H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karl Erik Haug, Ole Jørgen Maaø. *Conceptualising Modern War.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. xiv + 344 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70294-2.

Reviewed by Tal Tovy (Bar Ilan University)
Published on H-War (June, 2012)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

In 1986, Peter Paret issued a new edition of the book *Makers of Modern Strategy*. In a series of essays, it lays out before the reader the history of military thinking (mainly Western) from its beginnings to the modern period and extending onward to the era of nuclear weapons. This important collection augments the already prolific literature dealing with the development of Western military thought. Yet it sometimes seems that all the theories developed in the West after the Second World War that do not deal with nuclear weapons or with limited conventional warfare are not directly continuous with the development of Western military thought. The reference is mainly to military thinking in the field of war against guerrilla forces or more precisely, counterinsurgency.

The collection of essays, *Conceptualising Modern War*, therefore serves two aims. The first is to continue the discussion on the development of Western military thought, which means simply to continue from where Paret leaves off. The second is, in my opinion, the more important one, which is a discussion within a research field that is critical for the West in the post-Cold War period. Even though the phenomenon of conventional war between states has not yet disappeared, it has become rarer in relation to military confrontations between states and non-state protagonists.

The basic assumption of the book is that warfare has changed during the past two decades. Through this series of essays written by experts in their fields, this book tries to create a holistic picture that will explain the changes and the ways in which Western armies have coped with these changes in order to achieve a decisive victory. Although the emphasis is on the period after the Cold War, the historical sources for the military theories that were developed before it are not neglected. The writers of these essays recognize the contributions of history, whether far or near, to contemporary realities.

During the past two decades we have witnessed changes in the character of warfare, and this collection tries to understand the causes for the changes, their characteristics, and their influence, in relation to and in comparison with earlier wars and the various conflicts that have occurred over the last twenty years. In this connection it should be mentioned, for example, that most of the research deals with the daily confrontations of the American army and its allies against insurgency in Iraq. This is done in comparison with the discussion and analysis of the impressive conventional war conducted by the United States and Britain in March-April 2003. A similar trend can also be found in the case of Afghanistan. It is an interesting fact that in Israeli historiography the trend is the reverse. Most of the discussion is about the regular wars with Arab states and less about the exhausting and dogged warfare against unconventional forces.

The editors are aware of the fact that war between states has not disappeared and that military thinking still exists about the levels for conducting and prevailing in such a war. In their view, the mental and practical paradox is that while the Western military establishment, with the Pentagon in the lead, has created the concepts for victory in regular warfare, such as Effects-Based Operations (EBO) as well as Network-Centric Warfare and Transformation, there has hardly been any progress in confronting the type of conflict with which the West has had to cope and in developing the theories that could be put into practice on the battlefield. Clear evidence of the need for in-depth academic discussion, which would constitute a kind of ad hoc summary, is shown by the long series of articles in the various military journals dealing with the phenomenon of war as expressed during the past three decades, and outstandingly so, after 9/11.

The main objective of this book is, among other things, to try and create a conceptual system that will help in understanding the phenomenon of war and thus perhaps find the way to achieve victory in the changing aspects of the battlefield. According to the editors, the wealth of existing concepts today, such as Asymmetric

Warfare, Fourth Generation Warfare, and Hybrid War, does not create a framework that can explain the essential nature of the new warfare phenomena and how victory can be achieved. As they write in their introduction, "if the emperor is indeed naked–somebody must tell the world" (p. xii). Therefore the different parts of the book are constructed in a logical manner in order to cope with the theoretical and practical challenges of the present-day warfare phenomenon. The first part examines the concepts through which war is described and defined. The second part analyzes the concepts that explain the possibilities placed before regular armies to achieve victory. The three essays that comprise the third part summarize the developments of contemporary warfare.

The editors forestall any future criticism that might be made that the book hardly deals with the major wars and interstate warfare. The focus of the book is on the phenomenon of irregular warfare in all its forms: guerrilla, terrorism, and insurgency. In fact this focus is logical. During the raid of American Special Forces in Mogadishu, Somalia, (October 3-4, 1993) more soldiers were killed than those who fell every day in Operation Desert Storm. Two Delta soldiers received posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest decoration granted by the United States and one that had not been given since the Vietnam War. Since the Gulf War (1991), irregular warfare has become more widespread. An example of this has already been given in research of the relationship between the regular stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the conflicts in this dissevered state until the beginning of 2012. Britain is another example for the marginal part taken in regular warfare as compared with its intensive involvement in irregular conflicts. The most extreme example is Israel. Since the war of 1973 (Yom Kippur War) the Israeli army has not directly confronted regular Arab armies except for a few days during the First Lebanon War (1982) when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fought against units of the Syrian army. Over the last four decades, Israel has been fighting against a series of organizations that have irregular military forces. We have to understand this type of warfare and the way to achieve victory.

This collection of essays links up with a long and estimable series of books claiming that the nature of warfare has changed radically and that the Clausewitzian definition is no longer relevant or cannot successfully explain the warfare phenomenon of recent decades. Various studies, such as Martin van Creveld's *Transformation of War* (1991) or John Keegan's *A History of Warfare* (1993), stress the rise of the non-state actor in the international arena and the loss of monopoly over violence once held by the nation-state. The events of 9/11 are proof of this claim. This was the first time in American history that the United States was attacked at the strategic and political level by a non-state actor. It was clear to the Western world that new thinking was necessary to combat such threats, including original military thinking that would provide an answer to them. This book is also part of a series of studies dealing with the new war phenomenon and tries to present its theoretical aspects. By doing so, this collection opens the way to a better historical and theoretical understanding of this phenomenon that must be translated by political decision makers and their military advisers into practical means to achieve decisive victory on the battlefield and in war with all their new and special characteristics.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Tal Tovy. Review of Haug, Karl Erik; Maaø, Ole Jørgen, *Conceptualising Modern War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35743

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.