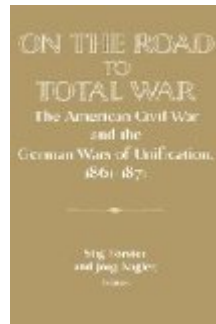


H-Net Reviews

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.

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The contributors to *On the Road to Total War* do not agree about what “total war” is, whether it applies to the American and European wars in question, or even whether it is a useful term at all. Some ignore it altogether. Wars of unification fought simultaneously on different continents would seem to invite comparisons, but only two of the thirty-two essayists venture to make them.

The collection’s center of gravity is the American Civil War. The participants in the debate on the Civil War as a total war disagree sharply over whether a concept derived from twentieth-century warfare can be usefully applied to a nineteenth-century conflict. Mark E. Neely Jr. believes “total war” is an anachronism bound to distort understanding. By his definition (each contributor employs a somewhat different one), total war obliterates the ancient distinction between combatants and non-combatants. For Neely what matters most is not whether this line was occasionally blurred or eradicated in the course of fighting the Civil War, but how military leaders thought and behaved with respect to the distinction. William Tecumseh Sherman is his great case in point, if only because Sherman has so often been singled out as a leading progenitor of total war.

Sherman was given to a lot of wild, or at least excitable, talk about war. Some of his utterances make the nineteenth-century general sound much like a twentieth-century one, and a sanguinary one at that. But viewed from the perspective of what he actually did or ordered done, Sherman looks different. His campaigns, like those of his Victorian fellow generals, respected the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Grant’s case is similar. On the basis of scattered remarks, some histo-

rians make a “brutal slugger” of a man whose actions reveal “a deftly political puncher” (p. 43). To portray Grant as a total warrior is as anachronistic as claiming he kept time with a quartz wrist-watch.

If Neely’s refusing to see the Civil War as a total war rests on process or action, James M. McPherson’s cautious embrace of the term depends on outcomes. Conceding to Neely that Civil War realities did not match the rhetoric of generals like Sherman, McPherson nevertheless maintains that in terms of consequences, the total war label is not inapt. Consequences made the Civil War distinctive in the American experience: the involvement of the home front as well as the armies in the field, the huge loss of life, the material devastation, the radical social and political changes, the extinction of a nation-state and of slavery as a social and economic system—all tend to validate the Civil War as a total war.

Edward Hagerman is as convinced of the fit between the Civil War and total war as Mark Neely is skeptical. “Union political and military strategy,” he writes, “was the most deliberate and deepest plunge by western military culture into the depths of total war until World War II” (p. 169). Echoing Charles Royster, he sees the Civil War as a vortex of destruction without precedent and scarcely without limit. Detecting the darkest forces of the twentieth century in a nineteenth-century setting, Hagerman creates a mirror image of the Whig interpretation of history. Perhaps he too readily equates scope and impact with totality. Few historians would question the vastness and consequence of the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, for instance, but even fewer would regard them as examples of total war.

More nuanced in use of the term is Stanley L. Enger-

man and J. Matthew Gallman's essay on the Civil War economy. Engerman and Gallman deploy a continuum model, in which the degree of economic mobilization of the population for war and the level of centralized direction imposed by the state are indices of totality. In their scheme, paradox rules. The Civil War drew thousands of Union entrepreneurs into the war effort, but without fundamentally altering the shape of the northern economy; the war's economic impact was broader than it was deep. Nor, they insist, did Federal direction of the war reach far beyond the battlefields. For the South, the war was a different story. Short of population, short of resources, with a view to enhancing its war-fighting capacity, the Confederacy readily resorted to the coercive direction of both. So the North employed the latest weapons in a struggle limited to fairly traditional means, if not objectives; the South came much closer to waging total war. Or, as Engerman and Gallman put it, "[The North] did not embark upon total war because it did not have to. The South, on the other hand, moved toward total war because it had to" (p. 247).

On the Road to Total War offers many by-ways having little or nothing to do with the theme announced by the title. Phillip S. Paludan, for instance, provides an interesting essay on Abraham Lincoln as democratic propagandist, but it was written for a different occasion and does not mention total war. Other essays are less tangential, dealing with such comparatively unexplored themes as women in war and war in the trenches and more familiar subjects like nationalism, army reform, and military mobilization in both the United States and Europe. Still, it is hard to escape the impression that the editors of this volume were extremely reluctant to insist that contributors address the topic at hand.

For the sheer pleasure of reading good historical writing, turn to Reid Mitchell's trenchant essay, "'Our Prison System, Supposing We Had Any': The Confederate and

Union Prison Systems." Because a modern war employs huge numbers of troops, Mitchell notes, it is likely to produce a correspondingly large number of prisoners of war. The Union was able to meet the challenge of suddenly creating a large prison system; the Confederacy was not, and the most conspicuous result of its failure was Andersonville. Perhaps the numbers of prisoners of war the Civil War generated ought to settle, in favor of the modernists, the old debate about the war's modernity. Far more problematical, Mitchell points out, is what the POW question suggests about total war. There is abundant evidence about the relatively neglected issue of prisoners of war, but "fitting this [evidence] into a picture of total war is complicated by the fact that the historian's image of total war will be a matter of personal choice—or even, more likely, the image of total war will be something thrust on the historian by history" (p. 585).

In the aftermath of Eric Hobsbawm's century of extremes, it is impossible to regard the concept of total war as anything but pejorative. Perhaps it is well to remember that Emilio Douhet, the Italian air-power enthusiast, and Erich von Ludendorff, that able soldier and bumbling putschist, first gave the term currency; they believed the realities it was meant to describe marked an advance in the conduct of warfare. Given its own peculiar history, perhaps historians should be wary of such a concept. As Roger Chickering points out in his able summary chapter, Neely and Hagerman sometimes appear to be writing about two different wars. Maybe historical understanding is difficult enough to achieve when each of the mid-century wars of unification is thought of as one war only.

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