

Cities into Battlefields: Metropolitan Scenarios, Experiences and Commemorations of Total War

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Stefan Goebel

Derek Keene

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Nick Hayes

Writing some thirty years ago, Brian Bond noted that ‘strictly speaking, total war is just as much a myth as total victory or total peace’.(1) Undoubtedly, too, some wars – even world wars – were more total than others. If in the First World War civilians suffered indirectly from shortages, separations, blockade, etc., it was still the soldiers that did most of the dying. Yet in World War Two those on the urban ‘home fronts’ were equally at risk – seen as legitimate targets because they were essential producers for the war effort. None of this, of course, is wholly new. Sherman, for example, used armed force against civilians (as a modern form of *chevauchée*), although mostly he targeted property, not people.(2) Nonetheless, the degree of state-led mobilization, and the consequent ability to out-produce opponents, or degrade their socio-industrial capacity/will, has come to govern our understanding of the totality of modern warfare.(3) Total war can thus be constructed as the willingness of individuals to subordinate themselves to the demands of the state.(4)

Stefan Goebel’s and Derek Keene’s ambitious collection of essays takes up the theme that ‘mass-industrialized warfare blurred distinctions between home and front, soldiers and civilians’ (p. 4), and seeks to tease out the social costs of this as it was played out in a predominantly urban environment. This is to be welcomed, for, quite clearly, if total war is episodic (in terms of mobilization and military intensity), its relative intensities, too, have a strong urban/spatial component. Nonetheless, one of the odd things about the collection is that, despite a very long introduction of some 46 pages, there is actually very little formalized

discussion of total war per se, other than to acknowledge in passing its complex and illusive qualities. For a book with total war in the title this seems strange. The key questions set are: 'How was urban space affected by the totalizing tendency in warfare in the first half of the twentieth century? And how did cityscapes shape the way people thought about war, experience violence and remember its legacy?' (p. 4). There are studies on the metropolises of London, Paris, Belgrade, Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, Stalingrad (and in passing Berlin and Baghdad), Hiroshima and Tokyo; and the smaller cities of Coventry and Edirne (the Ottoman second capital). With one exception, the essays focus on the First and Second World Wars.

The exception is again Edirne, which surrendered after five months of siege by the Bulgarians during the First Balkans War. The social impact of siege – sometimes at higher costs – stretches back into time (witness Jerusalem, Tenochtitlan) (also pp. 5-6). Indeed, when I talk to my 'earlier' colleagues, I hear stories of the poor being brutally evicted from besieged cities into a no-man's land between two hostile armies, simply to save food. Whether this was before or after each side catapulted plagued bodies in or out is beyond my level of expertise. We might ponder, too, on whether the siege of Edirne (population 90,000) constituted a total war even in microcosm; it seems contextually counter-intuitive (small city, minor war). Yet, in Eyal Ginió's account, 'totality' lies not with the event but the aftermath. With the city recast as a bulwark against yet one more Christian Crusade aimed at obliterating a Muslim presence in Europe, non-Muslim inhabitants became the 'other' (partly through atrocities literature and assertions of treachery). Liberated Edirne then became a site of mass pilgrimage, a 'focal point of collective ceremonies of purification, commemoration, rejuvenation and celebration of Muslim unity' (p. 94) – a 'symbol of a possible turn of fortune for the Ottoman nation and its attachment to Islam' (p. 99). Yet does this re-imagining constitute totality? Measure this happening against Hannah Arendt's acute observation that defeat in a 'truly' total war meant the wholesale collapse of the state, not just a reconstituted identity.(5)

Jovana Knežević, writing about the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Belgrade 1915–18, similarly chooses to focus not on the brutality of siege, or that many, many citizens fled, but instead on the subsequent battle for identity and belonging between occupiers and the diminished number of inhabitants, played out through the voids of rumour and official propaganda. Cocooned within the city, as one contemporary recalled: 'We do not know the truth, this is all just inaccurate news and conjecture!' (p. 117). Many Serbs thought 'the city was no longer their own. Perhaps the streets and cafes were crowded, but they were not crowded with locals' (p. 110). 'Most people saw themselves as being "enslaved", and frequently referred to themselves as "slaves" (*robovi*) in their personal writings and exchanges' (p. 104). In short, 'Belgraders resented having to share their homes and city with these uninvited and unwelcome guests' (p. 110). The relative totality of this also remains unclear: at least if construed against the consequences of earlier siege conflicts, where failure to surrender promptly brought actual enslavement or worse. Indeed, one of the paradoxes when dealing with the mass destructive power of 20th-century total war is that frequently, when compared with the past, the present is at least no worse. For example, the Thirty Years War devastated Germany, reducing its urban population by 33 per cent and its rural population by 45 per cent. In the 20th century captured soldiers had an expectation of humane treatment, not death or enslavement. Thus, certain 'rules of the game' had changed for the better, although the high level of atrocities committed on the Eastern Front after 1941 makes you temper such a view.

Yet contemporaries certainly thought that modern warfare was quantitatively and qualitatively different (but maybe that is true of all contemporaries?). Winston Churchill argued that 'The Great War ... differs from all ancient wars in the immense power of the combatants and their fearful agencies of destruction, and from all modern wars in the utter ruthlessness with which it was fought' by supposed '*civilised, scientific, Christian States*' (my italics).(6) We might well think that Churchill had a point when reading Antony Beevor's account of Stalingrad (here and elsewhere). This was a 'war fought for values that were not material and therefore finite, but spiritual and therefore infinite'.(7) Both Stalin and Hitler 'utterly dehumanized their enemies through propaganda and their complete control of the media'. They were also, he adds, totally 'prepared to waste the lives of the own men' (p. 153). Beevor particularly has in mind the punishment battalions and blocking units used by both sides 'to ensure ... total compliance' by their soldiers. This was a 'new form of warfare, concentrated in the ruins of civilian lives' (p. 154). 'Street-fighting', John Frances

argues, was ‘just as costly in the Middle Ages as at Stalingrad’.(8) Yet Stalingrad took the form of extended urban warfare amid the ‘detritus of war’, reminiscent of the Western Front of 1914–18, but here occurring between the wreckage of people’s homes. Other comparatives aside, the scale, intensity, location and barbarity of Stalingrad mark it out as being of a different order to the battles listed elsewhere in this collection. John Meuller has observed that, while the 20th century did not invent horrific wars, for the first time people were thoroughly repulsed by these horrors, ‘being aware that viable alternatives existed’.(9) In this light, Stalingrad, Berlin and Hiroshima take on a new meaning and poignancy in our imaginations.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the inter-war flirtations with collective security and pacifism: that war ought to be abolished because the consequences were too obscene. The naval bombardment of Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool in 1914 claimed a significant number of civilian lives. Yet it was the less intense aerial bombing raids that were remembered for the future: to be, as Grayzel notes, ‘mythologized in various wartime cultural media’ (p. 52). This ‘new means of waging war’ – the ‘terror to come’ was deemed apocalyptic: ‘the notion that civilization itself was at stake gained rhetorical power with the attacks’ on women and children. Urban life itself was at risk (p. 62). Again, targeting cities was not new; it was only the technology that was different (and each successive generation frets over the impact of new destructive technologies). Yet what had changed was the scale of hyperbole that accompanied even official predictions. As Richard Titmuss later noted, British estimated casualty rates were ridiculously wide of the mark; coping with a predicted initial casualty rate of some 200,000 per week was simply impossible for the medical planners to contemplate.(10) The realities, of course, were very different, so that across the war in total only some 60,000 British civilians were killed (with 86,000 seriously injured and 149,000 slightly injured). Peter Stansky, in looking at the first day of the Blitz – although other stories become intermingled – nevertheless asserts (erroneously) that: ‘Up until the middle of 1944 there were more civilian deaths than military ones’ (p. 64).(11) These were ‘ordinary victims’, ‘those who had not deliberately chosen to put themselves at risk’ (p. 63). Everyone, apparently, knew someone who had been killed or badly wounded, knew of places and buildings hit or destroyed, and felt that a bomb might fall nearby (p. 64). Perhaps, although even within the metropolitan centres spatially levels of destruction and suffering varied significantly. The vital point, he believes, however, is that terror and terror bombing (if that’s what the Blitz was) (12), is not an ‘absolute’ but lives in the imagination as being a possibility (p. 64). But the totality of terror, too, has to be based on probability, measured and tempered by lived experience: as an abstract or semi-abstract it has less impact, for in practice there was, despite pre-war medical predictions, no mass outbreak of hysterical neurosis. Indeed, the incidence of such illnesses actually fell, as did the number of suicides.

The reality for Coventry, as Stefan Goebel recalls, was a legacy not just of destruction but also of remembrance. It is a story of how a ‘war-torn provincial city matured into a, if not the, “commemorative cosmopolis” of post-war Europe’ (p. 163), and of how a new word, ‘Coventration’ (*Coventriëren*) gave rise to an unspeakable deed and idea (p. 165). He argues, not unreasonably, that the semantics of ‘Coventration’ had a more powerful impact than the bombs themselves (for the rubble was cleared, the 568 dead buried and the city rebuilt (p. 164)). ‘Collective memory’, Goebel observes, is a ‘collected memory’; it requires ‘organization, guidance and direction (p. 169). It also works best at a local level within clearly defined communities. By 1962, in an activity much favoured by local councillors, the city had twinned with 23 other cities to spread its message, although links to Hiroshima were brusquely rejected, perhaps because Coventry feared being overshadowed in its international ambitions in commemorative politics (p. 171). Through the dynamics of international reconciliation – at which the new cathedral stood centre stage – truth itself became the subject of exaggeration. This utilised a new narrative, that if all were guilty – as with the bombing of Dresden – then all too were victims, although the church unwisely prosecuted this debate using the figures supplied by David Irvine (pp. 180–2).

The reality for Paris was completely different. As Patrice Higonet reminds us in his refreshingly sardonic essay on ‘The French capital and total war’, the city suffered very little physical damage. “Paris in the age of total war” – fortunately, that notion represents difficulties’ (p. 73). There were ‘dark sides’ – food shortages, fuel shortages – but, ‘in many respects, life went on in occupied Paris much as it always had’

before 1939 (pp.76–7). For Paris, there were two clear exceptions, the Communists and Jews, where the war brought misery and death. Modern wars, he concludes, are about ‘moulding men’s minds’ – in this sense the two world wars changed what ‘Parisians thought about themselves and the place of their city in the world’ (p.79). Very few joined the Resistance, and very few also joined the fascist parties. Most, instead, tried to forget their immediate surroundings and sought escapist entertainment (pp. 80–1). As Maureen Healy notes, too, in her essay, the Nazi regime killed far more Viennese citizens – on racial and political grounds – than did enemy bombers (p. 120). Interestingly, its citizenry became inward looking, relatively unconcerned about foreign policy and military operations; because of ‘low spirits any and all interest in the big events ... disappeared’ (p. 121). Thus at the city level the definition of ‘enemy’ changed. In the First World War, as food shortages became endemic, the tensions were ethnic: between the German-speaking majority and ‘other’ city dwellers – Jews, Czechs and Hungarians – labelled as black-marketeers and hoarders. In the Second War, the ‘other’ was quickly redefined as non-native Germans, so that even German-speaking Viennese were hostile to an external German presence and the greater Germany project. It was primarily a passive resistance, splattered with occasional vibrant scenes of defiance, perhaps diluted by the Nazi exploitation of domestic anti-Semitic sentiment.

In one of the more thought-provoking essays, Tim Cole examines the socio-urban processes of ghettoization in Warsaw (from 1940) and Budapest (1944). In Warsaw the practices of mental mapping were already underway, in a manner very similar to Victorian constructs of slumland: certain streets were deemed unsafe (physically for Jews); other Jewish areas were deemed contagious – filled with ‘imaginary’ diseases – ‘infected’ and, therefore, physically quarantined. Subsequent ghettoization impacted significantly on both Jew and non-Jew: no ‘tradesman or storekeeper wants to move to a strange section’ (p. 141). Some 250,000 people (138,000 being Jewish) relocated over a two week period, although boundaries remained fluid. In Budapest, the process was less structured. Following the Nazi occupation of 1944, the concern was that creating a single Jewish quarter would open up the rest of the city to allied bombing. Yet plans to establish mini-ghettos around strategic sites were abandoned in favour of designating each individual house or block to be Jewish or non-Jewish according to majority occupation. This reduced significantly the internal disruption, but also brought forward a flurry of petitions from Jews and gentiles alike who did not want to move: although some argued, too, that their apartment buildings were ‘unhealthy and entirely unsuitable for “non-Jews”’ (p. 147). Thus, Cole concludes, in both cities the final locations were decided not by ‘imaginary geographies’ but by pragmatic concerns for getting the job done quickly (p. 149).

Finally, there are two essays on Japanese public history; on how Hiroshima and Tokyo have chosen to represent their pasts. If we focus, in terms of totality, on the means employed rather than the objectives obtained then events like Hiroshima (and Nagasaki) stand clear: being absolutely total. The obvious question is how this past should be remembered; accepting that pasts cannot be re-created, only retold in certain selected ways. The object of Lisa Yoneyama’s essay is to question the ‘limits of compassion and historical knowledge when considering such matters as war, atrocities and other historical injuries’ (pp.186–7). Hiroshima commemorates the first ‘successful’ use of nuclear weapons. It was a site, too, that demonstrated the ‘interchangeability between two concepts, the “atomic weapon” and “world peace”’. This she reads as an oxymoron, illustrative of US ‘techno-military supremacy’ (pp. 187–8). She notes, too, the controversy over how the history of bombing – its rationale – should be presented, and the ambiguities of meaning within such national representations. Given the nature of the event a diversity of view is hardly surprising.

The shifting ambiguities of representation are also central to Julie Higashi’s focused essay ‘The spirit of war remains intact’, which examines public memorialization in Tokyo: of what is kept, of what is restored, what is promoted and how this has changed. Certain representations were impervious: the impressive Masujiro Omura column – a figurative representation of the father of the modern Japanese army – symbolized ‘unshakable loyalty to the state’ (p. 206). It survived both wartime collections for metals and the post-war US cull of statues and monuments that roused feeling of militarism and nationalism. The Yushukan museum, by contrast, was required to sever its militaristic links. Now, however, it has reverted to being a military museum, offering positive representations of Japan’s past that centres on worship of the emperor

and the glorification of the war dead: promoted as ‘the correct modern history of Japan’ (p. 212). The newly built Showakan museum, a response to a strong demand from the War Bereaved Families Association, similarly focuses on Japanese war and post-wartime suffering. Higashi concludes that as a consequence of such devices remaining intact and gaining power, Tokyo has become ‘even more haunted by the past than ever’ (p. 218).

Several of the essays attempt cross city comparisons, some contemporaneously, some offering contrasts with more recent events like 9/11. By and large, these add little to the overall theme of the collection, and, at times, detract from the core themes themselves. A common problem with most collections is their inevitable disparate character, because essays are generally not written to order but reflect, quite naturally, the on-going or past research interests of the contributors. Urban space helps give this collection a vectored form, although this unity, when married to differing aspects of totalising experience, memory or activity brings with it its own challenges. Nonetheless, as might be expected, what the collection does show is that there was no one common impact, no one common outcome, no one common experience or response, and indeed that people then, as now, were viewing totality – however loosely defined – in differing ways. The breadth overall of the collection is more than satisfactory, even accepting the problems of definition and focus that this brings, but the research base and adding-to-knowledge element within it is mixed. Some essays – for example by Cole, Healy, Knežević and Gino – have strong empirical bases; others less so. What we have, then, essentially, is an interesting and diverse collection of essays on the impact of modern warfare on individual cities, where notions of any totality reside as much in the imagination as in the realities and practices of everyday urban life. Indeed, even here there must be questions about contemporary provenance and understanding because the experiences for many people were very, very different.

Notes

1. Brian Bond, *War and Society in Europe, 1870-1970* (London, 1984), p. 168.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Hew Strachan, ‘Total war in the twentieth century’, in *Total War and Historical Change: Europe 1914-1955*, ed. Arthur Marwick (Milton Keynes, 2001), pp. 256, 267.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ian Becket, ‘Total war’, in *Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice*, ed. Colin McInnes and Gary Sheffield (London, 1988), pp. 12–13; Mark Harrison, ‘Resource mobilization for World War II: The USA, UK, USSR and Germany, 1938-1945’, *Economic History Review*, 41 (1988), 171–92.
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Stachan, ‘Total war’, p. 264.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, NY, 1963), p. 5.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, Volume 1* (London, 1923), pp. 2–3.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Strachan, ‘Total war’, p. 262.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. John Frances, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000–1300* (New York, NY, 1999), p. 109.
[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. John Mueller, ‘Changing attitudes towards war: the impact of the First World War’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 21 (1991), 12.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Richard Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London, 1950), pp. 13–14, 325–7; C. L. Dunn, *The Emergency Medical Services, Volume 1* (London, 1952), p. 13.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Number of casualties up to Sept. 1944 were as follows. British Armed Forces: Killed - 176,081/ Missing – 38,275. Merchant Seamen: Killed – 29,629. Civilians (inc. Civil Defence): Killed – 57,298. These figures are from *Statistics Relating to the War Effort of the United Kingdom* (Cmd. 6564) (London, 1944), p. 9. Civilian deaths include 5,476 killed from June to Sept. 1944 by flying bomb attacks. British military deaths over the same period are estimated at 20,000-22,000. [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Richard Overy, *The Air Wars 1939–1945* (London, 1980), pp. 34–6.[Back to \(12\)](#)

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