

Total War and the Short 20th Century

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One day in the summer of 1945 at 08.15 the twenty-nine year old Tsutomu Yamaguchi was walking towards the dockyards in Hiroshima where he worked as a draftsman designing oil tankers for Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. His three month secondment to the shipyard was due to end on the morning that the Americans dropped the first atomic bomb. The bomber was the Enola Gay so named after the pilot's mother and the baby in her belly nicknamed Little Boy weighed more than 40 tons. It took one minute to reach the ground. Almost instantly a fireball expanded into a mushroom cloud. Houses a mile apart spontaneously burst into flames from thermal radiation.

Yamaguchi was knocked over by the blast which shattered his eardrums, and temporarily blinded him and left him badly burned. Most fatalities were caused by flash burns from the nuclear explosion. Injured and reeling from the horrors around him, Yamaguchi fled to his home – two days walk from the city. He arrived in Nagasaki just in time to experience the second atomic attack of the war. He survived that too and went back to work conscientiously the day after. His luck had held – first working for a reserved occupation he had been spared conscription and a possible anonymous death on a wretched Pacific battlefield; second, he survived not one, but two atomic attacks – the only two that the world has witnessed – so far. Surprisingly almost a hundred other people were in the same boat, but Yamaguchi was the only one to be officially registered as a hibakusha – or atomic bomb victim – in both cities. And he lived a long life, surviving until January 2010.

In those few days in August Yamaguchi found himself a victim of what Theodor Adorno (then in exile in the US) called “the infernal machine that is history”.¹ In different ways, however, both men were victims of history – Adorno was a refugee from the Third Reich living safely away from the bombing; Yamaguchi had retained his citizenship but was a victim of aerial warfare at its worst. Both their lives came to parallel history's rhythms. In the C20th, writes the novelist Milan Kundera, men were “eaten whole by history” (it is a vivid turn of phrase); they were primarily shaped from the outside.² The changes within the human being which had so fascinated C19th novelists – their interest in the psychology of their characters – gave way to an interest in the way that outside events including war changed men's character for better or worse. History couldn't be

¹ Cited Stefan Muller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 304.

² Milan Kundera, *Encounter: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 54.

escaped – to flee or stand one's ground was the only option. In William Empson's telling phrase, "the duality of choice... becomes the singularity of existence". War was central to the experience of the 20th century. In going "total" it became the accredited theme of modern life.

"The short 20th century" we are encouraged by many historians to call the period between 1914 – 1989, taking their lead from the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm. Whether we find this compelling or not, in a way does not matter. What does matter is that those who lived through it were conscious of the significance of their times. Some writers expected it to be a continuation of the century that had gone before in hoping that it would mark a further advance on the long march of Progress. Many were enthused by the speed of development, especially of scientific invention, even when their scientists turned their energies to fighting war. The hope was expressed eloquently by Henry Adams who noticed on the eve of the new century "1830: 1860: 1890 – X and X always comes out, not 1920, but infinity".³ Adams was proposing one of the Laws of proliferating modern energy, but he might also have been writing of the sense of change which Americans, in particular, found so exhilarating.

Other writers hoped that the century would mark a decisive break with the past, and were inspired not by C19th scientific positivism, but C19th philosophical Idealism which in its Hegelian origins was at the heart of many of the great political dreams, including the vision of the American Century. All three of the century's great political religions – Liberalism, communism and fascism, were willing at one time or another to harness war in order to realise history's promise. Woodrow Wilson took his country to war in 1917 to create a New World Order, totally different from the old.

There was, alas, another vision which suggested that the C20th might be discontinuous not only with the past but also with itself – in short, there would be no future. And it was glimpsed early on in *War in the Air* (1908) a novel by H. G. Wells "This was no slow decadence that came to the Europeanised world – other civilisations rolled up and crumbled down, the Europeanised civilisation was, as it were, blown up". The vision of a world blown up compounded the view that modern life was fragile, and that human progress was by no means assured. For much of the century, people believed there would no twenty-first.

Total War and the First 20th Century

As many soldiers were to discover to their dismay, C20th war was only a logical extension of

³ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Modern Library, 1931), p. 240.

the wars the west had fought after 1860. Many of its features would not have been unfamiliar to the generals who had fought in the American Civil War – the very first intimation of the industrialised battlefield to come. Indeed, many of the great technological breakthroughs in war were merely extensions of technologies that dated from the 1890s – the invention of the internal combustion engine; the use of electricity and oil as new sources of power; the revolution in communications produced by the telephone and the tape machine (the foundations of the modern bureaucratic state). The production of the first synthetic chemicals in the 1890s enabled the German army to deploy poison gas on the battlefield in 1915.

With a few other exceptions such as the tank, the weapons used in the First World War were not so different from those that had been employed by the Europeans against the relatively unarmed societies of Africa or Asia. Although Raymond Asquith, the son of the British Prime Minister who took the country to war in 1914, was probably correct in claiming that “a battle is far too much like a railway accident to be susceptible of description” the firing of the machine guns on the battlefields of the Western Front were foremost among the details which gave the battles of World war 1 what shape and form they possessed. But they were in essence only an extension of the Maxim Gun 40 years earlier. The only difference between the Battle of the Somme (1916) and that of Omdurman (1898), the last of the great colonial battles, was that in deploying the same technology, both sides soon found themselves occupying the moral No-man’s Land.

Nor were high casualty lists unprecedented. High rates of attrition had been seen in the Wilderness campaign in the closing part of the American Civil War. The actual proportion of casualties to the total number of combatants in the field was not significantly higher in the First World War than in any other major conflict of the previous century. Long before the Great War, in fact, soldiers had already begun to see themselves no longer as professionals, so much as “assets” or “resources”, to be used up as their commanders saw fit. The industrial metaphor was not new – the armies that were despatched into the field in 1914 were assembled, fitted out and transported by a state bureaucracy that was able to master logistic problems with the same efficiency Prussia had shown in 1870. And right through WW2 on the Eastern Front the means of getting the men to the Front was the railway. Henry Adams again, writing of the 1860s generation that had fought in the American Civil War: “we had been mortgaged to the railways ... and no-one knew it better than the generation itself”.⁴

Most importantly of all, total war did not change the human dynamics of conflict. As John Keegan writes, the outcome of battles in the 20th century was not so different from that of the

⁴ Adams, p. 240.

distant past – it was determined in the end by the human factor, the behaviour of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for survival with their sense of honour. The methods by which an army could break through a well defended trench line were partly tactical and partly technological, but in the end, in a century in which infantrymen still counted for more than tank crews, or pilots in the air, victory or defeat was still a matter of will. The factors which turned victory into defeat, or vice versa, were as operative in 1945 as they had been in 1870. The factors that accounted for the disintegration of armies in the field – anxiety, uncertainty and misapprehension – in a word, loss of morale, were much the same as they always had been even though the armies in the field were made up largely of young conscripts who had never expected to fight a battle.

Even the coming of airpower – before the atomic era – the direct and deliberate targeting of citizens and cities did not challenge Clausewitz's central proposition, that victory in modern conflicts tended to go the side that prevailed upon its enemy to surrender. This was true for most combatants except Hitler's Germany. Countries won when their enemies were persuaded to concede defeat. As Hegel had predicted, war became the ultimate test of the "ethical health" of a nation – the willingness of citizens and soldiers alike to put the survival of the ethical community above their own material interest, even personal survival. The nation-state itself – largely a C19th invention – enabled a people to turn its desire for power against itself. In war, in learning to obey its own self-imposed commands it became a 'people' for the first time. This was the great achievement of the Great Patriotic War, the ultimate redeeming narrative of Soviet communism which the post-Soviet state celebrates still. So it could be said that the C20th took further what had already been forecast in the nineteenth – victory and defeat were no longer technical matters to be decided by opposing armies in the field, so much as final conclusions to be drawn about the viability of an entire society and its way of life.

Nowhere was this more in evidence than in Yamaguchi's own country, one of the younger nation states, Japan. As early as the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), foreign observers had been impressed by the remarkable courage of Japanese soldiers in the face of intensive firepower in the desperate, bloody and often unimaginative assaults on Russian positions. The loss of men so shocked the commanding officer General Nogi that he had asked the Emperor (and was refused) permission to take his own life. The Samurai honour code, Bushido – an original import from China – was the Japanese (bu) rendition of the Chinese wu (martial spirit). It was a C19th invention in its modern form but in the course of the C20th became nationalised. And once that happened, the generals were able to tap into moral and material resources that had not been available in the pre-Meiji era. Since "spirit" was the universally acclaimed factor that was taken to explain Japan's unexpected victory against Tsarist Russia, the army leadership tended to

emphasise the irrational (spirit) over the material (technology). In 1928, the Army revised one of its key doctrinal manuals, *The Essential Points of Supreme Command*, significantly deleting the words, “surrender”, “retreat” and “defence”. A young Kamikaze pilot who survived the war later explained that, “the most effective thing to do was to rely on the bushido spirit”.⁵ Unfortunately, by 1945 the spirit of self-sacrifice was expected not only of young pilots, but the entire nation, as it prepared for the expected invasion by an unforgiving United States.

War and the Second 20th Century

“We’re are out of the backwaters of history”, remarks Gen Cummings in Norman Mailer’s novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, to which his interlocutor, a young officer of radical thoughts and a cheeky disposition, remarks sardonically, “So we have become destiny, eh?” It is a telling commentary on what the C20th meant to many people – to those who hoped that it would mark a break with the past, that it would be discontinuous with the century that had preceded it. Where the previous century had its great engineers, its rail builders and shipwrights, the twentieth had what Stalin once called, its “engineers of the human soul”.

Mailer’s novel appeared in 1948 and was grounded in his own experience of the Pacific War, as a foot soldier of the American Century. The phrase was first coined on the eve of the war by Henry Luce, the editor of *Time-Life*, but its dawning had been captured much earlier in Joseph Conrad’s novel *Nostromo* (1904) where the Yankee businessman remarks, “we shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith Sound ... the world can’t help it, and neither can we”. At one point in Mailer’s novel Gen Cummings ruminates at length on what the American Century means, and the place war will play in it.

There are countries which have latent powers, latent resources, they are full of potential energy, so to speak, and there are great concepts which can unlock that, express it. As “kinetic energy” a country is co-ordinated effort.⁶

Not for nothing does Cummings invoke the latent power of his own country which was quite simply the century’s most powerful state that from 1917 was able to successfully out produce as well as outfight its enemies. The 20th was also intensely ideological, and it just so happened that

⁵ Cited Jonathan Lewis, *Hell in the Pacific* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), p. 191.

⁶ Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Reinhart and Co, 1948), p. 321.

Liberalism was the most persuasive or compelling ideology of all. The other political religions with which the US found itself at war – as well as “Prussianism” (the term was Wilson’s for the Kaiser’s regime) – appropriated its institutional forms, including parliaments and elections even if both were hollowed out. And as Cummings also grasps a country’s material and social capital have to be focussed through a medium – revolution or war. As he concludes didactically, “the purpose of war historically is to translate America’s potential into kinetic energy”. The United States and the Soviet Union – after destroying Fascism as a political religion, though not a philosophy – continued after 1945 to see themselves not so much as countries, but promises to the future, or contracts with history. Both saw themselves as historical agents with the power as well as the will to give history a push. And both entered the century within months of each other, when Woodrow Wilson took the United States into the First World War, and Lenin took Russia out of it to prosecute another war against the Russian people, a civil war in which 9m citizens lost their lives.

In terms of all three factors, total war gave war an even more “inhuman face”. Any activity which is so pervasively entrenched in our social practices as war can hardly be called inhumane – it is what makes us, for good or ill, distinctively human. Intraspecific violence is unique to ourselves. But what also makes us the creatures we are is our capacity to act more or less inhumanely at different times in our history, and as Keegan writes in *The Face of Battle* (1976), the face of total war was especially inhumane. Once the world became a laboratory for releasing reserves of energy, a powerful state, provided it had the courage of its ideological convictions, could sweep aside all the old conventions that had inhibited the release of human energy in the past, including most social conventions and religious taboos.⁷

It was the expenditure of human and social capital that was most striking about the C20th as individuals became mere tools of destiny. One aspect of this is what Keegan calls impersonalisation – an inelegant term (he is the first to confess) but one whose progress can be charted without too much difficulty. What had started out as a close-up activity dictated by human limitations of physical strength and stamina – the length a man could throw a spear or discharge an arrow, or fight in the field in hand-to-hand combat, had previously mediated the inhumanity of war. With industrialisation and increasing firepower, and conscription, which allowed reserves to be brought up and thrown into battle, the rhythms of war changed. Battle acquired a mechanical dynamic of its own. Soldiers became “resources”, and resources are often expended until they are finally used up.

⁷ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Pimlico, 2007).

Between October 1941-April 1942, 7m men were thrown into the fighting before Moscow. The Russians alone lost 2m men. The Soviet High Command expected to lose in battle 2-3 of their own soldiers for every German. Stalin's wasteful strategy was only made possible by the knowledge that manpower was an inexhaustible resource. In 1941, the average survival rate of a new recruit in some units was 5 days; many went into battle with instructions to strip equipment from fallen comrades in the absence of any weapons of their own.

At another level, writes Keegan, the fostering of deliberate cruelty made war quite different qualitatively from the past. The cruelty of war inhered in technology, the coming of area-killing weapons systems like the machine gun. At least, there had been an attempt in the C19th to inhibit the worst weapon systems but after 1914 most moral scruples were soon swept away as scientists went on to develop weapons which were far crueller than they needed to be. The land mine was a case in point, filled with metal cubes; another was the cluster bomb filled with jagged metal fragments. In both cases the shape of the projectile was designed specifically to tear and fracture the human body more extensively than a smooth-bodied one.

The third, and in its fashion, perhaps most devastating development was the role coercion paid in keeping men on the battlefield. In general, writes Keegan, total war coerced the soldier in many ways. He was awed by its very impartiality, by the vast forces against which he might rail, but against which he could not strike back. The English poet Keith Douglas who served as a tank commander in North Africa recorded in his journals that war resembled "a silent movie" "quite unrelated to real life". The actual engagements were remote and impersonal. In a few words he scribbled across the page of his journal that was published posthumously in 1946 he added in what was almost a personal epigram: "I look back to a period spent on the moon, almost to a short life in a new dimension".⁸

But there were more traditional methods of coercion that were far more threatening to sense of self. It is telling, writes Ian Kershaw in his new book *The End: Hitler's Germany 1944-5* that despite conscripting millions of citizens to fight in World War One only 18 German soldiers were executed for cowardice. The Wehrmacht executed 15,000. More coercive still was Stalin's Russia. In the 5 month battle of Stalingrad, the turning point of the war, 13,500 soldiers were executed. Stalingrad of course was the most intensive battle of the war and it produced some telling vignettes of life at the Front. On one occasion, writes Vasily Grossman, who was an eye witness to the fighting, a man condemned for a self-inflicted wound was shot by an NKVD Special

⁸ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 28.

Detachment. After shooting him, the execution squad buried his body in a shell hole. But they had been poor shots, probably because they were drunk. The man was able to dig himself out, and to return to his unit. The NKVD did not miss the second time.

To return to Mailer's novel, where Gen Cummings also contends that revolution and war are the two mediums through which history is forged. But revolution was seen from the beginning by Lenin as a form of war. Outside the Finland Station in St Petersburg where Lenin arrived in his boxcar from Germany there used to stand a statue of him in place of the traditional man on horseback. Finland Station is one of the five railway terminals through which a visitor may enter or leave the city. There in the communist days one would have seen Lenin's finger pointing at an imaginary crowd, making a point, striking a political gesture. There one would have glimpsed the symbol of a society continually mobilised for war. "Revolution is nothing more than war", wrote Herman Hesse, "like war, it is a continuation of politics by other means", a concept Michel Foucault was later to apply to politics in general, turning Clausewitz on his head. In the Russian countryside the first task of Trotsky's Red Army was to fight the peasant producers. Despite the fact that no campaign medals were ever issued, the war against the peasants provided the new army with its first combat experience.

And destiny? If the Soviet Union preached that the final revolution of the proletariat would see the triumph of permanent peace, the democracies tended to see war in similar terms. On 11 April 1945 Roosevelt formulated his testament to the American people in which he held out a unique vision, "more than an end of this war, an end to the beginning of all wars". The central charge against the 28 defendants at the Tokyo War Crimes trial (1946) was not that of committing crimes against humanity (the charge levelled against the Nazis at Nuremberg), but that of engaging in crimes against "peace". The defendants were accused of planning, preparing and waging a declared and undeclared war of aggression and were punished accordingly.

In blurring the distinction between war and peace, Roosevelt was a characteristic 20th century figure. In calling America's entry into war in 1917 "a crusade for peace", Wilson too had ensured that it would be difficult to discern where war ended and peace began. Peace was contained in the act of war and future war was always possible until a New World Order had been secured.

What made fascism so radical – a true break with the past – was its struggle to make the Aryan race "fit for purpose" through endless conflict. The Nazis devalued peace altogether and maintained that at best it might serve an instrumental end; or constitute a "strategic pause", an interval between rounds, while the belligerents recovered their strength for the next encounter. War was no longer conceived as an instrumental measure for the production of peace, permanent or otherwise but was considered to be an existential value in itself, as well as the supreme end of

political life. For Hitler death was a way of life.

After Hitler's defeat the two remaining systems of belief soon found themselves engaged in a war of attrition – a “cold war”, of course, which had at its heart a veritable Orwellian logic – War is Peace, Peace is War.

There is a long historical debate as to whether the US needed to attack Japan with atomic weapons or whether the generals were already close to surrendering – some historians have even claimed that Truman had the Soviet Union in mind when he attacked Nagasaki. It was a warning shot to the future. It served an unexpected purpose. The bombing of Japan, writes the novelist E L Doctorow, can be seen in one light as “a kind of inoculation and while this hypothetical benefit of bombing cannot acquit those who ordered them of their moral responsibility for sufferings that were all too real, it does at best suggest those sufferings were not in vain”.⁹ If Hiroshima opened the era of nuclear war, Nagasaki closed it. As one of the characters in Don DeLillo's novel *End Zone* remarks: “Nagasaki was an embarrassment to the art of war ... I think what will happen in the not too distant future is that we will have humane wars”.

War and the Third 20th Century

It didn't feel like that for most of the Cold War. Indeed Hiroshima appeared to herald in – as in another way did Auschwitz the last and most apocalyptic vision of the century, one which threatened to make it discontinuous with itself – there would be no 21st. Indeed, what was most striking about the atomic bomb was the fact that it was born of twentieth, not nineteenth century science. It was only made possible by atomic physics, the most radical and specialised science of the day. The A bomb broke with the past, with the Newtonian killing systems, such as ballistics, chemistry and aeronautics, all of which can be seen as extensions of the gunpowder “revolution” of the C16th. The bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima did not explode because of the blending of chemicals; it exploded because of a humanly engineered change in the very nature of matter.¹⁰

In their own way too through the Holocaust the Nazis had tried to change the human material, to remove a letter from the human alphabet, to make the race more pure by subcontracting variety from the human experience. Fear of war was compounded by the recognition that genocide had become the currency of military power. The two superpowers might not wish to eliminate each

⁹ Cited David MacGregor, *Hegel and Marx after the fall of Communism* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 30.

¹⁰ Brian Appleyard, *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man* (London: Picador, 1992).

other but war itself was now played out at the level of life itself. The most important date in the C20th claimed Arthur Koestler, was 6 August 1945, the day the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Before that date, humanity had to contend with its own mortality, with the terror of individual death. After the explosion, it had to confront the death of the entire species. For the Holocaust had been a war, too: one in which the resources of a state had been mobilised against an entire people. As the Cold war unfolded the world confronted the prospect of a nuclear genocide, no longer of a people but of the human race.

For what was most frightening of all was that nuclear weapons subverted the logic of Clausewitz. At one point in the 1950s – at the height of the balance of terror – the US Congress refused to fund any think tank studies that contemplated the prospect of surrender in a nuclear exchange. In his ground-breaking book on nuclear deterrence Henry Kissinger had an ironic index entry. Under the word “Surrender”, he put “See Victory; Total”. Total victory, of course, would have meant total extinction for the human race. “We get to win a nuclear war if there are only 3 people left alive on the planet, one Russian and 2 Americans”, expostulated Gen Powers, the Chairman of the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the moment of greatest danger, the Cuban missile crisis. At which point a young analyst riposted in turn: “In that case, General, let’s hope that the two survivors are a man and a woman.

Less apocalyptic thoughts were no more reassuring. In the early 1960s the nuclear strategist Hermann Kahn imagined a dialogue in the war room in which the President of the United States might say to his advisers, “how can I go to war – almost all of America’s cities will be destroyed?” And they, in turn, would answer, “That’s not entirely fatal, Mr President – we have built some spares”. Nuclear War promised what conventional bombing never could, not even the fire-bombing of Tokyo, or the destruction of Dresden, that the world might well go in for designer-made disposable cities or spares.

An Orwellian logic? Peace is War, War is Peace? It was an armed peace but it was peace of a kind. Only days after the dropping of the atom bomb Gen MacArthur remarked to the journalist Theodore White: “White, do you know what this means? There will be no more wars”. There were – many proxy ones. 50m people died on the killing fields and battle zones of the Cold war that followed. No further armed conflict between the Superpowers however was possible no matter how thoroughly each side might plan for such an outcome. We are surely right to view as “peace” a war in which the winning side made every effort not to fire a shot and the losing side could have no recourse to its weapons even when facing the endgame in 1989.

Conclusion

What is striking about the century of total war was that it was conducted in the light of the shadow of the C19th “It is probably fair to assert”, writes Norman Stone, “that Europe before 1914 produced virtually all of the ideas in which the twentieth century traded; the rest being merely technical extensions of these ideas”.¹¹ “Merely” hardly does justice to the conclusion. In 1989 when the curtain finally came down on the “short C20th” Joachim Fest, Hitler’s first German biographer, wrote that what the people had been demanding in East Berlin and Prague “was to be spared the political systems of redemption produced by the C19th. The century in which our opposing Fronts, our ideals and visions, our understanding of roles and even of ghosts, have their roots – has finally come to a close”.¹² In that sense it could be said that total war – in its modern, industrialised manifestation, was a product of the long C19th rather than the short twentieth.

¹¹ Norman Stone, *Europe Transformed 1878-1919* (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 390.

¹² Cited *German Comments*, 19 June, 1990, p. 93.