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Fear of War

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The humanitarian scientific literature contains various approaches to fear. In social sciences, especially in psychology, fear is considered as an emotional feeling or an affective reaction associated with a real or imaginary threat. It may be caused by past traumatic experience sensed in the present, or projected onto future situations. In sociology, anthropology, and history of emotions, fear is perceived as a social construct that is embedded into a particular context and produced with the help of interpersonal interactions in daily life. Frequently, fear relates to risks and is cultivated through connections with potential threats. To this extent, it is possible to talk about different human phobias such as fear of death, fear of pain, fear of violence, and fear of war.

According to social researchers, the emotion of fear plays a crucial role in the escalation of conflicts. Fear of losing power and control over a situation can trigger violent actions that, in turn, can lead to ethnic wars or genocides. Fear can also serve as a means of mobilization, inducing individuals to participate in war or fight with enemies who have been demonized in the public discourse and constitute potential or imaginary threats to a nation, ethnic group, or community.

Negative human emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and worry, may be manipulated by elites in order to retain power. As such, they are connected to the terms *politics of fear* and *fear factor*. Politics of fear is a tool used in political campaigns to motivate people to vote for a particular candidate. Fear factor is a term used by national leaders, politicians, authorities, and media for maintaining domestic power and constructing an image of an enemy.

Sarah Oates provides an example of conducting similar politics of fear in the United States and Russia during election campaigns in the early 2000s. She argues that media topics concerning terrorist attacks and threats as well as security and national “strength” were predominate in public debates in both countries, whereas in Great Britain they were not main issues during election races. She also writes that, in the United States and Russia, power elites exploit citizens’ worrying about security and “war on terror” by appealing to their emotions, whereas in Great Britain citizens perceive these issues more rationally in political debates.

Oates explains this through the history of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War as well as through the terrorist attacks that occurred in both countries in the 2000s. In such a case, “fear of terrorism” and “fear of war” reproduced by politicians and media serve not only as a means of sustaining power and cultivating nationalism but also of restricting civil rights and employing violence, physical and symbolic, in the name of international security.

According to Helena Flam, in totalitarian regimes such as Adolf Hitler’s in Germany, fear in its various forms helps the political system of the state to control human life-spheres and maintain repressive state apparatuses (e.g., concentration camps, prisons, mental health clinics). Fear of “other” or “otherness” can create a specific culture of fear interrelated with “culture war,” which can lead to domestic repressions, genocides, or invasions of foreign territories.

In the contemporary scientific literature, the topic of fear of war has been widely debated in two ways. First, scholars consider fear that has been experienced by the participants of actual military actions or by civilians who were in the zone of military operations. The events of the First World War and the Second World War considerably encouraged interdisciplinary research in this field of study. Second, scholars examine fear of the prospect of threats and

possible wars, such as a nuclear war or the Third World War. These topics became popular for research in the 1980s due to the acceleration of international tension and the nuclear arms race. This entry explores each of these approaches to the study of fear of war.

Fear of an Actual War

As Roger Petersen and Evangelos Liaras argue, fear is probably the central emotion that is experienced by people in war and contrasts with honor and bravery. Fear is associated with the terms *terror* and *worry*, but they are not the same feelings. However, fear, terror, and worry are frequently applied by leaders as ideological and strategic tools during wartime. Therefore, some researchers use these terms as equivalents.

In a time of war, fear produces various effects, both positive and negative. On one hand, fear changes human perception, transforms beliefs, and distorts information. It can lead to affective behavior and unreasonable actions, which can result in an individual's death. On the other hand, fear is responsible for self-preservation. In some cases, it can unite people or enhance rational decision making.

Although fear is the central emotion of war, it is not the only one. Emotional strategies are utilized during armed conflicts to counter fear; these include anger, shame, and hope. Sometimes these emotional strategies overcome fear and allow one to act reasonably in dangerous contexts. Petersen and Liaras also argue that the emotional strategies that counter fear vary in different cultures and times. They provide an example of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) between Athenians and Spartans, during which hope and reason were preferred to shame, anger, and spite. Hope combined with reason (rational arguments) made overcoming fear and anxiety possible.

In wartime, fear, along with other emotions, is embedded in the war system and regulated by military institutions. For example, to optimize soldiers' conduct in military operations, there are mechanisms aimed at controlling soldiers' fear. However, soldiers may experience fear that manifests as hysteria during combat or as a mental health disorder with first onset after the end of the war, during peacetime.

Fear in war appears in various forms and is attributed to different aspects of wartime. Soldiers and officers may experience a fear of death, a fear of fighting, a fear of blood, or a fear of invalidity, which may, in turn, lead to posttraumatic stress disorder, military trauma, or a deep-rooted fear of war. The effect of war on mental health has been recognized for more than two thousand years but has gained even more recognition, among the public as well as medical professionals, following the end of the Vietnam War.

Earlier examples include Susanne Michl and Jan Plamper in their article "Soldatische Angst im Ersten Weltkrieg" (Soldierly Fear in the First World War), who describe how institutionalized psychiatric, psychological, and medical discourses constituted the concept of fear of war in Germany, France, and Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. Consequently, fear of an actual war can be seen through the lens of the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and the history of emotions, meaning that fear of war is not only structured by the system of war but also inscribed in distinct social, historical, cultural, and political contexts as well as in shared emotional states.

The researchers argue that in the 19th century soldiers did not speak about their fear in public, because language for expressing fear did not exist. However, after the First World

War, advancements in military psychiatry resulted in transformations that allowed fear to be articulated. In addition, new strategies of waging war, including innovative technologies such as grenades and guns, affected soldiers' consciousness and behavior, which, in turn, led to soldiers and others reflecting on the fear complex caused by war.

Nowadays, historians and anthropologists of emotions consider various cultural models of "fear of war" and analyze different theories of the origins of soldiers' fear provided by military psychiatrists. They examine particularities of soldiers' and civilians' experiences of worry and anxiety in connection with being on the front line and at the home front, as well as pay particular attention to studying gendered passions and emotional memory.

Fear of the Prospect of War

Publications on the fear of the prospect of war present the second approach to the subject. Scientific interest in examining fear of a nuclear war increased during the nuclear arms race, especially in the 1960s when political, diplomatic, and military tension between the Soviet Union and the United States accelerated. In 1962, Nikita Khrushchev, the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, deployed soviet forces and placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, just 90 miles from the United States. This event is known in historical literature as the Cuban missile crisis, when two superpowers were very close to a nuclear conflict that could have resulted in mutual destruction.

According to the survey data analyzed by Joel Slemrod, 47% of Americans in 1981 believed that a nuclear war would be very likely within the next 10 years, whereas in the 1950s, 66% thought that a world war would be very likely within the next 5 years. During the postwar period, 60% of American respondents believed that nuclear weapons would be used in a world war, and approximately 60% supposed that their chances to survive were very poor.

Slemrod concludes that in the 1980s the American press played a significant role in creating and sustaining fear of nuclear war. He argues that high frequency of topics concerning nuclear weapons and threats in newspapers might be an alternative index of fear. To Slemrod, public discourse on nuclear war reflected collective feelings and awareness of worries about the prospect of war.

In a comparative cross-cultural survey conducted in six countries among undergraduate students in the early 1990s, sociologists examined fear of war and its relation to basic human values. The outcomes of the survey showed that 4% of American students worried about war, as did 15% of the respondents from West Germany, India, and Finland, and as many as 35% of the students from Eastern Germany, Austria, and Russia. In comparison with the results obtained in previous decades, these figures are lower. This outcome probably can be explained by declining danger and a decreasing probability of war.

In *Fear of War: Relations to Values, Gender, and Mental Health in Germany and Israel*, Claus Boehnke and Shalom Schwartz present the analysis of survey data they collected in 1994 in German and Israeli universities. The key research question they considered is how individual students' priorities correlate with worries about war. In this study, they proffer the following conclusions, which are partially proved by other social researchers.

First, fear of conventional war relates to geopolitical location of a country: It is higher in the states that have enemies as neighbors, as is the case with Israel. However, in this study the level of fear of nuclear war was the same in Israel and in Germany, and the authors conclude

that this is because nuclear conflicts constitute a danger to the whole world and are publicly discussed. They also suggest that fear of nuclear war depends on periods of acceleration and reduction of global political and military tension rather than on geographical location.

Second, respondents who are committed to values of universalism and benevolence have higher levels of fear of war. The researchers also established that universalism was more associated with worry about the prospect of war than benevolence, because the former value refers to the safety and well-being of all humankind, whereas the latter is addressed to the self.

Third, fear of war is greater among people with conservative values; for instance, its level is higher among those who stand for sustaining social order and supporting the present political regime. Reproduction of social and individual order is connected with values of security and conformity. Consequently, students who are committed to these values worry more about war.

Fourth, the level of fear of war corresponds to gender. The survey and other studies show that women demonstrate more worries about conventional and nuclear war than men. This is probably conditioned by gender patterns of women, who in traditional gender social structures perform the roles of raising children and taking care of others. According to this explanation, women and men equally experience fear of war, but gender patterns in traditional societies forbid men to express these worries in public. Therefore, female worries more frequently refer to such values as health, safety, environment, and socialization.

Fifth, according to Boehnke and Schwartz, the quantitative data do not reveal a statistical relation between worries about war and serious or mild mental health disorders.

During the second half of the 20th century, another source of worry was associated with the possibility of a new world war. Masuda Hajimu provides an example from the history of postwar Japan. He stresses the role of public debates, local discussions, and interpretations that attempted to reshape memory about the Second World War in the early 1950s, at the threshold of the Korean War, that created fear of the Third World War in Japanese society.

Final Thoughts

The fear of war is a difficult but significant subject of interdisciplinary social studies that can be examined through the lens of different disciplines (e.g., cognitive psychology, history of concepts and emotions, anthropology and sociology of passions, as well as quantitative analysis of survey data). Understanding the meaning and mechanisms of fear of war may help people to prevent destructive actions and aggressive behavior as well as to promote peace in the world.

See also [Aggression](#); [Emotional Withdrawal](#); [Emotions](#); [Empathy](#); [Evil](#); [Guilt and Remorse](#); [Hate](#); [Horror of Combat](#); [Psychological Warfare](#); [Threat Perception](#)

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Further Readings

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