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THE RETURN OF WAR
Why We Must Learn to Deal With War Again

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



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Introduction

[...]

‘Get your gear on and run to the bunker,’ I heard someone shout. I grabbed my helmet and flak jacket and sprinted to the bunker just outside my quarters. In the distance, I could hear two explosions. The shockwaves barely registered. Then came bursts of machine gun fire, which quickly died down. An eerie silence followed.

I had just lived through the first mortar attack of my life. It was summer 2012, in eastern Afghanistan. I was on a small US Army combat outpost in Paktia Province, over 2,400 metres above sea level. The voice that had warned me belonged to an American non-commissioned officer (NCO), a dog handler who was lodged in the windowless room next to mine with his dog. Just a few days later, that dog would prove invaluable, detecting an improvised explosive device (IED) along one of our patrol routes.

At the time of the attack, I had been on the base for barely 24 hours. As I soon learned, it was being shelled almost daily by a mobile Taliban mortar team, travelling on motorbikes.

A few days earlier, I had boarded an American transport plane that was to fly me from Bagram Air Base, about 50 kilometres north of Kabul, to a US outpost in Khost Province, before I was to continue by helicopter to Paktia. The cargo hold was deafening, so I put on headphones and flew into the Afghan night listening to Neil Diamond’s *Solitary Man*. As the song ended, I suddenly felt I was at war, or at least, that’s how it seemed. The moment the C-130 touched down on the dusty runway, I was faced with what I had only ever encountered in books or films: the dead and wounded, ambushes and firefights, IEDs and prisoners of war.

I still think often of that flight, which felt at once like a gradual and an abrupt shift – from peace into war. I also remember one sentence in particular from a book I’d brought with me and was reading in eastern Afghanistan. ‘My interest was abstract, concerned with the theory and philosophy of warfare, especially its metaphysical aspects,’ wrote T. E. Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of*

Wisdom about his military education. ‘Now in the field, everything was more concrete.’ Bridging the abstract and the concrete would become the guiding idea in my work as a military analyst.

That same thread runs through this book. It is about the theory of war and the reality of how war is actually fought. The title, *The Return of War*, refers above all to the return of war as an idea, to the way it is re-entering our collective imagination. This book is a call to society to engage seriously with war again in the twenty-first century, so that we might actively prevent its real return.

My aim here is, first, to explain why war is once again becoming more likely, globally, and in Europe. Second, to show why it is essential to understand the core principles of war: its enduring nature and its shifting character. I also want to outline what role the armed forces in Europe, the United States, and other allied nations should play in the future, and what shape future wars might take.

The book is structured in three parts of different lengths. The first part explores why we have entered a new era of misjudgment, one in which war is again becoming more probable. The second part, drawing on the ideas of the Prussian officer and war theorist Carl von Clausewitz, looks at the factors that define war and those that shape how it is fought. The third and final part presents specific war scenarios that may be particularly relevant for Europe and the wider West, and asks how our armed forces should prepare. Germany, in particular, with its potential to become Europe’s leading military power, has a key role to play.

This is not a scholarly treatise on military theory or history, though examples and reflections from both fields are included and, I hope, clearly explained. Nor is it a comprehensive study of modern warfare. Air, naval and especially nuclear warfare are touched on only briefly. The main focus is on high-intensity land warfare, still, in my view, the most decisive domain of military conflict.

Until recently, Europe’s political class, especially in the German-speaking world, showed little interest in anything to do with war or warfare. Most political leaders clung to the noble idea of a world without conflict, or at least one that did not touch their own territory. In twenty-first-century Europe, engaging seriously with military matters seemed unnecessary. That illusion

was shattered on 24 February 2022, the day Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, though many still seem reluctant to fully accept this reality.

A sizeable number of activists, politicians and business figures continue to believe that the wisest course is to press for international norms like the international law, and to issue broad appeals for peace and disarmament. *Lay Down Your Arms!*, the title of an 1889 book by the peace activist and Nobel laureate Bertha von Suttner, may sound morally compelling. Pacifism is a deeply noble ideal. One of my favourite songs is Reinhard Mey's *No, I Will Not Give Up My Sons*. One verse reads:

*They will not march in step,
not hold out, not fight to the bitter end,
not freeze on some godforsaken field,
while you sink into soft cushions.*

I like that song because it captures a simple truth. What father, especially one who, like me, has served in uniform or even seen combat, would willingly send his children off 'to be slaughtered'? That was the phrase Mey used in a live concert in the 1980s, and I must have come across it a few years later. It struck me so powerfully that I wrote it down in my diary in the early 1990s. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides (around 454 to 396-399 BC) once remarked that in peace, sons bury their fathers, but in war, fathers bury their sons, a line as brutally stark as it is accurate.

But however noble it may be, pacifism does not offer a workable answer to the question of how to prevent war. Certainly not the kind of passive, parasitic pacifism that remains widespread in German-speaking Europe. It quietly assumes that others will handle the ugly business of warfare, while denying the core premise of sound security policy: that armed forces must be ready and credible, both to deter aggression and to preserve peace. Pacifists and peace activists are naïve, or poorly informed, if they think military strength is inherently harmful or that it inevitably leads to an arms race. Escalation only occurs when defence policy is divorced from diplomacy (summarised as a country's security policy) – or when it dictates foreign policy, as it did in the German Empire before the First World War. That is not the danger facing

Europe today. On the contrary, Europe's military capabilities are so limited that we will not be rearming for some time; we will merely be catching up. And even then, our ability to deter potential aggressors will remain modest.

Yet deterrence is the foundation of any serious defence policy. In theory, it means building capable, well-equipped armed forces to signal to potential aggressors that any attack would come at a high price. At the same time, it is vital to strike the right balance between rearmament and dialogue with potential adversaries, to avoid fuelling an arms race. A sustainable security strategy continually recalibrates that balance in light of changing geopolitical conditions. This principle has been known since Roman times. 'If you want peace, prepare for war,' said the Roman general Vegetius. Still, many in Germany and elsewhere in Europe continue to treat military deterrence as if it were warmongering, linking it to the 'original catastrophe' of Europe, the First World War, and to the nuclear standoff of the Cold War.

The idea of balanced deterrence has never truly taken root in Europe's strategic culture. And because of that, we have never properly learned how to deal with war. Twice in the last century, conflicts that began in Europe, especially in the German-speaking world, brought the continent to the brink of collapse. In response, much of Europe tried to banish war itself and adopted a post-war, even post-heroic worldview as the cornerstone of its identity.

What is still too often overlooked, particularly in the German-speaking world, is this: the peace that followed 1945 was not simply the result of diplomacy or good fortune, but of American nuclear and conventional arms, and of a deterrence strategy devised in Washington. It was the fragile nuclear balance of terror that carried Europe through the Cold War without open conflict. When that chapter ended, we Europeans sought shelter beneath the umbrella of American military dominance, freeing us to focus on expanding and deepening *the* peace project – the European Union.

But that era of American hegemony, often referred to as the 'unipolar moment', is over. In any future crisis involving China and/or Russia, the United States will have to divide its military resources across two continents, Asia and Europe, always aware that either power might exploit the situation to launch an adventure of its own. Even the world's most powerful military cannot sustain a two-front war against both Beijing and Moscow. And within the US itself, the longstanding security policy consensus about its global role

has collapsed. How long will America be willing to protect Europe? In the end, 300,000 swing voters in a US election may now have more influence on NATO's future, and therefore Europe's security, than all of Europe's political leaders put together. This is why the book also examines in detail the state of US domestic politics and how it shapes American security policy.

As I will argue, America's continued defence of Europe is not simply a matter of political will; it is, above all, a matter of military capacity, and that too has its limits. The US can no longer act as the world's policeman. That alone is likely to lead to more conflicts globally and to conflicts that will be harder to bring to an end.

We in Europe need to relearn a hard truth: that in much of the world, war and military force are still seen as legitimate tools for securing national interests. For that reason, a strategic culture must also take root in the German-speaking parts of Europe, one in which military options, including the use of force to defend Europe's values and prosperity, even against major powers, are seen as part of a viable, carefully balanced security policy. A security strategy grounded in credible military strength can deter potential aggressors and help reduce the risk of war.

Some may still see any call for deterrence-based security as a form of crude warmongering. That is far from my intent. My work as a military analyst and adviser is shaped by a deep yearning for peace, precisely because war has haunted me all my life, more than almost anything else. Anyone who wants to preserve our way of life, our institutions, and our economic well-being must do everything possible to prevent future military conflicts. That has become my purpose.

If I may add a personal note: I do not know exactly where my deep fear of war comes from – a fear that somehow grew into a fascination with armed forces and military strategy. But it has always been there. One catalyst was undoubtedly the Balkan wars. I grew up in southern Styria, close to what was then the Yugoslav border, and I still remember the Slovenian independence war in June and July 1991, and the fighting along the frontier. The Austrian army was deployed, and we boys, *Buam*, as we say, went to 'see the tanks', meaning the armoured vehicles stationed along the border. Just a few years later, in July 1995, came the Srebrenica massacre, in which the army of Republika Srpska, supported by Serbian police and paramilitaries, murdered

more than 8,000 Bosniaks, almost all of them boys and men. I was twelve at the time, and the event left a deep mark. I could not understand how such a war crime could happen on Austria's doorstep, without Europe, and especially Austria, intervening. In my home village, Lebring-Sankt Margarethen, there was, and still is, a 'Heroes' Cemetery', where 805 Bosniaks from the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Infantry Regiment No. 2 of the Austro-Hungarian army are buried. An inscription states they 'heroically defended the shared Austrian homeland until the final day of the First World War'. As a child, I felt a particular bond whenever I heard Bosniaks mentioned in the news or saw them on television.

Perhaps that goes some way towards explaining it. But the real source of my deep fear of war, and my fascination with it, remains unclear to me. 'Heaven somehow planted these things in me,' says Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, trying to explain his thirst for glory and battle. I always knew I wanted to be a soldier. But when I finally became one, I quickly realised I had no interest in the daily grind. I was a poor soldier, much like I'd been a poor pupil; I simply refused to learn what didn't interest me. Instead of studying how to lead my small reconnaissance unit in the field, I spent my time, at nineteen, puzzling over how to quickly and effectively deploy a mechanised brigade for a counterattack without air superiority.

Nearly twenty years later, I had the chance to make up for these early gaps during professional military education courses. Even then, it was clear to me: I wasn't meant to lead troops. My place was in analysis. I wanted to become a military analyst, a niche profession, even in Washington, D.C., where I worked in 2008 and 2009 at the National Defence University at Fort McNair.

From the beginning, I knew I didn't want to be just a desk-bound analyst. I needed to understand war in the field, to get as close to it as possible, to grasp it with the greatest possible objectivity. One of my inspirations was the Austrian war correspondent Fritz Ortner, who called himself a 'peace reporter'. In his 2014 book *I Don't Know Why I'm Still Alive*, Ortner wrote that real war happens where the bombs land, not 'where the press films the missile launch'. For my own work, that meant focusing on impact, not launch, and keeping the human cost at the centre of everything. When I analyse a new tactic or weapons system, I must never forget its intended

function: to kill or wound young, healthy people, usually men, or to threaten them with such violence as to achieve political goals by military means. So when I estimate how many BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles Russia can produce in a year, or assess how many cruise and ballistic missiles the Chinese People's Liberation Army would need to overwhelm Taiwan's defences, that knowledge is always there in the background.

That's why I've always been determined never to lose sight of the human dimension of war, what Wilfred Owen, the British poet killed a week before the end of WWI in France, called 'the pity of war'.

Over the past ten years, during extended stays and assignments in conflict zones, I've studied at close range what war does to people. Despite my time in Afghanistan, Iraq and Ukraine, I used to believe I had seen war, but not truly experienced it. I thought that because I was always in a position to walk away when it became too much. Unlike most people caught up in conflict, I could always find a car, a train, a helicopter or a plane to get out. Or my time in-country was so short that it barely counted.

But recently, my body and mind have disabused me of that illusion. Extreme situations – being under fire, witnessing human suffering, leave their mark, even if you're not exposed to them constantly. Sometimes I cope well. Sometimes I don't. But either way, war has become a part of me. I have to live with that, and so do those around me. At times, that's a real challenge. But I also draw strength from those experiences, a strength that feeds directly into my analytical work.

Having the freedom to come and go, and the privilege to observe and analyse with detachment, is something I deeply value. It drives me to share what I've learned with military and political leaders in Europe and the United States. I hope that by improving our understanding of war and how it works, I can help shape a more balanced Western security policy, one that lowers the risk of catastrophic military conflict.

Paradoxically, that first requires us to let war back into our thinking, however unpleasant that may be. Put differently: we must face war again, and know how to wage it, should we have to, in a way that gives us a chance of winning. If we act wisely, war in Europe will remain a mental scenario and never become a reality.