

Mankind has to live with the fact that war is a common occurrence, and a truly peaceful world is unattainable. Discuss.

‘Can man in society best be understood by studying man or by studying society?’ Can the recurrence of war best be understood by studying war or by studying its recurrence? And can the unattainability of peace best be understood by studying peace or by studying its unattainability? Using the structure of Kenneth Waltz’s question, and his suggestion for the answer: the most satisfactory reply would seem to be given by striking the word ‘or’ and answering ‘both’.¹

Providing definitions of the terms ‘war’ and ‘peace’ is essential. War can be seen to be ‘a state of law and a form of conflict involving a high degree of legal equality, of hostility, and of violence in the relations of organized human groups’.² Galtung provides two definitions for peace: ‘the first definition is violence-oriented; peace being its negation. The second definition is conflict-oriented; peace is the context for conflicts to unfold nonviolently and creatively’.³ The understanding of peace is intrinsically tied to the understanding of violence and conflict.³ Violence, thus, is defined as ‘the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual’.⁴ All concepts are broad enough to include the most significant varieties, yet specific enough to serve as a basis for their categorisation and discussion,⁵ but the human frame and the violence, whether direct or indirect, remain a constant.⁶

This essay explores the intertwined nature of war, politics, and the State, demonstrating how these structures have evolved and legitimised each other throughout history. By examining foundational theories and critiques, it argues that understanding war requires recognising its deep roots in the organisation of power and the framework of the State. Using perspectives from Bourne, Clausewitz, and critiques like those of Keegan, the essay highlights how war is both sustained and shaped by these institutions. Ultimately, the unattainability of peace lies in the perpetuation of these structures, where the recurrence of war serves as a function of the political and systemic realities that define modern society.

Echoing the questions posed at the start, it is important to note that ‘where one begins its explanation of events makes a difference’.⁷ Waltz follows Rousseau’s lead for the causes of war:

As men live in states, so states exist in a world of states. If we now confine our attention to the question of why wars occur, shall we emphasize the role of the state, with its social and economic content as well as its political form, or shall we concentrate primarily on what is sometimes called the society of states?⁸

¹ Lawrence Freedman, *War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 71.

² Freedman, *War*, p. 70.

³ Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), ebook, p. 9.

⁴ Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6.3 (1969), 167–191 (p. 169).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Freedman, *War*, p. 9.

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Ibid.

Rousseau establishes a trinity that works as a framework for the causes of war, encompassing man, the state, and the state system which necessitates examination. An analysis of Randolph Bourne's posthumous essay, *The State*, which remains as relevant as when it was written in 1918, would provide a better framework and a clearer lens to the connection of these elements. This analysis, alongside an examination of theories of international relations and key criticisms to be discussed later, reveals that it ultimately does not matter where one begins to answer the question—all paths inevitably lead to the State as the central cause.

To begin with, the analysis is based on the distinction of Government, Nation, and State. Government is synonymous with neither of them. It refers to the machinery by which the Nation, organised as a State, carries its functions. It is the idea of the State put into practical operation in the hands of definite, concrete, fallible men. Its limitations are those inherent in all practicality.⁹ Nation and State are scarcely differentiated. Nation is a definite social group—what he refers to as the ‘herd’—with attitudes and qualities exact enough to mean something.¹⁰ The use of the term ‘herd’ is an attempt to reduce closer to first principles the nature of the State, as the original unit as seen in the most primitive tribes, in which the difference between the former and the latter is one of a degree of sophistication and variety of organisation.¹¹

The State is, therefore, a mystical conception, a medium for the political salvation of man. And wartime brings its ideal out into very clear relief, for war is the health of the State, as it sends the current of purpose and activity flowing down to the lowest level of the herd and its remote branches, and links all the activities in society to the central purpose of making a military offensive or military defense. In wartime, the State becomes what in peacetimes it has vainly struggled to become—the inexorable arbiter and determinant of men’s businesses, attitudes, and opinions; its power and influence within its territory, universal.¹²

Bourne notes that nations do not declare war on each other, nor fight each other. The notion of modern wars as wars of whole peoples is an assumption based in an entire nation being regimented and the whole resources of the country levied on for war, but only as a State, a nation can fight. States make war on each other through their Governments, acting as agents, declaring war on other Governments. The people of a nation are not consulted in the initiation of a war; there’s no democratic control of foreign policy, because foreign policy is the secret private possession of the executive branch of the Government. He describes the declaration of war by Parliaments and Congresses as the merest technicality, and he states that the country will have been brought to the very brink of war by the foreign policy of the Executive long before a demand for a declaration can take place.¹³ Such declaration could not be refused without reversing the course of history, repudiating the symbol and interpreter of the nation’s will and animus, and admitting that the country has been grossly deceived by its own Government.¹⁴

The State represents all the autocratic, arbitrary, coercive, and belligerent forces of a social group.¹⁵ It is intimately connected with war, for it is the organisation of the collective community when it acts in a political manner, and to act in a political manner towards a rival

⁹ Randolph Bourne, *The State* (Tucson, AZ: Sharp Press, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

group has meant waging war—throughout all history.¹⁶ War is a very artificial thing, no more primary than formal religion, and cannot occur except in a system of competing States, which have relations with each other through the channels of diplomacy, akin to a disguised war where States seek to gain their objectives.¹⁷ War is the chief function of State, it cannot exist without a military establishment, and a military establishment cannot exist without State organisation. Its immemorial tradition and heredity are the State's—they are inseparably and functionally joined. The State concerns itself with developing the powers and techniques which make for destruction, at the expense of the productive and life-enhancing process of the national life, because its very existence means that the nation lies always at risk of war and invasion due to the very nature of the system of States.¹⁸ International Politics is 'power politics' because it is a relation of States, and that is what States 'infallibly and calamitously are, huge aggregations of human and industrial force that may be hurled against each other in war'.¹⁹

The modern State is not the rational and intelligent product of modern men desiring to live harmoniously together with security of life, property, and opinion. It is not a pragmatic means to a desired social end. The security and benefit of life are a by-product and development of its original functions, shrouded by a veil of *ex post facto* idealism, and with it, the assumption that one has had a hand in its creation and is responsible for its maintenance and sanctity. Every one individual comes into a society already given, in a network of customs and attitudes, to be molded into the society and class one lives in. It is a process of kneading done so successfully that one adds one's personal inertia against change and the effort of reason, and society and its institutions become as much naturalistic phenomena as the weather itself. The opportunity for a large class to find its interest and expression of power in maintaining the State will render it an instrument to compel the obedience and power of the whole herd to be wielded for the benefit of a class.²⁰

This analysis prompts the discussion of several figures and their theories, and explores how Bourne's analysis aligns with various branches of realist theory, including Classical, Structural, and Offensive Realism, highlighting their shared focus on power and the State. It then discusses Clausewitz's framing of war as a political instrument tied to the State, emphasising its enduring relevance. Finally, it critiques Keegan's psychological interpretation of warfare, contrasting his views with Clausewitz's and exploring the implications for understanding the interrelation of war, politics, and the State.

Bourne's description of the system of states, formulated twenty-one years prior to the first theorisation of Classical Realism by E.H. Carr, aligns with the realist theory in International Relations—whether it be classical, structural, or offensive. His analysis is universal:

What one can say in an original way about foreign policy is extremely limited. You can apply the basic principles to new situations, but essentially one says the same thing all over again in a different geographic, political, and military context.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.22.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 25-26.

²¹ Bernard Johnson's Interview with Hans J. Morgenthau, in *Truth and Tragedy: A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau*, ed. K. Thompson and R. J. Myers (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), pp. 381–82.

It parallels the notion of ‘international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power’,²² and integrates the two different understandings of international politics as ‘the result of forces inherent in human nature’,²³ and as a structure that reinforces itself ‘by rewarding some behaviors and punishing others; outcomes cannot be inferred from intentions and behaviors’,²⁴ due to the very nature of the system of States, which incentivises aggressive behavior to ensure survival.²⁵ It not only synthesises the three branches of realist theory, tracing war and international politics back to a common origin, but also provides a logical and coherent framework for further exploration of the nature of the State, both as an individual entity and within the broader community of States.

Historically, the interrelation between the State and war can be traced to the Peace of Westphalia (1648). The concept of sovereignty emerged as a result of its negotiations, leading to the formation of a multipolar system.²⁶ Offensive realism posits that multipolar systems are particularly prone to war,²⁷ which provides an explanation for the military revolution that occurred in Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries. This period saw the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and territorial integrity remain largely unchallenged for the following 400 years.²⁸ The institutionalised warfare of the state can, in part, be attributed to these principles, as well as the legitimisation of war as a continuation of politics.²⁹

Criticisms such as Keegan’s that negate this reality of war miss a critical aspect of the discussion. His assessment of Clausewitz’s thought as incomplete, based on the implication of the existence of states,³⁰ is fundamentally flawed. While Keegan’s assertion that warfare is as old as humanity itself, rooted in pride, emotion, and instinct,³¹ offers a psychological perspective on conflict’s origins, it oversimplifies the inherently political nature of war, and fails to consider Clausewitz’s theoretical framework, as a mere interpretation of the institutions of War, Politics, and the State, that he saw as naturalistic as war is to Keegan himself. Indeed, war predates the existence of the State, diplomacy, and strategy by millennia.³² The ‘herd’, as Bourne uses to refer to the collective community, finds its roots in the most primitive tribes of men, and as he notes, the difference between them and the modern State is one of a degree of sophistication.³³ This is equally true for war, and for politics. It is a matter of sophistication and legitimisation into the structures of power, not of kind.

²² Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 13.

²³ Jaap W. Nobel, ‘Morgenthau’s Struggle with Power: The Theory of Power Politics and the Cold War’, *Review of International Studies*, 21.1 (1995), 61–85 (p. 63).

²⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 74.

²⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), p. 13.

²⁶ Derek Croxton, ‘The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Origins of Sovereignty’, *The International History Review*, 21.3 (1999), 569–591 (p. 591).

²⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 15.

²⁸ Seyom Brown, *International Relations In A Changing Global System*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 1996), ebook, p. 69.

²⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 605.

³⁰ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Bourne, *The State*, p. 10.

Keegan's critique of Clausewitz, where he remarks: "Clausewitz, a child of Aristotle, went no further than to say that a political animal is a warmaking animal,"³⁴ suggests he may have struggled to grasp the political dimension of motivations such as restless expansions of migratory tribes or the flame of religious fanaticism. Perhaps because he was swayed by the spectacle of war and its impact on his life. Indeed, man is a political and a warmaking animal. Both statements are not mutually exclusive. It doesn't negate the possibility of a culture that bounds war and politics with the ideal of State.

This essay has shown that war, in modern history, could never exist without the State. One is not born only into a country but into a State, and the history of a country is very different from the history of a State. War is the health of the state. We cannot crusade against war without implicitly crusading against the State.

³⁴ Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, p. 3.

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