

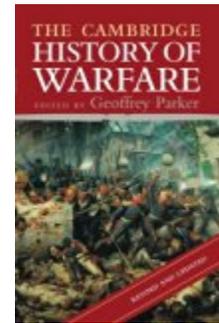
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Geoffrey Parker, ed. *The Cambridge History of Warfare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. viii + 524 pp. \$22.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-61895-3.

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## How the West has Won

Essentially, this book comprises the text of the *Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare: The Triumph of the West* (1995), without the illustrations, but updated to include wars fought since that date. In seventeen chapters (plus an introduction and epilogue), seven international experts in military history set out to consider their subject from 600 BCE to the present. In fact, their scope is narrower and more specific. It is to explain the rise to dominance of what its authors understand as “the western way of war.” This, Parker claims, explains the dominance of European or western culture—more than economic, intellectual and other factors. In his preface, Parker confronts the charge leveled against the earlier work that his focus is (too) Eurocentric. His defense against the charge has three aspects. Firstly, Parker argues, it would be impossible to cover adequately in a single volume the military history of all cultures. Secondly, and following from this, it would be a distortion to include some minor reference to the military traditions of those non-European cultures while devoting the vast part of the text to the European way of war. Third, and above all, the European way of war has become the dominant military culture in the last two hundred years. Either non-European states were conquered by that culture or they were obliged to adopt it themselves to survive.

This claim, of course, raises the question: just how do we understand this “western way” of war? According to Parker, it has five key aspects or foundations. The first of these is the reliance on technological superiority—generally as a means of compensating for inferiority in

numbers. Thus, starting with the Persian wars of the fifth century BCE, the West was usually able to field men whose (technological) fighting potential was superior to that of their opponents. However, having the “technological edge” alone was rarely enough to guarantee victory. This problem brings us to the Parker’s second factor—superior discipline and training, which often made up for numerical weakness. Associated with this training was the fact that western armies won their victories for the most part on the basis of their infantry. Parker’s third factor represents a remarkable continuity in the western military tradition, or rather, in military theory. Typically, Vegetius’s compendium of Roman military practice, *Concerning Military Matters*, compiled at the end of the fourth century CE remained popular for more than 1,000 years: George Washington owned—and read and annotated—a copy. In part in consequence of this tradition, certain basic ideas have had a remarkable longevity, including for example, a belief in the desirability of decisive victory. Parker contrasts this attitude with a non-western view of war which was less determined, less destructive—and ultimately less successful. A fourth factor emphasized by Parker relates to the existence in Europe of a multiplicity of competing states. The struggle between them apparently stimulated military innovation and improvement, according to what has been called the “punctuated equilibrium” model. In this model, short bursts of rapid change are separated by longer intervals of slower improvement. Thus, in the fourteenth century, English archers and Swiss pike men, or in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the so-called

artillery fortress (those familiar with Parker's work will recognize a hobby horse of his here) shattered the prevailing equilibrium and provoked a phase of rapid adjustment and transformation. However, the ability to respond to such challenges rested on Parker's fifth factor: innovation—adopting new technology and expanding armies and navies. Finding the typically enormous means to pay for this expensive strategy enhanced the power of the state in the West. Such power could provoke a negative reaction, but overall, the challenge of war—if successfully met—increased the effectiveness of the state. As Parker puts it, “states made war but wars also made states” (p.8). But success in this respect also depended in part upon the development of other instruments of power, particularly the financial institutions which enabled states to fund armies, including credit, which in turn required the cooperation of those who supplied the credit or the means which underpinned it. Long-term credit in wartime thus represented a crucial “secret weapon” of the West. Not surprisingly, not all western states stayed the course. Sweden, for example—an aggressive and imperial power in the Baltic and north Germany in the seventeenth century—dropped out of the race following its traumatic defeat in the Great Northern War (1700-21). However, the West as a block—Europe initially, subsequently joined by the United States—had found the means, that is, the military culture, that ensured “European” domination of the world, and which was already well advanced by the middle of the seventeenth century.

The rest of the book focuses on explaining these developments. Part 1, “The Age of Massed Infantry,” covers the period from 600 BC to 300 AD, with chapters on the “Genesis of the Infantry, 600-350 BC” and “The Roman Way of War 250 BC-AD 300’”; part 2, “The Age of Stone Fortifications” (300-1500 AD) includes chapters on “New Weapons, New Tactics 1300-1500” and “The Gunpowder Revolution 1300-1500”; part 3, “The Age of Guns and Sails” covers the period 1500-1800/1815; and part 4, “The Age of Mechanized Warfare” covers the period 1800-2004. Thus, the book's coverage is extended beyond that of 1995 to include most obviously the Al Qaeda attack on New York in September 2001, President Bush's “war on terror” (which, curiously, given its stretching of the nature and understanding of war, is not really discussed), the attack on (or bombardment) of Afghanistan (2001) and the invasion of Iraq (2003). The volume is completed by an epilogue in which Parker briefly recapitulates the factors that distinguish the Western way of war. He also explains the successes of this way of

war and seeks to divine future developments. Parker concludes that to maintain its (military) dominance, the West must continue “to be right” (p. 432). This difficult task is best done, he argues, by imitating the traditions outlined and analyzed in this volume, which thus is intended to function as something of a manual for policy-makers (and their electorates?). Some additional material is found in a chronology and in a glossary. Finally, there is a helpful bibliography, which inevitably, however, can only scratch the surface of the vast range of secondary literature which underpins what is essentially a work of synthesis.

Parker has edited a very readable and interesting volume, one which has already won widespread plaudits—for good reason. However (and inevitably, given the ambitious attempt to cover the great sweep of the history of war over two millennia in little more than 400 pages), some anomalies and lacunae remain. Half of the book deals with the 2,000 years or so to 1800; the other half with the mere two hundred years since. The nearer we get to the present day, the greater the detail, some of which might have been sacrificed in favor of fuller coverage of earlier periods. Thus the War of the Polish Succession (1733-38), whose title perhaps belies its real scope and importance, is omitted from both main text and chronology. The War of Bavarian Succession (1778-79), and the rather more important Russo-Austrian war in the Balkans against the Ottoman empire (1787-92), are also missing. As for the twentieth century, the Spanish Civil War is covered very cursorily, and nothing is said about the destruction of Guernica by the Condor Legion, although it might be thought to have deserved mention as representing the testing of some of the new thinking about the use of airpower in war. Curiously, too, the concept of *Blitzkrieg* is nowhere mentioned. The volume also occasionally seems to be shy of engaging with influential theorists of war. The important early-nineteenth-century Prussian military thinker, Carl von Clausewitz, who meditated on the recent experience of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (and on much more) and whose work is said to have influenced United States' commanders in the 1980s, is mentioned, but surely merited fuller discussion. Inevitably, individual readers will sometimes disagree with some of the interpretation. Were dynastic issues really less dominant in justifying war after 1640? The designation of various conflicts in the succeeding hundred years as wars of (Spanish, Polish, Austrian) succession may be overdone but there was some point to these labels. Last, but by no means least, given the attention devoted to contempo-

rary conflicts (notably the second Iraq war), and the lack of consensus about their justification, some will think the account, evenhanded and objective as it clearly seeks to be, insufficiently critical of the leaders who took their states to war.

Some readers will want more on their particular period, or war, or aspect of military (or naval) history, and less on others. Nevertheless, Parker and his collaborators

have produced an impressive and immensely useful survey, within which are invaluable—not least because they are concise, clearly written and very readable—surveys of major conflicts. In addition, the contributions of the various authors are made to fit into a coherent overall pattern or thesis. The volume will no doubt—and deserves to—find a large market among those seeking among other things to set recent conflicts, and developments in the ways of war, into historical context.

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