unnecessary as they are generally well-expressed in the particular idioms of the culture in question. Culture indeed is a key concept, for an emphasis on the way in which war can be seen differently in particular cultural settings offers an opportunity to move beyond supposedly universal propositions.

Most modern Western commentators in particular have little or nothing to say about religious values and their role in helping create and sustain particular attitudes to victory and defeat, suffering and loss; and thus to the acceptability of casualties. Yet, tactical, operational and strategic equations of success, and thus practicality, can all be affected by this factor, as was seen back to early accounts of warfare. Indeed, the relative neglect of religion is a problem with one of the most interesting theories about military history, that advanced in the 18th century by writers such as Edward Gibbon, William Robertson and Adam Smith who were convinced that history was a matter of development through socio-economic stages, notably from hunter-gatherers, to pastoral societies, agrarian counterparts, and then urban-based systems, with political and military systems varying accordingly. This thesis, which can be extended to include modern societies, allows for differences in physical and human environments around the world, but not for their counterparts in terms of ideological variations.

Whether with Clausewitz or with Gibbon, we are dealing with ideas over the longue durée, but most theorisation in practice is very short term, notably an analysis of recent

conflicts in order to attempt to understand the capabilities of possible opponents. Thus, the Germans analysed the poor Soviet performance in the Winter War with Finland in 1940, which encouraged them to plan the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, although, as yet another instance of the tendency of theory and analysis to confirm bias, they underplayed the key point of eventual Soviet victory in the Winter War.

Such military theory was prone to support convenience and apt to confirm institutional, national and social bias. Thus, the American Air Corps analysts, assessing the failure of the German Luftwaffe in the air offensive on Britain in 1940, attributed it to a lack of strategic bombers, rather than the overall deficiencies of the Luftwaffe and the role of Britain's integrated air defence system. In July 1941, Air War Plans Division No. 1 offered a comprehensive plan for defeating Germany by means of air power, which was an instance of the right opponent helping to push forward both the doctrine and the crucial support.

Military theory is very separately advanced through popular culture, with a repeated emphasis on individual heroism, collective bravery, and the group cohesion that helps cement resolve. This is an element from the ancestral tales of the earliest recorded literature to modern electronic games and their equivalents. The theory here is of the triumph of will, although there can be a providentialism and fatalism that ensures a heroic failure, as with the Spartans at Persian hands at Thermopylae in 480 BC or the Texans at Mexican hands at the Alamo in 1836, which itself then becomes a form of triumphant will.

This form of commentary attracts the most attention, and not least because of the popularity, strengthened from the 1970s, of 'face of battle' accounts, with their emphasis on the stories of individual combatants, and the related use of oral history. This approach downplays background elements of great significance, such as strategy, logistics and communications, and focuses, instead, on the tactical dimension and also willpower. This is a long way from Clausewitz, but there is no correct approach.

Moreover, modern cultures are particularly apt to respond to visual stimuli and 'lessons,' and those can focus on tales of heroism as well as the particular capabilities of weaponry. Thus, the specific medium of the history provides a message, and one that, in this case, is a long way from the use of written text which is more readily able to suggest ambiguity and qualifications. Visual media, moreover, are more accessible for usage across much of the world. They are where the theories of military history, generally implicit theories, are being expressed, and they offer the modern equivalents to the oral epics that were so important in the past.

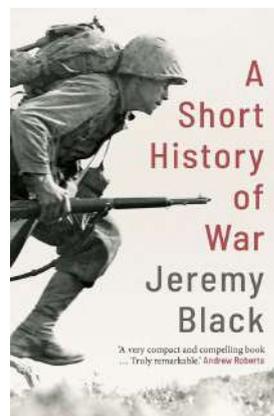
The cruelty of war is not only visited on the living. At the height of the fighting over the fort of St Elmo on Malta in 1565, the bodies of three dead Knights of St John were decapitated and disembowelled before being nailed to wooden crosses that were floated across Valetta harbour in order to discourage the sending of further reinforcements.



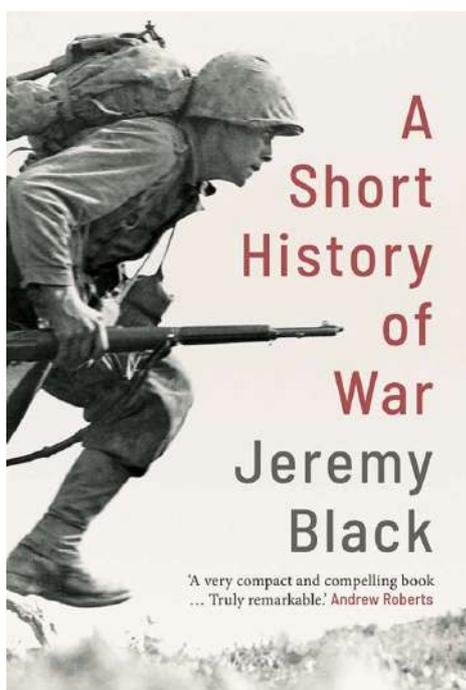
**Finnish troops during the Winter War with the Soviets**

When the fort fell, only five badly wounded knights were captured. They also were nailed by the Turks on crosses that were floated across the harbour.

Wars today can be far shorter than the time it takes to write a chapter, let alone a book, and yet there is no shortage of lengthy books that if dropped from any height might well be fatal to a pedestrian on the ground. A short book, however, risks simplifying the nature of war in order to provide a clear account and use a causal narrative to explain developments. All then falls into a pat analysis, with technological proficiency in weaponry generally the measure of proficiency and the Sorcerer's apprentice of steadily more frenetic conflict. Weaponry provides both a developmental narrative and analysis, and a way to rank and link past, present and future. It also answers to the strong interest in the material culture of war, the sense that it is about things. That is a mistake. War is about people.



Jeremy Black is a prolific lecturer and writer, the author of over 100 books concerning 18th century British, European and American political, diplomatic and military history. His latest book is *A Short History of War*, published by Yale University Press.



# A Short History of War

**Jeremy Black**

**Major General Sir Evelyn Webb-Carter saw service in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, and later commanded the Household Division, and was General Officer Commanding London District.**

*A Short History of War* is indeed short at 240 pages, however I have learnt that it is extremely challenging putting a big story into few words and in this Jeremy Black has succeeded with distinction. He writes in a snappy style with an abundance of facts to cover the history warfare across the globe from the time of Adam and Eve to today. An excellent reference for any student of warfare, it includes all likely campaigns and wars they may have to study and many they won't. The chapters are commendably brief, and describe initially the early years BC and are taken at a gallop covering several centuries in a paragraph; the Waterloo campaign is described in two sentences. If interest is sparked, for example, by the Chinese dynasties of which there were over a dozen, Black has prompted the reader to delve elsewhere for the detail. What is so interesting is the variety of means in which tribes, nations and armies conducted warfare throughout history.

Some astonishing facts appear such as it was Napoleon III who instigated a competition to find a non-rancid substitute to butter, margarine, for use by campaigning armies; and the fact that Portugal in the 20th century produced the greatest (less the Israelis) percentage of the population in an Army. Many of us will have been taught that Hannibal crossed the Alps with elephants when in fact only one actually traversed and the poor beast died shortly after.

Black has made a point in placing emphasis on the development of military power in and within China over the ages, something we all should take note of in the current political climate. It was interesting to see Wuhan appear in an entirely non-Covid context as the site of the 1911/12 revolution. The mention of Cannae, which had a disproportionate influence on military thinking in 1911 and its connection to the Schlieffen plan brings to mind the fact that although Carthage won that particular battle, Rome won the war.



**Black has demonstrated an enormous capacity for the length, breadth and depth of global military history which will prompt readers to explore further into campaigns they know little about.**



The latter chapters are perhaps the most interesting as they are a commentary on our current, troubled world. In that context the table of comparative defence expenditure in 2019 is revealing. The points Black makes about a looming China and the potential for India to rise in the century to come are sobering, and for this reason he has dwelt less on the European story to ensure the reader grasps the historical context of these two nations, particularly China.

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