

Notes & Comments May 2024

Locked in war

On wars & cultural annihilation.

The story of the human race,” Winston Churchill wrote in 1924, “is War.” The pre-Socratic Ionian philosopher Heraclitus went even further. “War,” he wrote, “is the father of all things” (πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι). John Kerry had apparently not received those memoranda. It was while Kerry served as Barack Obama’s secretary of state in 2014 that Vladimir Putin invaded and annexed Crimea. Kerry was dumbfounded. “You just don’t in the twenty-first century,” he sputtered, “behave in nineteenth-century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped-up pretext.”

We are not sure why Secretary Kerry skipped over the twentieth century, which after all was replete with such kinetic incidents—as, truth be told, has been the still-young twenty-first. Indeed, it seems to us, reflecting on the situation in Ukraine *circa* 2024, that Poland’s prime minister, Donald Tusk, is rather more *au courant* than John Kerry. “War is no longer a concept from the past. It is real, and it started over two years ago. The most worrying thing at the moment is that literally any scenario is possible. We haven’t seen a situation like this since 1945.” Since Russia possesses some six thousand nuclear warheads, “the situation” in question is more than usually fraught.

We offer these melancholy thoughts by way of introducing Victor Davis Hanson’s new book, *The End of Everything: How Wars Descend into Annihilation* (Basic Books). Regular readers will know that Hanson, a classicist and prolific military historian at Stanford University, is a frequent contributor to

these pages. Since he is also a visiting critic at *The New Criterion*, we do not propose to review his new book. Rather, we shall endeavor to lay out some of the main lessons he draws from his survey of four famous wars of annihilation: Alexander the Great's destruction of Thebes in 335 B.C.; Scipio Aemilianus's obliteration of Carthage in 146 B.C.; Sultan Mehmet II's conquest of Constantinople on "Black Tuesday," May 29, 1453; and Hernán Cortés's siege and ultimate annihilation of Tenochtitlan, the seat of the Aztec empire, in 1521.

Hanson brings an impressive gift for narrative history as well as deep but lightly worn scholarship to his discussion of these four world-ending cataclysms. Each of his chapters offers a tightly organized and authoritative yet gratifyingly accessible account of the history, the main actors, the politics, and the military stratagems that composed these grisly episodes. Each chapter gives a masterly, gemlike summary.

There are, Hanson notes, many ways in which a city, a people, an entire civilization can be brought to an end. Nature herself is a mighty extinguishing angel. But Hanson concentrates on certain man-made catastrophes. His subject is not the sort of conflicts that the Sybil foresees and warns Aeneas about—*Bella, horrida bella, / et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno*: "I see wars, horrible wars, and the Tiber frothing with much blood." Nor is his subject the various genocides, pogroms, and exterminations that have punctuated with grim regularity the story of mankind's adventure in time. It is not even the mind-boggling, industrialized slaughter of the modern age—the twenty-odd million killed in the First World War or the seventy-some million who perished in the second.

Hanson concentrates on a handful of events in which not just cities but entire cultures are obliterated. When Alexander razed Thebes in 335 B.C., he brought to an end not just a proud Greek city—home of Pindar, Hercules, Cadmus, Oedipus, and so many other central characters in Greek history and mythology. He also certified the end of the entire system of independent Greek city-states. Similarly, when Scipio Aemilianus brought the Third Punic War to

an end in 146 B.C., he did more than fulfill Cato's demand that *Carthago delenda est*: "Carthage must be destroyed." He also ended one of the two great cultures in the western Mediterranean. Carthage had been among the richest cities in the classical world. Even after its humiliating defeat in the Second Punic War, it remained vital and prosperous. When the siege of Carthage began in 149 B.C., the city boasted a population of about 500,000. When the Romans were finished, only 50,000—one out of ten—remained. All but Hasdrubal, their leader, were sold into slavery. He alone bargained immunity from Scipio. Neither his wife nor his children were saved. After being paraded through the streets of Rome in Scipio's triumph, Hasdrubal was allowed to live out his life in Italy at ease among the destroyers of his civilization, his culture, even his language.

Hanson's main point in these vignettes is admonitory. The story of "how civilizations disappear" (the title of his introduction) is not of historical interest only. It is just as pertinent to us now in the twenty-first century. When Thebes rebelled against Macedonian rule, it had not bargained on Alexander's ruthlessness; it had assumed other city-states would come to its aid; this "naïveté" (one of Hanson's favorite words of disparagement) was its undoing. "The continual disappearance of prior cultures," Hanson writes, "should warn us that even familiar twenty-first-century states can become as fragile as their ancient counterparts, given that the arts of destruction march in tandem with improvements in defense."

It is difficult for us in the modern West to attend to that warning. We are so rich. We are so comfortable. How could all that surrounds and supports us simply vanish? Hanson quotes a famous passage from Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*. "How did you go bankrupt?" one character asks another. "Two ways," was the response: "Gradually, then suddenly." The same calculus can apply to annihilation. One major lesson in these episodes concerns the suddenness and velocity of apocalypse. The "transition from normality to the end of days," Hanson writes, "could occur rather quickly. A rendezvous with finality was often completely unexpected."

A second major lesson has to do with the continuity of human nature. “The more things change technologically,” Hanson notes, “the more human nature stays the same.”

The gullibility, and indeed ignorance, of contemporary governments and leaders about the intent, hatred, ruthlessness, and capability of their enemies are not surprising. The retreat to comfortable nonchalance and credulousness, often the cargo of affluence and leisure, is predictable given unchanging human nature, despite the pretensions of a postmodern technologically advanced global village.

Our culture is not surrounded by towering walls thirty feet thick, as was Constantinople. Our defenses are far more sophisticated. Unfortunately, so are the weapons of our likely opponents. There is an irony in the fact that the seeds of our peril lie in the very power we command. “Even as humanity supposedly becomes more uniform and interconnected,” Hanson notes, “so too our world grows increasingly vulnerable and dangerous, as the margins of human error and misapprehension in conflict shrink—from Ukraine to Taiwan to the Middle East.”

Hanson takes his introduction’s epigraph from the sestet of Shelley’s sonnet “Ozymandias.”

And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

That monument to the progeny of hubris casts its light over the whole of Hanson’s argument. “We should,” he cautions,

remember that the world wars of the last century likely took more human life than all armed conflicts combined since the dawn of Western civilization twenty-five hundred

years prior. And they did so with offensive weapons already obsolete, and all too familiar destructive agendas that persist today, unchanged since antiquity. As for the targets of aggression, the old mentalities and delusions that doomed the Thebans, the Carthaginians, the Byzantines, and the Aztecs are also still very much with us, especially the last thoughts of the slaughtered: “It cannot happen here.”

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