



## *The Causes of War and the Spread of Peace: But Will War Rebound?*

by Azar Gat.

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Review by Edmund F. Byrne, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (ebyrne@iupui.edu).

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With this book, Israeli political scientist Azar Gat (Tel Aviv Univ.) makes a commendable contribution to the ongoing discussion of whether peace is replacing war as the preferred policy among the developed countries in the world or human beings are simply by nature warriors. He draws extensively on the research of anthropologists and specialists in ancient history in this distillation of his much more exhaustive volume *War in Human Civilization*<sup>1</sup> (41).

From his study of prehistoric Australia (19–31), Gat concludes that human beings have never been altogether peaceful, but he stops short of arguing that we are violent *by nature*. Rather, he finds, humans have always resorted to violence, including organized war, when the benefits of so doing have seemed to outweigh those of remaining at peace. This situation endures today in the undeveloped world, where most armed violence takes place. By contrast, the people of present-day modernized states have determined that they gain more by remaining at peace with one another. That said, two important and populous countries—Russia and China—though committed to industrialization, have yet to modernize politically and thus pose threats to peace in years to come.

Gat parries objections to his thesis. Some influential thinkers, for example, Thomas Hobbes, have held that violence, including group violence, has always been endemic among humans (chap. 1). In contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued the contrary, a position espoused by certain anthropologists, notably Douglas Fry, who downplay the evidence for warring in earliest times. Gat himself follows John Locke in stressing how people and communities have learned to live together in peace (39). Before such “humanization” could occur, hunter-gatherers had to compete with one another for the limited resources available at any given time and place. Such was the first 90 percent of human history (chap. 2). That competition continued more brutally among pre-industrial civilizations (chap. 3).

In time, the contest merely to survive expanded into quests for power and abundant resources and led to “massive social power structures” (65) or, in Gat’s Hobbesian terminology, State-Leviathans. Leaders of such organized communities often seduced or compelled their subjects to fight less well organized outsiders in a collective quest for power, including sexual and reproductive power, among other rewards. One consequence of this was that the zero-sum game of pre-state warfare often gave way to net-loss outcomes for warrior males.

Gat maintains, pace Carl Clausewitz, that policies extended by war often failed to benefit all participants and that raping women often served as a compensatory reward for warriors (74). Leaders, for their part, acquired whole harems and other perquisites of power and glory and so grew soft: “For this reason, large, rich, and populous states and empires throughout history regu-

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1. New York: Oxford U Pr, 2006.

larly fell prey to relatively small armed groups led by ambitious upstarts from their poor and war-like barbarian marches” (90).

Next come critiques of scholars of (pre-state) anthropology and international relations (chaps. 4–5). Gat writes that, for instance, Franz Boas and Margaret Mead long minimized the prevalence of fighting in antiquity, overlooking “a fairly recognizable deep core of evolution-shaped innate propensities, needs, and desires” (100). Anthropologists have remained slow to perceive a continuum between biological and cultural anthropology. “Cultural materialists” like Marvin Harris stress production, reproduction, and surviving offspring as purely cultural phenomena, as against Napoleon Chagnon and Brian Ferguson, who concentrate on reasons for war.

As regards international relations, Gat focuses on realism, which sees state behavior as driven by self-interest and self-reliance in the quest for power and wealth. Over time, however, realists have moved closer to the liberal/idealist approach. Kenneth Waltz, for example, asserts that security is the main goal of the international system and calls for “structural neo-realism.” The author identifies other goals besides security and notes that realists increasingly recognize that war does not pay (117).

Gat devotes chapter 6 to the claim that modernization fosters peace. He begins by asking whether peace has really become a preferred goal and, if so, why. Against the horrific world wars of the twentieth century he sets unprecedented periods of peace: 1815–1914, 1918–39, and 1945 to the present. He points out, too, that pre-modern wars killed much higher percentages of belligerent countries’ populations. He notes that modern armaments do not necessarily increase mortality, because they improve defensive as well as offensive measures, but he fails to consider saturation bombing.

Ancient peoples were more likely to approve going to war, because in their day it often brought greater benefits than did peace (144). That attitude has changed and modern democracies now rarely fight each other directly. Why? Scholars like Erik Gartzke and later Patrick McDonald have pointed to mutual trade and free trade as reasons for keeping the peace. This fails, however, to take account of the global economic depression of the 1930s and the economic progress made in non-democratic countries such as China and Russia (152).

Nevertheless, Gat insists that the key peace-favoring factor—modernization—constitutes “the decisive change” whereby “profitability has been not on the war side of the equation but on its peace side” (156). Such wars as still occur (“new wars”) mostly involve under-developed countries or the intrusion of a developed country. Gat notes the latter’s restrictions on violence, ignoring the ever-increasing use of killer drones. Democracy as such, he believes, contributes to peace, but less so than industrialization and economic modernization (158–63), especially in a global context. Other peace-favoring factors include affluence, urbanization, and sexual liberation.

In his book’s seventh and last chapter, the author identifies current causes of war: ethno-national conflicts, resurgent imperialism, a new association of ownership with profitability, and the rise of anti-liberal and anti-democratic ideologies (191–94). The failure of communism has left democratic capitalism, Gat avers, as the only path to peaceful modernity. But its efficacy varies according to the degree of equality secured by “welfare state” policies (200). Gat sees potential problems arising out of China and Russia (223–26) and the (re)emergence of illiberal parties in Europe and, seemingly, the United States. Based on demographic data, he sees the European Union, Japan, East Asian and Pacific allies, and India as future great powers (213). He reiterates that the poorest countries constitute the “zone of war” and speculates (230–40) about how well terrorists can be contained. Ironically, his conclusion is built around President (and drone-killing activist) Barack Obama’s speech upon receiving the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.

Azar Gat has written a balanced, thought-provoking, and (comparatively) succinct appraisal of arguments about peace enhancement and its ongoing viability.<sup>2</sup> Its most serious flaw is a failure to consider the implications of a US budget that devotes over 50 percent of disposable income to the military.<sup>3</sup>

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2. The book has not been well edited: it is, e.g., rife with misspellings of proper names.

3. American military spending rose from \$598 billion in 2015 and \$610 billion in 2017 to President Trump's \$700 billion in 2018. Inflation is a factor in this increase, of course, but is not in itself an adequate explanation. By comparison, China's military budget was \$145 billion in 2015, \$151.4 billion in 2017, and \$174.5 billion in 2018. Russia's was \$52 billion in 2015, \$66.3 billion in 2017, and \$46 billion in 2018.