

War

This is a type of violent social conflict between two or more armed powerful organizations, in which each aims to prevail by destroying the other's power, primarily through the deliberate use of armed force.

As a form of social violence, war is distinguished first by its character as an organized contest. Although war sometimes leads to spontaneous violent acts by individuals, it centers on courses of action planned by collective social actors.

War is also distinguished by the general legitimacy of its violence. It is the only context in which large-scale killing, in other situations highly illegitimate, has become generally legitimate in human society. Indeed in modern society, in which legitimate killing by individuals is limited to very narrow contexts of self-defense, and many states have abandoned the death penalty, war is almost the only context of legitimate killing of any kind.

Because violence is always an extreme form of social power, this social institution concerned with legitimate, organized violence is one of the most important in all societies in which it exists. A society's mode of warfare, the complex of all the social practices concerned with the organization and preparation of war, is always one of its most influential institutional clusters. Indeed the development of warfare has been associated with the emergence of many other social institutions. Thus, the differentiation of a warrior class has been seen as one of the first forms of social stratification – closely linked to the development of gender distinctions since warriors have generally, although not always, been man – and of social class and social status, since warriors often obtained greater material wealth and prestige than other members of society.

The development of warfare has also been linked to the development of the state, as a social institution concerned first of all with the control of violence.

Source: Turner, Bryan (2006): *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 658-660