

“Total War”

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Total war is one in which the whole population and all the resources of the combatants are committed to complete victory and thus become legitimate military targets. With few, mostly 20th-century, exceptions, all the other wars in history have been limited, in that they have engaged less than the entire energy of the societies involved and have stopped short of unconditional surrender by one side. Total war can be unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral and is characterized by an absence of rules or restraint in the conception and execution of military action in pursuit of unlimited political objectives. It precludes capitulation, so there is no incentive to cease fighting even when defeat is objectively inevitable. Practically by definition, total war is or becomes ideological in nature at an early stage, not least because the ruled need to be reassured that the sacrifices they are called upon to make are for a worthwhile cause and not, as is invariably the case, to increase the power of the rulers.

It is thus a term to be used sparingly. The annihilation of Carthage at the end of the Punic wars was total in its effect, but the proportion of the overall resources of the Carthaginian empire committed to prevent this outcome was minor. The principle of total war was contained in the proclamation of the levée en masse on the eve of the French Revolutionary wars, but the wars were still waged with very much less than the full resources of the state. The term ‘unconditional surrender’ was coined by Grant, and Lincoln made it his policy but, once again, only a limited proportion of the entire resources, even of the Confederacy, were mobilized during the American civil war. A notable theorist of the ‘nation in arms’—a theory which envisaged wholesale male mobilization—was the French socialist Jean Jaurès. This has encouraged some theorists to draw a distinction between the nation in arms and total war, but the differences are semantic only as to theoretical ends; in practice the means inexorably predominate.

Clausewitz lived only at the beginning of an age which saw the power of the state increase immeasurably through war. He died in 1831, before railways made mass mobilization practicable and before even the advent of breech-loading artillery and rifles. It is unhistorical, therefore, to cull *On War* for phrases that prefigure total war, since the philosophical parameters were those of a general European society that was still primarily pre-industrial both in fact (France only became more than 50 per cent urban in 1948) and, even more to the point, in ethos. He wrote about absolute war, by which he meant not much more than that moderation in the prosecution of war was folly. What he predicated was the use of means unconstrained by rules to achieve defined and achievable political ends. Implicit in his philosophy was that there were natural, not man-made limits on those means, and he explicitly declared that war was the servant and not the dictator of policy. The war he wrote about represents the mid-point between the peasant who, when warned that the battle of Marston Moor was about to be fought over his plot was surprised to learn that king and parliament had fallen out, and the peasant in Flanders after WW I, who could not even find the landmarks that would enable him to establish where his plot had been.

Thus the wars of Bismarck and Moltke 'the Elder' were indeed Clausewitzian. Modern game theory, with its penchant for reinventing the wheel, would term them 'mini-max', in that the party enjoying the maximum advantage after the trial of arms was satisfied with gains much less than could have been imposed on the loser. The annexation of Alsace and Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian war was a breach of the mini-max principle and was opposed by Bismarck until the continued futile resistance directed by the demagogue Gambetta made his objections untenable. This was indeed a breach of the German chancellor's fabled *realpolitik* and created the festering sore of French revanchisme that certainly contributed to further wars. The malignant genie of nationalism let out of the bottle by the Napoleonic wars rendered such transfers of territory anachronistic and Bismarck probably knew that a less browbeating settlement would have better served the long-term interest of his newly recreated German Reich.

By contrast the 20th-century world war, its two greatest outbursts divided by a twenty-year armistice, has been likened to a man whose tie gets caught in a mangle, from the imperatives of the rigid mobilization schedules that dictated events in August 1914 to the firestorms that consumed whole cities in 1944-5, of which the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were merely a more efficient means to the same end. In between the two acts of this fatal drama, none other than Ludendorff coined the phrase 'total war' in his 1935 book *Der totale Krieg*, drawing on his experience as the virtual dictator of the German war effort in 1917-18. By comparison with the harm he had already done by lending his prestige to the upstart Hitler, the book is little more than a curiosity and there is no evidence that it had any influence. It is far more interesting for the glimpse it gives us into the technocratic German officer mentality in which the military means were fatally detached from the political ends they served, without which the evil that Hitler stood for might never have extended beyond the truncated borders of Germany. Ludendorff's book was an elaborate *apologia per vita sua* and perforce specifically rejected Clausewitz. He was entirely correct in pointing out that Germany was never mobilized internally on a scale commensurate with her geopolitical ambitions, but it does not seem to have crossed his mind that the fault lay in the latter.

Although the concept of total war is indissolubly associated with German militarism, the most ringing declarations were made by Clemenceau in 1917 and Churchill in 1940. The statement of war aims made by the latter after the fall of France was unequivocal: 'Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.' Wonderful rallying cry though it was, it was also patently based on a false postulate. Britain could have withdrawn from the war at that point relatively painlessly; Hitler was counting on it and insofar as he thought anything through, he wanted Britain to sustain her empire to counterbalance the USA. But just as Ludendorff had been unable to comprehend that Clemenceau would not negotiate while an inch of French territory was occupied by Germany, so Hitler failed to understand that Churchill would not compromise with the evil he represented. The result was that France in WW I and Britain in WW II mobilized far more completely than Germany.

Darwin might not have proposed a theory *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 had he known that less thoughtful men would apply his themes of the struggle for existence to whole societies. Social Darwinism allied to nationalism has been the true ideology of total war, and although it is most clearly identified with the Axis in WW II, its influence was very strong in the USA. Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were strident social Darwinists, with all the racism and cultural imperialism it implied. Seeking moral

equivalence is a slippery and usually pointless exercise, but it is relevant to mention that the forcible sterilization of the mentally incompetent for which Nazi judges were condemned at Nuremberg was practised in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s, with the blessing of the Supreme Court. Practically the only good thing that can be said about the horrors perpetrated by Hitler is that they discredited, one hopes for all time, the idea that there is some genetically 'natural' ruling élite.

Nuclear war introduced an element of caution as the rulers of the major powers grappled with the sobering thought that they would very likely be early casualties in an all-out war. An early and contemptible response was to dig themselves elaborate secret shelters where they might survive while the common herd got irradiated, the existence of which has still to be fully revealed. Suffice to say that more by good luck than judgement all the theories of limited nuclear war were never put to the test. But even all-out nuclear war would not have meant the end of the world, or even of humanity, any more than the various other doomsday scenarios of anthropogenic Armageddon with which the political élites seek to justify the immense powers that total war permitted them to accumulate. What it did do was threaten them directly and reduce their options. Rulers were never happy with the iron logic of deterrence based on mutually assured destruction (MAD) and in some ways the much ballyhooed Strategic Arms Limitation/Reduction Talks can be seen as a way to make limited war between the powers possible again.

At the more practical level, assymetrical total war in Vietnam and a number of other post-imperial conflicts revealed a principle as old as time, namely that military might alone cannot substitute for an absence of doctrine and of properly thought-out policy. If the total wars of the 20th century taught nothing else, they underlined the wisdom of Clausewitz in pointing out that once war is embarked upon, the urge to win means there is no natural resting point in what we now call 'escalation'. It therefore behoves those who might start them to consider, very carefully, whether the ends are sufficiently important to justify flirting with means that may consume them.

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