

The SAGE Encyclopedia of War (*forthcoming*)

States Systems, Origins of

Origins of States Systems

Modern states emerged from a crucible of economic, military and institutional competition. They proceeded out of Western Europe to directly and indirectly dominate all other regions of the world. War proved central to this transition; however, historians and social scientists remain undecided whether war itself drove the development of the modern state and the modern states system. Proponents argue that as several types of political organization arose in the late Medieval period, those best able to collect resources and deploy them for war prevailed. In a process of natural selection, then, political entities either adapted certain characteristics or ceased to exist. If true, this claim carries important implications for the modern states system. Specifically, like animals bred for aggressiveness, the central units of international politics are designed for conflict. Building a states system that eliminates war may be impossible because security competition and war is why these states exist. Critics, however, insist that efficient war-making was a byproduct of a process in which economic and institutional performance mattered most. Whether modern states can escape or minimize war, therefore, depends partly upon how the states system originated.

The War and State Making Thesis

Most scholars agree that the late Middle Ages saw an expansion of political, institutional and other organizational types. Causes of this transition include demographic and climate change. The resulting international system, however, included city-states, traditional feudal arrangements, city leagues, titular empire, and national monarchies. Simultaneously, maritime and commercial innovations drove up the cost, but also the effectiveness, of economic and military activities. In other words, deep-water sailing vessels, double-entry bookkeeping, firearms, fungible capital (and, later, corporations and stock exchanges) and other adaptations in early modern Europe enabled political entities to generate and centralize greater wealth, but they also increased pressure on late adopters to assimilate or lose the innovation race.

In one of the most important studies related to the origins of the modern states system, Charles Tilly (1929-2008) argued that successful early modern states effectively managed coercion and capital. Specifically, some rulers, such as in Russia, could dominate large regions by extracting labor and agriculture and succeed in war through overwhelming force. In regions dominated by strong towns and cities, such as Northern Italy, large territorial actors could not compete with the capital and wealth these areas wielded. However, in a few areas, such as France and England, historically strong monarchies combined these two approaches. Rulers here had developed arrangements with major land holders that allowed them to mobilize resources for war, but they had also made compromises with towns and commercial interests, who were willing to trade taxes for stability and relative independence. Through a process of natural selection over subsequent centuries, then, other political entities were forced to adopt similar structures or be eliminated. Nearly all levels of society fell under this pressure. Local property rights and labor, for example, saw increasing demands to transfer taxes or other goods directly to a central government rather than passing through layers of feudal obligations. States emerged as primarily war fighting organizations.

History and Dissent

Several other modern developments can be tied to this move toward greater capabilities to wage war. National governments increasingly found that periodically raising armies or relying upon mercenaries proved prohibitively expensive as weapons grew more expensive and local lords paid less of the bill. Professional officer corps and standing armies, kept busy with innovations related to drill and exercise, solved this problem. In turn, standing militaries and the infrastructure to support them also enabled states to enforce complete domestic supremacy. Central governments now demanded and enforced a monopoly on violence within their own domains, but between states, war remained an accepted tool of dispute resolution. By the mid-seventeenth century, the rudiments of modern sovereignty were in place because national governments could claim that they represented the sole legitimate authority within their respective territories and no worldly authority existed above them. This transition was increasingly formalized in treaties, most notably the Peace of Westphalia (1648).

Out of this environment arose a specific institutional and legal international system. While religion was rejected as a justification for violence, *raison d'état*, or national interest, developed as a legitimate—and flexible—cause of war. Grievances related to territory, trade, balance of power and other material interests allowed leaders to initiate war under cover of legal rights. Further, with a more precise notion of sovereignty, borders grew more rigid and diplomacy between leaders grew more formalized. Peace was designated as the default position between governments. War became a specific legal condition in which legitimate combatants should represent a specific government, wear clearly marked uniforms and leave civilians unmolested. Under such conditions, interstate war occurred less regularly as a matter of seasonal or political practice; however, increasingly massive mobilization and concentrated campaigns set states on the path toward total war. Periodically, leading states have sought to dominate the international system or rebuilt the international order after a systemic war. At such moments, though, even unmatched great powers have remained constrained by these early modern institutional arrangements.

Overall, this argument claims that pressures to compete in war drove the development of the modern state and, in turn, the modern states system. Centralized states able to effectively protect and extract capital as well as deploy professional militaries eliminated or marginalized their competitors. The legal notion of sovereignty remained essential to this development, and formal relations between states often centered on questions of war and peace.

Many scholars, however, insist that war's role in the origins of modern states system is overstated. One competing explanation finds that while early modern polities did proliferate then narrow through a selective process, economic performance and institutional design were the key variables. In this argument, nation-states organized and rationalized national economies, guaranteed rule of law and made credible commitments, but the ability to wage war was a byproduct of these deeper developments. Other scholars argue that the ideas of sovereignty, legitimacy, diplomacy and so forth were already shifting in early modern Europe. The Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation exemplify this move. In that context, the modern states system developed as leaders claimed sovereignty and reorganized their state institutions. War, however, followed rather than led the change.

Predicting and Constraining War

If the war and state making thesis is correct, it raises questions about modern states and their collective destiny. Most fundamentally, the intimate relationship between war making and

modern states suggests that war may remain an inevitable aspect of international politics. On the one hand, the number of interstate wars has declined steadily for at least 200 years and is now outpaced by internal wars. Debate persists about whether war itself can be abolished; however, this evidence suggests that early modern Europe's patterns of endemic, widespread warfare are not inevitable. On the other hand, the most prominent efforts to constrain or abolish war have centered on working within or around the prerogatives of the modern state. These efforts include balance of power, international law and international institutions. In other words, interstate war has declined; however, that decline may be a result of deliberate efforts to compensate for or even change the basic nature of the modern states system. In this account, war declines to the extent that the nature of the states system is controlled.

Another essential question is whether newly independent or developing countries, such as Somalia, must experience interstate war in order to become a modern state. Extending the war and state making thesis in the light of European experience might suggest this is the case; however, little evidence exists to support this notion. While war may have driven development of the modern states system, replicating the modern state itself can occur without interstate war. This move is comparable to a poor state skipping over landline telephone infrastructure and directly adopting a cellular system. Even large and middle-tier powers such as Australia, Brazil, India and China have experienced war as they developed, but war has not defined their respective developments.

Nevertheless, disentangling war—or at least war preparation—from the rise of the most powerful states is impossible. Germany and Japan, for instance, explicitly pursued a militarized development strategy, and the United States, after consolidating power through several wars starting in the 1860s, finally vaulted to dominant power status with World War II as a springboard.

The modern states system is tied to its violent origins. Whether that system is less war prone than the alternatives and whether that system can escape war altogether remains an open question.

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See Also: Balance of Power; Capitalism and War; Conscription and Mobilization of Soldiers; Diplomacy; Economic Theories of War; Militarism and Development; Modernization; Nation State; New and Old Wars; Professional Military Forces; Revolution in Military Affairs

Further Readings

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