Introduction

The economic and social history of war

J. M. Winter

'We are as ignorant about war as the physicist is of the true nature of matter.' With this characteristic flourish, Fernand Braudel launched his discussion of the 'forms of warfare' in the Mediterranean world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His discussion of privateering, of brigandage and piracy, of the financial, logistic, and technological problems of wars, both declared and undeclared, has illuminated many aspects of the interaction of armed conflict and social change. It is no surprise that the historian of 'la longue durée' has rejected the legalistic view, which has passed into colloquial language, that there are chronological limits to wars, and that there is an exact moment when a state of war between social groups ends and a state of peace begins. By studying war as part of a spectrum of group conflict, Braudel, like Clausewitz and Marx, has suggested that war cannot be understood if abstracted from non-military developments, which both affect and are affected by it.

The leading historian of the Annales school has not been alone in his effort to foster the study of the economic and social history of war. Indeed, R. H. Tawney anticipated Braudel's argument in his inaugural address of 1932, when he called on students to turn their attention to 'the most neglected factor in social development, the institution of war' and to the ways that wars and other non-economic forces 'twist and divert' economic activity. Any account of past economic life which ignored these forces, Tawney believed, was bound to remain 'abstract and artificial'. More recently the American historian F. C. Lane also called upon historians to pay closer attention to the topic of war. 'Economic theorists', he wrote in 1958, 'have generally traditionally defined their subject so as to exclude analysis of the use of violence. One of the tasks of economic history is to overcome the exclusion.' In a number of studies of the history of Venice and of European commerce in general, he took as first priority the need to 'distinguish those uses of force that contributed to economic development and those that did not'.

The shadow of the Second World War reinforced the sense of the urgency of the task of relating war and economic development. A glance at the Economic History Review for the war years will suffice to show the influence
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of events on historians’ choices of subjects for study. In the post-war decades, however, research largely returned to less disturbed, and less disturbing, aspects of economic development. In France after the end of the Second World War, a number of scholars attempted to break down the divisions between military, economic, and social history and to found a new social science of war, or ‘polémologie’. But such movements were isolated and the old compartmentalisation between the disciplines of military and economic history easily withstood the challenge.

There are numerous exceptions to this rule, as the bibliography which is appended to this book shows. Many military and political historians have written extensively about economic problems of recruitment and supply. Still, there have been relatively few comparative studies of the war economies of belligerents or of the consequences of different wars for any country or region. G. N. Clark’s classic work on war and society in seventeenth-century Europe, J. H. Clapham’s essay on ‘Europe after the Great Wars, 1816 and 1920’ and A. S. Milward’s valuable studies of the German, French, and Norwegian economies during the Second World War are examples of the kind of work that remains to be done.

The reticence of economic historians on the subject of war is surely related to the intractability of the problems that it raises. To write about the effects of war is to come up against the difficulty, as Professor Postan has put it, of distinguishing ‘the action of war from the action of mere time’. To write on the economic preconditions and causes of war is to face a different set of problems. It is to enter the ideological debate about imperialism opened by Hobson, Hilferding, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, that still engages the energies of some Marxists and anti-Marxists. Others face the further, and in many cases decisive, barrier of the scantiness or non-existence of appropriate evidence about wars in earlier centuries.

If historians were to turn to economic theory for assistance, they would find many observations and tangential comments on war as an ‘exogenous variable’ but no fully worked-out analysis open to empirical testing. The sociological literature, in contrast, presents almost the opposite case. There is a large and growing body of statements about ‘the war-phenomenon’ and its effects on social stratification. Many of these studies are ambitious in scope and in claims of predictive value, but there is at least some question about their usefulness to students of particular wars. More concrete work has been done by psychologists in the analysis of the burdens borne by soldiers in combat and in its aftermath. The problem of civilian stress in war-time has received less attention. Here too collaboration among scholars is required for a fuller understanding of war.

It is not the purpose of this collection of essays to examine the validity of any theoretical statement about war and social or economic change. It is rather to show both the similarities and the differences in the ways societies
have prepared for war, have met its economic demands, and have coped with its economic consequences. Professor Braudel has put the point well when he wrote that ‘Every age constructs its own war, its own types of war.’

Every generation also has its own vision of war, its own sense of what war meant to those who lived through it and to those who lived in its aftermath. Economic and social historians have an important part to play in shaping that interpretation. This book is intended in part as a contribution to such an effort.

The subject of war and economic development is among those which occupy what Professor Coleman has called ‘the border-country between economic and political history: a region remarkably neglected by economic historians’. Those who have ventured into this field have written about war for many different purposes and from many different viewpoints. There are, however, a number of approaches which many writers, including the contributors to this book, have shared.

One way that historians have studied war is by writing what may be termed the ‘internal history’ of armed conflicts. These scholars have focused on war itself, and they have discussed both the mobilisation of resources which precede it and the ways in which economic activity and policy have been altered by what G. N. Clark has called ‘the multifarious abnormalities of war’.

The greatest incentive to research along this line has undoubtedly been the experience of the two world wars. In Britain, the twelve-volume Official History of the Ministry of Munitions, published in 1922, was a pioneering attempt to chart the development of war production. An even more ambitious project was launched in the early days of the First World War, when the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace decided to sponsor ‘an historical survey’ which would ‘attempt to measure the economic cost of the war and the displacement it was causing in the process of civilisation’. The sense of the urgency of this task deepened the longer the war went on and the more it released complex forces of national life not only for the vast process of destruction, but also for the stimulation of new capacities for production. This new economic activity, which under normal conditions of peace might have been a gain to society, and the surprising capacity exhibited by the belligerent nations for enduring long and increasing loss – often while presenting the outward semblance of new prosperity – made necessary a reconsideration of the whole field of war economics.

The outcome was the 134-volume Economic and Social History of the World War. Some of the strengths and many of the weaknesses of this monumental effort are a result of the fact, as J. T. Shotwell, its editor-in-chief, put it, that ‘this greatest of all co-operative histories was not a task for historians. Its authors had to be those who held office in wartime from which they could...
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watch how things actually were done.”24 The organisers of the project in Europe were distinguished men who had unique first-hand knowledge of their subject. Among them were Beveridge in Britain, Pirenne in Belgium, Charles Gide in France, and Einaudi in Italy. But the very fact of the authors’ personal involvement in the war inevitably led to studies which Shotwell himself said were ‘best described as about half-way between memoirs and blue books’.25 These ‘autobiographical overtones’, one later critic suggested, were ‘at times inimical to the critical appraisal of effort, failure and achievement’.26

This judgement was made by the man who organised the first historians’ economic history of war, Professor (now Sir) Keith Hancock, editor of the British Civil History of the Second World War. Like the Carnegie Series, his project was launched in the midst of war, but this time with the full consent and cooperation of a war-time government. That historians were asked to study the war effort while it was in progress, Hancock wrote, was an indication of how widespread was the recognition that ‘the fighting services are no more than “the cutting edge” of the nation at war”27 and that therefore, any account of the military effort must be accompanied by studies of the economy and the medical services in wartime. The thirty-one volumes of the Civil Series which have appeared fulfil Hancock’s aim of providing a ‘comprehensive and precise understanding of the economic, social, and administrative problems of a twentieth-century nation at war’.28 Not all the disadvantages of ‘official history’ were avoided, though, and now that the appropriate papers are open to research, the documentary record on which these studies rested without citation can be scrutinised afresh.

A second approach to the study of the non-military side of war has been adopted by other historians. These scholars have been concerned to evaluate the way war may deflect or accelerate trends in motion long before the outbreak of hostilities. Others have chosen a similarly long-term perspective to examine the effect of economic and social change on the waging of war and its destructiveness.

One of the men whose writing stimulated debate about the consequences of war was Werner Sombart, professor of sociology and national economy at the University of Berlin from 1917 until his death in 1941. His first major work was a study of capitalism which appeared in 1902 and in which he followed Weber’s challenge to Marxist economic history.29 Eleven years later he published a book, the stated purpose of which was to free the problem of war and capitalism from ‘the clutches of historical materialism’ by asking not whether war was an inevitable outcome of capitalism, but rather whether capitalism was an outcome of war.30 Sombart’s affirmative answer to this latter question rested on his contention that war and only war was able to fulfil many preconditions of capitalist development in Europe. Armed conflict provided the means to instill in the masses the discipline so
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central to the capitalist spirit and the incentive to create large-scale enterprises to meet the demand for food, clothing, and above all, for arms.\textsuperscript{31} To satisfy the requirements of the military, Sombart argued, businessmen were forced to rationalise their methods of production and exchange and to develop industries, such as heavy metals and shipbuilding, which were essentially 'children of war'.\textsuperscript{32} The impoverishment of many by war taxation was undeniable, but there were others whose gains during war financed nascent capitalist industry and trade. In sum, war was not the offspring of economic structures, but rather their progenitor.

The attack on Sombart's thesis has been led by the American scholar J. U. Nef. By the time Nef had begun his series of rebuttals of Sombart, the latter had become an ardent supporter of Hitler.\textsuperscript{33} This fact convinced Nef that the author of Krieg und Kapitalismus was not only profoundly mistaken, but that his book was also an expression of elements in German intellectual life which helped prepare the way for the Nazis. Writing in 1942, Nef was not surprised that the ‘constructive’ side of war had struck ‘especially an historian of the Reich, because his country during the past eighty years had been busy invading foreign territory, without the more disagreeable experience of finding enemy armies spreading havoc in Germany itself’.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, Sombart's argument was ‘of little service to truth’ because it examined only ‘the economic consequences of the production of the instruments of war as if this could be kept separate from the economic consequences of their use’.\textsuperscript{35} As Nef put it, ‘With one hand, the continental war lords and their marching armies created a need for large new establishments to furnish war materials. With the other, they interfered with the progress of large new establishments designed to cater to peacetime markets.’\textsuperscript{36} Indeed it was precisely England's avoidance of continental wars in the century 1540–1640 to which much of her economic progress in those years must be ascribed. Conversely, Nef considered her more bellicose behaviour in the following century as one of the causes of the retardation in British economic growth between his ‘early industrial revolution’ and the eighteenth-century one.\textsuperscript{37} For these reasons he concluded that war in Europe has been ‘less a cause for industrialism... than its nemesis’.\textsuperscript{38}

Nef’s views have not been universally accepted,\textsuperscript{39} but they have not been subject to the scathing criticism which Sombart’s thesis has received. For example, T. S. Ashton made clear his position in his inaugural lecture of 1946 by chastising those ‘who so confuse Economics with Technology as to think that, because wars sometimes lead to inventions, those who make wars are to be given a place among the pioneers of social development’.\textsuperscript{40}

A similarly sceptical approach was taken by Professor M. M. Postan in an article which appeared in the same issue of the Economic History Review in which Nef’s first broadside appeared. Attributing to Sombart the view that ‘it is in the nature of war to revolutionise economic processes’, Postan set
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out to examine the evidence relating to the Hundred Years’ War.41 His conclusion was definitely anti-Sombart. ‘In the machinery of social change’, he wrote,

the War was not so much the mainspring as a make-weight. Wherever its actions ran counter to the economic tendencies of the age, as in the development of financial capitalism or the movement of land values, it was on the whole ineffective. Only at points at which changes were taking place anyhow was its influence great and irrevocable enough to deserve the attention not only of the chronicler but also of the social historian.42

This argument about the formative influence of the Hundred Years’ War was taken up in 1962, when K. B. McFarlane challenged Postan’s interpretation. His main complaint was that too many historians were blinded by ‘the dogmatic belief, inherited from the nineteenth century, that wars can never be anything but damaging to every society involved in them’.43 To correct this mistaken idea, he re-examined the costs of the war in terms of the profits raked in by men like Sir John Fastolf in the course of the ‘systematic exploitation’ of occupied provinces, which ‘increased the wealth of England... swollen still further by tribute from the European mainland in the form of taxation on exported wool’.44 In addition, ‘the ways in which the noble captains spent their winnings set up eddies in other parts of the economy’ which, McFarlane argued, must be counted among the war’s consequences.45 A rebuttal by Postan two years later did not narrow the gap between their positions.46

Certainly Sombart’s thesis has been neither the sole inspiration nor the guiding force behind much research into the problem of war and economic development. Numerous scholars have written, without any reference to Sombart or Nef, about the possibility that military or naval requirements may have been more productive of large-scale enterprise than those in the private sector. For example, John Ehrman in his study of the British Navy in the later seventeenth century, has pointed out that in 1688, the Navy was ‘the most comprehensive, and in some respects the largest industry in the country’.47 A. H. John has considered some of the ways that government demand for war supplies in the early eighteenth century favourably affected the heavy metal and capital goods industries without any corresponding contraction in investment in other forms of economic activity. John did not make the same claim for the Napoleonic wars which, in his opinion, produced ‘counterbalancing forces’ which ‘probably negativied the advances of war’.48 The research of Professors Ashton, Rostow, and Crouzet has tended to support this conclusion with reference both to Britain and the continent.49

This brief survey of some of the literature on war and economic development illustrates the historiographical background against which the essays in this book must be set. Six of the contributors have followed the ‘internal’
approach to war in their studies of war production, war finance, and the overall guidance of the economy during war. In different ways, C. Trebilcock and D. C. Coleman illustrate the problem faced by British businessmen who produced goods essential to the war effort and by the public officials who had to see that the necessary orders were met. E. Miller and S. Schama discuss in very different settings the sources of war taxation, the protests at such exactions, and the effects on government finance and economic activity as a whole. The traditional association of taxation and war is highlighted by G. Elton’s discussion of how much of an innovation was the Tudor claim of the right to tax for purposes other than war. J. Lee examines aspects of the formation and consequences of agricultural policy in Germany during the First World War.

The other essays in this book examine the effects of war on long-term patterns of economic and social development. The impact of the Napoleonic wars on the process of industrialisation in Britain and of the revolt of the Netherlands on the Low Countries and Spain are examined by P. Deane and G. Parker respectively. P. Mathias discusses the contribution of military and naval doctors in eighteenth-century Britain to preventive medicine and improvements in standards of public health. R. and K. MacLeod present a case-study of the effects of government intervention during the First World War on science-based industry and on the development of scientific and technical education for industry as a whole. J. Harris places the Beveridge Report in the context of the pre-war and war-time debates on British social policy.

No comprehensive treatment of the economic implications of war is possible in a single volume. The effects of war on population growth, on patterns of consumer demand, on agricultural productivity, on banking, on the housing and working conditions of labour, on family structure: there is room for work on these and many other subjects not treated here. What a book of this kind can do is to point the way to further research and interchange between scholars who are working on different aspects of this complex historical problem.

The contributors to this volume have in common an association as colleagues, students, and friends of the late Professor of Economic History in the University of Cambridge, David Joslin. After his death in 1970, this book of essays on but one of his historical interests was begun. As a reminder of his influence on the study of history at Cambridge and of his learning, his generosity, and the kindness we all knew, we dedicate this book to his memory.

NOTES

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2 Ibid. ch. 7 et passim.
3 Ibid. p. 837 for a brief statement of his thesis: ‘no sooner was regular war suspended than a subterranean, unofficial conflict took its place – privateering on sea and brigandage on land – forms of war which had existed all along but which now increased to fill the gap like second growth and brushwood replacing a fallen forest. There are different ‘levels’ of warfare then, and it is only by studying the contrasts between them that sociologists and historians will make progress towards explaining them. The dialectic is essential.’
5 On the problem of the definitions of war, see Q. Wright, A Study of History, 2nd edn (Chicago, 1965), ch. 1.
11 A group of patriotic German economists did make an attempt in the 1930s to formulate principles of Wehrwirtschaft by drawing on recent historical experience. These studies of ‘War Economic Research and Training’ published in Hamburg from 1935 to 1938 were inspired by a desire to contribute to the buildup of Germany’s war machine. See: W. M. Stern, ‘Wehrwirtschaft: A German Contribution to Economics’, Economic History Review, 2nd ser., xiii (1960–1), pp. 270–81.
12 War and Society in the Seventeenth Century (Cambridge, 1958); The Dutch Alliance and the War against Dutch Trade (1923); Science and Social Welfare in the Age of Newton (Oxford, 1937).
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17 See: E. Silberner, La guerre dans la pensée économique de 16e au 18e siècle (Paris, 1939), and the same author’s The Problem of War in Nineteenth Century Economic Thought, trans. A. H. Krappe (Princeton, 1946). Silberner’s careful studies raise doubts about Quincy Wright’s claim that ‘Economists have not discussed war very much.’ A Study of War, 2nd edn (Chicago, 1965), p. 708. Equally open to debate is Wright’s claim (p. 1565) in the introduction to the second edition of his book that ‘I did not consider economics a primary approach to the study of war in 1942’, when the first edition was published, ‘and it has not been so considered since either by economists or by [statisticians]’.

18 The phrase is Gaston Bouthoul’s. See note 10.


23 From the editor’s preface which appeared in each volume, p. v.


25 Shotwell, Editor’s Preface, p. viii.


29 W. Sombart, Der Moderne Kapitalismus (Munich, 1902).

30 Sombart, Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Modernen Kapitalismus, II. Krieg und Kapitalismus (Munich, 1913), p. 3.

31 Ibid., pp. 14, 70, 84.

32 Ibid., pt iii, et passim.

33 See Sombart, A New Social Philosophy, trans. by K. F. Geiser (Princeton, 1937), in which he claims to be ‘not in the least . . . indifferent or unfriendly to the German spirit’ (p. ix) and offers some suggestions to help ‘free ourselves from the Jewish spirit’ including stripping Jews of civil rights (pp. 176–9).


38 Nef, Cultural Foundations of Industrial Civilisation (Cambridge, 1948), p. 66.

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or chemical research, it broadened the interest in applied mathematics and so helped contribute to the changed atmosphere in which real scientific advance became possible. R. Bean, ‘War and the Birth of the Modern State’, Journal of Economic History, xxxiii (1973), p. 205 in which it is argued that changes in military technology or in administrative technique altered the ‘range of optimum sizes of the state’ and H. Kamen, The Iron Century: Social Change in Europe 1550–1660 (London, 1971), pp. 123–5, in which he discusses ‘how the practice of war came to be an integral feature of early modern capitalism’.


M. M. Postan, ‘Some Social Consequences of the Hundred Years’ War’, passim.

Ibid. p. 12.


Ibid. pp. 10–11.

Ibid. p. 11.


