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0521026377 - Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918

Edited by Roger Chickering and Stig Förster

Excerpt

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Introduction

STIG FÖRSTER

World War I has consistently attracted the attention of European and North American scholars. In recent years international academic interest in this conflict has, if anything, increased: A number of major conferences have been devoted to the war, and more are planned for the near future. A spate of books and articles has recently appeared, and many more research projects are currently underway.¹ This scholarship covers aspects of the war that have hitherto been neglected. World War I, along with its origins and aftermath, has thus returned to center stage in international research.

The current interest in the “Great War” is due largely to the currency of new methodologies in historical scholarship. Previous research laid the groundwork for today’s debates, but it left many questions unaddressed. Historians of earlier generations focused on diplomatic, political, and sometimes economic history, but more often on narrow military aspects of the war. Recent research on the history of modern warfare, by contrast, has encompassed social dimensions, gender, culture (broadly understood), and “mentalities,” to name but a few of the new areas of interest.²

1 To mention just a few: Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, 1989); Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York, 1989); Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz, eds., *Keiner fühlt sich hier mehr als Mensch: Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen, 1993); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *La guerre des enfants 1914–1918: Essai d’histoire culturelle* (Paris, 1993); Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War* (Oxford, 1993); Martin Gilbert, *The First World War* (London, 1994); Centre de Recherche de l’Historial de Peronne, ed., *14–18: La très grande guerre* (Paris, 1994); Wolfgang Michalka, ed., *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse* (Munich, 1994); Wolfgang U. Eckart and Christoph Gradmann, eds., *Die Medizin und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Pfaffenweiler, 1996); Johannes Burkhardt et al., *Lange und kurze Wege in den Ersten Weltkrieg: Vier Augsburger Beiträge zur Kriegsursachenforschung* (Munich, 1996); Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London, 1997); Gerhard Hirschfeld et al., eds., *Kriegserfahrungen: Studien zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen, 1997); Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 1998).

2 See, e.g., Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War* (Princeton, N.J., 1978); Frank Kühlich, *Die deutschen Soldaten im Krieg von 1870/71: Eine Darstellung der Situation und der Erfahrung der deutschen*

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New approaches have challenged long-established methods, and military history is itself a case in point. Decades ago, Basil Liddell Hart denounced traditional approaches to the “battle history of war” in characteristically harsh words. “To place the position and trace the actions of battalions and batteries,” he wrote, “is of value only to the collector of antiques, and still more to the dealer of faked antiques.”³ Military historians today have begun to apply a rich variety of methods to their topic. “War and society,” an innovative concept in the 1960s and 1970s, is still of great value.⁴ Even the analysis of battles and campaigns, traditionally the focus of military history, has changed under the influence of new approaches.⁵

This book pays tribute to these innovations. It seeks to mobilize a variety of methodologies to address a difficult question – the “totality” of the Great War. The question raises definitional problems on all levels: The issue of the war’s totality extends far beyond battles and campaigns, nor can it be addressed in tracking the politics of World War I in isolation. It requires analysis of economies and finances. It directs attention to techniques of modern warfare at every level of combat. It also demands investigation of the interaction between war and society, the mentalities not only of cultural elites but also of broader social groups and “ordinary” individuals. “Total war” aimed at the mobilization of all forms of public, if not private, life toward victory on the battle-front; thus, understanding total war requires total history, whereby all the available research methods are required to capture its enormous complexity.

A study of total war might begin with the premise that total warfare, the scourge of the first half of the twentieth century, did not fall from the skies in 1914. Its political, military, economic, social, and cultural origins lie in the nineteenth century, if not earlier. The Wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars fundamentally altered the course of military history. For the first time since states had established monopolies over the use of armed force (*staatliches Gewaltmonopol*), mass mobilization

Soldaten im Deutsch-Französischen Krieg (Frankfurt am Main, 1995); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975); Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1989).

3 Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American*, 2d ed. (New York, 1958), viii.

4 It suffices to mention the groundbreaking studies by Michael Howard: *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870–1871* (London, 1961), and *War in European History* (Oxford, 1976). See also Geoffrey Best, *War in Revolutionary Europe, 1770–1870* (London, 1982); Brian Bond, *War and Society in Europe, 1870–1970* (London, 1984).

5 See John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (London, 1976); Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979).

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and broad social support became the basis of warfare.⁶ The great Prussian military analyst, Carl von Clausewitz, was so impressed by this military revolution that he later wrote: “Suddenly war again became the business of the people – a people of thirty million, all of whom considered themselves to be citizens.”⁷ Despite their revolutionary fervor, these wars took place in a largely pre-industrial age. The means to mobilize economies and societies for war thus remained limited. Not until the middle of the nineteenth century did wars begin to implicate entire nations in Europe and North America.⁸

The Franco-Prussian War precipitated the first large-scale military conflict between industrializing nations in Europe. It thus is plausible to argue that this was the first “industrialized people’s war” on the old continent.⁹ On the other side of the Atlantic, the U.S. Civil War appeared to be even more “modern.” For more than four years Americans mobilized economies and societies to an unprecedented extent. This spectacle has convinced some historians that the Civil War represented the first total war in history.¹⁰

The first book in this series on total war compared these wars and came to mixed conclusions on this historical problem.¹¹ Aspects of “modernity,” which portended developments in the twentieth century, characterized these wars but so did “old-fashioned” methods of fighting. Still, one concludes that these earlier wars were the structural forerunners of twentieth-century total warfare in significant respects. This judgment applies particularly to the proposition that the enemy’s state was to be destroyed, for this idea played a role in both mid-century wars. The judgment also applies to the concept of mobilizing economies and societies, which became the goal of political and military leaders for the first time after 1815, and to the practice of carrying war systematically to enemy civilians. However, no direct line led from the combat of the 1860s and early 1870s to total war. Not only were other options open, but the implications of the American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification were ambiguous in this respect.

6 This was the principal issue in the Thirty Years’ War, according to Johannes Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992).

7 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J., 1989), 592.

8 For an overview, see Best, *War in Revolutionary Europe*.

9 See Stig Förster, “Facing ‘People’s War’: Moltke the Elder and Germany’s Military Options After 1871,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (1987): 209–30.

10 John B. Walters, *Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1973); James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988).

11 See Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds., *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871* (New York, 1997).

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The problems posed by a “narrative” that traces a straight path from the wars of the mid-nineteenth century to the total wars of the twentieth are more visible in the essays collected in the second book in the series, where the focus is on developments in the United States and Imperial Germany.¹² The conclusions of this collection are somewhat clearer. In neither the United States nor Germany was the idea of total war an issue. In Germany, important military experts harbored no illusions about a short war, and they were pessimistic about the future. But not even these experts were clairvoyant: No one foresaw the meaning of an industrialized people’s war. Thus there were no preparations for total war, although some dimensions of total warfare – the large-scale killing of enemy civilians with the object of annihilating entire nations – were rehearsed on the colonial periphery. But these features were not new to colonial warfare. However, none of these “small wars” remotely required total mobilization of the metropolitan power. The very idea of such mobilization was either shunned or deemed impossible. The developments that began in the summer of 1914 (or the spring of 1917) came as a surprise to all.

The year 1914 thus arguably marked a watershed. But the question remains: a watershed in what? Did the world suddenly change sometime after August 1914? Or was World War I fought out on bases that had been laid during previous decades? The first two books in the series demonstrated that most of the ingredients that gave World War I its catastrophic character had emerged long before 1914. These included industrialized mass society, nationalism, chauvinism, and racism, the participation of the masses in politics, mass armies equipped and provisioned with modern weapons, industrialized economies that provided the means for large-scale destruction, and the erosion of distinctions between soldiers and civilians. It took only a long, stalemated war among the major powers to bring these ingredients together. Yet we still must question whether this combination led to total war.

Two notable German participants in the Great War, Ernst Jünger and Erich Ludendorff, were not convinced of its totality. After the war, disappointed by Germany’s defeat, they criticized their country’s lack of total commitment, and they argued that a future war should in fact be total. To them, the inability of Imperial Germany to go all the way had led to disaster.¹³ Many historians have agreed with the judgments of Jünger and

12 Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (New York, 1999).

13 On Jünger, see Thomas Rohkrämer, “Die Verzauberung der Schlange: Krieg, Technik und Zivilisationskritik beim frühen Ernst Jünger,” in Michalka, ed., *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, 849–74. General Ludendorff summarized his ideas in his booklet, *Der totale Krieg* (Munich, 1935).

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Ludendorff that the Great War was not total. Other scholars, including several represented in this book, disagree. They argue that something approaching total war did take place, at least during the second half of the Great War.

In many respects World War I was indeed a watershed. With it began the disastrous “short twentieth century.”¹⁴ There are good reasons to claim, as does George F Kennan, that World War I was “*the* great seminal catastrophe of this century.”¹⁵ When the German leadership decided in the summer of 1914 to plunge Europe’s great powers into armed conflict, they started a cycle of wars and crises that concluded only with the end of the Cold War.¹⁶ In addition, World War I constituted a major break in military history.

To contemporaries and historians alike, World War I appeared to surpass anything that had taken place before. No other military conflict had hitherto reached such magnitude. But one should not exaggerate: This war not only was followed two decades later by a larger one, but some of its predecessors could, in several respects, offer valid comparisons. The Thirty Years’ War and the Seven Years’ War lasted longer than World War I; and, measured in relative terms, they were at least as devastating.¹⁷ World War I also was not the *first* world war. Global wars had raged before, as European expansion carried conflicts among the Great Powers into the wider world. Both the Thirty Years’ War and Seven Years’ War had global dimensions. If world wars are defined as global conflicts, the “French wars,” which began in 1792–3, marked the first instance.¹⁸ As a global war, the war of 1914–18 in fact ranked below the French wars, which were fought in more theaters and over a longer period of time.¹⁹

14 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1994).

15 George F Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), 3.

16 The literature on the causes of World War I is almost endless, as research continues. The origins of the war are enormously complicated, and every power had its share of responsibility. In the end, however, Germany’s political and military leaders must shoulder most of the blame. One of the best summaries of research on this topic remains James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London, 1984).

17 On the Thirty Years’ War, see Burckhardt, *Der Dreissigjährige Krieg*; Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years’ War* (London 1984); Ronald G. Asch, *The Thirty Years’ War: The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618–48* (London, 1997). On the Seven Years’ War, see Dennis E. Showalter, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (London, 1996), 135–351.

18 See Stig Förster, “Der Weltkrieg 1792–1815: Bewaffnete Konflikte und Revolutionen in der Weltgesellschaft,” *Jahrbuch für historische Friedensforschung* 3 (1994): 17–38; A. D. Harvey, *Collision of Empires: Britain in Three World Wars, 1793–1945* (London, 1992).

19 The question nonetheless remains whether the global character of wars has anything to do with their “totality.” Global conflicts have featured limited campaigns waged for limited objectives. When they were fought by small, professional armies or navies, they required no large-scale mobi-

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Measured in terms of casualties, costs, and the extent of mobilization, World War I looks frightful nonetheless. According to one account, thirty-six countries participated and mobilized 70 million men. At least 10 million people lost their lives, although civilian deaths can only be estimated. Twenty million soldiers were crippled, and direct expenditures for the war totaled \$208 billion. Even these figures, however, must be put in context. They were far surpassed during World War II.²⁰ But given smaller populations and comparable levels of economic and financial activity, some previous conflicts were just as devastating as World War I, if not more so. The Taiping Revolt in China (1850–64) was one of the bloodiest civil wars in world history: Some 20 million people lost their lives.²¹ Paraguay's war against the Triple Alliance (1865–70) was as total as imaginable: Of a population of 1.4 million at the beginning of the war only 230,000 survived, 600 of whom were males of military age.²² Earlier wars also occasioned financial disaster. Britain alone spent £830 million on the French wars at a time when prewar annual public spending had averaged £18 million.²³

What, then, was so exceptional about World War I? The question begs the answer: It was the first large-scale industrialized conflict, and it gave birth to the concept of total war. Industrialized warfare added a new dimension to fighting: Men now battled machines; combat became anonymous; new weapons of mass destruction, such as poison gas, were used for the first time; and problems of supply assumed unprecedented proportions. At sea, submarines introduced a new kind of combat that was particularly cruel when used without restriction. Put together, new technology, mass warfare, and the surprising strength of national economies created a terrible impasse. Neither side could win a rapid victory, and thus the war continued. Under these circumstances, every-

lization at home. Even the global dimension of the "French wars" did not turn these conflicts into people's wars. Excepting only Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt, these campaigns were fought on the periphery by professional forces or, as in North America (1812–14), by small militias. The currency of the concept of total war in the early twentieth century reflected not so much the global character of conflict as the changes that industrial mobilization brought to warfare. During the 1930s, Japan moved toward total war in China – years before the "Empire of the Sun" entered World War II. See Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London, 1987).

20 See Gerhart Hass and Wolfgang Schumann, eds., *Deutschland im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, 6 vols. (Berlin, 1975–88), 6:782.

21 Jürgen Osterhammel, *China und die Weltgesellschaft: Vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in unsere Zeit* (Munich, 1989), 150–2.

22 See Louis Schneider, *Der Krieg der Triple-Allianz gegen die Regierung der Republik Paraguay*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1872–5).

23 J. Steven Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760–1815* (Oxford, 1960), 570.

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thing depended on the integration of armies in the field, navies at sea, and citizens on the home front. More than ever before, whole nations became integrated fighting units. This tendency underlay the idea of total war, although its theoretical fine-tuning took place only in the 1920s and 1930s.

The definition of total war thus is a central problem. In this book the reader will find several working definitions because a consensus has so far eluded us. For the time being, therefore, we have contented ourselves with provisional models. Ludendorff presented one such model, which has the virtue of simplicity. In his view, total war meant simply the total mobilization of all human and material resources for unlimited warfare under the total control of a military dictatorship. Ludendorff himself proposed that the nation be prepared single-mindedly for this endeavor, even in peacetime. Under the guidance of a military dictator, the nation was to live for war and nothing else. This had clearly not been the case before 1914, and Ludendorff accordingly denied that World War I was total.²⁴ But the tendency toward totality was certainly present after 1914.

Participants in our series have suggested other attributes for total war. Total mobilization at home is one thing, but war is, as Clausewitz reminds us, in its essence the violent interaction between two or more parties. Thus the aims of the war and the modes of fighting also must be taken into consideration. Here it is pertinent to emphasize the growing trend, noted in the books in this series, toward fighting wars without compromise, that is, to the bitter end. Unlimited war aims, the idea of unconditional surrender, and the complete subjugation of the enemy play an important role in total war. Moreover, as entire nations become involved and chauvinistic public opinion is mobilized, neither side is prepared to compromise. With both sides committed to unlimited warfare, the conflict tends to continue for a long time, until resources are exhausted or one side collapses. Complete victory and crushing defeat appear to be the only alternatives in total war.²⁵

Another important aspect of total war is the role of civilians. Because the home fronts have become as important as the battlefields and civilians provide the economic and moral backbone to armies and navies, people at home become military targets. Breaking the home front's will to continue represents as sure a route to victory as triumph on the bat-

²⁴ Ludendorff, *Der totale Krieg*.

²⁵ For an analysis of this complex question, in addition to the question of unlimited war aims in the mid-century wars, see the contributions by Mark E. Neely Jr., James M. McPherson, and Stig Förster, all in Förster and Nagler, eds., *On the Road to Total War*.

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tlefield. Under these circumstances total war implies the tendency to break down the borders between soldiers and civilians in defense as well as in attack. William Tecumseh Sherman used such tactics when he embarked on his march through the South. At least theoretically, Philip H. Sheridan and Otto von Bismarck agreed that carrying the war to the civilian sphere was an appropriate way to fight a people's war. Strategies of large-scale starvation and strategic bombing pointed in the same direction; in the end, so did genocide. The wholesale involvement of civilians in war, as active participants and as victims, is one of the most significant hallmarks of total war.²⁶ It implies the destruction of traditional gender roles, and it also has profound effects on culture, mentalities, and social stratification. After total war, or anything approaching it, no society remains unchanged.

Is total mobilization possible? It is unlikely that even the best organized military and civilian bureaucracies can ever channel every activity of a given nation into the war effort. Even during the two world wars of the twentieth century, none of the participating parties managed – in spite of the grandiose pretensions of their leaders – to mobilize everyone and everything for war. As several authors in this book argue, for example, the so-called Hindenburg Program of 1917 was a failure. In addition, the attempt to achieve complete mobilization under total control proved to be self-defeating. Not only did this effort hamper war production, it also persuaded enemies to adopt similar measures. The war therefore was prolonged, and it became increasingly ruinous for all sides. The same point can be made for attempts to use ever more ruthless means to achieve victory. The employment of poison gas, naval blockades to starve enemy populations into submission, and unrestricted submarine warfare led only to a cycle of measures and countermeasures that raised the stakes and extended the casualty lists. In World War I, at least, all attempts to wage total war only prolonged the fighting, promoted havoc, and damaged the fabric of society.

The attempt to wage total war did not promote total victory. In the end, all the belligerents were exhausted, if they did not collapse completely. Only the United States emerged strengthened from the ordeal.

26 See Walters, *Merchant of Terror*. See also the more cautious arguments in Michael Fellman, *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York, 1995), 213–37. For further clarification of this argument, see Stig Förster, “Vom Volkskrieg zum totalen Krieg? Der Amerikanische Bürgerkrieg 1861–1865, der Deutsch–Französische Krieg 1870/71 und die Anfänge der modernen Kriegsführung,” in Walther L. Bernecker and Volker Dotterweich, eds., *Deutschland in den internationalen Beziehungen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts: Festschrift für Josef Becker zum 65. Geburtstag* (Munich, 1996), 71–92.

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But this country represented an exception, not in the least because it had participated only for a year and a half. World War I represented no brief on behalf of total war. The concept did not work: Instead of total war and total victory, the result was total chaos.

Total war will probably never be realized. It instead represents an “ideal type.” It can be pursued but never fully implemented. The contradictions inherent in it – particularly the tensions between total mobilization and total control and between the quest for total victory and the resultant provocation of the enemy into a total war effort of its own – militate against the realization of the ideal. If total war is an ideal type, however, it provides a standard for historically analyzing the conduct of wars. Total mobilization, for instance, may well be impossible, but degrees of mobilization have varied enormously. By the end of 1918 Britain had mobilized far more people and resources than at the end of 1914. After 1941 the Soviet Union’s mobilization efforts arguably went further and thus more closely approximated the ideal type. The chapters in this book should be read in this light, for only then does the question make sense: How total was the Great War?

World War I is too large to be covered comprehensively in a single collection of essays. The difficulty of understanding the history of that war applied immediately to the geography of the war. The war in Europe was fought in the west and east, in the south – on the border between Italy and Austria-Hungary and in the Balkans – and on the adjacent seas. It also was fought in the Middle East, Africa, and the Far East, as well as on the oceans of the world. Every continent was affected. We would like to have taken the geographical expanse and variety of the conflict into account, for these features, too, speak directly to the problem of total war. An analysis of the war in eastern Europe, for example, would have raised the question of how the 1917 Russian Revolution was linked to total war. No less interesting is the problem of total war’s bearing on imperialism and colonialism on the periphery. We had originally hoped to address the relationship between total war and genocide by analyzing the slaughter of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. These and other issues certainly belong in an analysis of total war in the era of the Great War.

Such broad consideration would have sprung the bounds of this book. We decided accordingly to focus our attention on the major powers that fought on the western front or were immediately affected by combat in this theater. This decision was not arbitrary. Our series has so far con-

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centrated on “the West,” in a narrow definition of this term.²⁷ We had originally planned a comparison between only the United States and Germany. But the first book required the inclusion of France in the deliberations. For the third book we added Britain and the Netherlands. In any event, focusing on the western front allowed us to draw on the results of the previous collections. As the series continues, however, we intend to broaden the scope into eastern Europe and beyond.

Our aim was not to recount the history of World War I. This book, which reflects an intense debate among the contributors, instead presents a series of topical analyses, and it highlights structural comparisons. We were less interested in diplomatic exchanges and battles than in the experiences of societies under the impact of World War I. The central analytical question, however, remained the extent to which these societies approached the ideal type of total war. We employed as many different methodological approaches as possible and combined a number of case studies with more general comparative analyses.

The first part of the collection contains two comparative chapters that provide basic reflections on the concept of total war. Hew Strachan (Chapter 1) first draws a line “from cabinet war to total war” by looking at the development of military doctrine from 1861 to 1918. His cautious argument is that in many respects World War I did indeed approach total war. This notion is further developed by Roger Chickering (Chapter 2), whose comparison of Germany and Britain before 1916 emphasizes that the Great War constituted a watershed. Only after 1914 did the concept of total war emerge. Together, these first chapters yield a conceptual framework for the rest of the book.

One of the most remarkable developments of World War I was the changing character of warfare. Because of these changes, this war stood in sharp contrast to earlier wars, and the immediate origins of the concept of total war lie in this realm of analysis. Martin van Creveld (Chapter 3) elaborates on his groundbreaking study of logistics.²⁸ In this field, he

27 It does of course make sense to define “the West” as all nations and states of European background, including the whole of Europe and all overseas societies with European roots. European expansion distributed the idea of the West around the globe. See Wolfgang Reinhard, *Geschichte der europäischen Expansion*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1983–90). However, the West also can be defined in a narrower sense, as the realm of bourgeois liberty and capitalism. The concept is then restricted only to parts of Europe and the Europeanized world on other continents, depending on the spread of its main characteristics. See John A. Hall, *Powers and Liberties: The Causes and Consequences of the Rise of the West* (London, 1985).

28 Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, 1977).