Did The Second World War, More So Than The First World War, Exemplify The Character Of ‘Total War’?

By WGCDDR Michael Rouhan
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ABSTRACT

Both World War Two (WWII) and World War One (WWI) mark some of humanity’s darkest moments in the 20th century—cities razed to the ground, acts of unspeakable cruelty and deaths numbering in the untold millions. In this essay, the author argues that, despite the undeniably bloody legacy left by both wars, WWII still stands as the more destructive and intense of the two battles, henceforth referred to as it being closer to ‘Total War’. The author highlights factors like an immeasurable body count, greater aggression across all parties concerned, a more profound impact on industries, the participation of more civilians and the involvement of countries and regions that were previously not involved in WWI, which underscores the devastation left by WWII. The unprecedented impact of WWII, the author feels can, even now, be felt in every continent of the world and, therefore exemplifies the character of ‘Total War’ rather than WWI.

Keywords: Conflict; Intensity; Evolution of Strategies; Industry; Total War

INTRODUCTION

The 20th Century saw a level of conflict maturity not seen in previous generations of wars. Acknowledging this, militarists began to speak of a term ‘total war’. The French Minister Georges Clemenceau pressed for ‘la Guerre integrale’ in 1917 and the German General Erich Ludendorff used the term in his book Der Totale Krieg in 1935. However, it can be argued that conceptually the idea dates back to Clausewitz’s concept of absolute war.1 Many academics argue that no war has truly met the threshold to be considered a ‘total war’ as each has been limited in some dimension. Yet, there has been on-going debates by the likes of Arthur Marwick and Michael Sheehan to determine a widely accepted definition for the term ‘total war’. To date, no such agreement has been met.

Bomb Damage in London during the Second World War. Office workers making their way through debris as they go to work after a heavy air raid on London.
To analyse the concept, it is important to first establish an understanding of what quantifies the term 'total war'. To frame this essay, the author intends to adopt Jeremy Black's definition as it is broad enough to include components common to most theories. To adjudicate on a conflict's qualification as a total war, Black suggests the terms—intensity of the struggle, the range of the conflict, the nature of the goals and the extent to which civil society participated are generally accepted characteristics. It is with these dimensions that the two world wars will be discussed and through which the level of totality will be determined throughout this essay. This comparison will argue that although WWI displayed elements of total war, the evolution of strategies and technology enabled participants of WWII to employ the characteristics of total war to a greater extent, therefore exemplifying total war to a higher degree.

INTENSITY OF THE STRUGGLE — CASUALTIES

In a comparison between low intensity warfare and high intensity warfare, there can be no doubt that both world wars fall within the latter due to the conventional nature of the two. There can be no denying the destructive carnage of either WWI or WWII. During the 'Great War' of 1914-1919, 36 countries participated in a conflict that saw 10 million people die and a further 20 million crippled. The financial cost of the conflict was conservatively estimated at $208 billion. The brutality of WWII saw 42 countries contribute to the killing of 60 million people, costing the world economy approximately $1.3 trillion. From a pure statistical perspective, WWII demonstrated a higher level of intensity than WWI as a result of military actions and its consequences.

INTENSITY OF THE STRUGGLE — CHARACTER OF WARFARE

In the decades preceding WWI, military strategists studied conflicts such as the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 and the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, popularising the concept of massed infantry assaults. Concurrently, in the shadow of the industrial revolution, technologies such as the machine gun, barbed wire, the telegraph and advances in artillery all favoured defensive operations. Indeed, Germany's realisation of this dissonance came with the impasse following the failed Schillffen plan in 1914. The desire of a mobile campaign and a swift victory ended in a static impasse that lasted for years. The enduring trench warfare character therefore became more localised (particularly after Russia's withdrawal) to the Western Front, converting the war into a test of endurance through efforts to supply mass armies with industrialised quantities and qualities of weaponry. This restriction on manoeuvre limited rapid movement and any collateral kinetic effect on civilian lives and infrastructure, although this did change as the war progressed.

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The inter-war period saw technology and doctrine mature to enhance the return of manoeuvre warfare in WWII. War had returned to the offensive. Sheehan and Black both discuss the evolution of air power in WWI as a driving force in the creation of aircraft carriers in WWII to enhance force projection. Amphibious capabilities, mechanised land formations and parachute troops all attempted to avoid the stalemate characteristic of WWI. Examples such as the swift victory doctrine of 'Blitzkrieg' and the Japanese expansion into China and Southeast Asia (SEA) ensured the mobile nature affected more than just the troops on the front line directly, enabling the effect to be applied to the occupied populace. Technological advances such as the flamethrower, mortars and man-portable radios
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all contributed to the ability of forces to remain more mobile and independent than the fixed positions of WWI, thus further enabling the character of manoeuvre in WWII.

**INTENSITY OF THE STRUGGLE — INDUSTRY**

Totality in war also references the commitment of society's industrial resources. Industry's overall contribution and the agility of its response was pivotal to the outcome of WWI. The stalemate of The Western Front quickly shifted the industrialised arms race to efforts of wartime production. As an example, during the last quarter of 2014, 2,164 hand grenades were made in Britain, whilst in the second half of 2016, 11,052,451 hand grenades were delivered. Initial industrial response was of disorientation and uncertainty. Eventually, Britain saw the creation of the Ministry of Munitions in 1915 consolidating the nation's industries, whereas Germany's industry remained under civilian control, failing to coordinate with military requirements even with the implementation of the Hindenburg programme in 1916. Furthermore, Germany did not expand into a wider war economy, most notably neglecting food security which exacerbated the effects of the Allied naval blockades. Depopulated agricultural industries and naval blockades had already had immense impact on public morale and caused widespread undernourishment. Importantly, the Allies also had the immense industrial support of the United States (US) contributing an increased production level of 32% and approximately 20% of its GNP in aid of the Allies, significantly increasing upon the declaration of war. Therefore, while WWI industry developed into a level of total war, it was completely reactionary and not initially deliberately prepared for.

WWI is often described as a pre-cursor to WWII. Legislative amendments introduced by the Commonwealth during the inter-war period allowed rapid control over free trade and unregulated industry to accommodate the nation's transition to war efficiently. The US created The War Production Board in 1942, increasing an already impressive production rate producing formidable quantities of equipment and munitions—for example, one plane built every 196 seconds and a shipbuilding industry that could surpass her losses. Russia, although an authoritarian state, mobilised enforced mass labour and strategically redeployed hundreds of wartime industries to protect wartime production from German advances. Japanese expansion into SEA was a result of its war industry needs and at the war's beginning, German industry was completely aligned with the military as the Nazi ideology presented the conflict as a matter of racial purity and national survival. Therefore, while some evolution did take place during WWII, the advances in pre-war industrial preparations enabled a far more coordinated and efficient scale of production than seen in WWI.

**RANGE OF THE CONFLICT — GEOGRAPHY**

WWI initially saw a battlefield restricted to a relatively small component of the European continent and the restriction on manoeuvre warfare limited its expansion. A further contraction of the battlefield followed upon the withdrawal of Russia from the conflict following the Russian Revolution in 1917, closing the Eastern front. The Allies had tried to break the stalemate of the Western Front in the Middle East, most notably through the Dardanelles in 1915. Germany also tried to increase its influence through an alliance with the Ottoman Empire and engagement with other states in an effort to expand the war to Egypt, India and the Caucasus. Notwithstanding a relatively minor operation in East Africa and an early naval foray into the Pacific, these battlefields indicated the extent of the WWI battlefield.

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In contrast, the WWII battlefield was dispersed to the farther reaches of the globe. The increasing roles of naval power were employed in the industrial lifelines through the Battle of the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Land warfare was now far more mobile and offensive in nature, seeing Germany's operations spread from the English Channel—east to 100km short of Moscow and south to Northern Africa. Japan, in the quest for industrial resources, operated forces from Manchuria to Papua New Guinea, Hawaii West through to Burma. Every continent on the globe, excluding
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Antarctica, had witnessed battle. Therefore geographically, WWII had a wider alignment to total war than did WWI.

RANGE OF THE CONFLICT – PARTICIPANTS

The intensity and scope of mobilisation during WWI drove an insatiable appetite for human resources, with participants drawn from around the globe due to alliances and colonial memberships. Major allied forces included France, British and Commonwealth forces from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India, South Africa and later included the addition of Japan, Italy and the US. Russia was also an allied nation prior to its withdrawal in 1917. Axis forces main contributors included Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Turkey and Romania.¹⁷

The extent of involvement from the above-mentioned did not dramatically change (with the exception of alliances) in the following world war, aside from two major exceptions. WWII was the first war that encompassed the world’s major powers by including China and Japan as major combatants. Germany attempted to expand WWII by trying to agitate Mexico into taking action against the US and by influencing South American countries such as Argentina into the Axis alliance. Brazil was also impacted as Brazilian shipping had become a casualty of the German U-boat campaign pushing them towards an alliance with the Allies. Consequently, as a result of the scale of China’s and Japan’s additional involvement, and the attempted influence on South American nations, WWII exhibits a wider sphere of participant influence.

NATURE OF THE GOALS

WWI was initially a regional conflict sparked by Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia, which pulled in European allies of either side and was not envisioned to be a protracted global war. Germany, although threatened by Russia and France, encouraged limited military aims within Austria-Hungary as it saw the depth of alliances between Serbia and Russia as possible escalations to be avoided. Invariably, the spin-off nature of the initial crisis drove a wider conflict than was envisioned. During the operational impasse on the Western Front, German aspirations were to maintain its gains and not to drive any further, whereas the British simply wished to return to the pre-war status quo.¹⁸ However debilitating the cost of the conflict was, it was only after the late return of the allies to the offensive successes and operational realignments of 1917-1918 that peace became a serious consideration by the Germans.¹⁹

United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and their advisors in Casablanca, 1943.
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WWII began under different circumstances and the desired outcomes were very different. Both Germany (under Adolf Hitler) and Japan (under Emperor Hirohito, though domestic politics was increasingly dominated by the military) had imperial ambitions of expansion. Additionally, both of their nations instigated unexpected extensions of the wars—Germany in 1941 with the execution of Operation Barbarossa into Russia, and Japan with the strike on Hawaii and invasions of SEA. Japan contracted ‘victory disease’ and continued to expand beyond their initial goals. From an allied perspective, the goals were never to accept the axis gains and executed actions with the intent of swift victory such as the Normandy Landings, Operation Market Garden and the first use of nuclear weapons in war with the atomic bombings of Japan. Importantly, as the war progressed the difference displayed in WWI was that an armistice or treaty was never a consideration. Total defeat \( (\text{summa clade}) \) and unconditional surrender was the aim of allies following the Casablanca Conference in 1943. Does ‘total defeat’ imply ‘total war’? Through the extent of imperial ambitions of the axis forces in WWII, and not the more limited aim of WWI, the nature of the goals of WWII reflect a more aggressive and deliberate goal of wider war and is more aligned to the concept of total war.

**SOCIETY’S PARTICIPATION — IN SUPPORT**

In total war, a nation must exert all efforts to support its military operations, including the psychological and physical mobilisation of its people. Governments require popular support, or psychological mobilisation, and therefore enthusiasm needs to be maintained. In WWI, allied nations succeeded in gaining popular support by riding a nationalistic wave and depicting the enemy as bloodthirsty savages (highlighting military atrocities), whereas German propaganda focused on sacrifice and failed to motivate the same level of support. This can be quantified through the German government’s inability to sell war loans to its people. Importantly, the advent of the printer enabled the effective dissemination of this propaganda. The second characteristic, partially dependent on the first, is the level to which society participated with war making support functions, such as industry. The sizeable armies of WWI saw a mobilisation of manpower, effectively draining industry of scarce labour resources whilst increasing consumables required for the battlefront. The effectiveness of popular support also enabled the expansion of the traditional workforce to remedy the loss of manpower to the battle front, further drawing on the full potential of the populace. So, while WWI garnered a level of popular support, the initial industrial mobilisation was reactionary to the war itself and not necessarily a total war to begin with.

WWII had a more deliberate approach so that at the outbreak of war, a more totalised national approach was underway—lessons had been learnt. As early as 1937, security services in Germany and Britain began manipulating news and spreading propaganda, so popular support pre-existed prior to mobilisation. Improved methods of this mobilisation were conducted by many nations. Britain extended conscription legislation to include women, Russia introduced women as combatants and Germany developed its female workforce resource in a more deliberate manner. America introduced gender recruitment ideologies such as ‘Rosie-the-Riveter’ to boost female numbers, increasing females in industries such as aviation from a pre-war 1% to 65% in 1943. Importantly, Japan did not mobilise its female population at all. Rationing in Europe was introduced prior to hostilities to conserve vital commodities, martial law was introduced in some nations and civil defence procedures were established to aid in the preservation of both industry and society. In almost all facets of societal involvement, WWI was
reactionary evolution, the lessons of which were applied to WWII prior to its commencement and evolving even further throughout the latter war’s conduct, a far closer representation of total war.

**SOCIETY’S PARTICIPATION — AS TARGETS**

In WWI, the effects of psychological mobilisation and industrial support were recognised, prompting anti-societal strategies either directly or indirectly targeting non-combatants by both sides of the conflict and resulting in an estimated six million civilian deaths. Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare on British naval supply lines, and Britain's naval blockade of German ports are the most notable examples. The British blockade led to significant food shortages and German disaffection in late 1918, and thus led to the German government signing the armistice. Germany conducted the first strategic bomb attack on the Belgian city of Liege, and also engaged in Zeppelin (and subsequent aircraft) raids on London, all aimed at targeting British morale. The increasing role of allied air power enabled the initial targeting of German military and industrial targets to rapidly expand into reprisal bombings randomly targeting city centres such as Karlsruhe in 1915 and Freiburg in 1917. Therefore, strategic targeting was a logical development as a result of reducing distinctions between societal and war mobilisations. From a total war perspective, the WWI intent to target society developed, yet was limited in execution by the technology available.

WWII’s Axis and Allied forces’ initial distinction of non-combatant immunity to the overall aim rapidly eroded. German naval forces had greater freedom of action than in WWI and could indeed improve upon the targeting of Britain’s principal trade routes. Air power enabled militaries to effectively target civilian and industrial populations. In 1940, Germany’s Blitz on London began the evolution of strategic bombing on Germany from 1943 onwards. Technology advancements, such as heavy bombers and V1 rockets, did not have the precision to be employed at anything more definitive than cities as general targets. The high level of civilian casualties can be seen in examples such as the bombing of Dresden which caused 130,000 civilian casualties in 1945. Similarly, US attacks on Tokyo in March 1945, saw over 83,000 civilian deaths, not to mention the later deployment of the nuclear weapons in August of the same year, in order to increase pressure on Japan to surrender. Whilst smaller factors contributed, such as the treatment of occupied and captured peoples, WWII saw an estimated 45 million civilian casualties, emphasising a greater acceptance of civilian targeting than in WWI.

**CONCLUSION**

There can be little doubt as to the immense scope of both world wars. While both wars evolved in intent and character during their execution, WWII achieved a level of total war more effectively. The intensity of the struggle, both statistically and by character, and the nature of the participant’s goals were vastly more conducive to totality in WWII. The global reach of both the battlefields and the participants were far wider in WWII and there can be no doubt as to the increased casualties of civilians during WWII compared to WWI. Although WWI evolved in totality as a result of the war itself introducing an intent to wage such a conflict, WWII applied this intent in a pre-determined manner, particularly in the areas of industry and societal mobilisation. WWII therefore exemplified the characteristics of total war to a greater extent than WWI.
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