WARFARE AND STRATEGIC CULTURES IN HISTORY

Gérard Chaliand

Opposite the entrance in the Velázquez room in the Prado Museum in Madrid hangs the Surrender of Breda, also known as Las Lanzas, which the artist painted in about 1634–35, when triumphant Spain was just beginning its decline.

The scene depicted by Velázquez shows a flat, water-covered landscape stretching as far as the eye can see, under a lowering, gray-flecked sky. In the foreground, the composition is so skillful that it creates the impression of a sea of humanity whereas a close look reveals only about twenty faces. On the left, the Dutch; on the right, the Spaniards, in a tighter group, with the array of lances in serried ranks behind them. Very close up is a horse’s croup. Everyone has dismounted. In the center are two figures: Justius of Nassau and Ambrogio Spinola. Justius is bowing and presenting the keys of the fortress to the victor. Spinola is also bowing and putting his right hand on his opponent’s shoulder in an exquisite gesture of forbearance. He is about to speak a few words worthy of a gentleman. Both sides belong to the same world. Doubtless they would be dining together that evening.¹

This is a picture of war, of a particular war, within shared conventions, accepted by both sides, even if populations were subjected to reprisals or exactions.

The town of Breda, besieged and taken by the Dutch in a surprise move in 1590, had been so well transformed into a fortress that it came to be known as the “bastion of Flanders.” Thirty-four years later, in the context of one of those conflicts that could, with long periods of quiescence, stretch out over two generations, the Spaniards laid siege to it. Taking advantage of the lies of the land, and resorting to their usual tactic, the Dutch opened their dikes and flooded the region. But, in less than a year, the fortress had to capitulate. The commander of the Spanish forces, a Genoan in the service of the Hapsburgs, offered the besieged very honorable terms of surrender. “They must be treated

¹. Three centuries later, in the film La Grande Illusion, Jean Renoir portrayed the same aristocratic relationship between a German and a Frenchman.

[1]
as brave fighting men and come out in good order with all their weapons. The infantry, with flags flying and drums beating..., the cavalry with banner in the wind and mounted as if on campaign."

That was on 5 June 1624. At the court of Spain, there was rejoicing. And yet, a quarter of a century later, the Netherlands won its independence and Spanish hegemony in Europe, which had lasted almost a century and a half, gave way to the long hegemony of France over the continent.

Since the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the Netherlands had been fighting Spain, the hegemonic power of the time, with the Hapsburgs ruling over half of western Europe and a large part of the Americas. In the sixty or so years that the war between Spain and the United Provinces lasted, there was only one large-scale battle. The art of war then, as in the eighteenth century, consisted above all in besieging and attacking fortified places; the whole aim was to carry on operations prudently and avoid battles, which were too costly in men. Maneuvers and feints designed to cut the enemy’s communications were the chosen weapon, the aim being to wear down the enemy’s will or exhaust his financial resources.

Velázquez’s painting depicts a period. It expresses a long tradition in which wars in Europe had only limited objectives and were not designed, as they were after the French Revolution, to annihilate the opponent’s armed forces in a decisive battle.

And yet, wars of religion have the implacable character of wars of ideas, and in a theater close by, at the very time when Velázquez was painting the Surrender of Breda, the terrible Thirty Years’ War was unfolding at the expense of the people, a bloodletting that affected Germany for many years after, so well summed up by Grimmelshausen in his picaresque tale Simplicissimus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Unger und Durst, auch Hitz und Kält,} \\
\text{Arbeit und Armuth, wie es fällt.} \\
\text{Gewaltthat, Ungerechtigkeit,} \\
\text{Treiben wir Landsknecht allezeit.}^2
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hunger and thirst, cold and heat,} \\
\text{Work and want, as is meet.} \\
\text{Injustice and violent crime} \\
\text{We soldiers commit all the time.}
\end{align*}
\]

2. Grimmelshausen, Der Abenteurlicher Simplicissimus Simplicissimus, bk. 1, ch. 16. “This couplet was not misleading, but quite accurate, for all they did was eat and drink, endure hunger and thirst, wallow in debauch, kill and be killed, shoot and be shot, torture and be tortured, hunt and be hunted, terrorize and be terrorized, rob and be robbed, pillage and be pillaged, spread misery and suffer it. In short, everywhere, cause havoc and ruin and suffer havoc and ruin,” says the author.
The art of war in seventeenth-century Europe comprised lengthy campaigns, and sieges were its key feature. In fact, the picture that we have of warfare in the eighteenth century (when, indeed, battles were very costly in terms of men) originated in a much earlier period: from the time of the Renaissance and in almost every country, war was carried on by mercenaries. Under Louis XIV, “nationals” were incorporated because they were cheaper.

Conserving manpower and wearing down the enemy were counterparts to the price paid by civilian populations. These wars had their share of atrocities. The sack of Malines in 1568 was total, the Spanish troops not having been paid: it even included churches and convents, which were theoretically sacrosanct.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF WAR

The strategist is concerned with the ways and means of coercing the enemy and imposing his will on him. Conversely, he rarely poses the problem, which is one of considerable interest for the historical perspective, of the nature of warfare.

Today, mention of war—at least in the northern hemisphere—summons up both fear of nuclear apocalypse and the painful reminder of the two great wars of the first half of the century. The qualitative change brought about by nuclear energy underlies the feeling of rejection of a general war. Such a war seems less likely than ever, although it is difficult to imagine that the human species can forever continue to behave so rationally.

But the phenomenon of war, as a manifestation of collective violence in history, cannot be analyzed on the basis of today’s sensitivities and moral judgments.

Arnold Toynbee sought, with the help of a series of examples drawn from ancient history, to show that a halt or breakdown of civilization invariably accompanies each new improvement in the art of warfare. Nothing could be less certain, especially in modern history. The opposite is not certain either over the long haul. It should be noted, however, that Toynbee is looking at violence only from a strictly moral angle. Examining the fate of rulers who had come to the throne by violence, he develops the hypothesis of the “suicidal impor-
tunity of a sword that has been sheathed after tasting blood. The polluted weapon will not rust in its scabbard but must ever be itching to leap out again. . . . The would-be saviour who first had recourse to this could now find no rest until his sin of seeking salvation along a path of crime has been atoned for by the agency of the very weapon which he once so perversely used.”

The Judeo-Christian world, of whose criminals Macbeth is one of the prototypes, cannot account for the fate of illegitimate rulers through the ages, any more than warlike activity, when it is offensive, automatically disqualifies the conqueror morally. And if there are societies that are permanently warlike, can it not be said that Europe is in the forefront of such societies?

For the most part, wars have not been wars of extermination. Formerly, victory meant the appropriation of goods, slaves, and land. Extermination involved only particular categories of conflict, and the annihilation of the adversary theorized by Clausewitz as the goal of military operations was in itself only a phase in the ever-changing conception of warfare.

Today, when, since the advent of nuclear energy, it is possible to envisage an archaeology of warfare (possibly only a provisional one), what must be stressed is how much the French Revolution completely transformed the very conception and nature of warfare for a century and a half.

By resorting to the "levée en masse," a logical consequence of the idea of popular sovereignty, the French Revolution and, subsequently, the Empire, radically democratized an occupation hitherto reserved to professional armies composed largely of mercenaries, a term that from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century had no pejorative implications.

Modern nationalism, a new idea based on the concept of the nation-state and popular sovereignty, leads naturally to mass warfare. 4 With Napoleon began the era of what Clausewitz calls "absolute war," the "decisive" battle in which the aim is to exterminate the enemy's armed forces. Gradually, armies became exclusively national affairs, and compulsory military service was introduced. The considerable advances in firepower associated with the advances of industrialization, the growing bitterness of national antagonisms, reminiscent of the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century, and the diabolization of the enemy in wars of ideas made the wars of the first half of the twentieth century total wars. The development of propaganda during World War I, engendered by democratization, aimed to bind the rear and the front together in a common effort, in which the outcome of prolonged conflicts depended more and more on industrial capacities. World War II accentuated the total character of warfare. In the Spanish Civil War, the destruction of Guernica symbolically prefigured the reversal that was under way, with civilians becoming targets as much as, if not more than, soldiers, as Coventry, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki were subsequently to show. In fact, reverting to a tradition long abandoned in Europe, an attempt was made to terrorize civilian populations and destroy their morale, in addition to attacking purely military targets. Europeans emerged from World War I with a feeling of disgust, tempered in the

4. Itself rendered technically possible by the introduction of the divisional system.
victors by the often bitter scent of victory, and strengthened in the defeated by a painful feeling of frustration. After World War II, in which Europe collapsed, pacifism spread. The attitude of some French conscripts during the Algerian war of independence and of some Americans in Vietnam is evidence of this. Soviet conscripts behaved similarly in Afghanistan. But it is not possible to analyze warfare historically simply in terms of the criteria of sensitivity that we have today. Executions, for example, were public in parts of Europe before World War I and drew excited crowds there, as they still do in some other parts of the world. The great change in western Europe seems to have crystallized during World War I; the officer caste began to give way to more democratic recruitment; other ranks no longer accepted being looked upon as cannon fodder. War ceased to be perceived as a game: the cost in suffering was too high. Human life was considered more precious than in earlier times. Other, demographically younger peoples outside Europe, many of whom did not directly experience the severe losses of the two world wars, and who have virtually no reason to be satisfied with the current world status quo, may have different sentiments.

THE NATURE OF WARFARE: A TYPOLOGY

For a long time, at different periods and in various societies, warfare took on a ritual character. Its ritualization manifested itself, for example, when two rival groups designated champions to settle a conflict: David and Goliath, or the Horatii and the Curiatii. Sparta and Argos fought through chosen champions; out of six hundred, three survived (Herodotus Histories 1.82). The high Middle Ages in the West were a significant period in this respect. As Jacques Duby writes, battles were organized as the ultimate recourse to the judgment of God: "Their role was to compel heaven to declare itself, to reveal its plans, to show once and for all, clearly and indisputably, on what side right lay. Battles, like oracles, partook of the sacred." Battles were duels; the two sides fought until one of them conceded defeat. God had then given his verdict. Until the beginning of the twelfth century, this procedure was virtually unchallenged: "The greatest princes had no hesitation in offering battle to anyone challenging their authority."

"Here there was no surprise, no ambush, but a long ritual preparation, as is appropriate when approaching a sacrament. The two adversaries were about to present themselves before the tribunal of God. . . . On the field of battle of Tinchebray, in 1106, Henry, the son of [William] the Conqueror, was readying himself; against him, his brother, Robert Courthoise; and the duchy of Normandy and the kingdom of England were the stake. Henry proffered his
prayer in justification and propitiation, a plea in his own behalf: ‘I am going into battle only to come to the aid of the desolated people; I implore the Creator of all things from the bottom of my soul that in today’s battle He may grant victory to the one whom He has chosen to secure protection and rest for His people.’”

Among the Aztecs, a warrior people whose empire was built up through a series of conquests, the goal of warfare, along with the aim of increasing tribute enriching the hegemonic group, was less to cause casualties among the enemy than to procure prisoners to be sacrificed to the gods. The enemy was defeated when the leaders had been seized or when his temple was destroyed, a sign that his gods were less potent.

In the course of its internecine struggles, the wars of Western feudalism were fought economically and ritualistically, the purpose often being to take knights prisoner in order to make them pay ransom. Even later, in the Renaissance, the conception of war held by the condottieri was close to one of chivalry, in that both, aiming to secure ransom, sought not to annihilate the enemy but to capture him. The sudden arrival in Italy in 1494 of troops equipped with artillery belonging to Charles VIII of France was something completely new. The same is true of the Swiss squares that, at the very beginning of the fourteenth century, gave back to the infantry an importance it had lost for a thousand years, thanks to their cohesion (the squares were formed on a cantonal basis, so that everybody knew everybody else). Unlike other soldiers of the time, the Swiss gave no quarter. No prisoner, whatever his rank, was spared. In the seventeenth century, Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden was the first to break with the strategy of his time; he sought frontal battle. Once he had improved the firepower of his forces, largely made up—at least at the beginning of his great campaign—of Swedish nationals (and Finns), he did not waste time with sieges and sought a decisive engagement in open countryside. He fought as many as three battles in seven months, something unprecedented in his time.

In fact, the dogma of the “decisive” battle, according to which the aim is the annihilation of the enemy’s armed forces, lasted approximately a century and a half (from Napoleon Bonaparte to 1945). But military historians in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries traced the pattern of the decisive battle to a much earlier period of history, without making much effort to distinguish the nature of the warfare within which the allegedly “decisive” battle was being fought. If we limit ourselves to what the British and Americans call grand strategy, only battles whose historic military

and political results are decisive should be considered decisive. In that sense, the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Turks and the Arab victories at the River Yarmak and Kadesaya in 636, which—fought against Byzantium in the case of the former and against the Persians in the case of the latter—gave them possession of Syria and Iraq, were decisive battles.

Difficult and complex though it may be, it is important to develop a typology of wars, starting from the observation that there have been many different concepts of warfare and its nature in history. If we exclude the wars of primitive societies, which were determined by subsistence and demography and were probably not very costly in lives (because of concern for survival), we can try and sketch out a loose typology of wars, as follows:

Ritualized wars. These usually occur within a given society or neighboring societies in conflicts that are not wars to the death. Generally, they are the mark of societies that are still archaic or traditional.

Wars with limited objectives. Are these a modern variant of ritualized warfare? It is worth asking the question. In any event, they occur within a world in which the code of behavior, values, and institutional and social framework are implicitly accepted. Dynastic disputes, for example, do not seek to change the world—that is, the established order.

Conventional wars of conquest. These have infinitely greater predatory objectives and seek to coerce the opponent, no lasting compromise being possible short of military victory. They may involve annihilating the enemy or be satisfied with subduing him.

Mass wars. These wars (which Clausewitz calls "absolute"), the advent of which was marked by the French Revolution, reached their culmination in World War I and, especially, World War II. Such wars aim at the annihilation of the enemy's armed forces in battle and, increasingly, the collapse of the civilian population through the massive use of terror (summary executions, mass deportations, bombardments).

Wars without quarter. Over history, the two most cruel types of war have been civil wars, which in the early nineteenth century came to be called "wars of ideas." The wars of religion in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are a classic example. Civil wars are the hardest-fought and, proportionally, result in the most victims: the Thirty Years' War; the French wars of religion; the Civil War in the United States (1861–65), which caused more casualties than the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71); the Civil War in Russia (1918–20); the Civil War in Spain (1936–39); or the religious conflicts in India between Hindus and Muslims following partition (1947–48). If strategy consists in weighing an issue in relation to the risks it carries, civil wars are the most irrational of wars; the costs usually far exceed the value of what is being
fought over. However the conflict in Lebanon (1975–91) is interpreted (civil war or conflict between quasi-nations, as Maxime Rodinson would have it), the overall result of this fighting with no local victor is out of all proportion to any theoretically rational cost/benefit analysis.

War waged against a race seen as radically different is the other type of war without quarter. Conflicts between nomads and sedentary populations can be put in this category. The sudden irruption of the Mongols west and south of central Asia in the thirteenth century and colonial conquests, from America to Africa, are classic examples. The war waged in the east by Hitler’s forces (not to mention the extermination of Jews and Gypsies, both nonterritorial minorities) was of the same type, Poles, Ukrainians, and Russians, indeed all Slavs, being destined to become slave labor or to disappear, in part to open up living space.

To use different language, the sharpest conflict is that of the Same against the Same, just exceeding in intensity that against the Other who is radically Other because his essence is perceived as Other.

CONCEPTS OF WARFARE IN THE WEST

There is a great difference between wars with limited objectives and the total warfare of the industrial age, which flows from the concept of the nation-state; a great difference between ritualized wars and the devastating clash of radically different societies or the frenzied fury of civil wars. Similarly, the combatant—mercenary, conscript, or volunteer—almost always corresponds to the particular type of warfare.

Battles were more frequent in the eighteenth century, despite the fact that they were then avoided where possible, than during the century between the battles of Mühlberg in 1547 and Breitenfeld in 1631. For over a century, the only two large-scale battles in western Europe were those of Nieuwpoort (the Netherlands, 1600) and the White Mountain (Bohemia, 1621). It was the age of the long siege. In a few decades, the answer had been discovered to cannon, which in 1453 had brought about the fall of Constantinople, whose high medieval walls were ill-suited to resisting gunpowder. 7 Under the influence of Italian engineers, Errard de Bar-le-Duc, and the Netherlander Simon Stevinus, the art of fortification was rethought: low, thick walls with bastions gave the advantage back to the defense. The adaptation occurred quickly. The can-

7. In the same year, 1453, it was the cannon that enabled Charles VII to put an end to the long English occupation of Aquitaine.
non, briefly triumphant, for example, with Charles VIII in Italy in 1494, was countered by innovations in fortification. The cost of mercenary forces and the consequent professional prudence of their captains (who hesitated to risk their destruction) also explain why these dynastic wars with limited objectives were so long, so indecisive, and thus so disastrous for civilian populations, which were systematically plundered. The regularly paid and well-disciplined army of the United Provinces, which saved the country from ruin in its long conflict with the Hapsburgs, was the sole exception.

The wars of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were aimed at exhausting the opponent’s economic resources. From the time of the formation of national states in the fifteenth century, war was in fact waged largely by mercenaries, and mercenaries came from all over Europe: Swiss, Germans, Italians, Croatians, and Hungarians fought indiscriminately in the armies of France and the Hapsburgs. Gustavus Adolphus’s army, which, for the seventeenth century, looked like a national army, was in fact made up of a core of Swedes and large numbers of Finns, Scots, and Germans. Generals themselves placed themselves successively at the service of rival rulers: until the eighteenth century, there was nothing unusual in being successively an officer with the Hapsburgs, the czar of Russia, and the king of Sweden. The great Condé himself (1621–86) went into Spanish service at the time of the Fronde.

It was rulers that one served, the state being a dynastic one. Identities were religious in the seventeenth century, as they had been in the previous one, and it was often more important to a French Protestant to be free to practice his religion in Germany or Holland than to continue being a subject of the king of France.

Aristocratic values survived for a long time, at least until the American and French Revolutions, and sometimes until the beginning of the twentieth century in other European countries, such as the Austro-Hungarian empire. Other ranks, under the orders of warrant officers enforcing rigid discipline (Prussian drill) based on corporal punishment, were looked upon in this context as an inferior species.

LONG-TERM GEOPOLITICS: NOMAD/SEDENTARY CONFLICTS AND THE ANTAGONISM BETWEEN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

For anyone looking at the history of Europe over the long term, a history built on the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman heritages, the prime adversary,
from the seventh and eighth centuries to the sixteenth century at least, was Islam. In the course of its prodigious initial expansion, Arab Islam in less than a century seized control of half the largely Hellenized, Romanized, and Christian Mediterranean and reached the Iberian peninsula, whose reconquest, begun in 1085 with the taking of Toledo, was only completed in 1492. In Europe, this Muslim expansion was followed by a second thrust by the Ottomans between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries: the Balkans and a considerable part of the countries along the Danube were conquered after a series of defeats inflicted on Christian armies: Kossovo, 1389; Nicopolis, 1396; Mohács (Hungary), 1526. Vienna itself was besieged in 1529 (and was to be a second time in 1683, when it was only saved by the intervention of the Pole Jan Sobieski). As for the Mediterranean, it remained a disputed zone until the battle of Lepanto in 1571 and well beyond. The final collapse of the Ottomans in the Balkans took almost a century, between 1821 when Greece declared its independence and the Balkan Wars of 1911–12. A massive exchange of populations (on criteria that were not linguistic or national but religious) between Greece and Mustafa Kemal’s Turkey, following the latter’s victory (1922–23), closed this period. Such a perspective reflects European history over the long term, but if we look at universal history, other phenomena appear that make short shrift of some of our received ideas.

Historians, generally more interested in national histories, when not concerned with the ancient Greek and Roman world, have too often neglected the role and impact of nomads.8 According to a view generally accepted today, there has throughout history been a fundamental antagonism between maritime powers and continental ones. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, geopoliticians have repeatedly stressed this antagonism. Doubtless this assessment is valid for modern history since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it is untrue of the two millennia that separate the fourth century B.C. and the fourteenth century A.D., notwithstanding the battle of Salamis and Rome’s efforts to become a maritime power. The fundamental antagonism in Eurasia between the fourth century B.C. and the fourteenth century was that between nomads and sedentary peoples.

From the Huns, who raided China even before the Han dynasty, to the Mongols, who seized control of it in the thirteenth century, the Eurasian landmass, from China to central and even western Europe, continuously felt the turbulence of central Asia: China, Persia, the Fertile Crescent, Asia Minor, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and, beyond, the plain of Pannonia and western Europe (the

battle of Châlons) were affected. One after the other, Scythians, Huns, Avars, Magyars, Turks, and Mongols—all archers on horseback—made brutal onslaughts into the Eurasian theater.

In fact, the steppes of central Asia can be compared to a vast inland sea, whence, in successive waves for over 2,000 years, nomad raids erupted. The area between the Caspian Sea and Manchuria can also be considered both a "zone of turbulence" and the true heartland of the Eurasian world for some 2,000 years. Through this new vision, geopolitics recovers its historical depth.

Over the period stretching from the fourth century B.C. to the fourteenth century, this zone of turbulence affected China under the Han and succeeding dynasties, until the advent of the Ming, with varying degrees of seriousness. The Yuan dynasty established by Kublai Khan was Mongol, although, after the conquest, it gradually became sinicized. The Manchu dynasty, which seized power in 1644, represented a new victory of the nomads. The longest-lasting threat was that of the Hun tribes (Hsiung-nu); the most devastating was that of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, which even affected Vietnam, Burma, and Korea on China's periphery. Two attempts by the Mongols to land in Japan failed, mainly because of bad weather.

This zone of turbulence had a continuous influence on Persia, where invasions by Turks and Mongols followed one another. Iran was separated from central Asia only by the fluid barrier of the Oxus (Amu Darya). Byzantium, too, was threatened many times between the sixth century and its fall by waves of nomads from the steppes of central Asia—Huns, Avars (sixth century), Magyars, and Seljuk Turks—until the final assault by the Ottoman Turks that led to the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

The impact of the nomads was also felt further west: in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and the Pannonian plain. On the eve of the fall of the Roman empire, the Huns arrived with Attila, after ravaging Russia, Poland, and Germany as far as the plain of Châlons in eastern France. The Hungarians (ninth century), with the Bulgars (seventh–ninth centuries) and the Finns, constituted the most westerly outpost of the world of the steppes. As for the Mongols, who built up the largest empire the world has ever seen, their irresistible advance westward was only halted in the mid thirteenth century by the death of the great khan Ogadei.

Apart from this area of turbulence, which, in terms of its duration and its impact, was the most significant in world history, a second such nomad area, that of the Bedouin of Arabia, played a vital role. In less than a century, between the death of Muhammad in 632 and their arrival in Spain in 712, the Arabs, motivated and sustained by the Muslim faith, defeated Byzantium in Syria, conquered Iran, seized Egypt and the Maghreb, and reached the Indus and the foothills of the Himalayas.
With slight setbacks, notably in the Iberian peninsula, Islam continued to expand between the eighth and seventeenth centuries in both Asia and Africa: it made inroads in central Asia, where a significant number of steppe nomads were converted, sometimes, like the Turks, when they advanced into sedentary areas. (Gradually speakers of Turkic languages from central Asia seized political and military power, which had initially been monopolized by the Arabs.) The Muslim advance reached as far as Sinkiang. India, where Islam had already made converts, was invaded in 1525 by Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), who had himself been driven out of Transoxiana by Uzbeks, initially toward Afghanistan. The dynasty of the Great Moghuls was thus born, and the subcontinent had been almost entirely conquered when the British arrived. Meanwhile, the Muslim advance continued toward Malaysia, Borneo, Java, Celebes, and Sarawak, and reached Mindanao, the southernmost of the Philippine islands, where it was once again halted, this time in Asia, by the Spaniards.\(^9\)

Finally, Islam, which had already penetrated black Africa in the ninth and tenth centuries in the Sahel, moved vigorously southward in both the east and the west in a continuous movement.

There is one last large-scale nomadic expansion to be mentioned in the period from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, that of the nomads of the sea, the Vikings, whose impact on France, England, and later Sicily, albeit important, was less significant than the role these Scandinavian warrior-sailors played in the creation of Kievan Rus, sailing up the rivers of Russia, marking their passage at Novgorod, and traveling down the Volga. Some of them entered the service of Byzantium, where they were called Varangians.

Thus, looked at in a long-term perspective, what seems to characterize the history of the Eurasian landmass is not the opposition between sea power and continental power but the opposition between sedentary areas and nomad invasions. The ancient settled centers were China, India, Persia, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Egypt, Greece, Syria-Palestine, Italy, and, later, the Europe growing from the Carolingian nucleus. They were founded around rivers or oases and in the long run ended up triumphing over the nomads.

THE THEATER OF CONFLICTS BECOMES WORLDWIDE: WESTERN IMPERIALISM

A change began in the sixteenth century, reaching its peak between 1850 and 1950; the theater of conflict, which had essentially been Eurasia, including only

\(^{9}\) Today about 4 or 5 percent of the population of the Philippines are Muslim, mostly in the western part of Mindanao. They have waged an armed struggle for autonomy.
Africa north of the Sahara, gradually expanded to embrace the whole world. The Spaniards attacked Cuba and Santo Domingo and used these as jumping-off points to conquer Mexico, Yucatan, and Guatemala. Then, from Central America, it was the turn of Peru and Colombia. Chile and La Plata were soon invested too. Christianization followed military conquest. The Portuguese, who also succeeded in sailing round the south of Africa, established themselves in Brazil.

In the sixteenth century too, thanks to the Cossacks, the Russians, only recently liberated from the long Mongol domination, made a prodigious advance and seized the whole of southern Siberia as far as the Sea of Okhotsk. This first European push in the sixteenth century, by sea in the west and by land in the east, was followed by a second one in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Dutch installed themselves in Indonesia, and before long the British did likewise in India. The Ottomans were constantly retreating before the Russians and the Hapsburgs in the eighteenth century. Both the British and the French were present in North America.

The third push occurred in the nineteenth century after Europe had settled the problems emerging from the Napoleonic era. Gradually, and then faster in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, virtually the whole of Asia and Africa was occupied militarily and colonized by Europeans: India, Indochina, Australia, New Zealand, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and all of Africa south of the Sahara, except for Abyssinia and Liberia.

The Russian empire, which had made deep inroads into the Ottoman conquests north of the Black Sea (in the Crimea) in the eighteenth century, launched a series of offensives in the following century in the Caucasus against Kajar-ruled Persia, the Muslims of central Asia (Uzbeks, Turkmens, Tajiks), and the Manchu imperial possessions along the Ussuri River and in northern Manchuria.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans occupied Morocco and Libya. Following World War I, Britain and France carved out “mandates” in the Near East, hitherto under Ottoman rule.

In terms of geopolitics, the centuries between 1492 (when Columbus reached America) and 1945 marked both the globalization of the theater of conflict and the hegemony of Europeans—the Americans being their heirs. The maritime dimension of the globe only assumed its full importance in the fifteenth century, just as the nomads were losing their military superiority.

Modern nationalism, the major ideology of the nineteenth century, which Europe had helped spread through the influence of the French Revolution, was turned against it by the peoples it had subjugated. Nationalism harbors the death of empires: starting on the American continent, this movement of emancipation gradually spread to cover the entire planet. Meiji Japan suc-
cessfully evaded the white peril. The peoples dominated by the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires gained their emancipation, or aspired to it, after World War I. Mustafa Kemal’s Turkey succeeded in avoiding the semicolonial status that the Allies had been preparing for it. After World War II, the colonial empires disappeared, a development that eventually affected the Soviet empire in 1988–91.

AGAINST SOME RECEIVED IDEAS

Contrary to widespread belief, warfare has not always had as its objective the annihilation of the opposing force through a decisive battle. In fact, the very term decisive is worth reexamining; the taking of Constantinople, for example, was more decisive in its consequences than the battle of Austerlitz or the battle of Cannae, even though these were perhaps more striking affairs.

In the framework of European history looked at as a whole (that is, based on Christendom and not on the medieval opposition between the Church of Rome and the Eastern Churches or on the opposition deriving from the Reformation), the major antagonism opposed Europe to Islam (and vice versa). This antagonism was obviously sharpest in regions where domination and confrontation lasted longest: Spain and the Balkans on the Christian side (during World War I, the Armenians suffered a general deportation and mass liquidation, what today we would call genocide). Muslims suffered the domination of czarist Russia in the nineteenth century and of the USSR in the twentieth, both in central Asia and in part of the Caucasus. It should be noticed that the pressure of Islam, long ago felt in Europe, has conversely been acutely felt more recently in India. It was British interference that put an end to almost three centuries of Muslim rule in India, and that at independence gave power to the Hindus, while a significant proportion of Muslims opted for partition.

Modern nationalism, born at the end of the eighteenth century in France and developed in Europe through the nineteenth century to become, in the twentieth, the quasi-universal ideology based on the model of the nation-state, has tended to push into the background the fact that in the framework of dynastic states, most European armies up to the mid seventeenth century, and even beyond, consisted of mercenaries from many parts of Europe. Without denying the importance of nationalism, it is worth stressing how excessive the nationalist reinterpretation of the high Middle Ages has been. Moralizing criteria such as those used by Montesquieu and Toynbee to condemn war or bring out the causes of decay often misguidedly survive in assessments of the decline of empires. Roman “virtue,” for example, is largely a myth, invented for use in the secondary schools of yesteryear. Rome, like all empires, resorted to cru-
elty, and we pay little heed to how her adversaries saw things (the reverse occurs in studies of the Mongols; there it is the defeated who tell the story). Sallust puts these words into a letter he attributes to Mithridates, king of Pontus, writing to Arsaces, king of Persia, proposing an alliance against the Romans:

Do you not realise that the Romans, blocked by the Atlantic from expanding to the west, have turned their armies in this direction? That from the start everything they own has been snatched from others—home, wives, land, and empire? That they were once refugees, homeless and fatherless? Thus they are now the scourge of the world, who know no reason human or divine. They pillage and destroy friends and allies, near and far, weak and strong, and consider all who will not agree to become slaves, and particularly monarchs, as their enemies. For few wish for liberty, the majority desiring no more than justice from their masters. We are suspected of being their rivals, who will in due time exact vengeance on them. Look at yourself: you have the great city of Seleucia, and the kingdom of Persia with its legendary riches. Yet what do you expect from them except treachery now and war later? The Romans turn their weapons against everyone, particularly those whose defeat will yield the most spoil; by daring the deceit, by breeding war from war they have become great: in this way they overwhelm and put an end to everything. . . . [To defeat the Romans] is not difficult if you in Mesopotamia and we in Armenia surround an army that is without provisions, without support, and has remained safe hitherto only by good luck and our own shortcomings. And you will win fame as one who went out to help great kings and overcame the robbers who plundered the globe.  

Cold-blooded cruelty is the political use of calculated terrorism. Its aim is first to engender a collapse of the spirit of resistance, then a feeling of inevitability. At one point or another in their growth, all empires—among them Rome, the Ottomans, and Europeans overseas—have resorted to it. The political limits of terrorism are reached when conditions acceptable in the framework of what is recognized as such at a given time have been worked out for the subject populations. Such was the case with the status of non-Muslims in the Ottoman empire, which was felt to be tolerable until the birth of modern nationalism. In almost every case, the victor’s “generosity” is above all the expression of his diplomatic farsightedness.

Our Western-centeredness, in the military domain, leads us to treat the contributions of other societies as of no consequence. It took the unexpected victory of Mao Ze-dong to bring about a rediscovery of Sun Zi. European mili-

military superiority, so patent between Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign and World War II, led to neglect of the study of non-Western military thought. Between the fall of Rome and the seventeenth century, however, if we exclude Machiavelli, the outstanding strategic thinking was Byzantine and Chinese. India, too, occupies a place of honor, with Kautilya’s Arthashastra. More than in other disciplines, we are backward as regards matters military outside the West, above all because Orientalists and experts on overseas societies have rarely looked at military problems. Another reason is that because these societies were defeated or in decline, they were often looked down on. However much one may admire the prodigious work devoted to war as a historical phenomenon by Hans Delbrück, one cannot but be struck by his academic narrow-mindedness in dismissing the Mongols in the thirteenth century in three lines, on the pretext that they did not develop anything new in strategic thinking—as if theory simply limped along behind reality. 11 Despite their importance, the lightning expansion of the Arabs in the seventh century and of the Ottomans between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Chinese military tradition, and the strategies that made possible the survival of the Byzantine empire for a thousand years after the fall of Rome have been little studied compared to the numerous writings devoted to rather unimportant European captains. 12 Because he fought the Aztecs, Cortés is held to be a negligible “irregular” in most academic military studies. Yet he has the rare merit of being at once a political and military leader, a strategist (the siege of Tenoñochtityán was an operation on both land and water) and tactician who also classically doubled as heroic war chief. 13

Until the introduction and, above all, the improvement and spread of firearms—that is to say, until very recently, given that the real transition occurred with Frederick the Great of Prussia—the superiority of armies did not lie principally in the quality of their weaponry. Apart from the skill of the commander, organization, capacity to maneuver, cohesion, and morale were almost always decisive. As is shown by the battle of Cannae and some of Napoleon’s victories, numbers did not always carry the day either, provided that the imbalance was made up for by some other factor. In that sense, it is interesting to take a look at the modes of organization and strategic concepts


of other societies—in short, at other strategic cultures. For too long, from the
nineteenth century to the period after World War I, the strategy of indirect
approach (see p. 927 below) was generally neglected in Europe. The quest for
the decisive blow, firepower, and the spirit of unrestricted attack met their lim-
its in World War I, but it took colonial defeats in Asia and the lessons of rev-
olutionary wars to bring about a rethinking of indirect strategy, which is to-
day all the more important because it is almost the sole form conflicts have
been allowed to take since the nuclear stalemate.

SUN ZI’S CONCEPTUAL BREAKTHROUGH

Sun Zi was the author of the oldest known treatise on the art of war, a Chinese
masterpiece unequalled until modern times. In Sun Zi’s work, war is looked at
neither from a moral standpoint nor as either accidental or inevitable. In a
considerable advance on the military theorists of other societies (except for
the Greek historian Thucydides),14 Sun Zi presents war as an essential aspect
of statecraft and an activity lending itself to rational analysis, one to which
peace gives meaning. Sun Zi and Clausewitz agree that war is in the last analy-
sis a political matter. The Chinese treatise begins thus: “The art of war is of
vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death; a road either to
safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account
be neglected.”

Sun Zi does not limit himself to military matters seen from a technical (and
hence superficial) angle, but endeavors to bring out the essence of strategy and
its link with policy. He embraces and synthesizes the general principles that
should guide the conduct of a conflict, placing the greatest stress on the morale
and cohesion of the troops and the importance of “the harmony of the people
with their leaders.” His doctrine stresses the importance of knowledge of
the adversary, how he views things, and his modus operandi: “What is of
extreme importance is to attack the enemy’s strategy.” He devotes a great deal
of space to deception, to manipulating the enemy while maintaining steadfast-
ness and discipline in one’s own forces. For Sun Zi, strategy is based on in-
telligence of the other, knowledge of his weaknesses, and undermining his
morale so as to deliver a final blow to an enemy already in disarray.

As an undogmatic theorist, Sun Zi recognizes the importance of the ability
to adapt to the unforeseen: “And as water has no constant form, there are in
war no constant conditions.” He also adds that there should be no fear of dis-
obeying the ruler’s orders if the situation on the ground so requires. With such

14. See Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, translated by Rex Warner (Baltimore:
a bold assertion, especially at a time when despotism was the rule, Sun Zi was not questioning the political dimensions of conflict (“good rulers deliberate on plans, good generals execute them”), but the rigid directives of rulers lacking the means to assess a concrete situation. The courage and skill of a commander are measured also by his capacity to disobey orders when he is firmly convinced that he holds the tactical key to a situation.

Far from advocating war or even battle, Sun Zi considers that a conflict is best kept short, or else the victor himself risks being exhausted. He advises against sieges and advocates mobile warfare using the element of surprise. He recommends exploiting the enemy’s weaknesses, using what we today call psychological warfare: “Avoid force, strike where he is weak.” This last factor is vital, and rarely has so much emphasis been put on rumor, deception, creating a fifth column, sowing discord among the enemy, and subverting and corrupting his leaders. These tactics are that much easier when dealing with mercenary troops, generals with doubtful loyalties, and conflicts whose outcome is of no great importance except for the dynasty or ruler embarking on it.

Sun Zi’s art of war is essentially a brilliant conceptualization of conflicts with limited objectives and a masterpiece of universal relevance on the use of the indirect approach strategy. One cannot fail to note that in his implicit conception of warfare, none of the factors that determine the outcome of the most deadly conflicts—civil wars and wars to the death between societies with radically opposed values—are to be found. Sun Zi’s intellectual universe is naturally one in which war occurs within a single society, with relatively limited means, and ends within a framework of generally accepted rules. In that sense, the war that Sun Zi writes of is close in its motivations, objectives, and means to medieval conflicts or the dynastic wars with limited objectives of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. With Sun Zi, we are neither in the terrible world of religious and national wars nor in the climate of terror created by clashes between radically different societies—wars to death such as those of the conquistadores in America and the sweeping inroads of nomads that China was soon to experience, against which, after the time of Sun Zi, it built the Great Wall.

WARFARE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

To kings and nobles of the ancient world (from the second millennium B.C. on), the chariot was both a symbol of power and the supreme weapon. The chariot was used by the Egyptians, in the ancient Near East, in ancient India, by the Chinese at the time of the Warring States, and by the Mycenaean or Homeric Greeks, and it was the key means of attack in battle. Mounted on two
wheels and drawn by two horses, it usually carried three warriors: a driver, an archer, and, in the back, someone whom the Assyrian texts call “the third man,” whose role was to protect the other two with a large shield. Cavalry was, of course, used for offensive action. Behind, as always in larger numbers, came the infantry, divided into heavy infantry and light infantry, some using missile weapons—bows and slings—and some thrusting weapons—spears and swords. The body was protected by a helmet, a breastplate, and greaves. Siege weapons made their appearance at a very early date. The Assyrians used mobile screens of solid wickerwork, beneath which they sheltered as they moved toward the walls of a city to fire their arrows. Wheeled machines carried large battering rams to make breaches. Ladders were used for the assault. The Assyrians were probably the best-organized armed force in the ancient Near East. Their use of terror (although it is sometimes excessively attributed to them) seems to have been very widespread everywhere, in order to deter any later resistance, and the defeated paid dearly for their loss: enslavement was the least of evils for a conquered population, which was usually deported.

In about the seventh century B.C., the Spartan phalanx made its appearance in Greece. Foot soldiers played a growing role after they learned to maneuver in groups. The phalanx improved with time. Epaminondas of Thebes made a tactical innovation by strengthening the left wing in depth to annihilate the right wing of the enemy, which usually moved forward faster than the left wing (because of the position of the shield). This oblique arrangement secured victory at Leuctra (371 B.C.) against the Spartans and was also subsequently typical of the Macedonian order of battle. On the wings, the very numerous Macedonian cavalry and the light infantry countered moves by the enemy to outflank the main body. The Macedonian phalanx, armed with long pikes held in both hands, was more powerful than a Spartan phalanx armed with the short one-handed pike. Lightly armed infantrymen, peltasts or targetees, covered the flanks of the phalanx and also engaged in skirmishing. The cavalry, although without stirrups, were important and sometimes decisive, and sieges—too often neglected in the history of battles—also played a considerable role. Well before the fifth century B.C., the catapult, the battering ram, towers, and galleries on wheels were already being used. Later, the Romans improved the order of battle: Roman legionnaires, infantrymen armed with javelins and swords, marched into battle in thin order in two successive waves, a third being held in reserve. This system reached its peak at the time of the Civil War (c. 48–44 B.C.).

15. See, for example, the account of the siege of Tyre in Quintus Curtius, bk. 4.
In Europe (but not in China, where the cavalry played a much more important role because of the impact of nomads), the infantryman was supreme for a thousand years (from the seventh century B.C. to the fourth century A.D.). When, in A.D. 376, the Roman legions were crushed by German cavalry, the infantry was replaced as the shock force by Byzantine horsemen, called cataphracts. It was another thousand years before the infantry recovered its leading role in the fourteenth century with the Swiss in western Europe, and above all in the Balkans with the janissaries, the Ottomans’ shock troops.

For a long time, weaponry remained more or less unchanged, with some variations and improvements (better-smelted steels, bows with greater range, etc.). The pike was the shock weapon of men organized in groups; the sword, the individual shock weapon. Missile weapons included the bow, the sling, and, later, the crossbow. The use of horses in fighting and sometimes elephants or dromedaries completed a panoply that lasted three or four thousand years until the appearance and spread of firearms.

What in fact was important was the organization and cohesion of fighting forces and the combination of missile weapons and thrusting weapons. The skill and sometimes the genius of the leader were, of course, decisive. Great captains were rarely military theorists (the opposite was generally true). The result is that throughout history, until recently, war was generally better fought than studied. It is true that many Greek treatises on tactics (for example, those of Arrian and Aelian) have been lost, but the literature on use of the siege in warfare is considerable, including the writings of Aeneas the tactician, Athenaeus, Biton, Heron of Alexandria, and Apollodorus. Among the Romans, Vegetius (fourth century A.D.) was late. Concrete instances of strategy have to be sought in the historians: in this respect, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Arrian, Tacitus, and Sallust are more than precious. Sometimes in less famous historians, such as Cassius Dio, there are exceptional fragments. Cassius Dio’s description of the naval battle of Actium, in which Octavian, the future emperor Augustus, defeated Antony in 31 B.C. is admirable.

Fundamentally, throughout history, armies seem to have had two ways of fighting. One was through attack and retreat and envelopment, as practiced by the nomads of central Asia (archers on horseback) and the Arabs at the time of the first wave of conquest in the seventh century. The other was by charging in line to create a breach, as with the Macedonian phalanx, the Roman legions, and the Frankish armies at the very beginning of the Crusades, when they were fighting in accordance with the medieval tactics of the West.

The treatment of the defeated varied even in ancient times from society to society and depending on circumstances. It ranged from almost total destruction, as with the Assyrians and Timur, who practiced full-blown terrorism, to partial destruction accompanied by enslavement, the most common treat-
ment, or partial destruction followed by coexistence, the conquerer implanting himself on the conquered society. Alexander's campaigns fall into the last category, and the Muslims also took this approach in building their empires. Often it was the demographic factor (the number of the defeated) that determined this last sort of treatment.

The military side of Greek and Roman antiquity is generally quite well known to us, but for other societies, except for a few experts, we have little to guide us. I shall now sketch the broad outlines of the strategic cultures of a few societies that will be discussed in the pages that follow.

**CHINA AND ITS STRATEGIC CULTURE**

Three observations, of varying importance depending on the period, but all fundamental, must be made regarding the military aspect of Chinese history.

In the north was a frontier that was under almost constant threat from warrior nomads (except for isolated periods, such as the mid seventh and late tenth centuries) from the fourth century B.C. to the seventeenth century A.D. These incursions, which were sometimes invasions, began at the time of the Warring States and grew in intensity after the unification of China in 221 B.C., a few years before the rise of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.—A.D. 221). In less than half a century, between 138 and 90 B.C., there were over twenty large-scale raids and invasions by the Huns (Hsiung-nu). Not only did all Chinese dynasties have, with varying degrees of urgency, to fight the nomads from the north;" China was twice conquered by them. The Mongols, led by Kublai Khan, established the Yuan dynasty, which lasted for a century (1279—1363). They were overthrown by the Ming, but the Mongol threat, which followed that of the nomads generically called Huns, continued to hover over China until the sixteenth century. In 1550, Altan Khan’s Mongols reached the gates of Beijing. In 1620, that Mongol threat was replaced by that of the Manchus, who in 1644 overthrew the Ming and held power until the establishment of the Chinese republic in 1912.

It is impossible to overestimate the defensive aspect of Chinese strategic thinking, which inspired the building of the Great Wall (even though China did make use of offense at certain periods). The closing in on itself that resulted led China, not only to a vision that was self-centered, as with all empires, but to a stance that was simultaneously defensive and disdainful of the non-Chinese world.

17. In 138 b.c., Chang Ch’ien, a contemporary of the historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien, was sent by the Han emperor as ambassador to the king of Bactria to try and make an alliance with countries in the Huns’ rear.
Already by the fourth and third centuries B.C., Chinese troops had adapted to the necessities of war against nomadic mounted archers. Cavalry played an important role in China even before the Han, while logistical problems led to the multiplication of strongpoints that were not castles as such but fortified towns, in which the administration and trade were concentrated.

Starting in the fourteenth century A.D., another threat appeared, this time from the sea. Raids by Japanese pirates along the coast increased under the Ming, especially in the sixteenth century. The Ming established a new version of the Great Wall in the shape of a series of fortified strongholds from Korea in the north to Annam in the south, and a large fleet was mobilized, but it was not possible to think of an offensive given the threat of the nomads in the north, and the Ming ended up opting for depopulation of the coastal areas, with the resulting collapse of maritime trade. This Chinese “defensive withdrawal” embraced an area larger than the whole of Europe excluding Russia.

Another aspect of Chinese military history that is sometimes overlooked is the constant effort by the central government to cope with peasant revolts or provincial crises, upheavals that sometimes even precipitated the fall of a dynasty. The fact that some of the empire’s military operations were directed against the population it administered—which is not peculiar to China—recalls one of the often neglected functions of armies: to restore order. (For much of the nineteenth century after the congress of Vienna, the British and French armies intervened frequently to maintain or restore order in the metropoles.)

During the period between 750 and 950 A.D., Chinese military problems were internal: the T’ang put an end to regionalism and at the same time pursued an offensive policy. Historians noted that in 751 the Arabs defeated the T’ang, without always realizing that, at the time of the battle of Talas, the Chinese forces were as far from their bases as the Muslim ones were from theirs. Chinese troops who had covered 2,000 miles and were in the steppes of Turkestan, with an overextended supply chain, were far from enjoying favorable conditions.

The occupation and administration of China’s eighteen provinces were a considerable accomplishment, and it is wise to remember that China was the largest and longest-lasting empire that the world has known, built on a homogeneous society constructed around shared values. Unified China was virtually self-sufficient for almost ten centuries before maritime trade with the states of southeast Asia began to grow significantly.

The last essential military factor in classical Chinese history is the advance to the south and southwest that brought about a shift of the heart of Chinese society from its original northern home.

The military policy of the Chinese empire, founded on force of arms, political intelligence, and the social organization instituted by the mandarin bu-
The eastern part of the Roman empire, which lasted for a thousand years after the fall of Rome (how many empires have lasted so long?), was its more populous half. Apart from Rome, the biggest cities of the empire were Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Tarsus. In the course of its long existence, the Byzantine empire successfully resisted the attacks of the Huns, the Avars, the Arabs, the Bulgars, and the Kievan Russians, and survived the Crusaders before falling in 1453.

Under Justinian (527–65 A.D.), the Byzantine empire took the offensive, after defeating the Sassanids of Iran. The small but excellent forces of Belisarius, almost 40 percent of whom were horsemen (archers on horseback), triumphed over the Vandals of North Africa. Narses conquered central and southern Italy by defeating the Ostrogoths. Byzantine superiority lay in combining the use of mounted archers (taken over from the Avars), heavy cavalry (cataphracts) armed with lances, and infantry. Domination of the Mediterranean gave Byzantium a further advantage when it was necessary to send reinforcements.

For a brief moment, the Roman empire was almost wholly restored to its former territorial extent, but such far-flung borders were scarcely tenable in the face of rising perils. Byzantium was almost constantly threatened, often on two fronts. Before long, the empire embraced only what it was able successfully to defend.

From the reign of the emperor Maurikios (582–602) on, the empire’s policy was mainly defensive, and this was to remain its strategy for centuries to come. Byzantium pursued above all a defensive policy in the face of threats, or at best an offensive defensive policy. The reforms introduced by Maurikios were of great importance: he ensured the security of the frontiers through a

---

18. That is to say, taking the offensive for defensive motives, the purpose being more to maintain a status quo or ward off a threat than to extend domination.
system of distributing land to the soldiers of the themes. The theme system, which rested on local forces, made it possible to contain foreign intervention long enough for reinforcements to arrive. A strategic reserve was built up, and lines of fortified strongpoints were constructed in sensitive areas. A chain of over fifty fortresses defended the Danube, for example.

As a theorist, Maurikios condemned the line system, and for battle advocated, not penetration through shock, but envelopment, doubtless having learnt the lessons of the tactics used by the nomads from the steppes. Byzantine conceptions of war were much more developed than those of the feudal West. As against the direct approach of the Franks, whose heavy cavalry used shock tactics, the Byzantines preferred an indirect strategy, and, like every threatened empire, thought of war in all its dimensions. Diplomacy played a major role; war was only a last resort, and if it came to that, attempts were made to seek allies in the enemy’s rear. The Byzantine empire was more of a sea power even than Rome. Reinforcements were sent by sea rather than by land, as, for example, when Heraclius (610–41) was fighting the Sassanids, in a remarkable campaign of envelopment and attack from the rear.

Byzantine sailors, whose dromonds (biremes) covered the Mediterranean, had a considerable asset in Greek fire, invented in 673 and used successfully against Muslim fleets in 677 and again in 717–18, at the time of the siege of Constantinople by the Arabs, and later against the Kievan Russians in 941 and 1043.

Made up of patient prudence, stratagems, knowledge of the enemy, and sometimes the use of terror, as against the Bulgars under Basil II in the tenth century, the Byzantine art of war as practiced between the seventh and tenth centuries can be likened to that of Sun Zi: there was the same idea that war is a phenomenon that lends itself to rational analysis, the same strategy of wearing down and demoralizing the enemy. There was none of the chivalry and ritual of western Europe, where strategic thinking was at best in its infancy.

What is exceptional in Maurikios, as later in Leo VI, is that the enemy, instead of being abstract, as in classical strategic treatises, is described and analyzed in terms of his behavior, his virtues, his weaknesses, and his manner of fighting. Never in the history of strategy has the famous advice “Know your enemy” been applied with such seriousness and so concretely.” It is difficult for us to grasp how new the idea was that it was necessary to understand the strategic cultures of different opponents in order to be in a better position to thwart them. Different enemies require different solutions.

19. In his Germania, Tacitus sketches an ethnology of the Germans, but, not being a strategist, he does not explain how to fight them. Curiously, in the thirteenth century, it was the inspired Franciscan Giovanni of Plano Carpino who, dealing with the Mongols, rediscovered the importance of knowing one’s enemy. So, later, did Ibn Khaldun.
In the sixth and seventh centuries, Byzantium fought the Huns and Avars and adapted to the fighting techniques of mounted archers. In the seventh century, the empire was simultaneously fighting the Avars and the Slavs in the Balkans. In the east, the fight was against the Sassanids, not to annihilate them—as was the aim with the nomads and the Slavs—but to ensure respect for a zone of influence.

Just when the Byzantine and Sassanid empires were exhausted by a long conflict, the Muslim threat made its appearance. Following the death of the Prophet, the Arabs embarked on a lightning expansion. In less than fifteen years, Iran collapsed, while Byzantium lost Syria-Palestine and Egypt. Halted at the Cilician Gates, the Arabs sought to challenge the Byzantine empire for supremacy at sea. But Byzantium resisted, and in 717–18, the last Arab siege of Constantinople was a failure. The true bastion of Christianity in the seventh century was the Byzantine empire. The halt that it put to the Arab advance in 718 was far more important than the victory of 732 at Poitiers. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Muslims were able to advance as far as Vienna (1529).

In his *Taktika*, the emperor Leo VI (who paraphrased both Onasander and Maurikios) introduced a number of new features; it was also a treatise that, like Vegetius’s, constituted a summation of the strategic thinking that had preceded it: “Analyzing the causes of the success of Islam and how to put an end to it, [Leo] was led to think comparatively about the organization of the empire, the mode of recruitment of the soldiers and their integration into society and on the situation of a state engaged in constant warfare,” writes Georges Dagron.20

Emperor Leo’s thinking about this new adversary with a universal appeal, quite unlike the barbarians of the steppes, led him, a century before the Crusades, to envisage the idea of a war in the name of Christendom.

In Nicephorus Phocas’s work on guerrilla warfare, we can see how, for over two centuries, Byzantine horsemen protected the Cilician frontier against Islam. Such horsemen, patrolling the borders of the empire with their own special esprit de corps, were later also to be found under the Hapsburg empire in the shape of Hungarian hussars, Croatian pandours, and Albanian stradiots, waging the same mounted war of harassment against the Ottomans. This military frontier (Militärgrenze) guard created in the sixteenth century, often with refugees from the Balkans, was only dissolved in 1869.

Before long, other threats appeared: the Hungarians, the Kievan Russians, and, above all, the Bulgars. The war against the Bulgars was the main business

of the reign of Basil II (976–1025). Defense became chronically bipolar: in the west the frontier along the Danube was under pressure from the Bulgars; in the east, there was the Muslim threat in Anatolia. The decline of Byzantium began at the end of the tenth century, but the empire had enough wind and resources to survive almost four hundred years longer.

On land as on sea, the Byzantine empire established its supremacy over a period of at least six centuries under a series of remarkable emperors. In the ninth century A.D., a series of innovations in defensive siegework was introduced. The number of surrounding walls was increased; outworks were interposed; the height and, above all, the thickness of walls was increased, and walls were built with standard blocks, cemented, and reinforced with metal joints; and round towers (more resistant to battering rams than angle towers) were constructed with salients and recesses, all protected by wider and deeper ditches.

These innovations manifest a quite remarkable military art, whose true originality is too little known. This is partly because the Byzantine empire was long unjustly scorned because of its religious disputes; however, such disputes were for at least a thousand years just as much a feature of both the Catholic Church and Islam.

THE BEGINNINGS OF ISLAM

The initial expansion of the Arabs following the death of Muhammad in 632 was prodigious. A political and military empire was organized in the space of a few decades based on a religion with a universal vocation. Part of this drive came from the fact that Islam provides religious justification for war. The notion of the jihad, a holy war waged on behalf of God, like that of shahid, martyrdom for the faith, is to be found more than once in the Koran: “And call not those who are slain in the way of Allah ‘dead’. Nay, they are living, only ye perceive not” (2.154). With the introduction of Islam, the faith and discipline

21. Heraclius I (610–41); Leo III, the Isaurian (717–41); Basil I (867–86), who restored the border on the Euphrates; Romanus I, Lecapenus (919–44), who reconquered Armenia; Nicephorus Phocas (963–69); John I, Tzimisces (969–76); Basil II, Bulgaroctonus (976–1025); and Alexis I, Comnenus (1081–1118).

22. Contemporary works of relevance include Nicephorus Uranus’s Tactics and Kekaumenos’s Strategikon; see J. F. Haldon, Some Aspects of Byzantine Military Technology from the Sixth to the Tenth Century (London, 1975).

born of the Koranic precepts were added to the individual qualities of the Bedouin fighter. This was not an army of mercenaries, ready to mutiny as soon as it was not paid, but of volunteers, soldiers of God. In terms of numbers, the alliance between the various tribes of Arabia certainly made it possible to put ten or fifteen thousand men in line, and it must be remembered that, under Justinian, Belisarius undertook his victorious campaign against the Vandals and the Goths with fifteen thousand soldiers. The proverbial individual warrior qualities of the Bedouin are well known. “The nomads live an isolated life. They are not defended by walls. Therefore, they provide their own defense. They always carry weapons and are ever on the watch; they watch carefully for the least sign of danger, putting their trust in their fortitude and their strength. Fortitude has become a character quality of theirs, and courage their second nature,” writes Ibn-Khaldun.

As sons of the desert, the Arabs won their victories largely because they fought their decisive battles against Persia and Byzantium in the desert: “The key to all the early operations, against Persia and against Syria alike, is that the Persians and Byzantines could not move in the desert, being mounted on horses. The Muslims were like a sea-power cruising off shore,” Glubb Pasha observes.24 Rather like the Norse and Danish pirates who raided England, the Arabs were at first afraid to move far “inland.” Raiding fringe areas, the “shores” of the desert, they hastened back to their own element when danger threatened. Except for the “battle of the Bridge” in 635, when the Arabs made the mistake of crossing the Euphrates and fighting with their backs to the river, the Persians were always engaged on the desert side. When, after a prolonged resistance, the Byzantine armies collapsed at the battle of the River Yarmak in 636, a sandstorm helped the Muslim forces.

Less than half a dozen years after the death of the Prophet, the mobile and highly motivated armies of the Muslims had conquered both the forces of Byzantium in Syria-Palestine (Yarmak, 636) and the Persians at Kadisiya (636). Penetration into Mesopotamia began; Damascus had already fallen into the hands of the Muslims in 635. On the one side, they advanced as far as Antioch, at the foot of the Taurus mountains, and on the other as far as Ctesiphon on the Tigris (in 641). By 638, they appeared irresistible. Byzantium was able to counterattack and retain control of Asia Minor, but Muslim expansion continued eastward, toward the borders of central Asia and India, and westward into Egypt. Given the maritime superiority of the Byzantine empire, the conquest of Egypt, at least in the Nile Delta, might have been very difficult. But the Byzantine patriarch, who himself had continuously oppressed the Copts,

chose to submit after a single defeat in battle. By 641, the Arabs controlled Egypt from the east bank of the Nile, except for Alexandria, which submitted in 642.

The conquest of Persia continued on two fronts: along a line in the south from Basra to Ahvaz\textsuperscript{25} and a northern line, running from the Tigris, by way of the foothills of the Zagros mountains, to Nehavend (642). Following their victory at Nehavend, the Arabs occupied Ecbatana (Hamadan), and the Persians fought no further large-scale battles. Nevertheless, resistance continued, tenaciously; and the Persians, once Islamized, were the first to reassert their identity.

The Arabs suffered a reverse in the Sudan but moved victoriously toward Tripoli, which they took in 643. In a dozen years (632–44), from the reign of the caliphs Abu Bakr and ‘Umar on, there was a period of uninterrupted expansion, and these successes had to do with the fact that the conquered populations were not subjected to systematic forced conversions. Provided that they paid tribute, the “peoples of the book” (Jews and Christians) could continue to practice their faiths. Two of the greatest empires in the world had been defeated, and the Arab conquests proved durable.

Although the Arab expansion was halted in the north by the barrier of the Caucasus, it spread to east and northwest Africa. North Africa was, at least nominally, under the suzerainty of the Byzantine empire, but the Arabs had provided themselves with a fleet by 650, and Byzantine naval supremacy was strongly challenged from 655 on. In 652, the last Sassanid ruler disappeared.\textsuperscript{26}

After the assassination of the caliph ‘Uthman in 656, civil war broke out over the succession (‘Ali’s candidacy, etc.). In fact, the great Arab caliphate reached what was almost its military apogee in a quarter of a century (632–56). Schisms and heresies shook the Arab empire, but it nevertheless resumed its advance across North Africa, against tenacious Berber resistance, after the assassination of ‘Ali in 661. In 711 the Strait of Gibraltar was crossed, and in a decade almost the whole of the Iberian peninsula had been conquered. Constantinople was besieged, unsuccessfully, for a first time in 670 and again in 717. In the east, by the end of the seventh century, the Muslim conquest had reached central Asia (713) and the barrier of the Indus (710). In fewer than fifty years, the Arabs had conquered a vast empire, which, militarily, lasted for two and a half centuries. Only Alexander had previously achieved such vast conquests, but his were much less durable. Muslim expansion, the bulk of which occurred between 632 and 680, profoundly transformed the world.

\textsuperscript{25} This was the same route that the Iraqi armies took in 1980.

\textsuperscript{26} It was not until the sixteenth century that a new Persian dynasty, the Safavids, established itself.