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THE CHARACTER OF 'TOTAL WAR'?**

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author contends that World War Two (WWII) exemplifies the concept of Total War more than World War One (WWI) through the larger scales of military and economic mobilisation, as well as the deeper level and impact of civilian victimisation. The author presents his argument in three parts. First, he discusses how the scale of military mobilisation and complexity of WWII was markedly higher than that of WWI. Second, he assesses the cost of war and allocation of war economy as well as the relationship between military actions and economics of the key players. Lastly, the author then assesses the impact that each war had on the non-combatants of the war, as part of military and political actions.

Keywords: Impact; War; Cost; Violence; Involvement

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the concept of Total War, it is difficult to exclude World War One (WWI) and World War Two (WWII) due to their global scale of involvement and their impact on the history of the world. After all, WWI gave birth to the ideas of '*la guerre integrale*' in 1917 and *Der Totale Krieg* in 1935, while the larger scale of WWII is 'often taken to represent total war.'¹ However, does one war exemplify the concept of Total War more than the other?

In this essay, the author contends that WWII exemplifies the concept of Total War more than WWI through the larger scales of military and economic mobilisation, as well as the deeper level and impact of civilian victimisation. The author presents his argument in three parts. First, he will discuss how the scale of military mobilisation and complexity of WWII was markedly higher than that of WWI. Second, he assesses the cost of war and allocation of war economy as well as the relationship between military actions and economics of the key players. Lastly, the author assesses the impact that each war had on the non-combatants of the war, as part of military and political actions.

DEFINITION OF TOTAL WAR

It is necessary to define the concept of Total War and the characteristics that define it, so that both wars can be viewed with the same lens. 'Total War', by sheer

definition, refers to 'fighting without any restrictions' and should not be confused with Clausewitz's concept of 'Absolute War'—war that ideally should be 'waged with the extreme of violence.'² The definition of Total War has been debated since the concept of totality 'is in the eye of the beholder.'³ However, a more nuanced definition proposed refers to the 'total mobilisation of the military, economic and human resources of the state.'⁴ In addition, due to the involvement of civilian resources to support the war efforts, they also become legitimate targets. For the purposes of this essay, Total War will be characterised in the following domains, which will also be used for comparison between WWI and WWII (Unless otherwise specified, the comparisons will be between the major powers of the wars: United Kingdom (UK), Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), United States (US), Germany, Italy, Japan):

- a. Military Scale and Complexity;
- b. Scale of Economic Impact;
- c. Extent of Civilian Victimisation.

MILITARY SCALE AND COMPLEXITY

Scale of Mobilisation

This essay examines the number of nations which were involved in the conflicts, as well as the total military strength that were mobilised throughout the duration of each war. Both WWI and WWII involved nation states from all over the world and, due to the

involvement of major colonial powers, mobilised military personnel from nations beyond the main belligerents to conduct the fight. *Table 1* lists the nations and number of personnel mobilised for the armed forces in WWI and WWII.

Both WWI and WWII involved nation states from all over the world and, due to the involvement of major colonial powers, mobilised military personnel from nations beyond the main belligerents to conduct the fight.

The list of participating nations, as well as their mobilised force sizes give rise to some insights:

- a. In general, WWII saw a significantly higher level of overall troop mobilisation (>50% higher) than WWI. In addition, we can see that some of the major players, such as USSR, UK, Italy, United States, Germany and Japan, in themselves mobilised more troops for WWII.
- b. WWII saw deeper involvement of forces from Asia, particularly Japan and China, than in WWI. On a related note, both conflicts also saw a difference in expanse of the war—while fighting was mostly confined to Europe in WWI, WWII saw action in more theatres of war across the globe, including the Pacific, Asia and North Africa, embodying the global nature of the war.

Therefore, from a quantitative perspective, WWII demonstrates a significantly greater embodiment of Total War than WWI.

Complexity of War

Both WWI and WWII saw the introduction of new weapons technology that increased the efficiency of fighting and redefined warfare, which made war more complex. This can be seen in terms of the deaths caused and social or cultural impacts of proliferation during the conflicts.

In an effort to break the stalemate imposed by trench warfare during WWI, both Allied and Central power forces had to develop new fighting techniques and weapons to give their sides the edge. This is where the world saw the introduction of (1) the tank, and (2) gas warfare.

Tank

The first tank offensive took place in Cambrai in November 1917, with 476 British tanks gaining four miles of ground despite over 1,000 German artillery guns.⁵ Despite providing mobility and protection to fighting troops and helping to break through the trenches, it had limited impact on the war, due to its

| Country | WWI | WWII |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--|
| USSR | 12,000,000 | 13,200,000 |
| UK and British Empire | 8,904,467 | 9,912,800 (Total): 5,896,000 (UK) 993,000 (Australia) 2,581,800 (India) 192,000 (NZ) 250,000 (South Africa) |
| France | 8,410,000 | >2,680,000 |
| Italy | 5,615,000 | 9,100,000 |
| United States | 4,355,000 | 16,354,000 |
| Japan | 800,000 | 9,100,000 |
| Romania | 750,000 | >1,225,000 |
| Serbia | 707,343 | 1,500,000 |
| Belgium | 267,000 | 900,000 (As Yugoslavia) |
| Montenegro | 50,000 | |
| Greece | 230,000 | 540,000 |
| Portugal | 100,000 | ? |
| China | - | 14,000,000 |
| Poland | - | 2,400,000 |
| Germany | 11,000,000 | 17,900,000 |
| Austria-Hungary | 7,800,000 | - |
| Turkey | 2,850,000 | ? |
| Bulgaria | 1,200,000 | 1,011,000 |
| Grand Total | 65,038,810 | 99,822,800 |

Table 1: Personnel Mobilisation Figures for Selected Nations in WWI and WWII.⁶

durability and speed.⁷ The impact of armoured warfare is more pronounced during WWII, with the maturation of armoured technology, such as through the employment of *Panzerkeil* tactics by German Panzer divisions.

Gas Warfare

Gas warfare (such as chlorine or mustard gas) was primarily used in the trenches. Although it is disallowed by the Hague Declaration, it was still used on a large-scale during WWI, representing an acceptance of using unauthorised means to achieve the end state in war. Although it resulted in about 90,000 deaths, its effects remained with 1.3 million casualties.⁸

Likewise, WWII saw the further development of weapons to improve the efficiency of the kill. It is here that the premise of armoured warfare was taken further—while WWI saw about 9,000 tanks deployed by both Allied and Central powers, WWII had more than 260,000 operated by both Allied and Axis powers.⁹ Just as significantly, WWII also saw the increased use of aircraft for offensive purposes, such as tactical bombing of not just military but also civilian targets, whose impact will be discussed later in this essay. The direct result of the increased use of these new fighting techniques was the significant increase in military losses of major powers in WWII, as shown in *Figure 1*.

Therefore, from an overall military perspective, WWII demonstrated the higher level of totality in terms of its sheer scale of involvement, as well as its greater acceptance of more complex methods of warfighting.

SCALE OF ECONOMIC IMPACT

Both WWI and WWII involved nation states from all over the world and, due to the involvement of major colonial powers, mobilised military personnel from nations beyond the main belligerents to conduct the fight.

Resource Mobilisation

The scale of national resources that were mobilised to support both war efforts, including civilian resources, were deemed unprecedented for their times. Given the large scales of both wars, they needed to mobilise and divert national resources to sustain war efforts. Once again, as summarised in *Figure 2*, we can see that WWII had a greater economic impact on the major players with greater absolute mobilisation of

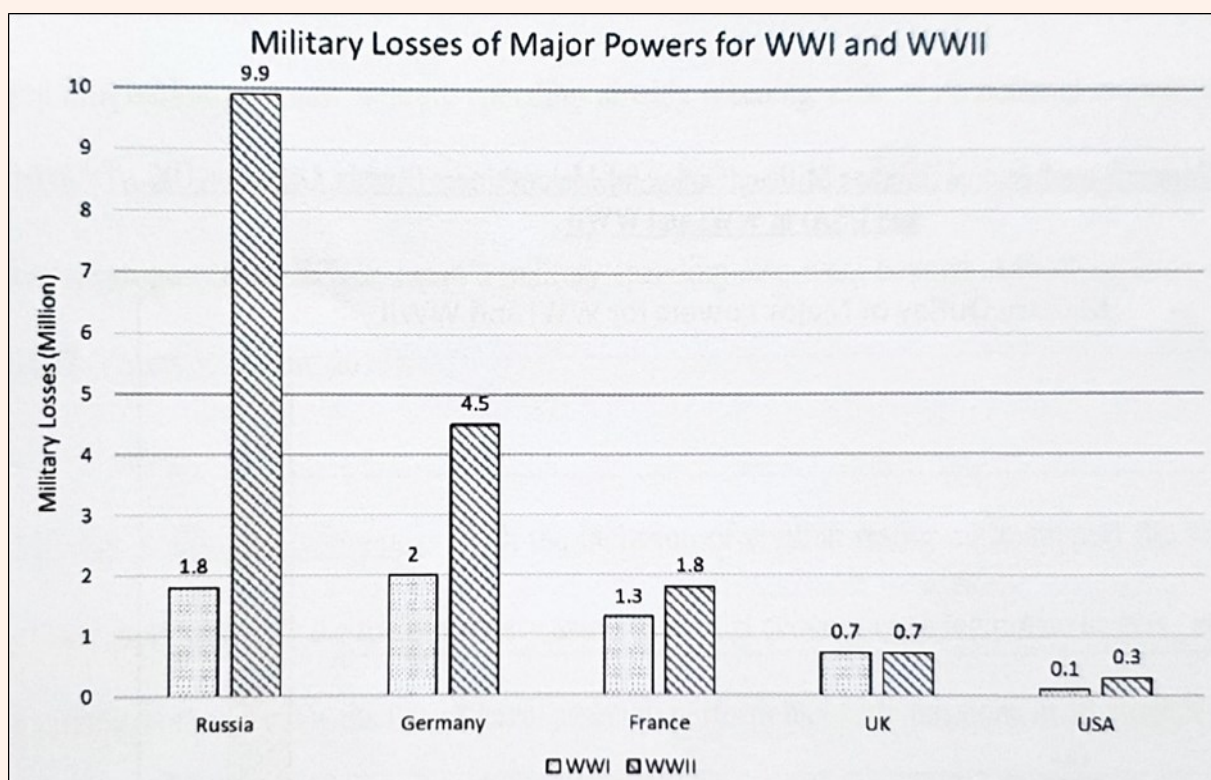


Figure 1: Military Losses of Major Powers in WWI and WWII.¹⁰

economic resources. This impact is all the more felt by Russia (10% to 23%) and USA (10% to 34%), who saw increased military spending in proportion to their GDPs, based on the same set of data provided by Gatrell & Harrison.¹¹

Both WWI and WWII saw the introduction of new weapons technology that increased the efficiency of fighting and redefined warfare, which made war more complex.

The impact of economic mobilisation is not just felt on the home fronts, but also in the colonies and associated states, who diverted their domestic resources to aid the major powers in their war efforts. For example, in WWI, India supplied food and textiles for Britain, while Germany took millions of tons of food from Russia and Romania.¹² Beyond just merely diverting resources to the war effort, WWI also saw legislative actions made to officially restructure countries' economy in support of the war, as can be seen in Germany's implementation of the Hindenburg Programme, under which the Auxiliary Service Law of 1916 mandated service for all able-bodied Germans, as

well as the guaranteed allocation of skilled workers for war production.¹³

Other than the higher level of economic mobilisation, what sets WWII apart from WWI in this aspect is the level of economic mobilisation by the warring nations even before the outbreak of war. This is particularly evident in the Axis powers Nazi Germany— whose eight-year remilitarisation plan saw military spending already reaching 11% of its national income by 1936, which overshadows the 3-4% of GDP spent by the major European powers in WWII. Japan's military spending also went beyond 20% of its GDP in 1937.¹⁴

Military Action on Economies

With the inclusion of civilian resources to support the war efforts, both wars saw the use of military assets to disrupt economies as legitimate targets. For example, both wars saw the use of naval assets to perform blockade missions in an attempt to starve opponents. WWI witnessed the use of unrestricted submarine warfare to sink 11.9 million tonnes of commercial shipping to the Allies, hampering Allied war efforts.¹⁵ Although debatable, the German U-boat campaign also signalled a willingness by the Germans to target civil shipping as evidenced by the sinking of the *Lusitania*. In return, the Allies also instituted the blockade policy on Germany, which not only halved its supplies of food from sources of the Central Powers by the final year of WWI, but also impacted them after the war as well.¹⁶

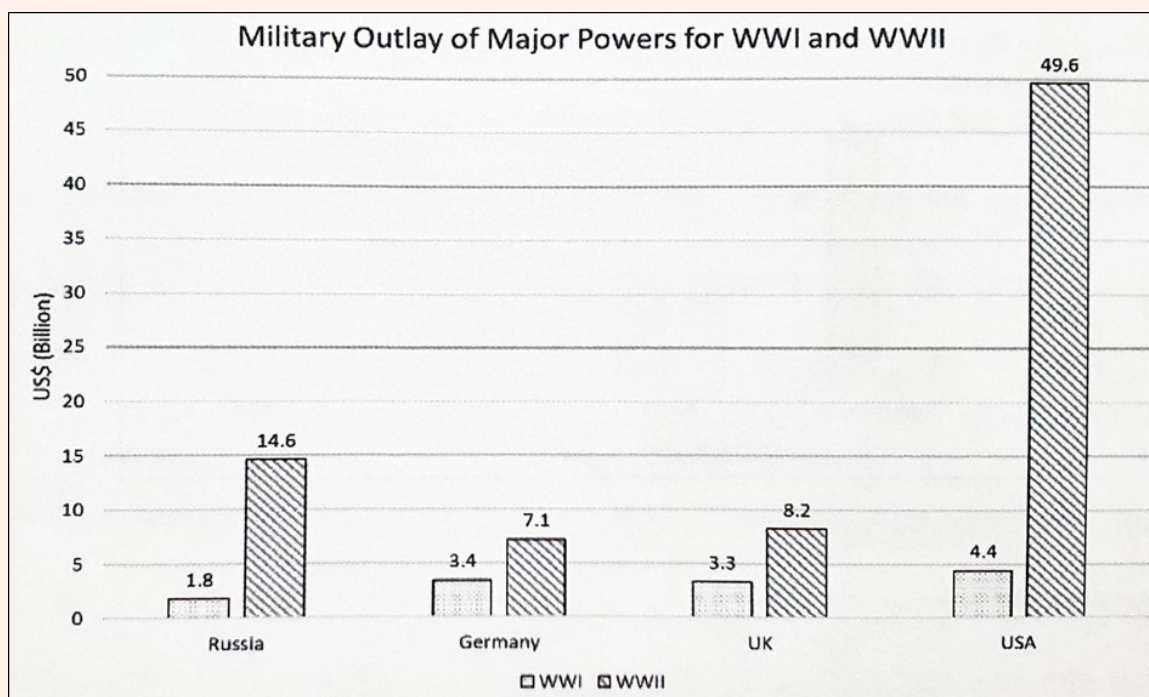


Figure 2: Comparison of Annual Average Military Outlay for Major Powers (Russia, Germany, UK and US) in WWI and WWII.¹⁷

Likewise, WWII saw blockade action by both Allied and Axis powers in an effort to restrict supplies to the other for military production and civilian sustenance. Across the span of WWII, both Allied and Axis forces lost more than 32.7 million tonnes of commercial shipping as well.¹⁸

Therefore, just as in the case of military mobilisation, the level of quantitative economic impact that WWII has, significantly surpasses that of WWI.



Japanese Americans in front of posters with internment orders.

EXTENT OF CIVILIAN VICTIMISATION

Civilian victimisation is defined as a military strategy 'that targets or kills non-combatants intentionally or which fails to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants and thus kills large numbers of the latter.'¹⁹ This domain will examine the scale of civilian victimisation in both wars, as well as the acceptance of their legitimacy.

As national economies became integrated as part of the nations' war efforts, along came a level of legitimacy for targeting non-military installations, particularly factories and production houses to disrupt war economies. While WWI saw the German bombing raids on London from Jun 1917, there was little tolerance for that action and there was a public outcry to this.²⁰ This is in contrast with the public attitude in WWII, which saw bombing of cities not just to disrupt war production, but also to break civilian morale. The Blitz of 1940 and 1941, for example, saw the extensive German bombing of London to not just to damage the British war economy, but also to pressure Britain to surrender, albeit unsuccessfully. This idea of strategic

bombing can also be further extended to the American deployment of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to bring about a swift conclusion to WWII, resulting in 280,000 dead.²¹

The victimisation of civilians also goes beyond direct military action, with selected ethnic groups targeted as part of a campaign. WWI saw the Armenian Genocide, during which 1.5 million Armenians were killed by orders of the Turkish government in 1915 in an effort to prevent them from supporting the war effort against Turkey.²²

WWII also saw mass persecution—one cannot discuss WWII without discussing the Holocaust, the systematic and state-sponsored persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. All in all, six million Jews were estimated to have been killed.²³ However, the author contends that this differs from the Armenian Genocide in that the hatred of Jews was used to drum up support for war, with Hitler leveraging on the irrational fear of his people, using it to drive the Nazi ideology raising it from 'his personal antipathy to an affair of state.'²⁴

On a similar note, WWII also saw the Japanese internment in US, whereby Japanese Americans were sent to detention camps due to the genuine American fear of the Japanese being spies and saboteurs supporting the Japanese war effort. While it did not directly result in the deaths of the American-Japanese population, it represented a governmental effort driven by an irrational fear in support of military actions.

The victimisation of civilians also goes beyond direct military action, with selected ethnic groups targeted as part of a campaign.

Thus, it can be argued that WWII embodies the concept of Total War to a greater extent through the planned victimisation of civilians not just during the war, but also in the lead-up to the conflict.

CONCLUSION

Looking in totality, it is evident that WWII eclipses WWI in terms of the sheer scale of impact on the military, economic and civilian fronts. While this may seem like a straightforward conclusion, a counter-

argument is that Total War is not just a measurement of numbers. Some authors argue that Total War 'is not absolute, but relative to its time', and is characterised by cultural or social change as well.²⁵ From this perspective, it can then be argued that WWI created a global change in the view of war, given its moniker as the 'war to end all wars', as well as some of the cultural influence in the memory of war. For example, the famous poem by Wilfred Owen, '*Dulce et Decorum est*', in which he describes the horrors of a gas attack in the trenches. However, one can contend that this argument can be applied to WWII as well, with the social changes that it instituted—the greater acceptance of civilian target as part of the military action, and the targeting of ethnic groups to drive the support for war.

In conclusion, beyond the larger scale of military and economic mobilisation, what sets WWII apart from WWI as the greater exemplification of Total War is its deeper premise of civilian victimisation. Unlike in WWI, where the Armenian genocide merely took place as part of the war, the reasons for the Holocaust i.e., the slaughter of the Jewish people, can be argued to be exploited as part of the narrative by Nazi Germany to incite war itself. This point of view is supported by other academics, who opine that the Holocaust represented the 'culmination of a totalising ideological militarism.'²⁶ Therefore, from both a quantitative and qualitative, it can be seen that WWII does indeed exemplify the character of 'Total War' more than WWI.

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