WAR

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THE ROLE OF CONFLICT IN CIVILISATION, FROM PRIMATES TO ROBOTS

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INTRODUCTION: FRIEND TO THE UNDERTAKER

I was twenty-three when I almost died in battle.

It was September 26, 1983, around 9:30 in the evening. I was hunched over a manual typewriter in a rented room in Cambridge, England, pounding out the first chapter of my PhD thesis in archaeology. I had just come back from four months of fieldwork in the Greek islands. My work was going well. I was in love. Life was good.

I had no idea that two thousand miles away, Stanislav Petrov was deciding whether to kill me.

Petrov was the deputy chief for combat algorithms at Serpukhov-15, the nerve center of the Soviet Union's early-warning system. He was a methodical man, an engineer, a writer of computer code—and not, fortunately for me, a man given to panic. But when the siren went off a little after midnight (Moscow time), even Petrov leaped out of his chair. A red bulb blinked into life on the giant map of the Northern Hemisphere that filled one wall of the control room. It signaled that a missile had been launched from Montana.

Above the map, red letters came to life, spelling out the worst word Petrov knew: "LAUNCH."

Computers checked and double-checked their data. Again the red lights flashed, this time with more certainty: "LAUNCH—HIGH RELIABILITY."

In a way, Petrov had been expecting this day to come. Six months earlier, Ronald Reagan had denounced Mother Russia as an evil empire. He had threatened that the Americans would build a space-based antimissile shield, ending the mutual balance of terror that had kept the peace for

nearly forty years. And then he had announced that he would speed up the deployment of new missiles, able to hit Moscow with just a five-minute flight. Next, as if to mock the Soviet Union's vulnerability, a South Korean airliner had strayed over Siberia, apparently lost. It took the Soviet air force several hours to find it, and then, as the plane was finally making its way back to neutral airspace, a fighter shot it down. Everyone on board died—including a U.S. congressman. Now, the screen was saying, the imperialists had taken the final step.

And yet . . . Petrov knew that this was not what World War III should look like. An American first strike ought to involve a thousand Minuteman missiles roaring over the North Pole. It should mean an incoming inferno of fire and radiation, a frenzied, all-out effort to destroy the Soviet missiles as they sat in their silos, leaving Moscow with no way to respond. Launching a single missile was insane.

Petrov's job was to follow the rules, to run all the mandated tests for malfunctions, but there was no time for any of that. He had to decide whether the world was about to end.

He picked up the phone. "I am reporting to you," he said to the duty officer on the other end. He tried to sound matter-of-fact. "This is a false alarm."

The duty officer asked no questions, betrayed no anxiety. "Got it."

A moment later, the siren was turned off. Petrov's staff began to relax. The technicians turned to their prescribed routines, systematically searching the circuits for errors. But then—

"LAUNCH."

The red word was back. A second light appeared on the map; another missile was on its way.

And then another bulb lit up. And another, and another, until the entire map seemed to be burning red. The algorithms that Petrov had helped to write now took over. For a moment, the panel above the map went dark. Then it flashed back into life with a new warning. It was announcing the apocalypse.

"MISSILE ATTACK."

The Soviet Union's biggest supercomputer automatically sent this message up the chain of command. Every second now counted. The aging, ailing Yuri Andropov, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was about to be asked to make the most important decision of all time.

You may not be very interested in war, Trotsky is supposed to have said, but war is very interested in you. Cambridge was—and still is—a sleepy university town, far from the seats of power. In 1983, though, it was ringed by air force bases, high on Moscow's list of targets. If the Soviet General Staff had believed Petrov's algorithms, I would have been dead within fifteen minutes, vaporized in a fireball hotter than the surface of the sun. King's College and its choir, the cows grazing as punts drifted by, the scholars in their gowns passing the port at High Table—all would have been blasted into radioactive dust.

If the Soviets had launched only the missiles that they were pointing at military targets (what strategists called a counterforce attack), and if the United States had responded in kind, I would have been one of roughly a hundred million people blown apart, burned up, and poisoned on the first day of the war. But that is probably not what would have happened. Just three months before Petrov's moment of truth, the U.S. Strategic Concepts Development Center had run a war game to see how the opening stages of a nuclear exchange might go. They found that no player managed to draw the line at counterforce attacks. In every case, they escalated to countervalue attacks, firing on cities as well as silos. And when that happened, the first few days' death toll rose to around half a billion, with fallout, starvation, and further fighting killing another half billion in the weeks and months that followed.

Back in the real world, however, Petrov did draw a line. He later admitted to having been so scared that his legs gave way under him, but he still trusted his instincts over his algorithms. Going with his gut, he told the duty officer that this too was a false alarm. The missile attack message was stopped before it worked its way up the chain of command. Twelve thousand Soviet warheads stayed in their silos; a billion of us lived to fight another day.

Petrov's reward for saving the world, however, was not a chestful of medals. It was an official reprimand for submitting messy paperwork and failing to follow protocols (it was the General Secretary's job to decide whether to destroy the planet, not his). He was shuffled sideways to a less sensitive position. From there he took early retirement, had a nervous breakdown, and sank into grim poverty as the Soviet Union fell to pieces and stopped paying its old-age pensioners.*

*In 2004 the San Francisco–based Association of World Citizens awarded Petrov a redwood plaque thanking him for saving the world and gave him a check for $1,000, and in 2013 he also won Germany's Dresden Prize, which comes with €25,000. Further contributions can be made at www.brightstarsound.com.

A world like this—in which Armageddon hung on shoddy engineering and the snap judgments of computer programmers—had surely gone mad. Plenty of people at the time thought so. Within the American alliance, where people were free to do such things, millions marched to ban the bomb, or protested against their governments' aggression, or voted for politicians who promised unilateral disarmament. On the Soviet side, where people were not free to do such things, a few more dissidents than usual took a stand and were betrayed to the secret police.

But none of it made much difference. Western leaders were returned to office with increased majorities and bought even more advanced weapons; Soviet leaders built even more missiles. In 1986 the world's stockpile of nuclear warheads reached its all-time high of more than seventy thousand, and the meltdown of the Soviet nuclear reactor at Chernobyl gave a tiny taste of what might be in store.

People cried out for answers, and on both sides of the Iron Curtain the young turned away from aging, compromised politicians toward louder voices. Speaking for a new post-baby-boom generation, Bruce Springsteen took the greatest of the Vietnam-era protest songs—Edwin Starr's Motown classic "War"—and sent a supercharged cover version back into the top ten:

War!
Huh, good God.
What is it good for?
Absolutely nothing.
Say it, say it, say it . . .

Oooh, war! I despise
Because it means destruction
Of innocent lives
War means tears
To thousands of mothers' eyes
When their sons go to fight
And lose their lives . . .

War!
It ain't nothing but a heartbreaker.
War!
Friend only to the undertaker . . .

*Peace for Our Time**

In this book, I want to disagree. Up to a point, anyway.

War, I will suggest, has not been a friend to the undertaker. War is mass murder, and yet, in perhaps the greatest paradox in history, war has nevertheless been the undertaker's worst enemy. Contrary to what the song says, war *has* been good for something: over the long run, it has made humanity safer and richer. War is hell, but—again, over the long run—the alternatives would have been worse.

This will be a controversial claim, so let me explain what I mean.

There are four parts to the case I will make. The first is that by fighting wars, people have created larger, more organized societies that have reduced the risk that their members will die violently.

This observation rests on one of the major findings of archaeologists and anthropologists over the last century, that Stone Age societies were typically tiny. Chiefly because of the challenges of finding food, people lived in bands of a few dozen, villages of a few hundred, or (very occasionally) towns of a few thousand members. These communities did not need much in the way of internal organization and tended to live on terms of suspicion or even hostility with outsiders.

People generally worked out their differences peacefully, but if someone decided to use force, there were far fewer constraints on him—or, occasionally, her—than the citizens of modern states are used to. Most of the killing was on a small scale, in vendettas and incessant raiding, although once in a while violence might disrupt an entire band or village so badly that disease and starvation wiped all its members out. But because populations were also small, the steady drip of low-level violence took an appalling toll. By most estimates, 10 to 20 percent of all the people who lived in Stone Age societies died at the hands of other humans.

The twentieth century forms a sharp contrast. It saw two world wars, a string of genocides, and multiple government-induced famines, killing a staggering total of somewhere between 100 million and 200 million people. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed more than 150,000 people—probably more people than had lived in the entire world

*It is the kind of detail that only a professor could care about, but peace *for* our time—not peace *in* our time—is what Neville Chamberlain actually said he was bringing home from Munich in 1938.