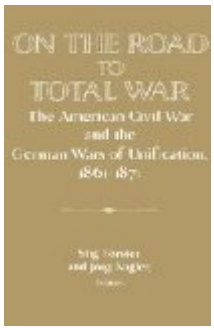
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stig Foerster, eds., Joerg Nagler. *On the Road to Total War. The American Civil War and the German War of Unification, 1861-1871.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xii + 705 pp. $84.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-56071-9.

Reviewed by Wolfgang Hochbruck

Published on H-USA (July, 1997)

The editors of this massive volume have tackled several controversial issues at once and, to send a resume ahead, the result is at least interesting, sometimes refreshing and thought-provoking, and often enlightening. The thirty-two published papers by some of the most noted scholars in the field cover a wide range of subjects, which can be organized into six subgroups: I. Basic Questions; II. Nationalism, Leadership, and War; III. Mobilization and Warfare; IV. The Home Front; V. The Reality of War; and VI. The Legacy. The book also includes an Introduction by the editors, and "Some Parting Shots" in a final chapter, written by Roger Chickering.

The volume originally grew out of set of conference papers under the same title, devoted to the governing question of how and where modern industrialized mass warfare originated and developed. The term "total war" is, not only in this context, problematic, and the editors address this problem. It was first applied to the American Civil War in a 1948 article by John B. Walters in the *Journal of Southern History*, and again by T. H. Williams in *Lincoln and His Generals* (1952). The former article applied the knowledge of the ravages of the total warfare of World War II retroactively to Sherman's campaigns, thus inscribing another piece in the mosaic Robert Penn Warren called "The Great Alibi" in *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961); the latter formulated a warning to democracies, to prepare themselves for any given war to be a lot worse than they would normally expect. Neither case for calling the ACW "total" satisfactorily proven, it is fortunate that the editors did not pursue the claim of putting the "total" tag on the American Civil War, or, for that matter, on one or all of the German Wars of Unification. Instead, and cleverly, they call their volume "***On the road*** to total war"--which leaves some space for development. The overall pattern of "totality" in war that seems to evolve from the volume is that the mass mobilization of whole peoples, the mobilization of all of a country's social and industrial resources, and the mobilization of collective and individual sentiments of nationalism, but also an increasingly important sense of duty towards the more or less amorphous nation, state, or com-

munity, all contribute to an increasing totalization of war.

Several of the contributors, following Edward Hagemann, simply adopt the term "modern war," whereas one of the editors (Stig Foerster) experimentally tries the term "industrialized people's war" in an attempt to fuse the modernity of industrialization and the mobilization aspect of the citoyens'/citizens' wars that had started with the wars of the French revolutions. Still, neither the Union nor the Confederate States of the conflict were yet really industrialized in the way the term came to be used in the twentieth century, and the wars against Denmark in 1864 and against the Austrians and Bavarians in 1866 were very much still in the tradition of the eighteenth-century cabinet wars. Separating the issues of modernity and totality, Stanley L. Engerman and J. Matthew Gallman point out that in terms of the Civil War's claim to industrialized *modernity*, the Northern Union States were far advanced, whereas the war as well as the war effort was more *total* in the South.

Some of the scholarly conflict arising in and from the volume can be traced to the necessary uncertainty of defining what kind of wars the ACW and the Franco-Prussian conflict really were. Unfortunately, the most recent and insightful contributions by Mark Grimsley (*The Hard Hand of War*, 1994) apparently did not come in time to be included in the volume, whereas the editors' choice to reprint an essay by Mark Neely which originally appeared on *Civil War History* in 1991 is quite understandable. That both Neely and Grimsely deny the "totality" of the Civil War as a necessary reaction to the exalted claims of the "great alibi"-school does not preclude the applicability of the volume's central contention that Civil War and Franco-Prussian War showed the way for the road to total warfare. Taking the issue beyond the boundaries of one or the other war, and rather than wallowing in one's own hemispheral blood and gore, the editors extend the scope of scholarly investigation to include both of the most significant wars of the decade--a genial idea for which they cannot be applauded too much. The possibility of trans-Atlantic comparison, the new, potential insights to be gained from such comparisons, and the reciprocal stimulation that students and scholars can gain from such comparisons, is shown by many of the essays in the volume.

It becomes most clearly palatable perhaps in the really comparative essays such as Annette Becker's insightful treatise on war memorials; Jay Luvaas on the influence of the German wars of unification on the U.S. military (which was considerably larger than the influence of the Civil War on the Franco-Prussian conflict), or the one essay that topicalizes the issue of comparison (the 3rd in the volume, by Carl N. Degler). However, many of the other essays in the volume become comparative by being paired off to highlight the same aspects in both wars: Reid Mitchell and Manfred Botzenhart write on the respective prisoner of war systems (or the absence thereof); Donna Rebecca D. Krug and Jean H. Quataert discuss the roles and functions of "Women and War in the Confederacy" versus "German Patriotic Women's work in War and Peace Time, 1864-1890." Wilhelm Deist, "Remarks on the Precondition to Waging War in Prussia-Germany 1866-71," Ulrich Wengenroth, "Industry and Warfare in Prussia," and Manfred Messerschmidt "The Prussian Army from Reform to War" show the already cynically modern condition of the Prussian-German Militaerstaat as opposed to the somewhat blue-eyed optimism of the French introit into the most devastating defeat in their history (William Serman). Complementary to these essays is one by James B. MacPherson, summarizing some of the basic theses of his *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) in showing the gradual conceptual and factual development of the Civil War from a large-scale police action against disloyal political oligarchs to a full-scale people's war.

Some essays do not or cannot really have counterparts (like Joseph Glatthaar's "African-Americans and the Mobilization for Civil War"), but even were there is no immediate opposite number, many of the essays show a refreshing willingness and ability to profit from each other and from preceding research on the other war. Thomas Rohkraemer's "Daily Life at the Front and the Concept of Total War" draws on the seminal work of Paul Fussell which already inspired the soldier-oriented books on the soldiers' experience by Reid Mitchell and Gerald Linderman (among others), and it finally sets out to provide the outlines of a similar picture for the life and experience of the common German soldier during the Franco-Prussian War; something strangely absent from published research so far.

Essays like this one already make the whole somewhat bulky collection worth the while. All in all, the collection by Nagler and Foerster does provide a broad survey of the topic. Still, it is not and probably cannot be exhaustive. A more surgical selection of essays might have excluded some which basically reiterate hypotheses and statements already published elsewhere, whereas one area in which the movement towards a totality of warfare becomes apparent particularly during the 1860s and 1870s has been left out: In the Civil War, and even more notably in the war with France, spionage and counter-espionage moved from the romantic yet anachronistic concept of the spy as a scout, informer, and cloak-and-dagger agent behind enemy lines to a modern approach using data collected from many sources and probed painstakingly for overall statistical evaluations of situations. Pauline Cushman and Rose O'Neal Greenhow epitomize the older, heavily romanticized form, and Alan Pinkerton, for all his attempts to operate with a modern networking approach, is still closer to them than he is to the quiet and devastating effectiveness of the Prussian Wilhelm Stieber.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa

Citation: Wolfgang Hochbruck. Review of Foerster, Stig, eds., Joerg Nagler. *On the Road to Total War. The American Civil War and the German War of Unification, 1861-1871.* H-USA, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1098