New Wars

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The wars that occurred post-World War II differed from previous wars in that multiple aspects of warfare had changed. Rules, players, targets, methods and effects were all different, thus essentially changing the nature of war. Mary Kaldor best describes this transformation of warfare by making a distinction between Old Wars and New Wars.

She defines old wars as traditional warfare, where two uniformed armies combat each other usually in an interstate collision, and the state plays a significant role in funding and running the war. In cases of old wars, the main targets are uniformed soldiers. Additionally, the war helps maintain state integrity by heightening nationalism, and enabling the state to further tax its people and accumulate money for the purpose of war. Prime examples of old wars would be those that occurred in Europe centuries ago that consolidated the major states as we know them today, as well as the more recent World Wars I and II.

In contrast to old wars is New Wars. Kaldor defines new wars according to the impact globalization has had on warfare, highlighting three main features that indicate a "new war":

1. It is based on claiming identity, not territory.
2. Guerrilla and terror tactics used.
3. International crime impacts how such wars are funded.

There are other characteristics of new wars such as:

1. The majority of the targeted victims are non-uniformed civilians rather than uniformed combatants.
2. Ethnic divisions are perpetuated.
3. The disintegration of the state is exacerbated.

The war in Sierra Leone can be defined as a new war. The RUF wanted to delegitimize the government, and were not fighting for territory but for recognition as a legitimate political opposition to the existing government. The film "Blood Diamond" gives us a sense of the tactics used in the war. Amputations, physical and mental abuse, and other terror tactics were used to take over villages and cities. At least one side, the RUF, were a non-uniformed combatant group. The targets were mostly civilians, not a national army or uniformed fighting force.

In discussing new wars in context, resources play a central role. Many new wars are fought over or sustained by the presence and control over natural resources. In Sierra Leone, the main resource was diamonds. Professor Shaw discusses the trade of diamonds, partly controlled by the RUF, which helped fund the conflict and sustained it. The RUF controlled diamond trade provided the group with money and power to in turn, control the people and carry out their missions. Resources are also a primary reason new wars are/have to be discussed in a global setting. Extra-national players are often involved in the trade, smuggling or control efforts of resources. Large international crime rings for resources such as drugs and diamonds are prominent in the world today, ensuring that new wars within countries like Sierra Leone are not fought without outside influence. Even big businesses and Multinational corporations dealing with resources such as diamonds, or colton from the Democratic Republic of Congo, continue to mine and obtain these resources, either with or without the knowledge that they help fuel the local conflict. International crime influencing the funding of "new wars" was demonstrated in "Blood Diamond," with the illegal trade of diamonds playing a significant role in funding and arming the RUF soldiers.

However, international influence or involvement in a new war need not be of an aggressive or negative nature. The way we most commonly and transparently see international actors becoming involved in local conflicts is through global humanitarian efforts and government interventions. Large scale UN relief efforts, or government sanctions against a local group like the RUF or Lord’s Army in Uganda, demonstrate how wars today are not confined to the borders of the country they’re being fought in. International assistance and involvement greatly shapes the way war is run. Humanitarian organizations have highlighted the atrocities of new wars, enabling victims, who are usually the masses, to gain some access at times to alternatives; these might include fleeing the country and receiving asylum as a refugee elsewhere or finding shelter in an internally displaced people camp (IDP). The positive role international involvement in new wars has played is most distinctly illustrated simply by the increased awareness and attention given to victims and perpetrators by more people around the world, a form of attention that was relatively absent on a global scale for old wars.

Thus, new wars are the prominent, and possibly only form of war occurring today. As Kaldor asserts, in view of this shift in warfare, there should come a shift in addressing and tackling it by both local and international actors. The three cases of Nigeria, the DRC and Colombia provide insight into recent new wars, and how they were handled locally and internationally. They also give some insight into the role of resources and the impact of globalization on them. Hence, these wars, like the one in Sierra Leone, demonstrate clear characteristics put forward by Kaldor as definitive of New Wars, thus providing clear depictions of how and why new wars occur.