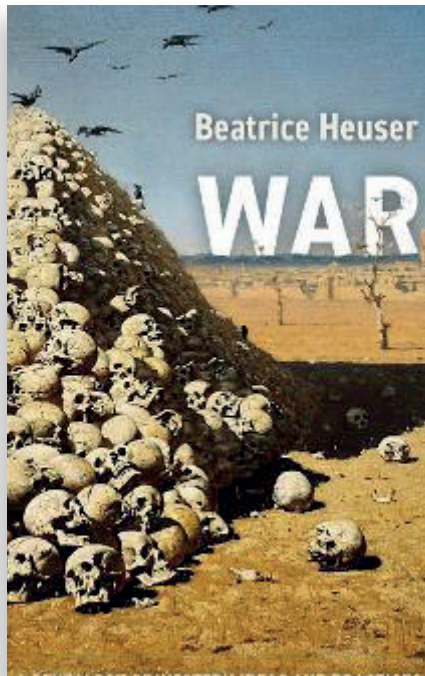


BEATRICE HEUSER

*War: A genealogy
of western ideas and practices*

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, 448 pp.



The outbreak of war in Europe about a year ago brought a significant shift in the western perspective towards war, leading scholars and experts to reconsider how they should approach it. Beatrice Heuser, Professor of International Relations at the University of Glasgow, has recently published a successful and praiseworthy book on a challenging subject that could potentially aid in this attempt. Her book seeks to synthesize not a specific research topic and its historical context, but the broader concepts and history of war as it has been seen and practiced by the Western world, therefore an impressive attempt to cov-

er a significant aspect of human history. As a scholar familiar with such endeavors, Heuser has previously demonstrated her capability to handle a wide range of sources essential for comprehensively addressing the subject matter.¹ Committed to exploring the history of ideas, this book not only focuses on the theoretical aspects of war concepts but also on their practical applications. This approach highlights the crucial continuity between the two facets of war². By doing so, Heuser presents a critique of the political realist approach, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of practice requires the inclusion of norms. She suggests that the relationship between theory and practice is much more intricate than solely based on legal concepts. Rather, it encompasses the imagination of the actors involved in war, their perception of reality, and the techniques they use to organize and motivate people to support their actions³. Another defining aspect of Heuser's book is its geographic focus, as indicated in the subtitle, which centers on the West. This emphasis on the Western world distinguishes the book from her previous works, which also shared a similar geographical focus but not in such an explicit way. As the concept of Western knowledge is not inherently self-evident, Heuser characterizes it as an outcome of encounters between the Hebrew Bible, Ancient Greece and Romans, then «the mongrel child of all three of these: Chris-

1 Heuser's recent research has focused on the history and evolution of the concept of strategy, delving deeper into its meaning beyond the use of the term. See Beatrice HEUSER, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; ID, *The Strategy Makers: Thoughts on War and Society from Machiavelli to Clausewitz*, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2010.

2 This is a point that the author has emphasized in recent the past, especially. ID, «Theory and Practice, Art and Science in Warfare: An Etymological Note», in Daniel P. MARSTON, Tamara LEAHY (Eds.), *War, Strategy and History, Essays in Honor of Professor Robert O'Neill*, Acton, Canberra, ANU Press, 2016, pp. 179-196; ID, *Strategy before Clausewitz: Linking Warfare and Statecraft, 1400-1830*, London, Routledge, 2017. On this pattern it's also the project coordinated with Isabelle Duyvesteyn: *A Global History Of The Practice Of Strategy*.

3 «While the observance of just war criteria could not be as fully and consequently enforced as they might have been without a superior enforcement authority, they clearly existed, were in people's minds, and were something decision-makers were measured against. The Realist paradigm negating this is simply unrealistic». ID, *War: A genealogy of western ideas and practices*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 217. On the other hand, a Realistic perspective would focus more on *performance*: Erik RINGMAR, «How the world stage makes its subjects: an embodied critique of constructivist IR theory», *J Int Relat Dev*, n. 19 (2016), pp. 101-125.

tianity»⁴, including also the contact with Islam and the spreading to North America. Therefore «This study, while fully cognizant of Europe’s mongrel heritage, is thus mainly Eurocentric»⁵. On the other hand, the book’s chronology aims to encompass the entire span from antiquity to the present day, demonstrating how ideas were conceptualized and interpreted over centuries. This broad timespan is also essential to emphasize two points that Heuser repeatedly underscores: firstly, the non-linearity of the evolution of war, (in this regard, one could describe the book as an ‘archaeology’ of war); secondly, the book emphasizes that most changes in the ways of practicing war are not fundamentally new⁶, while acknowledging that there have been instances of novelty in the conduct of warfare.

Given the various contextual factors surrounding the book, the Heuser’s chosen definition of war serves as the central point of departure: «war is premeditated, organized violence practiced by one group against another»⁷. Additionally, this concept of conflict is further subdivided by the author into four distinct categories of action: raids and massacres, siege warfare, battles and *Epicheirein* (activities related to preparing for campaigns, engaging in routine and waiting, and conducting patrols). Heuser maintains a recurring assertion throughout the book that war should be viewed as a spectrum, thereby necessitating an approach to these categories with an awareness that war is an activity that may encompass many of them simultaneously within the same campaign or moment: «The finding that this is a spectrum is crucial here, even if in certain periods, wars

4 *Ivi*, p. 5.

5 *Ivi*, p. 6. It could be called a very critic Eurocentrism.

6 «What an author describes as ‘new’ is often merely what she or he has not encountered in living memory. [...] The history of wars is not linear, from small and intra-State to ever larger and inter-State only, but moves up and down the various spectra of war, as Clausewitz had already discovered back in the 1820s». *Ivi*, pp. 56-58.

7 *Ivi*, p. 15. The definition presented in the book opens up many avenues for discussion and critique. For instance, Jennifer Kling, in her recent review of the book, points out that this definition would include genocides and other mass atrocities, which raises ethical concerns. Nonetheless, from Heuser’s perspective, genocide and democide fall within the realm of war as they «[...] are asymmetric warfare at its worst, as they involve, on the one hand, a State apparatus, including armed forces and police, and on the other, unarmed victims» (p. 51). This example highlights the challenges of addressing such a complex and sensitive topic and the difficult ethical considerations that must be taken into account. Jennifer KLING, review «War: A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices, Beatrice Heuser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 448 pp., cloth \$45, eBook \$44.99», *Ethics & International Affairs*, 2023, vol. 37, no. 1 (April), pp. 99–102.

would cluster more along one or several parts of the spectrum than others. The European mind, however, with its proclivity inherited from the Greeks to see things as either/or, black or white, one thing or another [...]. This has for a long time blinded Western militaries to the reality of the full spectrum of war and the endless variation in its manifestations»⁸. Within the spectrum of war, one can observe a range of conflicts, including small and major wars, hybrid wars, and others that emerge from the intermingling of these elements. Also, this operational part is just the «military-technical» component of war (analyzed in the first two chapters), to which it is crucial to also add the «ethical, political, and legal concepts of war»⁹. The book delves deeper into both the religious and secular just war traditions, as well as the disjunction between professed reasons and war aims. It also examines the various components of war, such as the identity of the actors involved in warfare, the definition of the enemy, and the boundaries of permissible targets within enemy societies, along with regulations governing the handling of war booty. Throughout these discussions, Heuser stresses the non-linear evolution of these concepts. Another characteristic of the book is that allows for each chapter, which focuses on a specific concept or idea, to be read independently of the others (as Heuser explicitly suggests)¹⁰.

What is only hinted at, however, are the issues surrounding naval warfare. The discussion of seas and oceans is mainly limited to naval blockades (and their consequences), piracy and naval privateering (*guerra di corsa*). While these aspects are significant, they do not encompass the entirety of this military domain. Given the author's extensive discussion of this perspective from a strategic point of view, it is plausible that there may be an editorial limitation at play¹¹. Another interesting aspect to explore would be the relationship between ideas and their

8 *Ivi*, p. 65. The author's view on war as a spectrum aligns with Clausewitz's concept of war as a chameleon. This insightful interpretation is reiterated throughout the book, with varying degrees of clarity: «In reality, each of these terms very usefully identifies the ends of a continuum, a spectrum along which real wars are situated. And each war can be characterized by its position along several of these spectra, not just on one. It may even be differently positioned p. 126 for the different parties involved. Finally, a war's positioning may change as the war evolves». pp. 125-126.

9 *Ivi*, p. 67.

10 «[...] this is not a book designed to be read cover to cover by those interested in specific ideas only. The table of contents will guide them to the relevant section». *Ivi*, p. 16

11 See *Part IV: Naval and maritime Strategy*, in *Id*, *The Evolution of Strategy...*, pp. 200-291.

dissemination, which is a topic that is mainly analyzed by social psychologists. This relationship is crucial in understanding how theory and practice are linked and how they need to be adapted to different cases and contexts¹².

From Heuser's long and in-depth exposition, the most striking outcome of her research is the revelation of the constructed nature of war throughout history¹³. Understanding the development of the Western genealogy of war is crucial for various reasons, particularly because it has led to the current international order¹⁴, which is now being challenged¹⁵. But also, Heuser asserts that it is important to recognize that war is not an inevitable outcome, and that communities must begin to envision the possibility of avoiding it: «The more we assert that war is eternal, the less effort we will make to fine-tune the great machinery of interactive factors that make up the world in favour of peaceful conflict resolution»¹⁶. Therefore the book, mainly conceptual, has a very practical end.

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12 Heuser briefly touches upon this topic: «Even the most venal hirelings may appreciate rousing speeches giving their enterprise a moral sense. People prefer to think of themselves as noble rather than just greedy. That is where ideas come in». *Ivi*, p. 3.

13 Once more, Heuser demonstrates her opposition to the realist school: «The claim that warfare has always existed and will always be with us, is as old as humanity and somehow hard wired into our DNA, is central to a 'Realist' and the closely related National Socialist/Fascist worldview with its pseudoscientific reasoning» p. 131.

14 Heuser highlights the diversity of perspectives within the western tradition. Nevertheless, it is overall true that: «Another Western particularity is that war is designed to lead to peace, and that peace is the only just aim in war. While not letting go of this one and only true ethical justification of the use of force, we must not assume that it is shared by all our antagonists». *Ivi*, p. 399.

15 Heuser notes that the current international order is being contested by non-western actors who view it as a historical injustice. «These may be growing: the dominance of the Western heritage in public international law is increasingly being challenged by other cultures, and their influence relative to that of the West is in the ascendant» p. 8. This becomes problematic when non-Western powers, in their efforts to challenge the West, promote values that align with authoritarian models. A recent analysis on this topic, in Italian, highlights this issue in recent events: Vittorio Emanuele PARSÌ, *Il posto della guerra e il costo della libertà*, Firenze, Bompiani, 2022.

16 *Ivi*, p. 414.

