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## The Age of Total War

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Lines of grey muttering faces, masked with fear,  
They leave their trenches, going over the top,  
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,  
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,  
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

- Siegfried Sassoon (1947, p. 71)

It may be thought better, in view of the allegations of 'barbarity' of air attacks, to preserve appearances by formulating milder rules and by still nominally confining bombardment to targets which are strictly military in character. . . to avoid emphasizing the truth that air warfare has made such restrictions obsolete and impossible. It may be some time until another war occurs and meanwhile the public may become educated as to the meaning of air power.

-- *Rules as to Bombardment by Aircraft*, 1921 (Townshend, 1986, p.161)

(Sarajevo, 1946.) Here as in Belgrade, I see in the streets a considerable number of young women whose hair is greying, or completely grey. Their faces are tormented, but still young, while the form of their bodies betrays their youth even more clearly. It seems to me that I see how the hand of this last war has passed over the heads of these frail beings. . .

This sight cannot be preserved for the future; these heads will soon become even greyer and disappear. That is a pity. Nothing could speak more clearly to future generations about our times than these youthful grey heads, from which the nonchalance of youth has been stolen.

Let them at least have a memorial in this little note.

- *Signs by the Roadside* (Andrić, 1992, p. 50)

I

'The lamps are going out all over Europe,' said Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary of Great Britain, as he watched the lights of Whitehall on the night when Britain and Germany went to war in 1914. 'We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.' In Vienna the great satirist Karl Kraus prepared to document and denounce that war in an extraordinary reportage-drama of 792 pages to which he gave the title *The Last Days of Humanity*. Both saw the world war as the end of a world, and they were not

alone. It was not the end of humanity, although there were moments, in the course of the thirty-one years of world conflict between the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia on 28 July 1914 and the unconditional surrender of Japan on 14 August 1945 – four days after the explosion of the first nuclear bomb when the end of a considerable proportion of the human race did not look far off. There were surely times when the god or gods, whom pious humans believed to have created the world and all in it, might have been expected to regret having done so.

Mankind survived. Nevertheless, the great edifice of nineteenth-century civilization crumpled in the flames of world war, as its pillars collapsed. There is no understanding the Short Twentieth Century without it. It was marked by war. It lived and thought in terms of world war, even when the guns were silent and the bombs were not exploding. Its history and, more specifically, the history of its initial age of break-down and catastrophe, must begin with that of the thirty-one years' world war.

For those who had grown up before 1914 the contrast was so dramatic that many of them – including the generation of this historian's parents, or, at any rate, its central European members, refused to see any continuity with the past. 'Peace' meant 'before 1914': after that came something that no longer deserved the name. This was understandable. In 1914 there had been no major war for a century, that is to say, a war in which all, or even a majority of, major powers had been involved, the major players in the international game at that time being the six European 'great powers' (Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Prussia – after 1871 enlarged into Germany – and, after it was unified, Italy), the USA and Japan. There had been only one brief war in which more than two of the major powers had been in battle, the Crimean War (1854--56) between Russian on one side, Britain and France on the other. Moreover, most wars involving major powers at all had been comparatively quick. Much the longest of them was not an international conflict but a civil war within the USA (1861-65). The length of war was measured in months or even (like the 1866 war between Prussia and Austria) in weeks. Between 1871 and 1914 there had been no wars in Europe at all in which the armies of major powers crossed any hostile frontier, although in the Far East Japan fought, and beat, Russia in 1904-5, thus hastening the Russian revolution.

There had been no *world* wars at all. In the eighteenth century France and Britain had contended in a series of wars whose battlefields ranged from India through Europe to North America, and across the world's oceans. Between 1815 and 1914 no major power fought another outside its immediate region, although aggressive expeditions of imperial or would-be imperial powers against weaker overseas enemies were, of course, common. Most of these were spectacularly one-sided fights, such as the US wars against Mexico (1846-48) and Spain (1898) and the various campaigns to extend the British and French colonial empires, although the worm turned once or twice, as when the French had to withdraw from Mexico in the 1860s, the Italians from Ethiopia in 1896. Even the most formidable opponents of modern states, their arsenals increasingly filled with an overwhelmingly superior technology of death,

could only hope, at best, to postpone the inevitable retreat. Such exotic conflicts were the stuff of adventure literature or the reports of that mid-nineteenth-century innovation the war correspondent, rather than matters of direct relevance to most inhabitants of the states which waged and won them.

All this changed in 1914. The First World War involved *all* major powers and indeed all European states except Spain, the Netherlands, the three Scandinavian countries and Switzerland. What is more, troops from the world overseas were, often for the first time, sent to fight and work outside their own regions. Canadians fought in France, Australians and New Zealanders forged their national consciousness on a peninsula in the Aegean – ‘Gallipoli’ became their national myth – and, more significantly, the United States rejected George Washington’s warning against ‘European entanglements’ and sent its men to fight there, thus determining the shape of twentieth-century history. Indians were sent to Europe and the Middle East, Chinese labour battalions came to the West, Africans fought in the French army. Though military action outside Europe was not very significant, except in the Middle East, the naval war was once again global: its first battle was fought in 1914 off the Falkland Islands, its decisive campaigns, by German submarines and Allied convoys, on and under the seas of the North and mid-Atlantic.

That the Second World War was literally global hardly needs to be demonstrated. Virtually all independent states of the world were involved, willingly or unwillingly, although the republics of Latin America participated only in the most nominal manner. The colonies of imperial powers had no choice in the matter. Except for the future Irish Republic, Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal, Turkey and Spain in Europe, and possibly Afghanistan outside Europe, virtually the whole globe was belligerent or occupied or both. As for the battlefields, the names of Melanesian islands and of settlements in the North African deserts, in Burma and the Philippines became as familiar to newspaper readers and radio listeners – and this was quintessentially the war of the radio news bulletins – as the names of Arctic and Caucasian battles, of Normandy, Stalingrad and Kursk. The Second World War was a lesson in world geography.

Local, regional or global, the wars of the twentieth century were to be on an altogether vaster scale than anything previously experienced. Among seventy-four international wars between 1816 and 1965, which American specialists, who like to do that kind of thing, have ranked by the number of people they killed, the top four occurred in the twentieth century: the two world wars, the Japanese war against China in 1937-39, and the Korean war. They killed upwards of one million persons in battle. The largest documented international war of the post-Napoleonic nineteenth century, that between Prussia/Germany and France in 1870-71, killed perhaps 150,000, an order of magnitude roughly comparable to the deaths in the Chaco war of 1932-35 between Bolivia (pop. *c.* 3 million) and Paraguay (pop. *c.* 1.4 million). In short, 1914 opens the age of massacre (Singer, 1972, pp. 66,131).

There is not space in this book to discuss the origins of the First World War,

which the present author has tried to sketch in *The Age of Empire*. It began as an essentially European war between the triple alliance of France, Britain and Russia on one side, the so-called ‘central powers’ of Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other, Serbia and Belgium being immediately drawn in by the Austrian attack on one (which actually set off the war) and the German attack on the other (which was part of the German strategic war plan). Turkey and Bulgaria soon joined the central powers, while on the other side the Triple Alliance gradually built up into a very large coalition. Italy was bribed in; Greece, Rumania and (much more nominally) Portugal were also involved. More to the point, Japan joined in almost immediately in order to take over German positions in the Far East and Western Pacific, but took no interest in anything outside its own region, and – more significantly – the USA entered in 1917. In fact, its intervention was to be decisive.

The Germans, then as in the Second World War, were faced with a possible war on two fronts, quite apart from the Balkans into which they were drawn by their alliance with Austria-Hungary. (However, since three of the four Central Powers were in that region – Turkey and Bulgaria as well as Austria – the strategic problem there was not so urgent.) The German plan was to knock out France quickly in the West and then move with equal rapidity to knock out Russia in the East, before the Tsar’s empire could bring the full weight of its enormous military manpower into effective action. Then, as later, Germany planned for a lightning campaign (what would in the Second World War be called a *blitzkrieg*) because it had to. The plan almost succeeded, but not quite. The German army advanced into France, among other places through neutral Belgium, and was only halted a few dozen miles east of Paris on the river Marne five to six weeks after war had been declared. (In 1940 the plan was to succeed.) They then withdraw a little, and both sides – the French now supplemented by what remained of the Belgians and by a British land force which was soon to grow enormously improvised parallel lines of defensive trenches and fortifications which soon stretched without a break from the Channel coast in Flanders to the Swiss frontier, leaving a good deal of eastern France and Belgium in German occupation. They did not shift significantly for the next three-and-a-half years.

This was the ‘Western Front’, which became a machine for massacre such as had probably never before been seen in the history of warfare. Millions of men faced each other across the sandbagged parapets of the trenches under which they lived like, and with, rats and lice. From time to time their generals would seek to break out of the deadlock. Days, even weeks of unceasing artillery bombardment – what a German writer later called ‘hurricanes of steel’ (Ernst Jünger, 1921) – were to ‘soften up’ the enemy and drive him underground, until at the right moment waves of men climbed over the parapet, usually protected by coils and webs of barbed wire, into ‘no-man’s land’, a chaos of waterlogged shell-craters, ruined tree-stumps, mud and abandoned corpses, to advance into the machine-guns that mowed them down. As they knew they would. The attempt of the Germans to break through at Verdun in 1916

(February-July) was a battle of two millions, with one million casualties. It failed. The British offensive on the Somme, designed to force the Germans to break off the Verdun offensive cost Britain 420,000 dead – 60,000 casualties on the first day of the attack. It is not surprising that in the memory of the British and the French, who fought most of the First World War on the western front, it remained the ‘Great War’, more terrible and traumatic in memory than the Second World War. The French lost almost 20 per cent of their men of military age, and if we include the prisoners of war, the wounded and the permanently disabled and disfigured – those ‘*gueules cassés*’ (‘smashed faces’) which became so vivid a part of the after-image of the war – not much more than one in three French soldiers came through the war without harm. The chances of the five million or so British soldiers surviving the war unharmed were just about evens. The British lost a generation – half a million men under the age of thirty (Winter, 1986 p. 83) – notably among their upper classes, whose young men, destined as gentlemen to be officers who set an example, marched into battle at the head of their men and were consequently mown down first. One quarter of the Oxford and Cambridge students under the age of twenty-five who served in the British army in 1914 were killed (Winter, 1986, p. 98). The Germans, though the number of their dead was even greater than the French, lost only a smaller proportion of their much larger military age-groups – 13 per cent. Even the apparently modest losses of the USA (116,000, against the 1.6 millions of French, the almost 800,000 of British, the 1.8 millions of Germans) actually demonstrate the murderous nature of the Western front, the only one where they fought. For while the USA lost between 2.5 and 3 times as many in the Second World War as in the First, the American forces in 1917-18 were in action for barely a year-and-a-half, compared to the three-and-a-half years of the Second World War, and on only a single narrow sector and not world-wide.

The horrors of warfare on the Western Front were to have even darker consequences. The experience itself naturally helped to brutalize both warfare and politics: if one could be conducted without counting the human or any other costs, why not the other? Most men who served in the First World War – overwhelmingly as conscripts – came out of it as convinced haters of war. However, those ex-soldiers who had passed through this kind of war without being turned against it sometimes drew from the shared experience of living with death and courage a sense of incommunicable and savage superiority, not least to women and those who had not fought, which was to fill the early ranks of the post-war ultra-right. Adolf Hitler was only one of such men for whom having been a *frontsoldat* was the formative experience of their lives. However, the opposite reaction had equally negative consequences. After the war it became quite evident to politicians, at least in democratic countries, that bloodbaths like 1914-18 would no longer be tolerated by the voters. The post-1918 strategy of Britain and France, like the post-Vietnam strategy of the USA, was based on this assumption. In the short run this helped the Germans to win the Second World War in the West in 1940 against a France

committed to crouch behind its incomplete fortifications and, once these had been breached, simply unwilling to fight on; and a Britain desperate to avoid committing itself to the sort of massive land war that had decimated its people in 1914-18. In the longer run democratic governments failed to resist the temptation of saving their own citizens’ lives by treating those of enemy countries as totally expendable. The dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 was not justified as indispensable for victory, which was by then absolutely certain, but as a means of saving American soldiers’ lives. But perhaps the thought that it would prevent America’s ally the USSR from establishing a claim to a major part in Japan’s defeat was not absent from the minds of the U S government either.

While the Western Front settled into bloody stalemate, the Eastern Front remained in movement. The Germans pulverised a clumsy Russian invasion force at the battle of Tannenberg in the first month of war and thereafter, with the intermittently effective help of the Austrians, pushed Russia out of Poland. In spite of occasional Russian counter-offensives, it was clear that the Central Powers had the upper hand, and Russia was fighting a defensive rearguard action against the German advance. In the Balkans the Central powers were in control, in spite of an uneven military performance by the rocky Habsburg empire. The local belligerents, Serbia and Rumania, incidentally, suffered by far the greatest proportional military losses. The Allies, in spite of occupying Greece, made no headway until the collapse of the Central Powers after the summer of 1918. The plan by Italy to open another front against Austria-Hungary in the Alps failed, mainly because many Italian soldiers saw no reason to fight for the government of a state they did not consider theirs, and whose language few of them could speak. After a major military debacle at Caporetto in 1917, which left a literary memory in Ernest Hemingway’s novel *A Farewell to Arms*, the Italians had even to be stiffened by transfers from other Allied armies. Meanwhile France, Britain and Germany bled each other to death on the Western Front, Russia was increasingly destabilized by the war she was patently losing, and the Austro-Hungarian empire increasingly tottered towards its break-up, which its local nationalist movements longed for, and to which the Allied foreign ministries resigned themselves without enthusiasm, rightly foreseeing an unstable Europe.

How to break the stalemate on the Western Front was the crucial problem for both sides, for without victory in the West neither could win the war, all the more so since the naval war was also deadlocked. Except for some isolated raiders, the Allies controlled the oceans, but the British and German battle-fleets faced and immobilized each other on the North Sea. Their only attempt to engage in battle (1916) ended indecisively, but since it confined the German fleet to its bases, on balance it was to the Allies’ advantage.

Both sides tried to do it by technology. The Germans – always strong in chemistry – brought poison gas onto the battlefield, where it proved both barbarous and ineffective, leaving behind the only genuine case of government humanitarian revulsion against a means of conducting warfare, the Geneva Convention of 1925, by

which the world pledged itself not to use chemical warfare. And indeed, though all governments continued to prepare for it and expected the enemy to use it, it was not used by either side in the Second World War though humanitarian feelings did not prevent the Italians from gassing colonial people. (The steep decline in the values of civilization after the Second World War eventually brought poison gas back. During the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s Iraq, then enthusiastically supported by the Western states, used it freely against both soldiers and civilians.) The British pioneered the caterpinned armoured vehicle, still known by its then code-name of *tank*, but their far from impressive generals had not yet discovered how to use it. Both sides used the new and still frail airplanes, as well as (by Germany) the curious cigar-shaped hydrogen-fined airships, experimenting with aerial bombardment. Fortunately not to much effect. Air warfare also came into its own, notably as a means of terrorizing civilians, in the Second World War.

The only technological weapon which had a major effect on warfare in 1914-18 was the submarine, for both sides, unable to defeat each other's soldiers, resorted to starving the other's civilians. Since all Britain's supplies were seaborne, it seemed feasible to strangle the British Isles by increasingly ruthless submarine warfare against shipping. The campaign came close to success in 1917 before effective ways to counter it were found, but it did more than anything else to draw the USA into the war. The British, in turn, did their best to blockade supplies to Germany, i.e. to starve both the German war economy and the German population. They were more effective than they ought to have been, since, as we shall see, the German war economy was not run with the efficiency and rationality on which the Germans prided themselves. Unlike the German military machine, which, in the First as in the Second World War, was strikingly superior to any other. This sheer superiority of the German army as a military force might just have proved decisive, had the Allies not been able to call on the practically unlimited resources of the USA from 1917. As it was, Germany, even hobbled by the alliance with Austria, secured total victory in the East, driving Russia out of the war, into revolution and out of a large part of her European territories in 1917-18. Shortly after imposing the penal peace of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918) the German army, now free to concentrate in the West, actually broke through the Western Front and advanced on Paris again. Thanks to the flood of American reinforcements and equipment, the Allies recovered, but for a while it looked a close thing. However, it was the last throw of an exhausted Germany, which knew itself to be close to defeat. Once the Allies began to advance in the summer of 1918, the end was only a few weeks away. The Central Powers not only admitted defeat but collapsed. Revolution swept across central and south-eastern Europe in the autumn of 1918, as it had swept across Russia in 1917 (see next chapter). No old government was left standing between the borders of France and the Sea of Japan. Even the belligerents on the victorious side were shaken, although it is difficult to believe that Britain and France would not have survived even defeat as stable political entities; but not Italy. Certainly none of the defeated countries escaped

revolution.

If one of the great ministers or diplomats of the past – the ones on whom aspiring members of their countries' foreign services were still told to model themselves, a Talleyrand or a Bismarck – had risen from their graves to observe the First World War, they would certainly have wondered why sensible statesmen had not decided to settle the war by some compromise before it destroyed the world of 1914. We must also wonder. Most non-revolutionary and non-ideological wars of the past had not been waged as struggles to death or total exhaustion. In 1914 ideology was certainly not what divided the belligerents, except insofar as the war had to be fought on both sides by mobilizing public opinion, i.e. by claiming some profound challenge to accepted national values, such as Russian barbarism against German culture, French and British democracy against German absolutism, or the like. Moreover there were statesmen who recommended some kind of compromise settlement even outside Russia and Austria-Hungary which lobbied their Allies in this sense with increasing desperation as defeat drew near. Why, then, was the First World War waged by the leading powers on both sides as a zero sum game, i.e. as a war which could only be totally won or totally lost?

The reason was that this war, unlike earlier wars, which were typically waged for limited and specifiable objects, was waged for unlimited ends. In the Age of Empire, politics and economics had fused. International rivalry was modelled on economic growth and competition, but the characteristic feature of this was precisely that it had no limit. "The 'natural frontiers' of Standard Oil, the Deutsche Bank or the De Beers Diamond Corporation were at the end of the universe, or rather at the limits of their capacity to expand." (Hobsbawm, 1987, p. 318.) More concretely, for the two main contestants, Germany and Britain, the sky had to be the limit, since Germany wanted a global political and maritime position like that now occupied by Britain, and which therefore would automatically relegate an already declining Britain to inferior status. It was either/or. For France, then as later, the stakes were less global but equally urgent: to compensate for its increasing, and apparently inevitable, demographic and economic inferiority to Germany. Here also the issue was the future of France as a great power. In both cases compromise would merely have meant postponement. Germany itself, one might have supposed, could wait until its growing size and superiority established the position German governments felt to be their country's due, which would happen sooner or later. Indeed, the dominant position of a twice defeated Germany with no claims to independent military power in Europe was more unchallenged in the early 1990s than the claims of militarist Germany ever were before 1945. Yet that is because Britain and France, as we shall see, were forced after the Second World War, however reluctantly, to accept their relegation to second-rank status, just as Federal Germany, with all its economic strength, recognized that in the post-1945 world supremacy as a single state was, and would have to remain, beyond its power. In the 1900s, at the peak of the imperial and imperialist era, both the German claim to unique global status ("The German spirit

will regenerate the world', as the phrase went) and the resistance of Britain and France, still undeniable 'great powers' in a Euro-centred world, were as yet intact. On paper no doubt compromise was possible on this or that point of the almost megalomaniac 'war aims' which both sides formulated as soon as war had broken out, but in practice the only war aim that counted was total victory: what in the Second World War came to be called 'unconditional surrender'.

It was an absurd and self-defeating aim which ruined both victors and vanquished. It drove the defeated into revolution, and the victors into bankruptcy and physical exhaustion. In 1940 France was overrun by inferior German forces with ridiculous ease and speed, and accepted subordination to Hitler without hesitation, because the country had almost bled to death in 1914-18. Britain was never the same again after 1918 because the country had ruined its economy by waging a war substantially beyond its resources. Moreover, total victory, ratified by a penal, dictated peace, ruined what little chances there were of restoring something even faintly like a stable, liberal, bourgeois Europe, as the economist John Maynard Keynes immediately recognized. If Germany was not reintegrated into the European economy, i.e. if the country's economic weight within that economy was not recognized and accepted, there could be no stability. But this was the last consideration in the minds of those who had fought to eliminate Germany.

The peace-settlement, imposed by the major surviving victorious powers (USA, Britain, France, Italy) and usually, if inaccurately, known as the Treaty of Versailles,<sup>1</sup> was dominated by five considerations. The most immediate was the breakdown of so many regimes in Europe, and the emergence in Russia of an alternative revolutionary Bolshevik regime dedicated to universal subversion, and a magnet for revolutionary forces everywhere else (see chapter 2). Second, there was the need to control Germany which had, after all, almost defeated the entire Allied coalition single-handed. For obvious reasons this was, and has ever since remained, the major concern of France. Third, the map of Europe had to be redivided and re-drawn, both to weaken Germany and to fill the large empty spaces left in Europe and the Middle East by the simultaneous defeat and collapse of the Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman empires. The main claimants to the succession, at least in Europe, were various nationalist movements which the victors tended to encourage insofar as they were adequately anti-Bolshevik. In fact, in Europe the basic principle of re-ordering the map was to create ethnic-linguistic nation states, according to the belief that nations had the 'right to self-determination'. President Wilson of the USA, whose opinions were seen as expressing those of the power without whom the war would have been lost, was passionately committed to this belief, which was (and is) more easily held by

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<sup>1</sup> Technically the Treaty of Versailles only made peace with Germany. Various parks and royal chateaux in the neighbourhood of Paris gave their names to the other treaties: Saint Germain, with Austria; Trianon with Hungary; Sevres with Turkey; Neuilly with Bulgaria.

those far from the ethnic and linguistic realities of the regions which were to be divided into neat nation-states. The attempt was a disaster, as can still be seen in the Europe of the 1990s. The national conflicts tearing the continent apart in the 1990s were the old chickens of Versailles once again coming home to roost.<sup>2</sup> The remapping of the Middle East was along conventional imperialist lines – division between Britain and France – except for Palestine, where the British government, anxious for international Jewish support during the war, had incautiously and ambiguously promised to establish 'a national home' for the Jews. This was to be another problematic and unforgotten relic of the First World War.

The fourth set of considerations were those of domestic politics within the victor countries – which meant, in practice, Britain, France and the USA – and frictions between them. The most important consequence of such internal politicking was that the U S Congress refused to ratify a peace settlement largely written by or for its President, and the USA consequently withdrew from it, with far-reaching results.

Finally, the victor powers desperately searched for the kind of peace settlement which would make impossible another war like the one that had just devastated the world, and whose after-effects were all around them. They failed in the most spectacular manner. Within twenty years the world was once again at war.

Making the world safe from Bolshevism and re-mapping Europe overlapped, since the most immediate way to deal with revolutionary Russia, if by any chance it survived – this was by no means certain in 1919 – was to isolate it behind a 'quarantine belt' (*cordon sanitaire*, in the contemporary language of diplomacy) of anti-communist states. Since the territory of these was largely or wholly carved out of the formerly Russian lands, their hostility to Moscow could be guaranteed. Going from north to south, these were: Finland, an autonomous region that had been allowed to secede by Lenin; three new little Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), for which there was no historical precedent; Poland, restored to independent statehood after 120 years, and an enormously enlarged Rumania, its size doubled by accessions from the Hungarian and Austrian parts of the Habsburg empire and ex-Russian Bessarabia. Most of these territories had actually been detached from Russia by Germany and, but for the Bolshevik Revolution, would certainly have been returned to that state. The attempt to continue this isolation belt into the Caucasus, failed, essentially because revolutionary Russia came to terms with non-communist but revolutionary Turkey, which had no fondness for the British and French imperialists. Hence the briefly independent Armenian and Georgian states, set up after Brest Litovsk, and attempts under the British to detach oil-rich Azerbaijan, did not survive the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Civil War of 1918-20 and the Soviet-Turkish

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<sup>2</sup> The Yugoslav civil war, the secessionist agitation in Slovakia, the secession of the Baltic states from the former USSR, the conflicts between Hungarians and Rumanians over Transylvania, the separatism of Moldova (Moldavia, formerly Bessarabia), and for that matter Transcaucasian nationalism, are among the explosive problems which either did not exist or could not have existed before 1914.

treaty of 1921. In short, in the East the Allies accepted the frontiers imposed by Germany on revolutionary Russia, insofar as these were not made inoperative by forces beyond their control.

This still left large parts, mainly of formerly Austro-Hungarian Europe, to be re-mapped. Austria and Hungary were reduced to German and Magyar rumps, Serbia was expanded into a large new Yugoslavia by a merger with the (formerly Austrian) Slovenia and the (formerly Hungarian) Croatia, as well as with the formerly independent small tribal kingdom of herdsmen and raiders, Montenegro, a bleak mass of mountains whose inhabitants reacted to the unprecedented loss of independence by converting en masse to communism, which, they felt, appreciated the heroic virtue. It was also associated with orthodox Russia, whose faith the unconquered men of the Black Mountain had defended against the Turkish unbelievers for so many centuries. A new Czechoslovakia was also formed by joining the former industrial core of the Habsburg empire, the Czech lands, to the areas of Slovak and Ruthenian country people once belonging to Hungary. Rumania was enlarged into a multinational conglomerate, while Poland and Italy also benefited. There was absolutely no historical precedent for or logic in the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak combinations, which were constructs of a nationalist ideology which believed in both the force of common ethnicity and the undesirability of excessively small nation-states. All the southern Slavs (= Yugoslavs) belonged to one state, as did the western Slavs of the Czech and Slovak lands. As might have been expected, these shotgun political marriages did not prove very firm. Incidentally, except for rump Austria and rump Hungary, shorn of most – but in practice not entirely of all – their minorities, the new succession states, whether carved out of Russia or the Habsburg Empire, were no less multinational than their predecessors.

A penal peace, justified by the argument that the state was uniquely responsible for the war and all its consequences (the ‘war guilt’ clause) was imposed on Germany to keep her permanently enfeebled. This was achieved not so much by territorial losses, though Alsace-Lorraine went back to France, a substantial region in the east to a restored Poland (the ‘Polish Corridor’ which separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany), and some lesser adjustments to the German borders; rather it was to be ensured by depriving Germany of an effective navy and any air force; limiting its army to 100,000 men; imposing theoretically indefinite ‘reparations’ (payments for the costs of the war incurred by the victors); by the military occupation of part of western Germany; and, not least, by depriving Germany of all her former overseas colonies. (These were redistributed among the British and their dominions, the French and, to a lesser extent, the Japanese, but, in deference to the growing unpopularity of imperialism, they were no longer called ‘colonies’ but ‘mandates’ to ensure the progress of backward peoples, handed over by humanity to imperial powers who would not dream of exploiting them for any other purpose.) Except for the territorial clauses, nothing was left of the Treaty of Versailles by the middle 1930s.

As for the mechanism for preventing another world war, it was evident that the

consortium of European ‘great powers’ which had been supposed to secure this before 1914 had utterly broken down. The alternative, urged on hard-nosed European politicians by President Wilson with all the liberal fervour of a Princeton political scientist, was to set up an all-embracing ‘League of Nations’ (i.e. independent states) which would settle problems peacefully and democratically before they had got out of hand, preferably by public negotiation (‘open covenants openly arrived at’), for the war had also made the habitual and sensible processes of international negotiation suspect as ‘secret diplomacy’. This was largely a reaction against the secret treaties arranged among the Allies during the war, in which they carved up post-war Europe and the Middle East with a startling lack of concern for the wishes, or even the interests, of the inhabitants of these regions. The Bolsheviks, discovering these sensitive documents in the Tsarist archives, had promptly published them for the world to read, and an exercise of damage limitation was therefore called for. The League of Nations was indeed set up as part of the peace settlement, and proved an almost total failure, except as an institution for collecting statistics. It did, however, in its early days, settle one or two minor disputes which did not put world peace at much risk, such as that between Finland and Sweden over the Åland Islands.<sup>3</sup> The refusal of the USA to join the League of Nations deprived it of any real meaning.

It is not necessary to go into the details of interwar history to see that the Versailles settlement could not possibly be the basis of a stable peace. It was doomed from the start, and another war was therefore practically certain. As we have already noted, the USA almost immediately contracted out, and in a world no longer Euro-centred and Euro-determined, no settlement not underwritten by what was now a major world power could hold. As we shall see, this was true of the world’s economic affairs as well as of its politics. Two major European, and indeed world, powers, were temporarily not only eliminated from the international game, but assumed not to exist as independent players – Germany and Soviet Russia. As soon as either or both these re-entered the scene, a peace settlement based on Britain and France alone – for Italy also remained dissatisfied – could not last. And, sooner or later Germany, or Russia, or both, would inevitably reappear as major players.

What little chance the peace had, was torpedoed by the refusal of the victor powers to reintegrate the losers. It is true that the total repression of Germany and the total outlawing of Soviet Russia soon proved impossible, but adjustment to reality was slow and reluctant. The French, in particular, only abandoned the hope of keeping Germany feeble and impotent unwillingly. (The British were not haunted by the memory of defeat and invasion.) As for the USSR, the victor states would have

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<sup>3</sup> The Åland Islands, situated between Finland and Sweden, and part of Finland, were and are inhabited exclusively by a Swedish-speaking population, whereas the newly independent Finland was aggressively committed to the dominance of the Finnish language. As an alternative to secession to nearby Sweden, the League devised a scheme which guaranteed the exclusive use of Swedish on the islands, and safeguarded them against unwanted immigration from the Finnish mainland.

preferred it not to exist, and, having backed the armies of counter-revolution in the Russian Civil War, and sent military forces to support them, showed no enthusiasm about recognizing its survival. Their businessmen even dismissed the offers of the most far-reaching concessions to foreign investors made by Lenin, desperate for any way to restart an economy almost destroyed by war, revolution and civil war ~ Soviet Russia was forced into developing in isolation, even though for political purposes the two outlaw states of Europe, Soviet Russia and Germany, drew together in the early 1920s.

Perhaps the next war might have been avoided, or at least postponed, if the pre-war economy had been restored again as a global system of prosperous growth and expansion. However, after a few years in the middle 1920s when it seemed to have put the war and post-war disruptions behind it, the world economy plunged into the greatest and most dramatic crisis it had known since the industrial revolution (see chapter 3). And this then brought to power, both in Germany and in Japan, the political forces of militarism and the extreme right committed to a deliberate break with the status quo by confrontation, if necessary military, rather than by gradually negotiated change. From then on a new world war was not only predictable, but routinely predicted. Those who became adults in the 1930s expected it. The image of fleets of airplanes dropping bombs on cities and of nightmare figures in gasmasks tapping their way like blind people through the fog of poison gas, haunted my generation: prophetically in one case, mistakenly in the other.

## II

The origins of the Second World War have produced an incomparably smaller historical literature than the causes of the First, and for an obvious reason. With the rarest exceptions, no serious historian has ever doubted that Germany, Japan and (more hesitantly) Italy were the aggressors. The states drawn into the war against these three, whether capitalist or socialist, did not want a war, and most of them did what they could to avoid one. In the simplest terms the question who or what caused the Second World War can be answered in two words: Adolf Hitler.

Answers to historical questions are not, of course, so simple. As we have seen, the world situation created by the First World War was inherently unstable, especially in Europe, but also in the Far East, and peace was therefore not expected to last. Dissatisfaction with the status quo was not confined to the defeated states, although these, and notably Germany, felt they had plenty of cause for resentment, as indeed was the case. Every party in Germany, from the Communists on the extreme left to Hitler's National Socialists on the extreme right, concurred in condemning the Versailles Treaty as unjust and unacceptable. Paradoxically, a genuine German revolution might have produced an internationally less explosive Germany. The two defeated countries which were really revolutionized, Russia and Turkey, were too concerned with their own affairs, including the defence of their frontiers, to destabilize the international situation. They were forces for stability in the 1930s, and

indeed Turkey remained neutral in the Second World War. However, both Japan and Italy, though on the winning side in the war, also felt dissatisfied, the Japanese with somewhat greater realism than the Italians, whose imperial appetites greatly exceeded their state's independent power to satisfy them. In any case, Italy had come out of the war with considerable territorial gains in the Alps, on the Adriatic and even in the Aegean Sea, even if not quite with all the booty promised to the state by the Allies in return for joining their side in 1915. However, the triumph of fascism, a counter-revolutionary and therefore ultra-nationalist and imperialist movement, underlined Italian dissatisfaction (see chapter 5). As for Japan, its very considerable military and naval force made it into much the most formidable power in the Far East, especially since Russia was out of the picture, and this was to some extent recognized internationally by the Washington Naval Agreement of 1922, which finally ended British naval supremacy by establishing a formula of 5: 5: 3 for the strength of the US, British and Japanese navies respectively. Yet Japan, whose industrialization was advancing at express speed – even though in absolute size the economy was still quite modest – 2.5 per cent of world industrial production in the late 1920s – undoubtedly felt that it deserved a rather larger slice of the Far Eastern cake than the white imperial powers granted it. Moreover, Japan was acutely conscious of the vulnerability of a country that lacked virtually all natural resources needed for a modern industrial economy, whose imports were at the mercy of disruption by foreign navies, and whose exports were at the mercy of the US market. Military pressure for the creation of a nearby land empire in China, it was argued, would shorten the Japanese lines of communication and thus make them less vulnerable.

Nevertheless, whatever the instability of the post-1918 peace and the probability of its breakdown, it is quite undeniable that what caused the Second World War concretely was aggression by the three malcontent powers, bound together by various treaties from the middle 1930s. The milestones on the road to war were the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931; the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935; the German and Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39; the German invasion of Austria in early 1938; the German crippling of Czechoslovakia later in the same year; the German occupation of what remained of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 (followed by the Italian occupation of Albania); and the German demands on Poland which actually led to the outbreak of war. Alternatively, we can count these milestones negatively: the failure of the League to act against Japan; the failure to take effective measures against Italy in 1935; the failure of Britain and France to respond to the unilateral German denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, and notably its military reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936; their refusal to intervene in the Spanish Civil War ('non-intervention'); their failure to respond to the occupation of Austria; their retreat before German blackmail over Czechoslovakia (the 'Munich Agreement' of 1938); and the refusal of the USSR to continue opposing Hitler in 1939 (the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939).

And yet, if one side clearly did not want war and did everything possible to avoid

it, and the other side glorified it and, in the case of Hitler, certainly actively desired it, none of the aggressors wanted the war they got, at the time they got it, and against at least some of the enemies they found themselves fighting. Japan, in spite of the military influence on its politics, would certainly have preferred to achieve its objectives – essentially the creation of an East Asian empire – without a *general* war, into which they only became involved because the USA was involved in one. What kind of war Germany wanted, when and against whom, are still matters of argument, since Hitler was not a man who documented his decisions, but two things are clear. A war against Poland (backed by Britain and France) in 1939 was not in his game plan, and the war in which he finally found himself, against both the USSR and the USA, was every German general's and diplomat's nightmare.

Germany (and later Japan) needed a rapid offensive war for the same reasons that had made it necessary in 1914. The joint resources of the potential enemies of each, once united and coordinated, were overwhelmingly greater than their own. Neither even planned effectively for a lengthy war, nor relied on armaments that had a long gestation period. (By contrast the British, accepting inferiority on land, put their money from the start into the most expensive and technologically sophisticated forms of armament and planned for a long war in which they and their allies would outproduce the other side.) The Japanese were more successful than the Germans in avoiding the coalition of their enemies, since they kept out of both Germany's war against Britain and France in 1939-40 and the war against Russia after 1941. Unlike all the other powers, they had actually been up against the Red army in an unofficial but substantial war on the Siberian-Chinese border in 1939 and had been badly mauled. Japan only entered the war against Britain and the USA, but not the USSR, in December 1941. Unfortunately for Japan, the only power it had to fight, the USA, was so vastly superior in its resources to Japan, that it was virtually bound to win.

Germany seemed luckier for a while. In the 1930s, as war drew nearer, Britain and France failed to join with Soviet Russia, and eventually Soviet Russia preferred to come to terms with Hitler, while local politics prevented President Roosevelt from giving more than paper backing to the side he passionately supported. The war therefore began in 1939 as a purely European war, and indeed, after Germany marched into Poland, which was defeated and partitioned with the now neutral USSR in three weeks, a purely west European war of Germany against Britain and France. In the spring of 1940, Germany overran Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and France with ridiculous ease, occupying the first four countries, and dividing France into a zone directly occupied and administered by the victorious Germans and a satellite French 'state' (its rulers, drawn from the various branches of French reaction, no longer liked to call it a republic) with its capital in a provincial health resort, Vichy. Only Britain was left at war with Germany, under a coalition of all national forces, headed by Winston Churchill, based on a total refusal to come to any kind of terms with Hitler. It was at this moment that fascist Italy mistakenly chose to slide off the fence of neutrality, on which its government had cautiously

been sitting, on to the German side. For practical purposes, the war in Europe was over. Even if Germany could not invade Britain because of the dual obstacle of the sea and the Royal Air Force, there was no foreseeable war in which Britain could return to the Continent, let alone defeat Germany. The months of 1940-41, when Britain stood alone, are a marvellous moment in the history of the British people, or at any rate those who were lucky enough to live through it, but the country's chances were slim. The USA's 'Hemispheric Defense' re-armament programme of June 1940 virtually assumed that further arms for Britain would be useless and, even after Britain's survival was accepted, the United Kingdom was still seen chiefly as an outlying defence base for America. Meanwhile the map of Europe was re-drawn. The USSR, by agreement, occupied those European parts of the Tsarist empire lost in 1918 (except for the parts of Poland taken over by Germany) and Finland, against which Stalin had fought a clumsy winter war in 1939-40, which pushed the Russian frontiers a little further away from Leningrad. Hitler presided over a revision of the Versailles settlement in the former Habsburg territories that proved shortlived. British attempts to extend the war in the Balkans led to the expected conquest of the entire peninsula by Germany, including the Greek islands.

Indeed, Germany actually crossed the Mediterranean into Africa when its ally Italy, even more disappointing as a military power in the Second World War than Austria-Hungary had been in the First World War, looked like being thrown entirely out of its African empire by the British, fighting from their main base in Egypt. The German Afrika Korps, under one of the most talented generals, Erwin Rommel, threatened the entire British position in the Middle East.

The war was revived by Hitler's invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941, the decisive date in the Second World War; an invasion so senseless – for it committed Germany to a war on two fronts – that Stalin simply would not believe that Hitler could contemplate it. But for Hitler the conquest of a vast eastern land-empire, rich in resources and slave labour, was the logical next step, and, like all other military experts except the Japanese, he spectacularly underestimated the Soviet capacity to resist. Not, however, without some plausibility, given the disorganization of the Red Army by the purges of the 1930s (see chapter 13), the apparent state of the country, the general effects of the terror, and Stalin's own extraordinarily inept interventions into military strategy. In fact, the initial advances of the German armies were as swift and seemed as decisive as the campaigns in the West. By early October they were on the outskirts of Moscow, and there is evidence that, for a few days, Stalin himself was demoralized and contemplated making peace. But the moment passed, and the sheer size of the reserves of space, manpower, Russian physical toughness and patriotism, and a ruthless war effort, defeated the Germans and gave the USSR time to organize effectively, not least by allowing the very talented military leaders (some of them recently released from gulags) to do what they thought best. The years of 1942-45 was the only time when Stalin paused in his terror.

Once the Russian war had not been decided within three months, as Hitler had



expected, Germany was lost, since it was neither equipped for nor could sustain a long war. In spite of its triumphs, it had, and produced, far fewer aircraft and tanks than even Britain and Russia without the USA. A new German offensive in 1942, after the gruelling winter, seemed as brilliantly successful as all the others, and pushed the German armies deep into the Caucasus and into the lower Volga valley, but it could no longer decide the war. The German armies were held, ground down and eventually surrounded and forced to surrender at Stalingrad (summer 1942-March 1943). After that the Russians in turn began the advance which only brought them into Berlin, Prague and Vienna by the end of the war. From Stalingrad on everyone knew that the defeat of Germany was only a question of time.

Meanwhile the war, still basically European, had become truly global. This was partly due to the stirrings of anti-imperialism among the subjects and dependents of Britain, still the greatest of world-wide empires, though they could still be suppressed without difficulty. The Hitler sympathisers among the Boers in South Africa could be interned – they re-emerged after the war as the architects of the Apartheid regime of 1948 – and Rashid Ali's seizure of power in Iraq in the spring of 1941 was quickly put down. Much more significant was that the triumph of Hitler in Europe left a partial imperial vacuum in Southeast Asia into which Japan now moved, by asserting a protectorate over the helpless relics of the French in Indochina. The USA regarded this extension of Axis power into Southeast Asia as intolerable, and put severe economic pressure on Japan, whose trade and supplies depended entirely on maritime communications. It was this conflict that led to war between the two countries. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 made the war worldwide. Within a few months the Japanese had overrun all of Southeast Asia, continental and insular, threatening to invade India from Burma in the west, and the empty north of Australia from New Guinea.

Probably Japan could not have avoided war with the USA unless the country had given up the aim of establishing a powerful economic empire (euphemistically described as a 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere'), which was the very essence of its policy. However, having watched the consequences of the European powers' failure to resist Hitler and Mussolini, and its results, F.D. Roosevelt's USA could not be expected to react to Japanese expansion as Britain and France had reacted to German expansion. In any case, US public opinion regarded the Pacific (unlike Europe) as a normal field for US action, rather like Latin America. American 'isolationism' merely wanted to keep out of Europe. In fact, it was the Western (i.e. American) embargo on Japanese trade and freezing of Japanese assets, which forced Japan to take action, if the Japanese economy, which depended entirely on oceanic imports, was not to be strangled in short order. The gamble it took was dangerous, and proved suicidal. Japan would seize perhaps its only opportunity to establish its southern empire quickly; but since it calculated that this required the immobilization of the American navy, the only force that could intervene, it also meant that the USA with its overwhelmingly superior forces and resources would *immediately* be drawn

into war. There was no way that Japan could win such a war.

The mystery is, why Hitler, already fully stretched in Russia, gratuitously declared war on the USA, thus giving Roosevelt's government the chance to enter the European war on the British side without meeting overwhelming political resistance at home. For there was very little doubt in Washington's mind that Nazi Germany constituted a much more serious, or, at any rate, a much more global danger to the US position – and the world – than Japan. The US therefore deliberately chose to concentrate on winning the war against Germany before that against Japan, and to concentrate its resources accordingly. The calculation was correct. It took another three-and-a-half years to defeat Germany, after which Japan was brought to its knees in three months. There is no adequate explanation of Hitler's folly, though we know him to have persistently, and dramatically, underestimated the capacity for action, not to mention the economic and technological potential, of the USA because he thought democracies incapable of action. The only democracy he took seriously was the British, which he rightly regarded as not entirely democratic.

The decisions to invade Russia and to declare war against the USA decided the result of the Second World War. This did not seem immediately obvious, since the Axis powers reached the peak of their success in mid-1942, and did not entirely lose the military initiative until 1943. Moreover, the Western Allies did not effectively re-enter the European Continent until 1944, for, while they successfully drove the Axis out of North Africa and crossed into Italy, they were successfully held at bay by the German army. In the meantime the Western Allies' only major weapon against Germany was airpower, and this, as subsequent research has shown, was spectacularly ineffective, except in killing civilians and destroying cities. Only the Soviet armies continued to advance, and only in the Balkans – mainly in Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece – did a largely communist-inspired armed resistance movement cause Germany, and even more Italy, serious military problems. Nevertheless, Winston Churchill was right when he confidently claimed after Pearl Harbor that victory by 'the proper application of overwhelming force' was certain (Kennedy, p. 347). From the end of 1942 on nobody doubted that the Grand Alliance against the Axis would win. The Allies began to concentrate on what to do with their foreseeable victory.

We need not follow the course of military events further, except to note that, in the West, German resistance proved very hard to overcome even after the Allies re-entered the Continent in force in June 1944, and that, unlike 1918, there was no sign of any German revolution against Hitler. Only the German generals, the heart of traditional Prussian military power and efficiency, plotted Hitler's downfall in July 1944, since they were rational patriots rather than enthusiasts for a Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung* in which Germany would be totally destroyed. They had no mass support, failed and were killed *en masse* by Hitler's loyalists. In the East there was even less sign of a crack in Japan's determination to fight to the end, which is why nuclear arms were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to ensure a rapid Japanese surrender. Victory in 1945 was total, surrender unconditional. The defeated enemy states were

totally occupied by the victors. No formal peace was made, since no authorities independent of the occupying forces were recognized, at least in Germany and Japan. The nearest thing to peace negotiations were the series of conferences between 1943 and 1945 in which the main allied powers – the USA, the USSR and Great Britain – decided the division of the spoils of victory and {not too successfully} tried to determine their post-war relations with each other: in Teheran in 1943; in Moscow in the autumn of 1944; in Yalta in the Crimea in early 1945; and at Potsdam in occupied Germany in August 1945. More successfully, a series of inter-allied negotiations between 1943 and 1945 set up a more general framework for political and economic relations between states, including the establishment of the United Nations. These matters belong to another chapter (see chapter 9).

Even more than the Great War, the Second World War was therefore fought to a finish, without serious thought of compromise on either side, except by Italy, which changed sides and political regime in 1943 and was not treated entirely as an occupied territory, but as a defeated country with a recognized government. (It was helped by the fact that the Allies failed to drive the Germans, and a Fascist ‘Social Republic’ under Mussolini dependent on them, out of half of Italy for almost two years.) Unlike the First World War, this intransigence on both sides requires no special explanation. This was a war of religion, or, in modern terms, of ideologies, on both sides. It was also, and demonstrably, a fight for life for most of the countries concerned. The price of defeat by the German National Socialist regime, as demonstrated in Poland and the occupied parts of the USSR, and by the fate of the Jews, whose systematic extermination gradually became known to an incredulous world, was enslavement and death. Hence the war was waged without limit. The Second World War escalated mass war into total war.

Its losses are literally incalculable, and even approximate estimates are impossible, since the war (unlike the First World War) killed civilians as readily as people in uniform, and much of the worst killing took place in regions, or at times, when nobody was in a position to count, or cared to. Deaths directly caused by this war have been estimated at between three and five times the (estimated) figure for the First World War (Milward, 270; Petersen, 1986), and, in other terms, at between 10 and 20 per cent of the *total* population in the USSR, Poland and Yugoslavia; and between 4 and 6 per cent of Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Japan and China. Casualties in Britain and France were far lower than in the First World War – about 1 per cent, but in the USA somewhat higher. Nevertheless, these are guesses. Soviet casualties have been estimated at various times, even officially, at seven millions, eleven millions, or of the order of twenty or even fifty millions. In any case, what does statistical exactitude mean, where the orders of magnitude are so astronomic? Would the horror of the holocaust be any less if historians concluded that it exterminated not six millions (the rough and almost certainly exaggerated original estimate) but five or even four? What if the nine hundred days of the German siege of Leningrad (1941-44) killed a million or only three quarters or half a million by

starvation and exhaustion? Indeed, can we really *grasp* figures beyond the reality open to physical intuition? What does it mean to the average reader of this page that out of 5.7 million Russian prisoners of war in Germany 3.3 million died? (Hirschfeld, 1986.) The only certain fact about the casualties of the war is that, on the whole, they killed more men than women. In 1959 there were still, in the USSR, seven women between the ages of thirty-five and fifty for every four men (Milward, 1979, p. 212). Buildings could more easily be rebuilt after this war than surviving lives.

### III

We take it for granted that modern warfare involves all citizens and mobilizes most of them; that it is waged with armaments which require a diversion of the entire economy to produce them, and which are used in unimaginable quantities; that it produces untold destruction and utterly dominates and transforms the life of the countries involved in it. Yet all these phenomena belong to the wars only of the twentieth century. There were, indeed, tragically destructive wars earlier, and even wars anticipating modern total war efforts, as in France during the Revolution. To this day the Civil War of 1861-65 remains the bloodiest conflict in US history, which killed as many men as all the later wars of the USA put together, including both world wars, Korea and Vietnam. Nevertheless, before the twentieth-century, wars embracing all society were exceptional. Jane Austen wrote her novels during the Napoleonic wars, but no reader who did not know this already would guess it, for the wars do not appear in her pages, even though a number of the young gentlemen who pass through them undoubtedly took part in them. It is inconceivable that any novelist could write about Britain in the twentieth-century wars in this manner.

The monster of twentieth-century total war was not born full-sized. Nevertheless, from 1914 on, wars were unmistakably mass wars. Even in the First World War Britain mobilized 12.5 per cent of its men for the forces, Germany 15.4 per cent, France almost 17 per cent. In the Second World War the percentage of the total active labour force that went into the armed forces was pretty generally in the neighborhood of 20 per cent (Milward, 1979, p. 216). We may note in passing that such a level of mass mobilization, lasting for a matter of years, cannot be maintained except by a modern high-productivity industrialized economy, and – or alternatively – an economy largely in the hands of the non-combatant parts of the population. Traditional agrarian economies cannot usually mobilize so large a proportion of their labour force except seasonally, at least in the temperate zone, for there are times in the agricultural year when all hands are needed (for instance to get in the harvest). Even in industrial societies so great a manpower mobilization puts enormous strains on the labour force, which is why modern mass wars both strengthened the powers of organized labour and produced a revolution in the employment of women outside the household: temporarily in the First World War, permanently in the Second World War.

Again, twentieth-century wars were mass wars in the sense that they used, and destroyed, hitherto inconceivable quantities of products in the course of fighting. Hence the German phrase *Materialschlacht* to describe the western battles of 1914-18 – battles of materials. Napoleon, luckily for the extremely restricted industrial capacity of France in his day, could win the battle of Jena in 1806 and thus destroy the power of Prussia with no more than 1,500 rounds of artillery. Yet even before the First World War France planned for a munitions output of 10-12,000 shells *a day*, and in the end its industry had to produce 200,000 shells *a day*. Even Tsarist Russia found that it produced 150,000 shells a day, or at the rate of four-and-a-half millions a month. No wonder that the processes of mechanical engineering factories were revolutionized. As for the less destructive implements of war, let us recall that during the Second World War the US army ordered over 519 million pairs of socks and over 219 million pairs of pants, whereas the German forces, true to bureaucratic tradition, in a single year (1943) ordered 4.4 million pairs of scissors and 6.2 million pads for the stamps of military offices (Milward, 1979, p. 68). Mass war required mass production.

But production also required organization and management – even if its object was the rationalized destruction of human lives in the most efficient manner, as in the German extermination camps. Speaking in the most general terms, total war was the largest enterprise hitherto known to man, which had to be consciously organized and managed.

This also raised novel problems. Military affairs had always been the special concern of governments, since these took over the running of permanent ('standing') armies in the seventeenth century, rather than subcontracting them from military entrepreneurs. In fact, armies and war soon became far larger 'industries' or complexes of economic activity than anything in private business, which is why in the nineteenth century they so often provided the expertise and the management skills for the vast private enterprises which developed in the industrial era, for instance railway projects or port installations. Moreover, almost all governments were in the business of manufacturing armaments and war material, although in the late nineteenth century a sort of symbiosis developed between government and specialized private armaments producers, especially in the high-tech sectors such as artillery and the navy, which anticipated what we now know as the 'military-industrial complex' (see *Age of Empire*, chapter 13). Nevertheless, the basic assumption between the era of the French revolution and the First World War was that the economy would, so far as possible, continue to operate in wartime as it had in peacetime ('business as usual'), though of course certain industries would clearly feel its impact – for instance the clothing industry, which would be required to produce military garments far beyond any conceivable peacetime capacity.

The governments' main problem, as they saw it, was fiscal: how to pay for wars. Should it be through loans, through direct taxation, and, in either case, on what precise terms? Consequently it was Treasuries or Ministries of Finance which were

seen as the commanders of the war economy. The First World War, which lasted so much longer than governments had anticipated, and used up so many more men and armaments, made 'business as usual' and, with it, the domination of Ministries of Finance, impossible, even though Treasury officials (like the young Maynard Keynes in Britain) still shook their heads over the politicians' readiness to pursue victory without counting the financial costs. They were, of course, right. Britain waged both world wars far beyond its means, with lasting and negative consequences for its economy. Yet if war was to be waged at all on the modern scale, not only its costs had to be counted but its production – and in the end the entire economy – had to be managed and planned.

Governments only learned this by experience in the course of the First World War. In the Second World War they knew it from the outset, thanks largely to the experience of the First war, the lessons of which their officials had studied intensively. Nevertheless, it only gradually became clear how completely governments had to take over the economy, and how essential physical planning and the allocation of resources (other than by the usual economic mechanisms) now were. At the outset of the Second World War only two states, the USSR and, to a lesser extent, Nazi Germany, had any mechanism for physically controlling the economy, which is not surprising, since Soviet ideas of planning were originally inspired by, and to some extent based on, what the Bolsheviks knew of the German planned war economy of 1914-17 (see chapter 13). Some states, notably Britain and the USA, had not even the rudiments of such mechanisms.

It is, therefore, a strange paradox that among the government-run planned war economies of both wars, and in total wars that meant *all* war economies those of the Western democratic states – Britain and France in the First war; Britain and even the USA in the Second – proved far superior to Germany with its tradition and theories of rational-bureaucratic administration. (For Soviet planning, see chapter 13.) We can only guess at the reasons, but there is no doubt about the facts. The German war economy was less systematic and effective in mobilizing all resources for war – of course, until after the strategy of lightning strikes failed, it did not have to – and it certainly took less care of the German civilian population. Inhabitants of Britain and France who survived the First World War unharmed were likely to be somewhat healthier than before the war, even when they were poorer, and their workers' real income had risen. Germans were hungrier, and their workers' real wages had fallen. Comparisons in the Second World War are more difficult, if only because France was soon eliminated, the USA was richer and under much less pressure, the USSR poorer and under much more. The German war economy had virtually all Europe to exploit but ended the war with far greater physical destruction than Western belligerents. Still, on the whole a poorer Britain, whose civilian consumption fell by over 20 per cent by 1943, ended the war with a slightly better-fed and healthier population, thanks to a war-planned economy systematically slanted towards equality and fairness of sacrifice, and social justice. The German system was, of course, inequitable on

principle. Germany exploited both the resources and the manpower of occupied Europe, and treated the non-German populations as inferior, and, in extreme cases – Poles, but especially Russians and Jews – virtually as expendable slave-labour which did not even have to be kept alive. Foreign labour rose to form about one fifth of the labour force in Germany by 1944 – 30 per cent in the armaments industries. Even so, the most that can be claimed for Germany's own workers is that their real earnings stayed the same as in 1938. British child mortality and sickness rates fell progressively during the war. In occupied and dominated France, a country proverbially rich in food and out of the war after 1940, the average weight and fitness of the population at all ages declined.

Total war undoubtedly revolutionized management. How far did it revolutionize technology and production? Or, to put it another way, did it advance or retard economic development? It plainly advanced technology, since the conflict between advanced belligerents was not only one of armies but of competing technologies for providing them with effective weapons, and other essential services. But for the Second World War, and the fear that Nazi Germany might also exploit the discoveries of nuclear physics, the atom bomb would certainly not have been made, nor would the quite enormous expenditures needed to produce any kind of nuclear energy have been undertaken in the twentieth century. Other technological advances made, in the first instance, for purposes of war, have proved considerably more readily applicable in peace – one thinks of aeronautics and computers – but this does not alter the fact that war or the preparation for war has been a major device for accelerating technical progress by 'carrying' the development costs of technological innovations which would almost certainly not have been undertaken by anyone making peacetime cost-benefit calculations, or which would have been made more slowly and hesitantly (see chapter 9).

Still, the technological bent of war was not new. Moreover, the modern industrial economy was built on constant technological innovation, which would certainly have taken place, probably at an accelerating rate, even without wars (if we can make this unrealistic assumption for the sake of argument). Wars, especially the Second World War, greatly helped to diffuse technical expertise, and they certainly had a major impact on industrial organization and methods of mass production, but what they achieved was, by and large, an acceleration of change rather than a transformation.

Did war advance economic growth? In one sense it plainly did not. The losses of productive resources were heavy, quite apart from the fall in the working population. Twenty-five per cent of pre-war capital assets were destroyed in the USSR during the Second World War, 13 per cent in Germany, 8 per cent in Italy, 7 per cent in France, though only 3 per cent in Britain (but this must be offset by new wartime constructions). In the extreme case of the USSR, the net economic effect of the war was entirely negative. In 1945 the country's agriculture lay in ruins, as did the industrialization of the pre-war Five-year Plans. All that remained was a vast and quite inadaptable armaments industry, a starving and decimated people and massive

physical destruction.

On the other hand wars were clearly good to the US economy. Its rate of growth in both wars was quite extraordinary, especially in the Second World War when it grew at the rate of roughly 10 per cent per annum, faster than ever before or since. In both wars the USA benefited from being both remote from the fighting, and the main arsenal of its allies, and from the capacity of its economy to organize the expansion of production more effectively than any other. Probably the most lasting economic effect of both world wars was to give the U S economy a global preponderance during the whole of the Short Twentieth Century, which only slowly began to fade towards the end of the century (see chapter 9). In 1914 it was already the largest industrial economy, but not yet the dominant economy. The wars, which strengthened it while, relatively or absolutely, weakening its competitors, transformed its economic situation.

If the USA (in both wars) and Russia (especially in the Second World War represent the two extremes of the wars' economic effects, the rest of the world is situated somewhere between these extremes; but on the whole closer to the Russian than to the American end of the curve.

#### IV

It remains to assess the human impact of the era of wars, and its human costs. The sheer mass of casualties, to which we have already referred, are only one part of these. Curiously enough, except, for understandable reasons, in the USSR, the much smaller figures of the First World War were to make a much greater impact than the vast quantities of the Second World War, as witness the much greater prominence of memorials and the cult of the fallen of the First World War. The Second World War produced no equivalent to the monuments to 'the unknown soldier', and after it the celebration of 'armistice day' (the anniversary of 11 November 1918) gradually lost its inter-war solemnity. Perhaps ten million dead hit those who had never expected such sacrifice more brutally than fifty-four millions hit those who have already once experienced war as massacre.

Certainly both the totality of the war efforts and the determination on both sides to wage war without limit and at whatever cost, made its mark. Without it, the growing brutality and inhumanity of the twentieth century is difficult to explain. About this rising curve of barbarism after 1914 there is, unfortunately, no serious doubt. By the early twentieth century, torture had officially been ended throughout Western Europe. Since 1945 we have once again accustomed ourselves, without much revulsion, to its use in at least one third of the member-states of the United Nations, including some of the oldest and most civilized (Peters, 1985).

The growth of brutalization was due not so much to the release of the latent potential for cruelty and violence in the human being, which war naturally legitimizes, although this certainly emerged after the First World War among a certain type of ex-servicemen (veterans), especially in the strong-arm or killer squads and 'Free Corps'

on the nationalist ultra-Right. Why should men who had killed and seen their friends killed and mangled, hesitate to kill and brutalize the enemies of a good cause?

One major reason was the strange democratisation of war. Total conflicts turned into 'people's wars', both because civilians and civilian life became the proper, and sometimes the main, targets of strategy, and because in democratic wars, as in democratic politics, adversaries are naturally demonized in order to make them properly hateful or at least despicable. Wars conducted on both sides by professionals, or specialists, especially those of similar social standing, do not exclude mutual respect and acceptance of rules, or even chivalry. Violence has its rules. This was still evident among fighter pilots in air forces in both wars, as witness Jean Renoir's pacifist film about the First World War, *La Grande Illusion*. Professionals of politics and diplomacy, when untrammelled by the demands of votes or newspapers, can declare war or negotiate peace with no hard feelings about the other side, like boxers who shake hands before they come out fighting, and drink with each other after the fight. But the total wars of our century were far removed from the Bismarckian or eighteenth-century pattern. No war in which mass national feelings are mobilized can be as limited as aristocratic wars. And, it must be said, in the Second World War the nature of Hitler's regime and the behaviour of the Germans, including the old non-Nazi German army, in eastern Europe, was such as to justify a good deal of demonization.

Another reason, however, was the new impersonality of warfare, which turned killing and maiming into the remote consequence of pushing a button or moving a lever. Technology made its victims invisible, as people eviscerated by bayonets, or seen through the sights of firearms could not be. Opposite the permanently fixed guns of the western front were not men but statistics – not even real, but hypothetical statistics, as the 'body-counts' of enemy casualties during US Vietnam War showed. Far below the aerial bombers were not people about to be burned and eviscerated, but targets. Mild young men, who would certainly not have wished to plunge a bayonet in the belly of any pregnant village girl, could far more easily drop high explosive on London or Berlin, or nuclear bombs on Nagasaki. Hard-working German bureaucrats who would certainly have found it repugnant to drive starving Jews into abattoirs themselves, could work out the railway timetables for a regular supply of death-trains to Polish extermination camps with less sense of personal involvement. The greatest cruelties of our century have been the impersonal cruelties of remote decision, of system and routine, especially when they could be justified as regrettable operational necessities.

So the world accustomed itself to the compulsory expulsion and killing on an astronomic scale, phenomena so unfamiliar that new words had to be invented for them: 'stateless' ('apartide') or 'genocide'. The First World War led to the killing of an uncounted number of Armenians by Turkey – the most usual figure is 1.5 millions – which can count as the first modern attempt to eliminate an entire population. It was later followed by the better-known Nazi mass-killing of about five million Jews – the

numbers remain in dispute. (Hilberg, 1985). One First World War and the Russian revolution forced millions to move as refugees, or by compulsory 'exchanges of populations' between states, which amounted to the same. A total of 1.3 million Greeks were repatriated to Greece, mainly from Turkey; 400,000 Turks were decanted into the state which claimed them; some 200,000 Bulgarians moved into the diminished territory bearing their national name; while 1.5 or perhaps 2 million Russian nationals, escaping from the Russian revolution or on the losing side of the Russian civil war, found themselves homeless. It was mainly for these rather than the 320,000 Armenians fleeing genocide, that a new document was invented for those who, in an increasingly bureaucratized world, had no bureaucratic existence in any state: the so-called Nansen passport of the League of Nations, named after the great Norwegian arctic explorer who made himself a second career as a friend to the friendless. At a rough guess the years 1914-22 generated between four and five million refugees.

This first flood of human jetsam was as nothing to that which followed the Second World War, or to the inhumanity with which they were treated. It has been estimated that by May 1945 there were perhaps 40.5 million uprooted people in Europe, excluding non-German forced labourers and Germans who fled before the advancing Soviet armies (Kulischer, 1948, pp. 253-73). About thirteen million Germans were expelled from the parts of Germany annexed by Poland and the USSR, from Czechoslovakia and parts of south-eastern Europe where they had long been settled (Holborn, p. 363). They were taken in by the new German Federal Republic, which offered a home and citizenship to any German who returned there, as the new state of Israel offered a 'right of return' to any Jew. When, but in an epoch of mass flight, could such offers by states have been seriously made? Of the 11,332,700 'displaced persons' of various nationalities found in Germany by the victorious armies in 1945, ten millions soon returned to their homelands – but half of these were compelled to do so against their will (Jacobmeyer, 1986).

These were only the refugees of Europe. The decolonization of India in 1947 created fifteen million of them, forced to cross the new frontiers between India and Pakistan (in both directions), without counting the two millions killed in the accompanying civil strife. The Korean War, another by-product of The Second World War, produced perhaps five million displaced Koreans. After the establishment of Israel – yet another of the war's after-effects – about 1.3 million Palestinians were registered with the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNWRA); conversely by the early 1960s 1.2 million Jews had migrated to Israel, the majority of these also as refugees. In short, the global human catastrophe unleashed by the Second World War is almost certainly the largest in human history. Not the least tragic aspect of this catastrophe is that humanity has learned to live in a world in which killing, torture and mass exile have become everyday experiences which we no longer notice.

Looking back on the thirty-one years from the assassination of the Austrian

Archduke in Sarajevo to the unconditional surrender of Japan, they must be seen as an era of havoc comparable to the 'Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century in German history. And Sarajevo – the first Sarajevo – certainly marked the beginning of a general age of catastrophe and crisis in the affairs of the world, which is the subject of this and the next four chapters. Nevertheless, in the memory of the generations after 1945, the Thirty-one Years' War did not leave behind the same sort of memory as its more localised seventeenth-century predecessor.

This is partly because it formed a single era of war only in the historians' perspective. For those who lived through it, it was experienced as two distinct though connected wars, separated by an 'inter-war' period without overt hostilities, ranging from thirteen years for Japan (whose second war began in Manchuria in 1931) to twenty-three years for the USA (which did not enter the Second World War until December 1941). However, it is also because each of these wars had its own historical character and profile. Both were episodes of carnage without parallel, leaving behind the technological nightmare images that haunted the nights and days of the next generation: poison gas and aerial bombardment after 1918, the mushroom cloud of nuclear destruction after 1945. Both ended in breakdown and – as we shall see in the next chapter – social revolution over large regions of Europe and Asia. Both left the belligerents exhausted and enfeebled, except for the USA, which emerged from both undamaged and enriched, as the economic lord of the world. And yet, how striking the differences! The First World War solved nothing. Such hopes as it generated – of a peaceful and democratic world of nation-states under the League of Nations; of a return to the world economy of 1913; even (among those who hailed the Russian Revolution) of world capitalism overthrown within years or months by a rising of the oppressed, were soon disappointed. The past was beyond reach, the future postponed, the present bitter, except for a few fleeting years in the mid-1920s. The Second World War actually produced solutions, at least for decades. The dramatic social and economic problems of capitalism in its Age of Catastrophe seemed to disappear. The Western world economy entered its Golden Age; Western political democracy, backed by an extraordinary improvement in material life, was stable; war was banished to the Third World. On the other side, even revolution appeared to have found its way forward. The old colonial empires vanished or were shortly destined to go. A consortium of communist states, organized around the Soviet Union, now transformed into a superpower, seemed ready to compete in the race for economic growth with the West. This proved to be an illusion, but not until the 1960s did it begin to vanish. As we can now see, even the international scene was stabilized, though it did not seem so. Unlike after the Great War, the former enemies – Germany and Japan – reintegrated into the (Western) world economy, and the new enemies – the USA and the USSR – never actually came to blows.

Even the revolutions which ended both wars were quite different. Those after the First World War were, as we shall see, rooted in a revulsion against what most people who lived through it, had increasingly seen as a pointless slaughter. They were

revolutions against the war. The revolutions after the Second World War grew out of the popular participation in a world struggle against enemies – Germany, Japan, more generally imperialism – which, however terrible, those who took part in it felt to be just. And yet, like the two World Wars, the two sorts of post-war revolution can be seen in the historian's perspective as a single process. To this we must now turn.

In: Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of Extremes*. Vintage, 1996. 21-53