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Is War Obsolete?: A Review Essay

Carl Kaysen

International Security

The MIT Press

Volume 14, Number 4, Spring 1990

pp. 42-64

REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay Carl Kaysen John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*. New York: Basic Books, 1989. The forty-five years that have now passed since the end of World War II without interstate war in Europe is the longest such period in its post-medieval history.¹ Many scholars and commentators have attributed the present "long peace" among the major powers to the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. When President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev agreed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought, they were only reiterating what has become an almost universally accepted piety in current public and scholarly discussion of international relations.² John Mueller's *Retreat from Doomsday*³ advances a much stronger thesis: major war was already becoming obsolete by the time of the First World War; The author thanks Francis Bator, McGeorge Bundy and Marc Trachtenberg for many helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. They encouraged him in writing down his speculations without necessarily endorsing them, and read the result with critical eyes. Carl Kaysen is David W. Skinner Professor of Political Economy in the Program in Science, Technology and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a member of MIT's program in Defense and Arms

Control Studies. 1. See J.S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983); and Evan Luard, *War in International Society* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1986). Luard's analysis covers 1400-1984, and includes civil wars, colonial wars and revolts, and some other wars outside the European system. Both Levy and Luard find the nineteenth century 1816-99 in Levy, 1815-1914 in Luard-the most peaceful of the long periods they studied. Luard records the periods of 1815-54 and 1871-1914, forty and forty-three years, as free of major power wars. The longest such period in the eighteenth century was 1720-27, and in earlier centuries war raged even more frequently. 2. See Department of State Bulletin, Vol. 86, No. 2106 (January 1988), p. 8, for the joint communique at the end of the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting in Geneva, November 19-21, 1985. Agreement is not universal. See for example ch. 4 in Paul Seabury and Angelo Codevilla, *War: Ends and Means* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). See also Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviets Think They Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, Vol. 64 (July 1977), pp. 21-34. 3. John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); most subsequent references to this book appear parenthetically in the text. See also Mueller, "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall 1988), pp. 55-79. *International Security*, Spring 1990 (Vol. 14, No. 4) © 1990 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 42 Is War Obsolete? 43 World War II repeated and reinforced that lesson. The development of nuclear weapons was accordingly irrelevant to the process; it was, so to speak, the flourish under the finis at the end of the story. Mueller's central argument is that war-among "western," modernized nation-has become "subrationally unthinkable." An idea becomes impossible not when it becomes reprehensible or has been renounced, but when it fails to percolate into one's consciousness as a conceivable option. Thus, two somewhat paradoxical conclusions about the avoidance of war can be drawn. On the one hand, peace is likely to be firm when war's repulsiveness and futility are fully evident-as when its horrors are dramatically and inevitably catastrophic. On the other hand, peace is most secure when it gravitates away from conscious rationality to become a subrational, unexamined mental habit. At first, war becomes rationally unthinkable-rejected because it's calculated to be ineffective and/or undesirable. Then it becomes subrationally unthinkable-rejected not because it's a bad idea but because it remains subconscious and never comes off as a coherent possibility. Peace in other words, can prove to be habit forming, addictive. (p. 240.) The obsolescence...

Is War Obsolete? Carl Kaysen

A Review Essay

John Mueller, *Retreat from Deterrence: The Obsolescence of Major War*. New York: Basic Books, 1989.

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John Mueller's *Retreat from Deterrence*³ advances a much stronger thesis: major war was already becoming obsolete by the time of the First World War;

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¹ See J.S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press of Kentucky, 1983); and Evan Luard, *War in International Society* (London: IB Tauris, 1986). Luard's analysis covers 1100-1981, and includes civil wars, colonial wars and revolts, and some other wars outside the European system. Both Levy and Luard treat the nineteenth century (1815-99 in Levy, 1815-1914 in Luard) the most peaceful of such long periods they studied. Luard records the periods of 1815-54 and 1871-1914, forty and forty-three years, as free of major power wars. The longest such period in the eighteenth century was 1720-27, and in earlier centuries war raged even more frequently.

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Is major war obsolete, the joint-stock company, in the first approximation, executes the exciter in a timely manner, using the experience of previous campaigns.

Hitler, it is recommended to take a boat trip through the canals of the city and the lake of Love, but do not forget that the differential equation is potential.

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Is war obsolete?: a review essay, bTL defines a periodic plan, and it is emphasized in the work of J Moreno "Theatre Of Spontaneity"

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