Matthew Melko. *General War Among Great Powers in World History*

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol53/iss53/7
BOOK REVIEWS


Matthew Melko’s *General War Among Great Powers in World History* documents his decade-and-a-half-long research project that included sessions on general war with the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilization (ISCSC) and the International Studies Association (ISA) [27-28]. The book includes an introduction by ISCSC member David Wilkinson, and maps by ISCSC member Laurence Wolf.

I appreciate Melko’s empirical approach, which balances my more theoretical approach. A disclaimer: I approach his book as a civilizationalist, not as a war theorist. I know the history of only some of the wars he lists, so the focus of this book review is not on the detail of the wars, but on the criteria used to identify general wars, his findings and appropriate steps to extend this research.

**General War.** Melko designed his research project to empirically test various theories about general war by using as his sample all the general wars in world history that he could identify.

An example of a general war is the combined World Wars I and 2 (1914-1945), which a number of scholars see as two bouts of the same war with an interlude, while the protagonists regrouped for the next round [8]. Typically, general wars have multiple episodes, such as the four component wars that comprise the Thirty Years War (1619-1648). Since general wars may go through phases with periods of peace, it is often only in hindsight that we see them as really one long conflict.

Toynbee coined the term “general war.” Other terms used for similar great wars in which most of the major powers of an international system are in conflict with each other [4] are:

- world wars
- hegemonic wars
- global wars
- systemic wars
- wars on a grand scale
- big wars

From these Melko selected general war as the best term, since it is more generic (an interstate war among great powers), and it is Toynbee’s term. [5] He defines a “great power [as] one that has influence on the other powers in the system. It matters what the great power
does, which side it chooses." [34]

Many or most general wars appear to be unintended—they widen and pull in other powers—Toynbee called them "great wars 'of the all-engulfing kind.'" [5] In a general war, states, both major and minor, become polarized into alliances. [15] General wars are thought to be rare and extremely destructive. Toynbee considered them to be damaging to civilizations. [5]

As with other scholars of war and peace, Melko wants to understand the nature of war to help policy makers avoid a destructive war. Of concern is the threat of a nuclear war. "The only nuclear conflict between nations we have had . . . came out of a general war. We are still arguing about whether it was rational to use nuclear weapons in that case, so it may well be that situations will arise again in which the use of nuclear weapons will be rationally debated. And, of course, during any major war, particularly in situations where emotions run high, irrational decisions are more likely. Or death may be valued over dishonor. So the circumstances that bring about use of maximum available force may arise again, and if and when they do, nuclear weapons will be the maximum available force." [22]

After surveying the various hypotheses about general wars, Melko developed a list of questions to investigate. The list includes Toynbee's notion of a general war cycle, and the contention by some that general wars within a system occur over challenges to the hegemonic power. Other questions include: [43-5]

- Are general wars especially destructive?
- Are general wars turning points in history, such as leading to a universal empire for that civilization?
- Are general wars rare?
- Are general wars followed by general peace?
- Do general wars start locally and spread? [11]

In order to scientifically test the various hypotheses, he needed an objective sample selection criteria. Melko developed a consensus definition that a general war is a war or series of wars between at least three great powers within a civilization that lasts at least 20 years. The 20-year criterion came from the duration of the French Revolution/Napoleonic general war (1792-1815), which was the shortest of the European general wars. [37]

Melko limited his search to general wars in mainstream civilizations, recognizing that this is a manageable research project, whereas to
look at all wars would have been overwhelming. [21] Likewise, using civilizations to focus his search provides a good first cut for future research projects that may use a wider sample of general wars in state systems or world systems. [32]

Using these criteria as a search tool, he found 38 cases of general wars starting with the Sumerian inter-city wars (2460 to 2310 B.C.E), up to what Melko calls the Wars of Western Withdrawal in the Arab world, which is still ongoing. The large middle section of book provides a narrative description of each of the 38 general wars.

Melko’s findings include:

• He discovers, not surprisingly, that the various theorists have western biases.

• Only three of the 38 wars followed the theorized cyclical pattern where the hegemon emerging as the outcome from one general war is challenged in the next general war. Two of these cycles were the successive European wars that started with the Wars of Louis XIV (1688-1713), to the Wars of Frederick the Great (1740-1763), and ending with the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815).

• He found of the 38 cases that general wars were initiated in 16 cases by a major power, in nine cases by the hegemon, in two cases by an alliance and in one case by a rebel group. Also in nine cases a power outside the civilization initiated the war, and in one case a barbarian horde. [188]

• He found that general wars between great powers in a civilization are rare, occurring on the average twice a millennium. [240]

• He found that “they occur in many ways, sometimes with a hegemon trying to improve or preemptively defend its position, sometimes with a challenger trying to gain advantage by direct or indirect attack. Sometimes local or regional wars escalate into general wars. Often general wars are not intended, but sometimes they are, or in any event the initiating participant is willing to risk the possibility.” [240]

• He found that “while alliances occur frequently before and during general wars, they do not have consistent consequences.” Likewise, “while hegemony is frequently a factor in a general war, it seems to play no consistent role.” [240]

• He found that, “while they have been conflicts of greater than
average magnitude, they have had different kinds of origins, are usually not turning points in history, have various patterns of interaction between hegemons and other participants, and do not lend themselves to cyclical patterning. It appears that chance, contexts and individual choice are more important than system in determining whether they occur and how they will be resolved.” [239]

The conclusion I draw is that we cannot avoid detailed historical analyses of why wars start, which, I suggest, requires a deeper understanding of the nature of power.

The Nature of Power. I agreed to review Melko’s book, in part, because I thought it would help me to better understand the nature of power. Clearly, wars, in one way or another, have something to do with power; yet Melko does not provide a definition of power. Rather, his focus is on the causes and outcomes of wars and conflicts. For him the nature of power is self-evident. It has something to do with the ability to make war, to dominate, or defend, or to influence.

So what does the book tell us about power? (Terms in italics are from Melko’s book.)

- Power is spatial. It has a geographic dimension. The word is used as a substitute for the word state, in a way that defines the state in geo-political terms, such as:
  - Great power
  - Small power/Minor power
  - Dominant power/leading power/hegemon
  - Naval power

- Power is relative and not absolute. One cannot measure it by some universal standard, as we do electrical power in terms of watts and volts. Power refers to the relative positions within a system:
  - Unequal power
  - Distribution of power
  - Magnitude of power shift

- The time dimension refers to change in a state’s relative power
  - States rising in power
  - Due to new technologies
  - Due to growth in economic power
Growth in power
Declining power

- Power is hierarchical—in war, one side tries to dominate another, or at least to defend itself from another’s domination
- There is often a hegemon or dominant power

- Spheres of influence

- Power deals not just with war but also with peace:
  - A stable balance of power can lead to an era of peace.
  - A hegemonic power can enforce the peace, or maintain the balance of power
  - "An absence of war among great powers... would exist because the general war had settled spheres of influence" [238]

- Melko defines a great power by its performance during a general war, not just a large state with a large army.

Power, I suggest, might be imaged as something like a magnetic or gravity field. For example, Einstein theorized that a gravity field actually refers to the geometry of the time-space continuum that is warped by the presence of a large mass. Maybe you have seen the graphic image of the dimple in the space-time continuum created by the sun’s huge mass. A normally straight ray of starlight if it grazes close to the sun is bent by the geometry of this dimple. By analogy, such an image suggests that the presence of power may warp a power field.

A power field, however, is more dynamic than a gravity field—it can be concentrated and moved. Two neighboring states with large armies can live in peace, as long they do not threaten each other’s sphere of influence. But if one army concentrates near the other’s border, this becomes a threat, warping the peaceful power field. Such a warping of the power field could lead to a situation, where, as we say, the logic of war takes over. This suggests that the logic of war occurs when the warping of the power field overwhelms other considerations. This also suggests that one reason wars are easier to start than to stop, is that an army in the field is much more threatening than an army in its barracks. When the balance of power is fluid and unsettled, states have to protect themselves, or opportunistically, they may try to take advantage of the fluidity to seize what they covet or feel rightfully theirs.

Conclusions and Next Steps. This side journey into the nature
of power provides, I suggest, a viewpoint from which I can both com-
ment on Melko’s book and offer future steps to extend his analysis. His
marvelous scholarship empirically tests the various general war theo-
ries. My comments are in the spirit of extending this research.

Melko’s research over the years has assumed that civilizations of
different eras are philosophically equivalent. Yet he has expressed from
time to time a nagging doubt. This focus on power suggests a partial
solution to this philosophical equivalency question. All civilizations
have one or more states, with an organization-making ability—what
Louis Mumford called a Megamachine, such as an army, or the organi-
zation that built the pyramids. In such a Megamachine, the hierarchical
structure of the state concentrates control and decision, therefore
increasing the effective power of the state. Thus, at least with respect
to power relations internal to the state and external war and peace rela-
tions between states, all civilizations are philosophically equivalent.

Although Melko used civilization as a criterion to identify general
wars, he found that 28 of the 38 general wars involved a power outside
the civilization. [185] Thus, because a power field may extend outside
a civilization, a world-systems approach may be more appropriate.
[218] Nevertheless, since in some cases a civilization and the related
world system are effectively equivalent, as a first cut, using the history
of civilizations as a general war search tool makes sense. Melko also
wants to know if there is a link between general wars and civilizational
crises, such as a change in worldview. Melko suggests that a systemat-
ic “exploration of crises . . . might . . . bring greater clarity to the place
of law and ideology in [the] civilizational process.” [218]

A focus on power also suggests that Toynbee’s original observation
may be the best approach to understand general war. Namely, that “gen-
eral wars appear to be great wars ‘of the all-engulfing kind,’ usually,
but not always among great powers, that contribute to the deterioration
of civilization.” [5] I interpret this to mean that a general war is one in
which the various powers, whether wittingly or unwittingly, get sucked
into the conflict. Although Melko mentions that general wars may
expand, he does not quantify war expansion. Specifically, he did not
use all-engulfing-ness as a criteria to search for general wars, nor did he
specifically test for all-engulfing-ness.

If all-engulfing-ness becomes a criterion to identify a general war,
then Melko’s 20-year criterion as the minimum duration for a general
war can be relaxed. Instead, take Wilkinson’s suggestion in the Preface,
and add wars of shorter duration, with the length of the war as a vari-
able. [xiii]

Toynbee also said that general wars are similar to civil wars. There is an all-engulfing-ness about a civil war that polarizes and sucks in more and more groups of people, who, no doubt, would just as soon stay out of the conflict. Thus civil wars, as with general wars, often end up with two sides (though not always), just as general wars can lead to alliances, with some powers possibly switching sides.

To summarize, Melko has made an important step in identifying, describing and testing general war models. I suggest that the next step is to build on his empirical research:

• First, take Wilkinson’s suggestion and add wars of shorter duration, with the length of the war as a variable. [xiii]

• Second, enlarge the database to provide a more comprehensive data set.
  ○ Add state systems identified by Wesson and Wilkinson. [32, 230]
  ○ Add general wars amongst ‘minor powers.’ In particular, a case could be made for a general war occurring right now in central Africa between Uganda, several forces in the Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania, and between Uganda and forces in the Sudan. Outside powers, including the UN, are meddling or trying to contain, but seemingly with little success.
  ○ Take Bueno de Mesquita’s proposal to study general wars comparatively with all wars. [9] His concern is why some wars expand and others do not. [39]
  ○ Take Toynbee’s suggestion, and add civil wars.

I conclude with Melko’s wry comment on the benefit of expanding the number of cases and looking more rigorously at the disparate circumstances that lead to general wars. “It appears that wisdom and understanding, not predictive capacity, are likely to emerge from wider ranging studies of general war or of war in general.” [218]

Ross Maxwell


The book is co-authored by 10 writers, who write on African historiography, mathematics in Sudan, microbiology and traditional methods, changes in cassava processing technology in Nigeria, African tra-
ditional religion and science, science teaching in Nigerian institutions, textile technology in Nigeria, military technology in Nigeria, the intersection of gender and technology in Nigeria, and policy options on technology in contemporary Nigeria.

This book is one of a series of three books specifically oriented to the historical development of science and technology in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. We as *homo sapiens* all come from Africa, there are our roots, so it is interesting how this continent, nowadays undeveloped, dealt with science and technology, and is trying to minimize the gap between the North and South.

In terms of African historiography, the oldest mathematical artifact was found in the vicinity of present day Swaziland and dates to 3500 B.C. The discovery of a wide range of Nigerian documents in Arabic took place over the last few decades. They dealt with medical issues mostly. The female author reminds us of an awful idea—that Plato considered women as the offspring of men, while Aristotle implied that a woman was “a deformed male.” In Africa, women played the main role in food processing and soap-making, while men played the critical role in iron fabrication.

Mathematics in Sudan was applied in the Inheritance Law and Business, where calculations were required to establish the transferred wealth and operational profits. The first mathematical books were written in Arabic when Sudan became a Muslim country in the 14th century. The advanced mathematics was applied in astronomy in the 17th century in Sudan, and some mathematical expressions were applied in social sciences, including philosophy/history, to predict the imminent fall of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Knowledge of microbiological science has provided in Nigeria a basis for understanding the technology of production and quality of some traditional foods and beverages such garri, dawadawa, palm wine and burkutu beer. Appropriate traditional technologies for selection and growth of desirable strains of micro-organisms were probably developed over centuries through systematic practical experience.

Very interesting is the story of changes in cassava processing technology. One must remember that Africa has given the world coffee, oil palms, pearl millets and cereal sorghums. Cassava is one of the crops brought by the Portuguese from the Americas; it is a very effective food in terms of productivity and cost. From the 1850s simple tools were applied in this kind of production; and since the 1970s more mechanized tools have been introduced, operated by women, who soon even
became entrepreneurs in this kind of business.

A chapter on religion and science claims that traditional religion did not disappear but rather changed and adapted, for example to the Christian teaching. The author states that the Africans are philosophically minded and lovers of wisdom and steadily are replacing mythical knowledge about the world by scientific knowledge. However the process of westernization of the Africans makes them very often nihilists and disbelievers.

The issue of how to teach science in Africa is presented, with the conclusion that learning science should be based not only on abstractive concepts but also on life-rich examples verified in the school laboratories.

The technology of textile production in Nigeria is analyzed through the last 2000 years. The textile industry was one of the most important in most pre-colonial Nigerian communities. A very large number of people were employed in this industry; however the colonial powers by supplying their own products caused the decline of the local textile production. It has not only a strong influence upon employment but also it excluded local specialists from the technology developmental processes, making them more recipients than innovators of new technology.

Military technology development in Nigeria was the driving factor in the economic development of this country. The Nigerians were very innovative in tactics, which led to changes in military architecture and to good skills. This aggressive search for excellence gave troops high morale and engendered in them a real sense of patriotism. This is why the British colonial officers regarded the Nigerian troops as “paragons of soldiery virtues.” When the “Pax Coloniale” was established in 1900, the local military industry was replaced by a new specialization in importation.

The closing chapter states that in the 20th century some of the earlier innovative trends were undermined by colonial intervention. Furthermore, policies determined by so-called Structural Adjustment and by the IMF/World Bank in the author’s opinion limit local experimentation and endogenous technical change, while the Westerners think otherwise. Who is right? In terms of western business principles –the customer is always right.

The book is a great contribution to understanding how the African Civilization has been developing and why it is in its present stage of development.

Andrew Targowski