Unit 1: Lecture B - Historical examples of the relationship between war and culture

We have a very brief window of time to examine a huge subject.  This brief lecture will present a few historical examples of the relationship between war and culture, examples we simply do not have time to examine in detail in these brief units.  Even these few examples represent only a fraction of the examples we could explore.

Spartan culture placed the highest consideration upon service in battle.  Spartan women told their men to come back “with their shield or on it”; in other words, win or die.  Two Spartans at the time of Thermopylae illustrate this importance of service in battle, two Spartans who missed the battle.  The lives of these two men were destroyed as a result.  Pantite had been ordered to Thessaly on a diplomatic mission at the time of the final encounter at Thermopylae.  Though he missed the battle as a result of orders, both he and members of his community viewed his absence with disgrace and dishonor.  He felt personal dishonor, but his community shunned and ostracized him with oneidos – public disgrace.  He later hanged himself because of this dishonor; the reason for his failure to take part in the battle did not matter.  Paul Cartledge, in Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the World, page, 156, says, “Sparta was an extreme case of an ‘honor and shame culture, so it was not only the public disgrace heaped upon him but the shame he felt inwardly that prompted him to take his own life.”  Another warrior to miss that day’s fighting was Aristodamus.  Aristodamus, along with another warrior, Eurytus, suffered an eye inflammation and was temporarily blind at the time of the battle.  Eurytus refused to miss the battle and had his servant carry him to his place on the battlefield.  Eurytus went to battle blind – and died.  Aristodamus chose to sit out the battle because of his blindness; he greatly regretted this decision.  No Spartan would give him light to make a fire, without which, he could not make due sacrifice to the gods.  His fellows ‘sent him to Coventry’ – deprived him of talk, ostracized him.  He was also publicly labeled tresas (the Trembler) – adjudged officially to have acted the coward – for no excuse, even blindness, was acceptable.  Eurytus died as a result of his decision, but he had died in battle; he had died an honorable death.  Aristodamus had chosen dishonorably that day.  He attempted to redeem himself at Plataea in 479, but his actions continued to smack of dishonorable behavior.  He was allowed a front-line fighting position, but during the battle, he broke ranks and committed the act he should have chosen earlier – dying in battle.  While he fought bravely, his breaking of rank was dishonorable because his absence in the battle line put his fellow soldiers at grave risk.  In an attempt to regain his honor, he had committed another grievous and dishonorable act, according to the standards of his culture.

So-called primitive warfare offers another clear illustration of cultural applications of warfare.  Two early theorists of the concept of primitive war, Quincy Wright (1890-1970) and Harry Turney-High (1899-1982), point out that motives for civilized, modern warfare are economic and political; primitives fought for different reasons – for personal, psychological and social reasons, such as pursuit of personal prestige and status, initiation to manhood, and revenge.  Surrender was not an option in primitive warfare because wounded or captured adult male combatants were nearly always immediately killed as part of the primitive conduct of war.  If not immediately killed upon capture, they might be saved for later ritual torture and sacrificial death, as with Iroquois and pre-Columbians.  A few primitive peoples, such as Meru herdsmen of Kenya, would ransom captives for cattle, but killing prisoners, especially males, was the more common practice, with rituals of mutilation or cannibalism providing significant trophies symbolizing honor and humiliation (Keeley, pp. 9, 84-85, 101).  Primitive peoples of today still practice ritual warfare and ritual ceremonies of initiation to manhood, revenge, prestige, status, and honor.  In many cultures, men who fail as warriors are reviled as women.  Indeed, an historical purpose of war was to make men from boys.  According to the Congo Fang people, unarmed men are not considered men and are told to go and rear children.  Upon successful ambush, Fang men come home shouting, “We are real men, we have shot a man, we are real men.”  Masai men cannot marry until they have blooded their spear.  The Karamoho youth must distinguish himself in war before he may marry.  Male members of Papuan Gulf tribes must become warriors before they can marry.  The Naga warrior must present a skull or scalp before he may marry.  If a member of the North American Creek nation had not been on a war party, he bore no title and was considered a boy.  According to Tacitus, “Many noble youths, if the land of their birth is stagnating in a protracted peace, deliberately seek out other tribes, where some war is afoot.  The Germans have no taste for peace; renown is easier won among perils, and you cannot maintain a large body of companion except by violence and war” (Harry Holbert Turney-High.  Primitive War: Its Practices and Concepts.  Columbia: University of South  Carolina Press. 1949, p 145.  .  Julie Wheelwright. Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who

Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Happiness.  London: Pandora, 1989.  Franco Fornari.  The Psychoanalysis of War.  Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975, p. 46.  Maurice R. Davie.  The Evolution of War: A Study of Its Role in Early Societies.  Dover Publications, 2003).Opportunities for war were welcomed and sought in these cultures.  Warfare was not shunned or avoided except under extreme circumstances.  Native Americans and later colonial Americans were no different in their acceptance of war.

Primitive warfare was also limited, not total. This important ideological aspect of warfare was a source of great misunderstanding between Native Americans and Europeans and colonists.  The overall aim of western warfare has been the total defeat and destruction of the enemy – war without mercy became the standard military technique of Europeans abroad.  Europeans and therefore colonists had a tradition of total warfare, the annihilation of the enemy with the goal of complete subjugation of the enemy or capture of enemy lands.  Native American warfare had much more limited goals and much less loss of life.  They did not seek enemy subjugation or perhaps control of enemy lands.  Instances of these ideological differences in warfare are scattered throughout the Wars for Empire.  These instances also illustrate that perhaps “primitive” is not an accurate description of warfare on the North American continent. Tom Holm (in “American Indian Warfare: The Cycles of Conflict and the Militarization of Native North America,” in A Companion to American Indian History, eds. Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury.  (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 2004.) offered a look at the use of the word primitive to describe Native American warfare.   According to Holm, long-accepted ideas about Native American warfare need re-analysis.  These ideas promote Native American warfare as “primitive,” meaning that it was illogical, inconclusive, and chaotic, and that it had no formal rules of engagement or codes of conduct, making it uncivilized and savage.  This ideological view further promoted European-style warfare and European conquest, then, as a civilizing process.  Holm discussed the South Dakota Crow Creek Massacre of 1325 which involved the deaths of 486 people, including women and children, to suggest that Native Americans had at one time used total warfare, perhaps over food and land, but had apparently decided the cost in lives of total warfare was too high and rejected it in favor of more limited warfare.  For the most part, Native Americans did not wage war to annihilate others or to colonize territories of the conquered (though the Pequots did subjugate nearby tribes to a certain extent for trade advantage).  Many groups have examples of total war in their past and settled on “complicit partnership” warfare instead of total decisive and destructive warfare.  The Crow Creek massacre is clearly an example of state, not primitive, warfare.  In other words, rather than practicing what some military historians call primitive warfare, these groups had experienced and rejected total warfare as a means to a political end.  Native American groups who joined the Puritans against the Pequots in 1637 were shocked at the level of death and protested to their Puritan partners.  Under Mason, the Puritans were intent on complete annihilation of the Pequots, including women and children, and killed all who surrendered.  This approach to warfare went against the ideology of their Mohegan allies, who abandoned the battle in light of what they considered unnecessary atrocity and destruction of human life on the part of their Puritan partners.  This clearly illustrated the different ideology concerning warfare that existed between the Native Americans and the Europeans.  Europeans reintroduced total warfare onto indigenous peoples of North America during the sixteenth century.  In the four hundred years that followed, indigenous peoples had no alternative but total decisive warfare.  In the process, Europeans adapted some of the brutality of the warfare of the primitive peoples they encountered on the American continents.  These ideological differences in views about warfare between Europeans, colonists, and North American Natives, in part or in sum, do not detract from the fact that these cultures and peoples all saw warfare as a large and necessary part of life.  Warfare was a common occurrence and was often sought for various reasons.  The Europeans and colonists sought invasion and conquest with objectives of annihilation or subjugation of peoples and control of land and other resources.  Native Americans sought what other tribal peoples had long sought – captives, prestige, honor, recognition of manhood.

In Japan’s Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945, Ed Drea illustrates the relationship between war and culture in Japan during these years.  He presents the ongoing conflict and debate in Japan during this time between traditionalists who wanted to build the Japanese military around the cultural values of warrior spirit and the non-traditionalists who wanted to invest in technology to compete with potential western enemies.  Their logic was that their warrior spirit would overwhelm the enemy and result in enough of a defeat early on to deter enemies from further conflict; in other words, their warrior spirit would break the will of the enemy.  Accomplishing this would eliminate the need for all the resources and technology needed to fight a war of attrition, as western countries were planning.  This resulted in training and battlefield tactics requiring great sacrifice on the part of the individual soldier, ending in very large death tolls in battles, such as the Pacific Theatre battles in World War II.

Indeed, western countries did develop technology as part of their war plans.  We can return to the Pacific Theatre in World War II for an example.  Scientists had been working on the Manhattan Project to develop nuclear weapons since early in the war, thinking that such a weapon would probably be used in the European Theatre.  Germany surrendered before the weapon was ready, and it was used in the Pacific Theatre instead.  Its devastation was stunning, the most destructive weapon in the history of warfare.  Its use brought on the Cold War and changed the face of war from the moment of its use.

These few examples illustrate the intimate relationship between war and culture.  We will continue to explore this relationship in the upcoming units, examining the American Civil War and the Great War.  Though many facets of this relationship exist, we will limit our examination to a few areas, such as death and shell shock.