A world of wars

With global peace still a distant dream, our need to understand conflict remains as urgent as ever. **Jeremy Hsu** explores a powerful synthesis of the explanations

Book
Why War?
Richard Overy
Pelican (UK), W. W. Norton (US)

AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The devastated area in Gaza around Al-Shifa hospital in April

RUSSIA'S invasion of Ukraine, Israel's military incursions in Gaza, civil wars in Sudan and Myanmar, tens of thousands killed, millions displaced and global military spending standing at $2.4 trillion in 2023 alone.

This persistence of war both defies and demands explanation. Many have tried. Albert Einstein felt driven to seek an (ultimately inconclusive) written exchange with Sigmund Freud on the subject, published as *Why War?* A number of books have since shared this title, the latest by historian Richard Overy.

Overy warns readers not to expect a comprehensive history of wars or grand arguments about whether humanity has become less violent over time. Instead, he explores the explanatory paths taken by evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology, ecology and social science in seeking motivations for war, with chapters on resources, ideology, power and security. The result is an excellent primer on the scholarship of war.

Starting with biology, studies of chimpanzees and modern hunter-gatherers shaped a nuanced view that "violence and cooperation are not opposites but two elements of an evolutionary package… to produce survival and reproductive benefits". For Overy, this aligns with the "evolution of a psychology for warfare" as a universal human adaptation.

Elsewhere, early attempts by psychoanalysts to explain war as "an act of collective insanity" proved a dead end. But Overy recognises social psychology's role in explaining how both hunter-gatherers and industrialised nations can dehumanise their opponents to the point of engaging in corpse mutilation, massacres and even genocide.

Many anthropologists viewed modern humans as descending from more egalitarian and peaceful ancestors. That view, says Overy, has been undermined by archaeological evidence of skeletal trauma such as embedded projectiles and cranial injuries, and sites with clues that suggest massacre and cannibalism.

> **"Environmental crises and climate shocks may have sparked some wars in China's history"**

As for environmental crises and climate shocks, Overy notes that ecologists have investigated how these may have sparked wars in China's history, and spurred conflicts between hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists in western North America, between AD 800 and 1350. But he also says that global cooperation can reduce the risk of climate wars.

Looking to the contribution of social scientists, Overy starts with resources. He recounts how the prospect of material gains propelled Viking raiders and Roman legionaries alike to loot cities and enslave populations, while the struggle to control oil production was a factor in several major 20th-century conflicts.

Yet Overy sees the difficulty of separating ambition for resources from other motivations, such as religious belief. While this doesn't always lead to violence, the history of Christian crusades and Islamic jihads or Europe's wars between Catholics and Protestants shows this kind of belief "can be a primary driver that cannot by any measure be rationalized away".

Many modern political scientists and historians have focused on viewing war through the prisms of power and security. Such discussions include the so-called Thucydides Trap that describes how transitions between ascendant and waning powers can lead to war, as in the case of ancient rivals Athens and Sparta. Overy recounts how scholars have fiercely debated whether this applies to China and the US now, although he rejects it as "at best premature, at worst an ill-considered provocation".

Overy also covers the security dilemma that describes how one group's sense of insecurity can spur a preventive or preemptive war that, in turn, increases insecurity. Researchers have offered sometimes conflicting analyses of how Russia's invasion of Ukraine and confrontation with NATO may fit that framework.

More ominously, Overy identifies the hubristic warmongering of leaders such as Alexander the Great and Adolf Hitler as the most unpredictable and dangerous cause of war, describing Vladimir Putin's territorial grab in Ukraine as fitting into that category.

Given that wars will be part of our foreseeable future, we need to better understand why. This book is a great place to start. ▮