

# **WARFARE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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Theory and Practice

Edited by  
Colin McInnes and G. D. Sheffield

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Volume 8

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TWENTIETH CENTURY

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# Warfare in the Twentieth Century

THEORY AND PRACTICE

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edited by

**Colin McInnes**

*University College of Wales, Aberystwyth*

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## ERRATUM

The editors regret that the following references were inadvertently deleted from Chapter 2, 'Colonial Warfare 1900–1939' by Keith Jeffery:

- R. J. Gavin, *Aden under British Rule 1839–1967* (London: C. Hurst, 1975).  
John Morgan Gates, *Schoolbooks and Krogo: the United States Army in The Philippines 1898–1902* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1973).  
David Killingray, '"A swift agent of government": air power in British colonial Africa, 1916–1939', *Journal of African History*, vol. 25 (1984).  
Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla: a Historical and Critical Study* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977).  
Joyce Lavery Miller, 'The Syrian revolt of 1925', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 8 (1977).  
Ronald Shaffer, 'The 1940 Small Wars Manual and the "lessons of history"', *Military Affairs*, vol. 36 (1972).  
Edward M. Spiers, 'Gas and the North-West Frontier', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 6 (1983).  
Brian R. Sullivan, 'A thirst for glory: Mussolini, the Italian military and the Fascist regime, 1922–36', PhD thesis, Columbia University (1984).  
A. J. P. Taylor (ed), *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).  
Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919–21* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), and *Britain's Civil Wars: Counter-insurgency in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber, 1986).  
Richard E. Welch, Jr., 'American atrocities in the Philippines: the indictment and the response', *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 43 (1974).

The editors regret any embarrassment this may cause.

# Editors' Introduction

The twentieth century has been dominated by war, or by preparations for war, in a way that is unparalleled in history. The first forty-five years of the century saw the scope of warfare vastly expanded; battle became larger, involving increasing numbers of personnel and machines, and covering ever greater areas. Entire economies and societies were organized for war, bringing social change in its wake, so the reality of conflict was, for the first time, brought home to every single member of states such as Britain and the USSR. Furthermore, the evolution of air power thrust civilians into the line of fire as manned aircraft rained high explosive down on to vulnerable cities with the aim of killing ordinary people and destroying their dwellings. The second half of the century in one sense has brought a shift in emphasis away from the 'total' wars of the first. Although Europe since 1945 has been free of old style wars, the world of the nuclear age has not been noticeably more peaceful. Under the 'nuclear umbrella', subconventional, or guerrilla wars have proliferated. Many conventional 'limited' wars have been fought since 1945 as a reminder that the era of the armoured fighting vehicle, artillery piece, tactical aircraft and infantryman is not yet over. In another sense, of course, there is the ominous possibility that any future war would be even more 'total' than those of 1914–18 and 1939–45. A whole theory – almost a science – of deterrence has evolved since 1945, aiming to prevent wars by threatening potential enemies with mass destruction. The possibility of deterrence failing and nuclear weapons being used has ensured that war has remained as much a reality to men in the second half of the century as it was to those in the first half.

The enormous impact of war on the twentieth century has been marked by a gradual recognition of the importance of the study of the subject. Until recent years, the field of 'military history' tended to be narrowly defined as the study of generalship, battles and campaigns – what has been described rather unkindly as 'drum-and-bugle'

history.\* However, the realization of the importance of war has led to non-military historians being drawn to the study of warfare and taking paths rather different from the traditional one. Historians of social change, literature and science, to name but a few, as well as scholars who would not necessarily describe themselves as historians at all have made important contributions to the study of conflict. The term 'military history' is no longer adequate to describe such a vast area of study. Thus terms such as war studies or strategic studies have been applied to the new discipline.

The change from military history to war studies has broadened the appeal of the subject. Whereas in previous years teachers of history at all levels tended to deal merely with 'causes and consequences' of wars, now increasing numbers of schools, colleges and universities are running courses that involve the study of conflict. Much important work has been undertaken in this field, but the editors, who are both professional teachers of the subject, became aware that a gap existed between academic monographs and 'popular' works, and that a single volume work that would present some of the major themes of warfare in the current century in an easily accessible manner would be useful. It is hoped that this present volume will help to plug that gap, and that it will be of use and interest not only to students and teachers of the subject but also to that nebulous class, the 'intelligent general reader'.

*Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice* is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of every facet of conflict since 1900. Instead, a group of scholars was invited to contribute chapters on certain key themes that the editors felt were vital to the development of warfare in the present century. These themes are as wide-ranging as warfare itself. Subjects such as the impact of war upon society, theories of insurgency and counter-insurgency and nuclear strategy are considered, as well as rather more 'traditional' topics such as tactics and strategy on land, the role of sea power and the evolution of strategic bombing. No attempt has been made to dictate the pattern of the individual chapters, so each contributor has taken a slightly different approach to his own subject. One theme runs throughout, however – the dichotomy between the theory of war and its practice, for it is as true in the penultimate decade of the century as it was in

\* Paret, Peter, 'Introduction', in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986), p. 5.

the first that, in war, things rarely go according to plan. The editors' hope is, that by providing a clear and up-to-date collection of essays on various aspects of warfare in the twentieth century, something will have been done to bridge the gulf between the academic student of conflict and the rest of the population – for one thing is clear, no one in the twentieth century can afford to ignore war.

CJ McI and GDS  
UCW, Aberystwyth and  
Old College, RMA, Sandhurst  
October 1987



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**NOTE** The views expressed in this book are those of the individual authors concerned, and should not be taken to represent the views of any official body or organization.

**Warfare  
in the  
Twentieth Century**





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# Total War

IAN F. W. BECKETT

## The historiography of total war

In the last twenty years, historians have come increasingly to recognize the often pivotal role played by war and conflict in historical developments. In the process, the interpretation and understanding of the impact of war upon states, societies and individuals have been transformed. In particular, the concept of 'total war', as applied to the two world wars of the twentieth century, has become a familiar one and a matter for modern historiographical debate. Generally, the term 'total war' is used by historians not only to describe the nature of the world wars but also to differentiate such wars from other conflicts. The study of total war within the context of war studies or studies of war and society is largely a product of the 1960s, but the term itself is older. Ludendorff appears to have used the term first in his memoirs, published in 1919, but it was also employed in a ritualistic fashion during the Second World War. Josef Goebbels, for example, threatened the Western Allies with 'total war' in a celebrated speech in February 1943 and was himself appointed Reich Plenipotentiary for the Mobilization of Total War in July 1944; Winston Churchill also used the phrase in an address to the United States Congress in May 1943. Now, the term has become almost synonymous with the concept of war as a catalyst of far-reaching social change, and it is in precisely that sense that total war is a subject of continuing historical debate.

The American scholar, J. U. Nef, whose *War and Human Progress* was published in 1950,<sup>1</sup> may stand perhaps as representative of an earlier period of historiography, when war was regarded as having a purely negative impact, in so far as it was at all relevant to historical development. However, there were other scholars in the 1950s whose

work was suggestive of the future approach to the question of war and social change. Richard Titmuss made a connection in 1950 between the two in his volume, *Problems of Social Policy*, for the British official history of the Second World War<sup>2</sup> while Stanislas Andrzejewski offered the 'military participation ratio' in 1954,<sup>3</sup> which postulated a firm correlation between the extent of wartime participation by society in the war effort and the amount of subsequent levelling of social inequalities. The English historian, G. N. Clark, also produced during the 1950s a pioneering study of war and society in the seventeenth century,<sup>4</sup> but the real broadening of historical perspectives with regard to what became known as war studies came in the following decade. A comparison of Michael Howard's classic military history of the Franco-Prussian War, published in 1961,<sup>5</sup> with his *War in European History*<sup>6</sup> fifteen years later may serve to indicate the profound historiographical change that occurred.

In the forefront of that change was Arthur Marwick, whose study of British society in the First World War, *The Deluge*,<sup>7</sup> published in 1965, was followed by *Britain in the Century of Total War* in 1968 and *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century* in 1974.<sup>8</sup> Marwick was not the only historian in the field and the titles of Gordon Wright's *The Ordeal of Total War* in 1968 and Peter Calvocoressi's and Guy Wint's *Total War* in 1972 were also indicative of the new approach.<sup>9</sup> However, it was largely Marwick who established the framework for the study of total war. Four 'modes' put forward in *Britain in the Century of Total War* had become a 'four-tier model' in *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century*, by which the changes effected by total war might be gauged and compared between different states. Thus, for Marwick, total war implied disruption and destruction on a vast and unprecedented scale; the testing of the existing social and political structures of states and societies; the participation, in the context of the total mobilization of a state's resources, of previously disadvantaged groups in the war effort; and, lastly, a 'colossal psychological experience'. The cumulative effect would be real and enduring social change. The model became familiar to a wide readership through the 'War and Society' course introduced by Marwick and his colleagues at the Open University in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

To be fair to Marwick, the model was only offered as a 'rough tool', but it is undeniable that the idea of war as a determinant of major change has had a profound impact during the past decade. Indeed, this concept has been described recently by Michael Bentley as one

of the most common 'misapprehensions' in the perception of modern British social history.<sup>11</sup> From the beginning, too, some historians were far more cautious than Marwick in their appraisal of the impact of total war upon society. Examples are Angus Calder's *The People's War*<sup>12</sup> – a title itself derived from a British propaganda slogan in the Second World War and echoed in a 1986 television series and accompanying book on Britain at war<sup>13</sup> – which was published in 1969, and Henry Pelling's *Britain in the Second World War*, published two years later.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Brian Bond has described total war as being as great a myth as the idea of total victory or total defeat<sup>15</sup> and, while the debate has continued to be waged within the context of parameters laid down by Marwick, recent and current research has done much to suggest that the social impact of total war in the twentieth century should not be overstated.

### **The emergence of total war**

A preliminary consideration is that the acceptance of the periods between 1914 and 1918 and between 1939 and 1945 as those of total war implies that conflicts prior to the twentieth century were more limited. Traditionally, historians have described the late eighteenth century as a classic era of 'limited war', in which armies were relatively small in size and would manoeuvre with the intention of avoiding rather than engaging in battle. Campaigns would be designed to exhaust an opponent's economy by occupation in search of strictly limited political and dynastic aims. Societies as a whole would hardly be touched by the impact of war and, indeed, a prevailing bourgeois assumption that military activity was not the destiny of mankind ensured that trade flourished between states at war. Examples usually cited of the normality of social intercourse include Laurence Sterne's visit to Paris during the Seven Years War (1756–63) and the continuance of the Dover to Calais packet service for a year after France in 1778 had joined the United States in the American War of Independence (1774–83). Closer analysis, however, reveals that war between 1648 and 1789 was limited, in the words of John Childs, 'only when it was compared with the holocaust that had gone before and the new totality of the Napoleonic wars'.<sup>16</sup> As surely as the Thirty Years War (1618–48) had devastated Germany, reducing its urban population by 33 per cent and its rural population

by 45 per cent, so incipient warfare during the next 120 years laid waste much of central Europe and the Low Countries at regular intervals. Conventions applied by armies in relation to each other did not extend to civilian populations, as the French army's ravages in the Palatinate in 1688 and 1689 or both the Russian and Swedish armies' depredations in the Great Northern War (1700–21) well illustrate. In any case, for all their balletic appearance, battles were murderous affairs, the 'butcher's bill' at Malplaquet in 1709 of an estimated 36,000 casualties not being surpassed until the battle of Borodino in 1812. Borodino itself was then exceeded by the 127,000 casualties at the four day 'Battle of the Nations' at Leipzig in 1813. The cumulative effect of such conflict upon areas that were fought over was considerable. Equally, participation in five major wars between 1689 and 1783 was a major stimulus for English industry and trade at a crucial early stage in the world's first industrial revolution.

None the less, warfare was to become increasingly more total in its impact during the course of the nineteenth century, which can be taken as representing an extended transitional period. During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1792–1815), the motive forces of nationalism and democracy combined to create a mass French citizen army through the introduction of universal male conscription. The success of this 'nation in arms' or 'armed horde' resulted in the example being emulated elsewhere, notably in Prussia. Although the concept of the nation in arms came under sustained attack after 1815 from monarchs and restored monarchs, who distrusted its social and political implications, the actual system of short-service conscription survived in Prussia. The military victories then won by Prussia in the German wars of unification of 1864, 1866 and 1870 and the ability of short-service conscription to produce large numbers of trained reserves upon mobilization encouraged European states – with the exception of Britain – to reintroduce Prussian-style conscription. Although the forms of universal service adopted were necessarily selective in practice, states were rapidly accepting the national birthrate as an index of military power. Moreover, the transformation wrought by the technological innovations of the industrial age, particularly the development of the railway, ensured that ever larger armies could be mobilized theoretically more quickly than hitherto and sustained in the field for far longer.

At the same time, industrialization dramatically increased the destructive capacity of armies by providing them with weapons of

enhanced range, accuracy and rate of fire. By 1870, a firefight between opposing infantry, which might have been conducted at 60 yards range seventy years before, had now stretched to a possible 1,600 yards and a breechloading rifle such as the Prussian Dreyse now fired seven rounds for every one from a smoothbore musket of the Napoleonic era. By the 1880s and 1890s magazine rifles, quick-firing artillery and machine guns had all entered service with major European armies. Just before the First World War, most armies were also experimenting with aircraft, even if it appeared to require a considerable feat of imagination to conceive that airmen could offer any valuable intelligence while flying over the ground at speeds approaching 30 mph. At sea, too, wood, sail and round shot had given way to iron and steel, steam and screw propeller, and shell, while mines, submarines and torpedoes all threatened the traditional supremacy of the capital ship.

Through the innate conservatism of European military and naval officer corps, the significance of much of the change that had taken place during the nineteenth century was misinterpreted. Contrary to popular belief, soldiers did recognize the problems inherent in crossing the so-called 'empty battlefield' in the face of modern firepower, but they believed mistakenly that they could solve the difficulty simply by closing with an enemy more rapidly. Moreover, the use of bayonet, lance and sabre implicit in this 'offensive spirit' ideally complemented traditional military ideals of honour and glory, which some feared devalued by the unwelcome intrusion of technology and professionalism into an overwhelmingly aristocratic occupation. While soldiers conspired to discount the more uncomfortable evidence of such conflicts as the American Civil War (1861–65), Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), civilians were equally seduced by the general trend in the later nineteenth century towards popular nationalism, imperialism, militarism and crude social Darwinism into a more ready acceptance of war and conflict as an appropriate test of nationhood and national virility. There were pacifists but, in 1914, it was nationalism and not inter-nationalism that triumphed across Europe. Similarly, a succession of international conferences, such as those at St Petersburg in 1868 or at the Hague in 1899 and 1907, failed to find a universal readiness among nation states to compromise their future freedom of manoeuvre by accepting meaningful limitations on the actual conduct of war.

Wars between 1789 and 1914, while such developments were occurring, were hardly devoid of impact upon those societies that

waged them. In the case of Britain, for example, the manpower problems experienced during the Crimean War (1854–56) were very similar to those encountered in the First World War, and losses sustained in the twenty years of almost continuous warfare between 1793 and 1815 were almost certainly proportionately higher in terms of men under arms than in the First World War.<sup>17</sup> Military participation in Britain was also probably greater in proportion to the male population between 1793 and 1815, and it is at least arguable that the resulting social, economic and political upheaval in the immediate postwar period was of more significance for the future pattern of British society and democracy than developments in the aftermath of either of the world wars. Of course, the wars of German and Italian unification were of very limited duration, but they still had profound political consequences for Europe.

There was once a tendency to view the American Civil War largely in terms of its military developments and to focus upon such innovations as armoured trains, the first clash of armoured warships, the first loss of ships to mines and submarine torpedoes, the first extensive use of the telegraph, and so on. In fact, the largely amateur armies fought the war on the battlefield as if it were the last Napoleonic encounter rather than the 'first modern war' but it is now recognized widely that the war was truly modern in terms of its impact upon society. Both the northern states of the Union and the southern states of the Confederacy deployed large numbers of men in the field but, for the predominantly agricultural Confederacy, war also demanded efforts to create an industrial economy to challenge the far greater manufacturing potential of the North. It had become essential to outproduce as well as to outfight an opponent. Despite its efforts at industrialization, the mobilization of 75 per cent of its white male population, and unprecedented participation by white women and blacks in industry and agriculture, the Confederacy was doomed to defeat by the superiority of the North's numbers and resources. The inescapable logic of the attempt to create a war economy was the recognition that a society that sustained a war became as much a legitimate target for military action as an army that waged war on its behalf. Thus, in the autumn of 1864, Sheridan's Union forces swept down the southern 'bread basket' of the Shenandoah valley while Sherman's armies wrought equal destruction in cutting a swathe from Atlanta to the sea in November and December 1864 and through the Carolinas in the following

months in a determination to expose the Confederacy to the 'hard hand of war'.<sup>18</sup>

## **The world wars**

Thus, there are sufficient examples of the way in which the impact of war upon society was increasing through the nineteenth century to suggest that the world wars should be regarded as a natural progression from earlier conflicts rather than as unique. But, of course, this is not to suggest that the impact of world war was not greater than that of earlier wars through the sheer scale of conflict enhancing the effect. Quite obviously, both world wars were global in scope, although both began as European conflicts. In the First World War, the Central Powers comprised Imperial Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turkey (from October 1914) and Bulgaria (from October 1915), but the Allies eventually embraced twenty-two states including the major European powers of Britain, France, Imperial Russia and Italy (from May 1915) and their colonies and dependencies, and also Japan, the United States (from March 1917), Liberia (from August 1917) and Brazil (from October 1917). Similarly, the Second World War widened with the aggression of Germany, Italy (from June 1940 to September 1943) and Japan (from December 1941) bringing in the Soviet Union (from June 1941) and the United States (from December 1941), although the Soviet Union did not join in the war against Japan until August 1945. Successive German and Soviet occupation contributed to a bewildering proliferation of contradictory declarations of war by many eastern European states during the war, while, between February and March 1945, no less than ten states ranging from Peru to Saudi Arabia declared war on both Germany and Japan and a further two on Japan alone.

Total war therefore implies a far wider global conflict than previous wars and, while limited war suggests a degree of constraint, self-imposed or otherwise, total war implies a lack of constraint. In practice, total war was still a relative concept in both world wars since, as an absolute, it was unrealizable through a lack of instantaneously destructive weapons. Nevertheless, belligerents could not be accused of failing to attempt the absolute even if they were unable to mobilize all their resources at the same time and at the same point. In effect, they employed all the weapons they felt appropriate rather than all



the weapons available in every case. The array and potential of weapons increased dramatically over previous wars. For example, in eight days before the opening of the British offensive on the Somme on the Western Front on 1 July 1916, British artillery fired 1.7 million shells at German positions. In fourteen days preceding the opening of the Passchendaele offensive on 31 July 1917, the British fired 4.2 million shells. In addition to the weight of shell, horrendous new weapons were introduced in search of an elusive breakthrough. Gas was first used on the Western Front at Langemarck near Ypres on 22 April 1915, although it had previously been used by the Germans at Bolimov on the Eastern Front, and, in July 1915, flamethrowers were used effectively for the first time by the Germans at Hooze near Ypres. In all, over 150,000 tons of varying gases were produced during the First World War and caused an estimated 1.2 million casualties, of which more than 91,000 proved fatal. Tanks were also introduced for the first time by the British on the Somme on 15 September 1916.

Although gas was not used in the Second World War other than in the context of Nazi genocide, its military use was pressed by a powerful military-industrial lobby in Germany. There were also considerable technological advances that further enhanced the destructive power of the belligerents. Paradoxically, the speed of the early German *Blitzkriegs* actually made these operations less costly in terms of casualties than trench warfare during the First World War but, equally, there was the development in the capacity to bring aerial destruction to civilian populations. Ultimately, Germany utilized its V1 and V2 rockets and the Allies, of course, dropped the first atomic weapons on Japan.

The conscious abandonment of most if not all restraints was paralleled by the wider war aims adopted by belligerents in total war. Limited dynastic aims had given way to sweeping territorial aggrandisement and the total destruction of states and of peoples. It could be argued in this respect that the necessary manipulation of the population of democratic states through propaganda and other means, in so far as this proved possible, in order to sustain the war effort introduced as great a push towards total war aims as the attempt by authoritarian or totalitarian states to impose their ideologies on others. Thus, on the one hand, the Germans pursued total domination in the Second World War, while Britain and the United States adopted a declaration of the need for the unconditional surrender of Germany at the Casablanca conference in January 1943. At Cairo in November

and December 1943 Britain, the United States and nationalist China also agreed to strip Japan of all those overseas possessions taken by her forces since 1894.

Quite clearly, the participation of many states and their willingness to use extreme means to achieve wide aims resulted in destruction of life and property on an unprecedented scale compared with previous wars. In all, the First World War is thought to have resulted in 10 million dead and 20 million maimed or seriously wounded, leaving 5 million women widows and 9 million children orphans. The Second World War may have cost 30 million dead in Europe, although other estimates put Soviet losses alone at well over 20 million dead. Although figures for the First World War usually exclude an estimated 1.5 million Armenians exterminated by the Turks in 1915, those for the Second World War do include an estimated 5.9 million Jewish victims of Nazi genocide. Moreover, as many as 26 million people may have become displaced from their country of origin during the Second World War through forced transportation or other reasons: in Britain alone, which did not suffer such displacement, there were still 60 million changes of address during the Second World War. Compared with previous wars, also, civilians had become subject to sustained and deliberate attack to an unprecedented degree. During the First World War, some 1413 British civilians were killed by aerial attack, but, between 1939 and 1945, German bombers and rockets accounted for 51,509 civilian deaths in Britain. Hamburg suffered approximately 50,000 dead in a week in July and August 1943, and calculations of the loss of life at Dresden on a single night in February 1945 range from 35,000 to 135,000. In all, total German civilian losses to aerial bombardment may have been 593,000 during the Second World War. USAAF 'fire raids' on Japan caused an estimated 100,000 deaths in Tokyo on one night in March 1945, or approximately the same number of immediate deaths at both Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined in August 1945.

The loss of life in individual states could be grave, but total war was not necessarily a cause of demographic loss overall. In France, the loss of life during the First World War did cast a long shadow, at least in political terms, and draconian laws were introduced against birth control and abortion in the interwar period. Yet, it would appear that more men and women married than might otherwise have been the case. In Britain, as Jay Winter has pointed out, the war was dysgenic in that some sectors of society volunteered for war service in larger