Trends and fluctuations in Roman war and expansion

The habit of constant war was as old as the Republic. There were very few years in the Republic's history when its forces saw no fighting (Harris 1979, 9–10; Oakley above, pp. 14–16). Yet the character of that warfare and the military commitment that it required underwent great changes during the Republic's history.

In the period down to 264, when the Romans' military activity was confined to Italy, their warfare had an annual rhythm. For the most part it was restricted to the summer campaigning season. An army was levied, marched out to fight for a few months, and then returned to be discharged. The command was normally held by the chief magistrates of the state—usually the consuls, but sometimes instead consular tribunes or a dictator. Sometimes they campaigned separately, but often they combined their forces.

The First Punic War (264–241) brought some important changes. During the war the Romans had to maintain a permanent military presence in Sicily all the year round, and for the first time they mobilized large war fleets. After their victory, the Carthaginians

[1] Cf. Doyle 1986, especially chs 1 and 6, on the inadequacy of what he classifies as 'dispositional, metrocentric theories' of imperialism, which seek to explain it simply in terms of internal drives to expansion within the dominant 'metropoles'. His principal instances of such theories are Hobson, Lenin and Schumpeter, but he cites Harris as a more recent example (p. 24).

ceded Sicily (241) and Sardinia (238). What initial arrangements the Romans made for the control of these territories is uncertain, but from 227 two additional praetors were elected annually for this purpose.

The Second Punic War (218–201) made unprecedented demands. Casualties were very heavy, particularly in the opening years: on a conservative estimate, some 50,000 citizens may have been lost in 218–215—one-sixth of all adult males and over 5 per cent of the citizen population.[1] The war was conducted in several theatres—Italy, Spain, Sicily, Illyria and Greece, and eventually Africa—and in some of these the Romans had to deploy a number of armies. Thus in total the Romans mobilized far greater forces than they had ever done before, as the detailed information given by Livy shows. From 214 to 206, twenty or more legions were in service. Many of the legions were kept in being for long periods.[2] Numerous additional commanders were required besides the two annually elected consuls. This need was met by using praetors, by proroguing magistrates after the end of their term of office (a device which had been employed occasionally since 326, and from now on was to be commonplace), and by electing private citizens to special commands (*privati cum imperio*—a new expedient, which after 199 was hardly used again until the late Republic).

In the first third of the second century, the Romans' military commitments, although less than they had been during the Second Punic War, were still much greater than before that war. The period saw three great wars against eastern kings: Philip V of Macedon (200–196), Antiochus III (191–188) and Philip's son Perseus (171–168). There was also much warfare in northern Italy: it was in this period that Rome completed the conquest of the peninsula up to the foot of the Alps. The victory over Carthage had left Rome with another permanent commitment overseas, in Spain, where Rome controlled the Baetis valley and the Mediterranean coastal strip. Maintaining and extending their control in Spain involved much fighting during these

[1] Cf. Brunt 1971, 54, 419–20. Compare the First World War: for the seven original belligerent nations, soldiers killed and dying of wounds during the war amounted to 2 per cent of the total population (Wright 1965, 664).

[2] For numbers of legions and length of service see Toynbee 1965, ii. 79–80, 647–51; Brunt 1971, 400, 417–22.

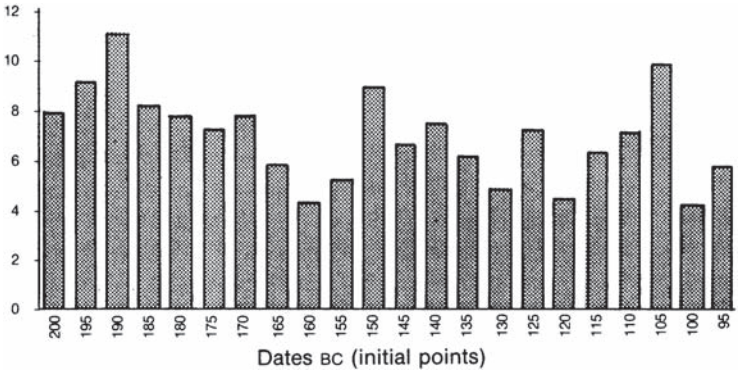

Figure 2.1 Legions in service by five-year periods, 200–91 BC (source: Brunt 1971, 422–34)

years, but by 178 the Romans had succeeded in extending their authority over the central plains. Once again Livy supplies us with detailed information on legionary deployment. The average number of legions in service in 200–168 was 8.75; in twelve of these years ten or more legions were deployed (Afzelius 1944, 34–61; Brunt 1971, 422–6; fig. 2.1). Those who fought in northern Italy might serve for just one or two campaigns, but for the eastern wars service was for the duration, and in Spain legions were kept in post for long periods, with individual soldiers being gradually replaced. Some evidence suggests that six years' service in Spain became accepted as entitling a man to discharge (Brunt 1971, 400–1). As always down to the Social War, contingents of Italian allies served alongside the legions; in this period the ratio of allied to Roman troops varied from 2:1 to parity (Afzelius 1944, 62–79; Brunt 1971, 681–4). The main commands in the East and in northern Italy went to the consuls. From 197 the two Spanish commands were normally assigned to praetors (increased then to six per year).

After 167 we lack Livy's full narrative, but it is clear that the years from 167 to 154 were comparatively peaceful. Spain still had permanent legionary garrisons and in most (if not all) years legions were deployed in northern Italy, but both regions saw little fighting. Elsewhere there were minor wars, in Corsica and Sardinia (163–2), Dalmatia (156–5) and Transalpine Gaul (154). According to

Polybius (32. 13. 6–7), one factor which led to the Dalmatian war was the Romans' concern lest 'the Italians should be made effeminate by the long peace, it being now the twelfth year since the war with Perseus'.

Serious warfare broke out again in Spain from 153, and in 149–146 the Romans found themselves fighting major wars on a number of other fronts as well—against Carthage (ending with the destruction of the city in 146) and in Macedonia and Greece. These wars led to the creation of two new provinces, Africa and Macedonia. From now on a legionary garrison was maintained in Macedonia to defend the province against the neighbouring tribes, but it saw little action until the late second century. Heavy fighting (much of it unsuccessful for the Romans) continued in Spain until 133, but thereafter the Spanish garrisons were comparatively inactive. The later years of the second century saw a number of wars in various regions, two of which led to the creation of new provinces (Asia after the war against Aristonicus in 133–129, and Transalpine Gaul after the wars of the late 120s). However, it was not until the closing years of the century that Rome was again involved in major wars on a number of fronts, most notably against the Cimbri and their allies.

Without Livy, we lack detailed information on legions from 166, but Brunt has made a plausible reconstruction of the annual deployment of legions (Brunt 1971, 426–34; see fig. 2.1).[1] It is clear that by and large the Romans' military commitment in this period was rather lower than in the early years of the second century. The overall annual average for 167–91 is 6.48. Only in seven or eight of these years were there ten or more legions in service.

Harris and North present us with a model of the Roman social system as geared to continuous war and requiring for its smooth working that a regular flow of the opportunities and profits of war should be maintained. The reality, as briefly sketched above, is rather more complex. It is true that there were few years when Rome was nowhere at war. However, the levels of Roman belligerence fluctuated very greatly. Periods of intense warfare, often on several

[1] Brunt arbitrarily assumes that two legions were deployed in Northern Italy every year down to 135, but thereafter only when a military presence is explicitly attested there. This may mean that some of his estimates are too high for years before 135 and too low thereafter.

fronts, alternated with comparatively peaceful periods with only a few minor campaigns, and sometimes, as in 167–154, these peaceful interludes were quite extended. Warfare had once been the consuls' summer activity, but by the second century most commands lasted longer, and every year the Romans deployed forces in a number of regions, some of which they were committed to garrisoning permanently. In some periods these garrison forces were involved in heavy fighting, but in others they remained comparatively inactive (as in Spain from 178 to 154 and after 133). Overall, the years 167–91 saw a rather lower level of military activity and required somewhat lower force levels than the preceding period.

The momentum of Roman expansion was by no means constant. In the Greek East, the Romans preferred to maintain indirect hegemony and avoided permanent military commitments as long as possible. They were constantly embroiled in the affairs of the cities and kingdoms, but it was only very rarely that a problem became so critical that they deemed it necessary to despatch an armed force. Normally they limited themselves to what they could achieve by diplomatic means and by the weight of their authority. In the resultant game of brinkmanship, some eastern powers succeeded in defying Roman orders without adverse consequences. Thus Ptolemy VI Philometor ignored Roman instructions that he should hand over Cyprus to his brother, and Antiochus V Epiphanes flagrantly disregarded his treaty obligations not to maintain a fleet or keep elephants. After Antiochus' death, when the kingdom was weak, a Roman embassy had the ships burnt and the elephants hamstrung, but, when the head of the embassy was murdered, no punishment was exacted, although in the Romans' eyes there was no more fitting ground for war than offences against embassies.[1]

Even in the West, the Roman advance was in some respects surprisingly patchy. The subjugation of northern Italy was largely completed by about 170, but the Alps and their foothills remained outside Roman control. Although troops were frequently stationed in northern Italy thereafter, they seem to have engaged in little fighting and for the most part Rome left the Alpine tribes alone until

[1] For the events see Gruen 1984, 655–65 and 699–702, with my comments at Rich 1985a, 96.

Augustus undertook and rapidly completed their conquest. The provincial boundaries established for Transalpine Gaul after the wars of the late 120s remained unaltered until Caesar's ambition to rival Pompey led him to undertake the conquest of the rest of Gaul. Although at least two legions were always maintained in Spain, expansion there virtually ceased after 133, and the conquest of the north of the Iberian peninsula was left to Augustus.

It is not the case that the benefits of successful war were maintained in constant supply. The most conspicuous disruption was the ending of land settlement. The two chief benefits which ordinary Roman citizens got from warfare were booty and land. From the fifth century the Roman government had confiscated land from defeated states in Italy, and much of that land had been distributed in land allotments. This practice played an important part in ending the social conflicts which troubled the early Republic and maintaining political stability thereafter. However, once the conquest of Italy was complete, the confiscation of land ceased, and as a result land allotment also ceased, about 170. The result was that an unsatisfied demand for land built up which in due course was met by tribunes and generals in spite of senatorial opposition. All this could have been avoided if the Roman government had been willing to make land allotments overseas, but they would not contemplate this solution, and stoutly opposed the few proposals of this kind which were made, notably Gaius Gracchus' attempt to refound Carthage. It was not until the dictatorship of Caesar that a large-scale programme of overseas settlement was undertaken.

Although none of the élite's benefits ceased altogether, a level flow was not maintained, as the record of triumphs shows. Information on triumphs is provided both by ancient historical writers and by the *Fasti Triumphales,* an inscribed list of triumphs set up at Rome under Augustus (Degrassi 1947, 64–87, 534–71). The data for the early centuries is of doubtful authenticity, and a lacuna in the *Fasti* for 155–129 means that some uncertainty subsists about those years.[1] However, it is clear that there were two peaks, in

[1] The lacuna, which is about 33 lines long, probably listed fourteen or fifteen triumphs, of which seven are known from other sources (Degrassi 1947, 557–9). Over the period 160–131 triumphs probably averaged six per decade.

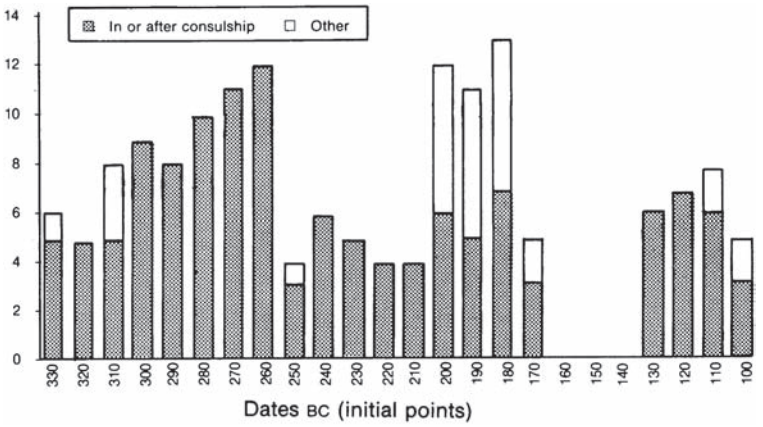

Figure 2.2 Triumphs and ovations per decade, 330–91 BC

the late fourth and early third century, and in the first thirty or so years of the second century (fig. 2.2). The first peak starts with the period of the conquest of Italy and extends into the first part of the First Punic War. The second peak corresponds to the years of heavy and largely successful warfare in northern Italy, Spain and the Greek East. The decline in the level of military activity in the rest of the second century, which we have already noticed, is matched by a sharp drop in the number of triumphs: 39 triumphs were celebrated in the years 200–167, an average of 1.15 per year, whereas in 166–91 only 46 triumphs were celebrated, an annual average of 0.6.

Closer inspection reveals significant differences between the two peak periods. In the first period, most triumphs were held in or following consulships, and the rest were celebrated by dictators. In the second, the number of consular triumphs was not much higher than later in the century. The high total in the period 200–167 was the result of an exceptionally large number of non-consular celebrations—eighteen in, or following, praetorships, and two by men who had commanded in Spain as *privati cum imperio*. Before 200 only one praetor had earned a triumph (in 241). The new, wider range of Rome's commitments brought unprecedented opportunities to win glory at this earlier stage of the political career, particularly in Spain, where twelve of the praetorian triumphs were earned. It is true that the two *privati* and seven of the Spanish praetors were awarded not a full

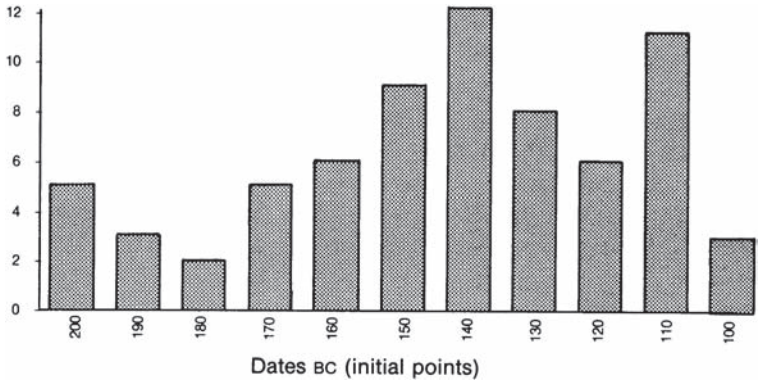

Figure 2.3 Consuls assigned overseas provinces per decade, 200–91 BC

curule triumph but the lesser honour of an *ovatio* (in which the victor entered the city on foot or on horseback, rather than in a chariot), and a joke in Plautus suggests that there may have been some contemporary cynicism about the frequency of triumphs.[1] Nonetheless, the value placed on these honours is confirmed by the success of those who won them in subsequent elections to the consulship (Harris 1979, 32, 262–3; Richardson 1986, 105–6).

After 167, praetors' opportunities for triumphs were sharply reduced. In the period 166–91 only six men are known to have triumphed after their praetorship.[2] This change is related to the overall downturn in military activity in this period, and in particular to a shift in the way in which the consuls themselves were deployed (fig. 2.3).[3] In the period 200–168 the consuls normally campaigned in northern Italy. The great eastern wars were conducted by consuls, but otherwise only two consuls were sent overseas in those years (Cato to Spain in 195 and Tiberius Gracchus to Sardinia in 177).

[1] Plautus, *Bacchides,* 1067–75. The slave Chrysalus represents himself metaphorically as bringing an army home loaded with booty, and then adds: 'But, audience, don't be surprised if I don't hold a triumph: it's so common, it's not worth it'.

[2] The names of a few more are probably lost in the lacuna for 155–129.

[3] The data are collected in *MRR.*

The completion of the conquest of northern Italy led to a change in practice. The loss of Livy means that our information on consular provinces is defective, but it is clear that it became much commoner for consuls to be sent overseas: 57 consuls are attested as holding overseas provinces in the period 167–91. Consuls sent overseas normally engaged in warfare.[1] The senate's usual practice seems to have been to send one of the consuls to wherever the main overseas trouble spot happened to be. Thus in fourteen of the years between 153 and 133, when Spain saw continued heavy fighting, one of the Spanish provinces was assigned to a consul. So in most years the best opportunities for winning glory went to consuls, and it was only exceptionally fortunate praetors who had the chance of a triumph.[2]

The consuls who were sent overseas went out to perform the traditional task of a consul, command in war. But the majority of consuls in this period still stayed behind in Italy. Although presence in Italy is positively attested for only about thirty, we can assume that most of those whose province is unrecorded also stayed in Italy, since some record is likely to survive of overseas activity. Yet only eleven triumphs were won in northern Italy in that period,[3] and only two other consuls are attested as having campaigned there.[4] Some consuls are known to have engaged in road-building (Wiseman 1970), and some appear to have spent all their year of office in

[1] A possible exception is M.Porcius Cato in 118: he may have been assigned Africa to carry out a diplomatic mission, the settlement of Numidia after Micipsa's death.

[2] Richardson 1975 clearly sets out the changing patterns in triumph-holding, but unnecessarily posits a stricter policy in the senate on granting triumphs to explain the drop in praetorian celebrations. The law passed between 180 and 143 requiring 5,000 enemy killed may have been the initiative of the tribune who proposed it rather than senatorial policy (as Richardson supposes), and, since most commanders would probably have had no scruples about claiming so many dead, it need not have had any significant effect on the frequency of triumphs.

[3] In Liguria: 166 (two), 158, 155. Against the Salassi: 143 (unauthorized: see below p. 57 n. 1). In and beyond the Julian Alps: 129, 117 (two), 115. Against the invading Cimbri: 101 (two).

[4] C.Papirius Carbo was defeated by the Cimbri in 113 (*MRR i.* 535). L. Licinius Crassus defeated raiders in 95 and claimed a triumph, but his colleague vetoed it on the grounds that his achievements were too insignificant *(MRR* ii. 11).

Rome (for example, Scaevola in 133, Fannius in 122 and Marius and Valerius Flaccus in 100). How the rest spent their time is a matter of conjecture, but it seems likely that most spent some time in northern Italy in effect on garrison duty, commanding an army but not fighting. This inactivity of the consuls in Italy is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that opportunities for war lay ready to hand in the as yet unconquered Alps.[1]

Thus the picture presented by Harris and North of irresistible pressures impelling the Romans to constant warfare and expansion is too simple. The levels of Roman belligerence fluctuated; fundamental changes took place in the nature of their military commitments; and in the later second century at least, opportunities for war and expansion were often missed and many consuls did not engage in warfare at all. Roman expansion was a patchy, untidy business, and we must take full account of this when seeking to explain the processes which were at work. The benefits of successful war were real enough and undoubtedly do help to explain the Romans' readiness to resort to war so often. However, there were also countervailing factors, which may in part account for the patchiness which we have observed. Two such factors were pointed out by Sherwin-White in his critiques of Harris: manpower limitations and aristocratic rivalry (Sherwin-White 1980, 178–9; 1984, 13).

The Romans' ability to call on vast reserves of citizen and allied manpower was a factor of fundamental importance in their success. It was this that enabled them to survive the crisis of the Hannibalic War. Their manpower commitments in the second century were less than those that had been required in that war, but still very heavy.[2] It would have been only prudent for the senate to seek to conserve manpower and to hesitate before undertaking new long-term manpower commitments. As Harris himself noted (1979, 144–5), this may help to explain why Macedonia was not made a province in 167, immediately after the overthrowing of the monarchy. It is commonly supposed that the maintenance of a property qualification for legionary service led to a manpower crisis in the later second

[1] Consular inactivity in Italy is stressed as an objection to Harris by Sherwin-White 1980, 178; 1984, 12.

[2] For estimates of numbers of citizens serving and of the proportion of the citizen body in arms in 218–91, see Brunt 1971, 416–34; Hopkins 1978, 33.

century as more and more citizens fell below the qualifying level. If this were true, it could have played an important part in bringing about the lower level of belligerence which we have observed in this period.[1] However, I have argued elsewhere that there is no reason to suppose that the numbers of qualified men declined steeply enough to lead to a shortage (Rich 1983).[2] There is, though, evidence of contemporary concern, not about the property qualification, but about whether the peasantry were bearing and rearing enough children.[3] Such fears were exaggerated, but they may have had some effect on decisions about wars and expansion.

As Harris has admirably shown, the traditions of their class drove Roman aristocrats to seek success and glory, and military achievements were the most highly prized. However, those same traditions would ensure that aristocrats would do all they could to prevent their rivals stealing a march on them. In the second century on average about ten senators may have become eligible every year for the six praetorships, and probably only about one in five of those senators who survived to the requisite age attained the consulship (cf. Hopkins and Burton 1983, 47–8). In that century only about one in four consuls celebrated a triumph during or after their year of office, and, as we have seen, after the early years of the century those who drew Italy in the ballot for provinces stood a much lower chance. Only a minority of praetorian provinces involved the command of an army,[4] and, as we have seen, except in the period 200–170 praetorian triumphs were a rarity. Common sense suggests that the majority who stood to be disappointed of the highest prizes

[1] Cf. Harris 1979, 49–50. Here and at pp. 36–8 he does show some recognition of the decline in belligerence in the course of the second century, but he fails to recognize the importance of the phenomenon or offer an adequate explanation.

[2] There is no foundation for the widely accepted view that the qualification was progressively reduced in response to the supposed shortage: Rich 1983, 305–16.

[3] Rich 1983, 299–305. The decline in the numbers registered at the census between 164/3 and 136/5 may have lent colour to such fears.

[4] Every year one or two praetors were retained at Rome. After the Hannibalic War Sicily and Sardinia were normally garrisoned only with allied troops, if at all, and the same was true of the new provinces of Africa from 146 and Asia from 129.

would not make it easy for the minority to win them, and this presumption is confirmed by the sources. Livy and other writers are full of stories of controversies in the senate over, for example, whether a commander should have his term extended or be granted a triumph. It is reasonable to suppose that this factor also operated as a brake on the initiation of war.[1]

The decision-making process

In theory Roman wars could not be begun unless authorized by the assembly of the people. In practice, however, only a minority of wars were submitted to the assembly for approval. Only about eight war votes by the assembly are known in the period from the First Punic War to the end of the Republic. There may have been some others of which no record has survived, but probably not many. Rome fought many wars in the period 218–167, but Livy records only four popular war votes in those years; since he takes scrupulous note of these, it is unlikely that he passed over others. A glance at the list of those wars for which popular votes are attested suggests that it was normally only before wars against major powers, such as Carthage and the Hellenistic kings, that the assembly was consulted (Rich 1976, 13–17; cf. Harris 1979, 41–2, 263).

Proposals for war were generally only put to the assembly after they had been approved in the senate.[2] Only once do we hear of objections being raised in the assembly, namely against the Second

[1] North replies to this objection as follows (North 1981, 6):

> In the middle republic, if one faction failed to gain a particular command or opportunity, there was always next year to hope for better things. It must have been far more important to all factions to keep a regular flow of opportunities and profits, than to attempt to exclude rivals from command.

This seems to me to disregard the strongly individualistic nature of Roman political culture, and recalls the misguided view of Roman politics as dominated by factions which North himself has recently dubbed the 'frozen waste' theory (North 1990).

[2] Apart from the First Punic War (see below), when the issue was strictly not whether war should be declared but whether help should be sent to Messana, the only recorded exception is a not very serious proposal for war against Rhodes in 167 (Livy, 45. 21).

Conclusion

Harris and his followers have exploded the old doctrine of 'defensive imperialism', but what they have offered in its place is also too one-sided. It is true that the Romans fought a war somewhere in almost every year, but at least by the second century there was no need for them to seek wars out: their far-flung imperial commitments ensured that there was generally no shortage of wars for them to fight.[1] Moreover, as we have seen, the pattern of Roman warfare and expansion was a good deal patchier than Harris' simple model implies: the nature of the Romans' military activity and commitments changed greatly over time, and in many regions there were long periods which saw few wars and little or no expansion. The wealth and prestige which success in war conferred certainly help to explain the Romans' readiness to fight, but there were countervailing factors. In particular, the ethos of aristocratic competition had more complex consequences than Harris allows. The likely participants and their friends might be impelled towards war by the prospect of the booty and glory to be won, but this same prospect might impel their rivals to thwart them. Due attention must be paid also to the workings of the decision-making process. Until the age of Caesar, the most important wars, which marked the crucial stages in Rome's advance, were the product of decisions taken in the senate, a body which on such matters is likely to have been swayed more by considerations of morality and the public interest than by personal advantage.

Roman warfare and imperialism were complex phenomena, for which no monocausal explanation will be adequate. Any attempt to provide a more satisfactory account must take the measure of this

[1] The frequency with which the Romans fought wars is in itself not so very remarkable. As Finley remarks (1985, 67), 'Athens…was at war on average more than two years out of every three between the Persian wars and the defeat…at Chaeronea in 338 BC, and…it never enjoyed ten consecutive years of peace in all that period.' The history of several major powers in modern times shows a high frequency of wars, and there is a clear correlation between states' political importance and their proneness to war (Wright 1965, 220–2, 650–5; Singer and Small 1972, 258–87).

complexity. In such an account fear, greed and glory will all play their part.[1]

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[1] This chapter has profited greatly from the observations of those who attended the original seminar and from Tim Cornell's comments on a later draft.

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