IDEAS AND THE STUDY OF WAR AND PEACE IN BRITAIN, 1850–2015

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The literature on war and peace in Britain is incredibly copious and covers a number of major disciplines. Here I shall address what I consider to be the major areas of thinking about war and peace from an historical and normative perspective and attempt to show how they reflect a particularly British experience of both. The temptation to look at this from a sociological perspective is strong. The British way of war (and peace) has indeed been looked at in that light by many good scholars (for example John Keegan). However my preference is to look at this evolution in a broader historical perspective, but nonetheless using what might be called a ‘constructivist’ methodology, itself inspired by the ‘English School’ approach of examining how a people like the British have related to each other and other peoples as well as interacted with ‘international society’ (see below). The impact of war on a national group (or in Britain’s case, groups as the country has always been an at times uneasy ‘Union’ of English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh identities) is always complex and changes over time. The time frame for Britain has been possibly the longest of all nation-states. As Michael Howard has put it, “self-identification as a nation implies almost by definition alienation from other communities, and the most memorable incidents in the group – memory – consist in triumph over other communities.” So whereas “the battles of Marengo, Austerlitz and Jena … set the seal on the new found national consciousness [of France … for] Britain it was Trafalgar – but it had been a nation for four hundred years, since those earlier battles of Crecy and Agincourt”. Britain, and its component parts, is almost *sui generis*.

Britain has also been one of the most warlike nations on earth, especially since its first forays into modern Empire in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, but also dating back to its earlier ‘Empire’ in what is now France in the early Middle Ages. There has hardly been a year in the last two hundred when Britain has not been involved in a war. It was recently calculated that the number of modern states

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in the world that have not been invaded by Britain military forces only numbers 22 out of more than 200. As John Keegan shows the ‘English’ were killing people on what the British call the ‘Continent’ well before the modern period and we can see a clear line of lethal continuity from 1000AD and the ‘Norman Conquest’ of 1066AD through the ‘Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453AD) and to the present day. In The Face of Battle Keegan takes the battles of Agincourt (1415), Waterloo (1815) and the Somme (1916) as emblematic of a particularly British way of making war, one that combines a proud tradition of defending British ‘rights’ with a commitment to continental ambitions and alliances. But the key, and indeed obvious, point that has to be made about Britain is that it is an island, or more accurately an archipelago. The two results of this are that the British people have had different civil-military relations from any other European continental Power. They have also put far more emphasis on the need to control the sea lanes round the island(s) and therefore on naval rather than land power than any other Power.

Britain has also, in the last few hundred years at least, mostly seen itself as an exporter of its power to the rest of the world. The technological superiority and economic ability that went with being the first nation to develop a sophisticated and well organised capitalist system and the inventor of ‘classical economics’ gave it the edge over other European Powers and over ‘native’ peoples. As Roger Mac Ginty pointed out to me in the writing of this piece, the curious historical accident of proto – and proper capitalist development that went with the rise of Empire meant that, “whether it was Elizabethan swashbucklers or the East Indian Company – much of [the Empire] was privatised”. The state granted licences and taxed the rewards, but much of the fighting and plunder was done by private individuals. This was the system of the ‘privateer’, which enabled enterprise and war to go hand in hand with the blessing of the state, but little cost to it, and could be ‘deniable’ if the ‘privateer’ exceeded the normal bounds of such behaviour. Then they could be re-designated as a ‘pirate’, their letters of marque removed, and hanged if necessary. Elizabeth 1st of England was particularly fond of this technique in her wars against the Spanish. In other words, the state did not have to think very deeply about the methods or ethics of this. So the cost of imperial expansion was actually quite low for the state during long periods.

Moreover, as the Anglo – French poet Hilaire Belloc 4 put it: “Whatever happens, we have got, the Maxim Gun, and they have not.” Once the hegemonic ‘English’ had subdued the Irish and Scots, the mobilisation of the working class of all three groups made them willing and worthy fighters for an Empire that became a strong unifying factor for the whole of Great Britain. This is reflected in the names of many of Britain’s key army Regiments (for example the Coldstream Guards, Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, The Irish Guards, Royal Regiment of Scotland, etc.). The Regiment has become the key unit of British land-based power, with enormous symbolism attached by its members to traditions that give each regiment a particular identity. Abolishing, or even merging regiments is a political act that has occurred after each major war as part of the ‘money-saving’ policies of most governments. But it is one fraught with political risk, as the Labour Government of 2004 discovered when the ‘Royal Regiment of Scotland’ merged several iconic names, to the disgust of many in Scotland and beyond. As has often been pointed out, such mergers often prove to