



WAR SINCE 1945

JEREMY BLACK

CONTEMPORARY WORLDS

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REAKTION BOOKS

For Mark Jackson

Published by Reaktion Books Ltd
79 Farringdon Road
London EC1M 3JU, UK

www.reaktionbooks.co.uk

First published 2004

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Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Black, Jeremy

War since 1945. – (Contemporary worlds)

1. Military art and science – History – 20th century
2. Military art and science – Developing countries – History – 20th century

I. Title

355'.02'09045

ISBN 1 86189 216 0

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Preface

This book seeks to provide a short and accessible introduction to war since 1945. Much coverage of modern warfare is taken to mean discussion of the period beginning with the outbreak of the French Revolutionary War in 1792, with an emphasis, for the twentieth century, on World Wars I and II, and a postscript on the Cold War; the great ideological and 'super-power' stand off between capitalism and Communism, and their leaders, the USA and the Soviet Union, that lasted from the close of World War II until the Soviet collapse in the early 1990s. The focus for other conflicts discussed is on those involving Western powers, especially the USA and particularly the Vietnam War, and the organizing principle is often that of the triumphs and travails of Western weaponry and methods, an approach that links the Vietnam War to the two wars with Iraq in 1991 and 2003. As the new century advances, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine how best to present the second half of the twentieth century. For a long time, this period was understood in terms of the Cold War, and it was possible to see the 1990s in terms of the winding down, or consequences, of that war. Now, however, it appears less convincing to analyse the second half of the century in these terms and more necessary instead to search for new approaches and concepts; this book is a contribution to that process. The Cold War thesis subordinated events throughout the world, especially in the developing world, to the confrontation to an inappropriate degree, obscuring other trends. The

emphasis in this book will be on the variety of post-1945 conflicts and the diversity of goals and methods. In addition, there will be an effort to show how war has played a major role in the history of the period; this is true both of conflict itself, particularly in South-West, South and South-East Asia, and in Africa, and of preparations for warfare. The coverage will be thematic, although these themes will be chronologically delimited.

Jeffrey Clarke made extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft and kindly provided journals and other material not readily obtainable in the UK. Stan Carpenter and Bill Gibson also offered useful comments. Discussions with other scholars while thinking about and writing this book have also been of value. In the period of writing, I benefited from invitations to speak at Assumption College, Boston University and Clark University, the University of Massachusetts at Boston, Roger Williams University, the Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Radley College, and to the Foreign Policy Research Institute and the New York Military Affairs Symposium. It is a great pleasure to dedicate this book to a good friend and much valued colleague.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The First and Second World Wars still dominate popular interest in war, and establish the parameters within which the Western public thinks about it. This was also very much the case after 1945, when, to many, it seemed obvious that future wars would follow the model of World War II. This conclusion was not restricted to the public. In the aftermath of the war, the campaigns were carefully scrutinized by military commentators seeking indications about how best to wage war in what appeared to be the imminent conflict between the Soviet Union and the group of non-Communist powers that allied in 1949 in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Atomic weaponry had appeared to suggest that there had been a paradigm shift in military capability and war-making, with aircraft able to drop those bombs as the war-winning tools. However, after 1949, when the Soviet Union unexpectedly exploded a nuclear bomb, the threat of nuclear devastation led to revived interest in conventional operations; although, at the same time, the prospect of nuclear devastation was employed as a deterrent with the American doctrine of 'massive retaliation'.

Concerned about conventional operations, the Americans took a close interest in the experience the Germans had acquired in fighting the Soviet Union. In the late 1940s they used German veterans to acquire information about the Soviet navy,¹ and in the 1950s they persuaded Luftwaffe commanders to write a series of reports. In addition, Franz Halder, head of the German army's General Staff in

1938–42, was employed by the American army's Historical Division for fourteen years, and indeed received the American Civilian Service Award in 1961. In their plans for conflict in Europe, both Soviet and, later, NATO forces came to focus on manoeuvre warfare, and there was great interest on both sides in the successful Soviet campaigns of 1943–5 against Germany, especially the concept of 'deep operations'. Similarly, the impact of the German and American submarine campaigns in World War II encouraged NATO to devote much attention to anti-submarine capability in the North Atlantic. Soviet willingness to sustain the losses seen in World War II made the Soviet Union subsequently appear to be such a threat to the West.

The legacy of the war also included among the victors a sense of righteous struggle, an affirmed nationalism, and a pride in military achievement. Politicians from the war years continued to be influential, the Americans electing General Eisenhower as President in 1952 and 1956, and the French turning to General de Gaulle. Conscription continued, or was revived for the Cold War, providing a collective experience of manhood. By 1958, 70 per cent of eligible young American males had served in the military, either as draftees or as draft-induced volunteers. The attitudes reflected and developed in this experience helped underpin willingness to serve in the Korean War and, at least initially, the Vietnam War.

The applicability, however, of the military lessons of World War II was lessened not only by the spread of atomic capability and the availability of improved weaponry, but also by the fact that most of the wars in the period of the Cold War were very different in type to World War II. The closest in operational terms were the wars between states where armour and airpower could be used by both sides, particularly the Arab–Israeli wars (indeed, Basil Liddell Hart saw Israeli operations as another instance of *Blitzkrieg*) and also the India–Pakistan war of 1965.

The most 'typical' wars, however, were those that involved at least an element of insurrection. This was true of the conflicts of decolonization, such as the British in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and Aden, and the French in Vietnam and Algeria, in which political will and the battle to win or intimidate 'hearts and minds' were as important as conventional military operations. This was also true of the American

engagement in Vietnam, a conflict that very much indicated the limited value of doctrine and strategy derived from both World War II and Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. Instead, the need to rethink military practice (and history) in order to give due attention to the range of challenges that might have to be confronted by major powers was made readily apparent.

Even so, all too many commentators continued to place their trust in the paradigm power and conflict approach to war, with the related assumption that a particular operational method and/or type of military technology would lead to increased capability and success. This book focuses instead on the variety of war, not the paradigm. As such, it contests the dominant meta-narrative of war, which is one securely located within the Western intellectual tradition. The stress in this meta-narrative is on the material culture of war, and the explanatory approach focuses on the capabilities of particular weapons and weapons systems, and a belief that progress stemmed from their improvement. This is an approach that extends across time; thus, for example, with the Iron Age replacing the Bronze Age, the emphasis is on how the superior cutting power of iron and the relative ease of making iron weapons led to a change in civilizations.

Improved technology, not least in the shape of mechanization, plays a major role in the dominant modern concept of war, as the capability of weaponry takes precedence over the purpose of conflict. In spatial terms, this relates to the collapsing of distance, strategically, operationally and tactically. The entire world is literally under the scrutiny of surveillance satellites. Missiles and planes benefiting from mid-air refuelling can deliver warheads continents away, and units can be rapidly transported to and around the battlefield. Once there, they can use real-time information to increase their effectiveness. Space no longer appears an encumbrance, let alone a friction.

This technologically driven approach to war, however, has serious flaws. In particular, it pays insufficient attention to the diversity of military force structures, methods, goals and cultures that exist and have existed. The conventional Western approach is an idealistic one that assumes a clear paradigm of excellence, as well as an obvious means by which capability is to be ranked: in terms of the quality and

quantity of resources applied in accordance with an effective doctrine and organization. In short, the world is seen as an isotropic surface: the space employed is one that is unvarying, and, from that perspective also, space has ceased to exist as an issue. This has been a particular problem with airpower theory, much of which has found it difficult to relate to low-intensity conflict, and to devise an appropriate doctrine.² Specific issues also arise from aspects of air capability. For example, the ability to transport units rapidly to the area of conflict and to 'insert' them into battle means that troops who are not always ready for the particular nature of the sphere of operations are exposed too swiftly, a problem that faced American forces in the Vietnam War.

In practice, across the world, there is a variety in military structures, methods, organizations, goals and cultures that raises serious questions about the conventional understanding of war. The method of approaching this issue, and the order in which aspects of it are considered, pose problems, as there is a danger that Western analytical concepts will prevail in a misleading fashion when discussing the remainder of the world. At the same time, it is necessary to give due weight to the variety of the 'non-West' or 'Rest'. For example, to suggest that the Western military approach places particular weight on battle, while the non-West does not, may well be valid in terms of the guerilla and irregular campaigns of the 1950s, '60s and '70s, especially in the wars of decolonization, but is less valid as a general conclusion. Nevertheless, such a contrast, between battle and non-battle as goals, does capture the important role of anti-tactics and anti-strategy in warfare; for instead of imagining that two sides in conflict approximate to the same methods, it is more pertinent to note the degree to which the advantages of one power are countered not by emulation (so that the key spatial model is diffusion), but by the choice of weaponry, tactics, operational methods, strategy and doctrine that nullify, or seek to nullify, the affects of these advantages; in short a model that sees contrasts, and, thus, boundaries.

To focus on battle for a moment, there is another problem stemming from the assumption that the 'face of battle', the essentials of war, are in some fashion timeless, as they involve men being willing to undergo the trial of combat. In practice, the understanding of loss and

suffering, at both the level of ordinary soldiers and that of societies as a whole, is far more culturally conditioned than any emphasis on the sameness of battle might suggest, while the experience of the harshness of war is in part affected by the nature of the society in question. The supply of toilet paper (and much else more serious) was an issue for the British forces sent to the Persian Gulf in 2003; for some other armies, such a shortage would not have led to public complaints. To put it bluntly, the willingness of societies to suffer losses varies, and this helps to determine both military success and differences in combat across the world in any one period. Cultural factors can also be seen in organizational issues such as discipline. This includes forces that are encouraged by alliance partnership toward inter-operability. Thus, the punishment for being a sentry asleep on duty is far harsher in the Turkish army than in its American counterpart; although both are NATO members.

Contrasts are readily observable in both chronological and geographical cultural parameters. To contrast the willingness of the Western powers to suffer heavy losses in the World Wars, especially World War I, with their reluctance to do so subsequently, and also the different attitudes towards casualties held by the Americans and the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War, is to be aware of a situation that has a wider resonance. It is far from clear that variations and changes in these 'cultural' factors, and related norms, should play a smaller role in the history of war than weaponry. Linked to this is morale, the single most important factor in war, while, as a related point, success in war, seen as an attempt to impose will, involves more than victory in battle.

It is unclear how far the Western will to win remains able to cope with the uncertainty and losses of war. At a time when as far as aggregate demographic and economic consequences are concerned, high casualty levels can be readily survived, Western sensitivity to casualties has become stronger over recent decades, producing powerful operational constraints. This sensitivity has grown at the same time as the threat of civilian casualties in the West has dwindled. Some commentators blame this on politicians, the media and public opinion, implying that the military is largely free of that sensitivity, although

operational and tactical practice suggests otherwise; and an awareness of the conditional nature of military service in volunteer forces is clearly important. Sensitivities about casualties extend to a reluctance either to inflict heavy casualties on opponents, or to cause civilian losses, and both affect planning. Thus, the sinking of the Argentine warship the *General Belgrano* during the Falklands conflict in 1982 was used to criticize the Thatcher government even though the ship was a threat to the British naval task force. Similarly, concern was expressed about the killing of retreating Iraqi forces in 1991. Concern about civilian losses greatly affected targeting for the air offensives on Serbia in 1999 and Iraq in 2003, and also produced a political reason to accompany the military desirability of 'smart' bombs.

Organizational issues – how troops are managed on the battlefield, the nature of force structures, and the structuring of societies for conflict – also vary greatly between countries. Instead of assuming that these issues are driven by weaponry, specifically how best to use weapons, and possibly also to move and supply them, it is necessary to appreciate the autonomous character of organizational factors and their close linkage with social patterns and developments. Thus, militaries that are the product of ethnically divided societies (such as Nigeria) frequently display attitudes and practices in their recruitment patterns and command structures that are different to those that lack such divisions. Linking back to earlier paragraphs, there are also cultural differences between conscript and volunteer militaries, not least in their degrees of willingness to engage in combat, although it is important to locate this issue in particular contexts as there is no invariable linkage between recruitment systems and zeal for conflict. A parallel case can be made with the causes of war, which can also be seen as an independent variable and one that does not conform to a chronology determined by technological developments.

Looked at differently, military forces are organizations with objectives, and in assessing their capability and effectiveness it is necessary to consider how these objectives have varied and changed, and how far such variations and changes created pressures for adaptation. This adaptation can be seen both in terms of changes in organizational character, and with regard to the responsiveness to opportunities, for

example those offered by advances in military (and related) technologies. In short, a demand-led account that focuses on the ‘tasking’ of the military has to be set alongside the more familiar supply-side assessment that presents improvements in weaponry or increases in numbers without adequately considering the wider context. ‘Tasking’ is certainly very important for force structures. Both the setting of goals and the definition of optimal force structures owe much to government policies. As a result, military history is an aspect of the total history of the period.

That, of course, begs the question of how best to describe the latter. Whereas nationalism, democracy and industrialization had been major themes in the Western world in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth they were important across the world. So also, especially in the West, was individualism, with its stresses on personal rights and consumerism; moral socialism, with its emphasis on the role of the state in ethical conduct; and the technological revolution of applied science. The most potent of these developments for conflict in the period after 1945 was not applied science but rather the nationalism that helped undermine empires.

Chapter 2

Aftermath Conflicts

The end of World War II in 1945 was followed by peace in some areas, especially the occupied Axis states; but elsewhere saw the continuation or fresh outbreak of warfare. This reflected the degree to which World War II was an umbrella conflict that encompassed many struggles, some of which had preceded the war and continued after it. Furthermore, the end of the war itself left issues that were clarified by the use of force. More generally, the militarized character of the late 1940s and early 1950s in part reflected the difficulty of moving to a peacetime situation. This was particularly apparent in the occupied Axis territories, as in place of peace treaties and rapid disengagement, there was an attempt to organize large-scale reconstructions of civil society that ultimately rested on military strength. Thus, in Eastern Europe, North Korea, Sakhalin and the Kuriles, Communism and state ownership were enforced in the shadow of Soviet military power, while in what became West Germany there was a process of disarmament and de-Nazification. In Japan, where the occupation lasted until 1952, the process was anchored by socio-political changes, including land reform, although in both Germany and Japan wartime industrial companies continued intact into the post-war period. The numbers of troops involved in support of these occupations were considerable, and represented important military commitments that affected the ability to demobilize. Furthermore, the troops used for these occupation duties were available for force projection, so that when the Korean War broke out in 1950,

American and Australian units in Japan were available for reinforcing South Korea.

CHINESE CIVIL WAR

The most dramatic aftermath conflicts occurred in East and South-East Asia, the largest being that in China, where civil conflict had followed the fall of the monarchy in 1911. In a complex process, the Nationalists (Kuomintang) under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) emerged as the dominant force in the 1920s, defeating the warlords who controlled much of the country. The small, urban-based Chinese Communist Party was largely destroyed in the 1927 Harvest Moon Uprising, after which control was increasingly taken by agrarian reformers under Mao Zedong, who pressed for a rural revolution. Despite a series of offensives, the Nationalists were unable to destroy the Communists in the 1930s, and their position was increasingly challenged by Japanese aggression, with full-scale war breaking out in 1937. Once Japan overran China's coasts and valleys, destroying the Nationalists' urban power bases, capturing Shanghai and Nanjing in 1937 and Canton in 1938, the Communists were able to make a greater impact in rural areas, where the Nationalists had little interest or control. In opposition to the Nationalists, Mao had developed a three-stage revolutionary war model, and during World War II was able to use a combination of clandestine political and social organization (Stage 1) and guerrilla warfare (Stage 2) in order to advance the Communist position, but was unable to move successfully into the conventional realm (Stage 3) until after the Japanese withdrawal.¹ The Nationalist government was gravely weakened by the long war with Japan, being particularly hard hit by Japanese advances in 1944 and 1945, and despite American support was defeated anew after World War II by the Soviet-backed Communists. This defeat would have been less likely were it not for the war: prior to the Japanese attack on China, the Chinese Communists had been in a vulnerable position in their conflict with the Nationalists, but, following that attack, the Communists benefited from having become, during the 1930s and early 1940s, the dominant

anti-Japanese force in northern China. Nevertheless, they were still weaker than the Nationalists at the close of World War II.

The Chinese Civil War was the largest in terms of number of combatants and area fought over since World War II, and it proves an instructive counterpoint to the latter, indicating the difficulty of drawing clear lessons from the conflicts of the 1940s; although it ought to be stressed that there has been far less scholarship on the Chinese Civil War, and much of the work published on it has reflected ideological bias. In China, technology and the quantity of *matériel* did not triumph, as the Communists were inferior in weaponry and, in particular, lacked air and sea power. However, their strategic conceptions, operational planning and execution, army morale and political leadership proved superior, and they were able to make the transition from guerilla warfare to large-scale conventional operations; from denying their opponents' control over territory to seizing and securing it. The Nationalist cause was weakened by poor leadership, inept strategy, and, as the war went badly, poor morale, while corruption and inflation affected civilian support. Indeed, the *China White Paper* published by the US State Department in 1950 blamed the Nationalists' failure on their own incompetence and corruption. Nevertheless, the classic treatment of the war as a Communist victory of 'hearts and minds', that indicated the superior virtues of Communism over the Nationalists, as well as the strength of the People's Liberation Army and its brave peasant fighters,² has been qualified by a greater emphasis on the quality of decision-making during the civil war and on the importance of what actually happened in the fighting.³

Until 1948 the Nationalists largely held their own. When the American use of atomic bombs led to Japan's sudden surrender in August 1945, the Communists liberated much of the north of China from Japanese forces, capturing large quantities of weaponry. Negotiations with the Nationalists actively sponsored by the USA, which sought a unity government for China, broke down as the Communists were determined to retain control of the north; and the ceasefire agreement that was negotiated did not apply in Manchuria where the Japanese forces had been defeated in a Soviet invasion in August 1945. In 1946 Nationalist troops transported north by the