Presentations

The Approach to "Total War" 1890-1918: the First World War and its Legacy

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"The Great War has haunted our century; it haunts us still" Modris Eksteins justly calls it "the representative event of our century."[1] Paul Kennedy writes in similar vein that, as this conflict-torn century nears its end "the shadows cast over it by the Great War of 1914-1918 seem in some ways longer, darker, and more daunting than ever before."[2] In Britain the First World War currently provokes more public interest and controversy than the Second but, paradoxically, is less accepted as objective history than the later conflict.

This paper cautiously uses the word "approach" to total in its title because historians continue to debate when exactly, if indeed at all, war became "total." We can, however, assert with confidence that from the mid-nineteenth century warfare was becoming potentially more intensive and destructive. This was mainly due to the belated impact of the industrial revolution on weapons, logistics and means of transport, and the adoption of mass conscription by most European armies. Prussia's short decisive wars in 1866 and 1870-71 proved deceptive as a guide to the general trend. The elder von Moltke, chief architect of these victories, was not optimistic that they could be repeated in the political and military conditions prevailing at the end of the century. Rather he viewed with foreboding the replacement of "Cabinet wars" (involving only a few decision-makers) by more emotional and unrestrained "peoples" wars. At the end of his long tenure as Prussian chief of staff he grimly predicted a future seven years or even thirty years war.

In a new era of contingency war planning in peace time, general staffs grappled with the daunting problems of winning quick, decisive victories in a context of huge armies, modern artillery and firearms and complex fortress systems. As early as 1883 the German General von der Goltz calculated that, when fully mobilized, the French and German armies would simply lack the space for maneuver on the western front: a long war of attrition appeared unavoidable.[3]

Free from the professional constraints of the military planners, Ivan Bloch, a Polish

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[1] Modris Eksteins "Memory and the Great War" in Hew Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 305, 317.

[2] Paul Kennedy, "In the Shadow of the Great War," *The New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1999, pp. 36-39.

[3] Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 83.

railway contractor and financier, was prepared to think the unthinkable by predicting that a general European war would be catastrophic, both in its conduct and consequences. After eight years of intensive research he published his six volume treatise on *The War of the Future* in the late 1890's. Bloch was a moral crusader for disarmament, peace and free trade. He correctly perceived that recent improvements in firepower had given an advantage to the defender which would probably lead to a long, indecisive static war. The huge armies would cause acute supply problems and leave little scope for maneuver. "Everybody will be entrenched in the next war," he wrote prophetically. "The spade will be as indispensable to the soldier as his rifle……Battles will last for days, and in the end it is very doubtful if any decisive victory can be gained."[4]

Turning to what we should now call "the home fronts," Bloch doubted the civilians' ability to withstand the psychological stress and economic hardship of modern war. There would be a shortage of labor to produce food and the transport system would break down. Anarchists and socialists would foment disorder with the eventual result that famine, leading to revolution, would be the ultimate arbiter rather than battlefield victories. Bloch was too realistic to believe that these considerations would make war impossible, but he did believe that resort to it would be suicidal for political, economic and social reasons. There would, in short, be no winners.

Bloch died in 1902 before his ideas could even be tested in the Russo-Japanese war. Though often cited as the "prophet without honor" who predicted the nature of the First World War with uncanny accuracy, in reality Bloch had the defects as well as the insights of a polemicist. As regards his military analysis, the fire-zone, for example, though extremely dangerous, was not impassable given flexible tactics and determination – as Japanese infantry proved in Manchuria in 1904. More fundamental, technical innovation, notably in the form of motor vehicles and aircraft, would soon restore mobility on and above the battlefield. Bloch failed also to make due allowance for such factors as patriotism, comradeship and military discipline which enabled even the poorly-led and appallingly equipped Russian armies to keep fighting until 1917.

Surprisingly, Bloch was less perceptive or prophetic on economic and political issues. He could not imagine, for example, the ruthlessness with which the belligerent governments would interfere in the private sector to take control of manpower, shipping, railways, coal mines and everything essential to waging a long attritional war. Ironically, he believed that Russia's self-sufficiency in food supplies and relative backwardness in industrialization would give her greater staying power in a long war.

Though wrong about the nation he served, Russia, which of course suffered the earliest and most complete revolution during the First World War, he was broadly correct

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[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 88-91.

in predicting that military losses and civilian hardships and suffering in a long attritional war would culminate in revolution in defeated nations. In the event the victorious nations, including France, Britain and Italy also all experienced strikes and violent outbursts bordering on revolution in the final stages and immediate aftermath of the war.

In retrospect it is easy to criticize pre-1914 military leaders for their apparent confidence that the impending war would be short and decisive. Recent research tends to suggest, however, that they were acutely aware of the nightmare scenario sketched by Bloch but felt it was their professional duty to find a solution. Not only did they foresee the probability of a stalemate on the battlefront; they shared the civilians' fear that the European economy and the political order dependent on it, could not survive a long, attritional struggle. As Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff in the 1890's was to write in retirement after 1906: "a strategy of attrition is impossible when the maintenance of armies of millions requires the expenditure of billions."[5] Even the so-called "Schlieffen Plan," for many decades subject to scathing criticism for its apparent arrogance in aiming at a speedy and decisive knockout blow in the west, has now been subjected to a radical reappraisal, suggesting that Schlieffen, as well as his successor, was far from confident about Germany's ability to seize the initiative and win a quick victory.[6]

Having thus far dwelt on the generals' anxieties and uncertainties before 1914, it must be stressed that Bloch's liberal, pacifist ideals and abhorrence of war were even more prevalent among the ruling classes in Western Europe, to whom the outbreak of war in 1914 came as a profound shock. Resort to war "as an instrument of state policy" in the mode of Germany and Austria-Hungary seemed to many liberals and socialists an aberration in an era of growing international trade and communications and in which a complex financial inter-dependency was already evident.

For optimists about the prospects of peaceful prosperity and co-operation in Europe there was, moreover, the positive evidence of widespread endorsement of the Geneva conventions which sought to restrain or even eliminate the worst sufferings of the wounded, prisoners and civilians; and the more recent, and complementary Hague conferences of 1899, and 1907 which pursued what we should now call arms limitation.

Thus, while it is easy to over-idealize the pre-1914 European world as an idyll of peace and international co-operation, Sir Edward Grey's oft-quoted valedictory still has a profound resonance. Looking out of the Foreign Office windows on the darkening scene on August 4, 1914 he remarked: "the lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." Whatever happened the world would never be the same

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 87

[6] Terence Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," War in History, Vol. 6, Number 3, July 1999, pp. 262-305.

again.[7]

There is no need here to attempt a detailed description of the First World War. Although military historians still find this conflict to be of enormous interest and are aware that many aspects have been neglected (for example the Balkan campaigns, the Eastern Front and the Italian theater), for non-specialists the war has become virtually synonymous with pointlessness in political aims, near criminal incompetence in its military conduct and failure or futility in its eventual outcome. For the British public, and cinema-goers in other countries, the prevailing stereotypes and clichés are most vividly embodied in the 1960's play, later a celebrated film *Oh What a Lovely War!* [8] Even so well-known a historian as John Keegan has endorsed these negative or ultra-critical views, recently describing it as "a dreadful war, cruel in its conduct (and) destructive in its outcome. From it flow most of the ills of the twentieth century." More questionably, he has been dismissive towards a younger generation of scholars who, after lengthy research in the archives, have rejected the traditional view of the British Army as a body of lions led by donkeys. More generally, Keegan scorns the notion of a ""learning curve" in the operations on the Western Front. I would endorse the view of one of Keegan's critics who asserts "In 1918 the German, and especially the allied armies conducted operations that were recognizably modern in a way that those of 1914 were not.[9]

For the general public, however, it is easy to understand why the First World War should retain a grim reputation in the broader context of civilization's plunge towards total war and barbarism in the twentieth century. What was initially a restricted European (or indeed a Balkan) conflict quickly escalated to encompass most of the continent, and by 1917 at the latest, with the United States' entry deserved the appellation "World War." A decisive victory in battle proved impossible to win against major powers, while even lesser states such as Belgium and Rumania clung tenaciously to small strips of national territory.

The scale of casualties, physical destruction and disruption of civil life far exceeded what all but the gloomiest prophets had anticipated, and seemed utterly out of proportion to the political objectives originally at issue. Here was the embodiment of Clausewitz's worst fears of war developing its own runaway momentum beyond political control.

It is a truism that all battlefields and "theaters of war" are places of suffering and destruction, beyond the imagination of civilians in the pre-television era, but it is not self-evident that the Western Front in 1914-1918 was the worst on all criteria. The

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[7] Grey's remark is quoted in George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), p. 424.

[8] Alex Danchev "Bunking and Debunking" in Brian Bond, ed., *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[9] John Keegan, "A Dreadful War," in RUSI Journal, June 1999, pp. 99-101 and G. D. Sheffield in RUSI Journal, February-March 1999, p. 91.

supply of food and water, medical treatment and off-duty entertainment were much less civilized in Gallipoli, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Life on the Isonzo River on in the Carpathian Mountains in winter was no picnic either. Russian soldiers endured privations which would not have been tolerated in the West. Yet for western Europeans and Americans the Western Front has become the epitome of "horror" in the First World War eclipsing and even negating all others. We are haunted by its topography, iconography, memoirs and poetry. The phrases "trench warfare" and "like the Somme" are daily invoked in the British media to signify unpleasant conditions, incompetent leadership and futility. Military historians may deplore such expressions as clichés, obscuring more than they reveal, but in any discussion, such as this, about the meaning of "total war" the myth overshadowing the historical reality has to be taken into account.

Another horrendous feature of the First World War was the heavy loss of life among soldiers and civilians. A recent authority gives an estimate of 8,427,015 military deaths (excluding the United States) and a round figure of 5 million civilian deaths.[10] Although this seems to me a conservative estimate of military fatalities the total was far exceeded by deaths in the Spanish "flu epidemic" of 1918-1919.[11] Of course this implied comparison is inconclusive. The loss or "sacrifice" of a high percentage of young men in battle was a man-made disaster which, critics will argue, should have been prevented or greatly reduced.

France, Russia, Germany and other continental countries had experienced such bloodbaths before and would do so again in the Second World War, but for Britain the scale of her manpower commitment and consequent losses were unprecedented and are never likely to be repeated. There was recently a bizarre correspondence in the British press in which two or three villages – in the whole country – claimed to be the "luckiest" in having not a single serviceman lost in the First World War. But for the overwhelming majority of cities, towns and villages the long lists of names on war memorials and in churches tell their tragic tale, showing a three or four to one discrepancy over the shorter lists for the Second World War. These, and the profoundly moving war cemeteries, are the memorials which understandably influence popular conceptions of the war and which revisionist historians neglect at their peril.

It is now almost impossible for historians to discriminate between contemporary criticisms of the conduct of the war while it was being fought, and later "anti-war" attitudes deriving from disappointment with the peace treaties and failure to achieve the more

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[10] Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 1328-9.

[11] Pete Davies, *Catching Cold: 1918's Forgotten Tragedy* (London: Michael Joseph, 1999).

peaceful and prosperous world promised in war-time rhetoric and propaganda.[12]

Thus, although there were military winners and losers in 1918, and the winners suffered less from the political turmoil of the early post-war years, there were deeply disturbing anomalies and ambiguities in the outcome of the conflict. To take just a few obvious examples: Germany's quest for European dominance had been checked – but not decisively ended. Russia, transformed by revolution into the Soviet Union, had suffered a humiliating defeat followed by years of anarchy and civil war yet was undeniably a potential World Power. France, Britain and Italy, though all nominally winners, behaved in some respects as though they were losers, inconsolable in their losses and, in the first two cases, determined to avoid another "total" war at almost any cost. Finally, the United States had played only a modest role in winning the war in 1918 but dominated the peace proceedings and emerged as the strongest economic and financial Power. In the aftermath of the First World War, the United States was left holding the trump cards but refused to play them to uphold a balance of power in Europe.

In any attempt to discuss the legacy of the First World War one is in danger of writing a history of the remainder of the twentieth century, so all-pervasive and persistent is its influence in politics, the arts and culture generally. Paul Kennedy, for example, believes that the war of 1914-1918 "changed the course of history more than any other in modern times." He mentions the destruction of the old European dynasties; the emergence of the Communist system that "blighted so much of humanity for the rest of the century;" and the growth of Fascism with its appalling German offshoot – National Socialism. Furthermore, "this ghastly and expensive struggle shattered a Eurocentric world order, shifted the financial center of gravity to New York, nurtured Japanese expansionism in East Asia and . . . stimulated anti-colonial movements from West Africa to Indonesia."[13]

Let us conclude this brief survey of a huge topic with a few points which seem to a military historian to provide "lessons" that are relevant to the theme of this conference.

First, one is struck by the remarkable willingness of the main belligerents in 1914-1918 to demand huge sacrifices from their peoples over several years, and the endurance of those people in the face of unimaginable hardship. As mentioned earlier, this critical human factor quite escaped from Bloch's pseudo-scientific calculations, whereas the military leaders seem to their critics to have taken the sacrifices of their soldiers for granted. Secondly, even the more liberal governments, like Britain's, were prepared to take draconian measures, unthinkable before 1914, to curtail institutional and

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12 Brian Bond, "'Anti-War' Writers and their Critics" in Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle, *Facing Armageddon* (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), pp. 817-830.

13 Paul Kennedy, op. cit. "In the Shadow of the Great War."

individual liberties in the interests of a "total" national war effort. This was especially the case with the introduction of general conscription early in 1916. A new era was also evident in censorship of the press and the concern – excessive as it turned out – to unmask enemy agents. Propaganda also received a higher priority in national war efforts than ever before with short-term successes in demonizing the enemy, but at the same time creating problems for the post-war world. As the late A. J. P. Taylor remarked, much of the "hate propaganda" of the First World War was believed but later found to be untrue or exaggerated, leading to extreme skepticism towards comparable atrocity stories in the Second World War which grossly understated the horrific reality.

Thirdly, there was a widespread and enduring perception that military leadership had been incompetent (the "lions led by the donkeys" notion), and that the generals were directly to blame for the high casualty levels. This belief was not entirely false but curiously seemed to take a firmer grip on the public imagination in victorious democratic countries such as France and Britain. This posed the question, seldom answered by the critics, that if French and Haig, Joffre and Foch were such incompetent leaders how did they compare with the likes of Conrad, Falkenhayn and Ludendorff? In Britain this "myth" (i.e., exaggeration) of military incompetence gave the Army a poor image after 1918 but also helped to produce a new generation of leaders, including Alexander, Montgomery, Brooke and Slim who took their profession seriously, realized the need to explain their battle plans and, above all, were concerned to minimize casualties. This, however, remains a topic where there is still a gulf between the views of military historians and the general public whose prejudices are regularly reinforced by caricatures of British generals, especially those of the First World War.

The inter-war period also witnessed the implementation of Clemenceau's declaration to the effect that "war is too important a business to be left to the generals" with the advent of the "civilian militarist" such as Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini or civilian autocrats such as Churchill and Roosevelt who took care, within a democratic framework, to assert their authority over the professional service leaders. Japan was exceptional in the Second World War in following neither of the above patterns despite the Western belief that General Tojo was a military dictator.[14]

The First World War was rendered more strategically complex and impossible to terminate in a "peace without victory" because it was essentially a war of alliances in which lesser partners periodically joined or defected from the main players. This was of course far from new, but given the further ingredients of national and nationalist aspirations, secret treaties and inflamed propaganda it went far to ensure that the conflict would be prolonged and total. Austria-Hungary, for example, attempted to negotiate a

[14] B. A. Shillony, *Politics and Culture in Wartime Japan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

separate peace treaty in 1916 but was unable to escape the embrace of its more powerful ally, Germany. There were also important lessons regarding the coordination of alliance policies and strategic plans which were much better heeded in the Second World War by Britain and the United States than the Axis Powers.

Inflated rhetoric during the First World War to the effect that this was "a war to end all wars," and the failure of the peace treaties to satisfy numerous territorial claims, served to open a gulf between the exhausted victors Britain and France, who henceforth were reluctant to face the prospects of another general war, and the main dissatisfied Powers, Italy, Germany and Japan who had not abandoned ambitions for military conquest.

This paper is cautiously titled "the approach to total war." Survivors in 1918 would have been dismayed to be told that their war was less than "total," but from our vantage point at the end of the century we can observe dispassionately that military developments in the period 1890-1918 were transitional and fell far short of the awful potential of scientific developments allied to demonic ideologies. For all its savagery the First World War, or at least on the Western Front, had been conducted with some reciprocal courtesies deriving from traditions of military honor and reinforced by respect for international treaties. This applied particularly to treatment of wounded soldiers and prisoners.

From our present perspective we can now appreciate that the First World War's most sinister legacy lay in the targeting of the enemy's civil population as a legitimate strategic objective. Of course civilians had always suffered in war, often as accidental victims, but sometimes deliberately as in sieges and naval blockades. Developments in artillery in the nineteenth century had already made cities, as in the case of Paris in 1870, vulnerable to long range bombardment, but before 1914 it had been impossible to claim that the enemy's whole adult population was involved in war work. Now, with the total mobilization of manpower and the widespread involvement of women in munitions factories, transport and agriculture, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants was seriously eroded. Thus the British and German navies adopted strategies which were certain to cause hardship to their opponent's civilians, and in 1917 the latter's unrestricted submarine campaign was overtly intended to cause such acute food shortages that the British Government would be obliged to sue for peace. Equally ruthlessly, the Royal Navy maintained a severe blockade of Germany for several months after the war had ended to force the latter to accept the Versailles Treaty.

It was, however, in aerial warfare, that the First World War witnessed a truly revolutionary development. The long-range bombing of cities by airships and aeroplanes did little physical damage, while civilian deaths, though a gift to propagandists, were on a small-scale compared with battle casualties. But the vulnerability of cities with their densely-packed populations immediately suggested to imaginative theorists that these

would be legitimate – indeed the principal targets – in the next great war.[15] Consequently, if the conduct of the First World War had fallen short of the total intensity and ruthlessness conceivable at the time, it had ended with a nightmare vision of all-out attacks on enemy forces and civilians by land, sea and, above all, from the air.

I have tried to suggest, in the short space available, that the First World War is anything but a distant saga of European battles which can be safely confined to specialist academic study. On the contrary, "its origins, course and consequences are central to an understanding of the twentieth century."[16]

[15] For an early discussion of the revolutionary potential of air power see B. H. Liddell Hart, *Paris or the Future of War* (London, 1925).
[16] Paul Kennedy, op. cit.