

‘New’ and ‘Old’ Wars

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The Emergence of the New War Thesis

The end of the Cold War did not abolish armed conflict, but it coincided with a substantial decline in the total number of violent outbreaks around the globe. At the same time, though, the number of internal wars increased substantially, making these the dominant form of conflict of the contemporary era. These empirical trends prompted a lively debate among scholars as to whether the observed quantitative change in conflict patterns that had taken place in the wake of the Cold War also indicated a qualitative transformation of warfare. Many authors indeed argued, that intra-state or civil wars, underwent a qualitative change during this time period. In this context, the term ‘new wars’ was introduced by Mary Kaldor, who suggested that in parts of Africa and Eastern Europe a new form of organized violence had emerged during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Kaldor understood these conflicts on the one hand as a result of accelerated globalization processes and, on the other hand, as a consequence of the power vacuum left behind by the Cold War era. According to Kaldor, new wars differed from ‘old wars’ in terms of how they were being financed, with regards to the underlying motives of the warring parties, and concerning their mode of warfare. Herfried Münkler further developed the new war thesis, arguing that the new forms of conflict were characterized by the joint occurrence of privatization, demilitarization, and asymmetricalization. These processes entail a weakening of state structures, an increase in non-state actors as warring parties, the dissolution of distinctions between military and non-military aspects, including the differentiation between civilians and combatants, and, finally, asymmetric constellations of actors, strategies, and capabilities. While for each of these phenomena historical precedents could be found in earlier times, Münkler argued that their joint occurrence after the Cold War led to the distinctly novel phenomenon of new wars.

Distinguishing Old and New Wars

The concept of new wars was developed primarily to distinguish new forms of organized violence from traditional conceptions of war between states. Classic examples of ‘old wars’ in this sense are the inter-state wars of 19th century Europe, famously described by Carl von Clausewitz in his seminal work *On War*. Old wars involve states, or rather governments, which deploy regular armies that fight over territory. Warfare follows a military logic where territorial gain is sought and an opponent’s forces and their military infrastructure are the primary targets. The conduct of war also respects informal and formalized rules, from a declaration of war that precedes the hostilities to specific regulations concerning the treatment of combatants, prisoners of war, and the civilian population. In new wars, however, none of the characteristics of old inter-state wars can be found. But new wars also differ from old civil wars. Whereas old inter-state wars aim for territorial conquest, old civil wars are fought over ideology, as in a ‘revolutionary fight’ to upset the existing order, or under the banner of national self-determination against foreign rule, neither of which motivates the warring parties in new wars.

A first essential feature of new wars is the progressive erosion of the state's monopoly on the use of force that takes place in the context of a general weakening of state structures. This coincides with a blurring of old war distinctions as between civilians and combatants, frontline and homeland, and a state of war and a state of peace. New wars elude these traditional conceptions of warfare: no declaration of war is issued before conflict erupts, combatants are difficult to distinguish from civilians, and rarely is there an identifiable frontline in combat. These observations are further tied to the increased emergence of non-state actors in new wars. These actors are alternately described as revolutionary, separatist, or insurgent groups that challenge the state's authority from within. But non-state actors can also emerge from positions where their original mission had been to secure the existing order. For instance, during the Balkan Wars in the 1990s a plethora of non-state actors took part in the violence, including paramilitaries, foreign mercenaries, renegades, local militia, and petty criminal bands. Some of these had initially been contracted by the political leadership to secure the *status quo* but had subsequently developed an interest in the perpetuation of violence as they became more and more involved in the war economy, which further destabilized state structures.

A related phenomenon is the growing presence of child soldiers in new wars. Exact numbers are difficult to obtain, but estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands boys and girls below the age of eighteen are being abused as child soldiers in almost every part of the globe. In many new wars the warring parties use child soldiers since they are deemed more 'cost-efficient' and easier to recruit than regular forces. They can also be kept under control with less effort. Finally, the erosion of the state's monopoly on the use of force in new wars also has implications for the efficacy of international law. As legal norms, the *jus ad bellum* (right to war) and the *jus in bello* (laws of war) were intended to inhibit war; or, in case this aim could not be attained, to at least restrain the conduct of war through shared humanitarian norms and practices as stated in the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. International law, however, rests on the Westphalian conception of sovereign nation-states that recognize each other as the primary actors in international politics. This rather Eurocentric understanding of statehood never truly fit on a global scale, which caused the development of international law to be out of sync with the political realities of the international system. As a consequence, new wars elude the established frameworks of international law. In wars between states the adversaries recognize each other as 'legitimate' enemies. Wars between states and non-state actors, however, are often characterized by mutual conceptions of illegitimacy.

The second characteristic feature of new wars concerns the way in which these conflicts are financed and maintained by the warring parties. During the Cold War, numerous intra-state wars across the globe were directly or indirectly supported by the United States or the Soviet Union, which either backed allied governments or rebel groups that fought opposing regimes. For example, in Afghanistan the Soviet Union installed a friendly government after invading the country and the United States backed the opposing forces with substantial military aid. In Guatemala the United States supported the regime, whereas the Soviet Union sponsored the rebel forces. As these sources of military and financial support dried up in the 1990s, warring parties in many similar conflicts engaged in economic and often criminal activity to continue the fighting and to maintain their own position. Local conflicts thus became tied to global war economies, creating networks of illegal trade, dealing in arms and drugs, human trafficking, hostage taking, government corruption, blackmail or 'taxation' of humanitarian aid, and supportive diasporas in Western countries. All of these combined to generate a self-perpetuating cycle of organized violence, criminal behavior, and economic activity that is characteristic of new wars.

The third typical feature of new wars is related to the war economies and refers to the goals and underlying motives of the warring parties. Whereas old wars were frequently fought for territorial conquest, ideological reasons, or under the banner of national self-determination, none of these interests predominates in new wars. By contrast, in new wars economic motives tend to be the primary drivers of conflict. However, some proponents of the new war thesis emphasize identity-based motives rather than economic aspirations. These authors refer to exclusive conceptions of identity, which are being instrumentalized for the purpose of seizing political power. Identity-based conflict emerges in the context of eroding state structures and the insecurities created by the processes of globalization. These conditions could be found in parts of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, but also in places like Kashmir and Eritrea. What these cases share is a political leadership with diminishing legitimacy and a growing parallel economy based on corruption and crime. Under these conditions, markers of identity are used by political elites to stay in power, fill the vacuum left by crumbling state structures with a sense of national identity, and provide a legitimization for obscure economic activities. Hence, identity-based arguments also assume an economic rationale that fosters conflict. In this sense, war becomes the continuation of economics using different means, to adapt the Clausewitzian dictum.

Finally, the fourth distinctive feature of new wars concerns their mode of warfare. New wars show an increase of violence directed against civilians, including outright barbarity in the conduct of war. Massacres among the civilian population, forced resettlement, the abuse of children as soldiers, and incidents of organized rape are particularly gruesome illustrations of this phenomenon. Some scholars have sought to explain these manifestations on the grounds of irrational, existential warfare that reflects 'ancient hatreds' among societies. However, most proponents of the new war thesis understand barbarous practices as part of the warring parties' rational strategies. Because the warring parties in new wars primarily follow economic motives, they have less concern for the local population. Moreover, criminal practices such as hostage taking, blackmail, or human trafficking already involve violence, which further reduces inhibitions. Whereas the classic conception of guerrilla warfare, which served as the model for many rebel groups in old civil wars, aimed to capture the 'hearts and minds' of the ordinary people to gain their support, the mode of warfare in new wars draws equally on counterinsurgency techniques that seek to destabilize and instil fear and hatred among the local population.

Critiques of the New War Thesis

The new war thesis sparked a fruitful debate on the nature of contemporary warfare, but it has also raised a number of critiques. First, commentators have taken issue with the very distinction between old and new wars, arguing that it establishes a dividing line where no fundamental differences exist. It is held that for each of the characteristic elements of new wars historical precedents can be identified, undermining claims of new wars as a truly novel phenomenon. Second, it has been criticized that due to conceptual ambiguity in the main works on the new wars, it is difficult, if not impossible, to empirically assess the validity of the new war thesis. This problem is amplified by an apparent lack of consensus on some core characteristics of the new wars as well as a shortage of clearly defined criteria for their measurement. Third, commentators have criticized the near exclusive focus on economic motives as the underlying cause of the new wars. It is argued that this practice overstates the relative importance of economic factors and that it neglects the complexity of motives in contemporary armed conflict. Finally, scholars have pointed out flaws in the empirical foundation of the new war thesis. For instance, the barbarization of warfare is expected to manifest itself in the ratio of civilian to military casualties. Proponents of the new war thesis

suggest that this ratio has seen a dramatic increase from about 20 per cent of civilian casualties at the beginning of the twentieth century to roughly 80 per cent during the 1990s. However, several independent studies have shown that these figures are misleading, if not inaccurate. Furthermore, substantial variation has been found between conflicts, a fact that underlines the importance of case-specific investigations.

See Also: Asymmetric War; Balkan Wars; Child Soldiers, use of; Civil Wars; Civilian Casualties; Cold War; Globalization; Political Economy of War.

Further Readings

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