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978-1-107-03995-7 - The Cambridge History of the Second World War: Volume III:

Total War: Economy, Society and Culture

Edited by Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze

Excerpt

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Introduction to volume III

MICHAEL GEYER AND ADAM TOOZE

Substance, scale and scope of peoples' war

The ambition of the third volume of the Cambridge History of the Second World War is to advance a history of the Second World War as an economic, social and cultural event on a global scale. This volume features economy, society and culture as forces in and of war. It puts war-making at its centre; it is unabashedly war-centric. It is global in that it posits the discrete, regional worlds of war as overlapping and interacting fields of force spanning the globe so that actions in one field push against others and histories and memories overlay each other. To the common vectors of globality such as communication and commerce, this volume adds violence. It proposes to think the Second World War as a culminating moment in the forceful, 'energetic transformation of the world'.¹

The editorial ambitions for this volume stretch the extant empirical work on economy, society and culture and, indeed, have stretched the knowledge and imagination of the editors. But the history of war as an economic, social and cultural event is an ambition worth pushing as far as we are capable, because in contrast to the military or the political and ideological histories of the Second World War there is no narrative frame for the Second World War as a global economic, social and cultural event that we could have accepted, modified or rejected. Whereas the idea of global or, in any case, world-wide war is quite well established in strategic studies, we are only beginning to understand the World Wars as pivotal moments in the process

¹ Jan Patočka, 'Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War', trans. Erazim Kohák, in Jan Patočka, ed., *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1996), pp. 119–37, here p. 124.

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of globalization.² What we have tried to do is to stake out a field of study; and what we have asked our authors to do is to offer in their respective essays some enticement for such a future history. Hence, this volume in the Cambridge History, unlike the first two, is less a summation of what we know than an invitation to explore what we ought to know and the way we might want to tell the history of a war that was fought by peoples against peoples and engulfed the entire world. We now know a lot more about what ought to be done than when we started out and we hope the volume will have a similar effect for the reader.

The crux of the matter is that the Second World War was a war that engulfed entire peoples – their economies, their societies, their cultures. In the wake of the horrors of the Thirty Years War and the bloodshed of the revolutionary era, both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had seen a determined effort to institute a division between ‘war and (non-combatant) society’. In the First World War, on the Western Front at least, this distinction had been largely upheld. As Richard Bessel points out in this volume, in the long history of warfare the ratio between civilian and combatant casualties reached an all-time low in the First World War. But in the Second World War that distinction collapsed. The Second World War was a war fought with, for and against peoples; in short, it was a war of peoples. Obviously, there are significant gradations, say, between Leningrad, Essen, Detroit and Calcutta. Like all ‘great wars’ the Second World War was a composite war. Moreover, there were fundamental differences between the regimes that fought this war. But it was a war of all against all, a war literally with, for and against peoples; that is, a war that encompassed entire societies with their respective economies and cultures not simply as a (passive) ‘effect’ or impact but as an (active) ‘pursuit’ or mobilization and that stretched far beyond combatant nations across the entire world. This notion of a war with, for and against peoples picks up and transforms nineteenth-century notions of peoples’ war much as it sets itself off from the post-twentieth-century concept of a ‘war amongst people’.³

2 Adam Tooze and Ted Fertik, ‘The World Economy and the Great War’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 40:2 (2014), 214–38. Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, ‘Regimes of World Order: Global Integration and the Production of Difference in Twentieth-Century World History’, in Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal and Anand A. Yang, eds., *Interactions: Transregional Perspectives on World History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), pp. 202–38.

3 Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds., *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of Warfare in the Modern World* (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2005).

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The first two volumes of the Cambridge History amply demonstrate that the Second World War was a high-intensity, battle-centric war. But these two volumes also make clear that it was a war in which entire societies mobilized. What that means in practice is a key subject for debate in the current volume. While governments and state apparatuses managed this process with varying degrees of suasion and compulsion, mobilization had also to take place from the ground up. The war was fought not merely in the name of peoples. Societies and nations did not simply give the war its purpose by defining 'war aims', for which the military then provided the means to be deployed. Populations were not merely a resource to be spent. Both as friends and foes they were a force that all military organizations and all governments reckoned with. Would people support the war? Could women be trusted to mobilize in support of the war effort? Could people be bombed into submission? Would men and women fight to the point of self-destruction? Societies, economies and cultures became an element, a force, in the military pursuit of war to be reckoned with at all times. Peoples threw themselves into the war in comprehensive mobilizations of economy, society and culture and they were targeted and destroyed by the war in military actions such as Scorched Earth or Strategic Bombing. It was a war fought not only for the control of territory, people and resources, but rather for the destruction of political regimes and social utopias. It was a war for distinct and mutually exclusive ideas of social order and, indeed, about the 'right' way to live.

The all-embracing violence of the Second World War has raised disturbing questions about the nature of and the restraints on warfare and violence, which by the beginning of the twentieth century had begun to be seen as key achievements of modern civilization. In turn, this disquiet has shaped the memory and history of the war. For to insist that the Second World War is best understood as a war of peoples against peoples does not imply that all conduct of war is the same. Quite the contrary! The conduct, goals and effects of peoples contending in the war differed radically. If entire peoples became enemies, this did not mean that all enemies were the same. In each case the relationship between the conduct of operations, the goals to be achieved and the actual effects generated was vastly complex. To cite two examples of such apparent incongruities, Nazi Germany paid the farmers of occupied Denmark for their food deliveries, while shooting thousands of Italian villagers in reprisals for guerrilla resistance and starving the urban population of the Soviet Union to death. The USA while it scrupulously sought to define the civil rights of its conscientious objectors and at Bretton Woods carefully

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prepared the blueprints for a post-war monetary order, set about annihilating the cities of Japan in order to hasten the peace. To come to grips with the incongruities of wars pursued by people against people, we need a history of war that takes seriously economy, society and culture as forces of war. It takes a history that is keenly aware of the 'Dynamism of Total War', but also of the limitations on what on the face of it appears to be unlimited violence.⁴ If Clausewitz was impressed by the limits imposed on the dynamics of violence by nature, historians and theorists of twentieth-century wars should rather be impressed by the second nature of human choice – the naturalized world of human institutions – in shaping regimes of violence.

Wars with, for and against peoples encompass economies, societies and cultures as forces of war, but they have their own gradations of intensity; that is, peoples' wars may be usefully described as totalizing, but not as 'total'. The common argument against the notion of total war is that this kind of war is never quite as total as it is made out to be.⁵ But this is a rather weak disclaimer for a war in which entire populations became the subject and object of violence. The reason that we prefer the term, war with and against peoples is precisely that it opens the door to a multi-faceted qualification of war, or, more appropriately, the 'war regimes' of individual belligerents. By contrast, the idea of total war allows only for variations of degree. Wars can be distinguished only to the extent that they are more or less total. By stealth, therefore, the concept turns the complex reality of a war that engulfs entire nations into a blunt and implicitly normative concept. However far historians might want to remove the notion of total war from the prescriptive fantasies of Erich Ludendorff, they are still stuck with his optic that makes the subordination of economy, society and culture to the military into the basic yardstick of totality.⁶ By contrast, the notion of a war of peoples allows the history of a war that engulfed and enflamed entire nations and peoples to be separated from the militaristic and fascistic imperative of total top-down mobilization.

The notion of a war with, for and against peoples also provides us with the potential for a historical narrative that ranges back to the revolutionizing, nationalizing and imperializing dimension of the first epoch of totalizing and global war, the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars,

4 Raymond Aron, *The Century of Total War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), pp. 32–55.

5 Mark E. Neely Jr., 'Was the Civil War a Total War?', *Civil War History* 50:4 (2004), 434–58.

6 Roger Chickering, 'Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept', in Manfred Boemeke, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 13–28.

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and builds a bridge to the second age of similar struggles in the mid-twentieth century. If Ludendorff stands for ‘total war’ fantasies of societies absolutely subordinated to the state, we find the contemporary antidote most clearly expressed in Mao Zedong’s ‘protracted (people’s) war’.⁷ Again, we should be wary of turning Mao’s politics of war, ‘protracted people’s war’, into a normative construct. ‘People’s war’ is not necessarily what people want or what people do, even if they do fight a war that engulfs them all. The stresses and strains in Mao’s first base area at Yan’an were all too evident.⁸ However, the term alerts us to the recognition that the ‘age of extremes’ (Eric Hobsbawm) was an age of revolutions that discovered economy, society and culture as dynamic fields of violent energy – *bios*, as the Greeks would call it – that propelled violence.

Understood in this way societies, economies and cultures are not merely frames or resources for war, as a more sedate liberal understanding would have it. They are the energy that makes war as a military and political and ideological project. It was this crucial insight that Clausewitz brought to the modern understanding of war and it is this force that he sought to tame. Without society’s energy, war was a mere exercise in statecraft coupled with abstract technical skill. What gave war – in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – its terrifying historical potency was its engagement with the live forces of society. In turn, the acts of war orchestrated by militaries and directed by political will, rearrange these force fields; they make and remake economies, societies and cultures. Rather than ‘impacting’ society, the Second World War was a societal project of transformation. If we think of the Second World War in this way, as a clash of radical and, indeed, revolutionary projects, to remake societies, fuelled by mobilizing peoples, we might not only find a more apposite place for a history of extermination and extirpation as part of this war, but also get a more appropriate understanding of what a totalizing war of peoples with, for and against peoples entails and how it can be narrated.

Forays into historiography

Three dimensions stand out that provide an analytic framework for grasping the historical reality of the Second World War as a war of peoples – first, the

⁷ Mao Zedong, *On the Protracted War* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1954).

⁸ Mark Selden, *China in Revolution: The Yanan Way Revisited* (2nd edn, Amonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995).

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encompassing mobilization for violence; second, the socialization of the risks of death; third, the formation of involuntary communities of friends and enemies.

First, mobilization for war encompasses economy, society and culture. It requires a comprehensive social effort, rather than the ‘mere’ mobilization of men of a certain age, of specialized industries, and elite interests. Though it is ‘total’ in the Ludendorffian sense only in exceptional circumstances, the war effort imposed severe privations, varying from the rationing of consumer goods essential to normal standards of living to outright starvation. Peoples are the active subjects of mobilization, though the effort is typically orchestrated by national governments (rather than the military) and entails varying degrees of compulsion. As the essays in this volume make clear, much of the complex dynamism of the Second World War derives from the variety of different modes of mobilization in use: ranging from the revolutionary land redistribution orchestrated by China’s communist activists, by way of Japan’s slash and burn war financing, to the highly technocratic models of wartime Keynesianism developed in Britain and the USA. The bottom line of a war of peoples is the comprehensive mobilization of society, but each of these mobilizations has its own gradation toward ‘absolute war’. Siege societies like the one in Leningrad perhaps come closest to absolute war.

In thinking through what this process of mobilization entails we might well take the image of Rosie the Riveter as an example. It is a selective image of course, one among many such images in the USA and around the world.⁹ The image of women partaking in war, directly or indirectly, had become something of a global symbol for the determination to fight. There are intriguing exceptions such as Japan and telling American preferences, say, for a young white, well-nourished female worker over, say an African-American, male or female, or the Soviet and Chinese preference for the fighting female.¹⁰ We also know that for the Rosies no straight road lay ahead from the war toward emancipation and civil rights. Rosie’s image and Rosie’s real-life experience were two quite different things. But what we are

⁹ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). Penny Colman, *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in World War II* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995). United States National Park Service, *Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park, California* (Washington, DC: US Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 2011). Donna B. Knaff, *Beyond Rosie the Riveter: Women of World War II in American Popular Graphic Art* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

¹⁰ Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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interested in is Rosie – as riveter, girlfriend or mother – making war possible, and making far-away war possible in no minor way. True, she is an ‘icon’ that can and should be studied with all the subtlety of a history of images; but as icon she points above all to the war-making power of society. Whatever she may have felt, dreamt or experienced; however much she was part of an elaborate division of labour and, hence, a replaceable cog in the wheel of the wartime economy; and however much she may have had doubts fostered by the culture of her upbringing about reconciling her femininity with men’s menial work; she produced the means of massive violence that made war happen. It diminishes her role not to think of her as a force in war.

The second distinguishing feature of a war of peoples is the socialization of the existential risk of injury, violation and privation and the danger of being killed. Entire populations participate in violent action; entire populations suffer the effects of violence, whether as combatants, belligerents, or as non-belligerents; entire populations become objects of violence because they are perceived as hostile. War directly or indirectly enrolls everyone, although once again the degree of endangerment differs among peoples and within nations. So too do the benefits and privations, as peoples become subjects and objects of violence. The bottom line is that on one hand (civil) economy, society and culture become weaponized and on the other the economy, society and culture of the opponent become targets of violence.

Talk of peoples’ war and the socialization of the risk of death raises anxieties. It is commonly asserted that ‘total war’ or ‘peoples’ war’ must lead to indiscriminate violence, as if violence once released from its institutional moorings in the military spills over uncontrollably and indiscriminately. Liberal states, notably Britain and the USA, hasten to insist that this is ‘not what we do’, even if their comprehensive ways of war-fighting produced very high levels of ‘collateral damage’ and provided their opponents with powerful justifications for their own efforts at totalization. Such juxtapositions are always already part of a discourse on what is right and what is wrong in war. Bracketing such distinctions does not make all belligerents equally right or equally wrong, but it suggests that the choice of war to be fought is itself a suitable and, indeed, a crucial subject for enquiry. All the belligerents in the Second World War discriminated in their use of force; however, they discriminated in radically different ways. Life and death were valued very differently. The Nazi war machine fiercely protected its own, while delivering entire populations to death. The Japanese cared little for the lives of the comfort women they enslaved. RAF Bomber Command targeted the urban fabric of Germany. The Americans sought to distinguish more

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carefully between military and civilian targets. But after the horrific destruction of two Japanese cities, their greatest military-technological triumph, the A-bomb, was subjected to the 'nuclear taboo'.¹¹ Rather than being a point of anxious line-drawing, the socialization of danger and privation in a war of peoples should be taken as the starting point for a 'moral history' of war that takes the labour of making choices in the pursuit of war – in defining friend and foe – as its crucial subject.¹²

It was the seeming limitlessness of the enrolment of entire societies in war-fighting and the resulting socialization of the dangers of war that required new efforts to specifically demarcate non-combatants and humanitarian zones. Nineteenth-century models of the law of war operated on the basis of a confined military model that posited a civilian world as the stable background of military action, a vision that could still be upheld in many of the arenas of the First World War. By contrast, the all-encompassing socialization of violence from the 1930s onwards required new and urgent efforts to define groups of people, activities, places and objects who would be put *hors de combat*, a legal or customary (moral) hedge that was more often upheld only in the breach. The twentieth century is thus heavily weighted toward national and international legal efforts to regulate and contain war.¹³

Much of this is covered in volume II of the Cambridge History of the Second World War. But it seemed to us that the debate on what is right or wrong in war – and, we might add, which war is right and which one is wrong – extends far beyond strictly military, political and legal discourses. We would submit that this debate is the crucial cultural labour of the Second World War. This labour exceeds the more classic themes of a cultural history of war, the representation of war and the articulation of the war experience.¹⁴ The ramified debate over the rights and wrongs of war and of particular forms of war-making is the necessary corollary to the history of seemingly limitless mobilization and the socialization of risk in wars of peoples. Recognizing this connection between the totalization and problematization of war

11 Nina Tannenwald, 'Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo', *International Security* 29:4 (2005), 5–49.

12 For a similar argument: Michael Bess, *Choices under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006). As a general statement: Didier Fassin, 'Les Économies Morales Revisitées', *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales* 64:6 (2009), 1237–66.

13 Daniel Marc Segesser, *Recht statt Rache oder Rache durch Recht? Die Ahndung von Kriegsverbrechen in der internationalen fachwissenschaftlichen Debatte 1872–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010). The First World War proved to be the turning point. See Isabel V. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law in the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

14 Michael Burleigh, *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (London: HarperPress, 2010).

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also serves as an antidote against a heedless relativization that considers all belligerents in the Second World War as equally guilty, because all of them overstepped the limits on violence imposed by a nineteenth-century 'liberal conscience'.¹⁵

Third and not least, a war of peoples against peoples creates involuntary communities of friends and enemies. The comprehensive mobilization of societies engenders a communitarization of identities. Thus, the Japanese at large become the enemy, irrespective of what individuals or groups fear or hope and quite irrespective of the way they experience war and articulate their experience. If surrender is the goal of all war, surrender in a war of peoples entails violent subjection. It no longer suffices to destroy armies or occupy capitals in order to ascertain victory and defeat; indeed, it becomes quite uncertain what it takes to defeat an enemy, if the question is how to break the will of peoples. The trepidations of nineteenth-century militaries about permanent war had become twentieth-century reality. It now seemed necessary, in a perverse reversal of the grammar of war, to pound peoples into submission in order to make governments and military leaders yield. This brutal logic was given a further twist by the experience of the First World War. Between the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917 and the collapse of the Central powers a year later, internal collapse had been decisive in bringing about the end of the Great War. The bellicist regimes that emerged in the interwar period were bent on hardening themselves specifically against any repetition of that traumatic collapse. As a result, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union all raised their internal repressive and persuasive capacities to an extraordinary new pitch. This time there would be no failure of will. Nothing less than the destruction of economy, society and culture would be the prerequisite of victory and defeat.

The intensity of the communitarian drive leaves its telltale mark in radicalizing, exclusionary policies. These ranged from surveillance to far more dramatic measures such as harassment, internment, displacement and, some would argue, even genocide and the Holocaust.¹⁶ The latter issue is not to be decided here, not least because it is treated extensively in Volume II,

¹⁵ Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*. George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures at the University of Cambridge, 1977 (London: Temple Smith, 1978).

¹⁶ Annette Becker, 'Captive Civilians', in Jay M. Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. III: *Civil Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 257–82. Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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where genocidal policies are linked to ideological war, or what German historians call *Weltanschauungskrieg*. However, we pick up a related thread in Volume III by investigating in some detail the question of limiting war and making peace in an age of total enmity. Indirectly we take on Carl Schmitt, who made the link between enmity and communitarized identity the lynchpin of his defence of German war.¹⁷ Contra Schmitt we maintain that nations do not just vary widely among themselves, but that each case demonstrates the existence of political and, indeed, cultural and moral choice. The totalization of enmity and communitarization of identity are not destiny. In fact, a totalizing war is difficult to sustain – and surely not only because of its privations. By 1945 the dramatic ‘overkill’ prosecuted by the Allies was deployed not only by states that were vastly superior in material terms but also by societies that were desperate to end the war that they had not chosen, as quickly as possible and by any and all means available.

What impelled this urgency? We can grasp how high the stakes had become in war-making only when we consider that in peoples’ war the choices made concerning the conduct of a war shaped entire societies indelibly. There was no return to the status quo ante. That possibility was already foreclosed in the First World War. The omnivorous reconfiguration of society in the mode of war made the Second World War a transformative ‘event’ in the long history of societies’ embattled transformation. If war is not the father of all things, it can be thought of as a ‘vanishing mediator’, in the manner that Protestantism functions for Max Weber in his famous account of the origins of capitalism.¹⁸ The society that moves out of war is different from the one that entered war. The ‘new normal’ constituted by the war persists long after the war has receded into memory.

The new reality, the trajectory altered by war opens opportunities and provides new horizons both for victors and vanquished. It is also, of course, defined by the bitter reality of lives un-lived and futures destroyed. In both senses, seventy years on from the war, we live still, for worse and for better, among its consequences. Any comparative history of the Second World War will be shaped by the intensity of wartime alliances and enmities and, in the case of Nazi politics, the eliminationist logic of the war. This is the main reason why stepping across the battle lines of the war to engage in comparison is still

¹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkungen zum Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1963).

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, ‘The Vanishing Mediator: Narrative Structure in Max Weber’, *New German Critique* 1 (Winter, 1973), 52–89.