

A history of warfare

John Keegan

His discussion of irregular warfare and Clausewitz in particular is extremely relevant 20 years later

I did not review this book on Amazon because Amazon did not then exist. I picked it up after twenty years to read it to see if I could get any insights into brushes were on Ukraine.

Yes, I did. Most of the book describes the levels of war long ago. Warfare among primitive tribes and warfare with bladed weapons, and then warfare with gunpowder.

Equally important are the mentalities or the philosophies of the warring parties. Some, mostly the primitives, fought wars of limited engagement, not battles to the death but rather skirmishes. This even characterized the highly successful horse warriors such as the Mongols and the Huns. They would swoop in on and devastate an area. However, they were not committed to a battle to the death. If they met firm resistance, they would retreat.

The Greeks with their phalanx warfare represented another step. They were fighting for something they believed in, their way of government, their city state, and their society. And they would, in their phalanxes, fight to the death. This willingness to maintain their ranks and to bravely fight until it was done was adequate to defeat the Persians and a great many other enemies. It led Alexander the Great to conquer the world. The Romans improved on Greek tactics, and especially, improved on organization and weaponry.

Keegan says that the next great advent came from Islam. It was to unite the people behind an ideology, in this case religion. The Muslims' belief in the righteousness of their mission made them an overwhelming force. This happened again in the Napoleonic wars. It was the first war of mass conscription, in which all citizens of the country were armed and sent to the field to represent the interests of that country. Napoleon was able to overwhelm his enemies because the soldiers felt that they were citizens of France, not simply serfs and servants of some lord someplace.

European warfare developed a set of principles of war, articulated by Clausewitz in the early 19th century. There had to be a reason for going to war, an Enlightenment style, rational purpose for going to war. War was, as he wrote, the continuation of politics by other means. The Europeans adopted rules of warfare to prevent mass civilian casualties and to ensure relatively humane treatment of the wounded and prisoners. The objective was to win, not to annihilate the enemy. This set of rules worked fairly well for the century between Napoleon and World War I.

By the time of World War I the technology has changed so radically that it led to a murderous slaughter between motivated citizen soldiers. It left vast numbers of them dead. The same happened again in World War II. Keegan notes that the European powers fighting in these wars did have some respect for the opposition soldier, and took some care with the prisoners of war. Notable exceptions were Japan, which was barbaric in its treatment of Chinese in Manchuria and then the Europeans whom it took prisoner in the Pacific. Russia was not terribly careful with the Germans it captured. Keegan reports that 3 million out of the 5 million taken as prisoners of war died before the end of the war.

What is relevant today? The first thing is the use of irregular forces. The first six pages of Keegan's book are about the Cossacks. The very same Cossacks that Putin has resurrected as his palace guard in Moscow, and has sent to Ukraine as irregulars, insurgents, rebel forces to cause trouble in Ukraine's Southeast. This is not an accident. The Cossacks are, as Keegan reports, a border people, a tough people, and xenophobic and rather unprincipled warriors. The same adjectives apply even more to the Chechnyan mercenaries that Putin has sent to Ukraine. This is therefore a battle between a Ukraine which espouses European values and would like to consider itself a friend of the

European Union and NATO, and the descendants of steppe horsemen who do not respect any of those conventions of war. The irregular and deceptive tactics that Putin has been using illustrate the difference in philosophy.

We see the difference again in Iraq, where religious fanaticism is carrying the day against a corrupt warlord type government installed by the West. It is happening as well in Afghanistan. The West simply does not have a means of fighting warriors who do not value their own lives or understand their own self-interest, as we in the West would like to conceive it. This is our own shortcoming. We simply do not see the world the way they do. In our decadent, self-centered way, we do not want to take the risks that they willingly assume in order to achieve ultimate victory.

I recommend this as a book for the ages. There are new chapters to be written, of course, after 20 years. I think that the most significant are the two just mentioned – Islam's wars against the West, and Russia's resurgence. But overall they stand well within the historical context that Keegan sets. He doesn't need to rewrite the book, just to add a chapter on the new manifestations of old phenomena.

It was a five-star effort in 1994, and remain so today.