

Masculinity and Human Nature

How Martin van Creveld's values become universal human characteristics in *The Transformation of War*

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Introduction

Martin van Creveld is one of the world's most renowned military historians. He has published twenty-one books on topics ranging from the role of the air force in military action to the logistics of war and more theoretical issues such as the position of the state in international relations. The topic of this thesis is one of his most famous works, *The Transformation of War*. This is a book in which the author addresses a range of topics that are fundamental to understanding warfare. It was written in 1991 and is still considered one of the most important books that van Creveld has published.

In the introduction to *The Transformation of War*, Martin van Creveld states that 'this volume has a message – namely, that contemporary 'strategic' thought [...] is fundamentally flawed'.¹ He wishes to explore the principles of warfare, '[aiming] at providing a new, non-Clausewitzian framework for thinking about war'.² Van Creveld sees Clausewitz³ as the principal proponent of 'contemporary strategic thought', and consequently his book presents two things: first, a bold criticism of Clausewitz, and second, van Creveld's own views on the nature of warfare. Van Creveld's most fundamental criticism of the Prussian writer is that the latter sees war as a means to an end, as a political tool. Van Creveld's most important assertion that war is an end in itself and is pursued for its own sake, makes the two differ.

At the first reading, van Creveld's book seems to focus on investigating the nature of warfare and its relation to humanity. Van Creveld asks questions that are fundamental to understanding the relation between war and humans, such as 'why do people fight?' and 'with what purpose are wars fought?'. The idea that this thesis will defend, however, is that actually, van Creveld does not ask these questions as part of an investigation of the relation between the nature of warfare and human nature. Rather, what he does in *The Transformation of War* is to justify a certain conception of war as the activity which allows men to assert themselves as the quintessential traditional male.

This thesis will discuss, first, Creveld's argument against Clausewitz, and second, the proposed substitute for Clausewitz' idea that war is a continuation of

¹ Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York 1991), ix.

² Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, ix.

³ For those who are not at all familiar with Clausewitz and his magnum opus *Vom Kriege* (translated as *On War*) it will be useful to know that Clausewitz is one of the most influential military minds of our day. He lived from 1780 until 1831, spending much of his life fighting in the Prussian army, and part of it writing a book in which he reflected on what war was and how it had best be fought. *On War* is mandatory reading in many war colleges and has very successfully propagated the idea that war is something political, mixed with emotions and random chance.

politics by other means. Van Creveld claims that Clausewitz' idea is faulty and cannot explain why people fight wars. He proposes a different way of looking at humans and warfare, one which he claims *does* explain the occurrence of wars. The problem is that he takes this task so literally that he works the wrong way round: he starts from the presence of warfare in our world, and builds an idea of 'the human' around that. Thus, he does not look at what humans are so as to see why they keep fighting wars; he looks at wars and distils an idea of 'the human' out of our conflict-ridden world.

The result of van Creveld's inversed way of reasoning is that he ends up with an idea of the human that is not universal. It appears that actually, van Creveld already has a very clear idea of what the role of war is for humanity. It is the activity that allows men to assert themselves as (what Creveld considers to be) males. Van Creveld's idea of what a 'man' should be informs his discussion of war. Because he justifies this idea of war by discussion its relation to 'the human' (van Creveld's idea of 'the human'), the male values embodied in his idea of war become universal.

The approach

Because the claims that this thesis makes require scrutinizing the fundamentals of van Creveld's argument, the reader needs to develop an understanding of the place of those arguments within the whole of *the Transformation of War*. Without this understanding, it will be impossible to either accept or decline the claims this thesis makes about van Creveld's reasoning. In order to develop a basic knowledge about *The Transformation of War*, the first chapter of this thesis will contain an elaborate summary of the book. The goal of this chapter is to represent shortly van Creveld's most important arguments, not to start interpreting them. Whilst some chapters will receive more attention than others, all of van Creveld's central arguments will be treated. A discussion, interpretation and criticism will follow in subsequent chapters. The first chapter will also discuss van Creveld's life and the way in which important elements of it can be traced in his book.

After having given the reader the necessary insight into what it is that van Creveld writes in his book, the second chapter will deal with other people's comments on it. We will investigate what kind of praise and criticism van Creveld has received. Incorporating the opinions of a variety of commentators into our image of what van Creveld says in *The Transformation of War* will enrich our understanding of its

contents. Those comments will also serve as food for thought, as the third chapter will evaluate and expand on them to form a critique of the way in which van Creveld builds up his argument against Clausewitz' famous assertion that war is the continuation of politics by other means.

By this point, the reader will have developed a thorough understanding of van Creveld's arguments. Having levelled the floor in chapters one and two, chapter three provides the first steps towards understanding the way in which van Creveld goes about the creation of his non-Clausewitzian framework. In chapters four and five we take a step back. Whereas chapter three is an evaluation of the internal coherence and strength of van Creveld's arguments, the following chapters reflect on van Creveld's assumptions. We will see that van Creveld sometimes works on the basis of normative statements that are neither presented as such nor reflected on.

Chapter four will make the claim that in *The Transformation of War* van Creveld demonstrates excessive machismo. His bias towards a very 'macho' point of view shows very clearly in his ideas on the relationship between men and women. This focus on 'the masculine' results in a one-sided perspective on what conflict is and on the role violence plays in the acquisition of power. What is more, his focus on the masculine pervades his thinking to such a degree that his views can be shown to demonstrate a lack of empathy.

In the fifth chapter of this thesis, the consequence of the claims made in the fourth chapter will be investigated. What does this perspective on van Creveld's work mean for our understanding of his book? The conclusion is that van Creveld's arguments should lead to a different conclusion than the one actually drawn. Whereas van Creveld concludes that war is an end in itself, a far more logical conclusion to his arguments would have been that war is a means to achieve true masculinity. This is the idea that much of van Creveld's book leads up to. Van Creveld's actual conclusion, that war is an end in itself, is not supported by the claims he makes. It is in chapter five that we will see how his conclusion is unsupported by but also conflicting with many of his claims.

Besides showing how van Creveld's conclusion is unsupported, chapter five will argue that his book is not only unhelpful but potentially harmful. The problem is not just that one might disagree with van Creveld on the value of war as something intended to make men assert themselves as males; rather, it is that van Creveld concludes that his view of war is one that should be adopted by all of humanity. What is more, the war

which he described is claimed to be attractive to and even defining of all of humanity. In addition to this, van Creveld takes the view that something as essentially human as war must be ethically acceptable. The nature of van Creveld's thinking will be investigated and reflected on.

Whilst this thesis will essentially be a critique of van Creveld's book, it must be made clear immediately that not all of his book will be discussed. We will be focusing on the central argument in *The Transformation of War*, one that attacks Clausewitz and proposes an alternative to his 'war is the continuation of politics by other means'. Therefore, many of van Creveld's chapters will not be discussed in detail at all. They will only be dealt with in passing in chapter one. Whilst this thesis' first chapter aims at giving the reader a general idea of what van Creveld writes about in his book, the focus will be on his chapters two, five and six from the start. Those three chapters are most important to our discussion here. However critical this text is about the arguments made by van Creveld in those three chapters, this does not mean that in the remainder, he has nothing valuable to say about nuclear warfare, the rise of Low-Intensity Conflicts or strategy. Van Creveld's style of writing, however, makes it impossible to examine all of the contents of *The Transformation of War* in the present text. The range of subjects that he covers is simply too wide.

Chapter 1: *The Transformation of War and its Author*

With *The Transformation of War*, Martin van Creveld 'aims at providing a new, non-Clausewitzian framework for thinking about war, while at the same time trying to look into its future'.⁴ Van Creveld wants to discuss a series of fundamental questions concerning warfare, and has named his chapters accordingly. The book has seven, namely 'Contemporary War', 'By Whom War Is Fought', 'What War Is All About', 'How War Is Fought', 'What War Is Fought For', 'Why War Is Fought', 'Future War' and a postscript called 'The Shape of Things to Come'. It is clear that van Creveld addresses a series of basic questions about war, limiting himself neither in the scope of the topics addressed nor in time. He does not shy away from predicting the future.

The Transformation of War

In Chapter I, 'Contemporary War', van Creveld discusses roughly two things. First, he writes about the effect that the advent of nuclear weapons has had on conventional warfare. Secondly, van Creveld claims that conventional modern forces have lost their military relevance in a changing world. On the topic of nuclear weapons and the effect they have on warfare, van Creveld writes that nuclear weapons have pushed 'conventional war into the nooks and crannies of the international system'.⁵ This is because the possibility of a nuclear war has resulted in the fact that nuclear powers and their allies are virtually immune to conventional war.⁶

Next, we come to van Creveld's argument about the obsolescence of modern forces. He starts his argument by remarking that of the conflicts that have been fought out since 1945, three quarters have been so-called 'low-intensity conflicts' (LICs). These conflicts, he writes, distinguish themselves from others for three reasons: first, they tend to unfold in the lesser developed parts of the world, carrying other names than 'war'. Second, they do not usually involve regular armies fighting on both sides. Third, LICs are usually fought without advanced weaponry.⁷ Other characteristics are thought to be the bloody nature of LICs, their political importance and the way in which conventional forces have failed to win them.⁸ Conventional forces, van Creveld claims,

⁴ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, ix.

⁵ Ibidem, 11.

⁶ Ibidem, 17.

⁷ Ibidem, 20.

⁸ Ibidem, 22.

cannot perform in LICs precisely because they are technologically advanced. It is especially the ‘gadgets’ that modern armies are so fond of that rid them of their military prowess, as the use of the machinery requires so much maintenance and logistics that the actual fighting force of an army is sacrificed.⁹

Van Creveld on Clausewitz

Chapter II, ‘By Whom War Is Fought’, is the chapter in which van Creveld thoroughly introduces Clausewitz to his readers. He explains what Clausewitz’ life was like and how his book relates to it. While he does so, it becomes clear that he interprets Clausewitz’ thought in a certain way. The Prussian is said to think about war in a ‘Trinitarian way’, seeing war as existing of three ‘vital elements’: government, people and army.¹⁰ Van Creveld makes it clear that he sees Clausewitz’ as convinced that wars can only be waged by the state.¹¹ He describes how the idea that war should only be waged by states was ‘codified into positive law’.¹² Thus, van Creveld writes, there have been many conflicts that were wars but were seen to be *hors de loi* because they were not waged by states.¹³

To show that there is an alternative to Trinitarian thinking about war, van Creveld introduces Colmar von der Goltz and Erich Ludendorff, two authors who supported the idea of total warfare. Van Creveld mentions these gentlemen in connection with the First World War, which he sees as a confirmation of their theories that war can outgrow the ‘Clausewitzian trinity’.¹⁴ This leads him to conclude that ‘whatever else total war may have done, it put an end to any idea that armed conflict, including specifically the largest ever fought, is necessarily governed by the Clausewitzian Universe’.¹⁵

Van Creveld goes on to name a series of conflicts in which the government was not the entity waging war. He moves back in time, tracing the distinction between government, army and people which he sees as the cornerstone of ‘the Clausewitzian Universe’. Arriving at the Middle Ages, he concludes that ‘as the term ‘feudal’ implies,

⁹ Ibidem, 29-32.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 38-9.

¹¹ Ibidem, 38-40.

¹² Ibidem, 40.

¹³ Ibidem, 41.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 44-5.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 49.

this was a period in which politics did not exist'.¹⁶ In the mediaeval period, van Creveld writes, neither states nor governments existed, and 'to speak of war in modern Clausewitzian terms as something made by the state for political ends is to misrepresent reality'.¹⁷ A similar argument is made for the obsolescence of 'the Clausewitzian Universe' for understanding the Classical period or tribal societies. He finishes the chapter by calling our attention to terrorism and other forms of 'non-Trinitarian war', for which modern states are not prepared. He blames this unpreparedness on our model of Trinitarian war. Because modern states apply the 'Clausewitzian definition of war' to the world, they only see those conflicts fought by the state as true wars¹⁸ and are thus unprepared for the more realistic security threat that non-state actors pose.¹⁹

Might and Right?

In chapter three, 'What War Is All About', van Creveld discusses the rules that apply to warfare, and why he thinks that those rules are absolutely necessary. He begins by criticizing Clausewitz' opinion on the law of war, presenting the Prussian as a supporter of unrestricted warfare. Clausewitz' remark that international law and custom consists of 'self-imposed, imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning'²⁰ is quoted (in part) to show that Clausewitz ignores the law of war. The rest of van Creveld's chapter on 'What War Is All About' is dedicated to showing that there is indeed a law of war and that 'war without law is not merely a monstrosity but an impossibility'.²¹ This claim is fully explained in the last part of his chapter, but first van Creveld discusses some historical examples of topics about which rules did or did not exist.

Van Creveld discusses the custom of taking care of one's prisoners that was prevalent in Clausewitz' own days, and traces the development of the rules concerning prisoners through time. The same is done for rules concerning non-combatants. Most of the examples that van Creveld gives go to show that in much of history, non-combatants did not have many rights.²² In modern warfare, however, rules concerning non-combatants do matter.²³

¹⁶ Ibidem, 52.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 57.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 60-1.

²⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton 1984), 75.

²¹ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 65.

²² Ibidem, 76.

²³ Ibidem, 80.

In the final part of his chapter on ‘The War Convention’, van Creveld returns to Clausewitz. He claims that ‘the purpose of the law of war is not, as Clausewitz and many of his followers seem to think, simply to appease the conscience of a few tender-hearted people. Its first and foremost function is to protect the armed forces themselves’.²⁴ The law of war, van Creveld states, is essential in delineating the line between crime and war, between what is legitimate and what is illegitimate killing. He claims that in those places where the line between war and murder is unclear, ‘society will fall to pieces, and war – as distinct from mere indiscriminate violence – becomes impossible’.²⁵ Van Creveld concludes his chapter with a note on those who are expected to fight in situations where it is not clear whether what they are doing is slaughtering people or fighting them. They will operate in a gray area between, as van Creveld sees it, what is legitimate (war) and what is not (indiscriminate violence). He claims that this will result in psychological difficulties on their part, and mentions the example of Vietnam veterans.²⁶

Van Creveld on Strategy

In chapter IV, ‘How War Is Fought’, van Creveld discusses strategy. On this topic, van Creveld seems to be in agreement with Clausewitz on many points. He mentions the Prussian’s concepts of inflexibility, friction and uncertainty. Those, van Creveld considers to be the obstacles to efficiency that need be overcome in the creation of force.²⁷ The chapter applies the concepts of inflexibility, friction and uncertainty to modern-day warfare. Van Creveld explains what strategy is, stating that it begins ‘where force-building and competition end – at the point, to repeat, where we are faced with an intelligent opponent who does not passively accept our design’.²⁸ The topic of this chapter is crucial to van Creveld, who sees the question of how armed conflict ought to be conducted the most important of all.²⁹ Still, he points out to his reader that in order to answer that question, one has to take into account ‘the things that men fight for, as well

²⁴ Ibidem, 89.

²⁵ Ibidem, 90.

²⁶ Ibidem, 94.

²⁷ Ibidem, 104.

²⁸ Ibidem, 118.

²⁹ Ibidem, 35.

as the motives that make them fight'.³⁰ These are topics that van Creveld addresses in chapters V and VI. In them, van Creveld presents the essence of his thinking about war.

What War Is Not Fought For: Politics

Chapter V, entitled 'What War Is Fought For', brings us to the core of van Creveld's argument against Clausewitz' concept of war as 'the continuation of politics'. At the beginning of his chapter he indicates clearly the idea which he wants to address: that 'war is a means to an end'³¹, 'merely one of the forms that political intercourse [takes]'.³² He points out that this idea was first presented by Clausewitz, and that the writer's most famous dictum has become so influential that 'many people today cannot even imagine an alternative to it'.³³ He presents this idea as one of the elements of 'the Clausewitzian Universe' and goes on to show his reader what the dictum implies:

One logical outcome of such a view was that the high conduct of war should be made subject, if not to politicians, then at any rate to political considerations. A second was that war should be fought solely for political reasons; a third, that politics should constitute the most important criterion by which the outcome of war is judged and the next one prepared for.³⁴

Following this, the reader is presented with van Creveld's perspective: that war as a continuation of politics is not the only possible view, and that the implications of that idea as outlined above are not self-evident.³⁵ The rest of the chapter is an attempt to prove that indeed, the view that war is an extension of politics does not even come close to explaining the reasons for which people fight.

Van Creveld starts his argument against Clausewitz with a discussion of what politics actually is. Given the vital importance of this point for his argument, one might expect him to devote a considerable amount of attention to this subject, but he is relatively short: 'Whatever the exact meaning of the term 'politics', it is not the same as 'any kind of relationship involving any kind of government in any kind of society'. A

³⁰ Ibidem, 123.

³¹ Ibidem, 124.

³² Ibidem, 125.

³³ Ibidem, 124.

³⁴ Ibidem, 125.

³⁵ Idem.

more correct interpretation would be that politics are intimately connected with the state'.³⁶ This point of view van Creveld backs up by stating that 'where there is no state, as was the case during most of human history, politics will be so mixed in with other factors as to leave room neither for the term nor for the reality behind it'.³⁷ Van Creveld, then, sees politics as something intricately tied up with 'states'. His conclusion is that 'the dictum that war is the continuation of politics means nothing more or less than that it represents an instrument in the hands of the state, *insofar as the state employs violence for political ends*'.³⁸

What War Is Fought For – if not for *raison d'état*

At this point, van Creveld does something that may confuse when not pointed out explicitly. He connects the idea that politics is always a matter of state with Clausewitz' idea of war as the continuation of politics. Therefore, the rest of chapter five takes as a starting point the idea that Clausewitz' idea of war as the extension of politics means that war is the exclusive preserve of the state. Thus, the other remarks van Creveld makes on the subject are intended to show that seeing war as a political tool is a modern, Western idea that few people in other places and times would agree with. When people in the past have attributed functions to war other than the acquisition of power, van Creveld treats that as an argument against 'the Clausewitzian view'. Van Creveld distinguishes three kinds of motives for which war can be fought: justice, religion and existence. He presents these as an alternative to political motivation, or the idea that war is always a tool in the hands of a state. For van Creveld, after all, those two are the same.

The first alternative that van Creveld presents for seeing war as a political tool is seeing it as a means to achieve justice. He writes that in the Middle Ages, 'war represented the stick in the hands of the law'.³⁹ This, van Creveld writes, is fighting about right, not about might. Seeing the 'Clausewitzian Universe' as an expression of the view that 'might is right', van Creveld sees fighting for a cause as non-political.⁴⁰ Another example he gives of fighting for a non-political cause is war for religious reasons. He mentions Christian, Judean and Islamic motivations for going to war,

³⁶ Idem.

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ Idem.

³⁹ Ibidem, 128.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 131.

concluding without further discussion that religious *motivation* (as opposed to justification) makes war non-political.⁴¹ A third type of reason for fighting wars that van Creveld discusses is a war for existence. He claims that fighting a war for one's community's existence shows the inadequacy of 'the Clausewitzian distinction between war, the means, and whatever its ends might be'.⁴² To van Creveld's mind, such a war does not *serve* a purpose at all, that it cannot be described as a means to an end. In other words: the continuing existence of one's community cannot be a goal. Such a war, he writes, 'is best understood as the supreme manifestation of existence as well as a celebration of it'.⁴³

The examples van Creveld gives of reasons people might fight a war for, serve as arguments for his final contention in chapter V: one might call everything that a war can be fought for 'interests', but doing so inflates the term's meaning in such a way that it no longer means anything.⁴⁴ He grants that it is possible to call everything people say they fight for 'their interests'. What he claims, however, is that doing so will not further our understanding of the reasons for which people fight. Interest, if it means all that people might fight for, cannot mean anything anymore. After all, to reverse things, one might as well '[reduce] interest to the underlying religious or legal principles'.⁴⁵ People fight for different reasons at different moments in time and different places. Those reasons might be normative, or they might be in a society's interests. It is exactly because of the wide range of reasons for which war can be waged that seeing all wars as waged for the sake of 'policy' is inappropriate.⁴⁶

Individuals fight – but why?

We move on to chapter VI, in which van Creveld continues to explore the fundamentals of his view on warfare. The chapter is called 'Why War Is Fought', and in it van Creveld again addresses 'the fundamental pillars of the Clausewitzian universe'⁴⁷ and replaces these with his own. Whereas chapter V explored how communities have gone to war for other reasons than the policy of their state, chapter VI does the same for individuals. Van Creveld is convinced that people do not go to war for their own, their

⁴¹ Ibidem, 141.

⁴² Ibidem, 142.

⁴³ Ibidem, 143.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 151-2.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 155.

⁴⁶ Idem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 157.

community's or someone else's interest. They fight not in order to achieve an objective, but purely for the sake of fighting.⁴⁸

Whereas van Creveld grants that if one is talking about a community, the reasons for going to war may be described as 'interests',⁴⁹ he does not allow this for individual people. Again, the idea that 'interest' is not a helpful term is central:

At bottom, the reason why fighting can never be a question of interest is – to put it bluntly – that dead men have no interests. A person may well lay down his life in the name of God, king, country, and family, or even for all four at once. However, to say that he does so because he has some kind of posthumous 'interest' in the survival even of his nearest and dearest is to invert the meaning of the term and turn it into a caricature of itself.⁵⁰

The conviction that people cannot be said to die (or risk death, supposedly) for their own or someone else's interest thus lies with the idea that the term 'interest' either does not cover the kind of commitment that braving mortal danger necessitates, or that, if it does, the term means so many things that it is no longer helpful. Thus, van Creveld concludes that 'for a man to die for his own interest is absurd; to die for those of somebody or something else, more absurd still'.⁵¹

Van Creveld presents the idea that people fight for 'interest' as a flaw in what he calls 'conventional strategic thought'. He identifies another such flaw as being the idea that war is 'members of one group killing those of another'.⁵² The mistake that 'conventional strategic thought' makes, then, is to take the act of killing as the central act of war. Van Creveld claims that not this, but the risk of being killed in return is really the essence of war. If the risk is not there, we cannot speak of war; we speak of massacre, murder, assassination. Braving danger is what makes the difference between murder and a fight, and therefore it is this that makes being a soldier commendable.⁵³

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 191.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 157.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 158.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 159.

⁵² *Idem*.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 159-60.

Danger and joy

Following this criticism of conventional ways of seeing war, van Creveld presents his own point of view. Since he has claimed that men do not die for ‘interests’, an alternative has to be presented. He does so by claiming that fighting is not a means but an end.⁵⁴ He lists those who have put on record the joy they took in fighting, and claims that those games that simulate war (such as the Roman games) show that war is not only enjoyable to those who take part in it, but also to those who watch it.⁵⁵ This is so because of the central place that ‘danger’ takes in war: ‘As in any sport, the greater the danger the greater both the challenge of braving it and the honour associated with doing so’.⁵⁶

War is a game, but it offers more than other games because it is more dangerous. In games, there are restrictions, most importantly on ‘the amount of violence that may be brought to bear’.⁵⁷ Van Creveld’s claim is that these restrictions make games second-rate compared to war, because ‘all such restrictions are artificial, hence in a certain sense absurd’.⁵⁸ These remarks build up to an interesting and very important remark which takes up a central place in van Creveld’s thought: that war, because of its nature as an activity in which danger is central, is the activity which allows for human nature to reach its full potential.

Because van Creveld sees war as the only activity which is not restricted the way games are, ‘war is the only creative activity that both permits and demands the unrestricted commitment of all man’s faculties against an opponent who is as strong as oneself’.⁵⁹ For van Creveld, games limit not only the use of certain equipment or the use of violence, but limit humans themselves. Thus, van Creveld asserts that: ‘War causes human qualities, the best as well as the worst, to realize their full potential’.⁶⁰ He does not explain what these ‘human qualities’ are, but his reader may assume that they are central to human beings, for van Creveld goes on to claim that ‘it is only those who risk their lives willingly, even joyfully, who can be completely themselves, completely

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 161.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 163.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 164.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 165.

⁵⁸ Idem.

⁵⁹ Idem.

⁶⁰ Idem.

human'.⁶¹ War, then, is not only an activity which allows for humans to develop themselves *as humans*; it is *the only* activity which allows this.

Central to this view of human nature is the braving of danger, which, as we have seen, van Creveld has put central in his idea of war. This is what van Creveld sees as the source of the joy that people seem to find in fighting.⁶² Van Creveld names some people that have professed to enjoy fighting over the years. He claims that this joy results from facing danger, making war an activity that 'suspends reality'. Just as sports like football or boxing can make people forget their surroundings, van Creveld writes, war makes people forget themselves. Therefore, 'the joy of fighting consists precisely in that it permits participants and spectators alike to forget themselves and transcend reality, however incompletely and however momentarily'.⁶³

The central place that danger takes in van Creveld conception of war is also the reason that later in the chapter, he presents opposition as the 'indispensable prerequisite'⁶⁴ of war. This means that a war between unequal opponents is not a war at all; a 'good war' is one in which one can brave danger, and that is not what happens when one fights a much weaker opponent.⁶⁵ These matters are related to seeing war as a game, because 'fighting does not make sense [if] it can neither serve as a test nor be experienced as fun'.⁶⁶ Thus, braving danger is not only what makes war enjoyable because it gives people a sense of freedom; it is also what makes war a 'test', an opportunity to display one's abilities.⁶⁷

The will to fight

As van Creveld pointed out in his fifth chapter, communities have fought each other for different reasons over the centuries. He included religion, justice, existence and even the political motivations that Clausewitz deemed the only explanation for warfare. Individuals, van Creveld claims, go to war simply in order to fight. Still, van Creveld also writes about the things that can convince men to risk their lives. Even though fighting is joyful and the only activity through which one can become truly human, 'since he who fights puts everything at risk, whatever he fights for must be deemed

⁶¹ Ibidem, 165-6.

⁶² Ibidem, 166.

⁶³ Idem.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 171.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 176.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 173.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, 165.

more precious than his own blood'.⁶⁸ He supports this idea by giving a list of ways in which fighting has been presented as something worth giving one's blood for. He writes of the deference with which objects of war have been treated over the years, considering the function of flags, mascots, decorated armours and weapons.⁶⁹

A crucial point that van Creveld makes is that not the objects themselves, but the way in which they are treated, makes them worth the fighting. Objectively, they may have no value whatsoever, or even undermine the fighting prowess of an army.⁷⁰ However, it is not the objective value but the myth that people risk their lives for; 'so elemental is the human need to endow the shedding of blood with some great and even sublime significance that it renders the intellect almost entirely helpless'.⁷¹ Objects are hallowed so as to inspire devotion and the will to fight, and only if they are experienced as important and even as 'ends in themselves'⁷² will they be able to do so. Thus, whilst war is the most serious activity, it is also a form of play, a performance.⁷³

Women and war

Chapter VI is replete with discussions of fundamental questions concerning the nature of war and its relationship with 'the human'. Van Creveld does not shy away from answering complicated questions, and in this chapter, he also deals with the discussion of women's place in warfare. Women, he says, have stakes in war that are as high as those of men, but have very rarely actually fought at the front. This is often thought to be for biological and thus military reasons, as women are generally less strong than men, and can get pregnant. Van Creveld, however, does not see this as the true reason that women do not participate in fighting, writing that 'the real reason why women are excluded is not military but cultural and social'.⁷⁴ Women are generally weaker than men, and indeed, 'the first qualities required by the combatant are strength and stamina'.⁷⁵ Still, van Creveld thinks that it is not their relative weakness that has caused women to be excluded from the battlefield.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, 166.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 168-70.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 168.

⁷¹ Ibidem, 166.

⁷² Ibidem, 170.

⁷³ Ibidem, 171.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, 181.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, 180.

For van Creveld, the true reason is that women can give birth and that men, unable to do so, have done much to ‘sublimate their inability to produce the one most marvellous thing on earth’.⁷⁶ War, as the many other achievements of males throughout history, is seen by van Creveld as one of the ways in which men can make up for their inability to give birth. For van Creveld, this drive on the part of males is the principle reason why women are not allowed to take part in war. The reason that men need to sublimate their inability to give birth is that ‘a field that is dominated by women by definition does not allow men to realize themselves as men’.⁷⁷ Therefore, men need to find other ways to prove themselves. Van Creveld explains by saying that ‘for good or ill, to have women take part in war would have greatly diminished its social prestige, taken away its purpose, and destroyed its *raison d’être*. Had men been made to fight side by side with women, or else to confront them as enemies, then for them armed conflict would have lost its meaning and might well have come to an end’.⁷⁸

Because of van Creveld’s idea that men cannot ‘prove themselves’ alongside women, letting them participate in warfare is problematic. For van Creveld, having women fight in wars threatens ‘the significance of what the men are doing’.⁷⁹ He claims that waging war will become unattractive for men if women participate, and jobs in the army will lose their attractiveness if they are (also) exercised by females. Van Creveld bases this claim on the idea that requiring men to work with women in a military environment ‘cuts right across the relationship between men and women, [which], whether for biological or social reasons, is always private by nature’.⁸⁰ In his opinion, men and women cannot be treated exactly alike. Therefore, ‘women’s presence in the military can be tolerated only to the extent that they are dewomanized’.⁸¹ Actual women’s presence would be a cause as well as a symptom of the approaching demise of state-run armies.⁸² After all, van Creveld thinks that if women participated, men would cease to.

The remainder of van Creveld’s sixth chapter is a reiteration of his ideas on ‘Why War Is Fought’. It relates them back to Clausewitz’ idea of war as a political tool, claiming that war has many other possible functions. Finding fault with the instrumental

⁷⁶ Ibidem, 181.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, 182.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 183.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, 183.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, 186.

⁸¹ Idem.

⁸² Ibidem, 187.

nature of strategic thought, he claims that it ‘not only fails to tell us why people fight but prevents the question from being asked in the first place’⁸³. For van Creveld, this is the great flaw in strategic thinking, because not understanding why people risk their lives means not understanding how a war should be fought.

Future wars

In the last chapter of *The Transformation of War*, van Creveld takes his reader into the future. Based on the views he has presented and explained throughout his book, he paints a gloomy picture of a world rife with uncontrolled conflict. The topics of previous chapters, ‘By Whom War Is Fought’, ‘What War Is All About’, ‘How War Is Fought’, ‘What War Is Fought For’, and ‘Why War Is Fought’, are answered in the future tense. This seventh chapter of van Creveld book gives a good overview of his ideas, but since those have already been discussed in some detail, we will focus here on the predictions van Creveld makes.

The central claim that van Creveld makes about ‘future war’ is that it will not be fought by states by means of their armies. The rise of nuclear weapons has made it ‘impossible for large sovereign territorial units, or states, to fight each other in earnest’.⁸⁴ To make an attack with nuclear weapons useless, those armed forces and political communities in conflict will have to become intermingled. Van Creveld thinks that the kind of guerrilla-warfare that is thus necessitated cannot be successfully performed by conventional modern forces. Adding to this van Creveld’s conviction that ‘the most important single demand that any political community must meet is the demand for protection’⁸⁵, we can come to understand why he concludes that the state as a political entity is obsolete. His reasoning is that because of the advent of nuclear weapons, wars will change in such a way that states’ armies will not be able to win them. Therefore, people will feel that their states cannot offer them what they need most: protection.

This argument leads to several conclusions; first, that wars will not be fought by ‘regular’ armies, but by whoever decides to get involved. Van Creveld states that it is likely that the distinction between soldier and civilian will disappear completely.⁸⁶ Also,

⁸³ Ibidem, 191.

⁸⁴ Ibidem, 194.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, 198.

⁸⁶ Ibidem, 203.

leaders are predicted to be targeted especially, and the war convention is expected to stop prohibiting this. What is more, ‘existing distinctions between war and crime will break down’ and ‘all restraints will go by the board’.⁸⁷ These future wars will consist not of battles but of skirmishes, bombings and massacres, and forces will become increasingly dispersed.⁸⁸ Soldiers will get more room ‘to satisfy their personal needs directly at the expenses of the enemy’.⁸⁹

People are predicted to fight more openly for personal gain, and van Creveld reiterates the idea that war is fought simply for its own sake. He writes that ‘men like fighting, and women like those men who are prepared to fight on their behalf’⁹⁰, concluding that if men are not allowed to fight, this will cause unhappiness (to them, and presumably also to women). Future wars, he concludes, will be ‘bloody, protracted and horrible’⁹¹, fought by men wherever they feel like it – which they will, often and in many places. Eternal peace does not make it in van Creveld’s future world, and may ‘not even [be] such a beautiful dream’ because it is *war* that makes us human.⁹²

Martin van Creveld

To be able to understand van Creveld’s work, it is important to know something about the man himself. Martin van Creveld has an interesting life story, and, as will become clear, one that is reflected in some ways in his work. Van Creveld was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in May 1946. His parents were Jews and firm Zionists, and having survived the German occupation of the Netherlands, decided to move to Israel.⁹³ Since his fourth year, van Creveld has lived in Israel, a country that he himself, a Zionist like his parents, is very proud of.⁹⁴ Van Creveld has published twenty-one books on different topics related to warfare, has ‘consulted to the defense establishments of several countries, and taught or lectured at practically every institute of higher defense learning’.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Ibidem, 204.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, 207-8.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, 212.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, 221.

⁹¹ Ibidem, 212.

⁹² Ibidem, 221.

⁹³ Jewish Telegraph, ‘Military Martin Strives for a Stronger Israel’ (2010).

⁹⁴ Humo, ‘Martin van Creveld, Zionist en Militair Historicus’ (23 March 2009).

⁹⁵ Martin van Creveld, ‘Martin van Creveld’ (2008).

Besides his family's Jewish background and their move to Israel in Martin van Creveld's youth, there is another experience which has profoundly shaped van Creveld's life: the fact that he was not permitted to serve in the Israeli army on account of his cleft palate. When he was eighteen he went into military service, like all Israeli youths. However, he was not thought fit to serve in the ranks, and received a position in logistics.⁹⁶ He pressed to participate in active military service, but was given the choice to either sign a form saying that he accepted all responsibility for harm done to his face, or to leave the service altogether.⁹⁷ Recalling this episode, he said in an interview that 'it was a problematic time and, for sure, my cleft palate affected me'.⁹⁸ Being disappointed not to be allowed to be a part of Israel's armed forces, van Creveld sought to prove himself in another way: he went to university.⁹⁹

As becomes clear from interviews with van Creveld, his works on military history are in some way an alternative to the work that he wanted to do for his country by serving in the military. Van Creveld felt humiliated by the rejection he received on the basis of his cleft palate, by peers as well as the representatives of the military.¹⁰⁰ The possibility of going into the army was a way to contribute to Israel's glory: the military was the epitome of national pride, and those not serving it were looked down upon. The humiliation van Creveld felt is what he thinks made him study military history with such a vengeance.¹⁰¹ His success as an academic seems to have made up for the fact that he has not been in a position to prove himself as a soldier.

Van Creveld's attitude towards academia corroborates the idea that his work as an academic has given him the opportunity to prove himself. He describes his work in terms usually used in reference to fighting, saying that as a theoretician, he seeks a challenge in trying to 'master' or 'conquer' ideas.¹⁰² Sometimes, van Creveld's nearly complete lack of experience of combat situations makes him the object of the criticism of writing on things he does not know of. Still, he himself cannot imagine an activity that is more 'macho' than writing a book such as *the Culture of War*.¹⁰³ As he sees it, writing such a book is macho because it makes the whole of human history into one's enemy. It then becomes the writer's task to 'destroy' the world and its history, building

⁹⁶ Jewish Telegraph, 'Military Martin'.

⁹⁷ Peter Giesen, 'Oorlog als bron van vreugde' (14 March 2009).

⁹⁸ Jewish Telegraph, 'Military Martin'.

⁹⁹ Peter Giesen, 'Oorlog als bron van vreugde'.

¹⁰⁰ Complotten en Samenzweringen, 'Martin van Creveld Interview' (17 February 2001).

¹⁰¹ Idem.

¹⁰² Peter Giesen, 'Oorlog als bron van vreugde'.

¹⁰³ Humo, 'Martin van Creveld'.

an alternative of one's own. Van Creveld thinks that this necessitates the use of an enormous amount of aggression¹⁰⁴, which for him makes writing a book like *The Culture of War* worthwhile.¹⁰⁵ It is interesting that van Creveld is in the habit of likening his activities as an academic to those of a soldier. Apparently, van Creveld's (perceived) lack of experience of combat situations is made up by the fact that he does something that is equally 'macho': writing books in which he tears down systems of thought.

Van Creveld's history of not having been on active duty and his family's background and move to Israel are interesting elements to keep in the back of one's mind whilst reflection on van Creveld's work. As we shall see, especially his Israeli background is perceived by some reviewers to be reflected in his work. We will now move on to these and other remarks that the fans and critics of *The Transformation of War* have made. Having introduced the book and its writer, it will be the last step necessary to prepare for an evaluation of van Creveld's argument on war as an end in itself.

¹⁰⁴ These sentences are translations of an interview with van Creveld that was conducted in Dutch by the Flemish magazine Humo. To not make this point inaccessible to non-Dutch speakers, the passage has been translated and paraphrased. The original quote is the following: 'ik kan me geen activiteit voorstellen die meer macho is dan zo'n boek te schrijven als 'Oorlogscultuur'. Omdat de hele menselijke geschiedenis je tegenstander is. Het is jouw taak de geschiedenis, de wereld te vernietigen en een tegenwereld op te bouwen. Vergelijk het met metaal smelten en dan met een geweldige hamer weer vormgeven: daar komt ontzettend veel agressie aan te pas' (Humo, 'Martin van Creveld').

¹⁰⁵ Humo, 'Martin van Creveld'.

Chapter 2: A Reception History of *The Transformation of War*

In order to prepare the ground for a discussion of van Creveld's *The Transformation of War*, the reactions it has drawn since its publication in 1991 will be presented. The insights drawn from previous appraisals and criticisms of the work will function as the foundation of this thesis.

Since its publication, *The Transformation of War* has been reviewed and discussed in a variety of ways. Some reviews approve of the work whilst others regard it with suspicion. Despite these variations, there are some appraisals and critiques to which van Creveld is treated with consistency. To be able to discuss the reactions that van Creveld's book has attracted in an orderly yet concise fashion, a thematic approach will be taken. Despite the fact that a chronological approach might be more common and, in some cases, the most logical, the reactions that van Creveld's book has attracted over the years are best discussed on the basis of their content. In this way, the recurring themes in the book's reviews will become apparent. Moreover, there are some reviews of *The Transformation of War* which address issues that are either not recurrent but do demand attention, or that go into the material so thoroughly that they are best discussed separately. Those kinds of comments will be discussed after the more recurring ones have been presented.

At the end of this chapter, some attention will also go to the various debates which *The Transformation of War* has sparked, or played a role in. Whilst our attention will thus be turned first and foremost to texts which are direct responses to van Creveld's work, it is important to realise that his book has set some minds at work.

Van Creveld as a controversialist

A short but generally representative review from *Foreign Affairs* can serve as a springboard for our discussion. The author writes that van Creveld 'can be faulted for leaving plenty of loose ends and running well ahead of the evidence but certainly not for failing to provoke'.¹⁰⁶ Whilst Treverton makes several comments in this one sentence, the focus will first of all be on van Creveld's inclination to provoke. Van Creveld's controversial manner is one of the most recurring elements in reviews of *The Transformation of War*. Many comment on it, noting that Van Creveld's writing is

¹⁰⁶ Gregory F. Treverton, 'The Transformation of War', *Foreign Affairs* (1991) 162.

‘controversial and provocative’¹⁰⁷, ‘strewn with interesting and provocative ideas’¹⁰⁸, and ‘brilliant and iconoclastic’¹⁰⁹. He has a ‘penchant for bold reinterpretation’¹¹⁰ and is seen as ‘arguably the most provocative military historian writing in the English language today’.¹¹¹ Most reviewers seem to evaluate van Creveld’s controversial manner in favourable terms, describing his work as bold¹¹² and invigorating.¹¹³ Some, like Daniel Moran, are less enthusiastic, calling van Creveld’s liking for provocation ‘free-floating iconoclasm’.¹¹⁴ Van Creveld’s daring is one of the themes one sees repeated in reviews of all his books, and clearly, *The Transformation of War* is no exception.

Writing style and argumentative power

The above quote from Treverton’s review also introduces two critical notes. Treverton writes that van Creveld ‘can be faulted for leaving plenty of loose ends and running well ahead of the evidence’.¹¹⁵ Firstly, van Creveld’s writing is seen as less than perfectly coherent. Secondly, Treverton charges van Creveld with a tendency of predicting the future on insufficient evidence. These comments are related. First, we will pay attention to those who reproach van Creveld for writing incoherently. This charge reappears in other commentators’ pieces. Van Creveld is accused of writing ‘rambling historical accounts’¹¹⁶ and is seen as ‘tossing stray thoughts across his pages with seemingly reckless abandon’¹¹⁷. Another example is the review by Barton C. Hacker, who comments on the style in which van Creveld presents his ideas as ‘lively but slapdash: colourful, cliché-ridden and careless in detail’.¹¹⁸

Related to these accusations are critical notes on van Creveld’s reasoning, often by the same authors. We have seen that Treverton comments on *The Transformation of War* as running ahead of evidence. Another critic is Werrell, who finds van Creveld’s

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth P. Werrell, ‘The Transformation of War’ *The Journal of Military History* (1991) 531.

¹⁰⁸ Barton C. Hacker, ‘The Transformation of War’ *Technology & Culture* (1992) 631.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Cornish, ‘More Books on Future Wars’ *The Futurist* (1994) 44.

¹¹⁰ Michael C. C. Adams, ‘Away with Clausewitz’ *Reviews in American History* (1993) 156.

¹¹¹ *Idem*.

¹¹² Adams, ‘Away with Clausewitz’, 158; Werrell, ‘The Transformation of War’, 530.

¹¹³ Arend Jan Boekesteijn, ‘Leviathan in Trouble?’ *European review of history* (2001) 241.

¹¹⁴ Daniel Moran, ‘The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict Since Clausewitz’ *Society* (1991) 86.

¹¹⁵ Treverton, ‘The Transformation of War’, 162.

¹¹⁶ Tiiu Kera, ‘Van Creveld is no von Clausewitz’ *Harvard International Review* (1991) 60.

¹¹⁷ Werrell, ‘The Transformation of War’, 531.

¹¹⁸ Hacker, ‘The Transformation of War’, 631.

writing so unstructured and confusing as to lead him to conclude that *The Transformation of War* is ‘not history; instead, it is speculation about future wars using history’.¹¹⁹ Kera writes that van Creveld gives very many historical examples but does not manage to make use of them as part of a coherent argument. Thus, his writing becomes too descriptive, lacking the power of solid arguments. Van Creveld’s points are ‘not always apparent’ and ‘it is difficult to discern exactly where Clausewitz is countered and a new hypothesis is offered’.¹²⁰ A similar point is made by Hacker, who says that, of van Creveld’s ideas, ‘few [are] systematically expounded’.¹²¹ The problems of arguing on the basis of insufficient evidence and writing incoherently are connected. As Kera’s comments make clear, it is at least partly because of van Creveld’s perceived carelessness that his arguments lose power.

History and future

For van Creveld’s critics, one important consequence of his flawed reasoning is that it undermines the credibility of his assertions about the future. The idea that the writer fails to effectively use historical examples is related to the criticism that he leaps to conclusions that cannot be sustained. As Barton C. Hacker comments, ‘history provides examples, but rarely becomes the focus of discussion, much less the subject of sustained analysis’.¹²² This reproach is also evident in other reviews. It shows that the kind of criticism that Hacker levels against van Creveld’s writing is related to the way in which his predictions about the nature of future warfare are received.

Some examples of comments of this kind have already been considered. One recalls Treverton’s remark on van Creveld’s ‘running ahead of the evidence’ and Werrell’s assertion that *The Transformation of War* is speculation instead of history. These comments are mirrored in other critics’ texts. Daniel Moran writes about van Creveld’s remarks on future warfare as based on evidence ‘that demands more scrupulous attention than it receives’.¹²³ He warns those who, like van Creveld, attempt to predict the future and advises care to those ‘aspiring to the role of prophet’.¹²⁴ This same warning is the topic of a piece by Colin Gray, who sees van Creveld as the father

¹¹⁹ Werrell, ‘The Transformation of War’, 531.

¹²⁰ Kera, ‘Van Creveld is no von Clausewitz’, 60.

¹²¹ Hacker, ‘The Transformation of War’, 631.

¹²² Idem.

¹²³ Moran, ‘The Transformation of War’, 88.

¹²⁴ Idem.

of a line of thinkers which are all too fond of unfounded predictions. Gray calls *The Transformation of War* ‘the founding theoretical text for the thesis that war is undergoing far more than just a light makeover’,¹²⁵ and ridicules the idea that war might indeed be changing fundamentally. He asserts that wars have always been the same in their basic nature¹²⁶ and censures those who try to predict that it will change, writing that ‘the future is not foreseeable, period’.¹²⁷

Careless editing and a lack of notes

Those critical of van Crevelde’s writing and argumentation often found another shortcoming in his book. It is directed against the author’s editing and fact-checking. The book and bibliography contain some spelling mistakes, and a number of reviewers has not let this go unnoticed. What is more, van Crevelde is attacked more than once for telling untruths. Whilst one reviewer states that ‘signs of hasty production are legion’,¹²⁸ Kera goes as far as saying that ‘The rambling text, factual errors and editing problems create the impression that an early draft of this work was mistakenly published’.¹²⁹ Also Barton C. Hacker comments on the editing, noting ‘too many misspelled names and an extraordinary number of bibliographical errors’.¹³⁰ Another notes ‘sloppy proofreading’.¹³¹

It seems that for most of these critics, it is especially the combination of careless editing and somewhat confused writing and argumentation that is problematic. These matters are sometimes addressed with an additional comment about the fact that van Crevelde makes no use of footnotes or endnotes. Werrell writes that for him, the book’s lack of footnotes is ‘One sure sign’¹³² of the validity of his assertion that what van Crevelde does is speculation. Whilst Werrell concludes that he can excuse the lack of footnotes to some degree because of van Crevelde’s ‘useful fourteen-page annotated bibliography’, others are less forgiving. The usefulness of van Crevelde’s bibliography does not go uncontested, and Moran reproaches van Crevelde for not including ‘notes of

¹²⁵ Colin S. Gray, ‘How Has War Changed Since the End of the Cold War?’ *Parameters* (2005) 25.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, 16.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, 15.

¹²⁸ Moran, ‘The Transformation of War’, 88.

¹²⁹ Kera, ‘Van Crevelde is no von Clausewitz’, 60.

¹³⁰ Hacker, ‘The Transformation of War’, 631.

¹³¹ Steven Metz, ‘A Wake for Clausewitz: Towards a Philosophy of 21st-Century Warfare’ *Parameters* (1994-1995) 131.

¹³² Werrell, ‘The Transformation of War’, 531.

any kind, just a glibly annotated bibliography'¹³³. Barton C. Hacker also finds fault with it, noting how Mary Kaldor's name 'is misspelled in van Creveld's bibliography'.¹³⁴

Brilliant writing, argumentation and editing

Balancing the unfavourable reactions to van Creveld's writing style and editing are approving ones, lauding van Creveld for exactly those things other criticize him for. One reviewer writes that *The Transformation of War* is 'A great reader!'.¹³⁵ Others more explicitly applaud either van Creveld's style or argumentation. One reviewer admires van Creveld for a 'beautifully written and splendidly edited work'.¹³⁶ Another calls *The Transformation of War* a 'brilliantly written and cogently argued book'.¹³⁷ There are also those who do not comment on van Creveld's argumentation. They approve of van Creveld's ideas, passively demonstrating that the author's argumentative powers are great enough to convince them. They limit themselves to repeating van Creveld's arguments or conclusion and praising his observations. Examples of this are the commentary by Leslie Anders quoted above and the 1992 review from *The Futurist*.

Those who reviewed the presentation of van Creveld's ideas approvingly do not explain why they do so. Thus, little insight can be obtained as to why the reviewers approve of van Creveld argumentative skills or writing. What should be clear, however, is that the critical stance to van Creveld is by no means the only or most common one. Many reviewers display enthusiasm for his entire work, contents and presentation alike. Interestingly, one author who explicitly praises van Creveld's argumentation is not convinced by it. He writes that van Creveld has written 'a brilliant book' and that although 'in the opinion of this theorist, van Creveld is brilliantly wrong, [...] there is no denying the quality of his argument'.¹³⁸

As has become apparent, comments on van Creveld provocative, controversial style are many, voiced by critics and fans alike. Some perceive a lack of structure in van Creveld's writing, and his argumentation is seen to suffer from this. Others do not identify the same problems and rate all of van Creveld's efforts highly.

¹³³ Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 88.

¹³⁴ Hacker, 'The Transformation of War', 631.

¹³⁵ L.S. Mnyandu, 'The Transformation of War' *Scientia Militaria* (1998) 296.

¹³⁶ Leslie Anders, 'The Transformation of War' *Armed Forces & Society* (1992) 428.

¹³⁷ N.B. 'The Future of War' *The Futurist* (1992) 58.

¹³⁸ Gray, 'How Has War Changed?', 25.

Thought-provoking, prescient and erudite

So far, our attention has mostly gone to the way in which reviewers have evaluated van Creveld's writing and argumentation. The focus has been not so much on the ideas presented in his book as on the way in which he presents them. Whilst there is a connection between the way in which the presentation of ideas is perceived and the way in which those ideas themselves are perceived, a distinction will be applied. As much as one would expect those who find fault with the presentation of a book's ideas to also condemn the ideas themselves, this is not always the case with *The Transformation of War*. Some reviewers are critical of van Creveld's argumentation or writing but show admiration for his thinking. Therefore, we will address the reception of the book's contents separately.

First, we will have a look at those who show themselves approving of the ideas presented in *The Transformation of War*. Just as comments on their presentation, these remarks differ. Whilst there are not very many reviews that explicitly praise van Creveld's writing or argumentation, a considerably larger number express esteem for its contents.

Werrell, who is known to have commented favourably on van Creveld's bold writing, also states that van Creveld 'provides a valuable and interesting discussion [...] which is well worth reading'.¹³⁹ Whilst we have seen that Werrell is not exclusively enthusiastic about van Creveld's book, he does praise some aspects of it. He is an example of someone who is critical of van Creveld's reasoning, but expresses interest in his ideas. The adjective he uses to express this approval is 'stimulating'.¹⁴⁰

Werrell is not the only reviewer to be impressed by the power that van Creveld has to make us think anew. Another reviewer states that the book 'challenges us to rethink in some major way our basic assumptions about a vital aspect of war and society'.¹⁴¹ Whilst the latter author is an example of those who are exclusively approving in their evaluation of *The Transformation of War*, there are others like Werrell. An example is Tim Travers, who has much to remark, but concludes on a favourable note, writing that 'Nevertheless, the book is full of interest, with many

¹³⁹ Werrell, 'The Transformation of War', 531.

¹⁴⁰ *Idem*.

¹⁴¹ Adams, 'Away with Clausewitz', 156.

diverse subjects covered, such as the place of women in warfare past and present'.¹⁴² He recommends buying and reading it for its many insights and interesting arguments.

Many of those who labelled van Creveld's writing 'provocative' or 'controversial' saw that trait as an asset. It is not surprising that they reappear here. *The Transformation of War* is called 'essential reading'¹⁴³ and presents a thesis that is considered 'thought-provoking'.¹⁴⁴ Some have been so impressed by van Creveld's thoughts on future warfare that they confer on him the status of a prophet. There is mention of 'uncanny prescience'.¹⁴⁵ Van Creveld's view on the role of 'groups whom we today call terrorists, guerrillas, bandits and robbers'¹⁴⁶ is believed to be a 'prophetic statement'.¹⁴⁷ He is considered to address the issue of nuclear strategy 'perceptively'.¹⁴⁸ One reviewer states that the book should be 'required reading for national security leaders in and out of uniform'.¹⁴⁹

If on the one hand van Creveld is criticized for not obliging the rules of academia by working without footnotes and making too little effort to check his facts, the other side of the coin is reviewers' admiration for his interdisciplinary approach and well-roundedness. The author is considered 'erudite'¹⁵⁰ and 'well versed in anthropology, political philosophy and international relations'.¹⁵¹ Although the last quote is followed by a comment on van Creveld's limited knowledge of economics, Boekesteijn lauds him on his interdisciplinary approach to history.

Van Creveld versus Clausewitz

By now, we have seen some of the most general and recurring comments that van Creveld's book has drawn from reviewers. Those reviews praising the contents of his book have been discussed, and it might seem most logical to discuss their counterparts under the same heading. However, the criticism levelled against the contents of the

¹⁴² Tim Travers, 'The Transformation of War by Martin van Creveld' *The International History Review* (1993) 216.

¹⁴³ Gregory McLauchlan, 'Book Review' *Journal of Peace Research* (1992) 122.

¹⁴⁴ Boekesteijn, 'Leviathan in Trouble?', 241.

¹⁴⁵ Adams, 'Away with Clausewitz', 156.

¹⁴⁶ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 197.

¹⁴⁷ Robert J. Bunker, 'Epochal Change: War Over Social and Political Organization' *Parameters* (1997) 15-25.

¹⁴⁸ Mnyandu, 'The Transformation of War', 296.

¹⁴⁹ Metz, 'A Wake for Clausewitz', 132.

¹⁵⁰ Adams, 'Away with Clausewitz', 156.

¹⁵¹ Boekesteijn, 'Leviathan in Trouble?', 241.

book is more elaborate than the praise it has received. It refers to matters that the more approving reviews do not address and should therefore be presented separately.

In *The Transformation of War*, van Crevelde aims at providing a ‘new, non-Clausewitzian framework for thinking about war’.¹⁵² In doing so, he necessarily needs to put into words what the ‘Clausewitzian’ view of war is, and on which grounds he disagrees with it. Thus, there are two matters that van Crevelde has had to take a stance on to prepare the ground for a criticism of Clausewitz. He has had to explain to his reader what Clausewitz has written and he has had to find a vocabulary suited for criticism of those writings. Both those elements have come under scrutiny from some of his reviewers.

The first, or van Crevelde’s presentation of Clausewitz’ ideas, is addressed amongst others by Barton C. Hacker. He accuses van Crevelde of ‘putting up a Clausewitzian straw man’.¹⁵³ This accusation is repeated in another form and for other reasons by Tim Travers, who writes that ‘to some extent, Clausewitz is used here as a stalking-horse’. Hacker goes further in his criticism. He writes that van Crevelde’s argument against the ‘ghost’ of Clausewitz is linked to the way in which the Israeli writer interprets the Prussian. According to Hacker, van Crevelde’s argument against ‘Clausewitzian straw man’ is made possible by the way in which van Crevelde delineated his vocabulary. As explained above, the criticism against van Crevelde’s argument against Clausewitz is twofold. What Hacker does in his review is to link those two elements. He writes that van Crevelde’s non-Clausewitzian argument ‘requires using the terms state, politics and strategy in highly idiosyncratic ways’.¹⁵⁴ Van Crevelde, he states, has adapted his vocabulary so as to make a critique of Clausewitz possible.

Trinitarian warfare and the ‘ghost’ of Clausewitz

Hacker’s point is also made by Daniel Moran, though more elaborately and with more frequent reference to Clausewitz’ *On War*. Moran claims that ‘Clausewitz’ statement, indeed the whole body of his work, does not mean anything like van Crevelde says it means’.¹⁵⁵ He harshly criticizes the ‘misrepresentation’ of Clausewitz’ work by van Crevelde, and states that ‘van Crevelde’s reading of Clausewitz is so tendentious and

¹⁵² Van Crevelde, *The Transformation of War*, ix.

¹⁵³ Hacker, ‘The Transformation of War’, 630.

¹⁵⁴ Idem.

¹⁵⁵ Moran, ‘The Transformation of War’, 86.

confused that one can only wonder whether it is Clausewitz' ideas or simply his reputation that inspires the free-floating iconoclasm that pervades this book'.¹⁵⁶

What is it that makes Moran so critical of van Creveld's reading of Clausewitz and moves Hacker to conclude that van Creveld misrepresents Clausewitz' work? Both authors explain that they object to van Creveld's reading because he too narrowly defines vital concepts. Hacker elaborates on the quote represented above by stating that van Creveld is able to attack Clausewitz only because of the way in which he defines 'state' and 'politics'. The reviewer writes that van Creveld applies an 'extremely restrictive usage of 'state' to mean only the modern Western nation-state and 'politics' only power relations in such states'.¹⁵⁷

Both critics object to van Creveld's interpretation of Clausewitz' work as 'Trinitarian warfare'. They claim to have identified a misrepresentation of Clausewitz' famous trinity of state, army and people. Moran quotes the full passage from *On War* in which the trinity is presented. Thus, he hopes to show that van Creveld presents the three elements of this trinity as separated whilst Clausewitz has never given reason to inspire such an interpretation. Moran explains that 'if there were such a thing as 'Trinitarian war', in the sense in which Clausewitz might have used the term, it would be characterized [...] not by the division but by the constant and close interaction of the three elements of Clausewitz' trinity'.¹⁵⁸

Both Moran and Hacker condemn the way in which van Creveld represents Clausewitz in his book. This misrepresentation is seen to be based on definitions of concepts that are vital in both the Israeli's as the Prussian's book. As Hacker writes, what van Creveld 'terms 'Trinitarian warfare' as a unique product of the so-called Clausewitzian universe makes no sense without these special definitions'.¹⁵⁹ The critics' argument goes as follows: if van Creveld would have defined 'politics' and 'state' more broadly, his criticism of Clausewitz would no longer hold water. The way in which van Creveld defines these terms is in contrast with what Clausewitz believed them to mean. Thus, van Creveld criticizes Clausewitz not on the basis of what the Prussian wrote, but on the basis of his own interpretation of *On War*.

Fundamentally, the criticism that Hacker and Moran have is based on the idea that van Creveld defines certain concepts in a way that is not acceptable. This same

¹⁵⁶ Idem.

¹⁵⁷ Hacker, 'The Transformation of War', 630-1.

¹⁵⁸ Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 86.

¹⁵⁹ Hacker, 'The Transformation of War', 630.

‘narrow definition’ is noted by Boekesteijn, who states that van Creveld’s perspective on what a state is almost forces him to conclude that states are declining. He explains that van Creveld sees the state as some sort of corporation, a mostly independent entity that has three main characteristics: it has a territory, it has sovereignty, and that sovereignty can only be attributed to it by other states. Van Creveld’s states exist independently of ruler or people and are, according to Boekesteijn, only such a recent invention as van Creveld claims they are because of this definition.¹⁶⁰ Thus, the Dutch academic is on a par with Hacker and Moran in concluding that van Creveld’s argumentation rests on the way in which he defines concepts that could be described as essentially contested.

Concepts, definitions and their effects on *The Transformation of War*

Moran, Hacker and Boekesteijn have levelled criticism against van Creveld’s book that is very fundamental. If one accepts their argumentation, *The Transformation of War* is put in a completely different light. They claim that van Creveld’s argument against Clausewitz only works as a result of certain definitions of a set of central concepts. As Hacker notes, ‘at heart the book is a diatribe against the Clausewitzian thesis that war is (or ought to be) an extension of politics’. The three critics may have found a reason to mistrust van Creveld’s concept of ‘Trinitarian war’ and thus the central argument of his book.

On the other hand, there are plenty of reviewers who do not take offence at van Creveld’s treatment of Clausewitz. They are in agreement with his argumentation. The reason that their work is not expanded upon further is that they do not add much to van Creveld’s interpretation of Clausewitz. Therefore, they will only be presented in the above piece on favourable reactions to the ideas presented in *The Transformation of War*. Admirers of van Creveld’s book simply seem less concerned with explaining themselves. They leave us in the hands of van Creveld himself, who is considered capable of convincing us on his own accord.

¹⁶⁰ Boekesteijn, ‘Leviathan in Trouble?’, 241-2.

Danger ahead?

Now, some of the less frequent comments that can be found in different reviews of *The Transformation of War* will be discussed. Some reviewers have written so much more extensively than others that it is hardly a surprise that they have commented on issues that had been left untouched by others. Other reviewers manage to address unexplored issues in short reviews. Even though the matters addressed here are not very common in reviews of van Crevelde's book, it will become evident that on some issues, different reviewers hold opposite views.

An example of this is the effect that *The Transformation of War* is expected to have, should it ever be used as a basis for policy making. In the book, van Crevelde warns against the impending uselessness of national armed forces. He is convinced that they have had their best days. Whilst he himself does not draw this conclusion, one of his reviewers sees the book as a 'wake up call' for those who decide on the design of the armed forces to adapt. The reason for the necessity of this change is seen to be the 'coming degeneration and regression of society to primeval settings'.¹⁶¹ Van Crevelde does predict this development, but sees the return to less organised forms of warfare as unavoidable. Mnyandu appears not to share this point of view. *The Transformation of War* is believed to be 'a plea to (those who take decisions on war-making) to realise the impending perdition of society should they fail to adapt their views and practices to the prevailing circumstances'.¹⁶²

The opposite view is taken by William Hawkins, who sees van Crevelde's writings as potentially harmful. Mnyandu considers the by changes in the nature of warfare predicted by van Crevelde as a reason for conventional forces to adapt. Hawkins sees this response to van Crevelde's thinking as dangerous, saying that if his theory 'were accepted it could lead policy-makers to scrap conventional forces and new weapons programs, thus becoming vulnerable to [...] larger threats'.¹⁶³ Even though Hawkins allows for breaches of security from non-state actors such as terrorist groups, he does not believe that conventional forces will lose their value. The reasons he gives for this is that developing countries are acquiring conventional modern forces, and that developed countries (in this case, the United States) will see their interest challenged by

¹⁶¹ Mnyandu, 'The Transformation of War', 297.

¹⁶² Idem.

¹⁶³ William R. Hawkins, 'War, More or Less' *National Review* (1991) 52.

them in the near future.¹⁶⁴ It is interesting to see that even though van Crevelde does not offer practical advice on the design of armed forces in *The Transformation of War*, his reviewers do discuss the subject.

Van Crevelde's path of life

Some of the reviews which *The Transformation of War* has sparked over the years make the interesting link between van Crevelde's views and his biography. They remark that van Crevelde lives in Israel and that that might have influenced his ideas or writing. The idea is presented in different shapes and guises, and is discussed only shortly: it never attracts the undivided attention of the reviewers. As we shall see, this result in speculation about the influence that Van Crevelde's location has on his writing.

In his book, van Crevelde predicts that the nature of warfare is changing, and that interstate conflicts will disappear entirely to make room for low-intensity conflicts. As is noted by Michael Adams, the low-intensity conflicts that van Crevelde predicts such a bright future for are exemplified in van Crevelde's home state of Israel.¹⁶⁵ He notes that 'van Crevelde is steeped in the history of the Middle East'.¹⁶⁶ In *The Transformation of War*, van Crevelde claims that people do not fight for their interests. They fight for fighting's sake, as war is an end in itself.¹⁶⁷ Adams thinks that van Crevelde's assertion that war is not always fought in people's rational interest has been shaped by his location in the Middle East. He seems to agree with van Crevelde's prediction, and lists a number of instances in which a conflict was indeed in not in the warring parties' interest.

Another author who notes van Crevelde's nationality is Steven Metz. In his review, which discusses three works, he speculates about the effect that van Crevelde's environment has had on his view of future wars: 'Writing from Israel, where the crack of gunfire more often forms the soundtrack of daily life than it does in the English countryside, Martin van Crevelde is less sanguine about the future' than the other author whose book Metz reviews.¹⁶⁸ Like Adams, Metz draws our attention to van Crevelde's home country and the influence it might have on his thinking. Yet, the conclusion he draws is quite different.

¹⁶⁴ Idem.

¹⁶⁵ Adams, 'Away with Clausewitz', 158.

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem, 159.

¹⁶⁷ Van Crevelde, *The Transformation of War*, 220.

¹⁶⁸ Metz, 'A Wake for Clausewitz', 129.

The line of thought that Metz takes is presented more directly by Tim Travers. The latter writes that ‘one cannot help but feel that van Creveld’s location at Hebrew University in Jerusalem makes him especially susceptible to thinking about *Intifada*-style conflict as the warfare of the future’.¹⁶⁹ Like Adams, Travers speculates about the influence that living in Israel has had on van Creveld. However, where Adams concludes that that must mean that van Creveld knows more about low-intensity conflict than the regular western academic, Travers asserts that it might have influenced van Creveld’s point of view. Whereas Metz only hints in this direction, Travers makes the link more boldly, proposing that van Creveld has been influenced in such a way that he sees fundamental change where it is not present. Low-intensity conflict may be winning ground swiftly in van Creveld’s surroundings, but that does not mean that the same is happening all over the world.

The Gulf War

Among van Creveld’s reviewers, there are three who mention the Gulf War as an event that may diminish the strength of his thesis that low-intensity conflict is winning ground and will at some point be the only type of conflict left. Not all these commentators are equally adamant that the conflict influences van Creveld’s credibility. However, one of them does take the point of view that the Gulf War has indeed proven van Creveld wrong. It is Kenneth Werrell who writes that:

Perhaps the most glaring problem is that *The Transformation of War* is a victim of recent events. Throughout the book, the reader cannot help but think of the Gulf War and judge the author's words and conclusions against it. In my view, that war calls much of van Creveld's thesis into question and proves some of his comments inaccurate. The Gulf War pitted a first-world power against a well-armed third-world power, in a similar but larger conflict than the Falklands War. Both conflicts clearly show that such wars can be successfully fought by regular forces armed with high-technology weapons and can as an instrument of state policy.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Travers, ‘The Transformation of War’, 216.

¹⁷⁰ Werrell, ‘The Transformation of War’, 531.

Werrell seems adamant in his judgement that both the Falklands War and the Gulf War, which were won by traditional, modern forces, show van Creveld's thesis to be flawed. Others, who also comment on the effect that the Gulf War may have had on the value of van Creveld's predictions, are less certain that this is indeed the case. Tim Travers provides a more balanced evaluation, writing that the occurrence of the conventional Gulf War was unfortunate for van Creveld, even though 'many internal conflicts around the world [...] lend themselves to van Creveld's analysis'.¹⁷¹ The Gulf War is seen as a possible argument against his thesis, but Travers admits that there are also examples of the opposite kind; low-intensity conflicts.

The idea that the Gulf War could disprove van Creveld's thesis receives the most careful comment from Daniel Moran. Although he comments that 'the recent conflict in the Persian Gulf may already have cast its shadow over this book',¹⁷² he adds an important consideration. He notes that 'it is easy, at the moment, to heap scorn on van Creveld's denigration of the military prowess of advanced society',¹⁷³ but asserts that the thesis of van Creveld's book should not be discarded on the basis of the news of the day. After all, 'The success of the allied war against Iraq does not prove him wrong, any more than its failure would have proven him right'.¹⁷⁴ Here, Moran makes an important point: van Creveld's predictions are about the world at large, painting a picture of a future in which low-intensity conflict will be prevalent everywhere. Disproving or proving this thesis requires more than showing that there are examples of either one or another kind of conflict.

Remaining remarks

By now, the more and less frequent comments that van Creveld's book has attracted have been presented. What follows are remarks by reviewers which are not seen more than once or twice. Nevertheless, they do have their bearing on the subject of this thesis. As such, they will not be overlooked. Their subject is the value of van Creveld's argument for the way in which the world approaches the future. Van Creveld paints a gloomy picture, and this fact is the subject of some comments from his reviewers. An example is Daniel Moran, who writes that 'to regard war as nothing more than an

¹⁷¹ Travers, 'The Transformation of War', 216.

¹⁷² Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 88.

¹⁷³ Idem.

¹⁷⁴ Idem.

atavistic reflex is to counsel despair, intellectually as well as morally'.¹⁷⁵ Seen as a critique of van Creveld's pessimism, this remark does not have much to contribute to our discussion. Still, Moran might have a point in the sense that van Creveld does not help his reader to draw either intellectual or moral lessons out of his book. As Tim Travers puts it, 'the rather apocalyptic tone of the last section of the book'¹⁷⁶ is less than appealing. Looking at it this way, van Creveld attitude is better described as resigned than pessimistic. As Moran explains, van Creveld's assertion that 'war is life written large'¹⁷⁷ is not much more than a reason to give up on changing the world. Van Creveld asserts that, in the future, we will live in a way of continuing and barely controlled violence. As Moran sees it, 'the goal of theory is to master this grim possibility. To this task *The Transformation of War* has nothing to contribute'.¹⁷⁸

The complaint that Moran makes is that van Creveld does not help his readers to deal either intellectually or morally with the prospect of the violent world put forward by him. This comment is related to another by the same writer, namely that van Creveld's view on the nature of war makes the existence of peace 'difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to explain'.¹⁷⁹ Moran points out that in van Creveld's view of war and human beings, war is an end in itself. Humans pursue it because it gives them pleasure. For van Creveld, war exists not because people are willing to kill, but because they are willing to die.¹⁸⁰ He claims that nobody will die for his or her own interests or for those of someone else, and thus concludes that 'there is a sense in which people will fight *only* to the extent that they experience war itself and everything pertaining to it as an end'.¹⁸¹

This conception of humans and war is something that Moran finds problematic, and because the goal of this thesis is exactly the relationship between views on human nature and views on war, we will have a closer look at why Moran finds fault with van Creveld's reasoning.

Moran claims to have identified several flaws. The first of these is that he finds van Creveld's interpretation of war to depend 'on a conception of human nature that is

¹⁷⁵ Ibidem, 89.

¹⁷⁶ Travers, 'The Transformation of War', 216.

¹⁷⁷ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 226.

¹⁷⁸ Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 89.

¹⁷⁹ Idem.

¹⁸⁰ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 191.

¹⁸¹ Idem.

asserted rather than demonstrated'.¹⁸² Secondly, he censures van Creveld for disregarding 'testimony to mankind's revulsion at war in favour of statements expressing guilty satisfaction'.¹⁸³ Thirdly, Moran claims that van Creveld is too quick in his judgement that many wars are not political. Moran writes that van Creveld 'ignores the self-perception of terrorists and guerrillas, who can be among the most politicized of fighters'.¹⁸⁴ What is more, van Creveld also denies 'the capacities of primitive and feudal societies to formulate and act on collective interests, to have politics at all'.¹⁸⁵

It must be pointed out that these last few claims are all made by one and the same author. They are presented here with the goal of serving as interesting material for further discussion of van Creveld's work. As they cover exactly those topics that are the subject of this thesis, they will not be elaborated on here. They will make an appearance in the following chapters.

Subsequent debate

Besides Daniel Moran's above comments, the next chapters will touch upon debates which *The Transformation of War* has played a part in. The current chapter has given an overview of reviews of van Creveld's book, but some larger themes or debates that followed the publication of *The Transformation of War* should also be recognisable to the reader. For that reader, the two most important ones will be outlined here.

The first of those is the debate around so called 'New Wars', or whether the phenomenon 'war' is changing fundamentally. The second is a debate about the meaning and continuing relevance of Clausewitz' *Vom Kriege*. As will be clear throughout the following chapters, the two matters are strongly related. Although van Creveld's work has played a role in many more debates, such as one about the effects of the advent of nuclear weapons on world politics and warfare, or one about the role of women in warfare, the two debates outlined above are the ones that deserve to be discussed in the limited space available here; they are both very widely discussed themes as well as important to the rest of this thesis.

¹⁸² Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 89.

¹⁸³ Idem.

¹⁸⁴ Idem.

¹⁸⁵ Idem.

New wars and Clausewitz

In a very short discussion of what is called the ‘new wars thesis’, Mary Kaldor’s book *New and Old Wars* cannot go unmentioned¹⁸⁶. In it, she formulated clearly the idea that contemporary wars are different from wars in the modern era, an idea of she is still seen to be the central exponent.¹⁸⁷ As we have seen, *The Transformation of War* is seen to be the founding text of this idea that ‘war is undergoing far more than a light makeover’.¹⁸⁸ Kaldor’s ‘new wars’ thesis has spurred an enormous debate, linking in with a discussion about a decline in the usefulness of Clausewitz. The link between the new wars thesis and Clausewitz’ work should not come as a big surprise to those who have read the Prussian’s work, as his claim is exactly that the fundamentals of war never change.¹⁸⁹

The criticism of the new wars thesis most important to the subject of the current text relates to Clausewitz. The manner in which proponents of the new wars thesis, such as Kaldor and van Creveld, have interpreted Clausewitz, has been the topic of quite some debate. This is the reason that it is important for the reader to know that, first, there have been big scholarly debates following the publication of such books as *The Transformation of War* and *New and Old Wars*, and second, the most important of those (for the purpose of this thesis) relates to Clausewitz. Notable critics of the new wars thesis and its implications for the position of Clausewitz in scholarly debate are Christopher Bassford, Hew Strachan, Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Jan Willem Honig. These scholar’s contributions to the debate on the nature of warfare and Clausewitz are best left for the following chapter, in which their comments can clarify our discussion of van Creveld’s thinking. They comment on how Clausewitz has been (mis)interpreted by those who support the idea that war is changing fundamentally, which is an important theme in the next chapter, in which we evaluate and elaborate on van Creveld’s critics’ comments.

¹⁸⁶ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars* (Cambridge 2012).

¹⁸⁷ B.W. Schuurman, ‘Clausewitz and the ‘New Wars’ Scholars’ *Parameters* (2010) 90.

¹⁸⁸ Gray, ‘How Has War Changed?’, 25.

¹⁸⁹ Schuurman, ‘Clausewitz and the ‘New Wars’ Scholars’, 90.

Chapter 3: Evaluating and Expanding on van Creveld's Critics

In this chapter, some of the comments that van Creveld has received at the hands of his critics will be evaluated. They will serve as a means to evaluate both van Creveld's argument for discarding Clausewitz' dictum and his own alternative. Van Creveld's book is directed at showing that Clausewitz was mistaken in asserting that war is a political tool. This argument is presented in great part in chapters two, five and six. Those are the chapters that need to be understood to follow van Creveld on his stated mission: providing a non-Clausewitzian way of thinking about war. Different comments that van Creveld has already received on his creation of a 'non-Clausewitzian' framework will provide the structure for an investigation of his argument.

Three chapters, a variety of comments

Van Creveld has received criticism directed at the perceived incoherence of his writing and on a tendency of the author to base his argument on insufficiently explained grounds. We have seen that van Creveld is perceived to write with a lack of attention for detail, and that he is faulted for providing insufficient evidence for his assertions. The remark made by Barton C. Hacker on van Creveld's argumentation is representative of these criticisms, when he writes that of van Creveld's ideas, 'few [are] systematically expounded'.¹⁹⁰

Examples of passages in which van Creveld can be said to make himself vulnerable to criticism such as that of Hacker are almost all directly related to van Creveld's criticism of Clausewitz' dictum and the alternative that he presents. In other words; the most essential parts of his work appear to be the weakest. Chapters two, five and six each present parts of van Creveld's argument for discarding Clausewitz' ideas and accepting his own. To remind the reader: chapter two focuses on a discussion of the 'Trinitarian' thinking about war, chapter five is a discussion of Clausewitz' dictum that war is a continuation of politics, and it claims that people have gone to war for many other reasons than political ones. Chapter six, finally, discusses why individuals fight, claiming that people do not fight for political reasons but for no reason but war itself. Each of these chapters, and also the relation between them, deserves to be commented on.

¹⁹⁰ Hacker, 'The Transformation of War', 631.

Van Creveld and Clausewitz' trinity

As we have seen, the criticism of van Creveld's attack on Clausewitz is based on a number of central concepts. We have seen these pass by in the summary of *The Transformation of War*. The most important ones are 'politics', 'interest' and 'state'. Van Creveld's critique of Clausewitz is largely dependent on the way in which these central concepts are defined. His critics claim that if van Creveld had not defined 'politics' and 'the state' in the way that he did, his argument against Clausewitz would no longer stand. The problem with the way in which van Creveld defines these essential concepts is conceived to be first, that he does not base this definition on Clausewitz' work, and second, that he defines them very narrowly. His critics claim that, as a result, van Creveld does not justify his definitions – they are not based on *On War*, but do serve as material for attacking its author. Whether this criticism is fair and whether van Creveld does justify his choices in another way is something we will assess here.

Clausewitz misused?

Scrutinizing the way in which van Creveld presents Clausewitz one finds that the basis on which much of van Creveld's argument rests is indeed not very stable. Van Creveld believes that Clausewitz' 'remarkable trinity' consists of the three elements of government, people and army.^{191 192} The problem with it is that seeing the trinity of government, people and army as the 'essence' of Clausewitz' trinity is by no means an uncontested view. Although many represent the trinity as consisting of these three elements, Clausewitz himself first introduces it as a trinity consisting of 1) primordial violence, hatred, and enmity; 2) the play of chance and probability; and 3) war's element of subordination to reason as an instrument of policy.¹⁹³ He links this idea with a trinity of the government, people and army,¹⁹⁴ but that is not 'the Clausewitzian trinity'. Therefore, the conclusion that both Hacker and Moran draw about van Creveld's misrepresentation of Clausewitz seems well-founded concerning the trinity.

¹⁹¹ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 38-9.

¹⁹² Van Creveld's (and John Keegan's) treatment of Clausewitz' trinity is a matter that has been criticized quite widely but perhaps most persistently by Christopher Bassford. An instance of this is his contribution 'The Primacy of Policy and the "Trinity" in Clausewitz' Mature Thought' in: Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford 2007) 80, 82.

¹⁹³ Von Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

¹⁹⁴ Idem.

Apart from claiming that van Creveld misrepresents Clausewitz, his critics write that the Israeli misuses the Prussian to support his own ideas. We have seen Barton C. Hacker describe this as follows:

By defining politics solely in terms of power relations and policy formation within nation-states, van Creveld can argue that von Clausewitz's instrumental analysis of warfare as the extension of politics was based on a historically unique situation and has lost whatever validity it may once have had.¹⁹⁵

As we have seen, both Moran and Boekesteijn joined Hacker in his criticism of how van Creveld defined key terms¹⁹⁶. When putting van Creveld's argumentation under close scrutiny, however, we find that it is not van Creveld's definition of key terms that enables his criticism of Clausewitz; rather, it is the other way around. Van Creveld criticises Clausewitz on the basis of a misrepresentation of Clausewitz' thought, and he supports the way in which he himself defines key terms by employing the 'Clausewitzian straw man' Hacker speaks of. We will have a look at how van Creveld goes about this.

The problem with van Creveld's dealings with this 'trinity' of the government, army and people is not only that it is a misrepresentation of Clausewitz, but that he misuses it to make two claims. First, that Clausewitz sees states as the only actors that wage wars, and second, that politics is something done solely by states.¹⁹⁷ We will start by investigating the origins of the first claim.

States and warfare

At the beginning of van Creveld's second chapter, the trinity is first introduced not as a theory postulated by Clausewitz but as the historical reality around the Prussian author.¹⁹⁸ Van Creveld, however, uses this historical background as a way to introduce to his readers the idea that Clausewitz thought that war could only be waged by the state. Clausewitz is thus claimed to believe that states are the only ones waging wars not

¹⁹⁵ Hacker, 'The Transformation of War', 631.

¹⁹⁶ Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 86; Boekesteijn, 'Leviathan in Trouble?', 241-2.

¹⁹⁷ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 38-40.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 36-38.

on the basis of his writing but on the basis of the fact that in his lifetime, states were indeed the ones waging (what was called) war. Van Creveld explains why it would be understandable for Clausewitz to think of wars as performed by states, but he does not substantiate his claim that indeed, that is what Clausewitz thought.

During van Creveld's second chapter, the unfounded contention that Clausewitz assumed war to be fought only by the state turns into the claim that 'The Clausewitzian Universe rests on the assumption that war is made predominantly by states or, to be exact, by governments'.¹⁹⁹ First introduced as historical reality, this idea is transformed into a claim that government, army and people are said by Clausewitz to be 'vital element(s) in any war'.²⁰⁰ Van Creveld tries to show that states are not the only entities waging war by giving historical examples of other types of situations. This seems to stand in relation to Clausewitz' trinity and work, as the idea which van Creveld is attacking has its basis in the historical circumstances in which Clausewitz lived. However, the attentive reader notices that it is rather van Creveld's 'Clausewitzian Universe' that is related to van Creveld's historical accounts, not the Prussian's work itself.²⁰¹ It is not Clausewitz' work that is discussed, but van Creveld's idea of it. Comparing the 'Clausewitzian Universe' to the actual world, in which there have indeed been many conflicts not waged by states, van Creveld comes to the conclusion that 'the Clausewitzian Universe' cannot explain most conflicts satisfactorily.²⁰² In the entire chapter, neither Clausewitz' original 'remarkable trinity' nor a justification for coining a 'Clausewitzian Universe' appears.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem, 49.

²⁰⁰ Ibidem, 39.

²⁰¹ This is especially interesting in light of the fact that it is not a generally accepted idea that Clausewitz worked upon the assumption that states were the only actors that could conceivably make war. Indeed, Clausewitz is believed by Peter Paret, a prominent scholar in the land of Clausewitz, and the producer of one of his most successful biographies, to have imagined the possibility of state decline (see Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (Oxford 1976), 3). More importantly, the notion that Clausewitz' work is irrelevant to non-state conflict is primarily van Creveld's, and it is criticized by more than one. See, for instance, Duyvesteyn and Angstrom (ed.) *Rethinking the Nature of War* 2005, 239 and Jan Willem Honig, 'Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting', in: de Nooy (ed.), *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague 1997), 110 and Christopher Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy and the "Trinity" in Clausewitz' Mature Thought' in: Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford 2007) 88.

²⁰² Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 58.

Van Creveld on politics in a state

Van Creveld's second claim is that politics is something performed solely by states. This claim seems not to be related to the first, which was that states are the only actors waging wars. The purpose of the following passage is to explain two things. Firstly, why the two claims seem unrelated but do require to be discussed together. Secondly, why it is indeed the case that van Creveld *misuses* Clausewitz to say that politics is the exclusive preserve of the state.

Two related claims

The two claims, the first pertaining to wars and the state, the second to politics and the state, are unrelated in the strict sense of the word. After all, the one does not necessarily follow from the other. However, it is important to discuss them as if they were related to each other. The reason for this is that van Creveld treats them as if they were.

Chapter two of *The Transformation of War* is dedicated to investigating the relationship between the state and wars. We have discussed van Creveld's treatment of this topic on the previous page of the current thesis. Chapter five of *The Transformation of War* is dedicated to investigating the relation between the war and politics. After all, the chapter is intended to disprove Clausewitz' idea of war as the continuation of politics. Thus, there seems to be a clear distinction between chapters two and five of van Creveld's book. The two topics of these chapters would indeed be clearly distinguished from each other, were it not for the first three pages of chapter five. In these pages, van Creveld builds a bridge between the topics of chapter two and five. Because he discusses the relationship between the state and politics on page 125, chapter five is no longer just about the relationship between war and politics. It is also about the state.

What van Creveld says about the state in the beginning of chapter five is the following: 'Whatever the exact meaning of the term 'politics', it is not the same as "any kind of relationship involving any kind of government in any kind of society". A more correct interpretation would be that politics are intimately connected with the state'.²⁰³ This is a normative statement from the hands of van Creveld. He says that politics is something only done by states. We have seen that, in chapter two, van Creveld makes the claim that Clausewitz' saw states as the only political actors. He does not

²⁰³ Ibidem, 125.

substantiate this claim. Suddenly, in chapter five, the idea resurfaces, and van Creveld appropriates it. Because of its appearance in chapter five, van Creveld makes it seem as though this idea of the state is related to Clausewitz' dictum. This is why the two unrelated claims about politics and the state, and politics and warfare are unrelated in essence but related in van Creveld's book. Now, we move on to the second claim made by the current thesis. That is that van Creveld *misuses* Clausewitz to say that politics is the exclusive preserve of the state.

Misusing Clausewitz

In chapter two, van Creveld's reader has been introduced to the idea that Clausewitz' idea of politics was restricted to the state. Had van Creveld not discussed this, his reader would be surprised at van Creveld's statement in chapter five. It would have been much clearer that van Creveld criticizes Clausewitz' dictum on the basis of a particular conception of what politics is. When van Creveld concludes in chapter five that 'the dictum that war is the continuation of politics means nothing more or less that it represents an instrument in the hands of the state',²⁰⁴ this seems to be an acceptable assertion *because* he has presented Clausewitz in a particular way.

What van Creveld turns out to have done is to criticize not Clausewitz but his own representation of the Prussian. Van Creveld attempts to support the way in which he defines 'politics' by employing a 'Clausewitzian straw man'. This 'straw man' (called the 'Clausewitzian Universe') is designed in chapter two. It represents the idea that states are the only entities that wage war and that all wars are fought for reasons related to 'might' – and not 'right'. It turns out that van Creveld's invention of a 'Clausewitzian Universe', in which the state was central to politics, functions as a tool to argue against the idea of war as the continuation of politics. Van Creveld's claim that politics are only a state's business is just that: van Creveld's claim. It is presented as a factual statement or an argument, but is a normative statement. It is neither founded on thorough argumentation, nor related to Clausewitz' trinity. Because of the way in which van Creveld presents his opinion, however, it may seem as though it is a logical outcome of the conclusions drawn in chapter two.

²⁰⁴ Idem.

The reality of van Creveld's argument is that in his second chapter, he presents a series of historical examples to show that in the past wars were fought by groups other than nation-states. In his fifth chapter, 'What War Is Fought For', he presents a similar collection of historical examples to show that sometimes, people went to war for purposes that were non-political. The conclusions that he might *reasonably* draw from this are that, first, other groups than nation states sometimes fight wars, and second, that people fight for reasons related more to 'right' (religious rights, or justice) than 'might' (politics). The conclusions that he draws instead are; first, that Clausewitz was wrong because he saw wars as the exclusive preserve of the nation state, and second, that Clausewitz was wrong in seeing politics as the only reason to fight wars for. The first is based on a misrepresentation of Clausewitz. The latter is an unsubstantiated claim, as van Creveld has not explained what he takes Clausewitz' dictum to mean. Only by discussing what the concept of 'political motivation' can be said to encompass, van Creveld could rightly criticize Clausewitz. However, he does not discuss the concept thoroughly. In the coming pages, we will see what consequences this lacuna has for van Creveld's argument as we explore the rest of his fifth chapter.

As we have seen, reviews of *The Transformation of War* go quite some way in explaining how van Creveld can be said to misrepresent and even misuse Clausewitz' work to support his own argument. Still, van Creveld's argument is built up of parts that are scattered across the pages of his book, and as Kera mentioned in her review, it is not always clear where one argument ends and the other begins. It is clear that in chapter five, van Creveld presents an argument against the view that war is a continuation of politics by other means. However much this argument might be mixed up with his own opinion on the essence of 'politics', he really does make another, more well-founded argument against Clausewitz' dictum at the *end* of his fifth chapter. It is not presented as well as it might have been, and comes to the fore only after having given the examples that would substantiate it. Still, it is worth investigating in its own right, separate from the matter of van Creveld's discussion of Clausewitz and the Prussian's idea of politics.

Why war is not the continuation of politics

We now move away from Clausewitz and into the heart of van Creveld's argument for the dismissal of Clausewitz' dictum. The reason for which van Creveld argues that

political motivation has insufficient explanatory value to create an understanding of war is presented at the end of chapter five. Here, van Creveld discusses the term ‘interest’. As we have seen, this is a term that van Creveld also invokes in his discussion of why individuals go to war. First, however, we will have a look at his reasons for including the term in his discussion of why communities fight wars.

As has become apparent from the above summary of *The Transformation of War*, van Creveld admits that one might say that all the reasons for which communities go to war could be called ‘their interests’. To him, this is problematic because it means inflating the term to encompass so much that it becomes meaningless. Peoples might fight for religious principles, legal matters or indeed, political matters. What is more, the things they fight for differ over time.²⁰⁵ Van Creveld criticises those who say that religious or legal principles are ‘mere pious smokescreens (for) selfish considerations pertaining to the community’s interests’.²⁰⁶ He writes that it is always a mix of normative ideas and objective interests that makes people go to war. It is hard to believe that anybody would disagree with this last statement. However, van Creveld draws from it the following conclusion; ‘war as fought for reasons of politics and interest represents a point of view that is both Eurocentric and modern’.²⁰⁷

Apparently, van Creveld finds it impossible to reconcile the idea that, first, in motives for going to war, interests and norms are always mixed up, and second, that war is something political. He writes that ‘to believe that justice and religion are less capable of inspiring people to fight and die than is interest is not realism but stupidity’.²⁰⁸ He does not, however, explain where in Clausewitz’ writing he has found that the Prussian saw politics as something devoid of concerns about justice and religion. As has been concluded at the end of our discussion of van Creveld’s statement on the role of the state in politics, van Creveld does not explain what exactly he takes ‘political motivation’ to mean. We now see why this is problematic; whereas one might consider politics something that always or often encompasses less ‘rational’ matters, such as a people’s pride or its religion, van Creveld does not. For this reason, he considers it impossible for interests and norms to be mixed up in ‘political wars’, and thus finds in their existence a proof against Clausewitz’ dictum.

²⁰⁵ Ibidem, 155.

²⁰⁶ Idem.

²⁰⁷ Idem.

²⁰⁸ Idem.

Apparently, van Creveld associates politics with pure rationality. At least, this is what he thinks that Clausewitz does, and can be faulted for. He writes that ‘the strategic approach probably overstates the degree of rationality involved’²⁰⁹ in war. Of this strategic approach, he sees Clausewitz as the principal proponent. Clausewitz’ is presented as a part of the tradition that sees war as a ‘rational means for achieving some rational end’.²¹⁰ This is curious, as Clausewitz’ trinity famously spread the idea that war’s subordination to reason or policy is only one of its elements.

All in all, it is hard to understand why wars for religion and justice could never fit into Clausewitz’ idea of war as the continuation of politics. Only if one takes politics to be as purely ‘rational’ as van Creveld seems to do, the surfacing of norms is problematic²¹¹. It seems there is hardly anyone who would claim that politics are completely devoid of norms. It is not Clausewitz’ writing but van Creveld’s idea of ‘the strategic approach’ that disallows for norms in politics.

War for existence

We have investigated van Creveld’s argument for claiming that wars for religion and justice disprove Clausewitz’ dictum. What van Creveld claims is that those wars are not covered by the idea of wars as the continuation of politics. Now, we move on to a third type of war which is claimed to be ‘non-political’. These are wars fought for existence. They form the most interesting part of van Creveld’s argument against Clausewitz’ idea of war. Although these ‘wars for existence’ are presented in the same category of ‘non-political wars’ as his ‘wars for justice’ and ‘wars for religion’, the argument he puts forward to show that this kind of war is different from the ones waged for policy is different.

War for existence, van Creveld writes, is a proof that wars are not waged for political reasons because saying that such a life-and-death struggle is fought ‘for’ something means abusing the term. A war for existence ‘cannot be ‘used’ for this purpose or that, nor does it ‘serve’ anything. On the contrary, the outburst of violence is

²⁰⁹ Ibidem, 157.

²¹⁰ Idem.

²¹¹ An interesting discussion of the matter is to be found in the paper ‘War without End(s)’ (*Distinktion* 15, 2007), in which Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Jan Willem Honig argue that a misunderstanding of Clausewitz’ dialectical method has led to a dichotomy between groups of scholars which belief war should be understood either as completely rational or as completely irrational. Martin van Creveld stars as the principal proponent of the latter group, having misunderstood that it is characteristic of Clausewitz to employ spectrums rather than extremes.

best understood as the supreme manifestation of existence as well as a celebration of it'.²¹² Van Creveld's reason for claiming that the survival of a community cannot be the goal of fighting a war does not become completely clear. He shows that those communities fighting for survival make different decisions and for different reasons than those fighting for 'policy', and gives the example of Algeria and France. Whereas normally, casualties are a reason to stop fighting, this is different in the case of a war for existence. The Algerians fought such a war, and they had less to lose as suffering and destruction grew. Thus, the war becomes more reckless with every fallen individual.²¹³ Van Creveld calls this the reversal of 'cost-benefit calculations'. Apparently, the two arguments that 1) war for existence means a reversal of 'cost-benefit calculations' or 2) calling a war for existence a war with 'a purpose' is abusing the term, should convince the reader to discard the idea that wars for existence are political.

What we have learned about van Creveld

The above discussions of van Creveld's second and fifth chapters go to show that the writer takes very big steps in his reasoning. Sometimes, he bases his arguments on certain ideas that he postulates rather than argues. This chapter started with the promise of an examination of van Creveld's argument and his critics' reviews, and this is what will now be done. Already, his treatment of Clausewitz has been related to the comments made on the topic by Moran, Boekesteijn and Hacker. Now, the more general comments that were repeated at the beginning of the current chapter will be evaluated.

Van Creveld has received comments on his careless style of argumentation and his less than systematic approach. We have seen that indeed, van Creveld is not always successful in making clear to his readers what exactly his argument is. His chapters seem to deal with quite specific matters, but van Creveld is not always able to present his thoughts on those matters in a clear way. Many times, the arguments that van Creveld gives, do not logically add up to his conclusion – or if they do, van Creveld does not explain why. He ridicules those who suppose that religious beliefs or infringed rights cannot inspire people to fight, and concludes that wars before the modern era could not be fought for politics or interests.

²¹² Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 143.

²¹³ *Ibidem*, 144.

In essence, van Creveld's central arguments boil down to the idea that the terms normally used to describe people's motivations for going to war are too broad. They encompass so many different wars in so many places and at so many moments that they can no longer mean anything. This is a dangerously shaky foundation to base the central argument of a book on. However, we often encounter the idea that certain concepts are inflated in his book, and always in those places where the essence of one of his arguments is located.

'Term inflation' is the reason that van Creveld claims that 'interests' cannot be used to explain wars.²¹⁴ Also, it is his argument for 'politics' never being something other than the political activity within a state.²¹⁵ His claim is that of Johann Gottfried Herder; 'When a term's meaning is inflated to mean everything, the point comes where it no longer means anything'.²¹⁶ When a term literally means *everything*, this may hold true. However, van Creveld does not explain why define 'politics' or 'interest' broadly jeopardizes the words' meanings. Because he does not do so, we are free to wonder why this argument holds up to Clausewitz, who has for centuries been able to convey meaning whilst using a much broader conception of 'politics' than van Creveld²¹⁷.

Daniel Moran has commented on van Creveld's idea of how much 'politics' can mean without becoming meaningless. Moran claims that van Creveld is too quick in his judgement that many wars are not political, ignoring the capacity of primate and feudal society to have politics. The reason van Creveld gives for supposing that feudal societies did not have politics is twofold: first, that in the Middle Ages, politics were entangled with military, social, religious and legal matters; Second, that the term 'politics' did not exist. Why the mixing of politics with 'social' or 'religious' matters might be a reason to suppose that those politics are not actually politics should dumb anyone; according to this idea, no society has ever had politics, and we today do not have politics either. Also, it is bizarre to say that the concept of 'politics' did not exist up to the sixteenth century, as it has obviously come into existence together with 'the polis' (at the very least).

²¹⁴ Ibidem, 151-2.

²¹⁵ Ibidem, 152.

²¹⁶ Idem.

²¹⁷ As pointed out by Christopher Bassford, Clausewitz has, although he nowhere defines the term '*Politik*', used the concept very widely. He argues for seeing Clausewitz' *Politik* as referring to all ways in which power is distributed between and within societies ('The Primacy of Policy and the "Trinity"' in Clausewitz' Mature Thought' in: Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford 2007) 83.

Besides the idea that terms can lose meaning, the idea that a specific word did not yet exist at some point in time is a favourite one of van Creveld. He tries to use it to take down ‘politics’, and does the same with ‘interest’. Claiming that the word ‘interest’ did not exist in the English language until the sixteenth century becomes a reason to conclude that people living before that moment ‘waged their wars for different ends’.²¹⁸ Apparently, the possibility of a similar word (in a different language) is not taken into consideration. How it might be possible to read e.g. Thucydides’ famous Melian dialogue if those words did not exist before the sixteenth century is a question we shall have to ponder on; after all, it is exactly the question of what place ‘interests’ should take (as opposed to justice), which the Athenians and Melians are discussing.²¹⁹ All this goes to show that van Creveld’s dismissal of broader concepts of ‘politics’ and ‘interests’ are based on insufficiently convincing evidence. Chapters two and five, which supposedly disprove Clausewitz’ view on war, are not set up well and under close scrutiny turn out to be based on precarious argumentation.

Mankind and the will to fight

To close off this chapter on the discussion of the reviews of *The Transformation of War*, van Creveld’s sixth chapter will be discussed. Together with chapters two and five, chapter six offers van Creveld’s central argument: that war is a means to an end. In chapter six, he makes the step from claiming that war is not fought by communities for their interests to claiming that individual people do not fight for their interests. Instead, people fight for the sake of war itself. Daniel Moran has made a comment that leads into this last, vital part of van Creveld’s argument.

The comment that Moran makes is that van Creveld disregards ‘testimony to mankind’s revulsion at war in favour of statements expressing guilty satisfaction’.²²⁰ This criticism is interesting because the idea that people fight because it pleases them to do so is central to van Creveld’s argumentation. War, van Creveld asserts, is enjoyable. One of the arguments he uses to back up this statement is by saying that ‘the list of those who have put their enjoyment of war on record is endless’.²²¹ We have seen his explanation of why war is a happy activity. Van Creveld claims that war has a

²¹⁸ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 150.

²¹⁹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (London 1831) 610.

²²⁰ Moran, ‘The Transformation of War’, 89.

²²¹ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 162.

‘liberating’ power, enabling men to forget their surroundings. War frees men of everything but their own free will, making it the only thing that allows a person to be completely human.²²² Moran is right in noticing that van Creveld does not mention ‘mankind’s revulsion at war’. The problem with this is that there is indeed a lot of evidence that for many, war is not a joyful experience. Even van Creveld has to admit that coercion is necessary to make men take up arms against each other.²²³ However, he does not comment on this and gives no explanation for why people are often unwilling to fight if it is such a joy to do.

On Killing

An important book on the less sunny side of war’s effects on men is *On Killing* by Dave Grossman. Grossman shows what the psychological costs of war can be, and argues that people are not naturally disposed to killing members of their own species. What is more, they only kill other humans if they have been conditioned to do so. He writes about the serious psychiatric difficulties that a great percentage of veterans has to deal with. Grossman writes; ‘When people become angry, or frightened, they stop thinking with their forebrain (the mind of a human being) and start thinking with their midbrain (which is indistinguishable from the mind of an animal). *They are literally ‘scared out of their wits’’*.²²⁴ The argument goes as follows: in combat situations, people are so stressed that they rely on their midbrain. To make them attack an armed opponent and risk death one has to train their ‘animal brain’. Killing other people, then, is not at all innately human. Actually, killing is done voluntarily only in some situations. In many others, people only do it when trained to.

What is interesting about Grossman’s book, is that it presents a collection of examples and quotes of men who have fought in war, who have killed people, and who have returned from a war psychologically damaged. As we have noticed, van Creveld does not explain why he states that indeed, coercion is sometimes necessary to make people fight. There is one single passage in his book, however, in which he discusses the heavy psychological cost a war may have. He does this in the chapter in which he considers the war convention and the necessity for having rules that distinguish war from crime. Van Creveld claims there are still many people, non-combatants and

²²² Ibidem, 161-6.

²²³ Ibidem, 216.

²²⁴ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. n.d.

combatants, who still have to come to terms with the Vietnam war because for those people there was no belief or rite to ‘expiate’ them and come to terms with their ‘transgressions’.²²⁵ For van Creveld, then, war makes psychological victims not because people are psychologically damaged as a result of having to kill or because of the stress of being in combat; they have psychological problems only when the line between killing and murder was not clear.

Van Creveld writes that to stare death into the face is to be reduced to free will.²²⁶ This assertion stands in contrast to that of Grossman, who claims that when in danger, people will lose their ‘human’ qualities and be reduced to their animalesque, conditioned behaviours. As van Creveld does not substantiate his claim about the role of the ‘free will’ in combat situations, it is difficult to understand why he makes this point. What is interesting is that he makes it in a passage in which he discusses the power of war to reduce people to their essential ‘humanness’. Apparently, being only one’s free will, free of the influence of the circumstances, is something that makes us more human. This reduction of man to his free will happens as a result of danger.

Discussing the effect that fighting has on humans, then, Grossman focuses on the act of killing, which van Creveld has decided is *not* the essence of war. To the latter, the essence of war is the possibility of getting killed oneself, the braving of danger.²²⁷ Neither the act of killing nor the effects of that act on a person seem to be a topic of reflection for van Creveld.

The centrality of danger

Moran’s comment that van Creveld ignores evidence on the negative sides of people’s relationship with war is not only true, it is interesting in the light of the observation that van Creveld focuses on danger and not on killing. Van Creveld claims that fighting brings up our ‘human’ essence because it allows us to pit our entire being against an opponent. It is the fact that that opponent actually *opposes* us that makes war what it is, that makes war interesting and enjoyable. A problem in van Creveld’s reasoning is that he does not address the difference between, on the one hand, war being able to bring joy and make a person feel brave, determined or strong, and on the other hand, the idea that people actually *want to* fight. It is much easier to agree with him that some people

²²⁵ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 94.

²²⁶ *Ibidem*, 161.

²²⁷ *Ibidem*, 156.

sometimes take pleasure in war, than that fighting another person to death is something quintessentially human.

This is a problem that van Creveld does not address. He does seem to run into it, for when he has exerted himself in proving that people sometimes enjoy fighting (and why they do so), all he has to say on the will to fight is this: ‘It is true that other factors – including rewards and coercion – are mixed up with the will to fight, but, since it is the ultimate meeting of men with death that we are speaking of, that is beside the point’.²²⁸ For a matter so vital to van Creveld’s discussion of the relation between humans and war, this ‘argument’ is awfully confined. The question of why rewards and coercion are sometimes needed to make men fight actually remains unanswered. Martin van Creveld simply discards this problem as ‘beside the point’, but if it is anything it is not that. The thesis that most people are not naturally disposed to killing is not necessarily disproven by the fact that some people enjoy war enormously. Van Creveld thus leaves himself the burden of proof for his assertion that the will to fight is embedded in human nature.

Two of the things that we have discussed here need to be remembered. First, there is van Creveld’s idea of humans as inherently disposed to make war. Secondly, there is the centrality of danger in van Creveld’s conception of war. This thesis will propose that the two are related. We will have a look at the connection between them in the following chapter.

²²⁸ Ibidem, 166.

Chapter 4: Men, Danger, Violence and Empathy

This chapter aims to support a series of claims; firstly, that there is a link between van Creveld's idea of humans as inherently disposed to make war and the centrality of danger in van Creveld's idea of war. Secondly, that van Creveld has a one-sided perspective on the role that violence plays in the acquisition of power. Thirdly, that in *The Transformation of War* van Creveld demonstrates a lack of empathy. All these things are connected to each other. The present chapter will argue that they all relate to van Creveld's idea of what men are supposed to be and do.

As this thesis claims that the central problem in van Creveld's book relates to his ideas on 'the male', his views on the male are what should first be investigated. What is it that could make one conclude that to van Creveld gender is so important as to determine all the most vital parts of his argumentation? Why would 'the man' be central to the nature of war, to what power is, and to our way of understanding humanity? These are the questions that need to be addressed.

It is important to remark here that van Creveld has, over the years, published an ever increasing number of texts on the topic of gender relations and war. Amongst those texts is his 2001 book *Men, Women and War*,²²⁹ in which he proposes and defends the thesis that the increasing influx of women into the military is both symptom and cause of the decline of that institution. In essence, this book is a more elaborate version of the arguments that van Creveld makes about men, women and either sex' role in warfare in *the Transformation of War*. *Men, Women and War* offers the same argument and conclusion as van Creveld's 1991 publication, although accompanied by a wealth of historical examples about women and their place in warfare. As our main concern here is the centrality of van Creveld's viewpoints on masculinity in *The Transformation of War*, that text will remain in the centre of our attention.

Men and war

Perhaps unsurprisingly, van Creveld opposes his idea of 'the male' to that of 'the female'. This distinction might seem the most logical thing in the world, but the extent to which van Creveld ascribes importance to it, is not. The distinction gives us insight into what war is to van Creveld. We have seen that he writes that: 'to have women take

²²⁹ Martin van Creveld, *Men, Women and War* (London 2001).

part in war would have greatly diminished its social prestige, taken away its purpose, and destroyed its *raison d'être*. Had men been made to fight side by side with women, or else to confront them as enemies, then for them armed conflict would have lost its meaning and might well have come to an end'.²³⁰ This is supposed to be the case because when women participate in warfare, they threaten the significance of what the men are doing: they make it impossible for the men to perform their role as soldiers in a meaningful way. Van Creveld makes this claim based on an idea of what women and men are. Therefore, it is his idea of men (and women) that must be examined.

Van Creveld's views on men and women are most easily understood by approaching them from a specific angle; the claims that van Creveld makes about the relationship between men and women. First we will see what van Creveld has to say about the latter category.

Women in public

What is most striking about van Creveld's idea of 'the woman', is that he sees her as an exclusively private figure. For van Creveld, a woman has to shed her femaleness in order to become a public figure. In other words, females cannot perform in public roles *as* public figures because they are women. Whilst men can have private lives and be a soldier, doctor, cleaner, teacher etc., women are never really any of those. In van Creveld's view, women who move in the public sphere are first and foremost *women*.

Van Creveld writes that 'women's presence in the military can be tolerated only to the extent that they are dewomanized. Either they are turned into public property, that is, prostitutes, or else they must be treated like substitute men'.²³¹ From *The Transformation of War*, it is not immediately clear why van Creveld writes this. Close scrutiny of his argumentation shows that the answer lies in van Creveld's view of what women's role in society is.

Van Creveld's view on women is interesting in the light of literature on the suppression of women. A relevant book on the topic is *the Man of Reason* by Genevieve Lloyd²³². In this classic book on the nature of suppression, Lloyd explores the 'maleness' of reason and rationality throughout philosophical thought. She shows how ideas of what is rational have long been tied strongly to ideas of what is male. She

²³⁰ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 183.

²³¹ *Ibidem*, 186.

²³² Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (Minnesota 1986).

comes to the conclusion that the things considered ‘male’ are the things that have been valued most. What is more, ‘rationality has been conceived as transcendence of the feminine; and the ‘feminine’ itself has been partly constituted by its occurrence within this structure’.²³³ The cultural ideal which women would have to achieve in order to become fully equal to the male is constructed in opposition to what they (women) are supposed to be. The solution to women’s exclusion from the public sphere is, to Lloyd, not the opening up of that sphere but an equal appreciation of the activities associated with both the public and private sphere. In that way, the norms and stereotypes that have constrained men and women alike will be kept from perpetuating themselves.²³⁴

The reason to introduce thoughts on the nature of oppression is to show that van Creveld is thinking in a paradigm that perpetuates the oppression of women. His claim that women can only work in the military if they are ‘dewomanized’, is exactly the kind of thinking that Lloyd criticizes. Martin van Creveld’s idea of ‘the woman’ is one that he cannot reconcile with her presence in the public sphere. Women cannot be soldiers *because* they are women.

In this context, it is interesting to consider what van Creveld has to say about sexual intimidation. He writes that ‘A commander must not subject his female subordinates to sexual harassment, which, strictly interpreted, means that he is expected to ignore the most prominent thing about them’.²³⁵ He is unable to accept the idea that, in the public space, a female soldier is first and foremost a *soldier*, not a woman. The above quote shows that for van Creveld, a female soldier is always a woman; she cannot escape from that. Therefore, van Creveld claims that the above commander is forced to ‘ignore the most prominent thing’ about his female subordinates: the fact that they are women. An interesting side note is that van Creveld does not allow for the possibility that the commander in question is herself a woman.

Tautological reasoning

When one reads his text, the reasoning behind van Creveld’s view seems unfinished. However, it would be closer to the truth to say that it is tautological. His argument for the impossibility of having women participate in warfare is that women can only

²³³ Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 104.

²³⁴ *Ibidem*, 106.

²³⁵ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 185.

participate in warfare when they are no longer women, or ‘dewomanized’. As a proof of the fact that women are in fact ‘dewomanized’, he states that ‘women employed by the modern military are made to wear ties and cut their hair short’.²³⁶ These measures are seen not as the steps taken to achieve uniformity amongst newly recruited soldiers, but as steps to strip women of their femaleness. This is proof of van Creveld’s proclivity to see men as the default sex. It is also, as Simone de Beauvoir explained in her famous *Le Deuxième Sexe*, characteristic of the oppression of women; those who still do view ‘the woman’ as defined by her traditional, submissive role cannot see those women as public figures as the two are irreconcilable.²³⁷

This view is epitomized by van Creveld as he asserts in *The Transformation of War* that obliging men to play football alongside women would put an end to the game. He writes that ‘rather than suffer the field to be littered with female bodies – or submitting to the even greater indignity of being beaten by a woman – most men would probably cease playing’.²³⁸ Van Creveld pretends to be speaking about universal phenomena here, but in truth he is led by his own quite specific idea of what men and women are. Why is it so much worse for a man to be beaten by a woman than by other men? Biologically, men should be more concerned about competition from males. What is more, van Creveld’s perspective is not universal. In countries such as Holland and Sweden, there are sports which actually demand mixed teams to appear in competition, and this does not seem to discourage men to play²³⁹. The fields are not ‘littered’ with female bodies and all the players participate equally. Van Creveld’s attempt to paint a poignant picture of mixed-gender football is not a serious contribution to the debate on women’s roles in war. It is an attempt to appeal to those who see women as weak creatures.

Warfare as a male activity

We have achieved insight into van Creveld’s idea of what women are and what their place in society is. Women should move within the private sphere – or expect to be harassed or ‘dewomanized’. We needed to investigate this matter in order to understand why van Creveld thinks that having women participate in warfare would ‘have greatly

²³⁶ Idem.

²³⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth 1972).

²³⁸ Ibidem, 183.

²³⁹ The most well-known example of this is Korfbal, which is played in teams of eight which consist of four female and four male players.

diminished its social prestige, taken away its purpose, and destroyed its *raison d'être*'.²⁴⁰ We have come to the understanding that for van Creveld, being a woman is something that one cannot combine with a public role. The reason that women threaten the significance of warfare when they participate is that they are not soldiers participating in what soldiers do; they are *women* participating in what soldiers do.

Van Creveld sees women's participation in warfare as a threat to its significance because he sees warfare as a male activity. In his opinion, 'a field that is dominated by women by definition does not allow men to realize themselves as men – and indeed in any society the worst insult that can be directed at men is to call them 'women''.²⁴¹ This quote shows what his view is on the relation between men's and women's roles in the public sphere. Van Creveld thinks that an activity which is performed by women cannot offer men the opportunity to be manly. One observer has commented with wit on this viewpoint. Explaining that van Creveld wants to exclude women from warfare simply because that will make it more satisfying for males, she writes that 'essentially, we must exclude women from military service so that men will feel better. One can imagine van Creveld's scorn for any argument defending in similar terms any particular privilege for women'.²⁴² With this observation, Kiesling has pointed out that van Creveld allows privileges for men without ever reflecting on what a woman's perspective might be.

The purpose of this chapter is to show why van Creveld's idea of what 'male' is, influences his ideas on war, human nature and violence so much. The reader might wonder why, with such an objective, so much attention has been given to his ideas on women. This matter might already have become clear during the discussion of van Creveld's ideas on women and men. Van Creveld's idea of the male is defined largely in opposition to that of the female. Men can distinguish themselves only if they can show themselves to be more important, stronger, or more powerful than women. If women were to show that they are able to do what men do (fight a war), this would make it impossible for the men to show that they are males²⁴³. Van Creveld explains the drive that men (supposedly) have to prove themselves to be better than women by referring to the fact that women can give birth and men cannot. He states that 'much of

²⁴⁰ Idem.

²⁴¹ Idem.

²⁴² Eugenia C. Kiesling, 'Armed But Not Dangerous: Women in the Israeli Military' *War in History* (2001) 100.

²⁴³ This idea, which is central to van Creveld's argument against admitting women into the armed forces, is one he reiterates clearly in later texts on women and warfare, see for example *Men, Women and War* (London 2001) 164-7.

human civilization is best understood as an attempt on the part of males to sublimate their inability to produce the one most marvellous thing on earth'.²⁴⁴ Apparently, the fact that men cannot give birth is not only an explanation of the fact that they have long oppressed the other sex in an attempt to show themselves superior; it is a justification. Why men cannot be satisfied with *their* indispensable role in creating children is not clear. Women, however, seem to be expected to be satisfied with just their role as child bearers.

Nowhere in his book does van Creveld address the justness of excluding women from certain positions for the sake of making the men feel good. What is more, he claims that this division is essential to the survival of our species as 'one suspects that, should they ever be faced with such a choice, men might very well give up women before they give up war'.²⁴⁵ The biological unlikelihood of such a scenario does not strike van Creveld as a problem. We will simply have to allow men to have 'their fun' in wars because not doing so will probably make them unwilling to procreate. Van Creveld thinks that 'had war not existed, separating the sexes and making them attractive to each other, then probably it would have to be invented'.²⁴⁶ From this perspective, allowing men to fight each other to death is essential to our species' survival.

Van Creveld and machismo

To make reference to van Creveld's idea of the male easier in the rest of this thesis, it will henceforth be referred to with one word; 'macho'. This term is taken to typify the view of 'maleness' that van Creveld is a proponent of. 'Machismo' means 'exaggerated or strong masculinity'.²⁴⁷ A macho man is a male who attempts to stress his masculinity by focusing attention on 'male' attributes like strength and bravery. Besides stressing these 'male' attributes, machos spend a lot of their time *not* being feminine. One of the most typically macho things is to *define* a man as the direct opposite of the female. As we have seen, this is exactly the perspective that Martin van Creveld takes. He explains that men cannot be proper males when operating side to side with women. The urge that

²⁴⁴ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 181.

²⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 222.

²⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 189.

²⁴⁷ Collins, *Collins English Dictionary* (Glasgow 2004) 493.

males feel to distinguish themselves from women, van Creveld writes, is a result of their incapability to give birth. To him, this is not only an explanation of the will to be superior on the part of males; it is a justification of it.²⁴⁸ As we have seen, van Creveld considers it important that males have the opportunity to assert themselves as being *better* than females. His view, then, is not only macho; it is a justification of machismo. Because his idea of what men should be is based on a) an excessive focus on physical masculinity and b) dissociation from anything that might make men appear to be (like or equal to) women, it will be called ‘macho’ from now on.

Danger and the male

The above passages were intended to illustrate what van Creveld’s view of ‘the male’ is. We will now move on to investigate whether it is indeed that case that this idea of the male is central in van Creveld’s ideas on 1) what war is, 2) what power is, and 3) the degree of empathy shown in his book. In other words, we will assess whether van Creveld’s macho perspective indeed pervades his thinking to such a degree that all his thinking on the subject of war is *one-sided*. This thesis claims that it is, as van Creveld claims that there is hardly a difference between what a man is, and what a warrior is. He places ‘the male’ at the centre of his world, and all his views on warfare are formed from the perspective of the warrior. All these claims will be addressed in the coming pages.

First, we will investigate the relationship between van Creveld’s idea of maleness and his idea of the nature of warfare. Is it true that van Creveld’s idea of war is built around an idea of the male as a ‘warrior’? We have encountered several times what van Creveld’s ideas are about the nature of warfare; ‘the essence of war is fighting’,²⁴⁹ ‘danger is the *raison d’être* of war, opposition its indispensable prerequisite’.²⁵⁰ War is enjoyable because of the centrality of danger in it. The braving of that danger is what makes war worthwhile.

The reasons that van Creveld gives to support these assertions boil down to the fact that facing danger is macho. Van Creveld writes that ‘throughout history, war has stood out as the most important male preserve by far; the only great occasion in which a

²⁴⁸ A point of view he exhibits again and with clarity in later texts, as in *Men, Women and War*, in which he claims that men’s ‘existential problem [...] *demands* (italics added) that masculinity be asserted and reasserted throughout life’ (Men, Women and War 163).

²⁴⁹ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 161.

²⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 171.

display of manliness was considered absolutely essential for success and, accordingly, not just permitted but required and desired. The association between ‘man’ and ‘warrior’ is, indeed, so close that in many languages the two terms are interchangeable’.²⁵¹ The reason that van Creveld considers a display of manliness laudable is that it requires important virtues. After all, ‘it is only in the face of danger that determination, loyalty, pride and boldness make sense and manifest themselves’.²⁵² War is not just a male preserve; it is the activity that allows best for men to show themselves virtuous males.

Just as in the case of his views on women, van Creveld’s idea on warfare and its relation with ‘male virtues’ is postulated and declared to be universal. He claims that in every society, the worst that could happen to a man is to resemble a woman, and that the best that could happen to a man is to resemble a warrior. As we have seen, he considers it impossible to be a woman and a warrior at the same time.

War as a praiseworthy activity

The centrality of danger in van Creveld’s view on the nature of war is what makes it possible for him to assert that fighting a war is the ultimate activity that allows for positive ‘male’ virtues to show. If one would take the perspective of Grossman, and focus on the act of killing, the romance of warfare diminishes quickly. Van Creveld’s argument that people enjoy fighting rests on the idea of warfare as a competition. His conviction that rules are essential to delineating what is war and what is crime, is very important to this argument. Fighting and killing an opponent can only be called noble or good if that opponent is an enemy. One has to be justified in killing that person. Van Creveld can present waging wars as something admirable because he asserts that wars can only be called wars when ‘the rules’ are obeyed. Opposition, therefore, is seen to be the ‘indispensable prerequisite’ of war. War is a game and ‘does not make sense [if] it can neither serve as a test nor be experienced as fun’.²⁵³

By first making war into a game, a competition and a liberating experience, van Creveld can then make the claim that warfare is fun, an opportunity for males to show their better sides. Bravery, determination and loyalty are virtues that we all value. However, we would not necessarily agree with van Creveld that they are present in all

²⁵¹ Ibidem, 183.

²⁵² Ibidem, 164.

²⁵³ Ibidem, 173.

the men that have ever fought in a war. The reason that van Creveld does, is that he sees war as a competition in the way a football game is a competition. Van Creveld neither discusses the fact that in war people murder each other, nor the fact that many conflicts that are considered wars have included or been what he claims to be massacres or bloodsheds.

Van Creveld claims that there is a clear difference between wars and those other instances in which people kill each other. He writes that ‘where no symmetry exists, violence may still take place, even violence that is organized, purposeful, politically-motivated, and on a fairly large scale. However, usually the name such violence is given is not war but disturbance, uprising or crime’.²⁵⁴ What van Creveld claims is that the only difference between wars and less praiseworthy forms of ‘organized, purposeful, politically-motivated, and large scale’ violence is the fact that wars are fought out by roughly equal opponents. This raises questions such as; when is a war no longer symmetrical? When somewhere, sometime during a larger war, a massacre takes place, is that still acceptable because the larger ‘war’ is symmetrical? Are those executing people still the embodiment of ‘male virtues’, even though what they are doing is slaughtering people? Van Creveld pays alarmingly little attention to the fact that his chosen ‘male’ activity might not always be as virtuous as he would like. On these grounds, we can conclude that van Creveld’s perspective on war as the ultimate opportunity to exercise ‘male’ virtues is one-sided: it fails to encompass the sides of warfare that are not virtuous and are simply acts of *killing*.

Reality or rhetoric?

Van Creveld rightly points out that there are some conflicts that are called ‘wars’ and some that are called a massacre, bloodshed, disturbance or crime. He attempts to explain the difference by claiming that these forms of fighting differ in nature. The problem with this view is that many times, it is not quite clear whether a conflict, in its entirety or in part, is either one or the other. What is more: some people call a conflict a war, another party might call the same conflict an uprising. These terms, then, are more indicative of the stance someone takes towards a conflict than of the actual nature of that conflict. In Europe, people talk of the conflict in Syria as a war, but Assad’s government prefers to think of it as an uprising. Putting danger central in his view of

²⁵⁴ Ibidem, 174.

what war is enabling van Creveld to disregard this fact. After all, it is this that enables him to claim that there is an actual, real difference between fighting against a stronger as opposed to a weaker opponent. Whilst it is not hard to agree with van Creveld that indeed, armies fighting a 'fair' war will be praised more than armies fighting an 'unfair' one, van Creveld does not offer convincing proof that the concept 'war' is applied only to the first.

Violence and power: Hannah Arendt

Having demonstrated the relation between van Creveld's insistence on the centrality of danger to war and his idea of war as a male preserve, we will move on to the next point. The following paragraphs will present support of the claim that van Creveld's machismo can be traced to his idea of the role that violence plays in the acquisition of power.

In 1970, Hannah Arendt published her famous essay *On Violence* in which she discusses both the changing place of violence in international relations and the relation between violence and power²⁵⁵. Her views on the last matter are interesting in comparison to van Creveld's. Arendt writes that 'it looks indeed as though violence were the prerequisite of power and power nothing but a façade. On closer inspection, though, this notion loses much of its plausibility'.²⁵⁶ Arendt accuses social scientists for having slighted the differences between the ways in which men rule over men. She herself distinguishes between power, strength, force, authority and violence. Power, firstly, is the ability of a group to act in concert; 'when we say that somebody is 'in power' we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name'.²⁵⁷ Strength, on the other hand, is something singular, the trait of one person. Force is 'the energy released by physical or social movements'.²⁵⁸ Authority 'can be vested in persons [...] or in offices [...]. Its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey'.²⁵⁹ Finally, violence 'is distinguished by its instrumental character'.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York 1970).

²⁵⁶ Arendt, *On Violence*, 47.

²⁵⁷ Ibidem, 44.

²⁵⁸ Ibidem, 45.

²⁵⁹ Idem.

²⁶⁰ Ibidem, 46.

Having defined her key terms, Arendt moves on to discuss whether power can indeed be equated with violence, as so many people think. Admitting that indeed, violence and power often occur together, she comes to the conclusion that ‘violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power’.²⁶¹ Thus, violence is not a means to achieve power but a tool to compensate for a *lack* of it. Arendt explains that this is especially apparent when violence has destroyed power in a certain region and is used as a means to keep up dominion. This, she calls terror. When terror is so universal that a state begins to kill its own citizens, power will have disappeared completely. This shows that ‘power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent’.²⁶²

Violence and power: Martin van Creveld

Hannah Arendt can help us come to a deeper understanding of van Creveld’s ideas on conflict. Van Creveld has read her book, and in the bibliography of *The Transformation of War* he calls it ‘a *tour de force* in which many of the present book’s ideas are foreshadowed’.²⁶³ This is striking to those who have read both books, as van Creveld takes a completely different perspective on the relationship between violence and power, a point that is absolutely central to Arendt’s work. Van Creveld writes that ‘war not merely serves power, it *is* power’²⁶⁴. As the use of violence is essential to warfare, something that van Creveld does not try to deny,²⁶⁵ he equates violence with power. Apparently, the ideas that van Creveld sees ‘foreshadowed’ by van Arendt are not those on what power is²⁶⁶.

What does it mean that van Creveld equates violence with power? To answer this question, it may be useful to have a short look at another of his books, *The Culture of War*.²⁶⁷ This book was published in 2008, and it shows two things; firstly, that van Creveld had not changed his ideas on the relationship between violence and power by that time. Secondly, it can give us more insight into why he connects the two. In *The*

²⁶¹ Ibidem, 53.

²⁶² Ibidem, 56.

²⁶³ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 229.

²⁶⁴ Ibidem, 219.

²⁶⁵ Ibidem, 90; 161.

²⁶⁶ It is likely that he is referring to the influence that nuclear weapons have had on the way in which war is fought, but a comparison between the two books on this issue is not the subject of the present thesis.

²⁶⁷ Martin van Creveld, *The Culture of War* (New York 2008).

Culture of War, he writes that ‘tearing up a living creature, drilling holes in it, breaking it to pieces, smashing it, doing away with it once and for all – speaking as a scholar whose self-imposed task in life is to try to understand people and society, if a greater manifestation of power exists, I would dearly like to know where to find it’.²⁶⁸ What van Creveld describes in the first half of the quotation can only be called violence. However, he calls it ‘the greatest manifestation of power’. From the perspective of van Creveld, power has more to do with imposing one’s will onto someone than with getting someone to cooperate with you. In this way, he not only distinguishes himself from Arendt, he diametrically opposes himself to her idea of what power is.

As we have seen, Arendt sees power as the property not of an individual but of a group. The people in that group are able to work together. We only say of someone that he or she is ‘in power’ if that person has been *empowered*. Power cannot be taken from someone; it has to be bestowed upon someone. Obviously, this is not what van Creveld describes in the excerpt from *The Culture of War*, nor is it what he points to in *The Transformation of War*. Van Creveld asserts that violence *is* power. But why is this of importance? The way in which van Creveld discusses violence and power is important because it gives us an insight into the way in which he looks at conflict. From the perspective of the person that is inflicting violence upon another, it seems as though he is exercising power over that person. Someone that is ‘torn up, drilled, broken, smashed and done away with’, however, is unlikely to bestow power on such an actor. Even if after the use of violence, the victim is still alive, it is unlikely that he or she will want to be part of the group of the aggressor.

Evidently, van Creveld employs a different idea of what power is than Arendt. In his world, power is making people do what you want. Van Creveld takes a one sided-perspective: focusing solely on the aggressor, he can see violence as the supreme manifestation of power. He only sees, in Arendt’s words, the way in which violence can destroy power. What he overlooks is that the victim of violence is not going to participate in *creating* power for the aggressor. Because Arendt takes into account both the aggressor’s and the victim’s perspective, she sees that violence will not result in more power for the party that employs it.

Van Creveld’s idea of violence as the manifestation of power fits in beautifully with his idea of war as a macho game. We have seen that van Creveld considers war

²⁶⁸ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 110.

the ultimate manly activity. War is to men what bearing children is to women;²⁶⁹ the supreme manifestation of their sex. To van Creveld, war is characterized not only by the fact that it is a *manifestation* of power, but also by the fact that it ‘results in a feeling of power’.²⁷⁰ Apparently, one of the reasons that war is the ultimate male activity is that, to van Creveld, it is the most *empowering* activity. In their quest to ‘sublimate their inability to produce the one most marvellous thing on earth’²⁷¹ men want to feel that they are important. Van Creveld writes that this quest is the reason that men have outshone women in ‘most human achievements in art, science, technology etc.’.²⁷² War is the ultimate field in which men can outshine women, and this is because war is the most dangerous and thus most prestigious activity. The fact that van Creveld sees the use of violence as a manifestation of power shows us how deeply the idea of war as the ultimate macho activity pervades his thinking.

Empathy

The third element that van Creveld’s macho view on warfare implies is the lack of empathy that he shows throughout his writing. This claim should strike the reader as a logical implication of the above passages on van Creveld’s views on women, power and violence. We have seen that van Creveld writes that violence equals power because he sees power as exercised over someone, not as granted to someone. His perspective is that of the person in power, not that of the group or the individuals in less fortunate positions. We have also seen that van Creveld’s view of danger as the essence of war is not the most balanced view. He never discusses the fact that in warfare people die at the hands of another human being. War is a game, war is fun. Having discussed van Creveld’s view on women, we know that he has not overly exerted himself to understand the opposite sex. Van Creveld makes all kinds of claims about what a women’s role should be, not contemplating for a moment whether those reading that their work ‘hardly counts as work at all’²⁷³ might take a different perspective. Van Creveld’s insistence that it is acceptable to see women as principally sexual objects²⁷⁴

²⁶⁹ Ibidem, 189.

²⁷⁰ Ibidem, 221.

²⁷¹ Ibidem, 181.

²⁷² Idem.

²⁷³ Ibidem, 182.

²⁷⁴ Ibidem, 185.

again shows a his failure to take a female perspective. All the matters discussed in this chapter can be brought under the rubric of van Creveld's lack of empathy.

One of the most striking examples of a passage in which van Creveld shows that he has not exerted himself to view matters from another's point of view is one in which he discusses conflicts in which one party is much stronger than the other. Van Creveld advises the stronger party to exercise 'swift, ruthless brutality'.²⁷⁵ The reasoning behind this is that it is better to kill a lot of people all at once and then be done with it, than to try restraint and to sit the conflict out. As an example of the latter, he mentions the British in Northern Ireland. They exercised discipline and self-control, which allowed them not to get alienated from the local population.²⁷⁶ The British, however, are thought to have exercised amazing self control, a quality that lacks in most armies. 'Passive waiting being the most difficult game of all'²⁷⁷, van Creveld's advice is not to put one's troops through the trouble of constraining themselves. Being the stronger party means that 'almost *anything* [one] does or does not do is, in one sense, unnecessary and, therefore, cruel'.²⁷⁸ In order for the strong party not to suffer the consequences of being considered cruel, van Creveld advises to just 'get it over with' and wipe the opponent off the map.

Van Creveld's advice to employ 'swift, ruthless brutality' is explained by means of the analogy of a cat killing a mouse. The mouse can drive the cat crazy, so the cat 'must kill the mouse at once. Should it fail to do so, then its very size and strength will cause its actions to be perceived as unnecessary; hence – had it been human – as cruel'.²⁷⁹ Again, van Creveld shows astonishingly little ability to take the perspective of the weaker party – the mouse. The main concern, for him, is that the choice between ruthless brutality and an attempt at constraint is a choice between exposing oneself shortly to criticism and making one's army going through the trouble of constraining itself. The cat will be thought much crueler when playing with the mouse for a long time than if he kills the mouse immediately. Constraining an army for a long time might result in a weakened morale and thus a weaker force, and thus van Creveld opts for the brutal alternative. Maybe people will detest the brutal party for a while, but that is a lot

²⁷⁵ Ibidem, 175.

²⁷⁶ Ibidem, 177.

²⁷⁷ Ibidem, 176.

²⁷⁸ Ibidem, 175.

²⁷⁹ Idem.

better than having to go through a long period of restraining one's troops, risking one's army's disintegration.

The element that never once enters this discussion is that, in one scenario, there are lots of casualties amongst the weaker party, and in the other, there are only a few. The lack of this consideration in van Creveld's thought again becomes apparent when van Creveld discusses the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Considering a scenario in which the Israelis would just have wiped the Palestinians off the map, he seems quite pleased to conclude that 'all this could have been done at the cost of negligible Israeli casualties or none at all. The benefits to Israel, in the short term at any rate, would have been immense'.²⁸⁰ The only problem he sees with this approach is that there would be 'potential international complications', which do not seem to worry him too much. The fact that many people would have been killed or displaced, and his inability to imagine that those Palestinians who were not killed would never give up trying to revenge themselves, shows that van Creveld has not spent much time considering their point of view – or opts to disregard it.

The inconceivability of sacrifice

The second issue that needs pointing out is that van Creveld considers is impossible and absurd for someone to sacrifice his life for his 'nearest and dearest'. As he puts it, 'for a man to die for his own interest is absurd; to die for those of somebody or something else, more absurd still'.²⁸¹ In part, this claim rests on the idea that 'the reason why fighting can never be a question of interest is – to put it bluntly – that dead men have no interests'.²⁸² Van Creveld does not remark on the possibility that men might fight and *survive* a war. Fighting does not necessarily result in the death of all involved, and thus a man might fight in the hope to kill the opponent and so refrain that person from killing him. Besides this interesting footnote, the point that can be made about van Creveld's argument against 'fighting for interest' is that apparently, he cannot imagine someone willing to risk his life for 'somebody or something else'. Because van Creveld sees war as an exceptionally challenging and dangerous game, he does not truly consider the possibility that one goes to war to protect the people one loves. He claims that people

²⁸⁰ Ibidem, 73.

²⁸¹ Ibidem, 159.

²⁸² Ibidem, 158.

can be brought to risk their lives for nearly anything: flags, mascots, religion, justice, or just for the sake of fighting. The idea that one might actually fight not just for one's own existence but for someone else's does not receive any attention. Thus, much of van Creveld's argument against Clausewitz' idea that war is a means and not an end, is that he cannot imagine people fighting for a personal reason.

Van Creveld's disregard for other persons' perspectives or views is an indication of the macho perspective he has on the world. This is not to say that macho men are incapable of showing empathy. The point is that van Creveld, who shows a macho perspective throughout *The Transformation of War*, has not considered seeing the world from another perspective than that of a dominant man living in a traditional, patriarchal society.

In this chapter, we have come to a deeper understanding of van Creveld's way of thinking about war. We have identified several interconnected elements of his thinking, all of which relate to van Creveld's machismo. He considers war to be a violent game, disregarding the fact that employing violence is in many ways not something praiseworthy. Van Creveld comes to the conclusion that fighting other people to death is an activity which allows virtuous qualities to come to the fore. This is a result of his ideas on war, danger, violence, power and the relation in which these matters stand to what men do in this world. In the next chapter, we will investigate how these insights can help us reconsider the meaning of *The Transformation of War*.

Chapter 5: The Human and War

This last chapter aims to help the reader interpret what has been said so far. Some elements of Van Creveld's book have been discussed very thoroughly. The overall conclusion of this discussion has been that van Creveld's thought is largely determined by his idea of what men are supposed to be and do. In the current chapter, the consequence of that claim will be investigated. What does this perspective on van Creveld's work mean for our understanding of his book? We have seen that van Creveld sees war as an activity which serves males' need to assert themselves as males. There are three problems with this view. First, that van Creveld comes to conclusions about the nature of warfare on the basis of a specific idea of what men and women are. Second, that he assumes this idea of warfare to hold for all of humanity. All humans, he says, are attracted to war (as he sees it). What is more, we are *defined by* it. Thus, he does not limit his remarks to the subject of warfare, but extends them to the subject of human nature. This produces a one-sided perspective on what humans are. Third, van Creveld implicitly takes the view that something as quintessentially human as war must be ethically acceptable. This is problematic because it means that van Creveld's ethics are as one-sided as are his views on what human nature is. Therefore, van Creveld has a limiting idea of what humans are and how they ought to live.

War as a *means* to achieve masculinity

In chapter four, we have seen that van Creveld's ideas on war, danger and violence can be explained as offshoots of his macho value system. *The Transformation of War* is intended to disprove Clausewitz' thesis that war is a political tool, and to propose the alternative that 'war is an end in itself'. The present text argues that this conclusion (war is an end in itself) is based on a normative ideal of maleness. Whilst van Creveld presents his claim about the nature of warfare as the logical conclusion of this argument, a more logical conclusion would be that indeed, warfare is a means to prove oneself manly. Van Creveld has drawn a conclusion that does not follow from his argument. To substantiate this claim, several inconsistencies between van Creveld's argument and his conclusion will be indicated.

In the third chapter of this thesis, we saw that most of van Creveld's central argument is based on the idea that concepts such as 'interest' and 'politics' are too

broad to be helpful in understanding war. According to van Creveld, these terms are ‘inflated’ to such an extent that they do not mean anything anymore. The alternative, narrower definitions which he offers are the basis for his own argument for seeing war as an end in itself. In short, van Creveld’s argument rests heavily on the notion that certain concepts should play a very specific role. What makes this problematic is that, first, he cannot thoroughly explain why the broader definition is unhelpful, and second, that he does not justify his own, alternative definitions. The current chapter argues that besides these inconsistencies in van Creveld’s reasoning, his conclusion is unjustified. This is a result of the fact that van Creveld’s book is not actually an investigation into the nature of warfare and its relation to humans; it is a justification of van Creveld’s idea of war as a macho activity.

Van Creveld’s conclusion

First, attention will be directed at how van Creveld’s conclusion is inconsistent with his argumentation. By now, the reader knows that the conclusion drawn by van Creveld is that war is not a means to any end; it is an end in itself. War has no purpose as such, it is not directed at achieving any goal. War, van Creveld claims, is *experienced as* an activity that is worthwhile for its own sake, and this is the reason that people fight each other. However, this idea contradicts some other central points of van Creveld’s plea.

The first thing that needs pointing out is that van Creveld’s explanation of why women cannot fight alongside men is that that would ‘defeat the object’ of the activity. As we have seen, women’s participation in war means that men can no longer prove themselves by waging it. As van Creveld explains, ‘had men been made to fight side by side with women, or else to confront them as enemies, then for them armed conflict would have lost its meaning’.²⁸³ Apparently, waging war has ‘meaning’ for men. This idea is not reconcilable with war being waged as an end in itself. The question that we must ask ourselves, is why it is especially *women’s* participation that is so problematic. After all, if warfare was really an end in itself, most likely men would not mind who they fought against or with. For women to be able to threaten the significance of warfare, it must have a (hidden) purpose that is obstructed by their presence. The present text argues that this ‘hidden purpose’ is the achievement of a macho ideal of

²⁸³ Ibidem, 183.

manhood. The achievement of this ideal would be obstructed by the presence of women because in van Creveld's view, men cannot prove themselves in fields in which women operate too.

Related to the issue of the inconsistency between war 'as an end' and war as threatened by the presence of women, is the difference between games and wars. Van Creveld claims that 'contests between humans that fall short of war are known as games'.²⁸⁴ The reason that games are second-rate is that they are not as dangerous as war itself. This is because war is 'unrestricted', and games are not. Most importantly, games know restrictions on 'the amount of violence that may be brought to bear'.²⁸⁵ These restrictions are 'artificial, hence in a certain sense absurd'.²⁸⁶ We can agree that within this view, it is logical to conclude that wars are more dangerous than games. We have seen that the centrality of danger in van Creveld's view of war can be explained as an exponent of his view of war as a macho activity. What makes this point worth recalling is the fact that it does not comply with van Creveld's remarks on the nature of warfare.

Rules, wars and games

In his third chapter, van Creveld tries to convince his readers that in warfare, rules are absolutely essential. They delineate the difference between war and crime. Therefore, they make it possible to see why wars are not criminal and why other kinds of killing are. What is more, van Creveld claims that the kind of organised, large scale violence that takes place without the guidance of at least some rules cannot be called a war. Such violence is called an uprising, rebellion, massacre or some other term with negative connotations.

We now come to the heart of the matter; if wars necessarily have rules, what is it that distinguishes them from games? Why are games 'second-best'? If this difference cannot be explained by the absence of rules in warfare – a possibility that van Creveld himself has ruled out – it must boil down to the amount of danger that needs to be braved in one or the other activity. Otherwise, men could just as well go play football and there would be no need to kill anybody.

²⁸⁴ Ibidem, 165.

²⁸⁵ Idem.

²⁸⁶ Idem.

Van Creveld's insistence upon the superiority of warfare over games on the basis of the former's lack of rules turns out to be a weak point in his argumentation. The question that remains is whether, within his perception of things, it is still possible to argue for the necessity of preferring fighting over sports. What remains of van Creveld's argument is that fighting is more dangerous than sports, and therefore to be preferred. One wonders why men might not just engage in violent sports, or some sort of armed conflict that is regulated and fought out within certain boundaries. If it is danger that distinguishes war from games, why would a really aggressive, unrestricted fight on a football pitch, something like the Roman games, not satisfy this criterion? The solution to this problem is that actually, van Creveld is not interested in answering these questions. He is not investigating the nature between warfare and humans; he is *justifying* his own idea of what war should be.

Van Creveld claims that there is a fundamental difference between wars and games so that he can draw the conclusion that war is an end in itself. We have seen that really, in the context of van Creveld's ideas on what war is and what games are, the distinction makes so little sense as to be useless in supporting his conclusion. Van Creveld's arguments, whether they relate to men and war, danger and war, violence and power, or women, are all much better suited to an argument directed at the conclusion that war is a means for men to show themselves manly. The reason that van Creveld cannot explain why it is better for men to fight wars than to fight each other as part of a violent competition is that his preference for war boils down to the fact that it sounds tougher than any existing violent sport. The most obvious explanation of the difference between war and very violent sports is that war is fought by political entities and not by private persons or sport clubs. However, this is not a point that van Creveld can make or does consider, as his book is a critique of exactly this idea.

The Transformation of War as a macho work

If van Creveld's book were really an attempt to investigate the nature of warfare and an attempt to come up with a new framework for thinking about war, he would not make so light of the fact that he leaves unanswered some of the most important questions related to this matter. As we have seen at the end of chapter three, van Creveld writes much on why war can be attractive to people. What he fails to do is to explain why this is synonymous with having 'the will to fight'. Apparently, he cannot explain why 'an

admixture of coercion will always be needed to make men fight'.²⁸⁷ Nor is he able to explain what makes wars so much more worthwhile than the most violent games. This is because van Creveld is reasoning the wrong way around. He has an idea of war as the ultimate macho activity, and from this he distils the claims that war is 'better' than sports, and that women threaten the existence of war. Is it possible that it is this idea of war as a macho activity that has led him to criticize Clausewitz' idea of war as a political tool?

A closer look at the motives that have moved van Creveld to write a book on the nature of warfare might give us another perspective on this. As we have seen, Daniel Moran wrote in his 1991 review that 'van Creveld's reading of Clausewitz is so tendentious and confused that one can only wonder whether it is Clausewitz' ideas or simply his reputation that inspires the free-floating iconoclasm that pervades this book'.²⁸⁸ What he hints at is that van Creveld is not so much attacking Clausewitz' ideas as he is attacking the man himself. We have seen that indeed, van Creveld ascribes viewpoints to Clausewitz that cannot be said to have their foundation in *On War*. Also, van Creveld's criticism is mostly founded on ideas that are better described as opinions than well-founded arguments. In the current chapter, we have seen that some of the problems that van Creveld fails to address are actually lacunae in his reasoning that are most easily and beautifully filled with the help of Clausewitz' ideas on war as a continuation of politics. This makes one incline towards the conclusion that indeed, van Creveld has little reason to disagree with Clausewitz. What remains standing of his book after close scrutiny are not those passages in which he disagrees with Clausewitz's view of things.

Moran's assertion that it is Clausewitz' reputation that has spurred van Creveld to write a critique of his ideas could explain all these matters. Moreover, the view that van Creveld takes on account of his own books corroborates this idea. As we have seen, van Creveld cannot imagine an activity that is more macho than writing a book in which one 'destroys' a system of thought. He likens his activities as an academic to those of a soldier, admitting that it is his rejection from the Israeli military that has spurred him to study military history with so much vigour. As we have seen, writing a book which destroys another's system of thought is something which he sees as requiring 'aggression' and the 'conquering' of ideas. Really, in view of these statements, it is hard

²⁸⁷ Ibidem, 216.

²⁸⁸ Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 86.

not to view van Creveld's book as a *fight* against Clausewitz. Van Creveld has shown himself a square proponent of the view that men should be allowed macho behaviour. His book can almost be called a work of praise on the subject of machismo. Seen in this light, his largely unsuccessful attack of Clausewitz is an attempt to outshine the Alfa-male of his field. Van Creveld cannot imagine anything more macho than attacking another's ideas, and who to choose but the most influential military theorist of the last centuries?

From this perspective, van Creveld's conclusion that war is an end in itself makes much more sense. After all, this is where he differs most from Clausewitz. We have seen that van Creveld's arguments are much better suited to be part of a plea for seeing war as the rightful opportunity that men have to be macho than as an argument against Clausewitz. His conclusion, then, seems not only to be an illogical one in relation to his argument; it is proof of the idea that his book is an attack of Clausewitz because it is a macho project in itself.

War and 'the Human'

So far, this chapter has been reflecting on van Creveld's work in a way that has focused on the viability of his conclusion and the nature of his project. The conclusion drawn is that *The Transformation of War* is best understood as an attempt to dethrone Clausewitz. Whilst this puts in doubt the value of some of van Creveld's arguments, it does not prove that his book can be detrimental to our thinking about war and humans. Yet that is a claim made in the introduction to this thesis. Therefore, the rest of this chapter will be dedicated to showing how *The Transformation of War* not only fails to deliver what it promises, but is also an example of a mode of thinking that one should be cautious of.

Van Creveld's book is objectionable because the author does not limit himself to defending a view of war as a macho activity. If he did, this would be a reason merely to disagree with him on what the nature of warfare is. What makes van Creveld's book one to be cautious with is the fact that he extends his ideas on war into the realms of ethics and thinking about human nature. In stead of exploring the relationship between what war is and what human beings are, he starts from an idea of what war is, building a world around it. This method and its implications are problematic. Firstly, van Creveld

makes war defining of humanity. Secondly, he lets his ideas on humanness dominate his ethics. We will discuss both these matters in the following paragraphs.

Defining human nature

Van Creveld's claim is that humans find war absolutely fascinating, and that 'war [is] the eternal, unchanging axis around which revolves the whole of human existence and which gives meaning to all the rest'.²⁸⁹ What is more, war is essential to the existence of humans as a species, as 'the real reason why we have wars is that men like fighting, and women like those men who fight on their behalf'.²⁹⁰ Men are eager to fight, and not permitting them to do so would mean 'turning people into zombies'.²⁹¹ Van Creveld claims that war is so fundamental to our nature as human beings that not doing it would make us less than human. This is what makes him claim that, when people fight for their lives, that 'outburst of violence is best understood as the supreme manifestation of existence as well as a celebration of it'.²⁹²

What makes van Creveld's idea of human nature and war problematic is that he assumes a very close link between humans and their activities as warriors. His proof for the claim that people love war is the fact that, over the centuries, people have said to love it. This is an insufficient ground on which to claim that humanity in general likes or needs warfare, as firstly, the people he names are all men. Secondly, it has almost always been socially acceptable or even required to present oneself as the warrior male. Thirdly, there have been quite a few very highly respected men who were openly and famously against warfare – one need only think of Mandela or Ghandi. So when Daniel Moran remarked that van Creveld's interpretation of war depends 'on a conception of human nature that is asserted rather than demonstrated',²⁹³ he was not far from the truth. Van Creveld's idea of war depends on a conception of maleness that is normative, and from this idea of war he distils an idea of human nature. Thus, Moran's conclusion that van Creveld's conception of human nature is asserted rather than demonstrated, is correct.

²⁸⁹ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 218.

²⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 221.

²⁹¹ *Idem*.

²⁹² *Ibidem*, 143.

²⁹³ Moran, 'The Transformation of War', 89.

Ethics

The core of the argument for claiming that *The Transformation of War* presents a perspective on war that is not without its risks, is that it implies a certain ethic. In addition to the fact that van Creveld builds an idea of what is human on the basis of his own conception of what war is, he takes this asserted universality to imply that war is ethically acceptable. His reasoning seems to be that, as war is something essentially *human*, it is something that cannot be objected to ethically. Because of the fact that the idea of ‘the human’ with which van Creveld works is *not* universal, his approach to ethics is disputable.

Throughout *The Transformation of War*, van Creveld only explicitly discusses ethics (or claims that he does) in relation to what an army must do when fighting an opponent that is much weaker. We have seen that his advice is to crush that opponent as quickly as possible, thereby limiting the risk of disintegration of the stronger army and the risk of being called cruel. Having discussed these dilemmas, he concludes that ‘we have been dealing with ‘squishy’ factors such as good and evil because, far from being divorced from warfare, ethics constitutes its central core’.²⁹⁴ Van Creveld is concerned with ethics because it can make or break the morale of an army; if soldiers do not feel that they fight for a good cause, they will not fight well. What van Creveld never discusses, however, is whether war itself is ethically acceptable.

The least that one would expect from a writer that is so keen on warfare is the claim that war is sometimes necessary, and that when it must be fought, one had better do it right. However, van Creveld does not really give his opinion on when the use of violence is justified. He claims that ‘the balance of right and wrong itself turns out to depend in large part of the balance of forces’.²⁹⁵ This boils down to saying that the only ethical consideration to be made is whether one fights against an opponent that is more or less of the same strength. As we have seen, this is important because it is of influence to an army’s fighting prowess. Van Creveld lends such importance to whether an army feels justified in its actions that he claims that ‘it is not a just cause that makes for a good war but a good war that makes for a just cause’.²⁹⁶ Apparently, then, a war is just when it is a ‘proper’ war. In van Creveld’s world, this means that it must be a competition, for wars can only make sense when they can either ‘serve as a test [or] be

²⁹⁴ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 178.

²⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, 175.

²⁹⁶ *Idem*.

experienced as fun'.²⁹⁷ In short, van Creveld claims that those wars that allow men to prove themselves as men, are justified because of it.

A lack of ethical consideration

Van Creveld's thinking about war seems to be lacking thoroughly in ethical thinking. It is clear that he does not discuss explicitly whether and when violence is ethically acceptable. Despite his insistence on the importance of rules in warfare, he does not give any clues as to what those rules should be. This is because van Creveld has a really clear-cut but implicit idea about when something is ethically acceptable. He bases his ethical thinking on his idea of what human nature is. If something is typically human, then it is ethically acceptable. Those things that come natural to us should not be made subject to restrictions, as doing so means restricting our nature as human beings. This is the reason that van Creveld does not go into the ethics of the use of violence: by saying that war is essential to our human nature, he makes it ethically acceptable. For van Creveld, the innate human drive to fight is linked up with 'other qualities essential to humanity, such as playfulness, curiosity, inventiveness, creativity, even the sheer joy of living'.²⁹⁸ This idea is what makes him conclude that eternal peace is not a beautiful dream: it would mean stripping ourselves of our humanity.²⁹⁹ Not to fight would be to give up on a human life.

With *The Transformation of War*, van Creveld writes a praise of war as the embodiment of 'masculine' properties such as bravery, physical strength and determination. The way in which he concludes the book is an excellent example of the candid enthusiasm with which he approaches war: 'One very important way in which men can attain joy, freedom, happiness, even delirium and ecstasy, is by *not* staying at home with wife and family, even to the point where, often enough, they are only too happy to give up their nearest and dearest in favor of – war!'.³⁰⁰

The issue that needs to be addressed here is that not just van Creveld's idea of 'the human' is problematic; the way in which he links human nature and ethics is problematic. To explain the matter, we will turn to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.³⁰¹ In it,

²⁹⁷ Ibidem, 173.

²⁹⁸ Ibidem, 221.

²⁹⁹ Idem.

³⁰⁰ Ibidem, 227.

³⁰¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York 1948)

Simone de Beauvoir explains why it is unwise to base one's ethics on a slanted idea of human nature. Her book can help us understand why van Creveld's ethics are one-sided, and therefore problematic.

Man's ambiguity and ethics

The basis of de Beauvoir's book is the idea that the human is both a physical entity and a consciousness. She explains; man 'asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things'.³⁰² On the one hand, man is free consciousness, but on the other, he is constrained within his body, which 'expresses [his] relationship to the world'.³⁰³ The dilemma that ethics must solve is for man(kind) to be able to treat his own life as end without, in the process, treating 'one another as instruments or obstacles, as means'.³⁰⁴ She claims that this can only be done by incorporating man's ambiguity into a system of ethics.³⁰⁵ The reason for this is that a system of ethics which does not incorporate both man as a consciousness and as a physical entity fails to represent man as he is.

De Beauvoir's observations about man's nature as a physical *and* conscious being can be a tool to create a deeper understanding of van Creveld's ethics. This thesis claims that van Creveld's view of ethics is objectionable because its author only observes one side of what it means to be a human. De Beauvoir's thinking is helpful here because it shows clearly how van Creveld's one-sided idea of war results in a one-sided view of ethics.

What van Creveld does by justifying war on the basis of its relation to 'human nature' is to fail to represent man's ambiguity. As de Beauvoir points out, violence reduces men to their physicality. She explains that 'since we can conquer our enemies only by acting upon their facticity, by reducing them to things, we have to make ourselves things'.³⁰⁶ War, in other words, is a confrontation by means of our bodies. For de Beauvoir, van Creveld's perspective leaves out one of the two sides of what it means to be human.

³⁰² De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 7.

³⁰³ *Ibidem*, 41.

³⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, 9.

³⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, 17-18.

³⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 99.

De Beauvoir criticizes those views of the human that eliminate ambiguity, that make humans ‘pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in one pure moment’.³⁰⁷ Ironically, van Creveld claims that it is ‘only those who risk their lives willingly, even joyfully, who can be completely themselves, completely human’.³⁰⁸ Whereas in de Beauvoir’s view, risking one’s life would be ‘enclosing oneself in one pure moment’, ‘being engulfed in the sensible world’, for van Creveld this means transcendence, happiness. The interesting thing is that van Creveld sees this transcendence as the suspension of reality. Man is only truly human when he can forget himself.³⁰⁹ Whereas for de Beauvoir, truly being human is something that one can only achieve by accepting that one is at once a physical entity and a consciousness, van Creveld sees the *elimination* of consciousness as the ultimately human experience.

Van Creveld’s ethics are weak because they are determined by a limited idea of what humans are. De Beauvoir can help us see that this view of humanity is indeed a flaw as she shows that it disregards a large part of human nature. Van Creveld claims that war lets us transcend ourselves, thus reducing us to our most fundamental humanity. One could also say that, as violence is directed against others’ physical appearance, it disregards our consciousnesses. In creating a ‘humanity’ based on an idea of what ‘the warrior male’ should be like, van Creveld disregards a number of essential human qualities such as our capacity for contemplation or empathy. When fighting, people forget that, in that moment, they are not only physical but also conscious humans. By seeing this as the essence of humanness, as *transcendence*, van Creveld dismisses one half of ‘the human’; he chooses to see the physical as the essentially human. The warrior male can thus become the measure for all things. Determining van Creveld’s views on war, human nature, and ethics, this aggressive and powerful man comes to define our world – a matter which becomes very clear when reading van Creveld’s reflections on what that world will look like in the future.

The fundamental problem with van Creveld’s book is that lets a biased view of human nature dominate the entire world. Van Creveld’s ‘human’ is a product of his macho ideas on warfare, and his claim that war (or the use of violence) is essential to our human nature reduces all humans to just that part of human nature on which van

³⁰⁷ Ibidem, 8.

³⁰⁸ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, 166.

³⁰⁹ Idem.

Crevelde's ideas are based: the macho man. Therefore, van Crevelde's idea of humanity, and consequently his ethics, are one-sided. They only leave room for an idea of the human as defined by its armed conflicts.

Conclusion

Martin van Creveld has written *The Transformation of War* with the idea of addressing ‘some of the most fundamental problems presented by war in all ages’.³¹⁰ He immediately indicates that it also has a ‘message’, namely that Clausewitz’ thought is not beneficial to our understanding of warfare, and that he will present a more helpful framework for thinking about war.³¹¹ The person that opens his book and reads the introduction will expect to find out, during the course of the book, how van Creveld’s investigation of ‘the fundamental problems of war’ has resulted in the conclusion that Clausewitz’ thought has lost all of its relevance. This thesis has made the argument that the attentive reader will be disappointed in his or her expectations. Van Creveld has written not an investigation of the fundamental questions related to warfare; he has written a plea for the acceptance of his own view of war as the universal mirror of mankind. In this view, a macho male is the blueprint for man’s ideal behaviour. The roles of women, men, and phenomena such as war in human society are determined by the central place of macho sentiment in van Creveld’s worldview.

The Transformation of War fails to convincingly disprove Clausewitz’ thesis that war is a continuation of politics by other means. Moreover, the alternative that van Creveld presents is not internally coherent. We have seen that van Creveld presents his arguments in a sloppy way, leaving loose ends as he moves through his arguments at great speed. Many of his conclusions are based on normative statements rather than full-blown argumentation, and van Creveld mixes topics of inquiry in such a way that he is likely to confuse his reader. Besides the fact that the book is not thorough in its argumentation, van Creveld’s arguments do not lead up to its conclusion. His objective of disproving Clausewitz is best understood not as the result of an investigation of the nature of warfare, but as an attempt to dethrone the alpha-male of the field. In reality, van Creveld gives arguments that do not support the idea that war is an end in itself. They support the idea that war is and should be the preserve of men in their (assumedly universal) aspiration to be warrior males.

The final and most important point that this thesis makes is not that van Creveld fails to promise what he delivers, but that he imposes his personal, and more importantly, disputable, views on humanity. By doing this, he proposes and promotes a

³¹⁰ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, ix.

³¹¹ *Idem.*

view of human nature and its relation to warfare that is not only incorrect but dangerous. Under the guise of ‘naturalness’, van Creveld fashions an escape for warfare as a topic for ethical scrutiny. War is the given, the central element of the world around which our lives revolve. By doing this, he disregards those elements of human nature that might be considered essential by others. Van Creveld’s human *is* a warrior, a principally physical being that needs war to be its essential self. By making this claim, van Creveld deprives man of the freedom to define himself and his world. All mankind can look to is a predefined future marked by bloody conflict.

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