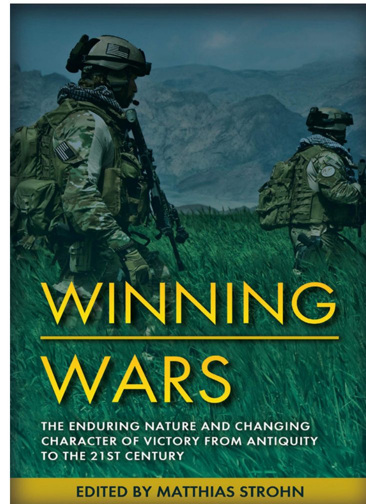
BOOK REVIEW



Winning Wars: The Enduring Nature and Changing Character of Victory from Antiquity to the 21st Century, ed. Mattias Strohn. Oxford: Casemate Publishers, 2020. 315 pp. ISBN: 978-1-95271-500-6.

Players of basketball, chess, or capture the flag might read a book on *how* to win these games, but they would not need a book that reflected on *what* winning was. Getting the most points within four quarters, checkmating your opponent's king, or taking your opponent's flag and making it back to your own territory are all temporally bounded discrete events that result in "winning." In war, the matter is less clear-cut. This is the case not only because there is a distinction between relative and absolute victory but also because victory can be assessed as a continuous variable—and change meaning and significance over time—the game is not a one-off or even a series but is infinite, the goals of the actors vary (beyond the foundational need for survival), and the subjective and objective are abstrusely mixed: victory, to one extent or another, is in the eye of the beholder.

For all these reasons, the Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, an independent British Army think tank, has compiled this edited volume, which looks at the concept of victory throughout history. The book's 18 chapters take the reader on a tour through history, from Rome to the modern European states system to contemporary Chinese and Russian ideas on the subject. Given the outstanding question of what "winning" means in Ukraine for Russia today, the volume's subject is of great interest to a wide audience.

How have conceptions of "winning" war changed throughout history?

For Rome in classical antiquity, the answer is clear: imposing peace. Even when Roman armies were defeated in the field, Rome itself would never allow itself to admit defeat in the overall war, Ali Parchami maintains in chapter 1. This was indeed the Roman way, but the chapter misses that Rome did finally learn how to negotiate peace in a series of interactions with the Persians in late antiquity.

In the Middle Ages, extensive fortifications, limited offensive technologies, poor transportation and logistics systems, and decentralized organization made sweeping offenses and decisive victory rare. John French, in chapter two, suggests that "the 'Hundred Years War' lasted as long as it did because the English won enough battles to keep their hopes alive, but never enough to win the war" (36). Elites often fought less to "win" than to destroy economies, imposing a pillaging tax on adversaries. The "essence of medieval warfare" (40) approaches, in this estimate, something very close to what today is categorized as crimes against humanity. Winning meant merely "adapting to these complex conditions" (44). Adaptation is a theme also of the Early Modern Period (chapter three), where, unable to eliminate religious or dynastic disagreements, polities had to vary their goals to a reality of indecisiveness.

Such adaptation was seemingly ended with World War I, where Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Germany all lost decisively (chapter 5). Who "won" is more ambivalent, given the inability of the Versailles peace to establish a stable new order. As Ezra Manela showed in *The Wilsonian Moment* (2007) colonized countries outside Europe also "lost" because of the discrepancy between Pres. Woodrow Wilson's initial opposition to empire and the actual result of the European negotiations, which left Egyptians, Indians, Koreans, Chinese, and others outside the Versailles order. Winning the war is not the same thing as winning a better peace.

An unwillingness or inability to define "winning" is central to Western strategic goals in Iraq and Afghanistan, chapter 8 argues. Despite military leaders and scholars reading Clausewitz in English for more than a century, his advice remains honored in the breach: "No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his sense ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it." (*On War*, cp. VIII). No matter how many battles Western forces won in the Middle East, the wars could not be won absent an agreed—and stable—theory of victory and peace.

Assad's theory of victory in Syria, analyzed in chapter 9, is summarized as "if you kill me—you kill yourself" (158). The Syrian regime's release of Jihadists from prison in May 2011 is said to symbolize this threat. To stay alive, Assad had to point to a greater threat, convincing even Turkey that "risking the disintegration of Syria" was not worth it (161). The strategy—which might be called deterrence

by entanglement—threatened the further destabilization of the region and exasperation of the refugee crisis, creating incentives for neighboring states to invest themselves in stabilizing the situation instead of defeating Assad.

When it comes to "winning" is modern China bidding for the right to play in the competition or is it seeking to decisively end the competition? Kerry Brown's analysis in chapter 11 raises, but does not answer, this question. Regardless of the apparent evidence, realists will default to a view of the world in which states naturally seek domination and supremacy. Interestingly, the different mind-sets can be compared to two styles of business: "The venture capitalist can, and must, see life in terms of a series of 'wins'; the family business owner can, and must, see life in terms of a series of moderated actions that keep them 'winning'" (278). With a sufficient number of "wins" a business may eventually establish itself as a monopoly. But in the modern states system, is *war* and *military victory* still an effective means to establish such monopolistic dominance? Already, the nuclear revolution makes this impossible between Great Powers, which can no longer be eliminated in the manner of the First World War. Nationalism, furthermore, makes such "wins" against even non-nuclear powers much harder. Putin is even now discovering this fact in Ukraine.

The Russian view of winning, discussed in chapter 15, argues that the core of the Russian idea is "a power that 'allows the Russians to absorb casualties that would cause others to flee'" (248). Beyond this patriotic essence, Russian strategists have developed a "sliding scale of success and failure" that contrasts "political victory"—the most desirable end state—with "complete destruction" in defeat. In the middle are "the avoidance of military defeat" and "no military victory" (253). Material, moral, informational, and cognitive factors are said to create zones "of victory" for opposing sides. Together, "victory as sacrifice and victory as science" are said to compose Russia's mind-set (256). By Russia's own terms, it faces in Ukraine today a situation of "no military victory." Russian military science has not proven sufficient to the task, leaving Russian forces dependent on a tradition of sacrifice. How robust this tradition will prove in a war of aggression, as opposed to deep defense, remains to be seen.

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