



## War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975

Review Author[s]:

John J. Mearsheimer

*The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Dec., 1984), 710-711.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-2801%28198412%2956%3A4%3C710%3AWITMGP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

*The Journal of Modern History* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Because it discusses nearly three centuries in little more than two hundred pages, and because its argument is not organized around a firm central hypothesis, it is perhaps closer to the textbook end of the range. Nevertheless many historians will find it a sophisticated, useful introduction to a constant in European history with which they may not be sufficiently familiar.

Clausewitz wrote not only that war is a continuation of politics by other means and a social act, but also that in consequence the purely military evaluation of a strategic plan would be an absurdity. In much the same way, and for the same reasons, the history of war makes little sense when it is studied in military isolation. The importance of the nonmilitary context has been readily acknowledged by Anglo-American historians at least since the Second World War, but this is not always reflected in their works, in part because the technical difficulties that stand in the way of a true integration of two or more fields are considerable. Strachan, however, takes the interdisciplinary challenge very seriously. A principal theme of his book, he writes on page 4, "will be to examine the works of the better-known theorists of war and to explain their popularity in the context of the external constraints [and, perhaps it should be added, stimuli] that have operated on war." Other major concerns are the relationship between politics and war and the impact on war of changes in society and in technology.

Themes of such complexity cannot be explored, only broached and outlined, in twelve brief chapters. But Strachan succeeds remarkably well in orienting the main features of the theory and practice of war in their changing social, economic, and political environment. He appears equally at home with the theories of Jomini and Clausewitz, to which he devotes two miniature essays in what might be called the applied history of ideas, and the technological and industrial factors that alternately froze and triggered in motion warfare in the First and Second World Wars. Throughout, his discussion is marked by independence of judgment and a pragmatic sense of the links between phenomena. It must be added that he does not raise new questions. The good discussion of eighteenth-century warfare, to give a characteristic example, accepts the standard view of the *ancien régime* as the period of limited war par excellence. The factors that restricted the mobilization and employment of force at that time are well known; nevertheless they could coexist with a conflict—the Seven Years' War—in which one side had the not unrealistic aim of dismembering its opponent. But the pursuit of such questions would be beyond Strachan's purpose and scope. As a general guide to a multifaceted subject, whose importance in European history can hardly be exaggerated, his book is excellent and deserves a wide audience. If it should help historians in other fields to give greater attention to war in their research and teaching, it might prove more useful to our discipline than yet another monograph on a narrow topic in military history.

PETER PARET

*Stanford University*

**War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975.** By *Jack S. Levy*.  
Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pp. xiv + 215. \$24.00.

Contrary to what one might surmise from the title, this is not an ambitious book. The aim is "to generate a compilation of war data for the Great Powers for the last five centuries" (p. xii). In other words, the purpose is to provide lots of hard information, lots of specific facts about European wars since the formation

of the state system. There is no central argument in the book, no theories about the causes, the conduct, or the consequences of war. The book is pure description. To the author's credit he acknowledges as much. He does note, however, that he hopes in the future to use the data for a more ambitious purpose: to test balance-of-power theory.

This book is the work of a young social scientist trained to use quantitative methods. Appropriately, the emphasis is on using precise terminology, paying careful attention to rules of evidence when selecting from the historical record, and using sophisticated methodological techniques to examine the data. Not surprisingly, he has produced a carefully constructed and useful data base. There is some definitional overkill in the book, but this is not a major problem. The heart of the book is found in chapter 6, where the author describes the historical patterns that his data reveal. This involves 119 wars that have taken place between 1495 and 1975.

His findings, for the most part, confirm the conventional wisdom. He finds, for example, that interstate wars involving the great powers have been less frequent over time, although the severity of the conflicts has been increasing. He finds two patterns that are interesting but not frequently mentioned in the literature on war. First, his data show that the duration of wars has been decreasing over time. It is not easy from the perspective of the late twentieth century to conceive of either of the world wars as anything but interminable; but when compared with many earlier wars, they are relatively short in duration. Second, he finds that in earlier centuries it was commonplace to have wars between just two great powers. Such wars are much less common in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when wars between great powers tend to involve all the great powers. Related to this point, he finds that before the eighteenth century it was not uncommon to have separate wars involving the great powers being waged simultaneously.

One interesting finding that directly challenges the conventional wisdom, although it is not a wholly new point, concerns eighteenth-century warfare. It is generally believed that wars in this century were frequent but limited in nature. The author finds, however, that of the five centuries examined, "the eighteenth century was the least war-prone with regard to frequency, yet the wars that did occur were generally more serious than the typical wars of other centuries" (p. 140). Unfortunately, no attempt is made to explain any of these findings. Instead, the aim is to concentrate on describing historical patterns.

Levy's data, though not earthshaking, are useful, especially for scholars who are suspicious of conventional wisdom and like to see concrete evidence to support commonly accepted truths. Nevertheless, because there are no arguments, no theories, in this book one cannot judge it an important contribution to the understanding of war. For that we will have to wait for his next book.

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER

*University of Chicago*

### **Germany, Russia, and the Balkans Prelude to the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression**

**Pact.** East European Monograph 145. By *Marilynn Giroux Hitchens*.  
New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. Pp. viii + 350. \$27.50.

The shock created for contemporaries by the announcement of the forthcoming trip of German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop to Moscow in order to