

The Idea of Total War: From Clausewitz to Ludendorff

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On 30 March 1941, the senior military leadership of the German Reich congregated in the Chancellery in Berlin to listen to an address from their *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. The event was intended ideologically to prime the 200 generals in the audience for the impending attack on the Soviet Union. General Franz Halder, the senior planner for the operation that had been codenamed 'Barbarossa', carefully noted Hitler's central message in his diary:

We must forget the concept of comradeship between soldiers. A communist is no comrade before or after the battle. This is a war of annihilation. If we do not grasp this, we shall still beat the enemy, but thirty years later we shall again have to fight the Communist foe. We do not wage war to preserve the enemy.¹

Halder summarized, a type of conflict that, with chilling deliberation, would develop into one of the most pitiless and deadly fought between two societies in history. Few would deny that the war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany deserves the epithet 'total' as violence enveloped and permeated both societies down to the last citizen.

Recent historiography has favoured the claim that 'total war' is a phenomenon that had been long in the making and can comfortably be traced back to the period of the French Revolution, or should even be seen as a type of war that lurks so close to the surface of all war and conflict throughout history that its buoyancy pushes it out in the open from time to time. If it has been more prevalent since the French Revolution the reason is that at that moment the powers of the modern nation-state had finally achieved such a level of perfection that whole societies could henceforth be efficiently mobilized for war. The unleashing of massive human and technological means of destruction is thus seen as an irresistible and unsurprising phenomenon. War, being an inherently brutal and uncompromising activity, naturally tends towards escalation. The French Revolution, in effect, turned politics into the handmaiden of war. Total war can thus be viewed not so much as a war of choice and design but as a war of natural necessity that will thrive once a certain stage of socio-political development has been reached.

In this line of argument, the fact that the term 'total war' itself was only invented shortly before

¹ Quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), p. 599.

the start of the Second World War only underlines that human analysts often take a long time to name things by their proper name. Any attempt therefore to associate the term and the ideas that lay behind its invention with particular military and political thinkers might be interesting but is ultimately not very helpful in explaining the phenomenon's existence. Indeed, the man traditionally most closely associated with conceptualizing and popularizing the idea of total war has recently been all but absolved from the guilt of contributing anything of importance to the course of the Second World War. The ideas of General Erich Ludendorff on the matter have been characterized as 'neither original nor interesting'. His 1935 book, 'Der totale Krieg', 'rehearsed platitudes' and, if it had any effect, 'its immediate impact lay in its title'.² This judgement featured in a recent authoritative five volume series, sponsored by the German Historical Institute in Washington DC, that considered the phenomenon of total war in expansive historical detail.³ Ludendorff was fortunate to get a chapter. Clausewitz did not — even though his concept of 'absolute war' has long been closely associated with total war even to the extent that the two terms are often conflated.⁴ Despite the existence of close connections, this is, as we shall see, not quite correct. The differences suggest that Ludendorff and Clausewitz chose their terms with care and, although they were children of their time in the sense that they closely interacted with the intellectual and practical military and political environments of their day, they tried to capture something distinct and uniquely appropriate to addressing effectively the military challenges of their time. Historians who see ideas as, in themselves powerless, expressions of more powerful underlying forces — or, to quote Fernand Braudel, as 'surface disturbances, crests of foam that the

² Roger Chickering, 'Sore Loser: Ludendorff's Total War', in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds, *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 176-7.

³ The other volumes are: Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds, *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds, *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds, *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Roger Chickering, Stig Förster and Bernd Greiner, eds, *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). To underline the series' editors contention that total war must be traced back even further, to the period of the French Revolution, they recently added a precursor volume: Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds, *War in an Age of Revolution, 1775-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴ Although this is incorrect, as we shall see, such eminent Clausewitz scholars as Michael Howard and Peter Paret conflate the terms at times: e.g., Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 47 and Peter Paret, 'Clausewitz', in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 199. For a discussion and how issues such as these impacted on the 1976 Howard and Paret translation of *On War*, see Jan Willem Honig, 'Clausewitz's *On War*: Problems of Text and Translation', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 57-73 and esp. pp. 64ff.

tides of history carry on their strong backs'⁵ — can underplay the important direction ideas can give to the actual conduct of war.

As I will argue, both Clausewitz and Ludendorff constructed important conceptualizations which found receptive audiences. Few others came close to formulating with equal clarity and coherence theories of how war worked and offering prescriptions for how it should be fought. They were major inspirations behind the two strategic techniques that vied for practical pre-eminence among the militaries in the developed world in the first half of the 20th century. Both men sought to address the fundamental issue of the relationship between their favoured strategic techniques and that which ultimately gave meaning and purpose to war: politics. Ludendorff (although this is perhaps not generally recognized) succeeded in providing the more intellectually coherent answer. His solution, however, proved socially unacceptable in the theatres of war in which they were tested, primarily because of where chose to draw the lines circumscribing the enemy. That is not to say that Clausewitz proposed a 'better' recipe for fighting and winning wars. As the experience of many contemporary wars suggests, he identified as enemy an actor who may no longer matter all that much and thus can be accused of proposing an inappropriate way of fighting wars.

1. Absolute War and Decisive Battle

Clausewitz's central contribution to military thought and practice was his rationalization of the usefulness of decisive battle and its centrality to the conduct of war. His reasoning was simple and straightforward. If the object of war was to impose one's will on an unwilling opponent by force of arms, success would be secured by putting the opponent in a position in which he was unable to defend himself and continue to resist. Translated into practical terms, Clausewitz saw governments as the controlling agents of the political will of the states that populated Europe.⁶ Their first, and mostly only, line of defence, was a uniformed, regular army. Their destruction would make governments defenceless and force them to accede to the demands imposed on them. The most efficient way of destroying the enemy's armed forces would be through fighting a single, decisive battle. The acme of strategic skill, exhibited so abundantly by Napoleon, was to engineer the conditions that permitted the great battle be fought and won.

⁵ Quoted in H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'Fernand Braudel, the *Annales*, and the Mediterranean', *Journal of Modern History*, 44, 4 (Dec. 1972), p. 475 (from the Préface of the 1st ed. of *La Méditerranée*). Braudel, of course, refers not to ideas but to (political) events.

⁶ On Clausewitz's views on the state and its relationship with war, see Andreas Herberg-Rothe, Jan Willem Honig and Daniel Moran, eds, *Clausewitz, the State and War* (Stuttgart & New York: Franz Steiner, 2011).

Here was a coherent theory that offered a seemingly practical basis for the development of doctrine that could be taught at the staff colleges that were springing up across Europe in the 19th century. Another critical by-product was that theory and doctrine provided a justification for the bureaucratic and professional independence of the military. War was a specific activity, different from any other in society, that could therefore best be pursued by a specially trained group of people. The effect of the process of professionalization that turned the militaries into the exclusive 'managers of violence' all over 19th century Europe also had the effect of taking the politics out of war. Even though war was overwhelmingly seen as an instrument of state politics, the relationship between political objectives and the strategic objective of destroying the enemy's means of resistance was at best an indirect one, with the attainment of each serviced by a different bureaucracy.

The theory of decisive battle rested on a major normative assumption: that with the destruction of the regular army the enemy state would surrender to the demands of the party that had taken possession of the field of battle. This assumption may have been overwhelmingly accepted as valid by political Europe from Clausewitz's day onward and the practice of the Napoleonic and later 19th century wars may have confirmed its validity, but that does not give it universal validity. Clausewitz sensed there was an issue. The clash of arms could spread beyond regular armies and come to involve, for example, the whole people of a state. However (and again a degree of political-normative bias intruded on his argument), Clausewitz believed that the people would not likely be an instrument that could impose its will on the enemy by force. For one thing, popular forces tended to lack proper organization and training. They could thus often easily be defeated or terrorized into submission. Even if a determined people might be able to prevent the enemy from prevailing, as had happened in Spain during Clausewitz's lifetime, a popular uprising would not be able to wrest the initiative from an invader and impose a final victory: for that, Clausewitz remained convinced, a disciplined, regular army was required.⁷

Late in life, Clausewitz developed his most sophisticated argument that sought to safeguard the basic tenets of his theory against accusations that it might not be universally valid. He had failed to rid himself entirely of a nagging doubt that his theory implied that war might lose its instrumentality and descend into a senseless orgy of violence. Moreover, and here also Clausewitz betrays his own biases, he could not see war completely abandoning all reason. Hence, in the chapter that continues to be regarded as the summation of his thought, he starts off with making the case why war should escalate to the utmost extreme, before making the counter case that in

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Bonn: Dümmler, 1980), Book VI, Chapter 26: 'Volksbewaffnung' (Arming of the People).

practice it would not. In the opening chapter of *On War*, a careful distinction is made between war in theory and war in reality. War in theory is now carefully designated with the novel term ‘absolute war’, underlining that it is a phenomenon which is absolved, or set free from the uncertainties and the impurities that bedevil the real world. Absolute war will escalate without pause for the simple reason that in order to prevail each combatant must come to war with the firm intent of applying maximum destructive force to their opponent. Failure to do so by one party would offer the adversary an irresistible opportunity to overwhelm him by employing more force. However, ‘ein unnützer Kraftaufwand’, or ‘an unprofitable expenditure of effort’, could easily result from any strict application of the escalatory logic in practice.⁸ Not only would the ‘human spirit’ refuse to be subordinated to this ‘logical tyranny’,⁹ but more particularly the logic offended against ‘the basic principles of the art of government’. The latter demanded that war serve a political purpose. Fortunately, the inefficiencies escalation encountered in reality created opportunities — with time being the critical one — for statesmen to interfere in war and seek to apply their instrumental reason.

I have argued elsewhere that Clausewitz strenuously, even desperately, tried to hold on to the idea that war was nonetheless best fought by decisive battles and never satisfactorily explained how variability in political objectives might affect this strategic aim.¹⁰ For such a strategy to work, as said, both sides at war had to accept that battle between regular armies was the effective strategic agent that resulted in political gain or loss. If changing political rationalizations of war would cause violence to spread beyond the battlefield and the clash of regular armies then the technique would lose its effectiveness. That was a problem that would be felt all the more acutely if military professionalization separated their main activity from politics. The military would end up fighting the wrong enemy and face political irrelevance.

⁸ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Book I, Chapter 1, §6, p. 196.

⁹ Terence Holmes has drawn my attention to the likelihood that a misprint occurs in the printed editions of *Vom Kriege*. From the first edition onward, the phrase reads ‘daß der menschlichen Geist sich dieser logischen Träumerei schwerlich unterordnen würde.’ However, Holmes found that in a draft of the same chapter, the modern editor reads ‘Tiranney’ for ‘Träumerei’: Carl von Clausewitz, *Schriften, Aufsätze, Studien, Briefe*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), Vol. 2, Pt I, p. 633. In Gothic handwriting the two words are easily confused. Tyranny makes more sense, as the theory is not really dreamt up. Also, one ‘subjects’ (*unterordnen*) oneself to tyranny not dreams.

¹⁰ Honig, ‘Clausewitz’s *On War*’ and id., ‘Clausewitz and the Politics of Early Modern Warfare’ in Herberg-Rothe et al, *Clausewitz, the State and War*.

2. Total War and Genocide

General Erich Ludendorff became acutely aware of these weaknesses in military theory and practice as they conspired against him retaining his effective professional grasp over war. As the man who effectively presided over Germany's imperial military descent into destruction and defeat in the First World War, he had good reason to reflect on his experiences in enforced retirement. His theory of total war, which he presented to the world two years before his death in 1937, sought not simply to restore military professional control over war, but also to re-establish the lost link between political effect and war.

Ludendorff's concept of total war shows how well he had internalized the shift in the political rationalization of war and the resulting need for its means and methods to change. During the 19th century, the growing pressures exercised by demands of national civic emancipation forced a process of domestically-driven regime change across Europe. Regimes that before the French Revolution had all been comfortably based on dynastic rule were now changing, albeit at greatly varying speeds, into regimes that took on the characteristics of national democracy. That meant that the cause of what could now justifiably be called *international* war changed from the defence of dynastic right to the defence of much vaguer and pliant concepts of the interests and power of the national community. In a stark contrast to the days of the *ancien régime*, when all players in the dynastic system, however small, had been accorded a right to exist, there now also emerged, especially in right-wing populist circles, an idea that the right for nations to exist was a naturally contested one. The modern international system was, by nature and thus by rights, an anarchic one in which nation-states vied with each other for national survival.¹¹

The increasing stake of every national in their nation's survival was at first channeled by regimes and their militaries into mobilizing increasing numbers of men who were trained to fight decisive battles against the armies of enemy nations. The experience of actual war, however, began to reveal some unsettling developments. Mobilizing large armies required large domestic support structures. While nation-states provided an effective vehicle for organizing mass mobilization, the involvement of so many elements in society in support of the war effort created vulnerabilities. Whereas soldiers were selected and trained to endure the rigours of combat, the civilians on the 'home front' came unprepared. If they could be attacked in some way, a nation might collapse without suffering defeat in front line battle. That possibility might be enhanced if society found itself divided and governed by a weak state. On the other hand, since wars involved

¹¹ For more detail on the emergence of these 'realists' ideas, see Jan Willem Honig, 'Totalitarianism and Realism: Hans Morgenthau's German Years', *Security Studies*, 5, 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 283-313.

such a high stakes, it might be possible to continue the war with irregular forces even if the regular army was defeated in battle.

The German High Command toyed with the idea of mobilizing the German people after the imperial army collapsed on the Western front in the Autumn of 1918.¹² However, the failure of that attempt seemed to confirm the validity of the theory that Germany had collapsed due to domestic weakness and division. The experience of the Weimar Republic further reinforced the view of many that a nation wracked by internal division could not function properly domestically, let alone survive in an unfriendly international environment. It was not long before the elements which Ludendorff later combined in his theory began to find advocates among prominent right-wing intellectuals. It was also not surprising that the adjective ‘total’ featured prominently in the recipes that were advocated to solve Germany’s many social and political ills. The word was a fashionable one in interwar Germany — and not only on the right. Many intellectuals were searching for radical, yet socially inclusive answers to social challenges. In 1927, for example, the architect Walter Gropius had proposed a new design for a ‘total theatre’ which involved the whole audience directly into the action of the play. The first major popular connection between matters military and total was made in 1930 when the novelist Ernst Jünger wrote a celebrated essay pushing the case for ‘total mobilization’. If the First World War held one lesson for the future, he argued, it was that ‘it no longer sufficed to arm the hand wielding the sword — [war] requires an arming to the core, to the innermost nerve.’¹³ In 1933, soon after the Nazi rise to power, the legal scholar Ernst Forsthoff published a pamphlet entitled ‘The Total State’. Forsthoff, who later became a respected constitutional lawyer in the Federal Republic, claimed that only a state which

¹² Michael Geyer, ‘Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée en masse* in October 1918’, *Journal of Modern History*, 73 (September 2001), pp. 459-527.

¹³ Ernst Jünger, ‘Die totale Mobilmachung’, in id., ed., *Krieg und Krieger* (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1930), pp. 9-30. The quote is from p. 14: ‘... genügt es nicht mehr, den Schwertarm zu rüsten, -- es ist eine Rüstung bis ins innerste Mark, bis in den feinsten Lebensnerv erforderlich.’ Jünger and the other Ludendorff precursors who follow are discussed in an article (to which I have long been indebted) by Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ‘Absoluter” und “Totaler” Krieg: Von Clausewitz zu Ludendorff,’ in Günther Dill, ed., *Clausewitz in Perspektive, Materialien zu Carl von Clausewitz: Vom Kriege* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1980), pp. 488-491, which originally appeared in *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, Vol. 10 [1969], pp. 220-248. On Jünger and his circle of ‘conservative revolutionary’ literati, also known as representatives of ‘Soldatischer Nationalismus’, see further the important chapter by Wolfram Wette, ‘Ideologien, Propaganda und Innenpolitik als Voraussetzungen der Kriegspolitik des Dritten Reiches’, in Wilhelm Deist et al., *Ursachen und Voraussetzungen des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1989), esp. pp. 51-58; Stefan Breuer, *Anatomie der Konservativen Revolution* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993) and Armin Mohler, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland, 1918-1932: Ein Handbuch*, 4th ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).

expanded its control to every element of society could assure the survival of the nation.¹⁴

It not surprising that the adjective found its way to being connected directly to ‘war’.¹⁵ In doing so, Ludendorff went one important step further than his precursors. The total state and total mobilization provided essential preconditions for fighting successful war. However, they did not specify any strategic aim. They did not specify how, with what strategic technique, the war to ensure the political aim of national survival was to be prosecuted and won.¹⁶ Ludendorff specified the missing strategic aim: ‘Total war is not only aimed against the armed forces, but also directly against the people.’¹⁷ Although the idea was ultimately legitimized by a defensive political objective — survival of the nation — this strategic aim had to be pursued by offensive means. The best security for the nation followed from the total annihilation of other nations. Total war thus involved the total mobilization by the total state for the pursuit of total — political *and* strategic — aims. However horrific we might now think Ludendorff’s product was, this was a coherent and seemingly practical concept of war that was adjusted directly to political demands.

Ludendorff borrowed profusely from other authors without acknowledgment. Even his notorious inversion of Clausewitz’s dictum that politics was really the continuation of war by other means came from someone else.¹⁸ Coupled with his claim that Clausewitz should be thrown out of the window, Ludendorff’s claim that politics was subservient to war could easily lead to the conclusion that the bitter old general was an advocate non-instrumental warfare and substituted war’s political rationale with self-serving militarist values that would lead to pointless and all-consuming violence. That view would not be quite correct. Ludendorff was at pains to explain that modern political conditions were such that the Clausewitzian objective of the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces no longer sufficed. But Ludendorff continued to see war in instrumental

¹⁴ Ernst Forsthoff, *Der totale Staat* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1933). Forsthoff based his 1930s theories on those of his highly influential and (later) extremely controversial teacher, Carl Schmitt. Two years after Ludendorff, Schmitt combined, into one the concepts of total state and total war with his own of total enemy: ‘Totaler Feind, totaler Krieg, totaler Staat’, *Völkerbund und Völkerrecht*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (June 1937), pp. 139-145.

¹⁵ The connection was first made in France during the First World War but it never achieved wide popularity there or for that matter in the rest of Europe until Ludendorff’s book took Europe by storm after 1935. For the first French uses, see Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 119.

¹⁶ Another important element Ludendorff added was the use of state propaganda to ensure the ‘seelische Geschlossenheit’ of the nation. On its novelty and importance, see the still seminal essay, written close to events, by the well-informed German expatriate Hans Speier, ‘Ludendorff: The German Concept of Total War’, in Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1943), pp. 315-318.

¹⁷ Erich Ludendorff, *Der totale Krieg* (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1935), p. 6. ‘So richtet sich also der totale Krieg nicht nur gegen die Wehrmacht, sondern auch unmittelbar gegen die Völker.’

¹⁸ The noted sociologist Hans Freyer probably wrote it first in *Der Staat* (Leipzig: Ernst Wiegandt, 1926), p. 142. According to Heuser (*Reading Clausewitz*, p. 67) the Soviet general Shaposhnikov had also used the same line before Ludendorff.

terms. In fact, he also continued to adhere to the principle that politics gave war meaning. It was the policies of the state which should be made subservient to the effort of ensuring the ultimately political, public good of national survival. In a fundamental sense, he was thus closer to Clausewitz than he cared to admit. Where he differed from Clausewitz was in the definition of 'the enemy' and the appropriate strategic technique necessary to deal with him. He believed it necessary that real war must be helped to escalate as much as possible to attack and render defenceless not states, but nations. Disarming nations required designating their every citizen as an enemy and therefore a legitimate target. It is difficult to believe that Clausewitz ever imagined that the genocidal strategy advocated by Ludendorff could have been justified by the reason that he believed endowed the human spirit and that it could come to be part of the 'basic principles of the art of government'.¹⁹

Ludendorff's ideas were not fundamentally different from those of Jünger, Forsthoff and many others on the conservative revolutionary right. The general devised a popular, comprehensive epithet for a concept of war that was, in a fragmented form, already influential in Germany.²⁰ General Wilhelm Groener, Ludendorff's successor as First Quartermaster-General and a former Reichswehr minister, for example, thought that there was nothing fundamentally new in Ludendorff's book.²¹ In particular, the ideas exemplified those also held by both the National-Socialist political hierarchy and the top Wehrmacht military leadership. Colonel-General Ludwig Beck, the Chief of the General Staff of the German Army from 1933 to 1938 and as such a key figure in Germany's rearmament and preparation for war, unreservedly accepted the validity of the idea of total war. Though he later turned against the idea, during his tenure in office he consistently described the nature of future war in Ludendorffian terms in speeches and memoranda.²²

¹⁹ Cf. Andreas Herberg-Rothe, 'The State and Existential War', in Herberg-Rothe, Honig and Moran, eds, *Clausewitz, the State and War*.

²⁰ Julia Sywottek, *Mobilmachung für den totalen Krieg: Die propagandistische Vorbereitung der deutschen Bevölkerung auf den Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1976). See also Wette, 'Ideologien, Propaganda und Innenpolitik'; Ludolf Herbst, *Die totale Krieg und die Ordnung der Wirtschaft: Die Kriegswirtschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik, Ideologie und Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1982), pp. 35-63.

²¹ Michael Geyer, *Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit: Die Reichswehr in der Krise der Machtpolitik, 1924-1936* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1980), p. 484. Geyer, however, argues that Ludendorff's and the Nazi concept of 'war was a way of life' was new. Many in the army leadership felt that these ideas ran counter to their professional conviction that war had to be 'limited' and 'controlled' in that it had to serve some defined political and strategic aim. See also his 'German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945', in Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 527-597. Geyer's terminology is idiosyncratic: to call all types of war limited (including hegemonic ones: *ibid.*, p. 535), except when war is fought for the sake of war, stretches any meaning of limited war too far.

²² For Beck's writings, see Ludwig Beck, *Studien*, ed. Hans Speidel (Stuttgart: Koehler, 1955) and Klaus-Jürgen

‘Der totale Krieg’ was an instant success in Germany. Four months after initial publication in December 1935, a third print run reached 120,000 copies. Thanks to its popularity at home the book and its ideas quickly spread abroad. The French 1936 translation resurrected the term ‘la guerre totale’, this time with enduring success.²³ In Britain it took a little longer even though Ludendorff’s book appeared quickly. The translator clearly believed that the terminology was new and alien. He therefore changed the title to ‘The Nation at War’ and in the main text he chose to render ‘der totale Krieg’ as ‘totalitarian war’.²⁴ However, after the outbreak of World War II, ‘total war’ became a common term in the English language.²⁵ Success seems to have been linked to the efforts of the US journalist William Shirer, who claimed in his bestselling ‘Berlin Diary’ (under the entry for 29 October 1938) that Ludendorff’s book was then one of ‘the most sought-after non-fiction books’ in Germany. The diary also described the concept in some detail.²⁶ Numerous German emigrés also jumped on the bandwagon and warned about the impending ‘new’ German warfare.²⁷ The theory of total war, as conceptualized by Ludendorff, thus proved both nationally and internationally successful. Let us, in the concluding section, turn to how it fared in practice.

Müller, *General Ludwig Beck: Studien und Dokumente zur politisch-militärischen Vorstellungswelt und Tätigkeit des Generalstabschefs des deutschen Heeres 1933-1938* (Boppard: Harald Boldt, 1980). On Beck, see the cited work by Müller and the articles summarizing his findings: ‘Clausewitz, Ludendorff and Beck: Some Remarks on Clausewitz’ Influence on German Military Thinking in the 1930s and 1940s’, in Michael I. Handel, ed., *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), pp. 240-266 and ‘Colonel-General Ludwig Beck, Chief of the General Staff, 1933-1938’, in Müller, *The Army, Politics and Society in Germany, 1933-1945: Studies on the Army’s Relation to Nazism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 54-99.

²³ Erich Ludendorff, *La guerre totale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1936). Cf. the book by the head of the permanent secretariat of the *Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale* in the 1920s and an expert on industrial mobilization, General Bernard Serrigny, *L’Allemagne face à la guerre totale* (Paris: Grasset, 1940), which predicts a German collapse due to economic shortages; and the doctoral thesis by the economist Luc Fauvel, *Problèmes économiques de la guerre totale* (Paris: Librairie du Recueil Sirey, 1940).

²⁴ General [Erich] Ludendorff, *The Nation at War*, trans. A. S. Rapoport (London: Hutchinson, [1936]). ‘Totalitarian’ is of course the adjective that in English is lastingly connected with the Nazi and other popularly-based autocratic regimes.

²⁵ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. ‘total war’.

²⁶ William Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941* (New York: Knopff, 1941), pp. 239-240 and 86.

²⁷ E.g., Helmut Klotz, *Der neue deutsche Krieg*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1937), which also appeared in a French translation; and Albert Schreiner, *Vom totalen Krieg zur totalen Niederlage Hitlers* (Paris: Editions Prométhée, 1939). Other more famous examples include the German contributors to Edward Mead Earle’s 1943 *Makers of Modern Strategy*, Hans Rothfels, Hajo Holborn and Hans Speier. Chickering’s claim (see note 2 above) that Ludendorff’s book was not popular and contributed, if anything, only a label seems therefore somewhat exaggerated.

3. Decisive Battle Defeats Total War

One of abiding images of the Second World War, and a fixture in television documentaries (and YouTube), is the speech Hitler's propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels, delivered in the Berlin *Sportpalast* on 18 February 1943. The crux of the speech was the question shouted at the audience 'Wollt ihr den totalen Krieg?' Do you want total war? — to which the supposedly representative sample of German society in the auditorium responded with a rapturous 'Ja!', followed by the raising of outstretched arms and chants of 'Sieg heil!' and 'Führer befehl! Wir folgen.' Goebbels posed nine more questions, drawing the audience into completely assenting to the German people's mobilization, as Jünger had put it, 'to their innermost nerve'. The view, however, that the reaction in the vast auditorium exemplified the German nation's total embracing of total war is not correct. The speech was a carefully staged event which was intended to prepare for a wider testing of national popular readiness to ramp up the war effort.²⁸ With disaster unfolding around Stalingrad on the Eastern front, the army leadership had been clamouring for more men and more equipment. The Nazi leadership, however, had long resisted introducing full national conscription which would allow all able-bodied men to be sent to the front-lines and all able-bodied women to be called from their homes to produce arms. The public reaction to the speech was disappointing. The local party leaders soon reported that public opinion across the country did not share the views of the audience in the *Sportpalast*. Fearing mounting unpopularity and internal dissent, the Nazi top command put off total mobilization once more.²⁹

The actions of the Nazi leadership during the Second World War thus present something of a paradox. On the one hand, they subscribed fully to the rhetoric of total war. They also, on the Eastern front, and to an increasing degree on the Western, pursued the aims of total war on a political and on a strategic level. Yet, they proved unwilling to fulfill the critical precondition for ultimate success of fully mobilizing the home front. Even though they had from the moment they took power in January 1933 vigorously persecuted their internal enemies in order to establish the 'seelische Geschlossenheit', or 'psychological unity', Ludendorff had demanded, they hesitated testing the strength of that national unity by putting the whole country on a true total war footing. When they finally did so, it was too late and regime and nation succumbed to the superior might of the allies.

²⁸ Bernhard R. Kroener, 'Wollt ihr den totalen Krieg ...? Die Angst vor dem totalen Krieg. Das Dritte Reich in der Winterkrise 1942/43', in *La guerre totale, La défense totale, 1789-2000*, Actes XXVIe Congrès International d'Histoire Militaire (Stockholm, 2001), pp. 120-129.

²⁹ Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

Defeat contained another surprise. The strategic technique that defeated Germany was not the one associated with total war. The idea of total war had tempted the allies and they also blurred the distinctions between the German people, the German armed forces, the Nazi party and its organs, and the German state. They repeatedly came close to seeing the whole German nation as their enemy. When it came to surrendering, however, the Germans — the Nazi party, the armed forces, the state, *and* the people — decided that they had been defeated by the method associated with decisive battle. The moment the regular German armed forces lost the fight over the capital Berlin, hostilities ceased. The remaining armed forces surrendered and with the army, state and people also put themselves at the feet of the allies. Even though millions of German men and women remained capable of fighting, there was no popular uprising, no *levée en masse*, no continuation of the struggle with irregular forces. There was no insurgency of the kind we witnessed in Iraq and Afghanistan sixty years later.

The nature of the ending of the Second World War in Europe provides support for the thesis that there the practice of decisive battle worked because it had been accepted by international society as the right way to prosecute war. Because both the prospective winners and, critically, the losers, accepted its validity battle could effectively regulate warfare. The history of the idea of total war and its application shows that this was not because decisive battle possesses some deeper and uniquely transhistorical validity. Rather, that the technique prevailed was the result of deliberate choice and assent. Just as total war did not come about because the modern state happened to possess the means — it could happen because people willed it — decisive battle could work because opposing soldiers, statesmen and societies across Europe chose for it to work. What wins or loses wars therefore does not follow some universal rule. Force does not speak the same language everywhere. Winning and losing require a process of learning and negotiation between adversaries. Often the negotiations take place in war amidst the clamour of the force of arms, but they can also be conducted by force of argument in the international military and political literature.

Clausewitz and Ludendorff prepared an international community, in peacetime, through the publication of ideas that resonated with political convictions and military preferences to fight wars in two distinct ways. That Ludendorff's way of war lost to Clausewitz's was not pre-ordained. Total War made warfare more of an objective, scientific process than Clausewitz's decisive battle. It offered the seductive promise of decisive and fully secure victory by obliterating all enemies. The winner would truly take all. The cooperation of the enemy on which decisive battle relied for political success would be superfluous. The French refusal to give up after their regular army was destroyed at Sedan and Metz in 1870 and the German refusal to accept the verdict pronounced on

the Western Front in 1918 suggested decisive battle was a politically ineffective means of concluding war and should be relegated to the dustbin of history. Its successful resurrection in 1945 was the surprising result of total war losing political support. The horrors it had unleashed, which were politically so obviously counterproductive for Germany and yet so hard politically to generate for the allies, fueled the search for a different strategic technique; one that specified enemy less comprehensively and identified a more attractive moment of submission than total national death.³⁰ Decisive battle offered a sufficiently well-rehearsed and familiar alternative repertoire for prosecuting and ending the war. In this historical instance, it acquired enough political traction for concluding the war decisively and permanently. In fact, it seemed to work so well that many militaries in the developed world found themselves greatly strengthened in their belief that the technique would work anywhere in perpetuity. Although the spectre of total war took time to disappear over the course of the Cold War, the means of destruction gradually dissolved and were no longer believed to require the total mobilization of society. As war, and especially nuclear war, proved increasingly abhorrent to societies in the developed world, armies shrank and professionalized, happily focusing on preparing for decisive battle with a uniformed, regular opponent — even though changing politics was making him an increasingly elusive character.

³⁰ General Beck provides a good example of this conversion. See his June 1942 speech ‘Die Lehre vom totalen Kriege: Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung’, published in Beck, *Studien*, pp. 227-258.