

# Introduction. Armed Conflict and Environment – War Impacts, Impacts of War, and Warscape

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This volume gathers contributions from a conference on War and Environment that took place at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Vietnam, Hanoi, (USSH) in autumn 2014. The conference which was generously funded by the DFG (German Science Association) and supported by Prof Pham Quang Minh and Prof Hoang Anh Tuan of the USSH in a wonderful way brought together an international group of scientists. They discussed the connections between war and the environment using the example of the war that is internationally denominated the Vietnam War – in Vietnam itself, the war that lasted from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s is called the American War. The expertise gathered at this time with participants from Vietnam, Cambodia, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, France, the USA, Japan and India seemed to suggest publishing an anthology on this topic.

While the Vietnam War was originally taken for the conference only as a (frightening) example of the connection between war and environment, it soon became clear that a historical classification was solely meaningful if the history of this interdependence was traced back at least for the entire 20th century. Only in this way was it is possible to understand the changes that took place during this period, for which the Vietnam War somehow is a culmination and a turning point at the same time. We will come back to this aspect later; first, we will deal with the two basic concepts of the conference, *war* and *environment*.

Looking for a definition, *war* is often understood as an organized type of violent conflict employing weapons and other agents of violent action, or *äußerste Gewalt* (utmost force) as Clausewitz put it, to impose the will of another party on one party. According to Clausewitz, a war does not begin with the attack but with the defence, i.e. the decision to resist the attempt to get one's own actions determined by others. According to Clausewitz' classical theory, war is an organized conflict which is fought out with considerable means of arms and violence. The aim of the participating collectives is to assert their interests. The resulting acts of violence

specifically attack the physical integrity of opposing individuals and thus lead to death and injury. In addition to damage to those actively involved in the war, damage also always occurs, which could be unintentional or intentional. Therefore, war also damages the infrastructure and livelihoods of the collectives. There is no uniformly accepted definition of war and its demarcation from other forms of armed conflict. Wars can, therefore, be classified into different basic types, whereby previous definitions often still concentrate on armed conflicts between two or more states. In addition, there are also guerrilla wars between a population and an enemy state army, civil wars, the struggle between different groups within a state, sometimes even beyond state borders, and wars of nationalities and independence. *Wars* are sometimes separated from *armed conflicts*, the latter are regarded as sporadic, rather accidental and non-strategic armed clashes between fighting parties. Since the end of the Soviet Union, so-called asymmetric wars, in which state-backed, conventionally highly superior military forces on the one hand, and opponents balancing their weakness with guerrilla techniques on the other, have multiplied. Examples of such a conflict are today's *war on terror* or the US drone war and the actions of Israel and Russia in the Middle East. These asymmetric wars, in particular, are now often semantically downgraded to police actions.

Despite intensive discussions, it was not possible to find a uniform definition under international law that restricts the concept of war. The Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Armaments (1932–1934) therefore replaced the unspecific term *war* with the clearer *use of armed force*. The United Nations Charter banned not *war* but the *use or threat of force* in international relations in principle<sup>1</sup> and allowed it only as a sanction measure adopted by the Security Council or as an act of self-defence. The Geneva Conventions use the term *armed international conflicts* to be distinguished from other forms of violence, such as internal conflicts. What an international armed conflict is, however, is not defined by the Geneva Conventions. The same is true for other types of violence, as a result of this unclear terminology, it can be helpful to look at the history of armed conflict instead.

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1 “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.” Charter of the United Nations, Article 2, paragraph 4, in: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-i/index.html>)

Historically, until Napoleonic times, the history of war fluctuated between the two poles of an agonal war and an unlimited war that primarily affected the population not directly involved in the fighting. Examples of this are the so-called Cabinet Wars of the 18th century and the Thirty Years' War. To what extent this subdivision could only have been fiction shall not be answered here, after all, it is important to emphasize that even this subdivision has only been applied to conflicts between states. Many uses of violence against actors declared *non-state* have therefore not been taken into account. Under international law at least, an important caesura occurred in the 19th century: its fundament was the continuing warfare in the 19th century and the increasing role of the modern armaments industry for war (visible in the Crimean War, the American Secession War and the German and German-French War). Since then, the first attempts were made to limit and regulate armed conflicts, which established themselves as modern international law. This resulted in a codified martial law or law of armed conflict. Its most important cornerstones were already laid before 1914:

- firstly, the Geneva Convention of 1864 primarily provided for the humane care of war victims;
- secondly, and the Hague Convention of 1907, which for the first time strictly separated civilians and combatants.

The latter also laid down a revolutionary sentence in Article 22: "The right of belligerents to adopt means of injuring the enemy is not unlimited."<sup>2</sup> The most important thing about this provision was the fact that it introduced a principle to limit warfare in international conflicts – and that this principle was increasingly ignored in the real warfare of the 20th century. If one looks at it from a European perspective, the Balkan Wars already ushered in an era of extreme violence, including the Colonial Wars and the wars in Asia, one can even understand the Hague Convention as a document of an epoch in which warfare increasingly began to evade control. Without a doubt, however, in the First World War the use of machine guns, tanks, airplanes, submarines, battleships, poisonous gas and the total war economy led to a new face of war. Field and naval battles claimed millions of lives and millions of people were seriously injured. However,

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2 See International Committee of the Red Cross: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=56AA246EA8CFF07AC12563CD0051675A>.

the wars on the various fronts waged between 1914 and 1918 were by no means the only acts of violence attributable to the collapse of the international order in 1914. What followed the peace treaties since 1919 was rather a continuation of violence at various levels: civil wars, revolutions, anti-colonial uprisings, mass murders, expulsions, wilfully produced famines and, last but not least, major international conflicts such as the Japanese-Chinese wars. There was, therefore, a gradual transition from World War I to World War II rather than a definitive period of peace in the 1920s and 1930s. Such an idea is apparently decisively determined by the propagandistic appropriation of history, as it was apparently pursued by the victorious powers of the Second World War in retrospect.

Like the first, this began as a conventional war, but quickly and unstoppably became a total war. State-controlled war economy, martial law, general conscription and propaganda battles on the home front involved the peoples completely in the fighting. The mobilisation of all national reserves for war purposes removed the distinction between civilians and combatants. Warfare, especially in Eastern Europe and East Asia, largely ignored the international law of armed conflict:

- by an ever-escalating bomb war, especially on targets in densely populated areas, which culminated in the Allied bomb attacks on Germany and Japan;
- by combining territorial conquest and mass killings of civilians on the Eastern Front and in China;
- by leaving to die millions of POWs;
- by the strategy of the *burnt earth* in the theatres of war in East Asia and Eastern Europe;
- by the atomic bombings of the USA on the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

With the surrender of the Wehrmacht and the Japanese Empire in 1945, however, this history of violence by no means came to an end, despite the founding of the UN. Especially in the Korean War, it continued as a more or less direct confrontation of the superpowers of that time. It was only with the establishment of a Balance of Power, around the mid-1950s, that a new chapter in the war history of mankind began. Most of the wars that then took place until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were so-called proxy wars. A proxy war is a war in which two or more major powers do not engage in direct military conflict, but instead, conduct this military conflict in one or more third countries. The third countries thus act

quasi as representatives of the major powers that are often *only* involved in the background.

The proxy war is characterized by the fact that a conflict, civil war or war that usually already exists in third countries is exploited for the respective own purposes of the major powers involved and, if this is not yet the case, expanded into a military conflict. The primary goal of the major powers in the proxy war is to preserve or expand their respective spheres of interest at the expense of the other major powers. The warring parties in the third countries receive direct or indirect support with the aim of helping the respective warring party to victory. The support can be indirect through military aid, logistical, financial or other, or direct by military intervention. The sphere of interest of the supporting great power is expanded and strengthened by a victory of the respective war party. The main cause of a proxy war is generally the fact that the major powers involved do not want a direct military confrontation. Under the conditions of the Cold War and the nuclear weapons of the superpowers, this was a basic condition that ensured the survival of mankind. The level of violence and war destruction was even higher in some proxy wars (especially like Korea, if you consider this conflict as a proxy war and in Vietnam) than on the western and southern fronts of World War II; among other things due to the further development of weapons and because another aspect was added there, the complete destruction of the human and natural environment.

Characteristic of the period after 1987, the beginning of the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, were initially major international military interventions, which were legitimized by decisions of the World Security Council and were considered supranational peace missions. In a second phase, they were replaced by unilaterally decided military actions, which NATO and finally the USA carried out alone with the respective *coalitions of the willing*. In the meantime, asymmetric wars have prevailed. An asymmetric war is a military conflict between parties that have very different orientations in terms of weaponry, organization, and strategy. Because asymmetric warfare differs from the familiar image of war, the term asymmetric conflict is also used. Officially, they are often portrayed by the hegemonic side as police actions.

Typically, one of the warring parties involved is so superior in terms of weaponry and numbers that the other warring party cannot win militarily in open battles. In the long term, however, needle-sting losses and weariness caused by repeated minor attacks can lead to the withdrawal of the

superior party, also due to the overstretching of its forces. In most cases, the militarily superior party, usually the regular military of one state, acts on the territory of another or its own country and fights against a militant resistance or underground movement.

Let us now turn to the second term, the environment. This has a basically similar complexity as the term war, since the term environment can signify different meanings in the context of various discourses: in political-ecological debate, in the humanities, in system theory, in organizational theory, in science, and in biology in particular.

Since this anthology is a contribution to a novel debate on armed conflict and environment, a restrictive definition is not given below. Rather, the aim is to show the various options for dealing with the interdependencies between armed conflicts and *environments* on the time axis outlined above and at various levels. The relationship between war and the environment can be summarized in three models or systematizing questions.

*1. What are the effects of the human and natural environment on war, its course and the way war is fought?*

This is the longest of any discussion of the subject. The leading military theorists always have known that an entire war or single military operations do not take place in sandboxes, but in the field of battle. Since the Napoleonic Wars, the social conditions of war, Clausewitz called it *will*, have repeatedly been discussed, taking into account the influence of natural factors on warfare, terrain and geostrategic space for warfare in particular. A look at military theory of the 19th and 20th centuries still provides interesting insights into the role of the human and physical environment in warfare: Carl von Clausewitz, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Charles Edward Caldwell, and Mao Zedong, to name but the most important contributors. Today, this approach is often being expanded to ask how the change in natural environments has generated wars – we can consider the role El Niño on Mezzo-American civilizations, the Little Ice Age, or climate change.

## 2. *How are wars, their course and conduct, influenced by human and natural environments?*

Furthermore, there has long been a manifest complaint about the devastation of war, for example in Europe in relation to the Thirty Years' War. However, a more systematic approach to the consequences of the war did not emerge until much later. With a view to the destruction of the human environment, especially since the First World War, in relation to the natural environment, not before the 1950s, initially in the context of the debates on the consequences of the nuclear winter. The first historical war in which a specific combination of peace research and pacifism combined with modern scientific methods was the American War in Indochina and the resulting damage to human and natural environments deliberately caused by the USA. These approaches were then further elaborated in the analysis of the Second Gulf War. The result is a current state of research that has put the actions of the most warlike nation of the second half of the 20th century, the USA, at the centre of attention, particularly in the field of the destruction of nature.

## 3. *How can we understand war as a human-natural interaction system?*

This approach begins to prevail only in recent years and it is based on system theory and on adoptions of ecological concepts on war. The basic idea of an ecology of war puts Micah Muscolino very well. I quote from him:

“Environmental factors mold the experience of war for soldiers and civilians alike, while war and militarization transform people's relationships with the environment in enduring ways.”<sup>3</sup>

This means that, especially under the conditions of total war, complex war-landscapes emerge, which – compared to times of peace – are based on completely different relationships of mankind to the natural and man-made environment. Or vice versa: that natural and man-made environments predispose human behaviour in a different way than is the case in peacetime. The war, as Kurt Lewin had already recognized in 1917,

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3 Mucsolino, Micah S. (2015): *The Ecology of War in China. Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938–1950*. Cambridge. 3.

changes people's view of their environments just as much as the war environments change people.<sup>4</sup>

The contributions gathered here attempt to understand these three aspects of the relationship between armed conflict and the environment for the historical developments outlined above in the 20th century: from the total wars of the first half of the century to the Vietnam War as an example of the proxy war par excellence to today's asymmetric wars in Sri Lanka and India. Reading this will reveal an implicit division of tasks.

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4 Lewin, Kurt (1917): *Kriegslandschaft*. In: *Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie* 12, 440–447.

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