

War: a beginner's guide, by Aaron Edwards, London, Oneworld publication 2017, x + 181 pp., £9.99 P(paperback), ISBN 9781780748948

This book appears as part of Oneworld's extensive and growing 'Beginner's Guide' series and provides an introduction to the academic study of war via a series of thematic chapters, rather than a definitive treatise on state conflict more generally. The intended audience being undergraduate security studies students or officer cadets studying war as an academic concept or for the first time. Bearing in mind these aims, the book successfully provides an interesting and engaging introductory overview of seven key themes relating to war studies.

The work is structured in a series of seven lecture-style chapters, each dealing with a different theme relating to war. The work is anchored at the beginning and end by obvious enough chapters defining what war is and discussing how wars end. The middle sections however leave more room for creativity, looking into strategy and tactics, regular and irregular war, the role of leadership and the likely future developments of war. Each chapter provides the reader with engaging, relevant and largely self-contained short discussions of debates and concepts that use a wide array of examples from antiquity to the present day the chapters are broadly similar in length and could serve pedagogically as interesting introductory readings in preparation for more indepth discussion.

Edwards, an experienced Senior Lecturer in Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and author of nine books on a range of subjects relating to violent conflict, presents his Beginner's Guide as an attempt to engage and inspire new students of the problems associated with studying war rather than presenting opinion or developing any overarching thesis himself. The author therefore errs at times on the side of ambiguity rather than becoming embroiled too deeply in competing definitions or perspectives. 'War' for Edwards, 'is a human activity that is seen as a means of resolving disputes through the use of force...though they rarely, if ever, end disputes, conflict or confrontation, and they may even prolong them long into the future.' (pp30-31).

The ambiguity continues beyond the opening, definitional chapter, partially as a result of the need for brevity in such a short work though also to allow readers a taste of the abundant discussions they would come across if they were to continue reading and studying the topic further. This approach is as commendable as it is risky, this is a work that is designed to be read and then discussed, the answers are not given, the conclusions are one's own. Edwards may use oft-quoted ideas from the classics Sun Tsu, Clausewitz and Douhet along with a couple of references to Thucydides too, but alongside these are references to examples from Rwanda, Northern Ireland and Vietnam along with current conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan

which, though they will date the work fairly quickly, provide students with examples where they can apply the ideas Edwards is putting forward for themselves.

Some of the examples are however remarkably short and only partly demonstrate what the author wants them to. The passages relating the Falklands war to strategic bombing (p56) and the Battle of Cambrai to tank warfare (p59) simply don't have enough evidence to demonstrate the practical application of the relevant theories described, though there are other areas where the risks of this approach does pay off. The discussion of Cassivilanus's guerrilla war against the Roman invasion of Britain (pp66-68) for example has the right effect on this reader, providing convincing evidence that demonstrates there is nothing at all new in irregular war.

The work is strongest in chapters Five (Future War) and Six (Leaders and Followers) which contrast strongly in terms of methodology and demonstrate the great breadth of the author's knowledge and interests. The theoretical approach of one and the more literary approach of the other should not be as easy a fit in the same work as they are here. That the chapters both work is down, once again, to the author's commendable concern for the diverse readership a book like this will likely have. And though more might have been done to widen the interest of this book even further, (for example the inclusion of the policy implications of Hybrid Warfare with a discussion of the CNN effect) the work still serves as a very useful starting point for those studying even this area.

It is the design and layout of the text that is the work's greatest drawback. Neither textbook nor lecture series, the work interrupts the chapters with what are, at times (p55) only partially relevant tangential details in impetuous text boxes with distressing irregularity. Inexplicably, the extra readings sections for the whole work are printed at the end of the book and surely would have been more useful had they been included at the end of each chapter. Discussion or seminar topics might also have been usefully included in a work that is so squarely aimed at an undergraduate market.

Otherwise this is an excellent introduction to the topic from an author with unique experience in presenting the issues raised to new audiences. Other short introductory texts do exist and the most direct competitor is likely Richard English's (2013) *Modern War: A very short introduction* from Oxford University Press. However few competitor works in this area are perhaps as detached or as consciously focused on introducing a topic (as opposed to simplifying it) as this one is. *War: A Beginner's Guide* is also the most up-to-date introductory text now in publication and as the work is completely new the 'current' examples are all still very current and topical. Edwards' book would undoubtedly prove useful as a core text for a shorter course on the topic of war itself or as pre-reading for longer taught courses on war and political conflict at undergraduate level in the fields of

humanities and social sciences from literature to security studies, history to international relations.

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