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Western (?) Stories of War Origins

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Introduction

War is a multicausal phenomenon, not only in the oft-noted sense that a variety of factors contribute to the making of a war, but also in the perhaps less obvious sense that there are multifarious causal paths to war. Some of the more ideographically-minded are adamant, therefore, that ‘the only investigation of the causes of war that is intellectually respectable is that of the unique origins . . . of the particular past wars’. And even one of the more nomothetically-minded has conceded, some dissenting voices notwithstanding, that ‘the hope that there are a few necessary conditions that must always be present in order for war to occur is probably not going to be fulfilled’. Indeed, those factors which are commonly considered as contributory causes of war – for example, misperception, domestic instability, the ‘cult of the offensive’, to name but a few – are neither sufficient by themselves, nor are they even necessary to bring about a war. To the extent that these factors are deemed to have been necessary elements in causing some specific wars of the past, they must be treated as having been only contingently so; and there are very many contingencies resulting in the outbreak of war. None the less, it is one of the main contentions of this chapter that there are some ‘family resemblances’ among the narratives, or stories, of war origins. The purpose of this chapter is to expound such a claim and outline some of its implications.

The approach followed here, it is important to note, is not one of generalising from a number of outbreaks of war, but one that investigates the form which the accounts of war origins are conventionally made to take. An attempt to generalise from a number of outbreaks of war is exemplified by Donald Kagan’s On the Origins of War. This example is
not followed here because generalisation from different wars is problematic where each case yields a number of plausible causal narratives; it is probable that those who succeed in generalising, like Kagan himself, have only read or selected similar stories about different cases. Instead, the approach of this chapter has been inspired by two literary–theoretical sources. One is the writings of Hayden White, who is rightly famous for his argument that history may be narrated as a comedy, tragedy, romance, epic, or satire. The other is the work of Vladimir Propp, according to whom the variety of moves made by the characters in Russian fairytales is limited in number, there are thirty-one of them at most, and these always appear in the same sequence. Applying some of their insights to the war-origins literature, I will argue below that although stories of war origins, when looked at in detail, are quite diverse, such stories, taken together, are not unlimited in their variety. What reduces the variety, and what functions it serves to tell a story within the apparently delimited range are two central questions to be explored in the following. But, as a preparatory move, I want to tell a story, or a history of an idea, which is relevant to analysing the structure of narrative explanations, yet entirely neglected in the recent epistemological discussion within IR. The story – heuristic in intent – begins with an observation made by Tzvetan Todorov in his *The Conquest of America*.

A remarkable trinity

The world of Christopher Columbus apparently comprised three parts. In his journal of the third voyage, he remarked:

I have come to believe that this is a mighty continent which was hitherto unknown. I am greatly supported in this view by reason of this great river, and by this sea which is fresh, and I am also supported by the statements of Esdras in his fourth book, the sixth chapter, which says that six parts of the world consist of dry land and one part of water. This work was approved by Saint Ambrose in his Hexameron and by Saint Augustine… Moreover I am supported by the statements of several cannibal Indians whom I captured on other occasions, who declared that there was mainland to the west of them.

Commenting on this passage, Todorov observes:

Columbus cites three reasons in support of his conviction: the abundance of fresh water; the authority of the sacred books; the opinion of