

State, society and mobilization in Europe during the First World War

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1997

First paperback edition 2002

Typeface Plantin 10/12 pt.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

State, society, and mobilization in Europe during the First World War / edited
by John Horne.

p. cm. – (Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare: 3)

ISBN 0 521 56112 4 (hardcover)

1. World War, 1914–1918 – Europe. 2. Preparedness.

3. World War, 1914–1918 – Social Aspects – Europe.

4. War and society. I. Horne, John N. II. Series.

D523.S685 1997

940.3'1–dc20 96-44927 CIP

ISBN 0 521 56112 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52266 8 paperback

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1 Introduction: mobilizing for 'total war', 1914–1918

John Horne

The subject of this volume is a major feature of the First World War both as an experience and as a shaping event in twentieth-century history. It is the relationship between national mobilization and 'total war'. The claim is not that this relationship determined the outcome and consequences of the war. Many other factors contributed to both. The argument, rather, is that if we think of the First World War as a trans-national or supra-national phenomenon, this relationship constitutes one of its essential dynamics which, along with others, needs to be explored comparatively across national cases, in order for the nature and significance of the war to be better understood. It is also a theme with obvious comparative relevance for the Second World War and other wars in the twentieth century. The two key terms of the relationship, 'mobilization' and 'total war', need further definition, however, before the parameters of the book can be indicated and some of the arguments which arise from it developed further.

'Mobilization' is used here in a broader sense than is customary in historical analysis of the First World War. The primary process of military mobilization, of raising mass armies from the population and delivering them to the battlefield within the cadres of a professional military establishment, is not the principal subject of investigation. Neither is the secondary process of economic mobilization, which rapidly revealed itself as no less crucial to the outcome of a war waged in the image of the industrialized societies that had generated it, and to which a good deal of attention has been devoted. Rather, the 'mobilization' explored here is that of the engagement of the different belligerent nations in their war efforts both imaginatively, through collective representations and the belief and value systems giving rise to these, and organizationally, through the state and civil society.

The nature of national mobilization so defined, both generically and in its particular manifestations, was naturally conditioned by the development of political and cultural life in pre-war society. Here, it is important to note a fundamental paradox in the broader emergence of

the modern state. While bureaucratization and technology have vastly extended the state's capacity for surveillance and repression, mass involvement in the political process has made legitimacy, the consent of the ruled, an increasingly vital condition of the state's effective operation. Political mobilization as a process has acted to legitimize (or contest) the authority of regimes as well as to articulate interests within them.¹ The paradox was apparent in the half century before 1914. The state responded to a variety of threats to public order and social cohesion by expanding its repressive capacities and intensifying surveillance and control. But increased popular participation in politics provided the major internal challenge for most European states. Political regimes sought, or were forced to seek, broader acceptance, while the building or consolidation of nation-states necessitated the articulation, and even the invention, of the national 'communities' on which these were based.²

Political legitimacy and a sense of nationhood derived ultimately from the founding acts and embodying mythologies of regime and nation. But both gained constant reinforcement from the rituals, symbols and repeated gestures that became characteristic of national politics in this period (elections, national days, mass meetings, monuments).³ Moreover, while legitimizing values and ideals of cultural community were promoted through the state apparatus, including national educational systems, they were expressed much more widely by a host of private and semi-private agencies, such as newspapers, political parties, pressure groups and churches. Popular legitimization of this kind and the sense of belonging to a densely defined national community were increasingly central to European politics by 1914, though with considerable differences of degree between countries.

The First World War dramatically reinforced both terms of the paradox. Exceptional wartime legislation conferred vast powers of repression on governments while millions of men were swept into the armed forces and subjected to military discipline. Yet in most cases, the war was held to involve not only the physical and territorial integrity of the national community but its distinctive values, ways of life and political institutions. The persuasive, legitimizing powers which underpinned mass politics immediately turned to generating support for the war effort. Not only the state, but the associational life of civil society, rallied behind the national cause. The conventional image of rampant jingoism greeting the outbreak of war has been modified by recent research.⁴ But what replaces it is an altogether more complex picture of a process of engagement in the war by the major belligerents which galvanized pre-existing sentiments of national community and political affiliation in what was usually perceived to be a defensive national

mobilization. Popular support for the war, initially at least, stemmed from persuasion, and self-persuasion, much more than from coercion. Repression, however, was available in abnormally strong measure if persuasion flagged.

National mobilization was, then, an essentially political and cultural process. Like so much else in August 1914, however, it was premised on a short war in which (like those of the recent past) military conflict could be seen as a rational instrument for achieving political ends, a deplorable but necessary evil, or even as beneficial to cultural development.⁵ The nature of combat under modern conditions was disastrously misread by general staffs, and to the extent that it entered popular consciousness did so in the form of conventional images of a war of movement replete with hand-to-hand encounters and heroic deeds – as press representations of the first few months of war in 1914 testify.⁶ In reality, the full application of modern industrial and bureaucratic capacities to warfare itself, and a particular conjuncture in military technology which conferred an overwhelming advantage on the defensive, combined to plunge Europe into the novel experience of industrialized siege warfare, in which successive hopes for military breakthrough, victory and a political settlement subsided repeatedly into a grinding conflict of attrition.⁷

Did this amount to 'total war'? There is the danger, as with any large concept, that the term may distort more than it reveals. This is particularly so if we adopt a fixed point as our measure and seek to grade all other cases by reference to it. If the Second World War exemplifies 'total war', with its unprecedented inclusion of civilians as combatants and targets, its perfection of mass destruction, and its global scale, the First World War looks less than total on any of these counts. If, on the other hand, we take the waging of 'total war' to be an evolutionary process, its origins can reasonably be identified much further back in, for example, the French Revolutionary wars as the first secular ideological conflict, with the American Civil War as an early example and the capacity for nuclear annihilation its logical term. In this perspective, the First World War is merely an important stage in the growing capacity of war to mobilize and destroy societies. Alternatively, it might be objected that no social phenomenon is total, least of all one planned by leaders and elites, and that 'total war' is only important as a contemporary illusion.⁸

These arguments all have force but all risk missing the essence of the First World War which lay in a totalizing logic, or potential, of which contemporaries were acutely aware and which appeared profoundly new. This dizzying escalation occurred in different spheres. It was

manifest in the trauma and casualties of trench warfare, in the sinister spiral of military technology and forms of warfare that overturned established norms of military conduct. It was apparent in the compelling but unanticipated need to reorganize the economy for war. It was equally clear, however, in the readiness to represent the war in absolute terms, as a crusade against a total (and often dehumanized) enemy in which great emphasis was placed on morale, opinion and what amounted to the ideological capacity of each nation to sustain the war effort.

The etymology of 'total war' and analogous terms is revealing in this regard. Ernst Jünger coined the term 'total mobilization' (*Die totale Mobilmachung*) in his celebrated essay of 1930 to capture the unprecedented way in which the war harnessed the energies of entire national societies – something he considered the democracies ideologically better equipped to achieve. Ludendorff, in both his war memoirs (written in 1918–19) and his significantly entitled *Der Totale Krieg* (1935), likewise described the First World War as in essence a 'total war' that relied ultimately on the 'spiritual and psychical forces of the nation'. Criticizing Clausewitz for failing to include this dimension in his notion of 'absolute war' and implicitly German politicians and the home front for failing to deliver this form of mobilization to the military leadership in 1914–18, Ludendorff (like Jünger) identified its historic source in the 'nation in arms' invented by the French Revolution and saw a remodelled, totalitarian version of this as the key to Germany's victory in a future war.⁹ Less remarked on is the fact that the terms *guerre totale* and *guerre intégrale* also made their appearance in France in the last year of the war, particularly to describe a renewed political and ideological commitment to the military effort.¹⁰ In the French case, the *levée en masse* of 1793 (with its appeal to the old men to 'stimulate the courage of the warriors and preach the unity of the Republic and the hatred of kings') indeed provided a potent and much cited precedent. It is significant, in other words, that the very term 'total war' arose from the First World War and connoted in particular the political and ideological investment of the nation in the conflict.

All this suggests that there is no simple dichotomy between national mobilization and 'total war', the former representing the innocent effusion of national sentiment that evaporated in contact with the reality of the latter. The terms and language of national mobilization and 'self-mobilization' in the principal belligerents in 1914, and the deeper processes of national formation and political participation that underlay them, were themselves a vital dimension of 'total war' without which neither the combatants' tenacity nor the duration of the conflict is

readily explicable. By the same token, however, the radical heart of the First World War perhaps lay here, in the encounter between national mobilization and the industrialized killing fields of trench warfare. The latter tested the legitimacy of pre-war states and the sense of national community to the limits and it was here, arguably, that much of the battle over the meaning of the war was fought out within and between the various belligerents. The way ordinary soldiers understood industrialized siege warfare, and either rebelled or kept fighting, had a good deal to do with the varying capacity of different powers to keep mobilizing their soldiers' will to continue. So, too, did the resilience of non-combatant populations faced with mounting bereavement and economic distortions of varying degrees, accompanied by a heightened sense of social injustice. The advantage of considering 'total war' (and national mobilization as one of its elements) to be a process, or a compelling logic, in 1914–18, rather than an achieved result, is that it encourages analysis of its form and evolution but also of its constraints and limitations – and of the variants in these between different belligerents.

Investigating mobilization at this level therefore involves the plans and projects of the state, which sought to stimulate and control 'opinion' and 'morale' (civil as well as military) to a degree and in ways that were hitherto inconceivable. But it also encompasses society, many elements of which fully engaged in the mobilization process, but much of which ultimately proved indifferent or resistant to state-led forms of mobilization or sought to redirect these in more autonomous ways. The study of wartime mobilization is partly about the ideal projections of military and civilian planners; but it is also about the lived relationship of a variety of different groups (intellectuals, school teachers, children, soldiers and many more) to the war and to its meaning.

Both individually and by the comparisons they establish, the essays in this volume raise a number of ideas and hypotheses for further research. The first of these concerns the chronology of mobilization in the different societies. Britain, France and Germany appear to share a common pattern of national mobilization in which the first two years of the war were strongly characterized by persuasion rather than coercion, and by a high degree of 'self-mobilization' in civil society. This is not to deny the real increase in state power. As already argued, coercive powers were hugely enhanced, though initially not much needed, given minimal collective opposition to the war. States also framed the process of persuasion in highly directive ways, through news control, censorship and early (though limited) forays into domestic propaganda. But what stands out is the strength of the process of voluntary participation by a

host of organizations and agencies both in the formal definition of 'national ideals' (and of their negative obverse, the enemy) and in the generation of a sense of national community.

Intellectuals and artists played a key role in Germany, as Wolfgang Mommsen shows, in defining the war less as a moment of suspended domestic politics than as one of cultural fusion. The nation appeared to rediscover its essence as a cultural community shaped by the spiritual values of a German *Kultur* which stood in sharp opposition to the rootless abstractions and shallow commercialism of western 'civilization', as exemplified by Britain and France. British and French academics and intellectuals responded with their own projections of the war as one of 'civilization' (variously defined) against a negative German *Kultur* of naked militarism and authoritarianism loosely wrapped in philosophies of power, dominance and nihilism. Although the intellectuals on both sides often derived their prestige from state educational institutions and academies, and cooperated with government in defining the war as a universal crusade, they willingly anticipated the state's needs and enrolled themselves in the national cause. Indeed, precisely because the war as a total struggle seemed to re-infuse existence with a sense of meaning beyond the humdrum banalities of daily life, it generated an irresistible attraction, according to Wolfgang Mommsen, even for writers and artists who could never remotely be considered propagandists.¹¹

Intellectuals and artists exemplify with exceptional clarity a much broader process. All kinds of social groups and institutions mobilized themselves behind the war effort and in so doing contributed powerfully to a cultural fusion, or at least convergence, in defence of state and nation. In effect, the war triggered what Nettl calls a 'national-constitutional mobilization', in which the legitimization of state and nation were reasserted and reinforced in what was perceived as a crisis of survival.¹² Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau shows how the primary school system in France provided a uniquely potent instrument by which the state could direct this process, given the ideology of secular republicanism with which it was invested and its centralized direction by the Ministry of Public Instruction. Even here, however, a crucial ingredient was the enrolment of the teachers as a social corps with a highly defined professional ethos and organization as the willing agents of a mobilization that extended far beyond the classroom itself.¹³ It remains an open question as to whether the primary school teachers of Britain and Germany played a directly comparable role, given the more hybrid systems of compulsory primary instruction that had emerged in the half century before the war – though if they did so, despite less singular and

centralized state direction, it further strengthens the evidence of 'self-mobilization'.

The resonance and variants of the languages of self-mobilization enunciated by the intellectuals went far beyond the mass education system, however, to encompass a host of pre-existing organizations as well as bodies set up with specifically wartime functions – whether to promote war aims or deal with a multitude of practical requirements, from charitable work to war loans. In France alone, there were 1,806 such organizations officially recognized by the government in 1918.¹⁴ Perhaps the clearest indication of the centripetal power of this mobilization process comes from the response of feminist and labour organizations which on the eve of the war had been battling against the entrenched political establishments in all three countries – and which, as more recent research has insisted, supported the war not just because of the collapse of pre-war ideological paradigms but also because the national component that had been one source of their pre-war identities reshaped the affiliations of class and especially gender in response to the crisis of 1914.¹⁵

If 'self-mobilization' marked the first phase of the war, the corrosive effects of a long war, soaring casualties and receding prospects of victory combined to force belligerent states in the second half of the war to adopt a more directly interventionist role. This was not a simple matter of altering the balance between coercion and persuasion in favour of the former. Political legitimacy remained central to the process of national mobilization. But states were faced with the need to play a more direct role in sustaining national commitment to the war as voluntary energies waned. This in turn posed a sharp challenge to the state's own authority and its capacity to represent diverse elements of the nation – a theme to which we shall return.

Arguably, the differences in political ideology and national values between opposed belligerents such as Britain, France and Germany initially mattered less in determining the process of national mobilization than the pre-existing strength of the associative webs and mechanisms of national integration that were common to all three, in contrast to less developed polities such as Russia, Austria-Hungary and Italy. This represents a second major theme of this volume and one which is explored essentially through the Italian case.¹⁶ The crisis of Italian intervention from August 1914 to May 1915 was self-consciously played out in relation to the process of national mobilization already taking place in the other belligerents. The conservative elites represented by the Salandra administration sought to use a short-war intervention with tangible territorial results as an alternative to the domestic processes of

expanded political participation for which they had condemned Giolitti since the turn of the century.¹⁷ Logically, this committed them to avoiding a national mobilization and relying instead on the traditional authority of the local notables. Democratic and radical interventionists, by contrast, divined in the war an opportunity to infuse Italian politics with a vaguely revolutionary idealism without, for all that, enjoying mass support.¹⁸ Thus a limited declaration of war against Austria-Hungary alone was dangerously charged with hopes of political transformation, while lacking the persuasive mechanisms of national mobilization and 'self-mobilization' available in more developed nation-states, which could also more credibly present themselves as the victims of aggression.

The result, as Paul Corner and Giovanna Procacci show, was a strongly authoritarian wartime state, in which military authority penetrated the civilian sphere more directly and with less institutional mediation than in Britain, France and Germany. At the same time, the logic of 'total war' drew the Italian government into extending the war against Germany in 1916. As the cost and casualties of the conflict rose (nearly 600,000 war dead in all), it also induced a process of combined state and 'self-mobilization' pivoted on the primary school system which, as Andrea Fava demonstrates, took up the themes of the radical interventionists (who entered the enlarged coalition government of 1916), expanded the sense of the nation, and undermined the restricted political culture of pre-war liberal Italy. The military catastrophe of Caporetto in October 1917, which at last lent plausibility to the cry of the nation in danger, galvanized something like the 'self-mobilization' experienced by other belligerents at the outset, though at a moment when indifference or even hostility to the war were growing among much of the population – thus maximizing the divisiveness of the Italian war experience.

Although the Russian government did not enjoy the same freedom of choice over entering the war, it would appear to have shared the Italian dilemmas and difficulties, considerably magnified. The domestic role of the army intensified state authoritarianism while fear of state reform left even something as fundamental as the industrial effort largely in the hands of private initiative (in the shape of the War Industries Committees). Unable to incorporate the wider forces necessary to mount a successful war effort without threatening its own existence, the regime moved in the opposite direction by reducing its legitimacy to the person of the Tsar – just when military setbacks compounded the incoherence of the home-front administration.¹⁹ The point of both the Italian and Russian cases is that the dynamic of national mobilization became a powerfully contentious factor in domestic politics, given the relatively

fragile basis of the pre-war regimes and limited degree of national integration. Feared by conservatives, embraced by radicals and uncertain of surmounting either mass apathy or counter-mobilization against the war, the mobilization process rapidly confronted narrowly based regimes facing the imperatives of 'total war' with the limits of their own legitimacy.

A third theme to emerge from the volume concerns the forms and languages of national mobilization. This is less a matter of the latter's concrete functions – solidarity with the front, social aid, industrial organization, military recruitment – than of its inner processes. The function of national mobilization, after all, was to generate unity and a sense of inclusiveness and this happened in different ways. It meant, most obviously, a weakening of sectoral mobilization around competing interests or ideologies within the nation in favour of unity against the external enemy, with a corresponding enrolment of particular identities behind the national effort. Here, pre-existing solidarities played a crucial role. Jean-Louis Robert shows that in the case of the Parisian labour and socialist movements there was a complex tissue of micro-cultures which maintained the identification of home with fighting front during the first year of the war, in the name of diverse values. Such specific social solidarities, especially where they linked with local or national political structures, were capable of strongly underwriting the mobilization process. This was equally true of cultural identities – those of religious minorities, such as German catholicism, for example – and of regional identities. In western France, even the conservative local administrations most hostile to the Republic engaged wholeheartedly in the national defence, in part precisely because it was a question of defending nation as well as regime, but also because the republican state respected the role of the local notables.²⁰

Broader languages, temporal and spiritual, also constituted a powerful vector of national mobilization. The conventional terminologies of national identity and the different political ideologies that coalesced behind the war effort naturally provided much of this. So, too, did the churches.²¹ Annette Becker has recently pointed out in her study, *La Guerre et la foi*, that the war itself reinvigorated the categories of religious faith (far beyond formal religious adherence) as an essential medium, and mediator, of the experiences of mobilization, combat, death and mourning.²² The argument can be extended, however, to include secular faiths – what Maurice Barrès in the French case termed the 'spiritual families' composing the nation.²³ The war was presented as a crusade not just for each nation's survival but for the values (variously interpreted) that it was held to embody. This imparted a chiliastic

dimension to the conflict as the upheaval preceding a new world, a dimension which was not necessarily dimmed by the lengthening experience of the war. The language of sacrifice, consolation, redemption and rebirth (the fatherland triumphant, the world freed of future wars) ran through the war experience in secular as well as religious terms, presiding over the confrontation of national mobilization with mass death.

Minority identities frequently benefited from enlarged space and consideration in the process of national mobilization, especially at the beginning of the war. Yet mobilization had the capacity to achieve the reverse by a negative self-definition, internally as well as externally. The 'enemy within' was one of the essential categories of the mobilization process. Although applied most obviously to 'enemy aliens' (the British term) who in all the belligerents were rounded up, classified and incarcerated in camps (another manifestation of the totalizing tendency of the war), the notion could easily be extended to domestic elements suspected for various reasons of sympathy with the enemy – such as Alsace-Lorrainers in both France and, as Alan Kramer argues, far more starkly in Germany. As wartime tensions mounted, more systematic distrust or outright hostility towards such groups might emerge as a form of mobilization by exclusion, rather than inclusion, through the creation of domestic scapegoats. But the extent to which this happened depended (amongst other things) on the degree of pre-war national integration, the particular value systems mobilized, and the severity of the national war experience.²⁴

Thus, anti-semitism remained current on the extreme right of French politics, but the Jewish community in France by and large experienced the war as a moment of powerful integration, prepared by the prior republican mobilization around this very issue during the Dreyfus affair.²⁵ In Germany, by contrast, as Christhard Hoffmann shows, an increasingly authoritarian military regime under Hindenburg and Ludendorff activated the anti-liberal fault lines in Germany by clumsily responding to anti-semitic sentiments and thus alienating a Jewish community which had begun the war, as in France, by reaffirming its integration into national life. None of this compares with the scale of anti-semitic pogroms that marked the chaos of rampant nationalism and nascent state-formation in eastern Europe in the wake of the war, let alone the Turkish genocide of the Armenians (a Christian minority accused of sympathy with the Russian enemy) in 1915.²⁶ The latter marked the most extreme and lethal mobilization against the 'enemy within' during the First World War (though falling far short of the organized extermination practised by the Nazis during the Second). But

as Hoffmann and Kramer show, anti-semitism and hostility to the population of a key frontier province marked the limits of inclusive mobilization in Germany during the second half of the war – and the relevance of the example for other states (especially Russia and Austria-Hungary) merits exploration.

No belligerent, of course, could escape the mounting strain of the war. A succession of failed offensives in 1915–17 brought soldiers face to face not only with the horrors of a particular type of industrialized slaughter but also with the question of whether the strategy and tactics of their own military commands were capable of achieving the proclaimed goal of the enemy's total defeat. The official version of military operations, recounted as the successful attainment of (ever more limited) goals, contradicted the haunting perception amongst many ordinary soldiers of a 'disproportion' between sacrifice and gain, and hence of military meaninglessness.²⁷ Sustaining military morale while breaking the deadlock became the overriding task of all powers in the last two years of the war, while the possibility of short-circuiting the whole destructive process by a partial or negotiated peace seemed to some an enticing alternative.²⁸

But the strains were no less evident on the home front. Here the war and the mobilization process itself generated a specifically wartime 'social morality' – or set of reciprocal moral judgements on the contribution of different groups to the national effort. This was potentially divisive and equally engaged the state's responsibility.²⁹ In part, the social morality of wartime pivoted on the relationship between soldier and civilian, front and rear. It is a truism that combat in 1914–18 was an affair between mass armies to the exclusion of civilians (apart from occupied zones and the limited effects of submarine warfare and aerial bombardment), and thus emphasized the gulf between military and civilian experience. Certainly, every army manifested this friction in the soldiers' dismissive hostility towards the 'detested rear' of 'shirkers' (or *embusqués*) and profiteers. Yet mass short-service armies were civilian forces in which the relations between men and the intimate home front of family, friends and locality remained powerful, sustained by unprecedented letter-writing and home leave, and reinforced by the influence of civilian culture.³⁰

Some of the deepest cleavages in wartime morality precisely concerned the differential connection of social groups to the fighting front and the highly variable risk of the loss of loved ones and breadwinners. Industrial workers and technicians in all countries, for example, were withdrawn from the front for an industrial mobilization that was necessarily based on the division of labour and specialization of function

– and hence on the inequality of risk. Much of the hostility to ‘shirkers’ was disguised rural and lower-middle-class resentment against an apparently privileged working class judged by the yardstick of what the French called the ‘blood-tax’ of military service. Other moral antagonisms, however, assumed different social configurations. The pragmatic reliance on private enterprise and the profit motive in the war economies provided a vocabulary of working-class hostility against industrialists by reference to the presumed equality of the national effort. In another way, it generated a moral community of working- and lower-middle-class urban consumers against rural producers and urban retailers, who were accused of ‘hoarding’ and ‘profiteering’ and blamed for inflation.³¹

Thus, on the home as well as the fighting front, the war challenged the very basis of the mobilization process. It strained the assumption that the primary, military mobilization could achieve its goals and cast doubt on the supposed moral unity of the nation by resuscitating sectional divisions, though not always in pre-war terms. It became apparent, too, that the very solidarities and languages expressing national mobilization could also do the exact opposite. Class, even nation (as the Czechs, Poles, Irish and others began to show), provided powerful vocabularies of counter-mobilization either against the war or in favour of the enemy. In some ways, the key term in the mid-period of the war was that of ‘sacrifice’, conveying as it did both the human cost of the military effort and the sense of differential burdens distorting civilian society and the home front. Sacrifice did not in itself negate the national mobilizations of 1914–15. But in tandem with the declining ‘self-mobilization’ already referred to, it strained the legitimacy of state and nation and intensified the pressure on governments and military commands to arbitrate between different perceptions of inequity and to remobilize the nation for ‘total war’.

One manifestation of this tension was a distinct military crisis which occurred (with variations and very different outcomes) in virtually all the belligerents in 1917–18. This constitutes a fourth theme of the volume and is examined in parallel essays by David Englander on the British army, Leonard Smith on the resolution of the French mutinies of 1917, Wilhelm Deist on the ‘underground strikes’ in the German army, and Mark Cornwall on the extraordinary difficulties faced by the multinational Austro-Hungarian army. The essential nature of the French ‘mutinies’ of May–June 1917 has long been understood as a protest against the French High Command’s inability to solve the military deadlock rather than as a refusal of the political logic of a war in defence of nation and Republic.³² It is clear, too, that morale in the Austro-