

III. Book Reviews

Hall Gardner and Oleg Kobtzeff. *The Ashgate Research Companion to War: Origins and Prevention*.

Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012. 682 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7826-7. # 95.-/US\$ 165.-

Reviewed by Michael Boyle

In this comprehensive edited volume, Hall Gardner and Oleg Kobtzeff, both of the American University of Paris, France, offer a range of perspectives on the origins and prevention of the war. Their take on this topic is explicitly inter-disciplinary and is based on ‘polemology’, an approach to war studies largely (though not exclusively) based in France and devoted to understanding the confluence of forces (political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, psychological, legal and even dialogical) that impact on the causes of conflict and war. The explicit commitment of those working with this approach is to utilize a wider historical lens which moves the story of war beyond structure and agents to an examination of all forces that set the stage for armed conflict, even in ways that were not fully evident to the participants themselves. The result is a volume which consistently takes a long view on the origins of conflict, and aims for synthetic observations rather than testable empirical theories.

The essays in this volume cover an admirable range of topics, including the evolution of modern warfare, the role of gender in conflict, the role of the state and Anarchist critiques of warfare, cyber-conflict, child soldiers, and the future of asymmetric conflict. Many of these essays are useful summaries of the literature and would be a valuable resource for students beginning to work in those areas. Moreover, the volume offers a select series of studies of major wars or types of wars, including chapters on both World Wars, the Russian-Ottoman Conflict (1876-1878), and surveys of warfare in the Hellenic world and the Middle Ages. There are some important omissions here – for example, there are no full cases on wars that made the Cold War hot (such as Korea or any of the Third World proxy wars for the United States and the Soviet Union), near-miss conflicts (such as the Cuban Missile Crisis) or more contemporary wars (such as Afghanistan or Iraq). These omissions are more forgivable given the sweep of the volume and its admirable effort to engage the literature both thematically and with case studies.

Some of the essays work remarkably well. Azar Gat’s discussion of how violence is hardwired into human beings and evident in societies that pre-date modern states is bound to be controversial, but is compelling. He makes the counter-intuitive argument that the advent of modern state warfare actually decreased mortality rates in conflict, in clear contravention of much of the work on war-making and the state based on the scholarship of Charles Tilly (p. 77). The essay by Debra DeLaet provides a useful overview of the role that gender plays a role within armed conflict. The overview of Anarchist thought provided by Andrew Robinson is similarly exhaustive, if less well-organized. Some of the case studies are equally well-done, including a fair-minded survey of the origins of the conflict in the Middle East and of the Napoleonic wars, both written by Marco Rimanelli.

More generally, the volume runs into problems when it comes to covering some key research areas within the social scientific approach to the study of war and with its application of the ‘polemology’ framework. Some of the key works on the origins of war – for example, the work of Robert Jervis on misperception and the security dilemma, and some of the more classic rationalist accounts of the origins of war from Stephen Van Evera and Geoffrey Blainey are ignored or given short shrift here. More problematically, there is little if any discussion of the influential bargaining model of the onset of war, pioneered by James Fearon. To some extent, this is an oversight driven by the theoretical preoccupations of this volume, but it undercuts its claim to be a comprehensive overview of the literature. Moreover, the work by Alexander L. George on prevention of conflict, and early warning systems for conflict, is largely ignored here. Much of the quantitative work on war, deriving from David Singer’s ‘Correlates of War’ and the Uppsala Projects, are also not covered here, which undercuts the value of the volume for doctoral students seeking to use this volume as a guide to the key works in the field. Even if the authors find little value in these contributions, some explicit discussion of them, and their limits, is warranted if the volume aims to be fully comprehensive.

Second, the volume takes an important step forward by translating the writings of some key French thinkers on war, such as Jean-Paul Charnay, while bringing the insights of others to the attention of English-speaking audiences (e.g., Kobtzeff’s chapter on the “Time of Troubles,” drawing from the work of Pierre Chaunu). This is important because there is relatively little effort by English-speaking experts to engage with the work of French writers, due in part to the fact that many of their works remain un-translated. They have also done a service by placing these writers alongside contributions by George Modelski and William Thompson, who share their long cycle approach to understanding conflict. Yet there is not enough context placed for much of their work, leading one to be a bit lost if not already familiar with them. The essays by Charnay on Islamic warfare and meta-strategy are particularly hard to follow, because (one suspects) they have been extracted from much larger and more detailed monographs. More generally, the polemological approach adopted here is difficult to pin down, as it includes almost every relevant causal factor for armed conflict and tends to rely on sweeping generalizations. For the reader, the issue with this volume is not one of quality of research or novelty of argument but rather one of theoretical position. If one wishes to adopt or even learn more about the polemological approach, these essays are fascinating. Yet if one is skeptical, many of these essays will not convince them, as many of the authors simply assume the approach is valid without a discussion of contending vantage points. This makes the volume less a research guide on war – especially on the question of prevention, which receives less attention than is needed here – than a series of essays on armed conflict that have a distinct, but often provocative, theoretical flavor.

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