

War Through the Ages

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John Keegan. *A History of Warfare*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 432 pages, \$36.95.

Keegan's *A History of Warfare* is a long and very uneven account of the "organized violence" which has dogged the history of humanity since the beginning of organized society. The attempt to encompass the whole of the human race in his account is wholly praiseworthy as are his divisions of warfare into four main sections — stone, flesh, iron and fire — which roughly correspond with the weapons at the disposal of the combatants. These sections are interrupted by four quite separate and often quite unrelated essays on topics such as "Limitations on Warmaking," "Fortifications," "Armies" and "Logistics and Supply." Keegan's military history is conventional; he deals adequately with various well-rehearsed topics from Alexander the Great to Hitler, adding little to what he and many other historians have said in similar but usually less ambitious accounts. One drawback of trying to do so much, however, is that the period for which there is most evidence, that is the last five hundred years, is covered in a rather breathless fashion in the chapter entitled "Fire" which attempts to encompass the history of warfare for the whole world from the first cannon to the hydrogen bomb in 69

pages, of which thirteen are devoted to the Second World War.

Had Keegan restricted himself to the history of warfare he would have produced a reasonable and sometimes stimulating account. Unfortunately he tries to do much more than that. The whole first section, some 60 pages, seems to be a speculative essay, entitled "War in Human History" which has less to do with history and more to do with an attack on Clausewitz. He begins with the portentous statement that "War is not a continuation of policy by other means" [p.3]. Contradicting Clausewitz is hardly an earth-shaking position. The problem is, however, that from there on, and for the next twenty-five pages, Clausewitz serves as a kind of whipping-horse for some of Keegan's less carefully considered flights of fancy. Clausewitz becomes a symbol for all things that Keegan considers have gone wrong with ancient society. This is apparently because Clausewitz was a "child of Aristotle" and therefore believed in the supreme importance of "politics." Warfare, argues Keegan, is not an extension of politics but of "culture." That may be an entirely defensible position but

having so clearly demonstrated that Clausewitz was wrong he might then surely have left him alone and explained his own theory of the relationship between "culture" and "warmaking." But he does not do that — he goes on berating Clausewitz not only for being wrong but also for being right, that is by showing how when people adopt Clausewitz's ideas, as they seem to do more often than can really be demonstrated from the record, they destroy themselves. His first example in the next section, entitled "War as Culture," is from Easter Island — in brief, the Easter Islanders destroyed themselves because they made war an extension of politics, they followed Clausewitz and "Clausewitzian warfare did not serve the ends of Polynesian culture" [p.28]. Next come the Zulus — "Shaka was a perfect Clausewitzian . . . In short the rise and fall of the Zulu nation offers an awful warning of the short-comings of the Clausewitzian analysis" [p.32]. We go on to the Mamelukes, who are, of course, destroyed by Napoleon and "Clausewitz, if he knew the facts did not draw the inference" (that culture was as powerful a force as politics in the choice of military means and often more likely to prevail), though nothing in this or the next section on the Samurai seems to prove his point; the Samurai are un-Clausewitzian because they preserve, at least for a time, their own culture, (swords rather than guns) which surprisingly enough, was not influenced by Clausewitz. Nowhere does Keegan seem to realize that if "Culture," defined on p.46 as practically everything that human beings do and think, is indeed the core of all societies then of course by that very definition "politics" can be no more separate from "culture" than warfare. The relationship between these two products of "culture" do need some close examination, even if Clausewitz is not the last word, or even the most important thinker, on this subject.

But Keegan has a different agenda. He begins the last section of the introductory chapter which he calls "Culture without War" by suggesting that 'Clausewitz really represents the heart of "western culture" because of the primacy in which "politics" was held by that "culture" from Aristotle onwards. He concedes that Clausewitz might

not have understood the importance of "cultural history" because Voltaire did not. He uses Berlin's essay on Vico to illustrate the relative newness of "comparative history" although one is not quite clear that he has understood the import of that essay. Clausewitz did not understand the importance of Oxus . . . "Military historians now recognize that the banks of the Oxus are to warfare what Westminster is to parliamentary democracy. . . ." It does get very confusing because within a page Clausewitz is cheering Robert McNamara for threatening the world with nuclear annihilation — the ultimate Clausewitzian "war" — which despite the veneration of him by the "post-war academics" has not be fought. Clausewitz in this section is blamed almost on the same page for attempting to recreate an archaic "warrior society" and being responsible for the creation of "nuclear deterrence abhorrent to humane sentiment," . . . he was also, of course, responsible for the huge casualties of the First World War. The point that the twentieth century has seen a substantial "remilitarization" is hardly a new one but it is not one that can be attributed solely to Clausewitz. Perhaps there is some need to look at politics after all, even if politics is only a reflection of "cultural" history. As he ends this rather muddled section, Keegan suggests that war can be abolished in the same way as the world has gotten rid of slavery, infanticide, human sacrifice and duelling — "~Tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd," but the idea that war will simply cease because humanity will realize that "costs clearly exceed benefits" seems to suggest that in the past people have most often fought wars out of calculation rather than fear, not really an adequate interpretation. Even more curious is the fact that in his interlude "Limitations on Warmaking" there is no reference at all to either cultural or political limitations to warfare, only limitations brought about by "the laws of nature" [p.71]. This interlude also includes a somewhat tangential discussion of naval warfare.

The chapter entitled "Stone" begins with the question of why men fight at all and attempts in a few pages to summarize the latest debates amongst psychologists and

anthropologists. This useful but somewhat abbreviated section leads us into the general history of warfare and Keegan attempts from there on to include in his discussion as many societies as possible. This follows more or less conventional lines but the "cultural" connection is everywhere vague and somewhat simplistic. Thus the Greek phalanx made warfare far more terrible than it had been in its more "primitive" version but the explanation for not seeking a "Clausewitzian" solution was that either "there nevertheless remained strong traces of primitivism in Greek warmaking" or that "invasion of city state's fields [was] . . . the violation of tabu" [p.251]. This was hardly a very sophisticated interpretation of Greek culture, which moreover does not explain how Alexander the Great escaped from these limitations so readily.

Keegan is a forceful writer and some of the sections in the book, particularly the ones dealing with the "horse people," are interesting and thought-provoking. The difficulty is that Keegan has tried to write two books at the same time. This becomes most obvious as he comes to the end of the section on "Fire" and in his "Conclusion." The relationship between "culture" and "warfare" is never really properly explored; the whole question of restraint, other than "primitive ritualization," and of international law hardly get any mention, except briefly on pp.382-3, almost as a kind of after-thought. The rather well-known essays which do in fact deal with the relationship between war and "culture," such as John Nefs "War and Human Progress," which not only deals with "culture" but also has some very sharp criticisms of Clausewitz, or A. Vagts "History of Militarism," which again has a very negative interpretation of Clausewitz and his influence, are missing from the bibliography and their ideas do not seem to have been incorporated into this work. The same may be said of Q. Wright's classic "A Study of War" and Fuller's "The Conduct of War, 1789-1961" with its devastating chapter on Clausewitz. The idea that Clausewitz is universally admired in "academic circles" hardly bears much examination.

In the "Conclusion" Keegan states that he hopes that he has illustrated that there are no simple answers to what war is or that it has only one nature. There can be no disagreement with this. Keegan goes on to repeat that "Culture is, nevertheless, the prime determinant of the nature of warfare" [p.387] and shows that "oriental" warfare is characterized by special features — one may again agree but it would be helpful to have some statement about the relationship between "oriental culture," which seems to include everything from the Mongol conquerors to Chinese, Japanese and Islamic civilizations and "warmaking." Their methods all included "restraint," unlike Alexander the Great and the Greeks. Yet almost on the next page Keegan explains that the Crusades "resolved the inherent Christian dilemma over the morality of warmaking by transmitting to the West the ethic of holy war . . ." [p.390]. Still it was "oriental restraint" that succumbed to the "ruthlessness it was not prepared or able to mobilize even in self-defence" against the Western style of warfare. Since that very style of warfare has "brought disaster and threatened catastrophe" [p.391], the world must now learn from "oriental" restraint and from the "primitive" world also. "Politics must continue, war cannot" — all fine sentiments and ones with which few can take exception — we even need to keep our "warriors" provided they only fight against "ethnic bigots, regional warlords, ideological intransigents and organized international criminals" [p.392]. Again, who can quarrel with that? Keegan will get proper praise for voicing such sentiments, but a book explaining the difficult connection between "culture" and "warfare" over the whole of human history, or even only in the twentieth century, has still to be written.

Robert Vogel, Professor of History at McGill University and co-author of the *Maple Leaf Route*, passed away on April 1, 1994. He will be sorely missed by *CMH* and its readers.