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0521812364 - The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States,
1919-1939

Edited by Roger Chickering and Stig Förster

Excerpt

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Introduction

ROGER CHICKERING AND STIG FÖRSTER

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it appears as if the age of total war may be over. Military history, let alone “history” itself, has admittedly not come to an end.¹ The so-called new world order, in which a single superpower remains, has failed to provide global peace or stability. Wars continue with unabated frequency. Nonetheless, the character of international conflict, at least in its organized form, seems to have moved away from the patterns that dominated the first half of the twentieth century.²

During the recent war in Kosovo, NATO officials routinely offered public regrets about the “collateral damage” that the alliance’s airplanes had inflicted inadvertently on civilians in the Balkans. The destruction of a single bus by NATO bombs resulted in an international outcry and consternation among Western leaders. By contrast, the same officials proudly announced that one of their pilots had avoided a target after he had determined that it lay close to a church. Fifty-five years earlier, during World War II, political and military leaders would have found this kind of warfare difficult to comprehend. They would not have been troubled by the destruction of a bus in the course of a bombing sortie. The wholesale killing of civilians was a common and essential part of their strategies, for the distinction between soldiers and civilians had ceased to matter much.

Today, however, wars are evidently fought for more restricted aims with more limited, albeit sophisticated, means. Unconditional surrender no longer represents the conventional conclusion to warfare. Mass, conscripted armies are found today primarily in less developed countries, where they

1 Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

2 Martin van Creveld has suggested a different “retreat” from total war. He argues that organized warfare is being replaced by low-intensity wars waged by terrorists and resistance movements. See Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York, 1991); cf. Ulrich Bröckling, “Am Ende der grossen Kriegerzählungen? Zur Genealogie der ‘humanitären Intervention,’” *Arbeitskreis Militärgeschichte, Newsletter* 11 (2000): 7–10.

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usually bring unhappy economic and political consequences. The strategies of modern armed forces are designed to reduce their own casualties – if possible (as in Kosovo) to eliminate them altogether. After Vietnam, as Hew Strachan has recently remarked, “both the public and politicians were re-educated to expect wars to be short, victorious, and comparatively bloodless.”³ The future of warfare seems to belong to highly trained, well-equipped professional soldiers, whose mission is, as the public hand-wringing over collateral damage in Kosovo suggested, to remove their business as far as possible from civilian affairs.

Has the “age of total war” really passed? Has warfare returned to a “normal” state? Was total war but a momentary aberration in the long history of warfare? Did it emerge in specific historical circumstances during the nineteenth century, come to fruition in the early twentieth century, and then disappear?

John Keegan has recently lent support to this view. He has restated an old argument that early human societies fought only limited wars – that they avoiding mass-killings and large-scale destruction. In this perspective, limited warfare appears to be the natural form of armed conflict among human groups. The radicalization of warfare, its extension to all the members of the participating groups, commenced only with the emergence of modern states and sophisticated armies.⁴

The paleo-anthropologist Lawrence Keeley has painted an altogether different picture.⁵ He concludes that prehistoric societies often fought wars in which destruction was limited only by the means at the disposal of the combatants. Mobilizing all able-bodied men – and sometimes women – these “primitive” groups set out to subjugate or annihilate one another. In this light, *total war* – waged to the limits of a society’s capabilities – has been the “normal” pattern, the basic historical form of intergroup conflict. Only when states could no longer afford the strains and costs of conflict in this pattern did the limitation of warfare begin.

If Keeley is right, the total wars of the twentieth century represented no historical aberration. Limiting warfare depended on the ability of states and societies to control the use of military violence, to employ it with limited means for limited aims. One could then argue that historical circumstances in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought the breakdown of these control mechanisms and opened the road to total war. Warfare returned to its

3 Hew Strachan, “Essay and Reflection: On Total War and Modern War,” *International History Review* 22 (2000): 347.

4 John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1993).

5 Lawrence Keeley, *War Before Civilization* (New York, 1996).

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basic nature, albeit in much more destructive form, which corresponded to the expanded capacities of modern industrial societies. The principal question then relates to the causes of the disastrous disappearance of constraints on warfare in the modern era.

This question has posed the underlying theme in a series of conferences of which this volume represents a part. “Total war” became a popular topos during the period between the two world wars of the twentieth century. It was coined during the first of them, and it subsequently played an important role in deliberations everywhere about the future of warfare. Even as it entered the popular vocabulary, though, a compelling definition of the term eluded contemporaries; and it has continued to frustrate historians. Accordingly, one of the principal goals of the conference series has been to explore the definition and historical meaning of the concept of total war. The first three conferences demonstrated the difficulties of the undertaking.⁶ Participants found it hard to agree on the dimensions of total war, the origins of the phenomenon, the conflicts that might lay claim to the label, and whether total war ever fully materialized. In fact, doubts have lingered over whether the concept of total war has occasioned more confusion than insight and ought best to be abandoned.

One of the difficulties lies in the expanding purview of warfare in the modern epoch. The idea of total war implies the breakdown of the distinction between organized combat and the societies, economies, and political systems that support it. Analyzing this phenomenon in turn has broad methodological implications, which are captured in the proposition that “total war requires total history.”⁷ If the idea of total war has any utility for historians, it requires the investigation of warfare in its many historical dimensions, an effort that extends to the fields of military, political, social, economic, and cultural history. This realization has brought a significant expansion in the scope of the conference series, as historians from other areas have joined the ranks of military historians in examining the history of warfare in the modern era.

The series began with the hypothesis that a phenomenon called total war could claim its immediate origins in the American and French Revolutions. As the revolutionaries in both lands invoked the idea of a “people’s war”

6 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); Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The American and German Experiences, 1871–1914* (New York, 1999); Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (New York, 2000).

7 Roger Chickering, “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept,” in Boemeke, Chickering, and Förster, eds., *Anticipating*, 27.

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as a response to the professional armies that they faced, they called on the support of the general public for their war effort. At the end of the eighteenth century, warfare increasingly involved entire societies. One might thus argue that the ideological foundations of total war were laid in these revolutions, once it became theoretically compelling and plausible to mobilize every citizen for war.

Industrialization later in the nineteenth century offered the material means to put the ideology of people's war into practice. Mass armies of volunteers and conscripts could be transported to the battlefields and provided with weapons, munitions, equipment, and food. These requirements attached enormous significance to the exertions of civilians on the home front. Non-combatants produced the essential material provisions for soldiers in the field; the moral and political support of non-combatants was consequently hardly less vital to the prosecution of war than were the efforts of the soldiers. Civilians became directly implicated in the fighting, hence legitimate targets of military action, as the conceptual distinction between them and soldiers began to erode.

At the same time, the aims for which wars were being fought themselves lost their constraints. As belligerent societies began to cast one another as threats to their own survival, the destruction of the enemy's basic social or political institutions seemed to offer appropriate redress. Finally, as mass mobilization for warfare reached its zenith in the industrial wars of the twentieth century, populations grew accustomed to mass slaughter. This experience reduced popular resistance to the employment of every means available to achieve victory.

Given the hypothesis that total war grew out of the combined military implications of what Eric Hobsbawm has called the "dual revolution" of popular sovereignty and industrialization,⁸ it seemed appropriate to begin the conference series in the middle of the nineteenth century, with a comparison between the American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification. These were the first large-scale wars in which many of these new features of warfare could be observed. The participants in the first conference could not agree, however, whether any of these mid-century wars might legitimately be called "total." The American Civil War in particular was the object of an extended debate. While James McPherson argued that this conflict turned total in 1862, Mark Neely disagreed.⁹ On the other hand, no one claimed

8 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York, 1962).

9 James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York 1988), 490; Mark E. Neely Jr., "Was the Civil War a Total War?" in Förster and Nagler, eds., *On the Road*, 29–52; James M. McPherson, "From Limited War to Total War in America," in *ibid.*, 295–310.

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that the German Wars could remotely lay claim to this label, although some argued that the Franco-German War showed tendencies in this direction.¹⁰ In all events, the conference resulted in no consensus. Disagreements grew primarily out of the paradoxical characters of these wars, which exhibited both “modern” and “traditional” characteristics. The conference did make clear, however, that any attempt to define total war would have to accommodate several dimensions of analysis, although the blurring of distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, the extension of warfare to include civilians as well as soldiers, impressed many as the most basic.

The next conference was devoted to the experiences of the United States and Imperial Germany in the era between the mid-century wars and the outbreak of World War I. This conference achieved more consensus. Although signs of the loosening of constraints on warfare could be detected in the writings of German and American observers, as well as in the practices of colonial warfare, it was clear that few contemporaries in either country foresaw the wars of the early twentieth century. While some military and civilian theorists in Germany envisaged a long, catastrophic war, even they failed to anticipate a war of such comprehensive impact that it might legitimately be called total.¹¹ The conference laid bare so many alternative visions of future war that it became difficult to contend that the road to total war led straight from the middle of the nineteenth century to the Great War.

The third conference was the first to confront a conflict that has conventionally enjoyed the designation “total war.” By virtually every index, World War I was the most extensive and comprehensive ever fought. Its sheer magnitude defied the limits of a single conference and made necessary a focus on the principal powers that were engaged on the western front. Although disagreements surfaced once again, the conference did yield some general conclusions. Despite the ghastly extent of the slaughter at the front, leaders in all the belligerent countries persisted in conducting the war as “business as usual,” at least until 1916, which proved to be a turning point. As the terrible battles of this year failed to break the military deadlock on the western front, conceptual limits on war began to break down. Unrestricted submarine warfare, the introduction of new technologies, and the grim attempt to achieve the full mobilization of society, cost what it might, all suggested that warfare had undergone a significant modulation.

10 Stig Förster, “The Prussian Triangle of Leadership in the Face of a People’s War: A Reassessment of the Conflict Between Bismarck and Moltke, 1870–71,” in *ibid.*, 115–40; Robert Tombs, “The Wars Against Paris,” in *ibid.*, 541–64.

11 Stig Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914,” in Boemeke, Chickering, and Förster, eds., *Anticipating*, 343–76.

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The Hindenburg Program in Germany and Lloyd George's policy of conscription and full mobilization in Britain were the most salient markers of this process. By this time, the belligerent states had resolved to fight to the bitter end, to subvert if necessary one another's institutions by revolutionary means, and to disdain all thoughts of a compromise peace.

Did the Great War in fact represent a total war? Contemporaries such as Erich Ludendorff and Ernst Jünger denied that it did. After the war they charged that the German leadership had failed to implement total mobilization. German society had not, they argued, devoted itself unconditionally to the war effort. The conference demonstrated, however, that this charge could have been leveled as well at France, Britain, and the United States. Nor, judged by the victimization of civilians, did the Great War present an unambiguous picture. Britain's naval blockade was admittedly directed against Germany's civilian population, while the German U-boats were deployed to repay the British in kind. But, as Strachan emphasized, the static character of the front, which turned the Great War into a protracted siege, spared most civilians from the direct impact of military action.¹² Still, civilian targets were bombed from the air on both sides. German atrocities against Belgian civilians at the beginning of the war and the subsequent deportation of Belgian labor to Germany were also pertinent in this respect. In the end, though, the argument of Ludendorff and Jünger seemed compelling: although tendencies in this direction were detectable, total war did not materialize during the Great War.

But should one even pose the problem in these terms? This basic methodological question has hung over all the conferences. It has to do with what one might call the ontological status of total war. Is total war something real, a potentiality awaiting its realization in history? This conception of the problem draws on Carl von Clausewitz's idea of "absolute war," although the military philosopher himself was convinced that for several practical reasons the potential of absolute war, which inhered in every act of violence, would not be fully realized in historical fact. Defining total war in these "realist" terms has invited discussion of the specific indices or measures of "totality." How unrestrained must military violence become to deserve the label "total"? How radical must war aims be? How total was World War I?

The difficulties of answering this order of questions suggested the possibilities of posing the problem in different terms. "Total war," in an alternative

12 Hew Strachan, "From Cabinet War to Total War: The Perspective of Military Doctrine, 1861–1918," in Chickering and Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War*, 19–33; cf. Gerd Krumeich, "Kriegsfront – Heimatfront," in Gerhard Hirschfeld et al., eds., *Kriegserfahrungen: Studien zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Essen, 1997), 12–19.

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reading, might be better conceived as an “ideal type,” in the sense that Max Weber understood the term – as a heuristic device, an intellectual construction that lays claim itself to no independent historical reality but serves instead as a conceptual model, which allows the observer to abstract from empirical phenomena in order to analyze broader tendencies or categories of events. By this definition, “totality” in warfare has never been achieved historically; it can be only approximated. As an “ideal type,” however, total war draws the attention of historians to specific dimensions of warfare, and it provides categories of meaningful comparison among historical cases.

If the conference series has failed to resolve issues like these, it has hardly ignored them. Roger Chickering has warned of the pitfalls that lurk in the teleologies of total war as a “master narrative.”¹³ The conferences have demonstrated that the “plot line” of this narrative did not lead directly or ineluctably from the French revolutionary armies to Hiroshima. Portraying historical developments in light of such narrative logic obscures a host of contingencies, accidents, alternatives, and counter-tendencies that have figured prominently in all the recent conferences.

The concept of total war was contrived only during the interwar period, so anyone who wishes to use it to characterize earlier conflicts must be sensitive to charges of anachronism. Neither Lincoln nor Bismarck, Moltke nor even Ludendorff had conceived of total war before 1916. Employing the standards of one era to judge another is a dangerous exercise, which requires considerable caution. In this spirit, the conference series has suggested that productive structural comparisons require careful attention to the question why constraints on warfare that prevailed in one historical era broke down in another.

The conferences marked out a number of analytical dimensions or axes along which any definition of total war must be framed, however the concept is understood. One has to do with war aims. Pursuing the destruction or complete subjugation of an enemy, let alone the genocidal annihilation of its population, was rare before the modern era. It occurred primarily on the peripheries of Europe, as in the Spanish Reconquista. More commonly, defeated powers needed only to accede to the victors’ limited demands in order to be left alone. Wars ended usually in some sort of negotiation. This state of affairs survived into the wars of Napoleon, who, at least when he fought other great powers, did not as a rule seek their destruction.

During the American Civil War this pattern changed. The Confederacy admittedly fought for limited aims, insofar as it wished only to gain

13 Chickering, “Total War,” in Boemeke, *Anticipating*, 15–28.

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independence. As Jefferson Davis pleaded, “All we ask is to be left alone.”¹⁴ As the war dragged on, however, Lincoln raised the stakes, defining the Union’s goal as nothing less than the revolutionary recasting of the South with the elimination of slavery, its basic social institution. “The character of the war will be changed. It will be one of subjugation,” he declared. “The South is to be destroyed and replaced by new propositions and ideas.”¹⁵ Thus, even if Lincoln were prepared to negotiate on details, the term “unconditional surrender” now well described the Union’s war effort. A similar tendency surfaced in the Franco-German War several years later. After Léon Gambetta’s *guerre à outrance* had caused enormous difficulties for the German armies as they sought to bring the war to an end, Moltke demanded the complete occupation and subjugation of France. The Prussian crown prince was horrified by this call for “a war of extermination,” and Bismarck refused to agree to it.¹⁶ Both cases suggested that the radicalization of war aims was becoming a feature of war in the industrial era.

During the Great War, the French and Germans envisaged their mutual dismemberment and the destruction of one another’s great-power status. That extreme war aims were seriously meant was demonstrated in the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk. During much of the proceedings at the Paris peace conference in 1919, the French called for radical measures against Germany, before the influence of the Anglo-Saxon powers moderated the terms of the treaty. In World War II, unlimited aims were an even more prominent feature. The Germans planned to destroy the Soviet Union and to enslave or eradicate the population of the conquered territories. At the Casablanca conference, Churchill and Roosevelt made unconditional surrender officially the goal of their war against the Axis.

The radicalization of war aims reflected the changing attitudes of belligerent states toward one another. Political and military leaders, as well as large segments of their peoples, tended to regard their enemies as threats to their existence. Such beliefs blocked the path to negotiations and directed wars against an enemy’s political system or its entire people. This trend was partly due as well to the enormous collective effort and sacrifice that mass mobilization demanded in industrial warfare. Limited war aims seemed incongruent with the exertions required.

A second dimension of total war pertains to the methods of war. It is difficult to argue that wars were more humane in premodern times. The conventions that were negotiated early in the twentieth century at The Hague

14 Quoted in McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 310.15 *Ibid.*, 558.

16 Förster, “Prussian Triangle,” 133.

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and in Geneva were thought to be necessary precisely because warfare had not historically observed international rules.¹⁷ Nonetheless, belligerents in both world wars of the twentieth century disregarded even the conventions that they themselves had negotiated. German submarine warfare constituted a flagrant breach of international law. So did the aerial bombing, scorched-earth tactics, and the use (by the Japanese) of chemical and biological weapons in World War II. Some of the worst abuses befell prisoners of war. During World War I the treatment of POWs was generally consistent with internationally accepted rules, although prisoners from both sides were occasionally killed behind the front lines.¹⁸ In World War II the maltreatment of POWs was far more extensive and brutal. The Germans murdered most of the Red Army soldiers who fell into their hands, and the Japanese often behaved in similar fashion. This phenomenon suggested the radicalization of the methods of war, and it extended to measures undertaken against partisans, whether real or imagined. The spectacle began with the German atrocities in Belgium 1914 and reached a climax in the *Partisanenbekämpfung* of the SS and Wehrmacht in occupied Soviet territory during World War II. One might well argue that the genocide of the European Jews in the same war was itself an aspect of the radicalization of warfare. The Nazi leadership itself regarded its campaign against the Jews in this light.

Signs of this radicalization could be seen during the American Civil War and the Franco-German War, albeit to less an extent. Aerial bombardment was not yet technologically feasible, but the shelling of Vicksburg, Strasbourg, and Paris suggested that it would have encountered few moral barriers. Sherman's march through the South and Sheridan's destruction of the Shenandoah Valley were like aerial bombardments by foot, although they usually spared the lives of civilians. In similar fashion, warfare against guerillas in the South and West during the American Civil War, like the German war against the *franc-tireurs*, foretold things to come. The treatment of POWs in the Civil War was often brutal, although the horrors of Andersonville were less the product of intent than incompetence.¹⁹ POWs from both sides in this war were randomly murdered behind the lines, especially when black soldiers fell into the hands of Confederate units. In the Franco-German War, by contrast, POWs were as a rule treated better.²⁰

17 Jost Dülffer, *Regeln gegen den Krieg? Die Haager Friedenskonferenzen 1899 und 1907 in der internationalen Politik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981).

18 See Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London, 1998), 367–94.

19 Reid Mitchell, "'Our Prison System, Supposing We Had Any': The Confederate and Union Prison Systems," in Förster and Nagler, eds., *On the Road*, 565–86.

20 Manfred Botzenhart, "French Prisoners of War in Germany, 1870–71," in *ibid.*, 587–95.

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In several cases the radicalization of the methods of warfare corresponded to the radicalization of war aims. During the Civil War the destructive raids of Sheridan and Sherman were geared to the principle of unconditional surrender; they were calculated to bring the horrors of war directly to the enemy's civilian population. The German atrocities in Belgium in 1914 were likewise designed to force an enemy population into submission. So was Allied aerial bombing in World War II, and it, too, was an integral part of a strategy to force unconditional surrender.

Unrestricted submarine warfare and the use of poison gas were more complex, for they grew out of technological developments in the means of warfare. Between 1861 and 1945 the destructive power of weapons increased immensely. This era was marked at the one end by the rifle and at the other by the atomic bomb. The results of technology were ambiguous, however, for it was no foregone conclusion that technological development would result in the kind of massive, comprehensive conflicts that are invoked by the term *total war*.²¹ If technological development be taken as the gauge of "modernity," total war, as Strachan has recently written, "need not be modern; a modern war need not be total."²² Many observers argued persuasively at the end of the nineteenth century that more destructive weapons would in fact shorten wars. A classical case was Bismarck's insistence on shelling Paris in order to bring the Franco-German War to a rapid end, before it got out of control. Advocates of strategic airpower in the interwar period resorted to similar reasoning in order to justify their visions of war. The effect was nevertheless to lower the moral threshold to employing all available weapons against civilians as well as soldiers.

Another important dimension of total war was the creation of mass armies. In the American Civil War and Franco-German War, the belligerent powers put hundreds of thousands of soldiers into the field. In the two world wars, the contending armies counted in the tens of millions. All of these forces could be moved, equipped, and provisioned only by industrial means. Keeping mass armies under control and in fighting spirit was also an organizational achievement. The sheer size of these forces made it difficult to defeat them. In addition, the million-man armies enjoyed the passionate support of their societies, if only because families had fathers, sons, husbands, and other male relatives in the field. Defeating armies thus increasingly implied defeating the societies that supported them.

21 Strachan, "From Cabinet War to Total War"; and Dennis E. Showalter, "Mass Warfare and the Impact of Technology," both in Chickering and Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War*.

22 Strachan, "Essay and Reflection," 351.