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THE SHADOWS OF TOTAL WAR:  
EUROPE, EAST ASIA AND THE UNITED STATES, 1919–1939

An International Conference held at Münchenwiler (Switzerland)  
August 25–28, 1999

One of the most striking features of modern history was the development towards Total War. Beginning with the 1860s, warfare began to expand beyond its former limitations and moved towards the involvement of industrialized societies as a whole into the war effort. From then onwards, belligerents tried to mobilize more and more human and material resources for war. War aims became increasingly extreme, culminating in attempts of total subjugation. As wars were fought by whole societies, the enemy's civilian population became a legitimate target. Aerial attacks on civilian centres, forced migration or even genocide could become elements of warfare. All in all, wars became more intense than ever before.

To study this all-embracing historical phenomenon, the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, has initiated a series of five international conferences under the title of »The Age of Total War, 1861–1945«. The first one took place in Washington, DC, in 1992, and dealt with a comparison of the American Civil War and the Wars of German Unification<sup>1</sup>. Two years later, another conference at Augsburg (Germany) tried to trace early manifestations of Total War during the period from 1871 to 1914<sup>2</sup>. The third conference of the series convened at Münchenwiler (Switzerland) in 1996 and focused on World War I<sup>3</sup>. At all three conferences, a large number of leading international (mainly North American, British and German) scholars discussed a broad variety of topics from many different perspectives. To broaden the point of view, not only military historians, but also specialists from fields like medicine history, environmental history, psychiatry, or international law joined the debates.

This was even more true for the 1999 conference which was also held in Switzerland. It dealt with the interwar period and focused on the development of the concept of Total War as well as on the memories and legacies of World War I and on the preparation for the next war. Convened by Roger CHICKERING (Georgetown University, Washington, DC) and Stig FÖRSTER (University of Bern, Switzerland), 40 scholars from the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, and Switzerland met for six days at the ancient Abbey of Münchenwiler. The conference was sponsored by the German Historical Institutes in London, Paris, and Washington, DC, the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, the Max and Elsa-Beer-Brawand-Foundation, and the Swiss National Science Foundation. The debates took place in a very relaxed atmosphere, but nevertheless produced promising results.

- 1 Conference proceedings published under: Stig FÖRSTER, Jörg NAGLER (Eds.), *On the Road to Total War. The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871*, Cambridge 1997.
- 2 Published under: Manfred F. BOEMEKE, Roger CHICKERING, Stig FÖRSTER (Eds.), *Anticipating Total War. The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, Cambridge 1999.
- 3 Conference proceedings will be published in due course.

The participants tried to cope with the complexities of the problem at hand through seven sections and a concluding panel discussion. The sections addressed the problem of Total War (general reflections); legacies of Total War; victims and consequences of Total War; new visions; warfare in a new mode; the mobilization of state and society; and rehearsing for the next war.

In their introductory statements, Hew STRACHAN (Glasgow) and Gerhard L. WEINBERG (Chapel Hill, NC) outlined the general characteristics of the period. After the traumatic experience of World War I, the military leaders in Europe in general, not only in Germany, increasingly doubted the value of the mass army and discussed models of small professional forces instead. While societies were still coping with the human and social cost of the last war, political leaders already began to prepare their countries for the next.

As Gerd KRUMEICH (Düsseldorf) pointed out, World War I had cut deep into the cultural memory especially of France. The resulting French pacifism in the interwar period gave French preparations for the next war a strange twist: With the Maginot Line, France tried to avoid another Great War on its own soil by all means. In contrast to this functional pacifism, Hartmut LEHMANN (Göttingen) portrayed the fundamental religious pacifism that the wellknown Paul Tillich formulated in Germany in the 1930s. James M. DIEHL (Bloomington, IN) clearly demonstrated how the mentality developed during four years of war implicated the political life of Europe's national states in the 1920s. Veterans of the Great War failed to demobilize mentally and could thus hardly be reintegrated into civil society. In many countries, the political life expanded into the streets and was carried on by the clash of paramilitary forces. Markus PÖHLMANN (Bern) analyzed the official military history of post-war Germany. With the installation of the Reichsarchiv, the dissolved General Staff managed to retain their monopoly on the military records and thus to shape the official interpretation of the last war. Consequently, the Reichsarchiv's publications focused mainly on the traditional operational history of warfare and gave only a cursory glimpse to the aspects of totalization experienced by Germany during the war.

Among the born losers of the Great War were its prisoners of war. They fell victim to the inadequacies of the peace settlement. Especially the German and Russian prisoners of war had to suffer from the continuation of the conflict even after hostilities had ceased. Only after years of mistreatment they were able to return to their respective home countries (Uta HINZ, Freiburg). The fate of Europe's eight million disabled soldiers was by no means more promising. Deborah COHEN (Washington, DC) related the systems of care for the disabled in Germany and Britain to the attitudes these groups developed towards the state. In Britain, the rehabilitation of the disabled remained the business of philanthropists. Surprisingly, the majority of the British veterans became loyal subjects of the state that did not care for them. In Germany, in contrast, the state assumed its responsibility for the disabled of the war. Here, however, the veterans became isolated from society. The newly recognized phenomenon of »shell shock« made the Great War a problem also for British psychiatrists, as Simon WESSELY (London) pointed out. The whole development of psychiatric treatment well into World War II derived many of its ingredients (e.g. group therapy) from the challenge of dealing with the soldiers' psyche. Last not least, the Great War had deep repercussions on the development of international law. For Reinhard MERKEL (Rostock), the rules for the conduct of war were transformed and defined anew after the experience of the war in Belgium and Northern France.

The writings of two notorious German soldiers of World War I show very different perceptions of the war experience. The »sore loser«, General Erich Ludendorff, who had contributed most to Germany's losing the war, came up with the conclusion that only a society tightly controlled by a military dictatorship would be able to survive another great war or even to survive at all. Consequently, with his programmatic work »Der totale Krieg« he acted as a harbinger of ideas later identified with the National Socialist movement (Roger

CHICKERING, Washington, DC). On the contrary, the author Ernst Jünger had experienced the war from the trenches and had nevertheless »learned to love Total War« (Thomas ROHKRÄMER, Lancaster). His writings glorified violence, personal heroism and the supremacy of men over materiel. Both Ludendorff and Jünger ended up with advocating a strong state and a conservative social order. Dittmar DAHLMANN (Bonn) emphasized the connection between the industrialization of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s and the preparation of the Red Army for the next war. He rejected the idea that Stalin's army was predominantly built to serve ideological needs but rather stressed the flexibility of its doctrine. The United States after 1918, in turn, were confronted with the problem of how to downsize its army to the size of a relatively small peace-time army, a solution favored by America's popular military tradition, while maintaining its ability to quickly expand in times of war. The vision developed by some military writers at the time of a new professional soldier replacing the citizen soldier of the past wars fueled this discussion (Bernd GREINER, Hamburg).

The paper by Timo BAUMANN and Daniel SEGESSER (Bern) compared the military journals of France and Britain with regard to conceptions of total warfare. British journals were the fighting ground for officers from all three services who tried to sell their ideas of future warfare to the public in order to get the lion's share of the military budget. For Britain, the question whether the next war would be fought on land and in the air in Europe or on the oceans by the Royal Navy was essential. On the contrary, France had only one conception for a future war: a war of national defence, that would almost certainly expand into a Total War. Dennis E. SHOWALTER (Colorado Springs, CO), summed up the military thinking of the interwar period under five paradigms: paralysis, management, mass, shock, and compensation. Whereas most participants would not fully agree with this point, Showalter's paper excelled by its far-reaching comparative approach. Wilhelm DEIST (Freiburg) stressed that Germany's political and military leadership in 1939 entertained no hopes of fighting something anywhere near a Blitzkrieg. Rather, they realistically expected the war to be another industrialized people's war, in a way, a Total War.

Surprisingly, the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft did not contribute to preparing the German public for a Total War. Instead, according to Norbert FREI (Bochum), it aimed at mollifying and comforting the Germans after the first republic's strife, so creating a feel-good society that wished everything but another war. For Hans-Heinrich NOLTE (Hannover), the militarization of Soviet society contributed to paving the road to Total War in a contradictory way. The purges of the military cadres deprofessionalized the army, while the command economy remained relatively well-suited to waging war. Claudia KOONZ (Durham, NC) compared the propaganda effort of Germany and Japan concerning the mobilization of women – or rather: she would have compared, since finally she could not attend the conference. Nevertheless, over 50 slides of propaganda posters, caricatures, and art illustrated the mutual reinforcement between gender and ethnic stereotypes, while the presentation was commented by the author's voice from a tape. Benedikt STUCHTEY (London) analyzed the complexities of planning and financing the defence of the world wide Empire-Commonwealth. He concluded that the incompatibility of Commonwealth interests and the different national interests prevented the formulation of a co-ordinated defence policy.

Giulia BROGINI (Bern) addressed the fascinating problem of Total War between belligerents of dramatically unequal strength. In the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935/36, Italy's army and air force were rehearsing for a Total War in Europe, but met merely an ill-organized army of traditional warriors. During the Spanish Civil War, Germany's new air force learned how to successfully use tactical bombers for closely supporting the ground forces. While this lesson contributed to the early success of the campaigns in Poland and the Low Countries, it prevented Germany from developing an efficient strategic bombing fleet (Klaus A. MAIER, Potsdam). Japan's Total War began already in the 1930s as a war of empire

on the Chinese mainland. Louise YOUNG (New York) emphasized the degree to which Japanese society and economy was mobilized for the war and the amazingly modern employment of media and propaganda.

The common denominator of all the papers presented at the conference was – or rather should have been – the problem of Total War. Accordingly, the concluding panel discussion was put under the title »No escaping from Total War?« The debate focused mainly on the merits of Stig FÖRSTER's preliminary definition, which attempted to catch the phenomenon through four characteristics, namely total war aims, total methods of warfare, total mobilization, and total control (which all too easily can turn into total chaos). Whereas many contributors had used these four ingredients to structure their approach, others denied the validity of the definition altogether or suggested to eliminate or add components. FÖRSTER and GREINER contemplated a fifth ingredient, namely total waste of resources, while Mark STONEMAN (Freiburg) warned not to impair the clarity of the definition by blowing it up. The majority of the plenum agreed that the definition was to be thought of as an ideal type that can never be reached in reality. Whether Total War was confined to modern industrial societies or was also characteristic for prehistoric warfare remained a matter of debate.

After four conferences on the issue, neither convenors nor contributors have come up with a generally agreed definition of Total War. Maybe the fifth conference, which presumably will take place in 2001, will contribute to a clarification, since it will address World War II, the closest approximation to Total War ever to have happened.