

politique étrangère

THE GREAT WAR

1914

2014

DE

AND THE WORLD  
OF TOMORROW

Spring 2014



# The impact of the First World War on Strategy

By **Hew Strachan**

**Hew Strachan** is Chichele Professor of the History of War, University of Oxford. He wrote several books, including *The First World War* (Penguin, 2003).

The First World War helped redefine the notion of strategy, giving it a political dimension that it previously lacked. New institutions were created to allow civilians and members of the military a means to discuss major strategic directions. Beyond strategy, the “all-out war” of 1914-1918 transformed the very idea of war. We need to preserve the memory of this conflict; its dissuasive power could prevent such extremism from arising again.

politique étrangère

During the Cold War, strategic thought lost the connection to its own history. Driven by technological change, and above all by the impact of nuclear weapons, it could too easily treat the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the departure point for all that was modern and reject what had gone before. This article does not argue that strategy has not changed over the last century; instead its purpose is both to acknowledge that it has (often in fundamental ways) and to show how the First World War in particular prompted innovations which resonated for the rest of the century. It begins by addressing the ways in which the war altered the understanding of strategy itself, giving it a meaning much broader than that current before 1914. As importantly, the demands which the war made of strategy needed new institutions to fuse political and military leadership. The consequences of these changes were not made obvious until the Second World War. In the post-1945 narrative, that war, which for most powers lasted longer than the first and caused far greater loss of life, gave meaning to the idea of “total war”, but the origins of that concept too are to be found a century ago.

Carl von Clausewitz is often cited as evidence of continuity in strategic thought. In practice he changed his mind on many things as he wrote and thought about war, but he did not change his mind on what he thought strategy was. “Strategy is the use of the battle for the purpose of the war”,

he wrote in *Vom Kriege*, echoing ideas he had first employed in 1804.<sup>1</sup> The definitions used by military thinkers writing in the years before the outbreak of the First World War sustained this focus on the link between strategy and tactics. In *Vom heutigen Kriege*, a title chosen to pay specific reference to Clausewitz, published in 1912 and translated into French and English, Friedrich von Bernhardi wrote that the object of strategy “is to bring the troops into action in the decisive direction and in the greatest possible strength; to bring about the combat under as favourable conditions as possible”.<sup>2</sup>

Ferdinand Foch spoke in a similar vein in the lectures which he delivered at the École de Guerre in 1900. “Non, il n’y a plus désormais de stratégie à prévaloir contre celle qui assure et qui vise les résultats tactiques, la victoire dans la bataille.”<sup>3</sup> Some of those who heard him utter these words in the classroom had by 1918 earned distinction under his command in the battlefield, and by then Foch himself had become the allied generalissimo, the supreme commander of the allied armies. If anybody deserved to be remembered as the outstanding commander of the war, it was him. Certainly, nobody was better placed to comment on how the First World War had changed understandings and interpretations of strategy. And yet in 1918, when invited to write a fresh introduction to his 1900 lectures for their first English edition, he remarked that, although new means had altered the conditions of war, “les vérités fondamentales” remained unchangeable.<sup>4</sup>

Others in comparable positions agreed with him. Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff between December 1915 and February 1918, argued as early as 1916 that the *Field Service Regulations*, published in 1909 and still valid throughout the war, would need replacing when the fighting was over, but the commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force, Sir Douglas Haig, disagreed.<sup>5</sup> His reaction to the war’s experience was to say that it had confirmed rather than overthrown the principles published in the British army’s first ever doctrinal publication.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, he had been one of its authors, but his reactions were not atypical. In Germany, Wilhelm Groener, appointed first quartermaster general in the Oberste Heeresleitung on the resignation of Erich Ludendorff

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, book III, chapter 1

2. Friedrich von Bernhardi, *On war of to-day* (2 vols, London: Hugh Rees, 1912-13), vol 2 p. 336

3. Ferdinand Foch, *Des principes de la guerre: conférences faites en 1900 à l'École Supérieure de Guerre* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, first published 1903; 4ème édn, 1917), p. 41; italics in original.

4. Ferdinand Foch, *The principles of war* (London: Chapman & Hall 1918), p. viii

5. David Woodward (ed), *Field Marshall Sir William Robertson: Chief of the Imperial Staff in the Great War*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p.72

6. See Haig’s final despatch, in J.H. Boraston (ed), *Sir Douglas Haig’s despatches (December 1915-April 1919)* (2 vols, London: Dent, 1919), I, pp 319-21, 325, 330)

in October 1918, devoted much of his time after the war to explaining the causes of Germany's defeat. He found his answers less in how the war had ended and more in how it had begun. In 1914 Wilhelm Groener had been responsible for the direction of the railway department of the Prussian General Staff. He argued that, if the army had been loyal to the legacy of Alfred von Schlieffen, the chief of the general staff until the end of 1905, the campaign of 1914 would have ended in quick victory.<sup>7</sup> Under the Weimar government, the German army was determined to understand the First World War through the vocabulary of strategy as it was defined before the war, in terms of operational concepts. Its focus was still on strategy as the business of generals, on the relationship between strategy and tactics, and on what had been taught at the staff colleges of Europe at the dawn of the 20th century. Its definitions of strategy were unreasonably restricted for a war fought on multiple fronts, at increasing distances from Germany's frontiers, and over a time frame too extended for its limited resources.

### The Evolving Meaning of Strategy

Before 1914 the Prussian General Staff had vigorously rebutted the interpretation of strategy offered by Hans Delbrück, the Berlin professor who pioneered the academic study of military history and sustained a running strategic commentary on the First World War in the pages of the *Preussische Jahrbücher*. Hans Delbrück had taken Carl von Clausewitz's prefatory note to *Vom Kriege*, dated 10 July 1827, as the basis for a twofold understanding of strategy. Clausewitz had argued that there were two forms of war, one requiring the complete overthrow of the enemy, rendering him so politically shattered or militarily defenseless that he would make peace on the victor's terms, and the other, resulting in the acquisition of territory and concluding in a negotiated settlement. Hans Delbrück argued that Frederick the Great, given that Prussia was faced by a coalition of three great powers – France, Austria and Russia, had opted for the second of these strategies. His overall aim was the survival of Prussia, not the destruction of his enemies through fighting. The historians of the general staff pointed out with increasing vehemence that Frederick had not shunned decisive battle, as the French had discovered at Rossbach and the Austrians at Leuthen in 1757. The two sides in this debate were speaking past each other, addressing what today would be called different “levels of war”: Hans Delbrück was looking at strategy in a more political context; the staff historians, like Wilhelm Groener, were focused on operations. Frederick's overall inferiority could require him on occasion to shun battle,

---

7. Wilhelm Groener wrote two *Operative Studien über den Weltkrieg*, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen* (Berlin, 1927) (see especially pp 237-44) and *Der Feldherr wider Willen* (Berlin, 1930).

and instead to exhaust his enemies by marching hither and yon, wearing them out, and using his central geographical position to exploit the advantages of time and space. Hans Delbrück called this *Ermattungsstrategie*, or a strategy of attrition; it said little about using battle for the purposes of the war and much more about using manoeuvre to avoid battle. Manoeuvre for Delbrück was not the antithesis to attrition but the means to its accomplishment. The nearest equivalent to an *Ermattungsstrategie* adopted in the First World War were the strategies associated with economic warfare, the Entente powers» use of blockade and the Germans» of unrestricted submarine warfare. One reason why the pre-1914 Prussian General Staff could not adopt Hans Delbrück's approach to attrition was that it presented Germany with a paradox. By avoiding battle, Frederick lengthened the war, and left Prussia economically prostrate in consequence. Alfred von Schlieffen and his acolytes faced a different calculation: Germany had to fight a short war because it lacked the economic muscle to fight a long one, especially if Britain joined France and Russia against it. The Prussian General Staff sought an early and decisive battle to break out of the logjam created by the weaknesses of its geopolitical and grand strategic position.<sup>8</sup>

In the First World War the pursuit of battle did not produce the sort of decisive victory which could independently shape a strategic outcome. Instead it ended in indecision and exhaustion: battle itself became the wearing out process. Trench warfare, adopted for good tactical reasons, for what today would be called "force protection", had operational and strategic consequences. It enabled ground to be held with fewer men, so permitting the formation of masses for manoeuvre elsewhere, and it protected both the human and industrial resources that lay behind the defensive positions. For France in particular, this use of trench warfare made absolute sense, as it prevented any more of the nation's territory and capability being lost to the war effort. After 1918, its army would regularize the lessons it had learnt from that experience, to stress the need to cover the frontiers and to sustain its defense through "la bataille conduite".

So overwhelming was the experience of trench warfare, both psychologically and practically, that it came to dominate strategy. The linear battlefield created by the lines of field fortifications meant that orders traveled forwards to the front but also downwards along the command chain, from army ultimately to battalion; strategy as it had been defined before the war

---

8. Stig Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871-1914. Metakritik eines Mythos, *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilunge*", 54 (1995), pp 61-95; Hew Strachan, *The First World War: volume 1 : To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp 1005-14; see also Sven Lange, *Hans Delbrück und der "Strategiestreit"*. Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879-1914 (Freiburg: Rombach, 1995).

could not deliver as generals found their pursuit of the war's purposes disappearing from their control and subject to their subordinates' conduct of the battle. Attrition became associated with the pursuit of battle rather than its avoidance, and so focused on tactics, not strategy. Generals struggled to impose strategic shape on a war conditioned by tactics. When their armies did not deliver their operational objectives, most obviously in not breaking through an enemy position, but also – especially earlier in the war – through not enveloping and encircling the enemy, they rationalized their lack of success in terms of exhaustion. By using attrition as a retrospective explanation for the battles of Verdun or the Somme, to take two obvious examples, Erich von Falkenhayn and Douglas Haig endowed it with connotations of slaughter and waste. Success was measured more in the balance of manpower lost, than in terms of outcomes on the ground. Moreover, it acquired an ambiguity reflected in the linguistic imprecision used to describe it. In 1915, Joseph Joffre used the verb “*grignoter*”, and hence “*grignotage*”; but others in France spoke of “*usure*”. In German the words were nearly always verbs (unlike the English use of the noun “attrition”): “*zermurben*”, “*reiben*”, “*ermatten*”, and “*erschöpfen*”.

This corruption of Hans Delbrück's original conception enabled the post-1918 German military thinkers to renew the attack in terms that were both personal (not least because Delbrück remained a pivotal figure in public debate) and conceptual. In 1920 Friedrich von Bernhardi, who had been recalled to service during the war to command a division, condemned both Hans Delbrück and attrition in a book whose title, *Vom Kriege der Zukunft: Nach den Erfahrungen des Weltkrieges* played on his pre-war text but could not disguise that it was a much slighter work. He said that a strategy which avoids the offensive and aims for victory through the exhaustion of the enemy is nothing. He too saw war taking two forms, but neither of them was defined by its political objective: a war of positions shaped by frontal attacks aiming for breakthrough, and “operational war”, in which flanks can be enveloped. Like Wilhelm Groener, who became minister of war in 1928, Friedrich von Bernhardi saw no reason to abandon the core of the debate generated by Alfred von Schlieffen, the pursuit of envelopment as a way out of the breakthrough battle, and the determination to find operational solutions to problems of strategy more broadly defined. Indeed Germany's military weakness after 1919, not least thanks to the terms of the armistice and of the Versailles Treaty, made the paradoxical attraction of this line of argument more compelling, not less. Georg von Soldan, who oversaw the Reichsarchiv's series of popular histories, *Schlachten des Weltkrieges*, wrote in *Der Mensch und die Schlacht der Zukunft* (1925) that because Germany would always be weak it must seek

battle. This line of thought brought stunning operational success in 1939-41 but also eventual and complete defeat in 1945.<sup>9</sup>

By then attrition had been appropriated as the method of war preferred by those possessed of economic strength not constrained by relative weakness. It explained the battles of the Normandy break-out in 1944, the winter fighting in the Ardennes in 1944-45 and – above all – the Soviet successes on the eastern front from Stalingrad onwards. It had become the antithesis of manoeuvre and focused on the means of destruction – through both artillery firepower and aerial bombardment. Although it was now associated with the economically stronger power, it was nonetheless still not necessarily an end in itself. Douglas Haig had argued that the wearing out battle was the preliminary to a breakthrough, and in 1945 the allies could also see it in these terms, as they delivered a victory sufficiently decisive to dictate the terms of the German surrender. It was the war in Vietnam which so elevated attrition that it seemed to become an end in itself, despite the fact that the logic inherent in such an approach was a negotiated settlement rather than an absolute outcome.<sup>10</sup> As “metrics” were used to measure to “progress” in the war, so numbers of enemy killed defined success. By 1997 a philosopher could argue that attrition “is a method of warfare that has as its deliberate aim the mass expenditure of men and material. It is a dehumanized view of war according to which war is seen as an industrial and mechanical process in which the distinction between the human and the material element it systematically suppressed. The problem with a war of attrition is that it is difficult to see how such a war can ever engage the criterion of the proportionate “conduct or means.”<sup>11</sup> This was the context in which NATO doctrine-makers, confronting the possibility of an attack by numerically superior Soviet conventional forces, could during the 1980s present manoeuvre as the alternative to attrition, and could reinforce the former’s alleged operational benefits with an implicit moral superiority.

### **The Making of Strategy and Civil-Military Relations**

Missing in the pre-1914 general staff conceptions of strategy – to the extent that the Prussian staff historians seemed barely to recognize its role in their

---

9. Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002) has much to say on these issues; see also Gil-li Vardi, “The change from within”, in Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers, *The changing character of war* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), and “Jochim von Stulpnägels military thought and planning”, *War in History*, XVII (2010), pp 193-216

10. Gregory A. Daddis, “The problem of metrics: assessing progress and success in the Vietnam War”, *War in History*, XIX (2012), pp 73-98

11. A.J. Coates, *The ethics of war* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 220, cited in Nigel Biggar, *In defence of war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 127

debate with Hans Delbrück – was the place of policy in the making of strategy.<sup>12</sup> Strategy's relationship with policy was both distant and difficult: distant because, while nobody disputed that strategy should deliver an outcome through victory which would be of political utility, few accepted that policy should pervade the making of strategy in an operational sense; difficult because many politicians in the First World War persisted in trying to invade what the generals saw as their space.<sup>13</sup>

The consequences of these tensions were played out during the war itself not through a conscious reworking of what was understood by strategy and more through struggles at the interface between generals (and only very occasionally admirals) and politicians. These exchanges were more evident in Britain and France than they were in the more autocratic states, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. In the latter, at least constitutionally, the distinction between civilian and military authority mattered less, since both were fused in the person of the emperor, who was at once both the supreme commander and the head of state. In reality, that point applied particularly in Russia, where Tsar Nicholas II made the ill-advised decision to take over the command of Stavka in September 1915. In the short run he derived credit for seeming to reverse his country's fortunes after the "Great Retreat" of that summer, as the advance of the Central Powers spent itself and the Russian army at last reaped the benefits of falling so far back towards its bases. In the long run, he ensured that the responsibility for Russia's overall performance in the war fell on him more than on his subordinates, including his army commanders who colluded in his removal in the March 1917 revolution. Neither Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany nor Kaiser Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary carried the same blame, although both the Hohenzollerns and the Habsburgs lost their thrones as a result of the war. Indeed in Germany's case, as in Russia's, the generals colluded in the monarch's abdication, with Wilhelm Groener himself playing a key role. By halting further revolution in its tracks the German general staff would preserve its reputation until it was swept away in a second and even more catastrophic defeat.

Much more volatile but also more creative in terms of strategy were the civil-military relations of France and Britain. Here civil authority was more

---

12. Jehuda Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht. Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkungen in zwei Weltkriegen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1970; first published 1967), is dated but still provides an introduction to these issues. Michael Geyer, "German strategy in the age of machine warfare, 1914-1945", in Peter Paret (ed), *Makers of modern strategy from Machiavelli to the nuclear age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) is both scholarly and provocative.

13. See Paul von Hindenburg's frustration on this point, citing Clausewitz in favor of keeping politicians out of strategy: *Out of my life* (London: Cassell, 1920), pp 111-12

divided from the exercise of military command that it had been in Carl von Clausewitz's Prussia. The memoirs of the principal makers of wartime strategy suggest perpetual friction. In France, socialist ministers harbored lingering suspicions of clerical and possibly Bonapartist officers; in Britain liberals attacked what they saw as an excessive focus on the western front over the eastern, and on land power over maritime. Both sets of politicians could refer to recent events to buttress their fears: in France, the Boulanger crisis of 188-9, the Dreyfus trial and the "*affaire des fiches*" of 1905, and in Britain the even more recent Curragh "*Mutiny*" of March 1914, in which some officers had shown themselves ready to refuse government orders, if they were to be issued, to impose home rule on northern Ireland. What worried France before 1914 was a military coup; what drove the clashes between soldiers and statesmen in both countries after 1914 was the making of strategy.

Here more united than divided the two parties, for all the fire and brimstone generated at the time and subsequently. For France the defense of the national territory and the recovery of what had been lost in the wars opening weeks united the two in ways that surprised them both. This union was consolidated in the bloody and protracted defense of Verdun in 1916, a battle which made little sense in operational terms (so much so that Joseph Joffre initially proposed that the town be abandoned) but which was accepted by the army not least because it recognized its political and national symbolism. So the generals subordinated their aims to those of policy. In 1917-18 Georges Clemenceau as prime minister could articulate a strategy in national and unitary terms, and so remove any sense of division between the army and the state. In Britain, the clash between "westerners" and "easterners" was more one of degree than substance. Neither side disputed the primacy of France and its pivotal place in British strategy on the continent. Pressures to deploy British troops to theaters outside the wars western front were always set in that context, and more about seeking interim advantages rather than fundamentally recalibrating strategy. Here too political primacy in the making of strategy had been achieved by the end of 1917. The losses sustained by the British Expeditionary Force in France on the Somme in 1916 and at the 3<sup>rd</sup> battle of Ypres in 1917, both designed with breakthrough in mind but rationalized after the event in terms of attrition, dented the reputation of its commander, Douglas Haig. The prime minister, David Lloyd George, was able to ensure that Haig's own principal staff officers were replaced during the winter and then to insert his own nominee, Henry Wilson, as chief of the imperial general staff, in February 1918.

Most importantly, both France and Britain had developed relatively mature systems for the unification of military and political inputs to the

making of strategy, while retaining overall political control. By 1911, when Joseph Joffre was appointed chief of the general staff, relations between the Third Republic and its army had found greater balance. The Conseil supérieur de défense nationale, first created in 1906 and reconstituted in 1911, gave this institutional effect, by bringing the ministers of foreign affairs, war, the navy and the colonies around the same table in order to settle strategy through an iterative process which combined political judgment with professional wisdom. The balance was upset by the German invasion, the evacuation of the government to Bordeaux, and the subordination of all north-eastern France to military control. By the end of 1916 Aristide Briand had won back the ground that had been lost, but the government forfeited it again in early 1917. In November 1917 Clemenceau gave a unity, military, political, economic and social, to the direction of the war which ensured strategic coherence. He appointed as the head of his military cabinet an officer, Henri Mordacq, who – unusually among the officers of the armies of Europe before 1914 – had read Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* for what it had to say about the relationship between war and policy. Henri Mordacq claimed that his opening advice to the prime minister was that, “In order to win this war, a coalition war, and consequently one very difficult to conduct, there must be a close alliance between policy and strategy, the latter being the continuation and the result of the former”.<sup>14</sup>

British coordination of policy and strategy owed its origins less to the specific circumstances of the First World War and more to the exigencies of imperial defense. Confronted with the need to coordinate maritime capabilities, trade protection and colonial security, all against the backdrop of relative decline, Britain created the Committee of Imperial Defense in 1902. An advisory committee of the cabinet, chaired by the prime minister, the committee brought the political heads of the relevant government departments together with the senior officers of the two services. The outbreak of the war, as in France, dislocated pre-war systems, in this case because the direction of strategy in its broadest sense now became the business of the whole cabinet. In practice, this proved too big a body, with too many ministers present who lacked direct responsibility for the war, and by 1915 the Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, was experimenting with more select groups for the task. In December 1916 his successor, David Lloyd George, put this sort of idea on a more formal footing, creating a war cabinet.

---

14. Henri Mordacq, *Le ministère Clemenceau: journal du témoin* (4 vols, Paris: Plon, 1930-1), vol I, p. 6, quoted by Jere Clemens King, *Generals and politicians: conflict between France's high command, parliament and government* (Berkeley / Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1951), p. 194; for Mordacq's debt to Clausewitz, see Benoît Durieux, *Clausewitz en France: deux siècles de réflexion sur la guerre 1807-2007* (Paris: Economica, 2008), pp 307-12, 328-33

Here in embryo was an engine to drive a broader definition of strategy than that used by the pre-1914 staff colleges of Europe, and moreover one better adapted to the need to unite military expertise with political control, not least in democratic states. War in 1914-1918 became so complex and so multifaceted that no one body and no single agency could control all its elements: the idea of the supreme war lord was no longer helpful. The committee structure which emerged as a result, and its iterative and deliberative methods of resolving strategy produced division, not least along the civil-military fault line, but the imperatives of war forced the members to resolve their clashes through consensus. The secretary of the British war cabinet, a Royal Marine captain called Maurice Hankey who had served the Committee of Imperial Defense before the war, gave coherence and even harmony to its deliberations through his minute-taking. He also applied his own views on the proper strategic direction of the war to its collective decision making.

The evolution of an effective means of making strategy during the war had not been accomplished without friction; indeed much of its creativity and of its capacity to evolve was the direct product of the clashes between politicians and soldiers, and also between one politician and another or one soldier and another. The productivity of the committee structure rested on free debate, even if the final decision was rightly and necessarily vested in the elected head of government. In Britain, after the war, the differences between the “frocks” and the “brass hats” spilled over into memoirs, which suggested these clashes had not been constructive but destructive.<sup>15</sup> In France the army’s desire to remain integrated with the Republic constrained it, and senior officers looked askance at Charles de Gaulle when he questioned the mass citizen army and advocated an elite armored forces in *Vers l’armée de métier* in 1934. Both reactions had the same effect: they were in danger of losing the iterative aspect in civil-military relationships, and replacing it with one of subordination even in the committee stage of strategy-making. In 1957 Samuel Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State*, although developing ideas designed to help the United States adjust to a stronger military in the context of the Cold War, treated the notion of military subordination as a defining characteristic of professionalism, and so put in jeopardy the very source of the creativity in strategy-making which the allies had uncovered through the First World War.

### **From Maritime to Grand Strategy**

Maurice Hankey had believed that the war would be won by economic pressure, applied through maritime power. Recognizing that this strategy

---

15. Brian Bond, *The First World War and British military history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp 87-162

would only take effect over a long time, he accepted Britain would have to contribute a mass army to the war in Europe, not least to ensure that France was not defeated before the blockade could deliver its result. And many in Britain after the war thought this was how the war had been won; it was after all an interpretation confirmed by the German army itself, which argued that it was still intact in the field and fighting on French soil when support for the war had collapsed at home. Communists and those anxious to warn of the dangers of Bolshevism might speak of revolution to explain “the stab in the back”, but maritime strategists attributed the victory to sea power and economic warfare. For Britain in the inter-war years these were the potential tools of future European warfare. Basil Liddell Hart had concluded his history of the war, published in 1930, with the assertion (almost entirely unsubstantiated) that the war had been won at sea, and in a couple of years had developed the idea of the British way in warfare. In it he argued that Britain’s historic pattern when involved in major European war had not been to create a mass army but to use maritime power and economic pressure.<sup>16</sup> Because the blockade had taken so long to take effect, British intelligence focused on identifying potentially critical vulnerabilities in the German defense sector in the hope that the impact of economic warfare could be speedier. These calculations were undermined in short order by Germany’s conquest of Western Europe in 1940. By controlling the Atlantic coast from the North Cape to the Breton peninsula, Germany outflanked Britain’s maritime position athwart its exits from the North Sea and so gave itself direct access to the oceans. The U-boat pens at Trondheim and Brest bore testimony to the German navy’s determination to exploit the opportunity which its conquests on land had given it, and the ensuing battle of the Atlantic was both the longest and strategically most significant engagement in the western theater of war, at least until the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944 – and they themselves were predicated on prior success at sea.

Because the allied blockade could not target Germany’s war-making capacity with precision in the First World War, it had by default struck at its food imports. Since those in uniform and in heavy industry were the first to be fed, those most hit by the shortages which resulted were also those least important to Germany’s war effort. Excess deaths among the elderly or the very young did not in themselves shorten the war, but they could prompt popular resistance to the war and to those deemed to be responsible for it. The German revolution of 1918 and the Kaiser’s abdication consolidated the thought that revolution could be a tool with which to wage war in the

---

16. Basil Liddell Hart, *The real war, 1914-1918*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1930), pp 502-3; see also Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: a study of his military thought* (London: Cassell, 1977), pp 65-87

democratic age. Both sides in the First World War had been ready to use revolution for strategic purposes: the Central Powers across the French, British and Russian empires, from North Africa to India and from Ireland to Poland, and the Entente from the Arabian peninsula to (ultimately and belatedly) the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian empire. By 1939 sea power was losing its primacy as the engine to insurrection. In the later stages of the First World War, independent air forces were developed to take the war directly to the urban populations of the enemy. Their bomb loads were limited, not least by the capacities of the aircraft which carried them, but by 1942 long-range heavy bombers were able to give effect to some of the ambitions expressed by the aspirational theorists of air power writing in the 1920s, like Giulio Douhet and Basil Liddell Hart. They imagined mass air attacks on inner cities, possibly using gas, and causing sufficient panic to cause national paralysis. Revolution would cause governments to sue for peace in short order, and without protracted ground warfare.

The allied strategic bombing offensive did not prompt the people of Germany to topple Hitler and the Nazis in the Second World War. But the notion that the people's loyalty had become a central battleground in war survived through the wars of decolonization and the waging of the "Global Cold War" in Africa and Latin America. The practice of counter-insurgency meant, however, that Britain and France, having been ready to promote revolution as a weapon of war in 1914-18, found themselves cast as counter-revolutionaries in Malaya and Algeria. The influence of their experiences on American thinking since 2002, reflected particularly in the *U.S. Field Manual 3-24* on counter-insurgency published in 2006, rests on a muddled approach both to insurgency and to what Rupert Smith has called "wars among the people".<sup>17</sup> The invasion of Iraq did not prompt a popular rising against Saddam Hussein: there was no "stab in the back" as there had been in 1918. Instead, the United States found fighting an insurgency themselves. The American readiness to cite in evidence the example of a hero of the First World War, T.E. Lawrence, was deeply paradoxical, given that his aim had been the opposite of theirs, to provoke revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Air power in the Second World War found itself integrated in a vision of strategy that was much broader than that to which the pre-1914 military theorists had cleaved. Strategy had to integrate war in three dimensions; it had also to balance the demands of competing theaters of war, to

---

17. Rupert Smith, *The utility of force: the art of war in the modern world* (London: Allen Lane, 2005)

18. John A. Nagl, one of the key figures in the US counter-insurgency debate, used Lawrence's words as the title of his book: *Learning to eat soup with a knife: counter-insurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002)

coordinate the frequently divergent aims of allies, and to embrace war's social and economic resources. Finally, so complex had all this become that it needed to address these issues in peace as well as war. A British maritime strategist, Julian Corbett, writing in 1911, had called this "major strategy" in order to distinguish it from "minor strategy". He also occasionally used the descriptor "grand strategy", and that was the term which gained currency in Britain in the inter-war years thanks to its development by J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart. The applicability of grand strategy, a lesson from the First World War, made particular sense to it and to the United States, both of which had to unite maritime capabilities to those of land power, and also had to project power at a distance. It became the intellectual construct for the Grand Alliance's formulation of strategy in the Second World War. Strategy increasingly defined itself less as the use of the battle for the purposes of the war and more as the use of war for the purposes of policy.

After the shattering blow of defeat in 1918, some in Germany reread Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* precisely for its insights on this point. But the institutional framework to give it effect found reflection less in the democratized structures which might have been expected to appeal to the Weimar government and more in the historical precedents of Frederick the Great or of Napoleon, those of Clausewitz's own times. During the First World War the army's frustrations with the Kaiser's inadequacy as a wartime leader led it to look for a *Feldherr*, thinking it had found it in Paul von Hindenburg, and then for a *Führer*. The issue that particularly pre-occupied the soldiers, especially given the impact of the stab in the back argument, was that of national mobilization, of the need for the whole nation and its economic capacities to be harnessed for the purposes of the war. In 1935 Erich Ludendorff, the former first quartermaster general, developed the theme in *Der totale Krieg*. Ludendorff was addressing what his English translators called "totalitarian war", and they rendered the title as *The Nation in Arms*.

### Total war

Here, less divided France from Germany than the war's legacy might suggest. The speeches of Clemenceau had made the same point in 1917-18: the sole purpose of France and of its national policies was to wage war. In 1918 Léon Daudet had used the phrase "la guerre totale" to describe a struggle which extended into the political, economic, commercial, industrial, intellectual, legal and financial domains.<sup>19</sup> In the inter-war years total

19. Léon Daudet, *La guerre totale* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie nationale, 1918), p. 8 ; see also the essays in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, *Great war, total war : combat and mobilization on the western front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University press, 2000)

war became part of the language of warning, an attempt to scare states from undertaking major war again and to create an architecture of self-deterrence. It was assumed after 1918 that wars between great powers, especially on European soil, would always be total wars. Even those who in the inter-war period tried to evoke concepts of limited war, like Basil Henry Liddell Hart, did not dispute that war in Europe would be “total war”: his aim was to find a way of containing Britain’s involvement. Those who hoped to avoid such a war entirely sought to do so less by limiting war than by preventing it in the first place, an ambition to which the Kellogg-Briand pact of 1928 bore testimony.

When the Second World War broke out, theory became practice. National leaders on both sides, Winston Churchill in Britain and Joseph Goebbels in Germany, used the phrase “total war” to mobilize their peoples for war. An idea which had been given birth by the First World War found expression in the Second, but was then given a new direction. The corollary of national mobilization was that the entire population could become a military target, a development that found its apogee when the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The indiscriminate and destructive effects of nuclear weapons were essential to their deterrent effect. The idea of “total war” now underpinned the stability of the international order. And so the shadow of Verdun fell across the Cold War world.

The big unanswered question since the end of the Cold War in 1990 has been how necessary the image of world war remains to international order. By speaking of “interventions” or “wars of choice”, the United States has recast limited war, and distanced war from the practice of 1914-18. The wars since 1990 have not, unlike the 3<sup>rd</sup> Balkan War of 1914, escalated. And yet there are regions – most obviously in the Middle East or in the seas off China – where local conflict could spark a chain reaction. On 2 January 2014, *The Guardian* carried an article headed “Nobody is talking about a Third World War between China and the west – yet”. If we discount the possibility of states behaving as they did in 1914, as the comparative and historically exceptional security of Europe encourages us to do, we also see the experience of the First World War as firmly in the past and of scant relevance to us today. However, if we wish to deter ourselves and others, we may need to use that title, “the Third World War”, just as it was used in the Cold War. It may be stretching a historical point, but in that sense extending the First World War’s long shadow could benefit us all.

