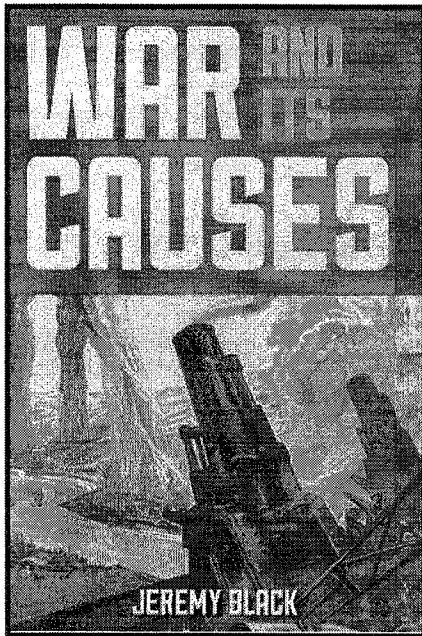


BOOKREVIEWS



WAR AND ITS CAUSES

BY JEREMY BLACK

Rowman & Littlefield, 2019
Pp. x, 241. \$34

REVIEW BY CHARLES A. METCALF

William Tecumseh Sherman, the U.S. Army general best known for his march to the sea during the War Between the States (which included the burning of Atlanta), commented as follows in remarks attributed to a graduation address at the Michigan Military Academy on 19 June 1879: “War is at best barbarism. . . . Its glory is all moonshine. It is only these who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. *War is hell*” (emphasis added).¹

When we consider General Sherman’s comments, we can easily understand the effects of war. Jeremy Black, a former professor of history at the universities of Durham and Exeter in the United

Kingdom, and currently a Templeton Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, has written an excellent book that offers a rational and detailed historical description of notable events, places, and times (he calls them “wars”) which serve as markers or milestones in military history.

His first chapter asks the defining question, “What Is War?” There is no simple or single answer. Black points out that it is much more than an academic exercise or a visible means of asserting influence and power. He correctly indicates numerous perspectives and points of view: “any definition of war in terms of a public monopoly of the use of force has to face the heavily contested nature of the public sphere” (4). Particularly relevant is his sage observation: “In practice, there is no one trend today, but rather a number of tendencies” that precipitate war (7). Yet he offers his thoughts when he comments, “the framework for analysis [of the causes of war] has changed over time.” However, he also acknowledges that the “risks underplaying the significance of [these] changes [also has changed] through time” (11). To compensate for this broad spectrum of opinions regarding the causes of war, Black relies on a historical perspective—because it appears to be the most useful way of asking and answering a question that has multiple and sometimes conflicting answers.

Black’s viewpoint suggests that “willingness . . . to fight is the key element in causing fighting, at least in the form of enabling it. This willingness is shaped by bellicose drives that encouraged and sustain war. . . . These drives include the role of integrity, honor, and reputation (including revenge) in the shaping of goals” (221). Furthermore, “when considering the causes of war historically (and in the present), it is possible to accumulate reasons for war, but without that accumulation necessarily explaining the drive or establishing priorities” (226). Black’s bottom line says it all: “The most significant fact is the determination to fight on the part of the leadership of at least one of the powers involved” (227).

Black never explicitly tells us war is hell. He intimates it through repeated examples drawn from the passage of time. He lets the facts speak for themselves. Consider: “Military planning, procurement, and preparations in the situation in 1914, let alone military influences in the decision-making process and cultural bellicosity were present for all powers—even the Swiss mobilized; but they were crucially different in character, context, and consequences” (123). Describing World War II and its origins, Black comments, “The causes of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1941, launched by Germany on 22 June, the largest land-scale conflict of World War II, can be firmly found on the German side” (155). Another, more recent illustration: “For example, in South Sudan, since independence in 2012 there has been ethnic conflict between the Murle, Dinka, and Nuer tribes, with many thousands killed, in large part due to competition for land and cattle and raiding for children to use as slaves” (209). War is ugly. War is violent. War is vulgar. Black does not need to tell us that “war is hell” because the examples, facts, and figures that he presents make his case clear. It is there, right in front of us, for us to read and digest. Regrettably, however, he does not balance the equation: Unlike Sherman, he does not consider or address the effects of war.

Sherman was right: War is hell. If we accept and take Sherman’s comment at face value, we should consider Black’s book, *War and Its Causes*, as valid without being questioned. Black started his book with a blank canvas but has left us with an image that is carefully crafted and offers a needed perspective on the causes of war. And, if we substitute reality for perception, we also might have a better idea about the effects of war. No one really wins. Indeed, *war is hell*.

Charles (Charley) A. Metcalf is a retired U.S. Army Reserve major and a retired Department of the Army civilian who returned to civilian service