On the Nature of War

by Helmut Moltke (the Elder)

**[In this letter to the international law expert, Johann Kaspar Bluntschli (1808-81), Count Helmuth von Moltke expressed his philosophical views on the necessity of war. Moltke was born in Mecklenburg, served the King of Denmark and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire before returning to Prussia in 1839. From 1858 until his resignation in 1888, he served as Chief of the General Staff from which position he planned the successful wars of unification against Denmark, Austria, and France. He was also a member of the Reichstag, 1871-91. Source: Harry Pross (ed.), *Die Zerstörung der deutschen Politik: Dokumente 1871-1933* (Frankfurt, 1959), pp. 29-31. Translated by Richard S. Levy.]**

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You have kindly sent me the handbook published by the Institute for International Law and would like my acknowledgment of the same.

First, I find the humanitarian striving to lessen the sufferings that come with war completely worthy. Eternal peace is a dream --and not even a beautiful one. War is part of God's world-order. Within it unfold the noblest virtues of men, courage and renunciation, loyalty to duty and readiness for sacrifice--at the hazzard of one's life. Without war the world would sink into a swamp of materialism. Further, I wholly agree with the principle stated in the preface that the gradual progress in morality must also be reflected in the waging of war. But I go farther and believe that [waging war] in and of itself--not a codification of the law of war--may attain this goal.

Every law requires an authority to oversee and administer its execution, and just this force is lacking for the observation of international agreements. What third state would take up arms because one or both of two warring powers had violated the law of war [*loi de guerre*]? An *earthly* judge is lacking. In this matter success is to be expected only from the religious and moral education, the sense of honor and respect for law, of individual leaders who make the law and act according to it, so far as this is generally possible to do in the abnormal conditions of war. Indisputably, humanity in the waging of war has in fact followed the general mitigation of morals. Only compare the savagery of the Thirty Years' War with the battles of the modern era.

In our day, an important step toward the attainment of the desired goal has been the introduction of universal military service, which has enlisted the educated classes in the army. Certainly, the raw and violence-prone elements have remained, but they no longer, as formerly, constitute the general complement.

Two further and effective means lie in the hands of the governments to avoid the worst excesses: military discipline, established and managed in peacetime; and the carefully administered provisioning of troops in the field. Without this precaution, discipline can be maintained in only limited fashion. The soldier who suffers sorrow and deprivations, exertion and danger, can do so only in proportion to the resources of the nation (*en proportion avec les ressources du pays*); he must take all that is necessary for his existence. We cannot expect him to be superhuman.

The greatest good deed in war is the speedy ending of the war, and every means to that end, so long as it is not *reprehensible*, must remain open. In no way can I declare myself in agreement with the Declaration of St. Petersburg that the sole justifiable measure in war is "the weakening of the enemy's military power." No, all the sources of support for the hostile government must be considered, its finances, railroads, foodstuffs, even its prestige.

With this sort of energy, and yet with greater moderation than ever before, the recent war in France was waged. The campaign was decided after two months, and only after a revolutionary government continued the struggle for four more months, to the ruination of its own country, did the battle take on an embittered character.

I gladly acknowledge that, better than in previous attempts, the manual recognizes the necessities of war in clear and concise sentences. However, even though governments recognize the rules [in the manual], that does not ensure their execution. It is a long-time usage of war that a parliamentarian should not be shot. Nevertheless, we have seen it violated several times in the last campaign.

No paragraph (no. 2 and 43) learned by rote will convince soldiers who are in fear of their lives every moment of the day and night that an unorganized civilian who picks up a weapon of his own free will is to be viewed as anything but a regulation enemy.

Individual demands of the manual may not be feasible, e.g., establishment of the identity of the fallen after a great battle. Consideration should be given to the insertion of modifying phrases such as, "circumstance permitting," "if possible," or "if necessary." Without such elasticity, the bitter seriousness of reality will burst the bonds laid upon [soldiers].

In war, where everything tends to be comprehended individually, only those paragraphs directed essentially at the leaders will, I believe, be effective. Among these are the what the manual wants to establish with regard to the wounded, the sick, doctors, and medical supplies. Universal recognition of even these principles, as well as those concerning treatment of prisoners, would already represent substantial progress toward the goal which the Institute for International Law strives toward with such praiseworthy steadfastness.

Most respectfully,  
  
Count Moltke