



World War I: A Total War?

By Amy Elizabeth Robinson

"Total war" includes four things: Mobilization, refusal to compromise, the blurring of roles between soldier and civilians, and total control of society. In many ways, World War I was the first total war.

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Total War: Definition and Debate

World War I is often referred to as the first “total war.” People used this term to describe the size and devastation of the war, which included both soldiers and civilians. In 1917, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau explained how the total war affected his country. He said, “We present ourselves in the single aim of total warfare... My foreign policy and my home policy are the same. At home I wage war. Abroad I wage war... I shall go on waging war.”

Many historians use “total war” when analyzing “modern” war. The idea of total war involves four things. First, mobilization refers to gathering troops, weapons, and resources to fight. The second is the blurring of the roles of soldiers and civilians. The third is the refusal to reach a compromise to end the war. The fourth is the government’s total control of society. In reality, no war has perfectly met all these criteria. We can see parts of each in World War I. We also see these four things in the social, political, economic, and environmental effects of the war.



British troops of the 55th Division of West Lancashire suffering from the effects of a German gas attack, Battle of Estaires, 1918, by Second Lieutenant Thomas Keith Aitken. By Imperial War Museums, public domain.

Mobilization and the blurring of roles between soldier and citizen

The scale of mobilization for World War I was far greater than anything before. People joined the war effort in different ways. Millions of men showed up at recruitment centers to volunteer for service. Women signed up to become military nurses and aides. Many working-class women were employed to make weapons. Civilians participated by helping house troops or buying war bonds to fund the wars. People planted “war gardens” to grow their own food once food rationing began.

Governments and private industries worked together in the war effort. Factories shifted production to creating weapons and other war supplies. Agricultural businesses fed soldiers and civilians. These businesses also improved military technology. Inventions included tanks, two-way radios, mobile x-ray machines, and gas masks.



"A female munitions worker is lifted into the barrel of a 15-inch naval gun in order to clean the rifling."

Photo taken by Horace Nicholls. By Imperial War Museums, public domain.

All the major warring countries used conscription (military drafts) to force men into becoming soldiers. Historian Kimberly A. Redding says:

Some 65,000,000 men were mobilized between 1914 and 1918. While not all saw frontline service, the casualty rate (killed, wounded, and missing in action as a percentage of those mobilized) was over 50 percent among Austro-Hungarian, Australian, Bulgarian, French, German, Russian, and ANZAC forces. 8.5 million soldiers died and at least twice that number were wounded. Of these, at least 9.5 million were considered permanently disabled....

The length and violence of the war took a toll. War even increased the devastation of illness. The flu broke out in 1917-1918 and rapidly spread by the movements of troops and workers, killing 3-5 percent of the world's population.

Complete destruction of the enemy

European wars were ruled by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. These were a set of international agreements outlining the rules of war. Countries in the First World War broke many of these rules. For example, the Hague Conventions banned poison gas as a weapon. But both sides used it to attack their enemies in the war. Another rule stated that war cannot begin without clear warning. The German invasion of Belgium violated that rule.

The Allies used their propaganda to call out German war crimes. Ironically, this pushed the Allies to use a "total war" approach that looked to destroy the enemy. Large weapons were fired broadly at the enemy, chemical weapons were used, and a compromise was rejected. These were startling actions for Europe.

World War I raised moral questions about technology. The Germans sank the British ship RMS *Lusitania*. The ship carried civilian passengers as well as ammunition for the Allies. Many saw this sinking as a symbol of German brutality and new extremes of war.

Many Europeans began the war believing that modern advances in technology would make war more efficient. As historians J.R. and William McNeill explain:

Military medicine had progressed to the point where doctors could keep gigantic armies free of epidemics long enough that they could engage in the prolonged slaughter of trench warfare. Heavy artillery and poison gas made life in the trenches living hell, while the machine gun made climbing out of them extremely lethal.

Total control of society

War impacted all areas of society. Private companies earned massive profits supporting the war. The landscapes of Europe were left full of trenches and craters from bombs. The countryside was filled with toxic poison.

The environment was harmed even more by the industrialization that had taken place during the war. European countries brought in materials extracted from around the world. Trees were cut down in Lebanon, India, and the United States. Mexico, the U.S., and the Middle East supplied petroleum. Historian Tait Keller says, "People far from the fighting felt the war in their everyday lives through its long environmental reach."

Governments also became more involved in civilians' private lives. They censored the press, distributed propaganda, and passed laws that restricted minority communities. Food became regulated in production and distribution.

The war brought nations together and many groups gave up their rights for the benefit of their countries. But the ongoing toll of the war created tensions in many countries. The tension resulted in revolutions in Russia and the Ottoman Empire. In other places, the war led to the growth of new social movements across national borders.

World War I displayed the rapid growth in four areas during the "long nineteenth century." These included industrialization, imperialism, international connections, and conflicts. The effects of this total war were felt for years. The young people who witnessed the horrors of war and saw their friends die on the battlefield were often referred to as the "lost generation." Gertrude Stein created the term when writing to Ernest Hemingway: "That's what you are. That's what you all are," Miss Stein said. 'All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation.'"



British propaganda poster with the sinking of the Lusitania in the background, by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, 1915. By Imperial War Museums, public domain.

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British propaganda poster with the sinking of the Lusitania in the background, by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, 1915. By Imperial War Museums, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Take_Up_the_Sword_of_Justice.jpg#/media/File:Take_Up_the_Sword_of_Justice.jpg



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