No phenomenon is arguably more central to the study of international relations (IR) than war. The history of armed conflict is deeply intertwined with the formation of virtually every nation-state and it was the very superiority of the modern territorial polity’s mobilization of the war machine that ensured its historical dominance over other types of units. The exercise of armed force is still viewed today by states as their singular prerogative and the greatest calling they can make on their populations and, as realist scholars keep reminding us, the ever-present possibility of war always lurks in the background of international relations. Yet for all its centrality, the concept of war itself was until relatively recently rarely submitted to sustained scrutiny within IR scholarship. This is a paradox given the importance accorded to war within the modern academic discipline of IR at its foundation. Back then, figures such as E. H. Carr (2001) and Hans Morgenthau (1948) insisted on a clear-eyed recognition of the inherent propensity of states to employ bellicose means to further their interests as the surest way to avert, or at least mitigate, the evils of war. The original emphasis on war is hardly surprising given that the field established itself in the shadow of two world wars and a tense confrontation between American and Soviet superpowers. But it is precisely the weight of these historical conditions that gave scholars little reason to probe the concept of war in any great depth, so self-evident did it appear to them that it primarily referred to the kind of large-scale inter-state conflict that had so dominated recent world affairs.

Today we can scarcely hold to such certainties any longer. While inter-state war may not have disappeared, its overall occurrence has been much reduced and a direct confrontation between major powers appears improbable for the foreseeable future. In its place has burgeoned a multiplicity of armed conflicts ever more difficult to reconcile with the classical coordinates of war that informed both state policy and early IR scholarship. Commentators have proliferated the number of prefixes attached to the term of “war” in an attempt to capture its proteiform manifestations, a non-exhaustive list which would contain “nontrinitarian war” (Van Creveld 1991), “postmodern war” (Gray 1997), “new war” (Kaldor 1999), “netwar” (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001), “asymmetric war” (Thornton 2007), “chaoplexic war” (Bousquet 2008) and “hybrid war” (Hoffman 2009). Simultaneously, the rhetorical invocation
of war in public discourse is more ubiquitous than ever, brandished whenever a heightened state of urgency or threat needs to be conveyed. Campaigners and political leaders have declared wars on poverty, disease, crime, drugs and any social blight deemed to require domestic or international mobilization. Political discourse is likewise replete with high-pitched accusations of wars being waged on women, working families, religious freedom or Christmas, implying a wanton attack on cherished values in need of robust defence. While these metaphorical references do little to clarify the concept of war, they do however reveal the enduring hold that its idea exerts on our collective imaginaries.

It is therefore all the more striking that states have concurrently largely disavowed the unilateral pursuit of war as a legitimate act of sovereign power and are today more likely to refer to their employments of military force as collective self-defence, counter-insurgency, humanitarian intervention or stability operations. Even the so-called “war on terror” that has defined world politics in the early twenty-first century and mandated the engagement of armed forces across the globe has not involved a single formal declaration of war of the kind that were a regular feature of international intercourse in the nineteenth century, nor does it appear to have any definable end-point that would bring it to a close. The terminology of the “war on terror” was eventually disowned by the Obama administration after 2008, preferring to it that of “overseas contingency operations”, a label that downplays the conflict’s military character while only further highlighting its open-endedness. If the rhetoric of war is still a powerful means of denoting a heightened state of collective life, it has visibly waned as a juridico-political category that was for so long central to the exercise of international politics. This is probably less an indication that war per se “has almost ceased to exist” (Mueller 2009) than of the twilight of a specific framing and apportioning of political violence that gave war its particular meaning within the modern state system.

This chapter will first consider the task of providing a formal definition of war that might pare down the phenomenon to its essential traits, thereby underlining the inherent limitations of any purely abstract conceptualization. In a second step, it will examine the specific conception of war that emerged alongside the Westphalian international order and informed the practice of armed conflict between states for several centuries. Despite its predominance, this state-centric bounding of war has not been without historical tensions and challenges that the chapter will then turn to. Finally, it will consider the present, and perhaps terminal, crisis of the Westphalian understanding of war in the face of the complex contemporary manifestations of armed conflict.

**Conceptualizing War**

While it is possible to devise a social scientific definition of war as organized violence perpetrated for political ends, such a conception remains decidedly broad and indeterminate until it is related back to the specific usages and meanings invested in it within the sociocultural practices of armed conflict. Central to these practices are the delineations and attendant legitimations that draw distinctions between various manifestations of political violence and set the parameters of conduct of the activity referred to as war. Or, as Michael Walzer puts it:
War is not usefully described as an act of force without some specification of the context in which the act takes place and from which it derives its meaning [...] the social and historical conditions that "modify" war are not to be considered as accidental or external to war itself, for war is a social creation [...] What is war and what is not-war is in fact something that people decide. (2006: 24)

The conceptualization of war is thus inevitably intertwined with its own practice and enmeshed within a wider constellation of significations and material forces. It is therefore necessary for us to pay particular attention to the specific institutionalization of war as a regulated means of punctuated intercourse between sovereign peers that was historically realized under the Westphalian state system, since it is that to which we still owe our dominant mental conceptions of armed conflict. Only then can we grasp the ways in which new expressions of organized violence have rendered this conventional understanding of war increasingly untenable, opening up its concept to renewed intellectual scrutiny.

When looking for a definition of war, IR scholars have long been tempted to adopt the one proposed by David Singer and Mel Small (1972) for the purpose of cataloguing its historical occurrence. The Correlates of War (COW) database sets a threshold of 1,000 battle-related deaths within a 12-month period for a sustained conflict involving organized armed forces to qualify for inclusion as a war. A further typology of wars (inter-state, extra-state, intra-state, non-state) is then overlaid on the basis of the nature of the belligerents. COW and other databases such as that of UCDP/PRIO are frequently referred to in IR literature to support arguments about general trends in the manifestation of war and, notwithstanding the pitfalls involved in handling military statistics of often dubious reliability, it would be unwarranted to deny them any empirical value. More problematic is the manner in which the chosen definitions of war are primarily dictated by the twin imperatives of populating the databases while broadly conforming to prevailing common-sense identifications of conflict. The inclusion of the 1982 Falklands War within the COW database, despite its fatality count falling short of the required threshold, is illustrative of the fact that the boundaries of the empirical phenomena under study are rather less scientific than its proponents would like us to think. A rigorous interrogation of the concept of war must therefore pass through a much more fundamental inspection of its elementary features and tendencies.

Hedley Bull's definition of war as "organized violence carried on by political units against each other" (2002: 178) remains a popular starting point for many discussions of armed conflict in international affairs. Although it does not provide a definition of violence, a philosophically contested category in itself (Thomas 2011), Bull's formula does usefully highlight the organized and political qualities it manifests in the activity of war. War is purposefully waged by and in the name of social groups against other groups as a means of settling disputes or competing claims between them. As such, it is a collective endeavour submitted to the prevailing rules and customs that govern the use of force within a given group. So while it may plausibly be argued that war draws on an innate human propensity, or at least potentiality, for aggression, it nevertheless constitutes a particular form of violence that is both socialized and culturally imbued with significance. For one, it represents
a particular institutionalization and codification of violence that rationalizes and even mandates acts that inflict death and injury on members of another collective which are otherwise prohibited or severely circumscribed. And if war necessarily entails the cessation or curtailment of other modes of interaction between political groupings such as trade or diplomacy, its conduct also still frequently obeys certain conventions and norms shared by the belligerents.

If organized violence is to be a necessary constituent of war, it may follow, as Barkawi and Brighton have suggested, that fighting is “the basic element of the ontology of war” (2011: 136). To be sure, the invocation of war first brings to mind scenes of large-scale combat pitting opposing armies against each other. A war that did not involve any violent struggle would hardly seem to merit the label other than as a loose metaphor. And yet it must be that war cannot be reduced to the strict temporality of the battle but also covers a wider condition of hostility that includes the actions of preparation, observation and manoeuvre that separate actual clashes of arms. The attribution of such a “state of war” can be readily applied to the period bookended by official declarations of the opening and cessation of hostilities that states have traditionally engaged in, but becomes more fraught where such usages have lapsed and deeply problematic when considering such phenomena as the Cold War or the War on Terror.

Some observers have gone on to propose that, insofar as polities maintain a persistent military capability and exhibit a readiness, however reluctant, to engage in armed conflict, there exists between them an ever-present condition of latent war. Indeed, this was already Thomas Hobbes’s judgement in the seventeenth century:

> In all times, Kings, and Persons of Soveraigne authority, because of their Independency, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their Forts, Garrisons, and Guns upon the Frontiers of their Kingdomes, and continual Spyes upon their neighbours, which is a posture of War. (1986: 18)

This contention has famously been embraced by the realist school in international relations, with its insistence on the anarchical nature of international relations and innate disposition of states to resort to force to either enhance their standing or simply ensure their survival. In his well-known inquiry into the causes of war, Kenneth Waltz (2001: 238) would conclude that “war will be perpetually associated with the existence of separate sovereign states” since “force is a means of achieving the external ends of states” in the absence of a “consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy”.

War in this view is entirely understood in terms of an instrumental action undertaken by states for the purpose of attaining their political goals, be they of aggrandizement or mere survival. Such a conception would appear to find support from the nineteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in the form of his much-cited dictum according to which “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means” (1989: 87). As a political instrument available to state leaders alongside the other tools of their craft, war is hence likely to be employed when and only insofar as it appears suited to achieve specific political objectives. As soon as the costs of its
use appear too great relative to the gains that it might be expected to deliver, it will be for-}

saken. The appeal of such a conception to policy-makers and analysts of international affairs is evident. Indeed, an entire field of academic study emerged on this very premise under the name of strategic studies, predominantly concerned with a practically oriented knowledge of military affairs that could best inform and guide the decisions of military officers and political leaders. By tethering it to a rational means-end calculus, war is made intelligible, limited and largely predictable. And to a degree it can be said to yield real explanatory value. States do go to war for deliberate purposes, estimating that their interests are thereby best served. However, by taking the above maxim in isolation from the rest of his writings, we risk ignoring the full richness of Clausewitz’s thinking on the matter, which reveals a much more sophisticated handle on the phenomenon of war that deeply problematizes and constrains any purely instrumental conception of it, while simultaneously establishing both the benefits and limits of any purely abstract theorization of war.

For one, Clausewitz never intended his dictum to be a purely descriptive statement to which all wars would perfectly conform. He insisted just as much on its prescriptive character – that wise statesmanship would consist in according military efforts with that which could be gained through them. That war might exceed the designs of policy-makers had however more to do with the very nature of war itself. In his efforts to conceptualize war, Clausewitz was careful to distinguish between what he referred to as the “absolute” and “real” forms of war. The former conception was derived from a purely logical and abstract deduction of war as a clash of wills striving to impose themselves on each other. Clausewitz submitted that such a struggle would, in principle, escalate in intensity and commitment through the reciprocal actions of the respective parties until the complete disarming, if not annihilation, of one side by the other: “War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory, to extremes” (1989: 77). In such a conflict, the belligerents might well have initiated the war with limited political goals, but these would eventually be entirely subsumed by the demands of an all-encompassing struggle to the death.

Yet Clausewitz observed that, much as this logic of escalation was an inherent tendency to the phenomenon of war, in practice absolute war was never attained (although he believed it had been most closely approached in his own lifetime during the Napoleonic wars). Because war is “never an isolated act”, abstracted from its particular historical and political context, that it “does not consist of a single short blow” which would definitively decide the outcome, and that it never yields a “final result” that forever precludes a future reversal of fortune for the defeated side (1989: 78–80), “real” war necessarily falls short of its ideal conception. It is thus precisely because concrete conflicts fall short of the abstract and logical concept of war that the “political object” is allowed to govern the conduct of the conflict throughout, determining military objectives and the amount of effort to be expended on their achievement. If we appear here to be back to the original dictum of war as the continuation of policy, the conditions laid out for it by Clausewitz now inherently restrict its applicability. The political instrumentality of war and the rational calculations imposed on the employment of forces are always liable to be undercut by both the elemental passions of sheer enmity and the inescapable role of chance attached to any military action. The intrinsic unpredictability of war acts as a persistent constraint on
the political designs of its would-be masters who neglect these uncertainties at their own peril. As Clausewitz sums it up:

War, therefore, is an act of policy. Were it a complete, untrammeled, absolute manifestation of violence (as the pure concept would require), war would of its own independent will usurp the place of policy the moment policy had brought it into being; it would then drive policy out of office and rule by the laws of its own nature ... In reality war, as has been shown, is not like that. Its violence is not of the kind that explodes in a single discharge ... War moves on its goal with varying speeds; but it always lasts long enough for influence to be exerted on the goal and for its own course to be changed in one way or another ... Policy, then, will permeate all military operations, and, in so far as their violent nature will admit, it will have a continuous influence on them. (1989: 87)

In carefully distinguishing between the “pure” concept of war and its actual realization in the world, Clausewitz opens up a space within which is articulated the complex and uneasy interplay of politics and organized violence, a relationship that threatens to collapse altogether as war approaches the plenitude of its ideal form. While Clausewitz determined that the absolute form of war could never be attained in reality, it has appeared dangerously approximated by the all-out thermo-nuclear war threatened during the Cold War. If good fortune played its part in averting its outbreak, political leaders were also forced to recognize the impossibility of reconciling the prospect of mutual annihilation with rational statecraft. It is this concern with nuclear apocalypse that prompted President Eisenhower (1956) to declare that “war in our time has become an anachronism”.

So, although it is possible to approach war in the abstract as a logical concept outside of space and time, the phenomenon of war also has to be apprehended in the concrete and always particular historical circumstances of its individual manifestations. Any purely formal conceptualization of war will be of limited empirical purchase unless it is attentive to the wider contextual frames that permeate its conduct. Indeed, the societies that wage armed conflict at any given time do so by reference to their own conceptualizations of war, not least through their delineation and regulation of the violent practices permitted within it. The concept of war will hence be from here on addressed as a social and historical construct that hinges on particular understandings of the functions of violence and status of the actors engaged in it. Whereas realist observers are wont to treat the dominant characteristics of war in the modern era as givens, reflecting a fundamental and largely fixed feature of international relations, the following sections will seek to provide an account of the constitution and development of the normative Westphalian model that defined war in Europe and beyond for several centuries, but which now appears increasingly ill-suited to manifestations of organized violence in the twenty-first century.

The Westphalian Institution of War

Notwithstanding the extremities to which it may tend, the practice of war can be thought of as a codified mode of interaction between social groups who ascribe cultural
meaning and purpose to the manner of its conduct. While some of these significations may be determined unilaterally for one side, many of them are also the outcome of intersubjective negotiation between belligerents. In this sense, war is not altogether different from the other forms of interaction that can take place between discrete groups, such as diplomacy or trade. Anthropology has indeed long pointed to the rich variety found in human societies in terms of expressions of organized violence and the cultural bounds placed on them (Haas 1990). The underlying point is that the very practice of war necessarily rests on an understanding of war according to which forms of violence are determined to be war or not-war and certain actions permitted or prohibited.

Our main focus here will be on the particular codification of war concomitant to the rise of the Westphalian state system in the modern era, since it is that which lies at the heart of the discipline of international relations, even as it frays ever more visibly. This is not to say, of course, that the Westphalian framing is any truer to a putative “essence” of war than other conceptions. But it is that framing which continues to anchor the coordinates of dominant understandings of war today and in relation to which various claims about the new manifestations of conflict are formulated. It is this conception of war that has served as a veritable institution of international society in political modernity (Bull 2002).

To label this specific institutionalization of violence as ‘Westphalian’ does not require that one thereby subscribe to any simplistic attribution of epochal change to that treaty from 1648 or that one deny the extent to which trumpeted principles of sovereignty have been inconsistently enforced and have constituted a form of “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner 1999). Nor can it be ignored that this order was, at its inception and throughout most of its existence, intended to apply solely to European (eventually Western) polities, and that other societies were conspicuously excluded from it, with all the implications that had for the ruthlessness with which they were frequently fought and stripped of their autonomous governance. The notion of a Westphalian compact does however provide a convenient shorthand for a regulative ideal that undeniably guided relations between states for several centuries. At the heart of the establishment of that ideal was a desire to ward off the generalized strife fuelled by the bitter theological disputes that erupted with the Protestant Reformation and whose convulsions reached their paroxysm in the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). If, following Bull, “the historical alternative to war between states was more ubiquitous violence” (2002: 179), this bounding of organized violence would hinge on the realization of new conceptions of territory and legitimate authority.

In Max Weber’s enduring formulation, the modern state consists in a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. As various scholars have shown (Giddens 1985; Tilly 1992; Porter 1994), this monopoly was achieved in Europe over several centuries through a bureaucratic centralization of political power supported by an effective taxation of nascent capitalist economies. Intense competition between rival polities and a revolution in military technology and tactics (Parker 1996) saw a dramatic decrease in the number of independent centres of power and the emergence of the nation-state form we are familiar with today. Simultaneous to this was a gradual disarming and disqualification of non-state actors as autonomous wielders of violent means (Thomson 1994).

The Westphalian norms that were established in this period played a vital role in this process. The key principle of sovereignty entailed recognition of the exclusive
political authority of states over their territories and formal legal equality between all states (see also Chapter 11, this volume). Along with that came a specific understanding of the forms of violence that could be legitimately understood as war and the circumstances under which they could be deployed. This codification of violence and of the institutions that can yield it rests above all on the partition of an essentially pacified domestic realm and an international sphere of intense armed rivalry.

Since the sovereign is endowed with an exclusive right over the governance of domestic territory, any unsanctioned acts of violence conducted therein are deemed illegitimate. In the typical conditions of low-level threat to the state’s monopoly of violence that these acts constitute, they are to be dealt with by police institutions in accordance with domestic law. The state will characteristically resist recognizing perpetrators of non-mandated violence in its territory as other than criminal since it can only grant them any legitimacy to the same extent that it undermines its own. Only where levels of internecine violence come to significantly challenge its monopoly will the state eventually be forced into acknowledging, at least tacitly, a condition of war. Of course, the characterization of certain conflicts as “civil” is only intelligible in a world in which violence perpetrated between certain political groupings (states in this instance) is conceptually distinguished from that occurring within these groupings. A spectral presence haunting each and every state, civil war effectively marks the breakdown of the sovereign power capable of deciding between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence. As such, determining the legal status of civil wars and the appropriate response to bring to them has unsurprisingly proven a persistently contentious issue within the international state system.

Counterposed to the domestic realm is an international sphere which, in the absence of any higher sovereign power, recognizes in each and every state the right to employ armed force to protect and advance its interests. Within the Westphalian international order, European states would face each other as peers with an equality of status, if not necessarily of power. Freed from responsibilities for the coercion of their domestic societies, military institutions could be dedicated to the clashes that would be expected to periodically break out between sovereign states. Although liable to result in formidable expenses in wealth and manpower for their pursuit, inter-state wars came to take on a highly codified and regulated form that can be seen most clearly in the practices of the nineteenth century. Hostilities were to be preceded by formal declarations of war that constituted an official “state of war” between belligerents and to be eventually concluded by a peace treaty that brought that state of conflict to an end. The conduct of war itself became increasingly subject to numerous conventions and rules governing the legitimate applications of force or the treatment of non-combatants and prisoners.

Consideration of both the grounds on which war could be permitted (jus in bello) and the principles that should guide its prosecution (jus ad bellum) was of course not new. A long established body of ethical thinking known as “just war” theory existed within the Christian tradition, as it did in other faiths. The Westphalian compact did however mark a fundamental break with this tradition in abandoning appeals to divine sanction to determine the justness of a cause for which war could be initiated. Anxious to avoid competing claims to theological rectitude of the kind that had driven the devastating Thirty Years War, the new secular order recognized in all states the right to determine for themselves when they wished to employ armed force.
While political leaders naturally never ceased to claim the moral high-ground for their actions, it was understood that to be sovereign was to hold an exclusive decisionary power over matters of war and peace. No appeal other than to national interest or raison d’état were ultimately required, a principle that finds its most naked expression in the unabashed adoption of Realpolitik in the nineteenth century. At the same time, entering into a war with another state signified the application of an international legal regime that formally recognized it and regulated its modalities. Quincy Wright (1964: 7) accordingly deemed war to be nothing else but “the legal condition which equally permits two or more hostile groups to carry on a conflict by armed force”. From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, customary restrictions on the conduct of war were thus increasingly codified into a burgeoning body of international law. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 and the Geneva Conventions of 1864, 1906, 1929 and 1949 notably sought to determine the types of weapons and munitions that could be employed, the protections that civilians should benefit from, and the protocols overseeing the treatment of prisoners.

Westphalian War and its Discontents

The institutionalization of norms regulating the practice of war had therefore arguably less to do with the moral advancement of the Western societies that promoted them than with principles of reciprocity and mutual recognition as formally equal members of a state system. Wherever these same states encountered in their colonial expansions peoples to whom this status was not extended, such restraints were rarely considered to apply. Wanton brutality and indiscriminate violence characterized many of the military adventures in these territories, at times begetting veritable wars of extermination against indigenous groups. For Wright (1964: 18), such conflicts did not even merit the term of war due to the absence of intergroup or international standards regulating them, since one cannot speak of war “where the participants are so self-centred that each fails to recognize the other as a participant but treats it merely as an environmental obstacle to policy, as men treat wild animals or geographical barriers”. From this perspective, war can only exist as an intersubjective activity that entails some mutual recognition by the belligerents that they at least minimally share in the same kinds of motives and social practices. This is the basis on which it is possible for reciprocal rules constraining military conduct to accrete and diffuse.

But even between signatory states the actual conduct of war frequently fell short of the standards set by the laws of war, not least because these same laws inevitably lagged behind the latest developments in military technology and practice. Indeed, the ‘Westphalian institution’ was severely tested by the dramatic intensification that inter-state war underwent in the first half of the twentieth century. Industrialism and modern technique (Bousquet 2009) combined with unprecedented degrees of social control over their populations to grant nation-states unprecedented human and material resources, which they hurled into war-making during two major global conflagrations. During the two world wars, the established boundaries between military and civilian spheres blurred under the mass social mobilization that saw war become “total”, exemplifying the escalatory logic of conflict outlined by Clausewitz. Non-combatants and vast areas behind the front-lines were increasingly targeted as a
means to destroy the capacity for an adversarial state to continue the fight. Fierce ideological enmities loosened many of the established restraints, with defeat in those conflicts becoming generally synonymous with the comprehensive collapse of the vanquished societies and the demise of their political regimes. The historian Johan Huizinga (1949: 89) would thus task total war with having extinguished the “play-element” that had previously granted war a “cultural function”, highlighting the limiting rules that regulated its exercise among antagonists who regarded each other as equals.

In fact, the Westphalian bounding of war had not remained unchallenged prior to the twentieth century even at the very heart of its Eurocentric order. The revolutionary war that erupted out of France in 1792 was motivated by fervent ideological belief in ideals of liberty and equality that rejected the prevailing constraints of limited war and sought nothing less than the complete overthrow of hostile regimes. War was, in this view, to be the means to both safeguard the revolution at home and export it beyond with the prospect of a definitive end to political tyranny and with it to conflict of any kind. Yet, after several decades of upheaval, the coalition of states pitted against the French Republic and then Empire succeeded in reasserting the principles of formal sovereign equality and limited competition that then largely prevailed throughout the nineteenth century.

Revolutionary war, and with it counter-revolutionary war that sought to buttress the existing order, would eventually resurface in 1917 with the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia. For Lenin and his comrades, inter-state war was merely the outgrowth of imperial rivalries between capitalists that masked the more fundamental class war that divided humanity into exploiters and exploited. Since global revolution and the triumph of the world proletariat were their ultimate political goals, any accommodation between communist and capitalist states could necessarily only be a temporary prelude to a final showdown. As Mikhail Frunze, a leading Red Army commander during the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) would put it, “between our proletarian state and the rest of the bourgeois world there can only be one condition – that of long, persistent, desperate war to the death” (Kipp 1992: 77). Indeed, for Schmitt (2004), war in the name of humanity and the “absolute” forms of enmity attendant to it could only culminate in the annihilation of one side by the other. This character of irrec- oncilable ideological struggle would come to impress itself on many of the conflicts of the twentieth century, notably through the related rise of the fascist and Nazi movements. Its influence would be further amplified with the break-up of the European empires and its accompanying armed struggles in which wars of national liberation frequently blurred into revolutionary war.

Yet the Westphalian institution proved quite resilient, even if the crippling human and material costs entailed by the pursuit of all-out industrial war did lead to sustained international efforts to revise the grounds on which armed conflict could be permitted. Through the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact and the 1945 United Nations Charter, “aggressive war” for the purpose of advancing a state’s interests became firmly proscribed. If in the nineteenth century war had been widely admitted as an essential and legitimate tool of statecraft for the deliberate enhancement of state power, now only in self-defence or under the strict mandate of the United Nations could military action ever be justified. Although not a formal requirement of the UN Charter, the new juridico-political framing of armed conflict it presupposed resulted
in the virtual disappearance post-1945 of the legal condition of the “state of war” (Greenwood 1987). Thus, neither the US nor the UK has issued any declarations of war since the Second World War, notwithstanding the numerous military operations they have engaged in thereafter. Similarly, Ministries of War have given way to Ministries of Defence across the world. Although not entirely prohibited, the state conduct of war is now tightly circumscribed and framed in terms of the protection of the interests and values of the “international community”.

Yet the more war in its traditional Westphalian guise has been restricted, the more the persistence of armed conflict in other forms has prompted an extensive interrogation of the concept(s) of war apposite to these manifestations. A recurrent feature of such discussions has been the noted blurring of criminality and policing with war, categories which had all acquired a particular meaning through the Westphalian ordering of the modalities of violence. There is therefore a sense in which we can speak of a twilight of war as predominantly conceived of in the modern era and which may well prove to be tantamount to the proliferation of war as a generalized, if fragmented, condition.

From the End of “War” to War without End?

If the ideological enmities of the twentieth century loosened war from its Westphalian moorings, it is in fact with the end of the Cold War and the ascendancy of a system of global governance underpinned by American hegemony that these ties have come close to being decisively severed. One particularly salient feature of this present era has been the increasing rationalization of the employment of military force as a form of policing of the world order (Dean 2006; Holmquist 2014), the most visible expressions of which have been those actions labelled as “humanitarian interventions”, most notably in Yugoslavia (1999) and Libya (2011). As we have seen above, the Westphalian compact rested on a delineation of domestic and international spheres which were the respective domains of police and military institutions with their particular missions and modes of operability, this distinction between inside and outside permitting the articulation of “a logical and political distance between enemy and criminal, peace and war” (Galli 2010: 161). Inconsistent and schematic as such a partition may have been in practice, it is nonetheless being subjected today to unprecedented levels of strain. To underline the contemporary “elision of police and military violence” (Caygill 2001) is not simply to recognize that the tasks undertaken by military organizations in the realm of peacekeeping and state-building come to resemble in certain aspects those of police bodies. At a more fundamental level, the exercise of armed force is being increasingly justified and framed as merely a moment in the continuous governance of a global polity (Neumann and Sending 2010). Thus, for Hardt and Negri (2000: 12) as for others, war has been “reduced to the status of police action”. Such deployments of military violence in the name of human rights, democracy or civilization see those held to be standing against such values relegated to the status of international outlaws, if not enemies of humanity itself (see also Chapter 16, this volume). Where the offenders are state entities, they are labelled “rogue” and in
need of “regime change”. Where they are non-state actors, they find themselves in a juridical no man’s land, denied the status of legitimate combatants under the laws of war but liable to being killed or indefinitely imprisoned outside of the framework of criminal law.

Of the conflicts that see the indeterminable amidst decaying state apparatuses and constitute prime candidates for global policing operations, scholars (Kaldor 1999; Münkler 2005) have proposed that they should be labelled “new wars”, with the qualifier not so much denoting new practices but differentiating them from those subsumed under Clausewitzian understandings of war. Fought over the control of natural resources and profitable global traffics by a motley array of armed groups and habitually characterized by large-scale violations of human rights, in the protracted new wars “often it is difficult to distinguish between criminal and political violence” (Kaldor 1999: viii). In direct contrast to Clausewitz’s celebrated formula, we are told that war has simply become “a continuation of economics by other means” (Keen 2000: 27), the perpetuation of which frequently serves the material interests of all the belligerents. In the absence of conclusive military outcomes that might lay the ground for a reconstitution of state authority, these low-intensity conflicts simmer on indefinitely, reputedly breeding multifarious threats to international security. Much commentary has been expounded on the globalized character of the new wars, in terms of the transnational reach of both their causal complexes and spill-over effects. However, to view these conflicts as being essentially driven by economic motives would risk occluding their political character, albeit expressed through modes of governance unfamiliar to us. Thus, for Mark Duffield, the new wars are to be understood as “a form of non-territorial network war that works through and around states” and participate in the emergence of “new forms of authority and zones of alternative regulation” (2001: 3).

Those processes of globalization that have as their correlate the erosion of the state’s centrality in war further manifest themselves in the marked reconfiguration of the spatio-temporalities of organized violence. Frédéric Mégret (2011) pointedly notes the disappearance of the battlefield as both a temporarily and geographically delineated space where combat takes place and a normative space in which the particular laws of war apply. The setting in which opposing sides traditionally clashed in their quest for a decisive victory, the battlefield was also a social construction that supported the idea that war, in contrast with other forms of violence, “unfolds in discreet spaces insulated from the rest of society, confining military violence to a confrontation between specialized forces whose operation should minimally disrupt surrounding life” (2011: 4). Through their extension of the reach and scale of hostilities, total war and the advent of nuclear weapons would however render entire continents into theatres of conflict. The post-1945 proliferation of guerrilla wars and insurgencies in turn diminished the role of decisive battlefield encounters and further blurred the distinction between civilians and combatants. But it is perhaps the War on Terror, initiated at the turn of the new century, that best exemplifies the present crisis of the notion of the battlefield. On one side, we see a “terrorist” adversary that eschews any direct military confrontation, dissimulates itself within the enemy’s society and embraces a maximalist definition of the legitimate target. On the other is a fluid coalition of states led by the US that arrogates itself the right to take the fight to wherever it perceives a sufficient threat, deploying an array of conventional troops, special operations forces
(Niva 2013) and drone strikes (Chamayou 2015) to neutralize it. To speak of a global battlefield in this context, as analysts are increasingly wont to, is to simultaneously concede the obsolescence of the very notion of the battlefield and with it of a certain conception of war itself.

The proclamation of a War on Terror by the George W. Bush administration was in itself highly ambiguous, asserting that the carnage of September 11 was on a scale that called for a full military response, while simultaneously refusing its perpetrators any of the legitimacy normally afforded to participants in a war through their labelling as terrorists. Subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq may have temporarily succeeded in locating the conflict within more familiar inter-state coordinates, but it soon became apparent that the term covered a much wider range of operations conducted across multiple geographies and against a nebulous and endlessly shape-shifting adversary. Scholars (Bigo 2005; Huysmans 2006) have further underlined the manner in which the expansive framing of the War on Terror has increasingly submitted domestic societies to processes of “securitization” that blur the established boundaries of internal and external security (see also Chapter 3, this volume).

Hence, for Carlo Galli (2010), global war “is a war without frontiers, without advances or retreats, consisting only of acts into ‘precise’ spaces, and in real time, the logics of war, economics and technology” (p. 162) and that signals “the collapse of the categories of modern political thought” (p. 183). Vivienne Jabri similarly refers to a “global matrix of war” in which “it is now always problematic to claim distinctions between the inside and outside, the domestic and the international, the zone of civic peace and the zone of war, the sovereign state and the anarchic outside” (2007: 2). In place of the traditional concept of war that rested on those categories, Frédéric Gros (2010: 260) refers to “states of violence” that involve the “moments of pure laceration caused by the terrorist act in the public spaces of great urban centres, the mathematic calculations of a missile trajectory in high-tech conflicts or the indefinite wasting brought about by civil wars in failed states”. The unity of the concept of war that prevailed in the Westphalian imaginary and was principally achieved through the exclusion of a much more disparate set of violent practices from its understanding, has manifestly been shattered. The neatly partitioned manifestations of violence and delineated spatio-temporalities of war and peace previously held to have become decidedly untenable, confronting us with a new landscape of conflict that presently confounds our attempts to circumscribe it and render fully intelligible its workings.

Conclusion

As an approach to concept analysis, this chapter has sought to keep in tandem the formulation of a general abstract conception of war as organized violence for political purposes with a historically grounded treatment of the ways in which the socially embedded practices of armed conflict entail specific understandings of war. A formal conceptualization of war is absolutely necessary to bring rigour to a term that is so widely and loosely employed in public discourse and to outline the broad features of a phenomenon to which we seek to ascribe some consistency across time. And yet such a general concept of war as we can arrive at in this manner remains wholly indeterminate outside of the specific cultural frames within which its practice takes place.
Indeed, if the notion of war is to refer to certain uses of violence and not others, it cannot be apprehended without engaging the web of related concepts and significations on the basis of which such discriminations are made.

While the Westphalian international order provided a certain stability to the meaning of armed conflict and the regulation of its conduct, there is today a growing sense that such understandings are no longer apposite to the new manifestations of war. The extent to which we are facing truly unprecedented types of violent conflict rather than their occurrences merely being more visible in the context of a decline of major interstate war, remains an open question. It is clear however that any novel conceptions of war are inevitably intertwined with new sets of martial practice and contests over the legitimacy of violent actions.

For a discipline of international relations founded in the last century on the central *problematique* of the recurrence of war and the means to reduce, if not completely arrest, its incidence, the task of reconceptualizing war is likely to be essential to any meaningful contribution to this laudable goal in the twenty-first century. That most efforts so far have insisted on the manner in which contemporary conflicts depart from an established Westphalian-Clausewitzian model tells us that we are still largely unable to apprehend the novel constellation of war on its own terms. It is perhaps more fitting than ever then that the etymology of “war” leads us back to an Old Germanic verb that means “to confuse” or “to perplex”. The present conceptual anomie may however have one great virtue in disclosing to us what war was all along—a dynamic and unstable ground that is both shaped by and constitutive of wider struggles over power, authority and legitimacy.

**Suggested Readings**


Gros, Frédéric (2010) *States of Violence: An Essay on the End of War* (London: Seagull Books). Offers a philosophical examination of the essential historical features of war to argue that war, as we have known it, is increasingly being replaced by new forms of violence that no longer conform to those customary characteristics.

Jabri, Vivienne (2007) *War and the Transformation of Global Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave). By reference to the ways in which the uses of armed force are legitimized today, Jabri discusses the blurring of notions of war and peace and the breakdown of the conventional delineation between domestic and international spheres of interaction.

Kaldor, Mary (1999) *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Oxford: Polity). Influential formulation of the concept of “new wars” to capture a transformation in the character of armed conflicts in an era of globalization. Although the object of considerable criticism and qualification, the label was widely adopted in the period following the end of the Cold War.

Wright, Quincy (1964 [1942]) *A Study of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). A classical liberal study of the phenomenon of war. Its attempt to provide a definitive scientific understanding may appear inadequate today in light of the changing expressions of conflict, but it remains instructive in highlighting where the conventional understanding of war presently flounders.
Bibliography


Wright, Quincy (1964) A Study of War (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).