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0521622948 - Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences,
1871-1914

Edited by Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster

Excerpt

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Introduction

ROGER CHICKERING AND STIG FÖRSTER

The chapters in this book were the focus of deliberations at a conference that convened in Augsburg in July 1994. This meeting was the second in a projected series of five conferences on “The United States and Germany in the Age of Total War, 1860–1945.” The design of the series is to survey the effects of new forms of warfare – and the new requirements of preparing for them – on these two countries, whose social structures, political institutions, and cultural traditions displayed significant differences during the period in question. The object is accordingly a comparative analysis of war and society – to study the massive impact of changes in technology and social organization on the conduct of war, as well as the impact of warfare on broader social, political, and cultural developments in the two lands.

The first conference in the series met in Washington, D.C., in April 1992, to examine the American Civil War and the midcentury wars of German unification in this light.¹ Here the deliberations laid bare the difficulties of comparison, for these campaigns appeared to have little in common beyond their contemporaneity. The German wars proceeded with a dispatch that not only kept the German casualty figures low but also limited the dislocations visited by mobilization on the home front, if one can even speak of a German “home front” during these conflicts. The American war, by contrast, provided many more plausible anticipations of the comprehensive kind of warfare that became known in the next century as “total war.” It was far longer, more extensive geographically, and more costly, and it involved civilians directly to a far greater degree as providers of moral and material support to the soldiers and as immediate victims of military operations. However, analysis of the American Civil War also drew attention to features of the German wars that seemed to betray the

¹ 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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operation of forces, both on and off the battlefield, that subsequently drove the prodigious aggrandizement of warfare in the twentieth century. Tactical operations during these campaigns confirmed on a small scale the lessons from the other side of the Atlantic, where modern weaponry had frustrated offensive maneuver and the quest for the “decisive battle.” Like the American Civil War, the war of 1870–1 also showed signs of becoming a *Volkskrieg*, a war that involved entire peoples. During the later phases of the Franco-German conflict, French civilians swelled the category of combatants, as the Germans directed their artillery on Paris and appeals from the French republican government for a new *levée en masse* ate away at operational distinctions between soldiers and civilians.

The second conference addressed the era bounded by the end of the midcentury wars and the outbreak of World War I, the great conflict that gave birth to the idea of total war. Framed as a question, “Anticipating Total War?” the theme of this conference was whether the experiences of war at midcentury figured in the subsequent anticipation and planning of warfare in Germany and the United States – and whether anyone anticipated warfare in the dimensions that it assumed after 1914. The first conference suggested a number of areas in which this question ought to be posed. Beyond analyzing the thinking of the soldiers and civilian planners who were professionally charged with anticipating warfare, it seemed important to investigate the attitudes of the figures who guided politics and diplomacy, as well as the calculations of business leaders about the likely economic impact of modern warfare. The study of popular attitudes toward war in this era recommended a survey of leading social and cultural groups, such as churches, veterans organizations, and other influential voluntary associations. Finally, it seemed essential to investigate possible portents of total war in several episodes of colonial warfare at the turn of the twentieth century that involved the soldiers of Germany or the United States.

The theoretical underpinnings of this venture are explored at more length in the book’s two initial chapters. To anticipate the findings of the subsequent chapters, which constitute the heart of the book, the answer to the question posed was in most cases “no.” The chapters reveal that discussion of war was ubiquitous in both countries. Apocalyptic visions were not uncommon, but many were tainted by association with pacifists or other marginal groups. Despite the extraordinary accuracy of some of them, these prophecies were remarkable for their extravagance or rhetorical abstraction; and regardless of who embraced them, they resulted in little reflection on the implications of protracted warfare and less in the way of practical planning. As a consequence, the course of events after the sum-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

mer of 1914 surprised virtually everyone. Bellicose nationalism and aggressive enthusiasm about the benefits of warfare, which could be found in abundance on both sides of the ocean, provided little guidance as to the face of combat and mobilization in 1914. This generalization applies alike to Germany, where anticipations of war filtered through institutions and traditions that supported the militarization of society, and to the United States, where despite the direct legacy of the Civil War, military institutions and traditions were much more inchoate. In both countries, if for different reasons, the “lessons” of the American conflict paled in the eyes of most observers, as the German wars of unification suggested a more inviting – and deceptive – precedent for thinking about the next war.

The essays by Roger Chickering (Chapter 1) and Irmgard Steinisch (Chapter 2), which make up Part One, are designed to provide bearings for the investigations that follow. The discussions during the first conference suggested the wisdom of examining the idea of total war more systematically. Chickering’s chapter surveys the history of this concept, whose utility, he argues, has suffered in the extravagance with which some observers have employed it. Chickering pleads for more sober use of the concept, principally as an “ideal type” or developmental model of warfare’s extension along a number of axes, the most critical of which was the “systematic, calculated incorporation of civilians into the category of participants.” Steinisch then explores some of the central parameters of comparison between Germany and the United States. Both countries, she argues, confronted problems born of rapid capitalist industrialization, the growth of imperial ambitions, and the currency of exceptionalist ideologies. Nonetheless, significant contrasts in institutions and traditions, as well as Germany’s more immediate involvement in great-power rivalries, affected the way in which “matters of war” – such as militarism, navalism, imperialism, social Darwinism, and pacifism – were debated in the two lands.

The chapters in Part Two examine how the debate over war in both Germany and the United States was interwoven into economic and social issues, particularly into questions of social integration and social control. In exploring the economic foundations of military planning in the two countries, Paul A. C. Koistinen (Chapter 3) and Gerald D. Feldman (Chapter 4) suggest that most economic elites failed to foresee a conflict that would require extended mobilization or the coordinated planning of military and economic affairs. Koistinen concludes that the professionalization of the U.S. military – a growing awareness of the managerial, technological, economic, and broader political imperatives of modern warfare – advanced significantly further in the navy than the army during this epoch. Feldman

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

examines the case of the German industrialist Hugo Stinnes, whose aggressive expansionism during World War I seemed to epitomize the marriage of war and industrial profit. However, during the prewar era, Feldman insists, neither Stinnes nor other leading German businessmen gave much thought to war, which they feared would only disrupt their pursuit of profit. “The great industrialists and the great bankers,” Feldman concludes, “showed very little interest in preparing for war.”

In other areas, discussions about war and preparations for war were impossible to divorce from questions of social power. Bruce White (Chapter 5) surveys the impact of military issues, from imperial expansion to intervention in World War I, on ethnic and racial relationships in the United States and Canada. He argues that debate over these issues fostered a growing intolerance of ethnic diversity in the United States, the conviction that minority allegiances could not be reconciled with patriotism. That attitudes toward ethnic minorities remained more tolerant in Canada was due to several factors, White suggests, including the nature and timing of immigration from eastern and southern Europe. Debates over war and peace also bore centrally on issues of social power that were garbed in confessional tension, as Gangolf Hübinger’s essay (Chapter 6) on the German churches reveals. He notes the “asymmetry” between the Catholic and Protestant discourses on war. The enthusiasm with which several strains of German Protestantism embraced militarism and radical nationalism contrasted with the reservation of German Catholics, whose reluctance to wear these ideological emblems of “Germanness” corresponded to the stigma Catholics bore as second-class citizens in Imperial Germany.

Because war figured so large in the definition of patriotism and civic orthodoxy in Germany and the United States, it bore centrally on debates about the socialization of young people. The essays by David I. MacLeod (Chapter 7) and Derek S. Linton (Chapter 8) investigate the different circumstances in which this debate took place, although both authors conclude that in neither country did premilitary training anticipate the kind of war that came in 1914. In the United States, argues MacLeod, the direct effort to train boys and young men in military skills and attitudes fell primarily under the auspices of the ROTC, but it was “limited and mostly ineffective.” More effective, he contends, was the “indirect” campaign that took place in the realm of youth groups, such as the Boy Scouts, and in organized team sports such as American football, where the virtues of aggressiveness, manly competition, and teamwork guided the agenda. Here the effort to inculcate patriotism and attitudes that were “effectively premilitary” provided training in a “metaphorical language,” in which ethnic conscripts from the lower classes

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[More information](#)

could one day converse with white upper- and middle-class officers. The “relative optimism” that MacLeod notes in these American efforts was absent in Germany, where, as Linton shows, class tensions, particularly middle-class anxieties about the success of socialist youth groups, drove the militarization of youth work. In his examination of the Pfadfinder and the Jungdeutschlandbund, Linton notes the centrality of premilitary training, war games, and the virtues of collective solidarity.

The systematic militarization of attitudes in Imperial Germany is also the theme of the essays by Thomas Rohkrämer (Chapter 9) and Jean H. Quataert (Chapter 10), which conclude Part Two. On the strength of his survey of veterans’ associations, Rohkrämer argues that a significant segment of the German population was prepared for a “major war,” if not the one that broke out in 1914. Of particular importance, he argues, was the intergenerational shift that occurred in these organizations, as veterans of the wars of unification ceased to make up the bulk of the membership. The place of these old soldiers, whose thinking about war reflected a sense of pride in their own achievement, went instead to reservists who had never seen action and who, to compensate for this lack, indulged in a general glorification of war. The radicalization of German militarism, Rohkrämer concludes, “resulted from the way in which [German] society dealt with [the] memories” of its earlier wars. Quataert draws attention to another dimension of the problem, which she calls the “gender war culture.” She points out that understanding the popular acceptance of war requires attention to the gendering of the ideology of war. Women participated in this ideology because it provided them a public place – as care-givers to the male warriors. “The female sphere of care,” she writes, “supported and authorized the emergence of a coordinated infrastructure of institutionalized civilian war-preparedness outside the usual military machinery.” No less than the premilitary training of youth, though, the rituals practiced in this gender war culture “reinforced power hierarchies and inequalities while they affirmed as well notions of community and solidarity.”

The focus of the chapters in Part Three is cultural. They deal directly with representations of war, the images that informed several levels of discourse on the character of future warfare, and the role of this discourse in the framing of national identities and policies. The chapters also provide direct documentation for the wide gulf that separated public expectations from the reality of combat. In a broad-ranging survey of the leading national magazines in the American market, John Whiteclay Chambers II (Chapter 11) controverts the proposition that acceptance of war was less widespread or enthusiastic in the American “public dialogue about the fu-

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ture of war” than it was in the German. The American discourse was both comprehensive and “extraordinarily inaccurate,” as most participants rejected the idea that the American Civil War was a harbinger of future conflicts. Alfred Kelly’s essay (Chapter 12) on the myth of the “Great and Glorious War of 1870–1” suggests why the memory of midcentury German triumphs nurtured images of war that were as compelling as they were obsolete. He demonstrates not only how this memory systematically misrepresented the experiences of the soldiers who fought in it but also how the myth was constructed and why it was persuasive. Volker R. Berghahn (Chapter 13) takes up a related problem, namely, the vital connection between war preparations and images of national identity in Imperial Germany. In his analysis of *Rüstungsnationalismus*, or armaments nationalism, he argues that constructing a German battle fleet was based initially on an “inclusive” construction of national identity that accommodated Catholics and industrial workers. A shift in armaments policy in 1906, however, betrayed the belief among German leaders that a European war was now imminent, and it encouraged a new “exclusive” definition of the national community as it added urgency to the German arms buildup. The category of “the other” henceforth applied not only to potential foreign enemies but also to the German “critics of vigorous war preparations.”

Whether they were associated with martial skills or caregiving, optimism or anxiety, heroic individualism or teamwork, images of war were common currency in Germany and the United States. In describing scenarios of conflict, they provided points of reference, however fantastic, that united veterans, young people, women, journalists, and churchmen in the popular discourse on “military matters.” These images also were the central concern, if not an obsession, of strategists and military planners in both countries, whose charge was to translate images into operational reality. As the next two chapters show, the professional “military imagination” drew on the same cultural inventory that provisioned the popular imagination. David F. Trask (Chapter 14) surveys the torpor into which American security policy fell in the aftermath of the Civil War, when war meant policing frontiers in the continental West or the new pockets of American empire in the Caribbean and Pacific. These frontier adventures encouraged neither the armed forces nor the strategic thinking appropriate to the challenge that the outbreak of European war signaled to American security in 1914. Woodrow Wilson, Trask suggests, accepted the challenge; and by the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, the president had presided over a “revolutionary revision of the nation’s cardinal national security policies.” Stig Förster (Chapter 15) then offers the book’s most significant

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challenge to the proposition that planners failed to foresee a long war. He reexamines a belief that has long been orthodox in the historiography of World War I, namely, that the scenario for war laid out in the Schlieffen Plan represented a “recipe for victory” and that the German army entered the war confident of a quick triumph. Förster shows that many of the officers who led this army into war, from Helmuth von Moltke on down, had a (more) sober appreciation of the risks that they were about to undertake. They entertained anxious images of the impending conflict, which some of them expected to last for years. If, however, these soldiers anticipated something approaching a “total” war, they did little to avert it, nor did they undertake any serious planning for long-term mobilization; and, in the moment of crisis, they pressed civilian leaders to pursue policies that promised, as Förster notes, to turn dreams into nightmares.

Finally, civilian leaders were themselves prey to fantasies when they contemplated war. In his analysis of the views of Theodore Roosevelt, Raimund Lammersdorf (Chapter 16) emphasizes the social Darwinist and racial motifs in the philosophy of this “most prominent militarist in American history.” In Roosevelt’s eyes, Lammersdorf points out, war represented the “highest and noblest achievement” to which a man could aspire. The American president’s brief intervention on behalf of European peace during the Moroccan crisis of 1905–6 represented no departure from this principled embrace of warfare, but rather his fear lest the “higher” races of Europe fight with one another instead of spreading civilization, by conquest if need be, to the rest of the globe.

Statesmen and soldiers might be pardoned their illusions about the war into which they were wandering, insofar as their most immediate impressions of combat were drawn from “small” wars in Africa and Asia. Because these contests involved vast disparities of force, they required only minor exertions of modern armies and seemed to offer little guidance to their leaders. To judge from the concluding chapters in Part Four, however, the impressions conventionally drawn from colonial warfare are misleading. These chapters are devoted to several episodes in which German or American troops saw action, and they suggest that these small wars paved the transition between the people’s wars of the nineteenth century and the total wars of the twentieth. Robert M. Utley (Chapter 17) examines the conflicts on the American Indian frontier. He rejects the suggestion that American Indians were objects of genocidal policies; in fact, he argues, the tribes fell victim to forces that were more economic, political, cultural, and psychological than military. Nonetheless, aspects of the conflict did anticipate “total” features of later wars, particularly the targeting of civilian infra-

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structures by warriors on both sides. The purpose, Utley writes of the army's strategy, "was not only to kill the enemy but also to destroy food, clothing, shelter, and transportation and cast everyone destitute on a hostile land to endure climatic extremes and psychological stress." Trutz von Trotha (Chapter 18) looks at the behavior of German troops in Africa, where he detects a similar tendency. In pursuing an "unlimited war of pacification" against indigenous peoples, he argues, the Germans recognized no distinction between soldiers and civilian populations. He concludes that "in the strategy of exposing entire populations to certain death by hunger and thirst, unlimited wars of pacification are radicalized to the limit and take on the genocidal trait of total war." In a careful analysis of the United States' "ugly little war" in the Philippines, Glenn Anthony May (Chapter 19) takes these observations further. He points out that that the "fragile barrier separating soldiers from civilians was definitely breached," particularly in the operations of the U.S. Army in southwest Luzon. In herding civilians into "zones of concentration" in order to contain the guerrilla campaign, the American forces consciously courted demographic disaster and anticipated "the World War II practice of bombing cities." In fact, May argues, "what came to be called 'total war' was colonial warfare writ large." Finally, Sabine Dabringhaus's account (Chapter 20) of the German expedition to China in the wake of the Boxer uprising features the same wholesale violence against both civilians and soldiers. The so-called cleansing of towns and villages, she writes, "extended warfare into purely civilian areas and cost more lives than in open battles." No more than in the other instances of colonial war, however, did this savagery reflect a set plan to wage total war against the Chinese. Like Utley, Trotha, and May, Dabringhaus underscores instead the ideological violence, the dehumanization of Chinese, Hereros, Filipinos, and Sioux, which ratified the indiscriminate physical violence that Caucasian troops visited upon peoples of color.

The chapters in this book invite similar conclusions. Although expectations of war were widespread in Germany and the United States, most were blind. The great majority of observers overlooked or disregarded the manifold forces that were transforming warfare into a protracted, comprehensive, and ruinous ordeal in which civilians were no less essential than soldiers to the outcome, and the very foundations of society were put at risk. Most soldiers and statesmen were no less unprepared for these developments than were the populaces they led. Plans to harness industry, commerce, or morale in support of a long war were nowhere in place; only delayed entry into the war spared the United States the grim surprises that greeted the European belligerents in 1914.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

These conclusions harbor important interpretive ramifications for the war that came in 1914. There were no realistic plans to fight it. The first total war of the twentieth century was from the start a titanic exercise in improvisation. The mobilization of armed forces, economies, and societies proceeded everywhere with no prior design, no precedent, and no clear goals save for the play of contingency and institutional and cultural constraints. At the risk of slighting longer-term continuities, World War I might well be portrayed as the great disjuncture in the “narrative” of total war. In all events, these are among the problems to be addressed in the third installment of this series, whose theme will be the Great War.

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PART ONE

Germany, the United States, and Total War