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A HISTORY OF MODERN WARS OF ATTRITION

Carter Malkasian

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Abbreviations

ANA	Australian National Archives
ANL	Australian National Library
AWM	Australian War Memorial
Bancroft	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
Churchill	Churchill Archives, Churchill College, Cambridge University
Hoover	Hoover Institute, Stanford University
IWM	Imperial War Museum
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London
NARA	United States National Archives and Records Administration
PRO	Public Records Office, United Kingdom
USAMHI	United States Army Military History Institute
USLC	United States Library of Congress

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The Straw Man of Attrition

The term *war of attrition* has many meanings, in fields ranging from biology to economics to warfare. In warfare, the term usually conjures up images of futile and bloody slogging matches, epitomized by the Western Front of the First World War. John Keegan has provided a good example of this imagery:

Like Verdun, the Somme was becoming an arena of attrition, to which fresh divisions were sent in monotonous succession—forty-two by the Germans during July and August—only to waste their energy in bloody struggles for tiny patches of ground, at Guillemont, Ginchy, Morval, Flers, Martinpuich. By 31 July, the Germans on the Somme had lost 160,000, the British and French over 200,000, yet the line had moved scarcely three miles since 1 July.¹

In spite of its popularity, this image of attrition is misleading. In reality, attrition has been effective in warfare and has not usually involved bloody slogging matches.

This book analyzes the nature and effectiveness of attrition in warfare from 1789 to 1991, with special emphasis on the Second World War and the Cold War. Why study attrition? Because, without a study of attrition, there is a gaping hole in the historiography of warfare. Attrition is one method of waging war, comparable to guerrilla, maneuver, or nuclear warfare. These other methods of warfare have received their due share of historical analysis. Many historians have even made the important observation that most attempts to achieve a “decisive” victory actually resulted in protracted wars of attrition, like the strategies of Hitler in the Second World War or Napoleon in the Napoleonic Wars.² But this has not led to any in-depth studies of attrition.

Attrition is a gradual and piecemeal process of destroying an enemy’s military capability. All conceptions of attrition share this primary characteristic. It

has been a reasonably effective method of applying force, often preferable to many other operational strategies. Proponents of attrition include figures central to strategic studies such as the Duke of Wellington, Carl von Clausewitz, Hans Delbrück, William Slim, Douglas MacArthur, Basil Liddell Hart, and Matthew Ridgway. Major turning points in several conflicts were the result of attrition, like Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia, the Battle of Britain, and the Battle of Imphal-Kohima. Nearly every major war has witnessed the implementation of attrition as an operational strategy in at least one campaign. Indeed, in conventional warfare, attrition has been the major alternative to the dominant strategy of seeking a decisive battle. From a practical perspective, this is even more relevant today as total and decisive warfare has been less useful since the advent of nuclear weapons.

It is common for historians to compare the importance of structure versus that of individual agency in the development of a particular concept. Did the course of a concept's development occur inevitably in reaction to the structure of the environment it existed in? Or was the concept's development more affected by the ideas of the individuals who conceived it? Structure relates to the historical context in which a concept existed. For a military concept like attrition, structure refers to the strategic context of the international system—the number of great powers, state of military technology, distribution of economic wealth among countries, balance of military forces, and degree to which wars were fought to total victory. If structure motivated the way a concept developed, then the decisions and ideas of individual people were not very important, if not irrelevant. Because outside factors molded the thoughts of individuals who created the concept, their decisions and thought processes were not critical to the development of that concept. A question that illustrates the divide between structure and individual agency would be, Did the economic effects of the Great Depression or the actions of Adolf Hitler play the decisive role in the development of Nazism?

The conceptual development of attrition was more affected by the thoughts of its individual proponents than by structure. Nevertheless, the usefulness of attrition varied with major changes in the structure of the international system and in warfare itself. Major changes in technology, the number of powers in the international system, and the totality of warfare caused changes in the general usefulness of attrition, first, during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and, second, during the Cold War. However, there is a marked lack of continuity in the strategic thought behind attrition, which structure cannot account for. Each conception of attrition, and especially its success, was more influenced by the persons who formulated it than by previous examples of attrition or the strategic context of the international system. If structure was key, then one would expect that similar conceptions of attrition would be developed under similar structural contexts. But this was not the case. Indeed, the history of attrition is the compartmentalized progression of various individuals' ideas rather than the unbroken evolution of a coherent strategic doctrine. The

uniqueness of each individual's ideas means that a definitive postulation of how wars of attrition are fought cannot be formed. Attrition can only be defined by very general observations, not definitive or universal principles.

This book is primarily an analysis of the strategic thought behind attrition, in other words, how various military commanders, theorists, and political leaders have conceptualized attrition. It seeks to examine why attrition has been implemented, what its goals have been, and how it has been formulated in order to attain those goals. Thereby the conceptual continuity of attrition since 1789 can be addressed. In addition to strategic thought, the book analyzes the effectiveness of attrition. Has attrition successfully attained the goals set for it at a sustainable cost? Together, the analysis of the strategic thought and effectiveness of attrition allows generalizations to be formed concerning how and why attrition has changed from 1789 to 1991.

The book is not concerned with particular battles or wars that could be described as ones of attrition. Just because attrition occurred in a war does not mean that a commander intended it to occur. If attrition is to be comparable to other methods of warfare like maneuver or guerrilla warfare, it must be the expressed intention of a commander rather than an unexpected result of combat. Otherwise, too many conflicts can be described as wars of attrition simply because they seem particularly bloody, futile, or indecisive. Indeed, it can be difficult to think of a single battle that was not characterized by attrition in some way. To prevent this, I consider only cases in which the persons formulating strategy explicitly label that strategy as one of attrition or use a very similar characterization, such as "wearing down the enemy."

The strategic and operational levels of warfare are relevant to the study of attrition.³ Strategy determines a state's political aims and the means to attain them, usually including the way in which the enemy will be forced into submission. Operational strategy is the design for attaining the specific objects set by strategy, in terms of defeating the enemy armed forces or seizing territory, particularly in certain geographical theaters. Generally, strategy addresses the way in which the enemy nation as a whole is to be defeated, whereas operational strategy deals with segments of the enemy armed forces. Attrition has been implemented primarily on the operational level.

Attrition usually has been applied within two different types of strategy. First, it has been applied within a strategy of annihilation, also known as decisive warfare. Wars of annihilation were created through the French Revolution, which mobilized entire nations for war, and the genius of Napoleon, who first devised the strategy. A strategy of annihilation aims at immediately defeating an enemy nation in one decisive battle that routs its armed forces, allowing the victor to impose his will upon the undefended population. Because it seeks utterly to destroy an opponent's armed forces and then force unconditional surrender, a strategy of annihilation naturally embraces total aims. Napoleon wrote: "I see only one thing, namely the enemy's main body. I try to crush it, confident that secondary matters will then settle themselves."⁴ Carl von

Clausewitz elucidated Napoleon's method of decisive warfare and endorsed it as the most effective means of waging war. Clausewitz outlined a strategy of annihilation as follows:

1. Destruction of the enemy forces is the overwhelming principle of war, and, so far as positive action is concerned, the principal way to achieve our object.
2. Such destruction of forces can usually be accomplished only by fighting.
3. Only major engagements involving all forces lead to major success.
4. The great successes are obtained where all engagements coalesce into one great battle.⁵

Clausewitz also wrote that speed was essential: "any additional expenditure of time—any suspension of military action—seems absurd."⁶ Examples of wars of annihilation in the twentieth-century include the 1940 Battle of France, the Schlieffen Plan, and the Six Day War.

Second, attrition can be applied within a strategy that embraces limited instead of total aims, dubbed a "war of limited aim" by Clausewitz and Liddell Hart. Decisive battles are not sought in a strategy of limited aim. Military weakness is the most common reason for avoiding a decisive battle. Additionally, in certain situations, total aims are not politically acceptable, such as when there is a risk of nuclear war or when a compromise cease-fire is sought. The objects of strategies of limited aim have primarily been to seize a small piece of enemy territory, enforce certain concessions in negotiations, defend territory, or merely persevere until a strategy of annihilation can be implemented. Most importantly, many strategies of limited aim simply seek to wear down an opponent. Examples of wars of limited aim include Wellington's 1809–1812 Peninsular operations, the 1942–1944 British campaign for Burma, and the 1951–1953 United Nations Command operations in Korea. Since a single war often can employ more than one strategy as goals and context change, a war with ultimate total aims often includes certain campaigns of limited aim. For example, the British aims in the Battle of Britain or the Burma Campaign were limited even though their ultimate aim in the Second World War was the total defeat of Germany and Japan.

As an operational strategy, attrition is often posited against maneuver warfare. Maneuver warfare seeks to defeat enemy forces decisively through placing the enemy in a disadvantageous position on the battlefield. Rather than frontal assaults or cautious advances, daring and mobile operations are implemented to seize the initiative and attack the enemy where least expected. This has been usually accomplished through flanking movements, encirclements, infiltration tactics, airborne assaults, or the use of interior lines. For example, Liddell Hart's indirect approach postulated unexpectedly hitting enemy weak points in order to effect a breakthrough in his front. Optimally, enemy positions are then successively attacked and lines of communications and command centers are destroyed as one's forces drive forward in an "expanding torrent." Liddell Hart

described this process of exploiting a breakthrough as “dislocation.”⁷ Maneuver warfare is highly risky because its ultimate goal is to come to grips with the enemy decisively. Like a strategy of annihilation, the fate of a nation potentially is staked on a single battle. Examples of maneuver warfare are the German blitzkrieg, Napoleon’s campaigns in Italy, and the 1991 Gulf War.

As noted in the first paragraph, the common conception of attrition is of a brutal and futile slogging match. This conception has been crystallized in writings about maneuver warfare. Maneuver warfare became especially popular in the US armed forces in the late 1970s as a supposedly decisive and relatively low-casualty method to thwart a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. In military and academic writings, attrition was described as a polar opposite to maneuver warfare.

Three characteristics of attrition were posited to provide a straw man to set maneuver warfare against. First, it was alleged that effective attrition requires relative numerical or material superiority to endure the casualties incurred in engaging the enemy. John Mearsheimer wrote:

The attacker must believe that he has enough soldiers and equipment to compensate for his heavier losses, a point suggesting that success in a war of attrition largely depends on the size of the opposing forces. Allowing for the asymmetry in losses between offense and defense, the side with greater manpower and a larger material base will eventually prevail.⁸

Second, victory in a war of attrition will not be cheap. Successful attrition entails heavy casualties and expenditure of resources through blunt tactics like frontal assaults. Edward Luttwak wrote: “It is understood that the enemy’s reciprocal attrition will have to be absorbed. There can be no victory in this style of war without overall superiority in attritional capacity, and there can be no cheap victories, in casualties or material loss, relative to the enemy’s strength.”⁹ Third, attrition seeks decisive victory, as Paul Huth wrote:

The objective of a strategy of attrition is similar to that of the rapid offensive action—decisive defeat of the enemy’s armed forces. The principal difference between the two strategies, however, is in the time required to achieve military victory. With a strategy of attrition the attacker anticipates not a series of rapid and decisive victories but instead a protracted conflict in which the goal is to wear down and outlast the adversary by being able to withstand heavy military losses better.¹⁰

From these three characteristics, the main conclusion of most writers is that attrition is clearly inferior to maneuver warfare.

The common conception of attrition does not square with reality. There is not even enough continuity in the history of attrition to support such a coherent definition. Furthermore, no commander or theorist who has purposefully implemented attrition or developed the concept was ever cited by advocates of maneuver warfare. This is an egregious error given the historical stature of many proponents of attrition. They even fail to mention William Westmore-

land—a general whose use of attrition surely supports their derision of the concept. Moreover, few proponents of attrition have endorsed a conception resembling the straw man of the maneuver theorists. Thus, what many academics, commanders, and politicians currently think of as attrition is vastly different from the actual history of the concept.

As I have already mentioned, there is a lack of continuity in the strategic thought behind attrition. Whereas a standard prescription for maneuver warfare can be postulated, conceptually attrition is merely a hodgepodge of disparate ideas. Only in a few brief periods, such as during the Napoleonic Wars or from the Korean to the Vietnam War, was attrition consciously developed from case to case. Despite this lack of continuity in its conceptual history, it is worthwhile to postulate the characteristics of attrition as an operational strategy. I propose to do so by answering three questions: First, what is attrition? Second, why is it implemented? Third, what makes it effective?

First, what is attrition? As I discussed previously, attrition is best defined as a gradual and piecemeal process of destroying an enemy's military capability. This destruction is accomplished through a variety of means. Depending on the situation, attrition has involved in-depth withdrawals, limited ground offensives, frontal assaults, patrolling, careful defensives, scorched-earth tactics, guerrilla warfare, air strikes, artillery firepower, or raids. These means are the basis for concluding that attrition is protracted, gradual, and piecemeal. None of them can achieve a quick decision. A succession of repeated engagements destroys parts of the enemy forces, not their whole body. The enemy's military capability is slowly whittled away in a piecemeal fashion. Even frontal assaults only destroy an enemy bit by bit.

Unlike maneuver warfare, attrition lacks one simple and universal strategic aim, such as decisively defeating the enemy on the battlefield. Attrition serves a number of aims: wearing down the enemy until a decisive battle is possible, compelling concessions in negotiations, defeating an enemy attack, undermining an enemy's resolve to wage war, and annihilating an opponent. Attrition's immediate tactical objective—the destruction of the enemy's military capability—is intangible. It does not require capturing or holding ground or breaking through enemy lines, although periodically attrition has sought these objectives. The more important goal is finding means, like those listed, that facilitate killing enemy soldiers, damaging enemy resources, or weakening enemy morale.

The avoidance of a climactic engagement reduces the risk entailed in an operational strategy of attrition. Because it rarely involves reckless or bold actions, attrition does not place its proponent in a disadvantageous situation. The chance of a decisive defeat is thereby marginalized. From another perspective, strategies of attrition reduce the risk of a conflict escalating or running out of control. Piecemeal and gradual operations engender better management of conflicts and crisis stability. One's actions can be controlled and even graduated. Furthermore, because the opponent is not threatened with total destruction, he is less likely to escalate the conflict.

Additionally, these means all aim to destroy the enemy's military capability, not his civilian population. Although civilians are dramatically affected by attrition, they are not usually its primary target. This is one characteristic that differentiates attrition from coercive methods of warfare like nuclear deterrence, strategic bombing, or terrorism.

One means of attrition receives particular attention within this book. From the Second World War to the present, proponents of attrition have increasingly emphasized air power as a key to inflicting losses on an opponent. Whereas other means of attrition, such as in-depth withdrawals, have been implemented in several wars of attrition, only air power has been a source of continuity in nearly every war of attrition since 1918. It has been extraordinarily appealing to leaders because it can strike directly at the enemy without incurring the costs of ground combat. The allure of minimal casualties has always overcome the fact that air strikes have rarely cracked an enemy's resolve. In the US armed forces, air strikes superseded and replaced ground operations as the primary means of causing attrition by the end of the Cold War.

Contrary to popular belief, most proponents of attrition have not enjoyed numerical superiority over an opponent or sacrificed their soldiers in brutal frontal assaults. Rather, they rarely had the manpower required to survive heavy losses. In fact, attrition was usually viewed as the best method of warfare for the side that lacked the numerical, material, or logistical capability to engage the enemy in a decisive battle. While avoiding decisive battle, the weaker side relied on defensive battles, guerrilla warfare, elongation of the enemy's supply lines, and scorched-earth tactics to degrade the enemy's physical and moral resolve. Lawrence Freedman wrote accordingly:

These alternative strategies reflect those that the weak have consistently adopted against the strong: concentrating on imposing pain rather than winning battles, gaining time rather than moving to closure; targeting the enemy's domestic political base as much as his forward military capabilities; relying on his intolerance of casualties and his weaker stake in the resolution of the conflict; and playing on a reluctance to cause civilian suffering, even if it restricts military options. In short, whereas stronger military powers have a national preference for decisive battlefield victories, the weaker are more ready to draw the civilian sphere into the conflict, while avoiding open battle.¹¹

The numerically weak can employ a strategy of attrition if losses can be reduced to a sustainable level. Indeed, in many cases, losses were kept at a level beneath that of the opponent. Certain stratagems can grind down the enemy at a low cost. First, the enemy's supply difficulties can be exploited through an in-depth withdrawal. Purposefully withdrawing elongates the enemy's supply lines and exhausts his forces without greatly endangering one's own manpower. Second, carefully planned and constrained limited offensives reduce the risk of assaulting forces being surprised or overly exposed to unsuppressed enemy firepower. At the same time, limited offensives can breach enemy defensive lines and induce the enemy to expend his manpower in hurried

counterattacks. Third, strong, in-depth defensive positions multiply enemy casualties and inhibit enemy offensive action, while sheltering the defenders. Through use of such stratagems, numerical or material superiority becomes irrelevant to outlasting the opponent.

I have cited many of the beneficial aspects of attrition's gradual and piecemeal nature. There are also several costs that make attrition a complex and difficult method of warfare to apply. Attrition inherently prolongs warfare and makes the avoidance of a decision a deliberate goal. Consequently, nations need to mobilize the economic and military resources necessary to wage war over a long period. In some contexts, domestic opposition arises to the prolonged burden of warfare. The constant flow of casualties, economic costs, and dislocation of normal life cause most people to prefer a speedy end to a war. Military commanders often question the merits of indecisive warfare. In the case of an in-depth withdrawal or scorched-earth tactics, the civilian population must enthusiastically support the war effort if they are to bear the sacrifices demanded of them. The inability of attrition to annihilate an opponent compounds civilian opposition by providing relatively small rewards to compensate for the burden of a long war.

Regarding my second question, Why is attrition implemented? It has almost always been employed to resolve a particular strategic or tactical dilemma. Attrition usually has been created quickly and in an ad hoc fashion in order to adapt to circumstances that inhibited decisive warfare or threatened imminent defeat. Examples of dilemmas that attrition has been implemented to overcome include a numerically superior opponent, difficult terrain or new technologies that inhibited mobility, the risk of a Third World War, and guerrilla warfare. Decisive action is particularly difficult under these circumstances. Attrition was often seized upon because it offered an outlet for the use of force. After the particular campaign, war, or battle, the conception of attrition devised to overcome the tactical or strategic dilemma was often forgotten as the military focused on how to succeed in maneuver warfare. After all, established operational doctrines rarely call for fighting an indecisive war of attrition. Thus, successful conceptions of attrition were rarely codified or indoctrinated, and when a new dilemma arose, instead of building on previous strategies, an entirely new conception of attrition was usually formed.

In my own conversations about attrition, I have encountered a widespread argument that it was only employed when it was the sole operational strategy available to a commander. Consequently, it is argued that attrition cannot be described as a preferable strategy. Supposedly, commanders implementing attrition were constrained from adopting any other operational strategy. The suggestion is that if another form of warfare, such as maneuver, had been possible, it would have far more effective than attrition. In reality, attrition was never the only alternative available to a commander. In any situation, there is always a range of possible operational strategies. Commanders never know in advance which of these strategies will be most effective. Historically, they usu-

ally considered a breadth of options and only chose attrition after a prolonged strategic debate. Difficult situations have not constrained commanders from choosing a particular method of warfare, regardless of how unsuccessful that method of warfare was likely to be. I have stated that attrition was usually implemented in order to resolve strategic dilemmas that inhibited decisive victory. In such cases, maneuver warfare often seemed unlikely to be successful. Nevertheless, many commanders did not hesitate to employ it, especially because it seemed to promise the chance, no matter how small, of a decisive victory.

Regarding the third question, What makes attrition effective? Three factors are essential. First, it should be sustainable. If casualties, economic costs, and damage to civilians are not minimized, attrition will not be sustainable over its protracted length. Second, attrition should be applied intensely. Inflicting heavy casualties or economic damage is essential to convincing the opponent that continued warfare is not worthwhile. Third, attrition should be applied to moderate goals. It cannot inflict the amount of damage necessary to attain maximal aims, such as annihilating an opponent, compelling his surrender, or forcing him to accept a humiliating negotiating position.

Nevertheless, there is no set framework for success in a war of attrition. Success in such a war, more than in most other forms of war, is uncertain because the imminent annihilation of the opponent is not threatened. The opponent, not the proponent of attrition, decides when battle will occur or when to concede in negotiations. The opponent can always decide to prolong a war in hope of an improvement in his fortunes. These decisions are not physically forced upon him. In other words, attrition exerts little control over his actions. Rather, successful attrition inherently depends upon the opponent's decisions. In particular, it is crucial that the opponent make decisions that will facilitate his attrition: hence the common argument that attrition can only be successful if it induces the opponent to dedicate resources to a battle, campaign, or theater. Henry Kissinger wrote, "Attrition works best against an adversary who has no choice except to defend a vital prize."¹² Despite this argument, the impossibility of determining the resolve, beliefs, and calculations of the opponent precludes predicting how to fight a successful war of attrition.

A major goal of this book is to leave the reader with an impression of the effectiveness of attrition as an operational strategy. Attrition has been especially useful in three situations: First, it has been extremely successful as a defensive operational strategy. In-depth withdrawals and careful defensive engagements usually incapacitate an attacker. In this respect, attrition has been far more useful than more decisive operational strategies, which are too risky for the defender—who is often also weaker than the attacker. In particular, it has repeatedly enabled a weak defender to persevere until a more decisive method of warfare could be implemented. Second, in numerous situations, a decisive victory is potentially dangerous, specifically when there is a risk of the conflict escalating into a wider or heightened war. The low risk of attritional operations allows the application of force without causing escalation. Third, in this capac-

ity, attrition can compel enemy concessions in negotiations. If sustainable and intense, attrition applies a steady amount of pressure that can convince an opponent that further warfare is not worthwhile. Maneuver warfare is often ineffective in this role because its climactic nature does not accord with the controlled action necessary to attain the inherently limited aims of most negotiations. As defensives, the need to prevent escalation, and negotiations are very common in warfare, attrition is of central importance to the study and practice of war. Granted, attrition has many costs as well, but its utility in these situations outweighs those costs.

Another major goal of this book is to show how the effectiveness of attrition changed as the strategic context of the international system itself changed. During the Napoleonic Wars, attrition adapted from eighteenth-century limited war to the new strategic context of total war, which persisted until 1945. Usually based upon careful maneuver and mutual avoidance of risk, eighteenth-century wars of attrition became ineffective when commanders, Napoleon in particular, aggressively sought a decisive battle. Attrition had to adapt to a new form of warfare in which total aims were sought and had to employ means that compensated for the possibility of an opponent seeking a decisive battle.

From the Napoleonic Wars until the end of World War II, the total aims of the wars in which attrition was employed usually concealed its costs. The sacrifices entailed in attrition were rewarded by the attainment of a total aim and its concomitant maximal gains. The major problem with attrition during this period was that its limited and protracted means could not usually attain these total aims directly or quickly. Speed is a primary requisite of a strategy of annihilation, but attrition is inherently based on prolonging a war. Indeed, attrition often met with marked ineffectiveness when it was applied directly to a total aim, as at Verdun in 1916 or in Papua New Guinea in 1942. Attrition was most effective when employed to a temporary limited aim. For example, it was repeatedly successful as a preliminary to a strategy of annihilation. The campaigns of Slim in Burma and Wellington in Portugal are outstanding in this respect.

The strategic context changed again after 1945 with the initiation of the Cold War. Nations were no longer willing to fight wars for total aims, the risk of mutual destruction was too great. Instead, attrition had to accommodate limited aims. This magnified some of the costs of attrition. Whereas total aims had promised maximal gains greater than the sacrifice called for, attrition in a war of limited aim offered minimal gains that made warfare less worthwhile. Resources were mobilized and put at risk without any guarantee of victory. Popular and political opposition to the indecisiveness of attrition often formed. Ironically, though, attrition became more useful and effective in the Cold War than previously; it accomplished the primary goal of warfare for most powers in the Cold War: avoiding escalation. Aggressive forms of warfare, like maneuver, risked escalation and, therefore, were less useful. Furthermore, states used attrition to coerce acceptable peace or truce agreements. Before 1945, total ends

often had precluded a compromise resolution to a war of attrition. In the Cold War, attrition provided the incremental and piecemeal degree of coercion needed to compel enemy concessions in negotiations. Attrition's failures during the Cold War, as in Vietnam, were due to major flaws in its implementation, not its applicability to a conventional war of limited aim.

The period from the Napoleonic Wars to the end of the Cold War is far too broad to be covered adequately in one book. I have adopted a case study approach in order to examine specific conceptions of attrition yet provide some generalizations on the overall history of attrition. The book is based on three case studies: the Papuan Campaign (1942–1943), the first part of the Burma Campaign (1942–1944), and the latter part of the Korean War (1951–1953). In the Papuan Campaign, the Australians and Americans defended Papua New Guinea against the Japanese. Too weak to gain a decisive victory, the Allied commanders, under MacArthur, devised different conceptions of attrition to halt and then counterattack the Japanese. The case study shows that attrition was ineffective when applied to total aims. The Burma Campaign, on the other hand, exemplifies the effectiveness of attrition in attaining a limited aim, even in the overall context of a total war. General William Slim constructed a method of attrition that enabled his forces to wear down the Japanese as a preliminary to a war of annihilation. These two case studies frame the effectiveness of attrition in the age of total war. The Korean War demonstrates the usefulness of attrition during the Cold War. The United Nations Command, particularly under General Matthew Ridgway, and the US government implemented attrition to reduce the risk of escalation yet coerce the Communists. Together, the case studies provide a means of comparing attrition in the two different periods of warfare. Additionally, there are three less detailed chapters describing attrition in the nineteenth-century, the First World War, and the Vietnam War. For the sake of conciseness, many important examples of attrition have been omitted or summarized, including the Battle of Britain, Montgomery's set-piece battles, British grand strategy in the Second World War, the naval battles around Guadalcanal, and the Iran-Iraq War. These cases are important but their lessons are not drastically different from those of my own case studies.

NOTES

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5. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 306.
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7. Liddell Hart, 334–337.
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9. Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 92.
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Attrition and the Advent of Total War

A new form of attrition arose during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as the eighteenth-century wars of attrition adapted to the new strategic context of total war. The tendency to avoid decisive battles characterized many of the wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, such as the campaigns of Maurice de Saxe, Raimondo Montecuccoli, and Henri de Turenne. When battles occurred, successes frequently were not exploited. Neither the subjugation of the enemy population nor the investment of their capital city followed most important victories. The concern to maintain supplies and lines of communication dominated operations. Sieges, which were easy to supply, rather than battles were the preferred military operation. Minor successes in sieges and battles were intended to wear down the opponent and convince him to surrender limited political objectives. Michael Howard wrote in *War and European History*: "To pile up such minor successes until their aggregated weight and financial exhaustion compelled the adversary to make peace seemed preferable to staking all on a battle in which advantages accumulated over several years might be thrown away in as many hours."¹ Furthermore, states tried to limit the involvement of the people in war in order to prevent upsetting the status quo too drastically. This analysis is not meant to suggest that decisive campaigns, bloody battles, or the involvement of civilians in war never occurred during this period. It is rather to state that war was not as total as it would be after the French Revolution.

The French Revolution and Napoleon made eighteenth-century wars of attrition obsolete. The French Revolution brought the nation into war for the first time through creating new ideas of patriotism and instituting universal conscription. Napoleon refined these changes by embracing a strategy of utterly annihilating an enemy's armed forces through a decisive battle. Consequently, a new type of attrition was developed to overcome these demands of total war.

Besieging cities before confronting a field army, maneuvering for long periods, and abstaining from guerrilla warfare were dangerous when an opponent could vigorously seek decisive battle. Instead, populations were mobilized for war and countries were devastated in order to wear down the enemy. Besides conscription, the people were brought into war through scorched-earth tactics, in-depth withdrawals, and guerrilla warfare. At first, attrition was employed solely in wars of limited aim, in which the goal was to avoid decisive battle until the enemy could be worn down and a strategy of annihilation could be implemented. Indeed, under Wellington and the Russians in 1812, attrition was exceedingly effective in countering French attempts at a decisive battle. But by the end of the US Civil War, attrition was also being used in the direct pursuit of total aims, as a component of a strategy of annihilation.

THE PENINSULAR WAR

In the Peninsular War, the Duke of Wellington implemented an operational strategy of attrition from 1809 to 1812 to cope with overwhelming French numerical superiority. Although sometimes regarded as a practitioner of eighteenth-century attrition, in actuality, Wellington revolutionized the use of attrition in warfare. Wellington's conception of attrition differed fundamentally from the eighteenth-century wars of attrition. First, his ultimate goal was to use attrition as a basis for resuming decisive warfare once his situation sufficiently improved. Second, Wellington used entirely new and total means to cause attrition, predicated on the possibility of being forced into a decisive battle. These means diverted French resources from more vital theaters to be worn down in Spain and Portugal.

Lacking a large army, Great Britain could not engage in a war of annihilation against France in the Napoleonic Wars. Accordingly, in the Peninsular War, British strategy sought merely to defend British interests in Portugal and wear down France's military resources in the process. When Britain first considered intervening in the Peninsula in 1808, Lieutenant-General Arthur Wellesley (he became Viscount Wellington in 1809) viewed the conditions of the Peninsula as optimal for distracting and wearing down French armies. Even when Wellington resumed decisive warfare in the theater in 1812, the strategic purpose of the Peninsular War remained to divert French forces from the main theater in central Europe. He wrote to B. Sydenham, a friend:

The principal point on which I wished to write you is the disposal of this army, supposing that there should be a general breeze in Europe. I think that you have miscalculated the means and resources of France in men, and mistaken the objects of the French government in imagining that, under those circumstances, Buonaparte will be obliged or inclined to withdraw his army from Spain. He will not even reduce it considerably, he will only not reinforce it. If I am right, the British army cannot be so advantageously employed as in the Peninsula. Of that, I trust, there is no doubt. If the British army is not employed in the Peninsula, that part of the world would soon be conquered; and the

army which would have achieved its conquest, reinforced by the levies in the Peninsula, would reduce to subjugation the rest of the world.²

Wellesley initiated his involvement in the Peninsular War with a short burst of decisive warfare in 1808. He demanded that all available British resources be concentrated in the theater and explicitly sought battle with the French Army. Unfortunately, overwhelming French superiority forced Wellington to retire into Portugal, after barely escaping encirclement in Spain in 1809. Wellington then decided that the French were too strong to be engaged repeatedly in offensives.³ In the face of British government and Spanish calls for an offensive, Wellington wrote to Marshal Beresford, the English commander-in-chief of the Portuguese Army:

You and I might make a very pretty little expedition into Castille, which we might concert with the military section of the Junta, and we should have the promise of all the Generals for their hearty co-operation. The French would then put 10,000 men at Almaraz, 5000 at Arzobispo, and 5000 at Toledo, which would effectually keep in check the Spanish Army, and then they would collect about 50,000 men in Castille to oppose us. There would thus be an end to this expedition.⁴

By the end of 1809, the French had defeated most of the conventional Spanish resistance and Napoleon sent reinforcements to the Peninsula, partly to annihilate the British. Therefore, Wellington adopted a new method of warfare to avoid decisive battle yet sustain the war. He described this strategy to Lord Liverpool in 1809: "during the continuance of this contest, which must necessarily be defensive on our part, in which there may be no brilliant events, and in which, after all I may fail."⁵

Wellington constructed an operational strategy to wear down the French while defending Portugal. Attrition would make the Peninsular War costly for Napoleon and divert French strength from other vital theaters; in Wellington's words, creating a situation in which, "the possession of the whole may be a burden rather than an advantage to the French government."⁶ Given Britain's military weakness, attrition was the only means of coercing the French in the Peninsula:

The contest is expensive, and affords but little or no hopes of success, excepting by tiring the French out. After all, military success could not reasonably be expected in a contest between the powers of the Peninsula and Great Britain on one side, and the French on the other, which had begun by the French seizing the armies, the fortified places, the arms, and the resources of the Peninsula.⁷

Moreover, Wellington believed his limited aims would be abandoned when "a change in the affairs of Europe," implying the creation of a new Coalition, would allow a reversion to decisive warfare.⁸

Wellington's means of causing attrition differed drastically from those of the eighteenth century. First, he planned to withdraw into the interior of Portugal,