


[Turcotte on Cabanes, 'Une histoire de la guerre: Du XIXe siècle à nos jours'](#)

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Bruno Cabanes, ed. *Une histoire de la guerre: Du XIXe siècle à nos jours*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2018. 800 pp. 32.00 € (paper), [ISBN 978-2-02-128722-6](#). 

Reviewed by Jean-Michel Turcotte (Leibniz Institute for European History) **Published on** H-War (December, 2022) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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War and warfare have certainly been among the most examined topics in the humanities and social sciences in the last 150 years. Not only scholars but also practitioners and victims of war have explored various military, legal, diplomatic, philosophical, social, political, psychological, economic, and human dimensions of armed conflicts. On the modern definition and understanding of "warfare," rich scholarship has been developed since the reflection of Carl von Clausewitz in his famous book, *On War (Vom Kriege)* (1976; translated and edited version, 1992). Therefore, research exploring the complexity of war is now recognized as the field of war studies, which is examined in numerous university chairs, research institutions, memorials, and documentation centers. A simple search using the word "war" in the *American Historical Review* results in 45,287 entries. Although very few interstate conflicts such as those that appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remain today, war is still well present in societies in different forms, causing major impacts on populations around the world. Modern warfare as defined by scholars has evolved significantly from the creation of nation-states to the war on terror. This complex evolution is the central object of the edited volume, *Une histoire de la guerre*, directed by Bruno Cabanes, Professor and Donald G. & Mary A. Dunn Chair in Modern Military History at the Ohio State University.

Published in 2018, and promoted by the publisher in their marketing as (an event), this impressive eight-hundred-page edited volume contains contributions of fifty-seven of the world's leading scholars in the field, including Sir Hew Strachan, Samuel Moyn, Richard Overy, John Horne, Robert Gerwarth, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Henry Rousso, and Annette Becker. The rich group of contributors from various multidisciplinary backgrounds includes historians, art historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists. This amalgam of specialists not only offers fascinating thoughts on new developments in the field of war studies but also proposes a comprehensive global history of warfare since the creation of nation-states in the nineteenth century. Readers can thus get in touch with various approaches used by scholars in the field of military history, broadly defined, as well as multiple avenues for future research. As stated by Cabanes, this book aims "to provide a multi-faceted analysis of modern conflicts from a global perspective, covering both the western and non-western worlds—the latter an area too often neglected in standard histories of modern warfare."^[1]

As the book shows, experience, practice, and representation of war have significantly changed over

the last two hundred years. Wars of revolution, imperial wars, total wars, ideological wars, and, more recently, war on terrorism are examples of the evolution of armed conflicts. Mutations of this phenomenon involve development of large-scale strategies, lethal technologies, large mobilization including women and children, industrial warfare, and mass destruction. Those aspects have notably contributed to blurring the frontier between combatants and noncombatants and provoking disasters for civilians, often victims of massacres, violence, atrocities, genocide, and ethnic cleaning. Even the meaning of traditional concepts, such as "battle" and "battlefield," evolved in the last century according to the nature of warfare. Meanwhile, wars also have contributed to discussions on refugees, international law, humanitarian issues, and ethical and moral debates on non-conventional warfare. Many of these issues are still present today, for instance, with the use in remote mode of unmanned combat weapons such as drones. The book thus aims to show how war and armed conflict affect societies, institutions, politics, the environment, and the economy, as well as beliefs, emotions, bodies, mentalities, behaviors, and representations.

In terms of methodology, the volume proposes an innovative approach by focusing on different themes related to nineteenth- and twentieth-century warfare instead of exploring individually and chronologically various conflicts and specific periods. In comparison to a large existing literature examining precise aspects of war, such as battles, diplomacy and international relations, strategies, or cultural production, *Une histoire de la guerre* advances a broad perspective on the concept of "modern warfare," conceived as a "total" social and cultural phenomenon involving state, military, and civilian components. Moreover, this approach brings readers behind traditional national histories of warfare, especially those of Western countries. To do that, the volume introduces various methodologies, such as transnational, global, and interconnected histories. It argues that war is a process not only of destruction, as largely suggested in scholarship, but also of construction (and reconstruction) in societies.

The book is divided into four parts. It begins with contributions examining the meaning of "modern warfare." This part proposes reflections on definitions and the multiple particularities of "modernity" in war by exploring cases of inter-nation conflicts, imperialism, radicalization of warfare, and post-1945 multilateral armed conflicts. The understanding of modern warfare also involves civil wars, colonial wars, guerillas, insurrections, and terrorism. Among the topics discussed are strategies, the concept of "citizen-soldier," the use of mercenaries, the creation of international humanitarian law to restrict warfare, the state of destruction in various areas, the impact of technologies and patriotism, and the development of various movements contesting wars.

The second part explores the diverse types and categories of combatants and their multiple motivations to participate in wars. Contributions answer central questions of who they are and why and for whom they are fighting. Chapters explore how traditional soldiers' careers contrast with the path of colonial soldiers, partisans, volunteers, and, from a gender perspective, women and children combatants. This section also includes a discussion on combatants who were taken as prisoners. Authors raise the question of how and why some individuals pursued combat in terrible conditions despite the horror and trauma they witnessed while others at the opposite resisted and refused to fight.

The following part contains nineteen contributions that explore various topics related to the experiences of war for two categories of participants: soldiers and civilians. The first texts examine

the case of soldiers as officially recognized combatants: impact of wars on their bodies and mind, the care of the dead and wounded, colonial war, soldiers' emotions, and soldiers as eyewitnesses to war. The second group of contributions addresses the experience of civilians through cases of bombardment, nuclear weapons, occupation, massacres and atrocities, mobilization, civil war, movement of populations and displaced people, and various forms of violence and abuses, such as hunger and sexual violence.

The last part of the book examines the "*Sorties de guerre*" or postwar transitions. Often neglected by scholars, the troubling and complex periods of transition from war to peace have involved important transformations in societies. According to the authors, the practice of war and type of warfare directly affect the construction of the postwar. They also show that the concept of "postwar" itself is far from being limited to armistices and peace agreements. After the end of combat, war continues to have a major impact on societies in terms of political, social, and cultural changes. Demobilized and wounded soldiers, civilians, families, intellectuals, governments, and policymakers are all affected by the transition to peace. For instance, Rousso mentions successive waves of demobilization and remobilization by the end of a war as well as long-term impacts of various forms of violence on populations and soldiers, making the boundaries between war and peace a far more nuanced process than some scholars have suggested. Among the numerous examples showing the blurred demarcation between war and peace, or the progressive transition of one to the other, contributions examine such cases study as Yalta peace agreements, displaced people, the return to civil life for soldiers and their families, the destruction (and reconstruction) of infrastructure, institutions and human beings, the trauma of war, the mourning of death, memory of violence and genocide, national as well as international reconciliation, and veterans' and survivors' testimonies of war.

Overall, the contribution of *Une histoire de la guerre* to the field of war studies is welcome. Not only does the volume gather an impressive collection of scholars exploring multiple facets of the global phenomenon of war, but it also succeeds to raise complex questions regarding the evolution of warfare over the last 150 years. In addition, the volume is written in a language accessible to a nonacademic public, which will help to democratize debates and discussion about the nature of war. As a result, it has been recognized as one of the "25 books of the year 2018" by the French magazine *Le Point*. The book has already been published in German and is under contract for Chinese, Korean, and Italian editions.[2] Its translation soon into English will certainly be welcomed by a larger public interested in military history.

However, although the contribution of this volume is refreshing and will remain a reference in the field, it also has some limits in terms of content and rather recalls the necessity of further research. It is obviously difficult for scholars to cover such a large and complex subject for a period of almost two centuries without inevitably neglecting some aspects, areas of the world, ethnic groups, and various personal experience of practitioners and victims of war. In other words, modern warfare is so deep-rooted in societies and includes millions of people that an eight-hundred-page volume could never be enough to cover the full spectrum and to advance a fully and exhaustive understanding. Nevertheless, this attempt could be seen as an impressive beginning, which will hopefully motivate scholars (and publishers) to pursue collective efforts like *Une histoire de la guerre* in the future.

Notes

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[1]. Bruno Cabanes, faculty page, Ohio State University, Department of History, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://history.osu.edu/people/cabanes.2>.

[2]. See Beatrice Heuser, review of *Une histoire de la guerre*, ed. Bruno Cabanes, *Francia recensio*, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/frrec/article/view/62882/55467>.

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