

A World at Total War

GLOBAL CONFLICT AND THE POLITICS OF DESTRUCTION, 1937–1945

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Are We There Yet?

World War II and the Theory of Total War

ROGER CHICKERING AND STIG FÖRSTER

In the vast library that now houses the historical literature on World War II, the volume that Gordon Wright published more than forty years ago occupies a special place.¹ It is one of the shortest books in the entire collection. It is also perhaps the most comprehensive survey ever published on the war in the European theater. It ranges over military operations, the diplomacy of war, the mobilization of economies and popular morale, occupation and resistance, psychological warfare, the harnessing of science and technology to destruction, and the war's revolutionary impact on society and culture. The volume is remarkable in an additional respect. Although it bears the title *The Ordeal of Total War*, it proffers neither a sustained discussion nor a definition of this pivotal term. Instead, it appears to argue by implication that World War II was paradigmatic, that the defining feature of total war was the very enormity of its scope and impact, and that such a degree of comprehensiveness made this conflict a singular phenomenon in military history.

This is a defensible argument that other historians of the Second World War have embraced in the same axiomatic spirit, which has had to work in lieu of analytical reflection.² However, at the conclusion of a series of volumes on total war, it seems appropriate to reexamine some of the premises of this argument. Defining the Second World War as the paradigmatic instance of total war has important methodological ramifications, which pertain above all to issues of narrative logic. The central analytical questions revolve around the degree to which this war resembled its predecessors – particularly,

1 Gordon Wright, *The Ordeal of Total War, 1939–1945* (New York, 1968).

2 See Peter Calvororessi and Guy Wint, *Total War: Causes and Courses of the Second World War* (New York, 1979); David Jablonsky, *Churchill, the Great Game, and Total War* (London and Portland, OR, 1991); Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca, 1987).

given the purview of this series of volumes, the American Civil War and the First World War.³

Four previous volumes have failed to produce a definition of total war that can command general assent. The most common and practical approach has been to treat total war as an “ideal type,” a model that features a number of salient characteristics, elements, or ingredients.⁴ Most of these indices pertain to the same expanding parameters of warfare that Gordon Wright’s volume emphasized. Total war, in this rendering, assumes the commitment of massive armed forces to battle, the thoroughgoing mobilization of industrial economies in the war effort, and hence the disciplined organization of civilians no less than warriors. Other hallmarks of total war have proved more difficult to measure. Total war erodes not only the limits on the size and scope of the war effort: it also encourages the radicalization of warfare, the abandonment of the last restraints on combat, which were hitherto imposed by law, moral codes, or simple civility. Moreover, in order to sustain popular commitment to the war effort, governments pursue extravagant, uncompromising war aims; and they justify these goals through the systematic demonization of the enemy. Finally – and in the eyes of some authors, most characteristically – total war is marked by the systematic erasure of basic distinctions between soldiers and civilians. Because civilians, regardless of gender, are no less significant to the war effort than the soldiers, they themselves become legitimate if not preferred targets of military violence.

By all these hallmarks, the evidence speaks powerfully to the “totality” of the Second World War – to the unique degree to which this conflict approximated the ideal type. By a significant margin, this was the most immense and costly war ever fought. If coastal waters are counted, its theaters of combat extended to every continent save Antarctica. It involved most of the sovereign states on the planet, the bulk of the world’s population, and the largest armed forces ever assembled. Well over seventy million human beings were mobilized for military service. This was the quintessential “deep war.”⁵ Economies were massively reoriented everywhere to war; in most of the belligerent countries, military production accounted for well over half of capital investment and GNP, while a majority of the civilian workforce,

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, 1997); Manfred Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Cambridge, 1999); Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2000); Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, 2003).

4 Chickering and Förster, “Introduction,” *Shadows of Total War*.

5 Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York and London, 1995), 190.

both male and female, was absorbed, along with millions of prisoners of war and deportees, into producing and delivering the tools of destruction to the warriors.⁶

The Second World War set other standards as well. Once announced at the Casablanca conference in early 1943, the doctrine of “unconditional surrender” symbolized the abandonment of compromise by all sides as they pursued the military defeat of their enemies.⁷ The brutal handling of Soviet prisoners of war by the German army and the cruelties Japanese and American forces inflicted on one another signaled a savagery in combat that was – in the modern era at least – unprecedented in both its extent and routinization.⁸ In the European and Pacific theaters alike, it fed on the same dehumanizing popular stereotypes that drove the mobilization of civilians on the home front.⁹ These stereotypes also underlay perhaps the most telling statistics of the war, which speak to the ratio of civilian-to-military casualties. The numbers remain necessarily vague, for many of the casualties occurred in circumstances, particularly in China, Poland, and the Soviet Union, that were calculated to make the accounting difficult. J. David Singer and Melvin Small have estimated a total of fifteen million soldiers killed in all theaters, which is probably a conservative figure.¹⁰ It pales, in any event, in the face of civilian deaths that doubtless exceeded forty-five million.¹¹ The preponderance of civilians was no accidental or peripheral feature of this war; it reflected the central significance of civilians in the conflict, the indispensable roles that they played in the war’s outcome, as well as the vulnerabilities that they shared, as a direct consequence, with the soldiers.

Rehearsing these “total” features of the Second World War risks belaboring the obvious. The paradigmatic significance of the Second World War has become orthodox in the literature on this great ordeal, and Gordon Wright could surely plead that the proposition needed little justification or elaboration. Since 1945, the same proposition has also lent the Second World War a special place in the broader history of warfare in the modern era. The

6 Alan Milward, *War, Economy, and Society, 1939–1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979); Mark Harrison, ed., *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison* (Cambridge, 1998).

7 Alfred Vagts, “Unconditional Surrender – vor und nach 1945,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitschichte* 7 (1959): 280–309.

8 Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945* (2d ed., Bonn, 1997).

9 John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986).

10 J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War, 1816–1965: A Statistical Handbook* (New York, 1972), 67.

11 See Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994), 894.

paradigmatic status of this war, its privileged proximity to the ideal type, has provided the structuring principle in what one might call the “master narrative” of modern military history.¹²

The narrative conventionally begins in the era of the French Revolution, which saw the first modern attempts to mobilize entire populaces in support of a war and ushered in an era of “peoples’ wars.” The technologies and productive capacities that were then liberated during the industrialization of the nineteenth century furnished the material wherewithal to equip, feed, and transport the mass armies whose ideological credentials had been defined during the revolutionary era. Industrialism also multiplied the difficulties of providing material support to the new field armies; and to this end, waging war required the efficient organization of modern economies and the mobilization of durable loyalties among the civilian workforce. Success in these efforts marked a major moment in the history of warfare. “Industrialized peoples’ war” in the nineteenth century, the marriage of industrialization with popularly mandated and recruited armies, provided the material basis of total war in the twentieth.

The history of warfare since the middle of the nineteenth century can thus be portrayed as the halting yet inexorable march toward the practical realization of total war, the ever-closer approximation of the ideal type. The American Civil War revealed in inchoate form the institutions and practices that gauged the subsequent development of warfare, including huge armies, the industrial manufacture and transportation of their supplies, and the exhaustion and utter defeat of one of the belligerents. In this connection, precocious significance attaches to the names of Grant, Sheridan, and Sherman, who early understood the ramifications of industrial mobilization and the importance of civilian morale to the war’s outcome. In this reading, the First World War differed from the Civil War less in its basic dynamics than in its scale, as well as in the sophistication with which industrial technologies and organization were marshaled to military ends. These developments resulted between 1914 and 1918 in a war of such immense proportions that it defied a decision-at-arms and remanded the outcome to the home front. The exertions of civilians were ultimately the deciding factor.

The Second World War stands at the end of the story, the goal of 150 years of military history. In its dynamics, this vast conflict resembled its two major predecessors, for it witnessed the perfection of features of modern warfare that had been earlier introduced and cultivated. Now, however, all

12 Chickering, “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept,” in Boemeke, Chickering, and Förster, *Anticipating Total War*, 13–28.

the elements of “totality” – the mobilization of belligerent societies, the exploitation of material and moral resources to military ends, and the systematic implication of civilians in war – were brought to their fulfillment.

The logic of this progression permeates textbooks that have been written since 1945 on modern military history. It has also provided the foundation for this series of volumes, which has mapped the “road to total war” from 1861 to 1945, from its putative beginnings in practice to its destination. To a large degree, the previous volumes thus prefigure the present one. These volumes have testified to the power and persistence of an analytical framework that arrays three great wars along a single narrative axis, whose culmination is situated in the Second World War. The preceding volumes have also offered cautions, however, about the analytical hazards that lurk within this framework; and some of these cautions deserve another hearing, for they pertain with special force to the historical place of the Second World War.

It bears emphasis in the first place that this grand narrative entails, like all historical narratives, an exercise in teleological thinking. If Hayden White is correct, historians must engage in this exercise if they hope to provide a structured or coherent account of the past.¹³ They can, however, attend to the dangers of what the literary scholar Michael Andre Bernstein has recently called, in connection with the Holocaust, “backshadowing” or a “kind of retroactive foreshadowing” of past events.¹⁴ Defining the Second World War as the telos of modern military history establishes the narrative perspective on preceding developments in compelling ways. It requires the framing of earlier conflicts as efforts in anticipation or approximation of institutions and practices that found subsequent fulfillment. The question “How total was the American Civil War (or the Great War)?” translates into “How much was the American Civil War (or the First World War) like the Second World War?” The question itself flirts with “retroactive foreshadowing” in two ways. For one thing, it is not a historical question. It judges the earlier conflicts by criteria that were defined only later in a different historical context. And by virtue of the very terms in which it is posed, the question privileges the similarities and continuities among these wars.

The earlier volumes have struggled with these problems, even as they have insisted on the importance of comparing the major wars of the modern era – an undertaking that requires some kind of analytical denominator. The

13 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1973).

14 Michael Andre Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994), 16.

essays in these volumes have provided compelling evidence that the “road to total war” was anything but straight and narrow. Contingency, accident, and inadvertence figured prominently between the way stations. Nothing inevitable or foreordained drove the progression to the monster war of the mid-twentieth century. The earlier contests differed from the last – and from one another – in essential ways. The first volume made clear that the American Civil War was in major respects a limited, primitive conflict. Many people on both sides remained untouched; and even the most notorious acts of war committed against noncombatants, the campaigns of Sheridan and Sherman, observed constraints that discouraged the loss of civilian life.¹⁵ The second volume, which addressed the era between the Civil War and the Great War, documented the near-universal failure of observers, military as well as civilian, to recognize the portents of the latter conflict in the former.¹⁶ The third volume, which dealt with the First World War, likewise laid bare the extent to which institutions conventionally associated with total war took shape eclectically, with no precedents or foresight whatsoever, while in other respects, such as the techniques used to finance it, the Great War resembled the Napoleonic Wars more than it did the war that followed.¹⁷ The First World War was itself limited in basic respects. Its hallmark, strategic stalemate on the western front, rendered the combat a protracted siege, which confined the scope of operations and reduced the scope of violence that could be inflicted on civilians, at least in this part of Europe.¹⁸

Stressing the limitations, the unachieved “totality” of the American Civil War and the Great War, conforms to a master narrative that culminates in the Second World War. Insofar as it casts limitation in an aura of insufficiency or imperfection, however, this emphasis imputes characteristics to this last struggle that are hard to demonstrate. The rhetorical extravagance of the

15 Mark E. Neely, Jr., “Was the Civil War a Total War?” Förster and Nagler, in *On the Road to Total War*, 29–53; cf. James M. McPherson, “From Limited War to Total War in America,” *ibid.*, 295–310; Herman M. Hattaway, “The Civil War Armies: Creation, Mobilization, and Development,” *ibid.*, 173–98; Stanley L. Engermann and J. Matthew Gallman, “The Civil War Economy: A Modern View,” *ibid.*, 217–48.

16 Gerald D. Feldman, “Hugo Stinnes and the Prospect of War before 1914,” in Chickering and Förster, *Anticipating Total War*, 77–96; John Whiteclay Chambers, “The American Debate over Modern War, 1871–1914,” *ibid.*, 241–80; Thomas Rohkrämer, “Heroes and Would-Be Heroes: Veterans’ and Reservists’ Associations in Imperial Germany,” *ibid.*, 189–216; cf. Stig Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914,” *ibid.*, 343–76.

17 Elizabeth Glaser, “Better Late than Never: The American War Effort, 1917–1918,” in Chickering and Förster, *Great War, Total War*, 389–408; Niall Ferguson, “How (Not) to Pay for the War: Traditional Finance and ‘Total’ War,” *ibid.*, 409–34; Roger Chickering, “World War I and the Theory of Total War: Reflections on the British and German Cases, 1914–1915,” *ibid.*, 35–53.

18 Hew Strachan, “From Cabinet War to Total War: The Perspective of Military Doctrine, 1861–1918,” *ibid.*, 19–34.

word “total” is itself a major obstacle to a sober appreciation of the Second World War, for it tends to equate “totality” with fulfillment, which in the governing narrative logic implies the removal of every restraint in the conduct of war.

The Second World War resists this characterization. It, too, remained limited in significant respects. While the theaters of war sprawled around the globe, combat was concentrated overwhelmingly in Central and Eastern Europe and East Asia, while large parts of the planet’s landmass, including sub-Saharan Africa and the entire Western Hemisphere, remained largely exempt. The destruction of civilian life and property observed the same geographical confinements. Economic mobilization was by no means uniformly “deep.” Richard Overy’s words are worth pondering in this connection. “Throughout the war,” he writes, “the German economy produced far fewer weapons than its raw resources of materials, manpower, scientific skill and factory floorspace could have made possible.”¹⁹ The same proposition was true of all the other belligerents, save possibly the Soviet Union.²⁰ Although the American economy registered prodigious productive achievements, it was far less dislocated, regimented, or intensively committed to the war effort than were the economies of the other major belligerent countries. The mobilization of the American armed forces, which featured the “Ninety-Division Gamble,” left vast reserves of manpower unexploited.²¹ Civilian life was likewise far less disrupted in this country than elsewhere by shortages of food, resources, or labor. Consumer purchases rose, amid what David Kennedy has recently called “loosely supervised affluence,” by 12 percent between 1939 and 1944.²² In sum, to characterize as “total mobilization” the experience of war in the United States, the pivotal participant in this total war, is to indulge in hyperbole.

Other features of the Second World War likewise blemish easy generalizations about its “totality.” Save again in the Soviet Union, the mobilization of armed forces deferred to limits dictated by traditional gender roles, for nowhere else were women allowed into combat roles. The reluctance of all sides to employ poison gas against one another in the European theater was

19 Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 198; cf. Alan Milward, *The German Economy at War* (London, 1965); Ludolf Herbst, *Der totale Krieg und die Ordnung der Wirtschaft: Die Kriegswirtschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik, Ideologie und Propaganda 1939–1945* (Stuttgart, 1982).

20 Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941–1945: A Social and Economic History of the U.S.S.R. in World War II* (London, 1991); cf. Harrison, *The Economics of World War II*.

21 Maurice Matloff, “The Ninety-Division Gamble,” in Kent Roberts Greenfield, *Command Decisions* (Washington, DC, 1960), 365–81.

22 David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York, 1999), 664; Milward, *War, Economy, and Society*, 63.

due to practical calculations of interest, but it also represented an appreciable act of restraint.²³ The treatment of prisoners of war was not universally savage; and those who fell captive in Western Europe or North Africa could expect, as a rule, to survive in reasonably humane conditions.²⁴ The doctrine of “unconditional surrender” was admittedly declared to exclude the prospect of a compromise peace, but it was motivated in no small part by British and American fears, which were not entirely groundless, that the Soviet Union was prepared to accept just such a peace with the Axis.²⁵

Finally, the master narrative of total war comports uneasily with the fact that the Second World War was in significant ways “less total” than its predecessors. Thanks to the ruthless exploitation of human and material resources in occupied Europe, life on the German home front was, by a wide margin, less disrupted or deprived during most of the Second World War than it had been during the First.²⁶ The war aims of the Western Allies involved far less violence to basic social institutions in the Axis states than the Union forces had earlier imposed on the Confederacy in the Civil War. Unlike slavery in the American South, the legal and institutional foundations of German, Italian, and Japanese capitalism were not at issue. In this respect, only the Soviet Union among the Allies fought for anything that might be called “total war aims” – a characterization that is modeled largely on the racial utopia that the Nazis sought to create in Eastern Europe.

All these conundrums address isolated aspects of the Second World War, but they are numerous and central enough to enjoin caution about the master narrative that has conventionally defined the significance of this war in military history. They also lend support to an alternative of this narrative. This one is less immediately dependent on an ideal type for its structure; instead, it addresses total war as a narrower, more concrete phenomenon whose meaning and contours emerged in a specific historical context.

The key to this reading lies in the fourth volume of the series, which considered the period between the two world wars.²⁷ This volume was the first to confront the problem of total war on its own historical terrain, for

23 Weinberg, *World at Arms*, 558–60.

24 See S. P. MacKenzie, “The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II,” *Journal of Modern History* 66 (1994): 487–520; Arnold Krammer, “German Prisoners of War in the United States,” *Military Affairs* 40 (1976): 68–73.

25 Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Die Chance des Sonderfriedens: Deutsch-sowjetische Geheimgespräche 1941–1945* (Berlin, 1986); H. W. Koch, “The Spectre of a Separate Peace in the East: Russo-German ‘Peace Feelers,’ 1942–44,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 10 (1975): 531–49; Bernd Martin, *Friedensinitiativen und Machtpolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939–1942* (Düsseldorf, 1974).

26 Lothar Burchardt, “Die Auswirkungen der Kriegswirtschaft auf die deutsche Zivilbevölkerung im Ersten und im Zweiten Weltkrieg,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, No. 1 (1974): 65–97.

27 Chickering and Förster, *Shadows of Total War*.

only in the interwar period did the term surface in professional and popular discourse. Erich Ludendorff's pamphlet *Der totale Krieg*, which appeared in 1935, played the principal role in popularizing the term, but its author was by no means an original thinker.²⁸ The honor of paternity belonged instead to French civilian leaders who, during the late phase of the Great War, coined the terms *guerre totale* and *guerre intégrale* in announcing their ambitions to mobilize the country's every resource.

The vision of total war took on more specific contours and connotations after the war.²⁹ Central in this process were debates over strategic airpower. So was popular interest in the new regimes in the Soviet Union and Fascist Italy, both of which invoked the experience of the Great War as they attempted to establish the material and moral mobilization of society as a principle of rule. The propagandists of the latter regime coined the word "totalitarian" in the mid-1920s to describe the Italian designs. The word thereupon migrated northward, where it fed the ideas of several German neo-Hegelian scholars who were sketching out a "total" theory of state, which likewise invoked the mobilization of society for war as a normative principle. The most influential voice in this discourse was that of the writer Ernst Jünger, who in 1930 introduced the term "total mobilization." In 1934, the term modulated for the first time into "total war" in the German military literature.³⁰

Several aspects of this story are significant here. In the first place, the term total war gestated historically amid ideological debate; and it was born with far-reaching political implications. Ludendorff's vision of total war featured the centralization of power over the entire war effort in the hands of soldiers. This proposition was bitterly contested before it was everywhere rejected. Many other figures, from Alfred Jodl to Joseph Goebbels, subsequently invoked the idea of total war to justify the ambitions of their own agencies in Nazi Germany's bureaucratic wars; and the term was similarly exploited in bureaucratic struggles elsewhere during the Second World War.³¹ The

28 Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "'Absoluter' und 'totaler' Krieg: Von Clausewitz zu Ludendorff," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 19 (1969): 220–48; cf. Roger Chickering, "Sore Loser: Ludendorff's Total War," in Chickering and Förster, *Shadows of Total War*.

29 See now the comprehensive analysis of the interwar discourse in Stig Förster, ed., *An der Schwelle zum Totalen Krieg: Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft* (Paderborn, 2002).

30 Markus Pöhlmann, "Von Versailles nach Armageddon: Totalisierungserfahrung und Kriegserwartung in deutschen Militärzeitschriften," *ibid.*, 346–51.

31 Jost Dülffer, "Vom Bündnispartner zum Erfüllungsgehilfen im totalen Krieg: Militär und Gesellschaft in Deutschland," in Wolfgang Michalka, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg: Analysen, Grundzüge, Forschungsbilanz* (Munich, 1989), 297–98; Peter Longerich, "Joseph Goebbels und der totale Krieg: Eine unbekanntes Denkschrift des Propagandaministers vom 18. Juli 1944," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 35 (1987): 289–314; cf. Hans Wenke, "Zur Philosophie des totalen Krieges," in Wenke, ed., *Geistige Gestalten*

polemical overtones that have attached to the idea of total war since its birth serve as an additional caution against its uncritical deployment as a tool of historical analysis.³²

The early history of total war also suggests, however, chronological markers narrower than the modern era for using the concept in historical analysis. Total war was born of one twentieth-century European war in anticipation of another. In all its variations, its reference point was the Great War and the critical place of civilian mobilization in this conflict. The concept served simultaneously as an analysis of one great war and a vision of the next. To this extent, the Second World War was in fact supposed to represent the fulfillment of trends marked out by the First, for in the German discourse at least, total war implied the redressing of mistakes committed by the country's military and civilian leadership during the Great War. The object of the whole enterprise was to ensure more coordination between the elements of the German leadership, to exert more ruthless control over morale on the home front, and to mobilize resources more effectively for use at the battlefield.

These features of the concept point finally to another truth. Total war was historically not in the first instance about soldiers. The vision rested instead on the insight that the claims of industrial war had become all-embracing, that they demanded the loyal participation of entire populations – men, women, and children – and that civilians had become more important than soldiers to the outcome of modern war. One might therefore mark the debut of total war in the second half of the Great War, at about the time that contemporary observers started employing the term to describe their own efforts to drive the mobilization of the home front to new extremes. The juncture found its symbols in the accession of Ludendorff, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau to power in 1916 and 1917, for all of these leaders recognized that stalemate on the battlefield had turned the home front into the decisive dimension of the war. The scope of military activity had broadened to require the ruthless reorganization of industrial production and civilian energies. Military victory demanded the regimented commitment of productive forces at home no less than of armed forces at the front. And the home front, no less than the fighting front, was logically a legitimate theater of direct military action.

und Probleme: Festschrift für Eduard Spranger (Leipzig, 1942), 266–89; John Burnham, *Total War: The Economic Theory of a War Economy* (Boston, 1943).

³² See Fabio Crivellari, “Der Wille zum totalen Krieg,” *Arbeitskreis Militärgeschichte, Newsletter* 12 (2000): 10–14.

In this sense, in the playing out of this logic, the Second World War did in significant respects represent the consummation of the First. The war against civilians of all descriptions achieved a virtuosity in the second war that became conceivable only in the aftermath of the first, as retrospective analysis of the Great War riveted attention on the civilians' role in the outcome – particularly, however, on their deficiencies and vulnerabilities. The conclusion seemed inescapable. Civilians were critical to the supply of weapons, munitions, and the other essential materials of combat, and they provided the moral backing without which the war could not be sustained. However, civilians were also more vulnerable to both subversion and military attack, for they were less acclimated to the terrors, deprivations, and demoralization of war. The *Dolchstoß*, the “stab in the back,” legend drew much of its force from this observation. The German military leadership genuinely believed that the moral collapse of the home front in 1918 had wrecked what would otherwise have been a victorious military campaign. They concluded that in a future war the civilian front would again constitute the weakest dimension of any belligerent's war effort, hence the most vulnerable and inviting target of an enemy's attentions.

The Germans were in good company in this reasoning. Their logic corresponded to the thinking of military planners elsewhere, above all to the calculations of strategic airpower's early enthusiasts, who likewise reasoned that attacking “soft” civilian targets offered the most feasible, if not the only way to break the frontline stalemate that inhered, they believed, in modern industrial warfare. “Future wars will be total in character and scope,” wrote Giulio Douhet in 1921. From this premise, he reasoned that “merciless pounding from the air” held the key to victory. “A complete breakdown of the social structure cannot but take place in a country” subjected to this kind of attack. “The time will soon come when,” he concluded, “to put an end to horror and suffering, the people themselves, driven by the instinct of self-preservation, would rise up and demand an end to the war.”³³

This confidence was not entirely vindicated in the war that followed, but the statistics of this conflict nevertheless revealed the extent to which military violence against noncombatants had become the hallmark of total war. Historically, the process had two central aspects. The first, which might be called the technological dimension, had to do with the weapons that could

33 Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (New York, 1942), 5–6, 57–8, cited in Edward Warner, “Douhet, Mitchell, Seversky: Theories of Air Warfare,” in Edward Meade Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (New York, 1966), 491, 495; cf. Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War: Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet, and Other Modernists* (Oxford, 1998), 43–79.

be directed against civilian targets. For the most part, civilians remained spared from direct attack during the Great War, but their good fortune was due only in part to the strategic circumstances that kept great land armies locked – on the western front at least – at some distance from areas that were heavily populated by civilians. The principal means of disrupting civilian activity remained a strategy with a hoary tradition, the blockade. Over time, it devastated the economies of the Central Powers, but it could not engage civilian areas directly. Strategic airpower could; and both sides employed it during the First World War. Some 740 Germans, almost all of them civilians, perished in aerial bombing attacks in the course of this war.³⁴ Airpower was restrained only by its own infancy; and its impact grew apace with its technological advance and the determination of the belligerent powers to extend the purview of combat to civilian areas. More than half of the bombing tonnage and civilian deaths occurred during the war's last two years.

Airpower was a central element of total war, for its technologies mandated bombing strategies that did not discriminate between military and nonmilitary targets, soldiers and noncombatants. Theorists of airpower in the interwar period merely sought to make virtues of the necessities imposed by an inability to aim weapons of enormous explosive power from great heights. The technologies of airpower did not change enough to alter this dynamic much in the Second World War. Many leaders of the Allied air war against Germany, including Arthur Harris and Hap Arnold, found “city busting” a distasteful strategy, but they discovered that even the most scrupulous choice of targets and the most surgical execution of air attacks entailed the colossal destruction of civilian life and property, which they were prepared to accept as a collateral benefit in the name of demoralizing the enemy.³⁵

Destructive technologies and the grudging acceptance of their unpleasant ramifications did not alone bring the apotheosis of war against the civilians. This frightful result owed as well to cultural and political factors, to ideological creeds that germinated during the First World War and culminated in the Second. These legitimated the destruction of entire groups of human beings, whose danger was thought to exceed that of enemy soldiers because it lay disguised in their civilian status itself. Genocide was the other face of total war.³⁶ Although its antecedents reached far into the past, the Holocaust had thick roots in the residual ideological animosities of the Great

34 Christian Geinitz, “The First Air War against Noncombatants: Strategic Bombing of German Cities in World War I,” in Chickering and Förster, *Great War, Total War*, 207–26.

35 Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 111–17; cf. Overy, *The Air War, 1939–1945* (New York, 1980).

36 Stig Förster and Gerhard Hirschfeld, eds., *Genozid in der modernen Geschichte* (Münster, 1999).

War, above all in the perception that the Jews had first systematically undermined home front morale in Germany and then engineered the mutiny of the civilians in 1918. Long before it eventuated in the decision to annihilate them physically, Nazi racial policy entailed a “war against the Jews,” which represented a primary theater in an all-embracing conflict.³⁷

From this perspective, the era of total war commenced in the First World War and concluded at the end of the Second. The history of total war was driven by material and ideological forces that culminated respectively in Hiroshima and Auschwitz – in weapons that did not discriminate and policies that did so with a vengeance.³⁸ After 1945, the concept of total war lived on as an ideal type (or countertype), now as the nuclear nightmare that would succeed the Second World War, set the ultimate parameters of “totality,” and capped the master narrative in apocalypse. Its realization has so far been confined to an imaginary realm invoked by Stanley Kubrick and others. In the meantime, however, a master narrative shaped in its image has ceased to provide much guidance to the military history of the twentieth century’s second half.

This series of volumes has thus yielded two approaches to the problem of total war, both of which offer analytical advantages. The one, which treats the concept of total war as an ideal type, might be characterized as a “realist” approach to the problem, insofar as it insists that the elements of this ideal represent real historical phenomena that gestated over more than a century. Invoking total war as an ideal type has made possible an imposing body of scholarship, which can trace the distant antecedents of a form of warfare that reached its culmination in the middle of the twentieth century. This scholarship suggests that if critically employed, this approach need not fall prey to uncritical teleologies. In the other approach, which might be called a “nominalist” reading, the analytical purview is necessarily less ambitious. It treats total war instead as a discrete historical phenomenon that was confined to the first half of the twentieth century – an era that the Second World War brought to a close.³⁹ Whatever the differences in their methodological foundations, the two understandings of total war have much in common. Above all, both insist that total war was characterized principally by the

37 Lucy Davidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York, 1975); Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung: Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung* (Munich and Zurich, 1998).

38 See Erich Markusen and David Kopf, *The Holocaust and Strategic Bombing: Genocide and Total War in the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, CO, 1995); cf. Hew Strachan, “Essay and Reflection on Total War and Modern War,” *International History Review* 22 (2000): 342.

39 This distinction was suggested by Robert Tombs in the discussion during the final session of the conference.

calculated, systematic conflation of the military and civilian dimensions of industrial warfare.

As they have the previous four, several central problems dominate the present volume, which grows out of the proceedings of a conference on the Second World War held in Hamburg in August 2001. Disagreements persist over the definition of “total war,” even as the authors confront a conflict that many of them instinctively regard as a paradigmatic case. The first section of the volume is devoted to general problems of interpretation. Gerhard Weinberg emphasizes the global dimensions of the conflict as its distinguishing feature. Hew Strachan then explores the radicalization in the conduct of military operations over the course of the war. The reasons for this development lay, he argues, above all in the salience of racism in the ideologies of both sides. Myriam Gessler and Stig Förster then emphasize the centrality of genocide as a potential element of total war. The Second World War represents the closest historical approximation of total war as an ideal type, they claim, for the Holocaust approximated “absolute genocide.”

The second section of the volume explores the question whether specific modes of combat and operations distinguished total war. Holger Herwig underscores the elements of central command control, limitless aims, and rhetorical extravagance in the German conduct of the Battle of the Atlantic. Jürgen Förster’s paper on the German land war likewise finds indices of “totality” in the unlimited and uncompromising objectives of the German forces, the lack of restraint with which they pursued these aims, and the central control exercised by Hitler. By contrast, in his broad analysis of the American war in two theaters, Dennis Showalter concludes that this country did not fight a total war, insofar as mobilization never reached the extremes that it did in other belligerent countries. Nonetheless, the American effort was not only geared from the outset to global dimensions, but was also conceived as a “mega-war,” which, Showalter contends, “changed the world’s paradigms” technologically and institutionally for the rest of the twentieth century.

The next section deals with economic aspects of the war, and it suggests some specific parameters for measuring the “totality” of war. Mark Harrison, Stephen Broadberry, and Peter Howlett argue that the economic dimension was in any case pivotal to the nature and outcome of this conflict. Harrison examines the plight of the Soviet economy during the war and concludes that the mobilization of resources was the single most important factor in deciding the war in favor of the USSR. The analysis of the British economy Broadberry and Howlett present likewise contends that in total