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The Uses of a Concept

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Symmetry and Asymmetry in Colonial Warfare ca. 1500–2000

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by Dierk Walter

This article is concerned with the uses of the concept of asymmetric war for our understanding of colonial war, and the uses of studying colonial war for the further refinement of a concept of asymmetric war that shall enable us to make sense of some present developments in the history of warfare.¹

What links the empirical phenomenon of colonial war to the theoretical conception of asymmetric war seems to be the way of waging war commonly known as small war. In the first of four parts of this paper I address the relationship between these three concepts – asymmetric war, colonial war, small war – and will discuss some concepts of definition. The key suggestion I submit in this part is that it is useful, especially in analyzing colonial warfare, to identify individual asymmetries and symmetries in a given war, rather than label the whole war as either asymmetric or symmetric.

In the second part of this paper I turn to the empirical application of this approach and explore some core asymmetries commonly found in colonial warfare. The third part emphasizes the somewhat

paradoxical situation that from essentially asymmetric means in many cases an ultimately symmetric way of waging colonial war has emerged. The fourth and final part discusses, by way of a conclusion, the uses of an analysis of colonial wars along these lines for our study of the future of war.

Asymmetric War, Small War, Colonial War

Not all small wars are asymmetric wars, and not all asymmetric wars are fought as small wars, at least not for their entire duration. But in the vast majority of the cases in the history of warfare, both phenomena overlap in a way as to make them almost indistinguishable on the outside: small war – the war of pinprick attacks against soft targets that shies away from pitched battle – is the way in which asymmetric wars are fought.²

Very much the same relationship seems to exist between small wars and colonial wars. It is true that a choice did exist – the imperial power usually preferred to settle disputes in the conventional, European-style way, and if the indigenous opponent was fool enough to

1 This article is based on a lecture given at the Institute for Defence Studies, Oslo, on 7 October 2004. The lecture, in turn, was in several parts based on a paper presented to the conference *The Transformation of Warfare* that took place at the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, Hamburg, Germany, 15 to 17 May 2003. A publication of the proceedings of this conference is forthcoming at the Hamburger Edition and will include a German version of this article.

2 Christopher Daase, *Kleine Kriege – Große Wirkung: Wie unkonventionelle Kriegführung die internationale Politik verändert* (Baden-Baden, 1999), esp. 97; Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge, 2003), 4.

oblige, a colonial war could be fought that way at least in its opening phase.³ Yet the most promising option for indigenous political entities resisting imperial conquest was usually the guerrilla war or small war. In fact, for most of the nineteenth century at least in Britain “small wars” was an outright synonym for colonial wars.⁴

While thus colonial wars are usually fought as small wars, small war has existed and continues to exist also in the realm of conventional, European-style warfare. However, here it is mostly confined to internal unrest or to resistance once occupation by a foreign power has been established by means of conventional war; or otherwise small war is a mere auxiliary to the war of conventional armies. In this sense, small war, *kleiner Krieg*, has been an integral, albeit usually inconspicuous, part of many campaigns fought among European states from the eighteenth century right to World War Two in Russia and the Balkans.⁵ These wars were also very rarely asymmetric, and thus they confirm the initial reservation.

“Colonial war” seems to be an “I know it when I see it” case and hence a universally adopted definition is wanting. When analyzing colonial warfare most scholars concentrate on the classic cases, those being

so obviously colonial wars that any attempt at defining the term seems patently pointless. The conquests of the Americas, of sub-Saharan Africa, or of India are such examples of European or Europeanized powers waging wars of conquest against indigenous political entities in remote corners of the world.⁶ But what about wars at the colonial periphery where Europeans fought on both sides, with or maybe even without the support of indigenous allies? What, on the other hand, about wars in the colonies were no Europeans whatsoever were involved, except individually say as trainers, advisors, mercenaries? What about intra-European wars of conquest and colonization, like the one waged by Germany against the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1944? Any attempt to talk about colonial wars without at least a working definition, any attempt to fall back on a truism like “colonial war is the war in the colonies”, any attempt to substitute for instance “overseas war” or any other meaningless term for “colonial war” leaves these perfectly legitimate questions unanswered and clouds the debate.⁷

Additionally, “war” – in itself a term that still lacks a universally accepted definition – leaves a lot to be desired as a description of most of the politically inspired violence at the

3 For stylistic convenience, i.e. to avoid monotony, this article uses a variety of terms such as imperial power, colonial power, colonizing power, European (great) power, power (or state) of the Northern hemisphere, etc., more or less as synonyms. Unless a specific meaning is evident from the context, all these terms invariably denote the “strong” actor in a situation of imperial domination, the one who uses political means to enforce the integration of new regions on the periphery into an expanding economic system that he controls, as described by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson (see note 10). By the same token, the somewhat clumsy, albeit useful term “indigenous political entity”, denoting the “weak” actor in an imperial relationship, is occasionally substituted, for stylistic reasons, by broad generalizations such as “the colonized”. While these rather general terms may not in every single case do justice to the actual political or constitutional situation on the spot, more precision is neither required nor even useful for an analysis of the use of force in colonial contexts over the centuries, as attempted in this article.

4 C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London, 1906/1976).

5 Johannes Kunisch, *Der Kleine Krieg: Studien zum Heerwesen des Absolutismus* (Wiesbaden, 1973); Herfried Münkler, “Die Gestalt des Partisanen. Herkunft und Zukunft”, in Münkler (ed.), *Der Partisan: Theorie, Strategie, Gestalt* (Opladen, 1990) 14–39.

6 “Europeanized” powers are those descendants of the European-controlled world system at the colonial periphery which, in their own relationship with indigenous political entities, act more or less like European powers. This is true, above all, for the United States of America, but likewise for all other colonies of European settlement, once they become independent political actors, such as Canada, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand after they achieved dominion status. The modern state of Israel is another example of such a “Europeanized” state. To avoid the monotonous repetition “European and Europeanized” as far as possible, in this article “European” alone will usually be used to cover both these groups of “strong” actors.

7 H. L. Wesseling, “Colonial Wars: an Introduction”, in J. A. De Moor/Wesseling (eds.), *Imperialism and War: Essays on Colonial Wars in Asia and Africa* (Leiden, 1989), 2; Erwin A. Schmidl, “Kolonialkriege: Zwischen großem Krieg und kleinem Frieden”, in Manfred Rauchensteiner/Schmidl (eds.), *Formen des Krieges: Vom Mittelalter zum “Low-Intensity-Conflict”* (Graz, 1991), 111–2.

colonial periphery.⁸ As a social phenomenon of limited duration, with a clearly defined beginning and a likewise clearly defined end and distinct from a complementary phenomenon usually referred to as “peace”, war does not exist in the history of European rule over indigenous populations at the colonial periphery. Colonial rule as such was at all times a function of structural violence and the threat *as well as* actual application of physical violence both on the individual and the collective level. Only the scope and intensity of such violence were variable.⁹ Occasionally, it culminated in that form of organized collective violence that fits the Clausewitzian concept of “war”. Any definition of colonial war that concentrates only on these tips of the iceberg would neglect the iceberg itself and thus fail to take the nature of colonial rule into account.

Hence, in my considered opinion, if the term “colonial war” is to serve any heuristic purpose, it should be described as the actual application of physical violence – regardless of the intensity and scope – in the context of that structural phenomenon that historians and social scientists have labelled, with varying actual definitions, as “imperialism” or without the ideological connotation, as “European expansion”. In line with the influential contribution of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, “The Imperialism of Free Trade” (1953),¹⁰ I would like to describe imperialism as the political function of the integration of new regions into an

expanding economic system. This way, we have a working definition that is wide enough to cover all actual manifestations of European expansion over the centuries without being burdened with the arbitrary restrictions of many other definitions. In this sense, to sum up, “colonial war” would be that part of this political function that consists of the actual application of physical violence. (Admittedly, under this assumption the term “imperial war” or “war of imperialism” would probably be more appropriate, but it is not as commonly used a term as “colonial war” and also somewhat prone to misunderstandings.)

Under this perspective colonial wars, paradoxical as it may sound, have not ceased to exist with decolonisation. Understood correctly, Robinson’s and Gallagher’s theory can easily be extrapolated into the twentieth century and applied to what happened after the establishment of formal rule. It then becomes obvious that the transfer of power to indigenous elites during decolonisation is, in analytic terms, equivalent with the reinstatement of collaboration regimes – regimes whose breakdown in the nineteenth century had necessitated replacing informal predominance through costly formal rule in the first place.¹¹ Thus, decolonisation is nothing more than the return to the normal state of affairs at the colonial periphery, to the dominant reality of imperialism for centuries.¹² The wars that states of the Northern Hemisphere waged and continue to

- 8 In spite of its political and criminological rather than historical character, the ongoing debate on whether terrorism can be usefully described as war is not without interest. From a historical perspective, the similarities and grey areas are obvious enough to make an analysis of politically motivated, organized terror within the parameters of (small) war appear both appropriate and productive. In this respect, the inspiring contribution by Herfried Münkler, “Guerillakrieg und Terrorismus”, in *Neue Politische Literatur* 25 (1980), 299–326, is still relevant. At the conference “Kriegsbegründungen” (normative justifications of war) in Berlin (30 to 31 January 2004), the former SPD politician Erhard Eppler has recently argued that calling terrorism war is tantamount to needlessly making combatants out of terrorists. Obviously, this is a purely political line of thought with little historical relevance.
- 9 Even though one does not necessarily have to agree with the broad generalizations and sweeping accusations against colonial rule as such, Trutz von Trotha, *Koloniale Herrschaft: Zur soziologischen Theorie der Staatsentstehung am Beispiel des “Schutzgebietes Togo”* (Tübingen, 1994), esp. 32–84; and Trotha, “‘The Fellows Can Just Starve’: On Wars of ‘Pacification’ in the African Colonies of Imperial Germany and the Concept of ‘Total War’”, in Manfred F. Boemeke/Roger Chickering/Stig Förster (eds.), *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Cambridge, 1999), 420–30, are valuable. On everyday violence on the frontier see for instance Urs Bitterli, *Die “Wilden” und die “Zivilisierten”: Grundzüge einer Geistes- und Kulturgeschichte der europäisch-überseeischen Begegnung*, 2nd ed. (München, 1991), 142–4; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788–1994*, 2nd ed. (St. Leonards, NSW, 1994), esp. 39–44; also Schmidl, “Kolonialkriege”, 116–7.
- 10 John Gallagher/Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, in *The Economic History Review* 6 (1953–4), 1–15.

wage in the Third World during and after decolonisation still follow the patterns established in earlier colonial wars, even though the actual war aims may have shifted. They are still being fought to establish or uphold the integration of the periphery in the Western style world system – that conclusion is really a simple enough consequence of the analytic tool provided by Robinson and Gallagher and does not need the politically instrumentalized theories of neo-colonialism and dependency.

So, coming back to the beginning, we have established that small wars are normally asymmetric, and that colonial wars are, as a rule waged as small wars. Does that mean that colonial wars are usually asymmetric wars? Formal logic says they are, and historical evidence supports the logic. The very essence of imperialism is the establishment and upholding of an asymmetric, unequal relationship between the imperial power and the political entities on the colonial periphery. Diplomatically, politically, economically, culturally, technically, and scientifically, the colonizing power enjoys all the advantages the Europeanized world system has to offer, while the colonized are burdened with all the disadvantages. That may sound like an oversimplification and in some cases, upon closer scrutiny, it certainly is. But by and large, the world system as it has emerged over the five centuries that have passed since the conquest of the Americas has been deliberately

constructed to ensure that the European and Europeanized powers enjoyed precisely those advantages described above *vis-à-vis* the indigenous political entities they had set out to dominate.

The system of international politics and international law that was the core of the European-style world system reserved all the rights of free and independent actors to the European states while indigenous political entities were marginalized, in the worst case even dismissed as non-existent. In any case, the system of imperial rule monopolized the external political contacts of the colonized so that their political organizations became dependent actors. Unequal economic relations were the very *raison d'être* of the imperial system; the economies on the colonial periphery were (re)constructed in a way that made them complementary to the metropolitan economies, usually by turning them into market-oriented producers of cash crops and raw materials while restricting their own industrial development. The political and economic domination of the imperial powers was aided, in many sense brought about in the first place, by their superior military and civil technology, the bureaucratic organization of their administrative systems, and their superior knowledge of the world on all relevant fields.¹³

Being, as stated earlier, the application of physical violence as part of the political function of domination at the colonial

11 Ronald Robinson, "The Excentric Idea of Imperialism, with or without Empire", in Wolfgang J. Mommsen/Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London, 1986), 267–89; Robinson, "Non-European foundations of European imperialism: sketch for a theory of collaboration", in Roger Owen/Bob Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the theory of imperialism* (London, 1972), 118–40.

12 This rather obvious conclusion – only implied by Robinson – has not yet been generally accepted in interpretations of the decolonization era. Cf., however, Tony Smith, *The Pattern of Imperialism: The United States, Great Britain, and the late-industrializing world since 1815* (Cambridge, 1981), 85; Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "The End of Empire and the Continuity of Imperialism", in Mommsen/Osterhammel, *Imperialism and After*, 333–58. On the continuity of aims (before and after decolonization) see also Phillip Darby, *Three Faces of Imperialism: British and American Approaches to Asia and Africa 1870–1970* (New Haven, CT, 1987), 213–4. In this light, it is difficult to agree with Schmidl's suggestion ("Kolonialkriege", 121) that the middle of the twentieth century should mark "the transition from colonial conflicts to Third World conflicts" (my translation), especially since the differentiation between both terms is merely implied rather than spelled out.

13 For introductions to the character of European imperialism/expansion and the European-centered world system see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus: Geschichte, Formen, Folgen* (München, 1995), and Wolfgang Reinhard, *Geschichte der europäischen Expansion*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1983–90); for a very brief overview, see my own article "Colonialism & Imperialism", in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict*, ed. Lester Kurtz et al. (San Diego, CA, 1999), 1:355–65.

periphery, colonial wars are therefore most obviously wars between actors that are defined by their asymmetric relationship and the difference in the means they have at their disposal. However, asymmetry is not to be confused with unequal strength. In many cases an apparent strength can become a weakness and apparent weakness can be capitalized upon and turned into a strength. Asymmetry, therefore, means in the first place different quality, not necessarily also different quantity; and asymmetric war signifies not primarily the war between strong and weak, but a war in which the opponents are of a different kind and use different ways to achieve their aims.

Asymmetric war, however, is not yet a fully developed analytical category – a historical concept clearly enough defined and sufficiently discussed to really further our understanding of violent conflict. At this time, “asymmetric war” is just another catchphrase describing the “other” structure of armed conflict – the non-Clausewitzian, non-European, non-state conflict pattern – that occupies the place of many other such categories that have come and gone over the last two centuries. The probably earliest concept was that of “small war” (*Kleiner Krieg, la petite guerre*) that was common in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ After 1800 “partisan war” – German *Partisanenkrieg* or *Parteigängerkrieg* – became the prevalent category.¹⁵ Its contemporary twin, *guerrilla*, achieved notoriety only after World War Two, at a time when political debates also frequently blurred the distinction between means and aims of war by talking of

“revolutionary war” or “anti-colonial war” as if they were analytic categories.¹⁶ The following decades were blessed with the frequent introduction of new terms to describe the familiar phenomenon: “Insurgency” (and “counter-insurgency”)¹⁷, the still popular concept of “low-intensity conflict”,¹⁸ and the US military contributed the expression “operations other than war”, or OOTW,¹⁹ that with its own charming logic defies translation into other languages (at least translation into German). The most recent offspring of this two-century old family is now “asymmetric war”, a term that is fast becoming commonplace even in the newspapers.

In spite of the term’s frequent use, a concise and widely accepted definition of asymmetric war – at least one that would go beyond stating the obvious – is still wanting. The superficial simplicity of the concept may be largely responsible for that.²⁰ Like OOTW, asymmetric war is ultimately defined through its opposite, symmetric war. Asymmetric war is the war that does *not* fit into the normative concept of the war between actors of maybe not equal strength, but of equal right – it is *not* the war between sovereign nation states in the European sense. Any war in which even one side is not a universally recognized state actor with a regular army is by default asymmetric war, so that a definition seems to be quite pointless. Just like in the case of colonial war, asymmetric war seems to go by the logic of “I know it when I see it”, or rather, “I know it when I don’t see its opposite”.

14 Kunisch, *Der Kleine Krieg*.

15 Münkler, *Partisan*.

16 A typical example is Mao Tse-tung, *Theorie des Guerillakrieges oder Strategie der Dritten Welt* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1966), esp. the introduction by Sebastian Halfner.

17 Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750* (London, 2001).

18 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York, 1991). Cf. Daase, *Kleine Kriege*, 136–46; Manfred Rauchensteiner, “An der Schwelle zum Krieg – historische Dimensionen des ‘Low Intensity Conflict’”, in Rauchensteiner/Schmidl, *Formen des Krieges*, 177–205.

19 Beckett, *Insurgencies*, S. 204–5.

20 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/Main, 2003), 152: “... beide Gegner sind militärisch in höchstem Maße ungleich” (“both opponents are militarily extremely unequal”); Herfried Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2002), 11: “... in der Regel nicht gleichartige Gegner” (“opponents that are, as a rule, not of the same kind”).

It was my private conclusion from a conference under the title of *The Transformation of Warfare* that took place in Hamburg, Germany, in May 2003 as part of a series on *The Future of War* that a single category like asymmetric war is of very limited analytic use. If our idea of symmetric war is quite narrow and well-defined – which is the case – then the notion that all other forms of violent conflict are asymmetric wars is tautological and in its vague generality really next to useless. A catch-all phrase like asymmetric war covers conflict patterns so diverse that a closer – much closer – look is definitely worth our time.

As will become evident below, even in a non-European, non-Clausewitzian, non-state-actor conflict, asymmetric structures can be found in quite different actual manifestations and can be joined or even replaced temporarily or permanently by completely symmetric elements. In a significant number of individual cases of such wars, this mix of factors is confusing enough to make the applicability of the label “asymmetric war” quite questionable. Therefore, I consider it prudent not to limit ourselves to the comparatively banal question, is a given war symmetric or asymmetric – unsurprisingly, the possible answers are “yes”, “no”, or “I can’t say”. An infinitely more helpful approach would be to ask *what kind* of asymmetries – and of symmetries – can be found in a given conflict, to which extent they govern its course and conduct, and how they interact with one another. Admittedly this does not make for a neat model of dichotomic ideal types of the sort so favoured by political scientists. It does, however, lead to much more precise answers, not the least under a comparative synthetic approach. It is then possible to ask, for instance, if and under what circumstances inequality of military strength favours asymmetric means of conflict resolution – which is in no way always self-evident.

Under this approach, especially by way of comparison, it is also possible to make sense

of the otherwise quite confusing circumstance that asymmetric structures are also found in wars between European nation states with a roughly comparable military potential – say for instance such elements as the dehumanization of the enemy and the almost complete dissolution of the *ius in bello* in the German-Soviet War of 1941 to 1944, or say, generally, the many instances of partisan warfare within the European interstate wars not only in the twentieth century. Should we describe these conflicts as symmetric wars, asymmetric wars, or some sort of neither-nor? A short-sighted question, I submit. Only by breaking down these wars into their constituent parts and analyzing them step-by-step can we hope to cope with their otherwise hopelessly contradictory nature. World War Two in the East combined a majority of symmetric and a significant minority of asymmetric elements. These elements transpired partly simultaneously, partly in succession, and sometimes only in specific regions, and they can be and should be analyzed individually, in their interaction with each other, and in their interdependence with geography, the military course of the campaign, the ideological confrontation, customs and traditions of warfare on both sides, and so on, and be compared under all these aspects with other conflicts. This way – this way only – the concepts of symmetry and asymmetry are suddenly extremely useful as heuristic tools. Compared with this approach, labelling a whole war as either symmetric or asymmetric is banal and pointless.

And still, there is one exception to that verdict that I would like to make. One of the rare, more specific models of asymmetric war, that developed by Christopher Daase in his “Kleine Kriege – Große Wirkung” is extraordinarily helpful in at least one respect. For Daase, asymmetric war is war that transforms the internal structure and the legitimacy of its actors, which in symmetric war remain basically unchanged and stable.²¹ This notion is significant for the

21 Daase, *Kleine Kriege*, esp. 90–105.

study of colonial wars because colonial wars can also be understood and described, borrowing a paradigm that has originally been coined to describe early modern conflicts, as state building wars.²² That is of course perfectly evident for wars of colonial occupation. It is a lot less obvious, but no less interesting, for wars of pacification on the colonial periphery.²³ It is, finally, equally true and not quite as banal as it looks for colonial wars of independence. Protracted wars of liberation massively transform the social and political organization of their actors.²⁴ The political system and the everyday politics of many Third World states that emerged after 1945 still bear witness of the heritage of the wars these states had to fight to achieve their independence.²⁵ Even decades later, the political discourse in many a former colony is dominated throughout by recourse to the mechanisms, techniques, patterns of behaviour, and strategies of legitimization that were first successfully tested and applied in the armed conflicts fought during decolonization.²⁶

Obviously, the consequences of asymmetric war at the colonial periphery, under the Daase model, are in no way as drastic for the "strong" actor, the imperial power (we will come back to this particular circumstance later). In many a sense, therefore, the "meta-asymmetry" of colonial war lies therein: what makes colonial war asymmetric in the sense described by Christopher Daase, the transformation of its actors by the conduct of the war, applies

primarily, sometimes exclusively, to the "weak" side.²⁷

Asymmetries in Colonial Warfare

Asymmetry of Means

One of the most familiar features of our image of colonial warfare, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, is the striking asymmetry between the means the imperial power and the means the indigenous opponents had at their disposal. Colonial wars are invariably pictured as the clash of cannon and musket versus spear, later of Maxim gun and repeater versus flintlock musket, and in the latest stages of aircraft and armour versus, at best, submachine gun. It is worth remembering, though, that in earlier centuries the purely technical military means of the colonizing powers were by no means as dramatically superior to those available to their indigenous opponents as this image suggests. Firearms may have impressed native Americans and occasionally scared Africans into submission, but were, for instance, perfectly well known in many parts of Asia already in the sixteenth century.

Accordingly, European powers enjoyed no in-built technological advantage whatsoever in land combat, say, in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁸ The picture is a bit different when taking naval warfare into account. There, the European maritime powers by necessity had developed already in the sixteenth century all the assets that eventually established their world-wide

22 Johannes Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (Frankfurt/Main, 1992).

23 For some typical examples see Lonsdale, "The Conquest State of Kenya", in De Moor/Wesseling, *Imperialism and War*, 87-120.

24 Daase, *Kleine Kriege*, esp. 216-35.

25 This is probably most striking in the cases of Algeria and Palestine, or, to take a much more recent example, of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, where the frontlines of the independence wars appear to be far from being overcome any time soon.

26 For the "cult of violence" in African politics of the post-decolonization era see Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa 1830-1914* (Bloomington, IN, 1998), 217-19.

27 Obvious examples to the contrary, like Indochina and Algeria, make it appear plausible that serious repercussions for the metropolitan society are to be expected only if (a) the mobilization of manpower and (b) the own casualties are on a scale that was rather unusual, for colonial wars, before the middle of the twentieth century, and if (c) the colonial war is merely a catalyst for existing massive socio-political conflicts in the mother country. For Vietnam see the forthcoming study by Bernd Greiner, *Das amerikanische Jahrhundert: Krieg und Zivilgesellschaft in den USA*, vol. 3 (Hamburg); for Algeria Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*, rev. ed. (London, 2002).

28 D. H. A. Kolff, "The End of an Ancien Régime: Colonial War in India, 1798-1818", in De Moor/Wesseling, *Imperialism and War*, 33.

dominance of the seas, while outside Europe even great powers like China and Mughal India had failed to build bluewater navies of any significance.²⁹

As far as land warfare is concerned, however, the technological lead enjoyed by the colonizing powers emerged gradually during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and peaked between 1890 and 1940 with the introduction of machine guns, armoured vehicles, aircraft,³⁰ not to forget communication technologies like telegraph, telephone, wireless and the great force-multipliers of colonial campaigning, steamships and railroads. Then after World War Two the European advantage slowly receded, when it became obvious that the weapons of mass warfare and mass destruction that theoretically constituted the last decided technological edge the great powers had on any colonial opponent had no immediate significance in actual campaigns in the Third World. At the same time, the moderately sophisticated weaponry of the twentieth century – submachine guns, mortars, even rocket launchers – became widely available to colonial liberation movements, albeit often only by means of being provided by the leading power of the opposing bloc in the Cold War era.³¹

Apart from technology, but closely related to it, one of the most striking advantages Europeans enjoyed in colonial warfare at least from the eighteenth century onwards was the rational, bureaucratic principles on which their administrative and military organization was based. Most indigenous opponents' will to fight could always be

severely shaken and more often than not outright terminated by the death of their leader. The same was not true for the European side, where the incapacitation or death even of an overall commander simply meant that the immediate subordinate took his place. European forces were thus much more resistant against the form of sudden breakdown of morale that regularly befell indigenous armies in case of a reversal and often ended in complete dissolution. On a less dramatic level, European-style bureaucracy enabled the armies of the colonizing powers to take the field more regularly, to hold it for longer periods of time, to maximize whatever technological and logistic advantages they enjoyed, in short, to multiply their numbers by means of superior organization.³²

The indigenous opponent invariably compensated for his technological and organizational inferiority with a dramatic numerical superiority.³³ That was of course a simple result of the fact that the efforts devoted to overseas warfare by colonizing powers by nature had to remain extremely limited. For one thing, the technical means of power projection in remote, especially overseas areas, were quite poor in pre-modern times. Shipping an army even some thousand strong to a remote coast, let alone maintaining it for any length of time, was a considerable logistic challenge in the age of sail.³⁴ For another thing, the cost of maintaining large overseas garrisons would have been prohibitive and any attempt to do so would have been directly contrary to the very end of colonial rule, that is, financial gain. Accordingly, until well into the heyday

29 D. H. A. Kolff, "The End of an *Ancien Régime*: Colonial War in India, 1798–1818", in De Moor/Wesseling, *Imperialism and War*, 33.

30 Geoffrey Parker, "Ships of the Line 1500–1650", in Parker (ed.), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare: The Triumph of the West* (Cambridge, 1995), 120–31; Reinhard, *Expansion*, vol. 1, *Die alte Welt bis 1818* (Stuttgart, 1983), 28–61.

31 On the Europeans' technological edge over the non-European world see generally William H. McNeill, "European Expansion, Power and Warfare since 1500", in De Moor/Wesseling, *Imperialism and War*, 12–21; Daniel R. Headrick, "The Tools of Imperialism: Technology and the Expansion of European Colonial Empires in the Nineteenth Century", in *Journal of Modern History* 51 (1979), 231–63; Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London, 1983), 82–3; Lawrence James, *The Savage Wars: British Campaigns in Africa, 1870–1920* (New York, 1985), 260–79; Robert Kubicek, "British Expansion, Empire, and Technological Change", in Andrew Porter/Alaine Low (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 3, *The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999), 247–69.

32 Callwell, *Small Wars*, 76–7, 90; Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus*, 52; Wesseling, "Colonial Wars", 6.

33 L. H. Gann/Peter Duignan, *The Rulers of British Africa 1870–1914* (London, 1978), 138–9.

34 Jeremy Black, *European Warfare 1660–1815* (London, 1994), 208.

of Europe's colonial empires in the early twentieth century, permanent colonial garrisons of metropolitan troops remained insignificant in size.³⁵ Before the arrival of air transport, however – which did not become a means of transferring large contingents of ground troops, let alone heavy equipment, for many more decades³⁶ – it was manifestly impossible to rapidly reinforce overseas garrisons in case of an emergency. Hence the only two means by which an imperial power could substitute for its usually massive numerical inferiority was technology on the one hand – and indigenous manpower on the other.

Colonial warfare has always, to a large degree, and even more so in heavily populated areas, relied on indigenous mercenaries, levies, auxiliary troops, or allies. Indigenous manpower was available in large quantities, easily raised and likewise easily disposed of, cheap, and significantly less susceptible to tropical diseases than European troops. In fact, the ultimate means by which tiny European garrisons could uphold European rule over vast indigenous populations was not technology, but the cunning exploitation of existing or newly created rivalries between the colonized themselves. In early modern times, the colonizing power usually availed itself of this manpower potential by means of temporary alliances. Later, and increasingly from the nineteenth century on, the forming of permanent colonial forces based on local

levies became the means of choice. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the largest colonial standing army was without comparison the British Indian Army, regularly well over 150 000 strong in peacetime and expandable to several million in war, with the bulk of the rank and file being of course native Indians. It by far outdid the metropolitan standing army in size; a fact, though, that fails to take into account that metropolitan Britain maintained, in peacetime, the most powerful standing *navy* in the world, thus providing the ultimate means by which the Empire was controlled.³⁷

Nevertheless, even counting colonial manpower, over the course of the five centuries of European expansion there was almost always a grave disparity in the numerical size of the armed forces on both sides in any colonial conflict. It approached the ridiculous in the earliest centuries of European expansion when a handful of poorly armed Spanish adventurers, albeit with the help of European diseases, toppled the vast Aztec and Inka empires, and was still bordering on the incredible in the seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries as a few hundred European regulars repeatedly outfought indigenous armies that reportedly numbered in the tens or hundreds of thousands.³⁸ Of course, in many such instances existing rifts among the opposing forces as well as indigenous allies of the colonizing power are discounted in the

- 35 David Killingray, "Guardians of Empire", in Killingray/David Omissi (eds.), *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers c. 1700–1964* (Manchester, 1999), 5–8. In 1930, with the British Empire spanning one-fourth of the globe's surface, there was not a single British (i.e. metropolitan) battalion in all of British Africa south of the Sahara. *Ibid.*, 8. See also Gann/Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*, 73, 84; Vandervort, *Wars*, 37–40.
- 36 For the mid-twentieth century, see William P. Snyder, *The Politics of British Defense Policy, 1945–1962* (Columbus, OH, 1964), 10–15; H. C. G. Cartwright-Taylor, "Organization and Training for Air Transported Operations", in *The Royal Engineers Journal* 76 (1962), 194–203.
- 37 Killingray, "Guardians", 2–16; Killingray, "The Idea of a British Imperial African Army", in *Journal of African History* 20 (1979), 421–36; Gann/Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*, 71–89; Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus*, 51–4; Beckett, *Insurgencies*, 34; T. R. Moreman, "'Small Wars' and 'Imperial Policing': The British Army and the Theory and Practice of Colonial Warfare in the British Empire, 1919–1939", in *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19 (1996), 111–2; T. A. Heathcote, "The Army of British India", in David Chandler/Ian Beckett (eds.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (Oxford, 1994), 376–401; Robert Holland, "The British Empire and the Great War, 1914–1918", in Judith M. Brown/Wm. Roger Louis/Alaine Low (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, *The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), 121–23.
- 38 For some drastic examples from Africa see David Killingray, "Colonial Warfare in West Africa 1870–1914", in De Moor/Wesseling, *Imperialism and War*, 147, and Gann/Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*, 138. In the Battle of Omdurman, on 2 September 1898, the Mahdi's Dervishes lost 27 000 men, including 11 000 killed; their Anglo-Egyptian adversaries suffered less than 400 casualties, only 48 of which were fatalities. James, *Savage Wars*, 106–8.

popular narrative, and equally often the very size of the enemy army is vastly exaggerated.³⁹ Nevertheless, until well into the twentieth century superior technology, tactics and organization provided the European powers with the means to overcome far larger numbers of Third World opponents – if and as long as those opponents complied more or less with the conventional ways of waging war.

It was the application of European technology, European ways of rational organization, and not least European theories of small war, but also the forming of trans-ethnic national resistance movements in the wars of decolonization after 1945, that finally necessitated the use of mass armies in the colonies.⁴⁰ These armies also more often than not were now composed of national servicemen of the metropolitan country, as in the face of indigenous nationalist movements colonial manpower was no longer considered completely reliable.⁴¹ Charged with the suppression of entire hostile populations, however, even these mass armies found the job to be beyond their means at least in the long run.

Asymmetry of Knowledge

Closely related to the technological advantages the imperial powers enjoyed *vis-à-vis* their indigenous opponents was their vastly superior knowledge of the world as such. In early times, the Europeans' lead in this field was overwhelming. After the "re-discovery" of America and the circumnavigation of the world, the Western civilization was the only one whose geographical image of the world encompassed *all* continents save Antarctica, the existence of which, if not its actual size and shape, was however known. Not even the Oriental civilizations, whose knowledge was for centuries limited to the "old" world, could compare with that.⁴²

Superior knowledge of the wider world gave the colonial powers a decided edge over their indigenous opponents. It allowed them to develop global, rather than local, strategies for dealing with local crises, and to refine *systems* of colonial rule and colonial warfare that were applicable to different circumstances and provided ready-made answers to many situations in advance. When the Europeans came to Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century, they carried with them not only trading goods and firearms, but also the accumulated

39 Some interesting qualifications in this respect were offered by Erik Lund on 21 January 2004 on the H-War discussion list, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-War&month=0401&week=c&msg=hxpDjzCZSwc7VzYa0HHWDQ&user=&pw=> (13 May 2005). The tendency to exaggerate the enemy's numbers was even greater in the (rare) instance of a defeat, like in the Maori wars in New Zealand: James Belich, *The Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict: The Maori, the British, and the New Zealand Wars* (Montreal, 1989), 314.

40 Even leaving aside the rather atypical Boer War, it is true that armies deployed for wars on the colonial frontier started to grow significantly already from the beginning of the twentieth century (Vandervort, *Wars*, 185–6). However, not until the 1940s did mobilisation for colonial wars increase to a scale roughly comparable to major European wars. The Soviet Union sent 642 000 men into Afghanistan; the highest level at any one time was 120 000 in 1986 (with 30 000 more operating from Soviet territory: Beckett, *Insurgencies*, 211). Two point five million Americans served in Vietnam (John M. Carroll, "America in Vietnam", in Carroll/Colin F. Baxter (eds.), *The American Military Tradition: From Colonial Times to the Present* (Wilmington, DE, 1993), 211), with a force level of 500 000 at the end of the 1960s (Marc Frey, *Geschichte des Vietnamkrieges: Die Tragödie in Asien und das Ende des amerikanischen Traumes*, 2nd ed. (München, 1999), 188). In the summer of 1957, France had nearly 400 000 men in Algeria (Hartmut Elsenhans, *Frankreichs Algerienkrieg 1954–1962: Entkolonisierungsversuch einer kapitalistischen Metropole. Zum Zusammenbruch der Kolonialreiche* (München, 1983), 396; unfortunately, I have been unable to find figures for the total number of French soldiers who served in Algeria). These are dimensions to which only the Boer War compares.

41 Conscript armies fought, for instance, for the UK in Malaya, for France in Algeria, for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and of course for the United States in Vietnam.

42 Jürgen Osterhammel/Niels P. Petersson, *Geschichte der Globalisierung: Dimensionen – Prozesse – Epochen* (München, 2003), 43–4; Jeremy Black (ed.), *Dumont Atlas der Weltgeschichte* (Köln, 2000), 76–7. That knowledge about a continent did not necessarily mean complete exploration and mapping, especially of the interior, goes without saying. Until well into the nineteenth century, most of the interior of Africa south of the Sahara was blank on European maps, even though the coasts had been explored, mapped and mostly also occupied with bases several centuries before.

experiences of nearly four centuries of dealing with, fighting, and subjugating “savages”. Colonial powers could learn from their own experiences, and from those of other powers. For their indigenous opponents, the situation they faced when trying to resist conquest by Europeans was often unique in that they had never encountered it before. Where conquest succeeded immediately, their first chance to learn was also their last. Significantly, the indigenous political entities most capable of resisting European conquest for extended periods of time were those who had been in contact with Europeans before,⁴³ whereas the ones that had been virtually isolated from the old world before the *conquista* – Central and South America – collapsed under the first onslaught.

To a certain degree the colonized could compensate for their lack of knowledge about the wider world with an abundance of knowledge of local relevance. As Europeans often took it for granted that from Canada to the Sudan to Borneo one “savage” was just like another, they remained more or less ignorant of the significance of information on local polities, cultures, and traditions, a fact that frequently caused them to underestimate their adversaries, to miss opportunities, or to even risk outright disaster. Indigenous opponents also could generally capitalize on their superior knowledge of local geography which was as often as not sadly lacking on the side of their European adversaries. The history of colonial campaigning is full of reports of European armies setting out to conquer indigenous cities that turned out to be non-existent or hundreds of miles off the assumed location; of armies taking roads

leading into nowhere; of armies finding their way blocked by mountains or rivers that should not have been there according to maps they considered accurate, and armies which, as a result, were ambushed or annihilated or starved to death. This gap in locally relevant knowledge was one of the essential preconditions for the capability of indigenous populations to resist colonial conquest by means of small war campaigns.⁴⁴

This asymmetric distribution of knowledge – primarily global on the European, mainly local on the indigenous side – was most dramatic in the earliest stages of European expansion, most notably in the Americas, to a certain degree in nineteenth century sub-Saharan Africa and some remote areas. The development of colonial geography, ethnography, and some other sciences then contributed to closing the gap in local knowledge on the European side. In the early twentieth century, colonial powers generally knew infinitely more about local affairs than say in the seventeenth.⁴⁵ At the same time, the globalization of the world, modern communications, and the emergence of Europeanized colonial elites helped to close the gap in global knowledge. In the wars of decolonization, national liberation movements usually led by intellectuals with European university degrees turned the tables on the former colonial powers. The Europeans now found that, while the modern world made global, general knowledge available to virtually everyone with the means to acquire a thorough formal education, knowledge of local affairs acquired by a colonial power remained, by nature, incomplete and outdated. As a consequence, in even the most recent wars in

43 T. O. Ranger, “African Reactions to the Imposition of Colonial Rule in East and Central Africa”, in L. H. Gann/Peter Duignan, *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960*, vol. 1, *The History and Politics of Colonialism 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 1969), 304.

44 Callwell, *Small Wars*, S. 43–56; Brian Bond (ed.), *Victorian Military Campaigns*, London 1967, 20–1. The most spectacular case of a European colonial army meeting disaster due to total lack of local knowledge is probably the Italian defeat at Adua: Giulia Brogini Künzi, “Der Sieg des Negus: Adua, 1. März 1896”, in Stig Förster/Markus Pöhlmann/Dierk Walter (eds.), *Schlachten der Weltgeschichte: Von Salamis bis Sinai*, 3rd ed. (München, 2003), 248–63.

45 David N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise* (Oxford, 1992), 177–259; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis, MN, 1996); Morag Bell/Robin A. Butlin/Michael J. Heffernan (eds.), *Geography and Imperialism, 1820–1940* (Manchester, 1995); Robert A. Stafford, “Scientific Exploration and Empire”, in Porter/Low, *Oxford History of the British Empire*, 3:294–319.

the Third World, the indigenous side has still been able to capitalize on its advantage in local knowledge that has been essential for its capability to fight, and often win, its “small wars”.⁴⁶

Asymmetry of Actor Status

The most striking asymmetry, bar none, in the relationship between a colonizing power and the indigenous political entities about to be colonized is of course the dramatic discrepancy in the international/legal status of the respective actors. For at least four and a half of the five centuries of European expansion it would be just a slight exaggeration to say that a non-European adversary was at least legally in many a sense not an actor at all, but much rather a non-entity. The strategies for legitimizing the marginalization of non-European actors have varied over time, but have always had a consistent common purpose in denying those actors both the *ius ad bellum* and the *ius in bello* entirely. From the earliest times right to the wars of decolonization, indigenous adversaries were, by definition, not belligerents. Instead, they were defined as pagans destined to be either Christianized or to suffer extermination (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries); as unenlightened, uneducated, childish savages to be patronized and civilized, even against their will (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries); in Darwinian terms, as people less fit for survival and hence to be treated as mere obstacles in the way of the ever-expanding European civilization (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries); and as late as the Cold War era, as insurgents resisting the legitimate rule of their internationally recognized colonial or post-colonial government. The international law system established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries underpinned this asymmetric view

of the world by reserving the rights of statehood to the established European and Europeanized powers, by and large; in this framework, whole continents with millions of inhabitants became a legal *terra nullius*, devoid of rightful owners and falling by default to any European power who first claimed possession by virtue of “effective occupation”.⁴⁷

In its dealings with political entities at the colonial periphery even the most inconsequential European power enjoyed all the advantages that were denied even to the most powerful non-European civilizations. Any European state was by definition a fully fledged political actor on the international stage, recognized by other powers, free to choose its own alliances, entitled to the full protection and all privileges of international law. To uphold their privileged position *vis-à-vis* the non-European world, European powers even acted resolutely together, putting their internal rivalries aside, when their rights were threatened by non-European actors. In extreme cases, this culminated in joint intervention, which happened as late as the twentieth century in China.⁴⁸

The indigenous political entities, on the other hand, became, in the heyday of the colonial empires, prophylactically, and often without their knowledge, part of “spheres of influence” which gave usually a single European power exclusive rights to diplomatic and trade relations with them. They were thus legally and practically denied any freedom of action in foreign relations and became dependent actors in advance of any own decision to this effect.⁴⁹ As a rule, in the interest of mutual protection of interests, colonial powers refrained from interfering with the affairs of the subjects of other colonial empires in peacetime. Around 1900, agreements to this effect were even envisioned for wartime, thus neutralizing at

46 Beckett, *Insurgencies*, esp. 249; for an overview see also Ronald Haycock (ed.), *Regular Armies and Insurgencies*, London 1979.

47 Ignaz Seidl-Hohenveldern, *Völkerrecht*, 5th ed. (Köln, 1984), 239; Aldo Virgilio Lombardi, *Bürgerkrieg und Völkerrecht: Die Anwendbarkeit völkerrechtlicher Normen in nicht-zwischenstaatlichen bewaffneten Konflikten* (Berlin, 1976), 173–5. The most drastic example of the application of this theory is Australia: Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations 1788–1993* (St. Leonards, NSW, 1994), 20–3.

48 Susanne Kuß/Bernd Martin (eds.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Boxeraufstand* (München, 2002).

least parts of the colonial empires even in case of a general war in Europe.⁵⁰ Again, the idea was to deny indigenous political entities legal actor status by preventing them from playing European powers off against one another.

In the twentieth century some breaches in this formerly watertight system of differential international law emerged. For one thing, the international law status of European actors ceased to be completely sacrosanct. As theories of social Darwinism were increasingly applied to the European states system itself, the partitioning of colonies of some minor powers became at least thinkable, especially when these powers allegedly failed to perform convincingly enough in their colonizing and civilizing role. With regard to Portuguese Africa for instance, such treaties were negotiated already before World War One (but were not implemented).⁵¹ The Great War itself *was* fought in the colonies, in spite of prior agreements. By giving millions of non-Europeans a chance to see Europeans fight *one another*, even enlisting coloured troops to shoot on fellow Europeans, it caused lasting damage to the illusion of universal European solidarity *vis-à-vis* non-European opponents.⁵²

The single most important factor that finally caused the demise of the differential international law system, however, was the ideology of anti-colonialism and the subsequent decolonization movement. Once "illegal" resistance movements could become, almost overnight, legitimate,

internationally recognized national governments while colonial powers forcibly resisting the independence of their colonies could severely damage their international credibility by doing so, the legal status gap between the actors began to shrink rapidly. The ideological confrontation of the Cold War that almost automatically guaranteed any resistance movement pictured as illegitimate by the one bloc complete international recognition by the other bloc added impetus to this deterioration of the old system. Still, the essential characteristics of the status gap have remained the same, and even in the colonial conflicts of the Cold War era, the fundamental asymmetry between the "strong" and the "weak", the state and the non-state actor, as suggested by Christopher Daase, still applies.⁵³

Asymmetry of Ends

Almost as dramatic as the consequences of asymmetry in the status of both actors in a colonial war are the discrepancies between the ends the war serves for the opposing sides. Obviously, war aims are always contradictory in nature; what one side gains, the other has to lose. But that is a superficial observation. Even in a "Total War" between great powers of the Northern hemisphere, the ends the war is fought for are contradictory, but of the same nature; one side seeks the overthrow of the other just as the other seeks one's own. The same is not at all true for wars of colonial domination.

49 The pertinent case is, of course, the casual way in which the European powers availed themselves of the control of most of south-Saharan Africa in the Berlin Conference of 1884/5: Stig Förster/Wolfgang J. Mommsen/Ronald Robinson (eds.), *Bismarck, Europe, and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition* (Oxford, 1988), esp. Jörg Fisch, "Africa as *terra nullius*: The Berlin Conference and International Law", *ibid.*, 347-75. For a convincing theoretical interpretation see Johan Galtung, "A Structural Theory of Imperialism", in *Journal of Peace Research* 8 (1971), 81-117, esp. 89-91.

50 At least this is what the Berlin Act provided for the area where it applied, i.e. most of Middle Africa. Fisch, "Africa", 372-3.

51 Rolf Peter Tschapek, *Bausteine eines zukünftigen deutschen Mittelafrika: Deutscher Imperialismus und die portugiesischen Kolonien: Deutsches Interesse an den südafrikanischen Kolonien Portugals vom ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert bis zum ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 2000), esp. 25-128; See also Jost Düllfer, "Vom europäischen Mächtesystem zum Weltstaatensystem der Jahrhundertwende", in Düllfer, *Im Zeichen der Gewalt: Frieden und Krieg im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Martin Kröger/Ulrich S. Soënius/Stefan Wunsch (Köln, 2003), 59.

52 See for instance Frank Furedi, "The demobilized African soldier and the blow to white prestige", in Killingray/Omissi, *Guardians of Empire*, 179-97; Killingray, "Idea", 425-7; Tom Pocock, *Fighting General: The Public and Private Campaigns of General Sir Walter Walker* (London, 1973), 25. Also Schmid, "Kolonialkriege", 122-3.

53 Daase, *Kleine Kriege*.

The situation at the colonial periphery with respect to war aims is a simple consequence of the structure of the imperial system as such; in many ways, it is a result of geography only. By definition, colonial wars are fought at the periphery of the empire. They take place in a remote area and involve either none or only a very indirect risk of affecting the metropolitan society at all. International prestige may be at stake, or in the worst case the supply of scarce raw materials – that is all there is to lose. Obviously, this does not mean that the centre of imperial power can not take a vested interest in colonial wars; if the stakes are high enough, governments can be toppled over colonial affairs.⁵⁴ But for the society in the mother country the war at the periphery is always fought for extremely limited aims.

The opposite applies to the indigenous political entities against which colonial wars are waged. Unless those entities are empires so large and powerful in their own right that they can dismiss some strife on the frontier as just as insignificant as the colonial power itself – this applied for a long time to the Chinese, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires –, for the people about to be colonized colonial war is almost by definition a war for survival. It is always fought on their own soil, and even if it does not culminate in cultural or actual physical genocide, the overthrow of at least the political, but equally often also the social and economic system is what the enemy strives for. From the perspective of the indigenous political entity, the war aims of the colonial power deserve in almost any case the label “total”, while one’s own war aims

vis-à-vis that colonial power are entirely defensive in nature even locally; with respect to the remote metropolitan society, they are non-existent.⁵⁵

In the decolonization era things began to change. Wars were no longer necessarily fought to uphold formal colonial rule, but rather to ensure that the newly emerging nation states would be politically stable, socially conservative, and – under the auspices of the Cold War confrontation – firmly planted in one’s own ideological camp and alliance system.⁵⁶ While every colonial war is in some way a civil war, as some social, political or ethnic groups are always on the side of the imperial power, in the wars of decolonization this aspect became dominant. This shift of emphasis tended to blur the asymmetry of the war aims of the opposing sides. However, in so far as these aims still referred to only one of the two societies involved, the one at the periphery, at its core the fundamental asymmetry of ends remained.

Asymmetry of Effort

Closely related to the asymmetric ends in colonial wars are the asymmetric efforts the adversaries require to achieve those aims. As pointed out above, in keeping with their limited aims, the imperial power employs, wherever possible, only very limited means in any war at the colonial periphery. Needless to say, those means require by nature no unusual effort on the part of the metropolitan society:⁵⁷ “total mobilization” for a colonial war is a contradiction in terms.⁵⁸

54 That was true especially for France, Germany and the UK from the “Scramble for Africa” to the First World War.

55 Wesseling, „Colonials Wars“, 3.

56 A typical example for this set of conditions is Malay(sia). See for instance John Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency: An Analysis of the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1954* (Boulder, CO, 1992); A. J. Stockwell, “Insurgency and Decolonisation During the Malayan Emergency”, in *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 25/1 (1987), 71–81; Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948–1960* (Singapore, 1989); Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948–1960* (London, 1975).

57 Merom, *Democracies*, 29, calls such conflicts „under-invested wars“.

58 This is what makes the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia such a strange and vexing episode in the history of colonial warfare. Ultimately, the attempt to launch a European-style total war against a decidedly pre-modern Third World country can only (and even then just barely) be understood within the context of Italian domestic and European foreign policy: as a carefully staged and propagandistically exploited rehearsal for a European war. See Giulia Brogini Künzi, “Die Herrschaft der Gedanken: Italienische Militärzeitschriften und das Bild des Krieges”, in Stig Förster (ed.), *An der Schwelle zum Totalen Krieg: Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft 1919–1939* (Paderborn, 2002), 56; Brogini-Künzi, *Italien und der Abessinienkrieg 1935/36: Ein Kolonialkrieg oder ein Totaler Krieg?* (Diss. Bern, 2002).

The exact opposite is true, yet again, for political entities against which wars of colonial conquest are waged. Faced with a war for total aims, fought on their own soil and constantly brought home to them, they have to employ whatever means possible to ensure survival. Hence, the effort required from them is as “total” as it can be, and the whole of society is enlisted for the war. Admittedly, the indigenous party in a war at the colonial periphery is as often as not a society with a decidedly pre-modern political organization and a very rudimentary division of labour, so that to speak of “total mobilization” is somewhat tautological. Nevertheless, the vast discrepancy in the effort required from both parties in most of these conflicts is striking. The non-European side is involved in colonial wars in a way the European side almost never is.

Again, the picture changed significantly in the era of decolonization. As colonial wars began to be fought by mass armies of national servicemen, the metropolitan society was increasingly involved in the war effort – Algeria and Vietnam are the best examples. Nevertheless. While modern democracies show a sharply declining tolerance of their own casualties in wars at the periphery,⁵⁹ thereby often creating an exaggerated image of the human cost of the war in the perception of the home society,⁶⁰ it is still true that the own effort in men and material is extremely limited compared with a war against a power of comparable military capacities. Likewise, the efforts required from the Third World adversary are still infinitely higher in comparison, and the consequences for its society dramatically more serious.

Symmetry of Ways

Paradoxically, the fundamental asymmetry of means and ends in colonial wars as described above is the source of the striking symmetry in the ways in which they are often

fought. As with every “small war”, the non-state or “weak” actor holds the power of definition. The “strong” or state actor – the imperial power in a colonial war – obviously prefers to fight his wars, even at the colonial periphery, in the conventional way that given his superior military means is most favourable for him: quick, decisive, offensive action, culminating in a series of pitched battles after which hopefully the indigenous opponent yields and accepts a peace settlement favourable to the imperial power – limited war of limited duration, fought with limited means for limited ends. As stated above, if the indigenous adversary is obliging enough to comply with the rules of conventional warfare he forgoes most of the advantages he would hold in a small war campaign. And still, throughout the history of European expansion many a political entity at the colonial periphery has opted for conventional ways of waging war, has tried to fight a symmetric war in total disregard of the completely asymmetric means both sides had at their disposal. Especially those powers holding regional supremacy before the arrival of a European actor tried to deal with the new challenge in the old way, only to learn the hard way that at the end of the day even the highly developed military machinery of warrior kingdoms like the Zulu could not cope with what any European power could field against them. Yet, as stated before, their first chance to learn was often also their last chance to apply the lesson.

Those indigenous political entities who survived their attempt to resist the European onslaught in open battle, as well as those who realized their essential weakness in the first place, usually took to fighting guerrilla campaigns. By doing so, they turned the tables on the Europeans who in any war at the colonial periphery were stricken with a number of fundamental disadvantages which their indigenous adversaries could capitalize upon.⁶¹

59 See Merom, *Democracies*, esp. 248–9.

60 This is evident, for instance, with respect to the United States and the present (2003–) guerrilla war in Iraq, just as for the earlier (1993) intervention in Somalia.

61 Gann/Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*, 139–43.

First and foremost, given the tiny “armies” Europeans maintained in their colonies, their troops-to-space ratio was ridiculous. Once the enemy started a war of pinprick attacks against its lines of communication, no European colonial army could have any hope of securing those lines while at the same time maintaining a sizable field force. The enormous expanse of many colonial frontier areas where lines of communication could easily run several hundred miles through hostile country produced situations where upwards of 50 per cent of an army had to be used for rear area duties – except that in a hostile environment there was no “rear”.⁶²

By fighting a defensive guerrilla campaign, the indigenous opponent also made the most of his superior knowledge of the land, above all its geography. Especially where nature itself provided ample cover for small raiding parties – broken ground, jungle, wooded areas, mountains, swamps, in other words almost everything except wide open plains – a tiny European colonial army had no means whatsoever of effectively suppressing a small war campaign. In fact, it had to consider itself lucky if it was not outright ambushed wherever it moved. Finally, with a small war campaign the indigenous adversary created an environment that was hostile throughout. Often, in the European perception, geography, nature, and local population merged into one combined challenge they had little hope of coping with – at least not by conventional means – and that constantly undermined their credibility both as a

superior military power and as legitimate ruler of the country.⁶³

It took the great powers of the Northern hemisphere some time to find a counterstrategy for local small wars waged against their colonial armies, and some never learned – as late as the 1960s, the United States tried to fight a primarily conventional war at the colonial periphery; the Soviet Union repeated that mistake even in the 1980s. The answer, of course, was to copy the ways of the indigenous opponent and turn them against themselves. Increasingly in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century, European colonial armies abandoned the conventional ways of waging war and learned to fight small wars.⁶⁴ If the enemy raided their own communications and thus tried to deny them means of keeping their forces in the field supplied, the answer was to destroy the means of his very subsistence and thus keep him from fighting at all. If the enemy used the local population for support and cover, the answer was to carry the war to this population, teach them that by supporting the enemy and resisting the imperial power they put their very survival at risk. If the enemy offered no target for a conventional military campaign – no army, no fortress, no capital city to be conquered – the answer was to make the entire country a legitimate target.⁶⁵ Hence, colonial campaigning increasingly ceased to have any similarity with European-style warfare; instead, it took the shape of cattle lifting and crop burning raids – in the best case – and of punitive expeditions against the population of entire areas – in the worst.⁶⁶

62 Callwell, *Small Wars*, 115–8.

63 See for Vietnam Bernd Greiner, “‘First to Go, Last to Know’: Der Dschungelkrieger in Vietnam”, in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 29 (2003), 251–4. The perception of the environment described here is representative of the entire history of European colonial campaigning. See also Bond, *Campaigns*, 21–2. It is, therefore, no coincidence that repeatedly fighting the hostile environment and fighting the enemy became indistinguishable in the minds of the Europeans at the colonial periphery, culminating for instance in Kenya (Frank Kitson, *Bunch of Five* (London, 1977) 54–5) and, more well-known, in Vietnam, in large scale deforestation or defoliation. See also Susanne Kuß, “Kriegführung ohne hemmende Kulturschranke: Die deutschen Kolonialkriege in Südwestafrika (1904–07) und Ostafrika (1905–08)” (unpublished paper, presented to the conference “Kolonialkriege” (colonial wars), Erfurt (Germany), 10 to 11 January 2003). For the exaggerated ideas that the British had of the “natural advantages” their Maori adversaries supposedly enjoyed in their natural domestic environment, see Belich, *Interpretation*, 315. Needless to mention that these theories came in very handy in explaining the reasons for a defeat.

64 Vandervort, *Wars*, 209–12; Beckett, *Insurgencies*, 30–51.

65 On the theory see Callwell, *Small Wars*, esp. 34–42, 145–9; James, *Savage Wars*, 183–4.

66 For some typical examples see again Lonsdale, “Conquest State”.

As stated earlier, the indigenous opponent in a colonial war had never, not even on paper, enjoyed the rights of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*,⁶⁷ but with small war becoming the means of choice for colonial campaigns all rules were abandoned.⁶⁸ The hostile population was increasingly viewed as being on the same level as any other element of the hostile natural environment – together with swamps, jungles, wild beasts and the tsetse fly, the “savage” became an annoying feature of colonial geography that was earmarked for extinction.⁶⁹ That did not regularly mean genocide⁷⁰ – but accidental killings, even massacres, were perfectly legitimate and not

worth a second thought.⁷¹ Large-scale removal of populations from entire areas became a means not only of convenient appropriation of land but also of pacification.⁷² Scruples about employing such practices had never been very pronounced in the history of European expansion, but with small war campaigns being waged against the colonial rulers, these practices acquired a new, more pressing justification – not as means of “developing” a colony, but as instrument to ensure the very survival of the colonial system and its European protagonists on the spot.

67 The recurrent claim that colonial wars were, by definition, exempted from the rules of the Hague convention, or of any international law of war whatsoever, appears to have no firm legal foundation in the Convention itself or in international law. That rules of war and the Hague convention had very little actual significance for colonial warfare was probably more a consequence of the fact that non-European states were, with only a few exceptions, not recognized by European powers and therefore not invited to sign the Convention.

68 A typical example is the behaviour of the American troops in the Philippines from late 1899 (Frank Schumacher, “Niederbrennen, Plündern und Morden sollt Ihr ...”: Der Kolonialkrieg der USA auf den Philippinen, 1898–1902”. Unpublished paper, presented to the conference “Kolonialkriege”, Erfurt 2003) and of course of the German *Schutztruppe* in South-West-Africa in 1904/5 (Isabel V. Hull, “Military Culture and the Production of ‘Final Solutions’ in the Colonies: The Example of Wilhelminian Germany”, in Robert Gellately/Ben Kiernan (eds.), *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2003), 152–4). Cf. Schmidl, “Kolonialkriege”, 117–9.

69 Representative also for earlier periods and other frontiers is the comparatively late quote from Kitson, *Bunch of Five*, 13–4, with respect to the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya: “Most of them [the British soldiers] saw evidence of revolting Mau Mau brutality from time to time, and probably regarded the finding and despoiling of the gang members in the same way as they would regard the hunting of a dangerous wild animal.” Europeans saw the apparently natural guerrilla war competence – bushcraft, if you will – of their indigenous adversaries as evidence of their intimate relationship with nature itself. Equating the “savage” to wild animals was then only a small step away and resulted in a drastically reduced inhibition level against decidedly brutal ways of warfare. Cf. Belich, *Interpretation*, 329–30.

70 For an intelligent, but ultimately politically motivated contribution to the recently much debated question of colonial genocide see Elazar Barkan, “Genocides of Indigenous Peoples: Rhetoric of Human Rights”, in Gellately/Kiernan, *Specter of Genocide*, 117–39. For Barkan, an explicit intention on part of the alleged perpetrator, together with the large-scale disappearance of an indigenous population, is sufficient to constitute genocide (136), which is tantamount to claiming that a motive and a dead body would suffice for a conviction for murder, even in complete absence of actual proof of the deed. Ultimately, Barkan does not deny that the *intentional* extermination of indigenous populations was a very rare exception in the history of European expansion. An interesting discussion of this problem can be found in Jürgen Zimmerer, “Kolonialer Genozid? Vom Nutzen und Nachteil einer historischen Kategorie für eine Globalgeschichte des Völkermordes”, in Dominik J. Schaller/Boyadjian Rupen/Hanno Scholtz/Vivianne Berg (eds.), *Enteignet – Vertrieben – Ermordet. Beiträge zur Genozidforschung* (Zürich, 2004), 109–28. See also Zimmerer, “Holocaust und Kolonialismus: Beitrag zu einer Archäologie des genozidalen Gedankens”, in: *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 51 (2003), 1098–119, and Zimmerer, “Die Geburt des ‘Ostlandes’ aus dem Geiste des Kolonialismus: Die nationalsozialistische Eroberungs- und Beherrschungspolitik in (post-)kolonialer Perspektive”, in *Sozialgeschichte* 19 (2004), 10–43.

71 See for Australia Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, esp. 39–44. Cf. Hull, “Military Culture”, 142–3.

72 Well-known instances of state-initiated land robbery on the grand scale are the expulsion of the Masai from the Laikipia Plateau of Kenya (M. P. K. Sorrenson, “Land Policy in Kenya 1895–1945”, in Vincent Harlow/E. M. Chilvert/Alison Smith (eds.), *History of East Africa*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1965), 683–4) and the Jackson administration’s *Indian Removal Act* (1830; see Reinhard, *Expansion*, vol. 2, *Die neue Welt* (Stuttgart, 1985), 217–8). The latter was, with respect to the “Five Civilized Nations”, without doubt a classical “final solution” just short of actual genocide (see Hull, “Military Culture”, 143). In the wars of the decolonization era, planned resettlement, aimed at facilitating permanent control of the population and severing their contacts with the insurgents, was a mainstay of many counterinsurgency campaigns, so for instance in Malaya, Algeria and Indochina (strategic hamlet programme). Of course internal security, not land appropriation, was the primary motive behind these latter instances of forced migration (especially keeping in mind the decolonization context) – another example of how long established instruments of imperial expansion and domination were partly transformed (but remained very much recognizable) in the twentieth century.

Accordingly, protracted small war campaigns on the colonial frontier became a regular feature of upholding European rule in the colonial empires. Both sides had taken to fighting their asymmetric wars as small wars – hence they fought, again, in a symmetric way. Many such wars were smouldering for decades, time and again erupting into more intensive phases with attacks on European farms or installations and the resulting punitive expeditions. Small wars of varying intensity were what accounted for the bulk of the continuous violence in colonial frontier areas.

Again, the second half of the twentieth century added a new quality. Nation-wide, trans-ethnic resistance and liberation movements emerged in many colonies. Public opinion in the First World, but also in other Third World countries began to take an interest in colonial affairs. The ideological confrontation of the Cold War as well as the decolonization movement provided effective international background forces.⁷³ As a consequence of all these factors, the political dimension of colonial wars acquired primary importance. Colonial wars were no longer fought for military domination only, but increasingly for supremacy in the headlines as well. Europe's great powers began to realize that the colonies could neither be held nor even be "de-colonized" as desired merely by state terror, by coercing hostile populations into submission. Accordingly, the new emphasis was on "winning the hearts and minds". Military means became subordinate to political ones in a way that was without precedent in the history of European expansion. The colonial soldier became

administrator, civil engineer, development worker. Colonial small war campaigning was transformed into its modern form, counterinsurgency – an integrated approach to Third World crises of which the purely military response was only one element among many.⁷⁴

Yet the decolonization era has also brought about a regressive tendency in the ways wars at the colonial periphery were waged. As indigenous liberation movements aspired to statehood, they increasingly aimed at proving their legitimacy by demonstratively acquiring the characteristics of traditional state actors. Above all that meant turning to conventional warfare based on regular field armies.⁷⁵ The development of colonial campaigning had come full circle. In fact, sometimes it went beyond that – paradoxically, in some cases the non-European actor now fielded conventional forces and the European power countered by employing special forces fighting a counterinsurgency campaign.⁷⁶

Conclusion

I am aware that the asymmetries and symmetries discussed in this article may occasionally have created the impression of clear-cut lines between different phenomena, and of linear developments over time. Yet this deceptive clarity is simply due to lack of space and with a view to the higher purpose of generalization. The thoughts presented here are a very summary overview over five centuries, five continents, and almost a dozen colonial powers; they aim to describe general trends, not to do justice to individual cases. To construct a general model of successive

73 Frank Furedi, "Creating a Breathing Space: The Political Management Of Colonial Emergencies", in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 21 (1993), 90–3; Wolfgang J. Mommsen (ed.), *Das Ende der Kolonialreiche: Dekolonisation und die Politik der Großmächte* (Frankfurt/Main, 1990); Mommsen, "End of Empire".

74 Roger Trinquier, *La guerre moderne* (Paris, 1961); Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London, 1966); Thomas R. Mockaitis, "The Origins of British Counter-Insurgency", in *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 1 (1990), 209–25; Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–60* (Basingstoke, 1990); Tim Jones, *Postwar Counterinsurgency and the SAS 1945–1952: A Special Type of Warfare* (London, 2001), esp. 1–18, 138–46.

75 Daase, *Kleine Kriege*, S. 216–34.

76 So for instance in the so-called Confrontation, the border conflict waged by Indonesia against Malaysia 1963–6, when regular Indonesian army units faced British special forces. Michael Dewar, *Brush Fire Wars: Minor Campaigns of the British army since 1945* (London, 1984/1987), 99–112; Tony Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: The Story of the SAS 1950–1982* (Glasgow, 1981), 65–77.

phases equally applicable to all individual cases, let alone to the entire history of European expansion, would be a hopeless and futile endeavour. Similar developments occurred on different continents at different times. For instance, the North American Indians (but not those in Central America) employed the means of guerrilla warfare from the moment of their first confrontation with European adversaries, while centuries later in Africa the Zulu met the British in pitched battles in the open.⁷⁷

Learning from the experiences made in colonial wars, and thus by implication the transformation of colonial warfare as such, is not even a linear development within the same colonial empire. On the contrary, learning is always connected to specific regions and actors. Whatever earlier protagonists of an imperial power may already have known about fighting their indigenous adversaries, other protagonists of the same power on another continent will have clean forgotten already decades, but certainly centuries later. And besides, learning is not always as easy as it seems. Even in the age of telecommunication, the Americans in Vietnam did not manage to draw useful conclusions from the experience their allies, the British, had made only very few years earlier in their successful counterinsurgency in Malaya.⁷⁸ In this light, the sheer impossibility and in any case the rather questionable usefulness of global development models for colonial warfare becomes obvious.

The tendency to fight a war the conventional way is strong on both sides, but on the European side it is almost irresistible. The temptation to end with a single massive stroke what the other side fights deliberately

as a protracted war of attrition⁷⁹ can be overwhelming.⁸⁰ Thus the option of fighting colonial wars in the style of the European great power war was not only theoretically available throughout the history of European expansion, but was frequently made use of. That is another reason why no single, overarching model of phases will ever be able to cover the entire five centuries of warfare at the colonial periphery.

To go even further, a general model would not even make sense for individual cases or categories of cases. Of course there were many colonial wars that followed quite closely the classical pattern described above: they started with a phase of pitched battles in the open and then moved on to a second phase dominated by guerrilla war, either after a crushing defeat of the indigenous side, or even without that. But on the other hand there always were cases where colonial wars were conducted as small wars from the outset, not the least because (as mentioned above) at the colonial periphery the distinction between war and peace was very definitely blurred. Such wars could continue as guerrilla wars for their entire duration, or they could pass through phases of open, conventional warfare, even culminate in such. That, again, rules out any general phase model for individual wars, although it may be worthwhile to think about several different, complementary models that describe, in a set of ideal types, the conditions for the various actual courses colonial wars could take.

So much for the *caveats*. All that, however, is not meant to imply that ultimately each and every colonial war is a special case in its own right, and any abstraction, any sort of general statement

77 For North America see Douglas Edward Leach, *Arms for Empire: A Military History of the British Colonies in North America, 1607-1763* (New York, 1973); Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian 1848-1865* (New York, 1967); Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian 1866-1891* (Lincoln, NE, 1973); on the Zulu see Ian Knight, *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army from Shaka to Cetshwayo 1818-1879* (London, 1995).

78 See for instance Steven Head, "The Other War: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam", in James S. Olson (ed.), *The Vietnam War: Handbook of the Literature and Research* (Westport, CT, 1993), 125-43.

79 Mao Tse-tung, "Über den langwierigen Krieg (Mai 1938)", in Mao, *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Kommission des Zentralkomitees der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas für die Herausgabe der Ausgewählten Werke Mao Tse-tungs, vol. 2, *Die Periode des Widerstandskriegs gegen die Japanische Aggression* (Peking, 1968), 127-228.

80 Schmidl, "Kolonialkriege", 114-5.

about the nature of colonial war is futile (and, thus, ultimately, this article quite superfluous). On the contrary: I maintain that there are some key characteristics that most colonial wars have in common; I believe that these characteristics can be usefully analyzed in terms of symmetry and asymmetry; and I submit that analyzing them is crucial for a better understanding of the development of warfare in our time.

In order to further such understanding, I believe, we must take great care to avoid two fundamental misunderstandings. One is a simple, popular, and old one, namely that the term “war” rightfully only signifies the Clausewitzian, symmetric war of state actors, and any other form of political violence is an aberration of sorts.

The other misunderstanding is newer, more complex, and just about to gain popularity, but in the debate among historians and sociologists it has already become commonplace. That misunderstanding is the notion that striving for symmetric, regulated wars was admittedly an exception in world history in that it was limited to the core states of the Western world and the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, but in this phase, so this thesis insists – in a formative phase for our collective memory – symmetric, interstate war was the dominant reality.

This second misunderstanding, being more subtle and – as an antithesis to the first one – by default more credible, may be the most serious obstacle for a better understanding of the development of warfare in modern times. War characterized by a large number of asymmetric elements has never been confined to some archaic age prior to the Peace of Westphalia – which seems to be the bottom-line of some recent debates that focus on the “return” to the stage of

early modern or even medieval forms of conflict in the shape of “new wars” or the “war of the future”.⁸¹ In actual fact, war characterized by a large number of asymmetric elements has never disappeared from world history, not for a single day. The same powers that in Europe fought symmetric, interstate wars – or at least professed to adhere to the noble principle of symmetry – at the same time ruthlessly capitalized on their massive superiority over their indigenous adversaries in small, asymmetric, “dirty” wars on the colonial periphery.⁸² Wars characterized primarily by asymmetries therefore never ceased to be the dominant manifestation, the primary reality of collective application of force. This is true even for most core states of the Northern Hemisphere in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, with the exception maybe of those that had no overseas possessions – but these happy few were usually at the same time those that hardly fought any wars anyway, or they had at least some sort of colonial frontier, like Austria-Hungary on the Balkans.

It is, therefore, my considered opinion that in order to understand warfare in history we must *in the first place* understand that form of war that is primarily characterized by asymmetries. Symmetric wars, Clausewitzian, state-actor wars, are a unique exception, idealized, heavily regulated and somewhat unreal models of warfare which could even be understood as deviations from what Clausewitz himself identified as the true nature of war. The early modern ideal of symmetric war has heavily influenced our – the twentieth century Europeans’ – thinking on war (probably more than our actual conduct of war). The dominant historical reality of warfare, however, is war in which the actual asymmetries determine the course

81 This debate reached its peak in 2001/2 but has since receded. Mary Kaldor, “Gegen wen? Gewalt im Zeitalter der Globalisierung: Die „neuen Kriege“ lassen sich nicht militärisch gewinnen”, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (14 September 2001), 52; Herfried Münkler, *Über den Krieg: Stationen der Kriegsgeschichte im Spiegel ihrer theoretischen Reflexion* (Göttingen, 2002), 199–264; Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege*; Rüdiger Voigt (ed.), *Krieg – Instrument der Politik? Bewaffnete Konflikte am Übergang vom 20. zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Baden-Baden, 2002); Christopher Daase, “Der Krieg ist ein Chamäleon’: Zum Formenwandel politischer Gewalt im 21. Jahrhundert”, in *Forum Loccum* 21/4 (2002), 6–11; Martin Hoch, “Die Rückkehr des Mittelalters in der Sicherheitspolitik”, in *WeltTrends* 35 (2002), 17–34.

82 So correctly Herberg-Rothe, *Krieg*, 20.

and conduct of the conflict, and this war, I submit, is the war that we must try to understand.

To do that, however, there is no better way than studying the history of colonial wars. Colonial war is the archetypical example of asymmetric war. No war in the core of the Western world, not even between a great power and a dwarf state, could ever be remotely as asymmetric as almost any war on the colonial periphery turned out to be. The nature of the imperial relationship on the one hand and of the European power system and the Europe-centered world system on the other hand made sure that the former war – the one between European states – remained essentially symmetric even in spite of a massively asymmetric ratio of military potentials, and that the latter – the colonial war – was kept asymmetric even under most favourable circumstances. In other words: if there is a phenomenon that can usefully be described in terms of its asymmetries it is, before all else, the colonial war.

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Symmetry and Asymmetry in Colonial Warfare ca. 1500–2000

The Uses of a Concept



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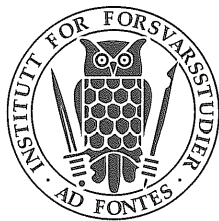
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