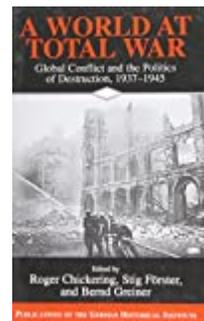




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How Total was Total War?

If any war can be called total, it was the Second World War. It was only in this period and its prehistory that the very notion of a total war became popular: Erich Ludendorff's book *Der totale Krieg* (1935) and Joseph Goebbels's notorious speech of February 1943 are outstanding examples. But to what extent was this war really "total"? As always, the answer to this question remains one of definition and the editors of this volume have undertaken more than a decade of effort to test its scholarly fruitfulness. In a sort of "retroactive foreshadowing," Chickering, Förster and their colleagues have asked how "total war" developed between the American Civil War and the Franco-German war of 1870-71. Five major conferences (sponsored initially only by the German Historical Institute in Washington, then including a continuously wider range of supporters) have led to a wealth of understanding of the problem of "total war" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In an earlier state of the debate it became clear—and Roger Chickering was the most vivid advocate of this insight in earlier volumes as well as in this one—that "total war" is an abstraction, an ideal type (if we may link

the horrible with an "ideal"). Conference participants addressed patterns of total mental and economic mobilization of manpower, as well as the end of distinctions between civilian and soldier or between "front" and "home-front." The notion of totality includes: the growing sophistication and destructiveness of weapons; the "total" annihilation of the opponent as an absolute enemy; and the totality of war on a global level. Seen in this light, total war as the sum of all these criteria means the end of history in quite a different way than Francis Fukuyama argued a decade ago: the destruction of mankind by war. But the editors agree with Michael Howard's final comment: the era since 1945, as a more globalized age, can hardly be analyzed with those concepts used for the previous century.

The preceding volumes have heaped up ample proof of the radicalization of warfare, and likewise, of the expectations placed on future wars. Most of this volume's authors, however, have agreed that the totality of war has not yet become reality. The Second World War, too, cannot be seen as a "total war" in this strict sense, although both contemporaries and later analysts described

it in this way.

To add to the underlying concept, one must assume that states act primarily within the framework of their ideas about total war and organize to prepare for such a war—or seek to inflict suffering on their opponents on a scale approaching totality. The “reciprocity” of which Hew Strachan speaks with regard to British and American warfare in the East Asian theater towards the Japanese (p. 51), or Dennis Showalter’s justification of Western responses to it as “by no means ... unreasonable” (p. 129) can be regarded as a relationship of mutual escalation in a more general way. If one side waged a more or less “total war,” the other side reacted to this strategy and became infected with this radicalization. This pattern may have changed the quality of the war as such.

If “total war” or “absolute war” (Clausewitz’s term) was never attained in a strict sense, because “frictions”—as Michael Howard reminds the reader, recalling Clausewitz’s assessment—are applied in real history, it makes sense to take a nuanced approach. Such an approach is applied successfully here in nineteen stimulating contributions. Gerhard Weinberg argues that scholars must distinguish between at least three different regions of World War II: in the war in Eastern Europe, more “total” features can be found than in the transatlantic and western European theatres, respectively. The Pacific War was a third theater with different features. That the Second World War is regarded as unique has, no doubt, also to do with the genocide that accompanied it. Myriam Gessler and Stig FÅrster argue that genocide is also an ideal type. It might be inherent in “total war”; in the concrete situation of World War II, it was the German implementation of this kind of mass murder that made the combination of war and genocide unique.

In a section entitled “Combat,” Holger Herwig argues that the battle of the Atlantic was increasingly fought by Admiral DÅnitz with the aim of mobilizing all material means. This strategy translated into radicalization. The notion of “them or us,” however, finally failed. In considering the German war in the East, JÅrgen FÅrster argues convincingly that the Shoah was “the most total of the German war aims” (p. 91). For FÅrster, Hitler pursued an ideological crusade with total aims from the start. Turning to the United States, Dennis Showalter denies that America fought a “total war.” Instead, he argues that the United States fought a global war that led to the founding of the United Nations.

The next section, on wartime economies, shows that economic mobilization was crucial for the final outcome.

Mark Harrison’s statistically based economic argument that the survival of the Soviet Union in 1942 depended on economic mobilization is not easily digested by a “normal” historian, but in the end it is convincing. The same can be said about the essay on Britain by Stephen Broadberry and Peter Howlett. They examine the effects of mobilization on the economy, but do not specifically deal with the question of whether the limits of total mobilization had been reached in that country—a question difficult to answer conclusively, in any case. Broadberry and Howlett also offer some comparisons with the lesser German efforts. A separate contribution on Germany would have been useful. Instead, Hans Mommsen offers a brilliant summary on the growing importance of forced labor for the German war effort.

“Mobilizing Societies,” the subsequent section, has four contributions: Martin Kutz discusses the ideological component of “total war” by comparing Erich Luderndorff and Joseph Goebbels. Other authors deal more directly with society. Jill Stephenson’s article compares women in Britain and Germany in a compelling way. She finds that British women, at least in theory, underwent a stronger system of subjection, while in Germany, younger women eventually bore a greater real burden in production. In the German case, however, foreign labor was used in an unprecedented way. Because many more German men were mobilized and died on the battlefield, the role of women in general changed. Stephenson nevertheless points to some striking similarities between the two cases that may have to do with the “objective” needs for raised production. John Barber, in turn, argues that “for none of the other belligerent powers was World War II fought on such an intensity, destruction, and suffering as for the Soviet Union” (p. 233). This assertion pertains in particular to women engaged in production and combat. In his essay, Bernd Greiner distinguishes between “pioneers,” “crusaders” and “shareholders” (p. 257) in U.S. society. The United States did not want to create a new value system, but inadvertently did so: “Mobilizing for war was an effort to achieve both national organization and social integration” (p. 257).

The war against noncombatants is addressed by Hans-Heinrich Nolte (who treats partisans in White Russia), Robert L. Messer (writing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and Richard Overy. The latter discusses Allied bombing and argues that the British, to a certain extent, had waited for the Germans to start this kind of war—which they did. As Overy notes, “the argument for bombing Germany derived from assumptions about the moral character of total war inspired by a vulgarized Darwin-

ism” (p. 294). Seen in this light, the very concept of “total war” (and also the concrete experience of it) could work as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The final section of the book, entitled “Criminal War,” includes three substantial pieces, which are, however, not necessarily related to the concept of total war. Birgit Beck demonstrates the extent of sexual violence committed by the Wehrmacht during the war—and the limited effort to deal with it through courts-martial. Japan’s war atrocities in China are addressed by Louise Young. Finally, Daniel Marc Segesser sums up the international debate on the punishment of war crimes since 1872, thus presenting a kind of framework for the whole “total war” series, rather than an engaging debate about war crimes in World War Two. In Allied considerations, summary executions or a legal tribunal remained alternative possibilities nearly up to the end of World War Two. This outcome demonstrates to me that there could apparently be no adequate legal response, only a symbolic judiciary that did not deal with the nature of “total war” as such—but only with specific crimes committed during the war.

In an even broader way than Segesser, Michael Howard sums up the whole conference series in a comment at the end of the volume, noting that “if the growth of democracy created a tendency for total war, the growth of industry created an increasing capacity for it” (p. 378). He insists that the Soviet Union under Stalin came closest to “total war”—with a near-total mobiliza-

tion starting in 1927. The United States, on the other hand, was prepared in principle “to do whatever it takes” to defeat its enemies, but its way of fighting was not total for American society, even if it seemed so to America’s enemies. Nevertheless, Howard and the other contributors to this book (as well as the series organizers and editors) agree that the time for apportionment of blame among the belligerents is over—even though we should not deny the apportionment of particular responsibilities for the war’s consequences, especially with regard to Nazi Germany and its role in the hostilities.

The phenomenon of the occurrence of wars, destruction and deaths on a potentially unlimited scale have developed in a much broader context over more than a century from the 1860s to 1945. An examination of the preceding “revolutionary wars” in America and Europe before and after 1800 (a volume is in preparation by Chickering and Föhlrster) as well as a consideration of the social history of the Cold War from a different angle (another conference series and publications are being prepared by Bernd Greiner and his team at Hamburg) are underway. In the end, this research will probably not single out only one century of (potential) “total war,” but contribute to a better understanding of the various degrees of the phenomena of destruction, war and mass murder. The volume presented here is—in conjunction with the four preceding volumes—an impressive contribution to this undertaking.

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