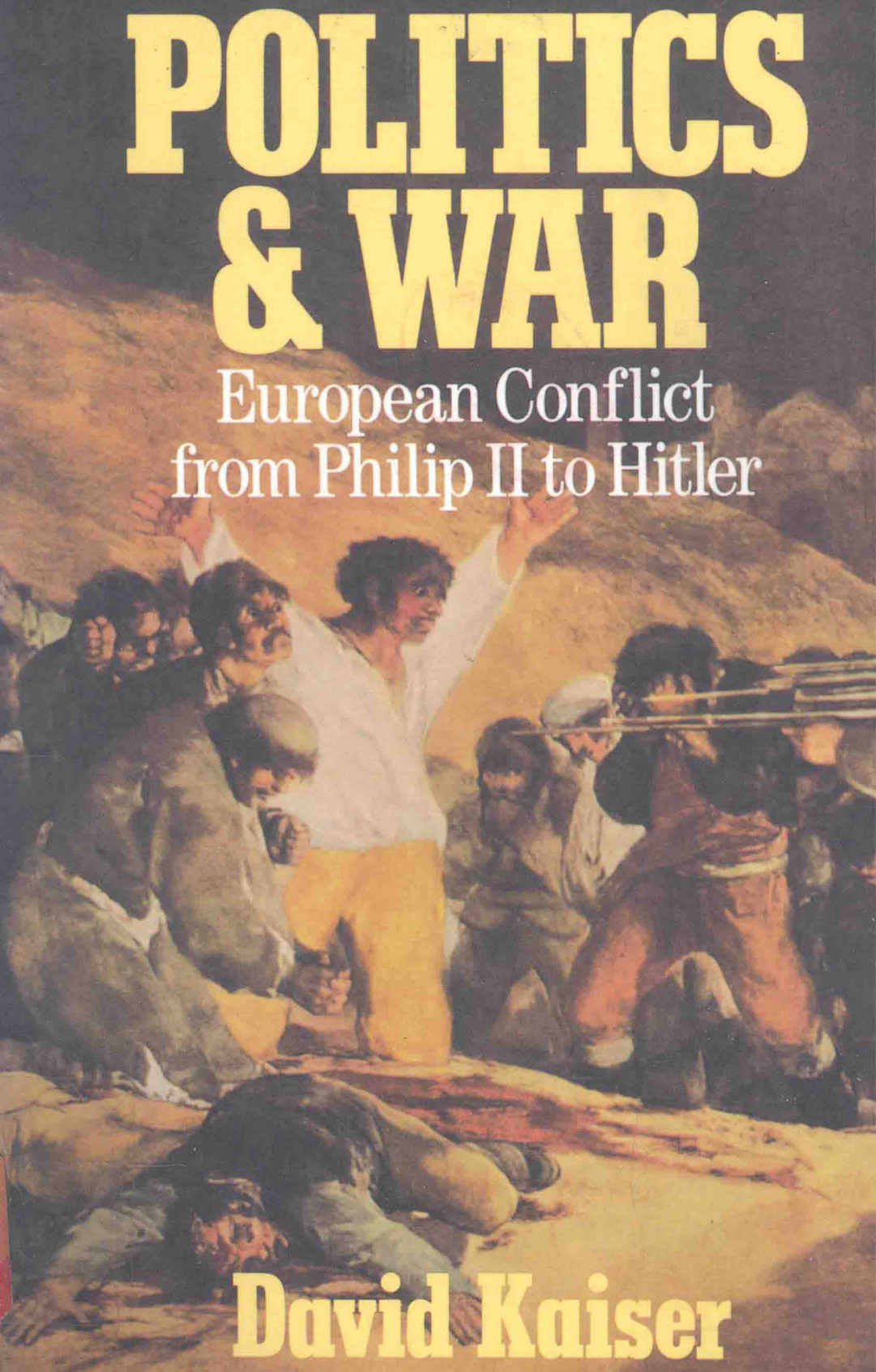
POLITICS & WAR

European Conflict from Philip II to Hitler



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Politics is much harder than physics.

—Albert Einstein

We are much beholden to Machiavelli and other writers of that class, who openly and unfeignedly declare or describe what men do, and not what they ought to do.

—Francis Bacon

Preface, 2000

This book first appeared in 1990, not long after Paul Kennedy had published *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers,* a very different general survey of European and world history that concluded with some tentative and qualified predictions about the future. Since then, the collapse of Communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia have utterly transformed European international politics. Meanwhile, two other large-scale historical theories of international politics have appeared. One, put forth most notably in Spencer Weart's *Never at War* and Michael Doyle's *Ways of War and Peace,* argues that peace and democracy go hand in hand, and that the spread of democracy will inevitably reduce or eliminate war as an element of international politics. The other theory, advocated by the political scientist Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations,* predicts that differences among civilizations—defined mainly by common religion or philosophy—will now become the major sources of international conflict. As a millennium ends, metahistory and large-scale analysis are enjoying a revival.

This book had a different premise, namely, that war in any era of European history was closely related to politics, and that its purposes, scope, and duration could only be understood in the context of European politics as a whole. Each era of general war in Europe grew out of specific political developments: the uncontrolled power of aristocracies in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the consolidation of monarchies in the late seventeenth, the expansion of state power and the new spirit of rationalism in the late eighteenth, and the twin problems of imperialism and the rights of nationalities in the twentieth. In each case, in contrast to many

earlier treatments that saw most of the nations of Europe uniting to defeat a single aggressor, I argued that the common features of European politics far overshadowed the differences among the various states.

The reissue of this book is doubly timely. On the one hand, the end of the Cold War allows for the statement of some broader conclusions than I was originally able to reach about the years 1945–1991—not, of course, another era of general European war, but an era that showed some similarities to the first half of the century. On the other hand, Europe clearly entered into a new era in the 1990s, and as the century ends, its own particular threats to the peace and their close resemblance to earlier periods have become fairly clear. I address both these issues in a new epilogue.

The first edition of this book referred more than once to Carl von Clausewitz, the greatest of all theorists of war. In the last nine years, while teaching in the Strategy and Policy Department of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, I have come to realize that *Politics and War* complements his classic book *On War,* because it systematically addresses key issues to which he paid very little attention. Clausewitz emphasized, of course, that war must serve politics (or "policy," which in his language is the same word), but he paid much less attention to the nature of policy in different eras—that is, to the changing objectives for which war was fought. I have argued, in contrast, that the nature of policy in different eras, and above all the extent to which military power allows governments to secure the objectives they seek, determine the character of war in different periods of European history. Of the four eras this book treats in detail, the first and the last were the most violent and the most destructive precisely because European states sought ends beyond their capacity to achieve. The same kind of analysis must now be applied to the new problems facing the states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union—a region once again in crisis—and to the responses that Western Europe and the United States, now united within NATO, make to them.

I also wrote this book to show how the vast body of monographic literature that the historical profession has generated during the last one hundred years or more might be used to draw general conclusions about the past while taking full account of the individual characteristics of every period. In so doing, I seem to have gone well beyond the boundaries of the interests of nearly any other

professional historian. I still believe that every individual monograph should have a broader application, and that the critical characteristics of any particular period in history emerge only when compared with another. Thus I welcome the opportunity to reintroduce *Politics and War.*

Politics and War

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Introduction

This book treats an old topic from a new perspective. The study of European war has occupied historians at least since the time of Leopold von Ranke, and although the focus of professional historians has largely shifted away from politics and diplomacy in recent decades, general treatments of European war in the modern era have continued to appear. The overwhelming majority of such treatments have taken a broadly similar approach. They generally treat every era of European war as an attempt by one power or coalition of powers to conquer most or all of Europe, and focus upon the reasons for the failure of such attempts. They pay relatively little detailed attention to the sources of European international conflict, implicitly considering war a normal phenomenon or assuming that states naturally try to expand. For all these reasons, most discussions of different eras of European war from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries have an essential similarity.[1]

Here I argue instead that the sources and consequences of European international conflict differ radically from one era to another, and that they can be understood only in the context of contemporary European domestic and international politics. In four distinct periods of European history—1559–1659, 1661–1713, 1792–1815, and 1914–1945—war became a natural function of politics, an inevitable result of contemporary political behavior. The wars of these eras must be understood within their political, eco-

1. The most recent example of this tendency is Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987).

nomic, social, and intellectual context. Each period of general war reflects a distinct stage in the political development of modern Europe—a stage in which states fought wars for particular ends, with specific means, and with particular consequences. While many historians have traced the origins of each era of general European war to the ambitions of one particular power—Spain in the sixteenth century, France and England from the late seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries, and Germany in the twentieth[2]—I argue instead that general war in Europe does not normally grow out of the ambitions of one power or coalition, but reflects a common set of European political developments among all the major European powers. Even if one power bears more responsibility for beginning a conflict, the conduct of all involved powers usually becomes almost indistinguishable. Within such an analysis, the issue of winners and losers—the focus of so much previous discussion—retreats into relative insignificance. In each of these eras the similarities among states—in economic strength and military tactics, as well as in political systems and social structure—generally outweigh the differences. Their similarities are reflected in the generally indecisive outcomes of the wars they fought. Of these four eras, only one, the last, ended with a decisive victory, and that victory was won mainly by one partially non-European power, the Soviet Union, and by the United States of America.

Thus, during the years 1559–1659, the almost continuous wars which plagued Europe revolved around the unsuccessful attempts of European monarchs to impose their authority upon great aristocrats and to impose religious uniformity throughout their domains—tasks which they lacked the necessary resources to accomplish. War in that period was the very essence of aristocratic politics, as well as one of the means by which the aristocracy drew resources from the rest of society, and the so-called general crisis of the 1640s was just one episode in a whole century of crisis. Then, during the rule of Louis XIV (1661–1715), the Sun King and his fellow monarchs largely brought European violence under their control, and changed the pattern of international conflict in ways which not only strengthened their own authority but made

2. For a classic treatment along these lines, see Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of European Struggle* (New York, 1962). Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, also frequently takes this approach.

war much less destructive to European society as a whole. By the time of the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, war was accepted not only as a right but as a duty of European states, who used it to consolidate central authority at the expense of surviving feudal institutions and to reorder the map of Europe along theoretically more rational lines. War also became a channel of social and political mobility and an outlet for the ambition of rising social groups. The course and consequences of the two world wars, whose human and material effects rivaled those of the wars of 1559–1659, reflected the gap between contemporary beliefs and contemporary European social and economic reality. They were fought partly for the purpose of establishing economically self-sufficient empires—a goal which the development of the world economy had rendered obsolete—and partly in an attempt to apply the principle of nationality to a Europe composed of mixed populations.

Indeed, in each era the relationship between idea and reality largely determined the extent and the effects of general war. Thus, the politics of the twentieth century required European governments to seek the total defeat of their opponents, even though they not only lacked the resources to achieve this but also had no prospect of any gain that would compensate for the cost of victory. The political logic of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries encouraged monarchs forcibly to impose their authority upon their nobility and to enforce religious uniformity upon their subjects, despite their lack of the resources which would enable them to do so. In the era of Louis XIV and in the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, contemporary political logic also required rulers frequently to undertake war, but it did not so frequently require them to attempt the impossible. As a result, the wars of those eras destroyed far less than the struggles of the years 1559–1659 or 1914–1945. Politics has a logic of its own, and the logic which governs political behavior need not seem reasonable or sensible when evaluated according to its consequences.

The organization of this book reflects its emphasis on politics as the source of war. Each of its four main chapters begins with a brief survey of the politics of the era and the ways in which contemporary politics promoted international conflict. Because the sources, nature, and consequences of war vary enormously from era to era, however, I have not adopted a single organizational scheme for all

four periods but have rather tried to organize each analysis in the way best calculated to bring out the particular period's features. Each era is characterized by certain special political problems and by contemporary rulers' specific responses to them—responses which involved the sustained use of military power. In each case, politics operated within its own autonomous sphere, but nonetheless reflected and powerfully affected contemporary social, economic, and intellectual life. The work as a whole provides a comparative treatment of European politics in the modern era, as well as of European war.

Narrative plays an important role in my presentation, but always within a well-defined analytical framework. One cannot show how certain common patterns of behavior characterized each of these periods of European history without discussing key events in some detail. Comprehensive arguments require a comprehensive demonstration. While presenting new analyses of different periods of European war, my book will acquaint the reader with the essential facts of the last four centuries of European conflict—and rare indeed is the contemporary reader who already knows them, even within the professional historical community.

Individuals also play an important role in my analysis, but their role must always be understood within a broader political framework. Although political leaders make the decisions that lead to war and peace, they can only exercise power according to the rules of contemporary politics. In the short run, their effectiveness depends upon the manipulation of contemporary beliefs and institutions, while in the long run it often depends upon their understanding of the need to reconcile existing beliefs with inescapable realities. Every age includes men like Wallenstein, Olivares, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Bethmann-Hollweg, Lloyd George, and Hitler, who exemplify particular aspects of contemporary political behavior, and whose careers therefore reflect in striking detail the politics of their age. Each era also includes politicians such as Henry IV of France, Elizabeth I of England, Lord Salisbury, or German Imperial Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, who understand the problems inherent in the illogic of contemporary political wisdom, and who therefore manage to avoid certain critical pitfalls. Precisely because of their unusual perspicacity, however, individuals of the latter type generally exercise only a limited influence upon the course of European politics. Most politicians share, or at least

respect, the illusions of their age, and therefore suffer the consequences of these illusions along with their peoples. Even Napoleon and Hitler, who initially took advantage of contemporary circumstances to achieve spectacular conquests or wreak enormous destruction, ultimately encountered the limits imposed by their circumstances.

This book differs from many earlier treatments in another way as well. Since Ranke, the historiography of European warfare has tended to idealize the state and its works, including warfare. While some historians have chosen simply to champion the claims of one state against the rest of Europe, others, like Ranke, have seen states as embodiments of the individual genius of nations, or as independent entities pursuing a higher good. Either approach bathes the doings of soldiers and statesmen in an aura of majesty. Such an attitude can produce inspiring writing but does not in my view promote historical understanding. This book tells a very different story. Here the history of European international conflict emerges not as a triumphant story of human progress, or of the victories and defeats of particular European states, but rather as a series of tragedies. War, though frequently a critical aspect of politics, has been a largely sterile pursuit. European society has survived and prospered, but the great economic and intellectual advances of modern civilization have generally taken place during periods of peace. Europe's eras of general war testify to the enormous latent emotional power of war and politics in Western civilization, if not indeed in mankind as a whole. They reveal war as a recurring form of political behavior, one which in these periods became the essence of politics—often, and especially in the twentieth century, with terrible consequences. War and politics are not humanity's highest callings, but their enormous consequences touch upon virtually every other aspect of life.

1 The General Crisis of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

> The wisest philosophers have for long taught us that it is impossible to avoid sedition in a kingdom, if persons of worth see themselves rejected and lose hope of achieving the dignities they think they have merited by their birth and virtue.
>
> —Pomponne de Bellièvre to King Henry IV of France, 1598

The Nature of Early Modern Politics

The armed conflicts which took place all over Europe between 1559 and 1659 grew out of three fundamental elements of European political life: the power and values of the aristocracy; the attempts by various European monarchs to assert more power and authority than their resources could command; and the spread of religious differences, which intensified these political conflicts. These problems lay behind all the major conflicts of this century of crisis—the revolts against Spanish rule in the Netherlands, Catalonia, and Portugal; the civil wars in France; the Thirty Years' War in Germany; and the civil wars in the British Isles in the 1640s and 1650s. While some of the conflicts of the era have customarily been regarded as civil wars or rebellions and others as wars between states, the political structure of Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries actually blurs the distinction between domestic and international conflict. All formed a part of a general struggle among the European aristocracy for economic and political power. To understand these wars, we must look first at the aristocracy and the nature of aristocratic politics; second, at the goals of contemporary monarchs; and last, at the nature of early modern armies, and the ways in which they affected the course of armed conflict. We shall then look in more detail at the politics of the Spanish empire, France, the Holy Roman Empire, and England, to