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# Der Erste Weltkrieg – ein totaler Krieg?

Roger Chickering

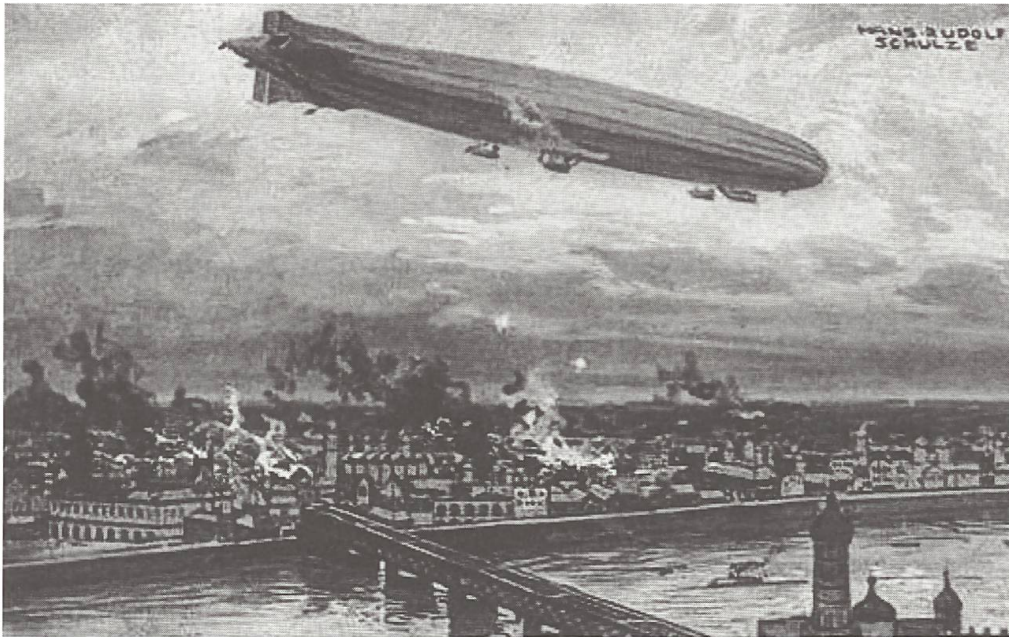
When did the War become Total?



«When did the war become total»? This question sounds simple enough, but it is loaded. It implies several additional questions that lurk in the background. These are anything but simple, and they demand answers before one can address the main question. One is whether the First World War became total at all, which in turn raises the more basic question of how one might even define the «totality» of war. Confronted with these questions, I propose to proceed modestly, to raise some paradoxes, or perhaps contradictions. I wish to take up this complex of questions more or less backwards. I shall begin with the main question, in the hope that I might in this way throw some light on the other questions. My proposal is all the more modest because I honestly do not know when the First World War turned total. I am thus in a position only to probe this question with some caution and to reflect on a number of possible answers. Even if this effort itself raises more questions than answers, however, I believe it will offer some benefits.

First, though, another preliminary methodological observation is in order. During the past several years, what one might call the «diachronic question» has been a central part of broad debates about the whole problem of total war.<sup>1</sup> «When did war become total?» has been a principal question, although the frame of reference has been quite different from the one that interests us here. Instead, historians have posed the question of when, in the course of the modern era since the French Revolution, did war assume a form that one might characterize as «total» – that is, the «war» that has been at issue in these debates has been a general phenomenon, which proceeded through developmental stages during the century and a half between 1789 and 1945 and emerged at the end of this process having undergone its perfection in the «total» Second World War. From this perspective the First World War followed the wars of the French Revolution and the American Civil War as a stage of development along the historical road to the totality that reached its goal in the Second World War. Admittedly, the First World War has often been assigned so many «total» elements that it, too, seems itself to merit the designation as a total war. The difficulty of this analytical exercise has been, in my view, to treat all the wars that mark the stages of long-term historical development – the American Civil War, for example – more or less statically, as constant units whose totality or lack of totality is assumed from the beginning. The question has not been sufficiently posed, how these wars changed character even as they were being fought – how they were transformed or increasingly approached something that might be described as totality. It was not asked, in other words, when this or that war became total. And the pivotal position of the First World War in this developmental pattern toward totality – the fact that it is often described as the first total war – makes the questions seems particularly significant in this case.





Bombardment of Warsaw from an airship. (Wikipedia Commons)

Answering the question begins best near the end of the war. On November 16, 1917 the newly elected French premier, Georges Clemenceau, presented his government to the Chamber of Deputies. He used the occasion to announce the determination of this government to prosecute an entirely new kind of war, which he characterized as «*la guerre intégrale*». This was, he explained, simply «war, nothing but war». From his statements, however, one could clearly perceive the comprehensive implications of his understanding of war. Clemenceau described a kind of war that drew no boundaries between soldiers and civilians. «The obligations of the front and the obligations of the home front», as he described the situation, «they shall be *confondu*», henceforth the same. «These calm soldiers of the factory, who are deaf to evil insinuations», Clemenceau continued, «these old peasants, bowed to the soil, these strong women workers, these children, who support these women through their own earnest weakness: They are all our *Poilus*».<sup>2</sup> Clemenceau's remarks had a transparent political purpose, for he promised to mobilize all the resources and powers of the French nation, civilian as well as military, human as well as material, in order to pursue the war to victory, ruthlessly and without compromise.

Clemenceau's speech to the Chamber of Deputies introduced an expression into the twentieth century's discourse of war, which henceforth took on a life of its own. The comprehensive unity of the nation, the *intégralité* that he invoked, found great resonance in France, particularly on the political right. Here Léon Daudet had already invented the term «total war» in connection with the German air attacks on French cities. During the final months of the war, this term evolved effortlessly in the sense of Clemenceau's *guerre intégrale*, giving birth to the concept of total war.<sup>3</sup>



But more than a concept was born in these circumstances. The new way of fighting war, the context in which «total war» was henceforth defined and understood, was constantly emphasized during the final months of the war. Above all, the object was to commit French society and politics to unconditional military victory as a moral principle. To this end, Clemenceau built up a «civilian dictatorship» in which he increasingly centralized executive power in his own hands and exercised it against the parliament.<sup>4</sup> Two weeks after the installation of his government, French grain stores were comprehensively regulated. He used the courts and censorship ruthlessly to counteract the so-called defeatists, among whom leading French political figures were to be found. The other, «positive» side of Clemenceau's efforts addressed a campaign, which was led principally by the French teachers' associations and massively supported by the state, to mobilize the population via mass demonstrations in the name of military victory. The purpose was, as a speaker explained in June 1918 in Toulouse, to allow «total war and moral force» to come into their own, to realize the principle that «everyone, in the rear, at the front», should wage total war.<sup>5</sup>

If one wishes to use the French case as the originating point of total war and, like the speaker in Toulouse, to define the concept in light of the systematic equivalence of the battlefield and the home front, one can go further. The French case was not unique. It was part of a broader phenomenon of war that one can characterize as the «remobilization» of society, as John Horne has argued in his study of developments in both France and Britain. In Britain the turning point came earlier, at the end of 1916, when David Lloyd George replaced Herbert Asquith as prime minister.<sup>6</sup> Like Clemenceau, Lloyd George seemed to embody a new determination to pursue the war ruthlessly to a victorious conclusion. Under his dynamic leadership the British administration was further centralized and war production significantly increased, as the principle finally was recognized that labor in the war-related industrial sector was hardly less important than were the soldiers of the BEF. As in France, and against the same moral background, a broadly based popular campaign also took shape, presided over by the party leaderships and massively supported by the government; its purpose, too, was to put an end to growing pacifism and all ideas about a compromise peace.<sup>7</sup>

The real beginning of remobilization took place in Germany, however. The installation of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff in the army's supreme command in August 1916 was greeted everywhere in Germany as a sign of intensified prosecution of the war. Within two days of their taking over, the two soldiers composed a memorandum in which, without using the word «total», they demanded «unconditional exploitation of all our resources» in the service of war.<sup>8</sup> Albeit at the cost of the country's economic exhaustion, war production in fact increased under the aegis of the so-called Hindenburg Program, which came close to imposing



the conscription of civilian labor. The German counterpart to the popular propaganda campaigns in the Entente lands took shape in Ludendorff's program of «patriotic instruction» at the front and on the home front, as well as in the frenetic activity of the German Fatherland Party, which was founded in September 1917 and mobilized over a million members in the name of a victorious peace.<sup>9</sup>

There are thus good reasons to assume that total war began only toward the end of the First World War with the renewed and intensified efforts to subject society in Germany, Great Britain, and France to a fundamental remobilization. In this context one can understand totality above all as the recognition that the front and home front were equal in importance and as the determination to increase the war effort to the extent possible on the home front. The problem with this proposition is, however, that the transition to «totality» came only late and then to different degrees – that is, at different points in different countries. It is thus perhaps best for the time being to put this problem aside and to use it instead as a pretext to consider some other possibilities for dating the transition to total war.

A second possibility rests on two features of the war's first phase. The first relates to the so-called war atrocities during the first weeks, particularly those committed by German soldiers in Belgium and North France, but also those by Russian troops in East Prussia and by the troops of Austria-Hungary in Serbia.<sup>10</sup> The key element in this respect is not so much what we have learned about the often frightful violence committed by soldiers against civilians than the contemporary interpretation of it, which quickly found its way into the propaganda of war. The proposition quickly became an indelible topos of this war that the two belligerent sides confronted one another across an unbridgeable chasm, which was defined by the slogans «civilization» and «brutality». In the allied propaganda, the opposing, German side was henceforth held capable of boundless inhumanity and cruelty. In this fashion, a tendency to demonize the enemy, to portray the opposing side as the embodiment of evil – which has often been regarded as a hallmark of total war – became early pronounced in the First World War.

Aside from these early episodes, however, historians have not commonly associated the idea of total war with the early phases of the conflict. Excepting only Stig Förster and several other scholars, most have agreed that all the belligerents entered the war in the expectation of a «short» termination of the combat, although the question of what constituted a «short» war has remained unclear.<sup>11</sup> During the first weeks of the war, few participants appreciated in any case the full implications of industrial war. It is, however, possible (and this is the second relevant feature of the war's first phase), to read the arguments of Fritz Fischer in a different light. With the September Memorandum of the German chancellor as his chief piece of evidence,

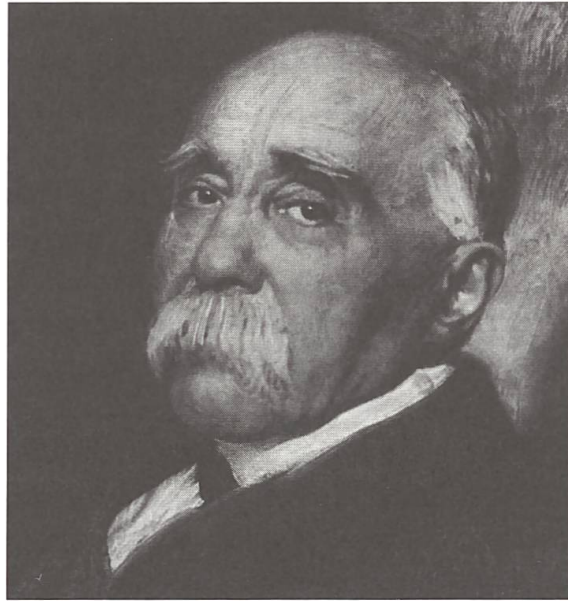


Fischer attempted to show that Bethmann Hollweg pursued what might be regarded as a «total» aim from the very beginning of the war, insofar as he aspired to the revolutionary transformation of international power-relations in Europe and the wider world in the name of German hegemony.

The possibility that developments during the first weeks of the war might be interpreted in this way seems to have dawned on at least one of Fischer's opponents. This was Egmont Zechlin, Fischer's colleague in Hamburg, who in 1964 published an intriguing article in the *Historische Zeitschrift* with the title «Germany between Cabinet War and Economic War».<sup>12</sup> Here he emphasized the transition to an entirely new kind of war. Zechlin defended Bethmann against Fischer's charges, rejecting the proposition that the chancellor had ruthlessly unleashed the war with the goal of achieving wide-ranging territorial annexations. Instead, Zechlin argued, the chancellor's calculations at the outbreak of war were directed toward a localized «cabinet war», which would be «limited by orthodox logic [*Raison der Kabinette*] and by the traditional «public morality» of old Europe». The principal goal would be to achieve a quick, respectable peace with Great Britain.<sup>13</sup> Bethmann Hollweg, however, quickly found himself confronting an unexpected and «fundamentally new situation», thanks to the unanticipated, intractable behavior of Britain during the first weeks of war, which took form in British attacks on the property rights of nationals of the Central Powers, the British resistance to its allies' negotiating a separate peace, and particularly a ruthless British economic policy that seemed calculated to drive German commerce from the international market.<sup>14</sup> In these circumstances, reasoned Zechlin, the German leadership adapted to this new kind of war. Now for the first time, indications surfaced in the discussions among German leaders that the Germans would undertake offensive economic war, including a continental blockade, and, in this connection, a central European economic bloc under German aegis. Only in this context, Zechlin concluded, can one appreciate the historical significance of Bethmann's September Memorandum.<sup>15</sup>

The plausibility of this analysis of German policy at the beginning of the war is not at issue here. More pertinent is Zechlin's attempt to trace the lines of continuity from the September Memorandum not, as Fischer had done, back into the prewar era but instead forwards, in the direction of what the war would become. Bethmann's position appears in this light as an indication of a new, comprehensive form of war, which would affect fundamentally the economic foundations of the belligerent powers. Although Zechlin himself (as far as I know) did not use the term, he could well have mentioned total war in this connection.

Indisputable in any case is the significance of the first weeks for the development of the war in a direction that practically no one had anticipated. Had the war ended with the unambiguous defeat of one side or the other



Georges Clemenceau, Prime and War Minister of France 1917–1920, called out the total war in November 1917. (Wikipedia Commons)

during the first months, we would in all probability need not debate the question when the First World War became a total war. The military stalemate that set in, particularly in the west, became instead the basis on which the war became a total phenomenon, in the sense that its effects, the growing burdens that were demanded by the mobilization of human and material resources, became ever more oppressive in every phase of life in the belligerent states. The question is, however, when did these effects appear in sufficient degree that one might speak of the beginning of total war. Whether it had come this far in the fall of 1914, or for that matter in September 1914, is doubtful despite the enormous human costs of the first battles on the western front, which were in fact the heaviest of the entire war.

Thus a third possibility for dating the onset of total war takes shape between the two that have already been mentioned. This one pertains to a series of developments that took place between the stabilization of the western front in the fall of 1914 and the beginning of the Battle of Verdun in February 1916. Some historians have written of this interval as a «*tournant*», a «turning point», or as «the long year 1915», and they have assigned it a central place in the history of the war.<sup>16</sup> At the end of this long year, they argue, the conviction was widespread that the war had become something different from what it had been at its beginning. In the intervening period people had to confront the frightening implications of the fact that the war had not ended in 1914.

The developments of the long year 1915 can be divided into several categories. One had to do with the radicalization or intensification of combat, particularly on the western front. It comprehended a number of military



innovations that significantly altered the face of warfare in 1915 and found a fitting symbol in the general introduction of steel helmets. These developments included the increasing use of flamethrowers, the introduction of poison gas by both sides in 1915, and the onset of trench warfare as a mass experience that, as one historian has recently written, represented «a complete break with all familiar standards of orientation» for the soldiers who participated in it.<sup>17</sup>

A second category of innovation that the year 1915 introduced had to do with the growing employment of military violence against civilians, the transformation of the home front into a fighting front. Although strategic airpower against cities in enemy territory had already been introduced in 1914, it intensified in 1915. The classic example of warfare directed against civilians, however, was the commercial blockade, which was extended in 1915 into a form of a «maritime war of annihilation» (the expression is Dirk Bönker's), as both sides increasingly disdained the laws of war at sea.<sup>18</sup> The critical point came in the spring of 1915, when the Royal Navy reacted to the German declaration of intensified submarine warfare by imposing a more comprehensive blockade of the Central Powers, which in practice extended to all imports and exports, even those that had passed through neutral countries. The significance of this step was apparent in Germany by early 1915, as the general introduction of ration cards for bread inaugurated the regulation of an ever longer list of foodstuffs.<sup>19</sup> This measure was hard, but its effects played out gradually in comparison to other forms of military violence against civilians that began with unmitigated brutality in the spring of 1915. During their great retreat in the east the Russian armies forced, often with violent means, the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, particularly Jews, out of their Polish or Lithuanian homelands. Thousands of them perished.<sup>20</sup> Worse still was the violence that was committed several months later against Armenian civilians in Anatolia, whose fate represented an unambiguous sign that the definition of «military measures» had now broadened to include genocide.<sup>21</sup>

A third category of innovations during the long year 1915 was admittedly present in inchoate form in the summer of 1914. This one pertained to the administrative reorganization of the home front as the indispensable prop of the fighting front. The mechanisms at play here were perhaps best illustrated in the spring of 1915 by the so-called shell scandal in Britain. When in May British newspapers published sensational reports of shortages of munitions in the front armies, the result was a governmental crisis, which led to the reorganization of the cabinet and the establishment of a new Ministry of Munitions under David Lloyd George. Equipped with authoritarian powers, this new agency took over control of the whole spectrum of British arms and munitions production and thus brought to fulfillment a system that soon coordinated the private and public means of



military production, including relations between capital and labor, in the other belligerent lands as well.<sup>22</sup> The history of this effort represented probably the most indelible feature of the war on the home front, because it encompassed the increasing public coordination of consumption. Let the observation suffice that the great push in the direction of centralized administration of all militarily significant resources, including food and fuel, came in the long year 1915. To cite but one example, a majority of the more than two hundred war raw-materials corporations, which represented the German institutional pendant to the British Ministry of Munitions, were founded in this period.<sup>23</sup>

A final dimension of this administrative reorganization is worth mention. It took place in the occupied lands of Europe, particularly in northern France, Belgium, and Serbia. By the end of 1915 at the latest, a new phase of occupation began, once it became clear that the end of the war was nowhere in sight and that the occupation would last much longer than originally thought. In these circumstances the last traces of moderation disappeared with respect to the occupied populations – limits that had been imposed on the occupying powers by international law, as well, perhaps, as a residual sense of humanity – so the economic exploitation of the occupied territories now expanded ruthlessly and without reservation to the point where it encompassed the deportation of forced labor.<sup>24</sup>

These developments during the long year 1915 can easily be cast as the progressive realization of total war. They all bear on the removal of the restraints on war, in other words on the conditions by which historians have usually sought to define total war. In total war all available kinds of weapons are deployed. In total war the distinctions between soldiers and civilians disappear, as both become not only essential for the prosecution of war, but also equally legitimate as goals of military violence. To this extent, civilians and soldiers alike are systematically and directly exposed in one way or another to the effects of war.<sup>25</sup>

One is tempted to say that these observations have brought us to a convincing answer to the question of when the war became total. The answer would thus be: by the beginning of 1916 at the latest. Or perhaps not. There is an analytical problem. It has to do with the often stated claim that total war was an unprecedented phenomenon, which took shape only with the development of industrialized people's war in the twentieth century. The problem is that nothing that emerged in the long year 1915 as a central feature of war was really new. This proposition applies in principle, if not to the same extent, to the organization of civil society for war (one thinks of the *levée en masse* or the cameralism of the 18th century). It applies also to the deployment of poison gas (Chinese sources cite the use of arsenic smoke three thousand years ago). It applies to trench warfare (the later phases of the American Civil War took place in the trenches of southern



Virginia), war in the air (which was in evidence in the Libyan and Balkan Wars), or mass violence against Jews in Poland and against Armenians in Anatolia, which was anything but unprecedented. Systematic military violence against civilians is a hoary tradition of war. It has been applied (should military history offer any guidance) whenever such violence offers military advantages.<sup>26</sup> The same can be said of commercial blockades, of which submarines ushered in a relatively new form, although even these weapons were already in use during the American Civil War.

It is therefore necessary to introduce an additional possibility before we venture a final attempt to date total war. In the running debates over total war, the economic historians have identified probably the most reliable measure of «totality», at least with respect to one of the central dimensions of modern war. In any case they appear to quarrel with one another a great deal less than historians do. For the economic historians the answer to the question of totality is a quantifiable factor. It is the relationship between gross domestic product (or national income) and public expenditures in the belligerent states, assuming that such outlays can, with some minor qualifications, be regarded as war expenditures. From here the determination is fairly simple, if a little arbitrary, that a proportion of more than «x» percent represents a «total» economic commitment to war.<sup>27</sup> If one assumes further that this «total proportion» lies, say, between thirty-five and forty percent, one arrives at the following results:

<i>Public Expenditure as a Proportion of Gross National Product*</i>					
	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Austria-Hungary**</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>USA</i>
1913	10,0	9,8	4,2	8,1	1,8
1914	22,3	23,9		12,7	1,9
1915	46,4	43,8	30,2	33,3	1,9
1916	47,2	50,3	26,8	37,1	1,5
1917	49,9	59,0	22,2	37,1	3,2
1918	53,5	50,1	17,2	35,1	16,6

\* Source: Stephen Broadberry und Mark Harrison (Hg.): *The Economics of World War I*, Cambridge 2005, 15  
 \*\* Ibid. 84. = War Expenditure as a proportion of gross national product

The advantages of this approach are obvious. Although one might quarrel with the size of the proportion, there is an unambiguous standard for totality. Although the statistics are in most cases lacking for earlier historical epochs, there is little doubt that these figures, should they be available, would reflect the novelty of industrial warfare in the twentieth century, insofar as until the end of the nineteenth century neither gross domestic product nor the capacity of the state to mobilize such a proportion of gross domestic product for the purposes of war was possible or, for that matter, conceivable. The disadvantage of the same approach, however, is



that it reveals in its own way the difficulties posed by the concept of totality in war. According to the figures in this table, totality was realized – if at all – at different times in different belligerent states. Accordingly, France and Germany pursued total war as early as 1915, Britain only in 1916, Austria-Hungary and Russia at no time – and the United States not even remotely. In the light of the same figures one has to deal with the conundrum that the First World War could become less total over its course. In 1917, for example, it was clearly «more total» in Germany than in France, a situation that was reversed the following year.

In the end, the question «when did the war become total» appears to raise more confusion than at the beginning. An answer to the question offers several possibilities. All of them involve difficulties, and many are mutually exclusive. The very concept of «total war» was invented only toward the end of the war. Probably as a symptom of growing exhaustion, however, war expenditures actually fell in the succeeding months in several belligerent countries – in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Great Britain, although not in Clemenceau's France. These methodological problems suggest above all that raising the question of the war's totality is itself misguided or futile, if one seeks an answer in a specific condition or state of affairs – a point after which a sufficient degree of «totality» existed to merit the designation «total war». In this way, «total» conditions themselves represent an analytical obstacle, insofar as they encompass so many controversial elements.

In an effort to find an escape from this dilemma and thus to offer an acceptable answer to the question of «when» the war became total, I would like to conclude with a modest suggestion. We should think of «total war» less as a condition or state of affairs than as a process – as an attempt to manage conceptually a series of developments, changes, growing material and moral burdens, which were caused by the war and experienced massively in the course of it in all belligerent lands, albeit in different degrees. If one wishes to follow the argument of Egmont Zechlin, Bethmann Hollweg was early alive to this challenge. The events of the long year 1915 confronted entire populations, whether they fought on the front or endured the war behind the lines, with the same challenge, which included a basic and comprehensive economic adjustment to the war, as well as the political remobilization that began to occur in different lands after 1916. The attempt of Clemenceau to find an appropriate designation for all these developments came admittedly late in the war, and it comprehended the sum of these developments. The enduring appeal of this semantic invention reflected its plausibility as a conceptual guide to the developments that entire populations had experienced during the First World War and would experience again twenty years later.

When did the war become total? My answer must be: when people became accustomed to understand it as a total war and to designate it as such.



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- 13 *Ibid.*, 365.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 The argument has been developed by Soutou, Georges-Henri, *L'or et le sang. Les buts de guerre économiques de la Première Guerre mondiale*, Paris 1989, 30–34.
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