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# Total war

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*For other uses, see [Total war \(disambiguation\)](#).*

**Total war** is *warfare* that includes any and all *civilian*-associated resources and infrastructure as *legitimate military targets*, mobilizes all of the resources of society to fight the war, and gives priority to warfare over *non-combatant* needs. The *Oxford Living Dictionaries* defines "total war" as "A war that is unrestricted in terms of the weapons used, the *territory* or *combatants* involved, or the objectives pursued, especially one in which the *laws of war* are disregarded."<sup>[1]</sup>

In the mid-19th century, scholars identified "total war" as a separate class of warfare. In a total war, to an extent inapplicable in less total conflicts, the differentiation between combatants and non-combatants diminishes, sometimes even vanishing entirely, due to the capacity of opposing sides to consider nearly every human resource, even that of non-combatants, to be a part of the *war effort*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Actions that may characterize the post-19th century concept of total war include:

- Strategic bombing**, as during [World War II](#), the [Korean War](#), and the [Vietnam War](#) (Operations [Rolling Thunder](#) and [Linebacker II](#))
- Blockade** and **sieging** of population centers, as with the [Allied blockade of Germany](#) and the [Siege of Leningrad](#) during the [First](#) and [Second World Wars](#)
- Scorched earth** policy, as with the [March to the Sea](#) during the [American Civil War](#) and the Japanese "[Three Alls Policy](#)" during the [Second Sino-Japanese War](#)
- Commerce raiding**, **tonnage war**, and **unrestricted submarine warfare**, as with [privateering](#), the German [U-Boat](#) campaigns of the First and Second World Wars, and the United States [submarine campaign against Japan](#) during World War II
- Collective punishment**, pacification operations, and **reprisals** against populations deemed hostile, as with the execution and deportation of suspected [Communards](#) following the fall of the 1871 [Paris Commune](#) or the German reprisal policy targeting resistance movements, insurgents, and [Untermenschen](#) such as in France (e.g. [Maillé massacre](#)) and [Poland](#) during World War II
- The use of **civilians** and **prisoners of war** as **forced labor** for **military operations**, as with Japan and Germany's massive use of forced laborers of other nations during World War II (see [Slavery in Japan](#) and [Forced labor under German rule during World War II](#))<sup>[3]</sup>
- Giving **no quarter** (i.e. take no prisoners), as with [Hitler's Commando Order](#) during [World War II](#).

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## Etymology [edit]

The phrase "total war" can be traced back to the 1935 publication of German general [Erich Ludendorff's](#) *World War I* memoir, *Der totale Krieg* ("The total war"). Some authors extend the concept back as far as classic work of [Carl von Clausewitz](#), *On War*, as "absoluter Krieg" (*absolute war*); however, others interpret the relevant passages differently.<sup>[4]</sup> Total war also describes the French "guerre à outrance" during the [Franco-Prussian War](#).<sup>[5][6][7]</sup>

In his December 24, 1864 letter to his [Chief of Staff](#) during the [American Civil War](#), Union general [Henry Halleck](#) wrote the Union was "not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as their organized armies," defending [Sherman's March to the Sea](#), the operation that inflicted widespread destruction of infrastructure in Georgia.<sup>[8]</sup>

[United States Air Force](#) General [Curtis LeMay](#) updated the concept for the [nuclear age](#). In 1949, he first proposed that a total war in the nuclear age would consist of delivering the entire [nuclear arsenal](#) in a single overwhelming blow, going as far as "killing a nation".<sup>[9]</sup>

## Early history [edit]

During the [Middle Ages](#), [destruction under the Mongol Empire](#) in the 13th century effectively exemplified total war. The military forces of [Genghis Khan](#) slaughtered whole populations and destroyed any city that resisted:

As an aggressor nation, the ancient Mongols, no less than the modern [Nazis](#), practiced total war against an enemy by organizing all available resources, including [military personnel](#), [noncombatant workers](#), [intelligence](#), [transport](#), [money](#), and [provisions](#).<sup>[10]</sup>

## 18th and 19th centuries [edit]

### Intertribal warfare [edit]

Author and historian Mark van de Logt wrote: "Although military historians tend to reserve the concept of 'total war' for conflicts between modern industrial nations, the term nevertheless most closely approaches the state of affairs between the [Pawnees](#) and the [Sioux](#) and [Cheyennes](#). Both sides directed their actions not solely against warrior-combatants but against the people as a whole. Noncombatants were legitimate targets. Indeed, the taking of a scalp of a woman or child was considered honorable because it signified that the scalp taker had dared to enter the very heart of the enemy's territory."<sup>[11]</sup>

### French and American Revolutionary Wars and Napoleonic Wars [edit]

In The [American Revolution](#), also known as the American Revolutionary War, many basic tactics of total war, such as the Scorched earth policy, were created in a modern form. In 1779, The [Sullivan Expedition](#) began, marching through Western Pennsylvania and up through New York, burning Iroquois villages to the ground, leaving nothing behind but smoldering ruin and dead animals. The goal was to force the Indians to go to Canada for food and thus be out of range of attacking American settlements.<sup>[12]</sup>

The [French Revolutionary Wars](#) introduced to mainland Europe some of the first concepts of total war, such as mass conscription.<sup>[13]</sup> The fledgling republic found itself threatened by a powerful coalition of European nations. The only solution, in the eyes of the [Jacobin](#) government, was to pour the entire nation's resources into an unprecedented war effort—this was the advent of the [levée en masse](#). The following decree of the [National Convention](#) on August 23, 1793 demonstrates the immensity of the French war effort, when the French front line forces grew to some 800,000 with a total of 1.5 million in all services—the first time an army in excess of a million had been mobilized in Western history:

From this moment until such time as its enemies shall have been driven from the soil of the Republic all Frenchmen are in permanent requisition for the services of the armies. The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge arms and [transport provisions](#); the women shall make tents and clothes and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn old lint into linen; the old men shall betake themselves to the public squares in order to



The mushroom cloud produced by the [atomic bombing of the city of Hiroshima](#) during [World War II](#). The bombing was an act of total war.



The drownings at [Savenay](#) during the [War in the Vendée](#), 1793



arouse the courage of the warriors and preach hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic.

Napoleon's retreat from Russia in 1812. Napoleon's *Grande Armée* had lost about half a million men.

In the [Russian campaign](#) of 1812 the Russians resorted to destroying infrastructure and agriculture in their retreat in order to hamper the French and strip them of adequate supplies. In the campaign of 1813, Allied forces in the German theater alone amounted to nearly one million whilst two years later in [the Hundred Days](#) a French decree called for the total mobilization of some 2.5 million men (though at most a fifth of this was managed by the time of the French defeat at [Waterloo](#)). During the prolonged [Peninsular War](#) from 1808–1814 some 300,000 French troops were kept permanently occupied by, in addition to several hundred thousand Spanish, Portuguese and British regulars, an enormous and sustained guerrilla insurgency—ultimately French deaths would amount to 300,000 in the Peninsular War alone.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Taiping Rebellion [edit]

The [Taiping Rebellion](#) (1850–1864) was one of the deadliest wars in history.<sup>[15]</sup> About 20 million people died, many due to [disease](#) and [famine](#).<sup>[16]</sup> It followed the secession of the [Taiping Heavenly Kingdom](#) from the [Qing Empire](#).<sup>[17]</sup> Almost every citizen of the Heavenly Kingdom was given military training and conscripted into the army to fight against the Imperial forces.<sup>[17]</sup>



A scene of the Taiping Rebellion [edit]

### American Civil War [edit]

During the [American Civil War](#), [Union Army](#) General [Philip Sheridan's stripping of the Shenandoah Valley](#), beginning on September 21, 1864 and continuing for two weeks, was considered "total war". Its purpose was to eliminate food and supplies vital to the South's military operations, as well as to strike a blow at Southern civilian morale. Sheridan took the opportunity when he realized opposing forces had become too weak to resist his army.<sup>[18]</sup>

Union Army General [William Tecumseh Sherman's 'March to the Sea'](#) in November and December 1864 destroyed the resources required for [the South](#) to make war. General [Ulysses S. Grant](#) and President [Abraham Lincoln](#) initially opposed the plan until Sherman convinced them of its necessity.<sup>[19]</sup>

Scholars taking issue with the notion that Sherman was employing "total war" include Noah Andre Trudeau. Trudeau believes that Sherman's goals and methods do not meet the definition of total war and to suggest as much is to "misread Sherman's intentions and to misunderstand the results of what happened".<sup>[20]</sup>

## 20th century [edit]

### World War I [edit]

Almost the whole of [Europe](#) and the European colonial empires mobilized to wage [World War I](#). Rationing occurred on the home fronts. [Bulgaria](#) went so far as to mobilize a quarter of its population or 800,000 people, a greater share of its population than any other country during the war.

One of the features of total war in Britain was the use of government [propaganda](#) posters to divert all attention to the war on the [home front](#). Posters were used to influence public opinion about what to eat and what occupations to take, and to change the attitude of support towards the war effort. Even the [Music Hall](#) was used as propaganda, with propaganda songs aimed at recruitment.



Damage and destruction of civilian buildings in Belgium, 1914 [edit]

After the failure of the [Battle of Neuve Chapelle](#), the large British offensive in March 1915, the British Commander-in-Chief [Field Marshal](#) John French blamed the lack of progress on insufficient and poor-quality [artillery shells](#). This led to the [Shell Crisis of 1915](#) which brought down both the [Liberal](#) government and [Premiership](#) of [H. H. Asquith](#). He formed a new coalition government dominated by Liberals and appointed [David Lloyd George](#) as [Minister of Munitions](#). It was a recognition that the whole economy would have to be geared for war if the Allies were to prevail on the Western Front.

As young men left the farms for the front, domestic food production in Britain and Germany fell. In Britain the response was to import more food, which was done despite the German introduction of [unrestricted submarine warfare](#), and to introduce rationing. The Royal Navy's [blockade of German ports](#) prevented Germany from importing food and hastened German capitulation by creating a food crisis in Germany.

### World War II [edit]

The [Second World War](#) was the quintessential total war of modernity. The level of national mobilization of resources on all sides of the conflict, the [battlespace](#) being contested, the scale of the [armies](#), [navies](#), and [air forces](#) raised through [conscription](#), the active targeting of non-combatants (and non-combatant property), the general disregard for [collateral damage](#), and the unrestricted aims of the belligerents marked total war on an unprecedented and unsurpassed, multicontinental scale.

### Shōwa Japan [edit]

During the first part of the [Shōwa era](#), the government of [Imperial Japan](#) launched a string of policies to promote a total war effort against [China](#) and [occidental powers](#) and increase industrial production. Among these were the [National Spiritual Mobilization Movement](#) and the [Imperial Rule Assistance Association](#).

The [National Mobilization Law](#) had fifty clauses, which provided for government controls over civilian organizations (including [labor unions](#)), [nationalization](#) of strategic industries, price controls and [rationing](#), and nationalized the [news media](#).<sup>[21]</sup> The laws

gave the government the authority to use unlimited budgets to subsidize war production, and to compensate manufacturers for losses caused by war-time mobilization. Eighteen of the fifty articles outlined penalties for violators.

To improve its production, Shōwa Japan used millions of [slave labourers](#)<sup>[22]</sup> and [pressed more than 18 million people](#) in [East Asia](#) into forced labor.<sup>[23]</sup>

### United Kingdom [\[edit\]](#)

Before the onset of the [Second World War](#), the [United Kingdom](#) drew on its [First World War](#) experience to prepare legislation that would allow immediate mobilization of the economy for war, should future hostilities break out.

Rationing of most goods and services was introduced, not only for consumers but also for manufacturers. This meant that factories manufacturing products that were irrelevant to the war effort had more appropriate tasks imposed. All artificial light was subject to legal [blackouts](#).

Not only were men conscripted into the armed forces from the beginning of the war (something which had not happened until the middle of World War I), but women were also conscripted as [Land Girls](#) to aid farmers and the [Bevin Boys](#) were conscripted to work down the coal mines.

Enormous casualties were expected in bombing raids, so [children were evacuated from London and other cities en masse to the countryside](#) for compulsory [billeting](#) in households. In the long term this was one of the most profound and longer-lasting social consequences of the whole war for Britain. This is because it mixed up children with the adults of other classes. Not only did the middle and upper classes become familiar with the urban squalor suffered by working class children from the [slums](#), but the children got a chance to see animals and the countryside, often for the first time, and experience rural life.

The use of statistical analysis, by a branch of science which has become known as [Operational Research](#) to influence military tactics was a departure from anything previously attempted. It was a very powerful tool but it further dehumanised war particularly when it suggested strategies which were counter intuitive. Examples where statistical analysis directly influenced tactics include the work done by [Patrick Blackett's](#) team on the optimum size and speed of convoys and the introduction of [bomber streams](#) by the [Royal Air Force](#) to counter the night fighter defences of the [Kammhuber Line](#).

### Germany [\[edit\]](#)

See also: [Reich Plenipotentiary for Total War](#)

In contrast, [Germany](#) started the war under the concept of [Blitzkrieg](#). Officially, it did not accept that it was in a total war until [Joseph Goebbels' Sportpalast speech](#) of 18 February 1943.

The commitment to the doctrine of the short war was a continuing handicap for the Germans; neither plans nor state of mind were adjusted to the idea of a long war until the failure of the [Operation Barbarossa](#). A major strategical defeat in the [Battle of Moscow](#) forced [Albert Speer](#), who was appointed as Germany's armament minister in early 1942, to nationalize German war production and eliminate the worst inefficiencies.<sup>[25]</sup>

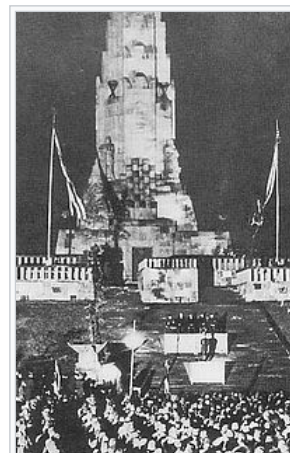
Under Speer's direction a threefold increase in armament production occurred and did not reach its peak until late 1944. To do this during the damage caused by the growing strategic Allied bomber offensive, is an indication of the degree of industrial under-mobilization in the earlier years. It was because the German economy through most of the war was substantially under-mobilized that it was resilient under air attack. Civilian consumption was high during the early years of the war and inventories both in industry and in consumers' possession were high. These helped cushion the economy from the effects of bombing.

Plant and machinery were plentiful and incompletely used, thus it was comparatively easy to substitute unused or partly used machinery for that which was destroyed. Foreign labour, both slave labour and labour from neighbouring countries who joined the [Anti-Comintern Pact](#) with Germany, was used to augment German industrial labour which was under pressure by conscription into the [Wehrmacht](#) (Armed Forces).

### Soviet Union [\[edit\]](#)

The Soviet Union (USSR) was a [command economy](#) which already had an economic and legal system allowing the economy and society to be redirected into fighting a total war. The transportation of factories and whole labour forces east of the [Urals](#) as the Germans advanced across the USSR in 1941 was an impressive feat of planning. Only those factories which were useful for war production were moved because of the total war commitment of the Soviet government.

The Eastern Front of the [European Theatre of World War II](#) encompassed the conflict in [central](#) and [eastern Europe](#) from June 22, 1941 to May 9, 1945. It was the largest theatre of war in history in terms of numbers of soldiers, equipment and [casualties](#) and



Founding ceremony of the [Hakkō ichiu](#) Monument, promoting the unification of "the 8 corners of the world under one roof"

"..There is another more obvious difference from 1914. The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women and children. The fronts are everywhere to be seen. The trenches are dug in the towns and streets. Every village is fortified. Every road is barred. The front line runs through the factories. The workmen are soldiers with different weapons but the same courage."

*Winston Churchill on the radio, June 18 ; and House of Commons 20 August 1940.*<sup>[24]</sup>

"I ask you: Do you want total war? If necessary, do you want a war more total and radical than anything that we can even imagine today?"

*Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, 18 February 1943, in his Sportpalast speech*



Three men burying victims of [Leningrad's siege](#), in which about 1

was notorious for its unprecedented ferocity, destruction, and immense loss of life (see [World War II casualties](#)). The fighting involved millions of [German](#), Hungarian, Romanian and [Soviet](#) troops along a broad front hundreds of kilometres long. It was by far the deadliest single theatre of [World War II](#). Scholars now believe that at most 27 million Soviet citizens died during the war, including at least 8.7 million soldiers who fell in battle against [Hitler's](#) armies or died in [POW](#) camps. Millions of civilians died from [starvation](#), exposure, atrocities, and massacres.<sup>[26]</sup> The Axis lost over 5 million soldiers in the east as well as many thousands of civilians.<sup>[27]</sup>

million civilians died

During the [Battle of Stalingrad](#), newly built [T-34 tanks](#) were driven—unpainted because of a paint shortage—from the factory floor straight to the front. This came to symbolise the USSR's commitment to the [World War II](#) and demonstrated the government's total war policy.

#### **United States** [\[edit\]](#)

The United States underwent an unprecedented mobilization of national resources for the Second World War. Conditions in the United States were not as strained as they were in the United Kingdom or as desperate as they were in the Soviet Union, but the United States greatly curtailed nearly all non-essential activities in its prosecution of the Second World War and redirected nearly all available national resources to the conflict, including reaching the point of diminishing returns by late 1944, where the U.S. military was unable to find any more males of the correct military age to draft into service.

The strategists of the U.S. military looked abroad at the storms brewing on the horizon in Europe and Asia, and began quietly making contingency plans as early as the mid-1930s; new weapons and weapons platforms were designed, and made ready. Following the outbreak of war in Europe and the ongoing aggression in Asia, efforts were stepped up significantly. The collapse of France and the airborne aggression directed at Great Britain unsettled the Americans, who had close relations with both nations, and a peacetime draft was instituted, along with [Lend-Lease](#) programs to aid the British, and covert aid was passed to the Chinese as well.

American [public opinion](#) was still opposed to involvement in the problems of Europe and Asia, however. In 1941, the Soviet Union became the latest nation to be invaded, and the U.S. gave her aid as well. American ships began defending aid convoys to the Allied nations against submarine attacks, and a total trade embargo against the [Empire of Japan](#) was instituted to deny its military the raw materials its factories and military forces required to continue its offensive actions in China.

In late 1941, Japan's [Army](#)-dominated government decided to seize by military force the strategic resources of South-East Asia and Indonesia since the Western powers would not give Japan these goods by trade. Planning for this action included [surprise attacks](#) on American and British forces in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaya, and the U.S. naval base and warships at [Pearl Harbor](#). In response to these attacks, the U.K. and U.S. declared war on the [Empire of Japan](#) the next day. [Nazi Germany](#) declared war on the U.S. a few days later, along with [Fascist Italy](#); the U.S. found itself fully involved in a second world war.

As the United States began to gear up for a major war, information and propaganda efforts were set in motion. Civilians (including children) were encouraged to take part in fat, grease, and scrap metal collection drives. Many factories making non-essential goods retooled for war production. Levels of industrial productivity previously unheard of were attained during the war; multi-thousand-ton convoy ships were routinely built in a month-and-a-half, and tanks poured out of the former automobile factories. Within a few years of the U.S. entry into the Second World War, nearly every man fit for service, between 18 and 30, had been conscripted into the military "for the duration" of the conflict, and unprecedented numbers of women took up jobs previously held by them. Strict systems of rationing of consumer staples were introduced to redirect productive capacity to war needs.

"It's a ticklish sort of job making a thing for a [thing-ummy-bob](#)  
Especially when you don't know what it's for  
But it's the girl that makes the thing that drills the hole  
that holds the spring that works the thing-ummy-bob  
that makes the engines roar.

And it's the girl that makes the thing that holds the oil  
that oils the ring that works the thing-ummy-bob  
that's going to win the war."

"The Thing-Uummy Bob", A British song made popular in the US by [Gracie Fields](#)<sup>[28]</sup>

Previously untouched sections of the nation mobilized for the war effort. Academics became technocrats; home-makers became bomb-makers (massive numbers of women worked in heavy industry during the war); union leaders and businessmen became commanders in the massive armies of production. The great scientific communities of the United States were mobilized as never before, and mathematicians, doctors, engineers, and chemists turned their minds to the problems ahead of them.

By the war's end a multitude of advances had been made in medicine, physics, engineering, and the other sciences. Even the [theoretical physicists](#), whose theories were not believed to have military applications (at the time), were sent far into the Western deserts to work at the [Los Alamos National Laboratory](#) on the [Manhattan Project](#) that culminated in the [Trinity nuclear test](#) and changed the course of history.

In the war, the United States lost 407,316 military personnel, but had managed to avoid the extensive level of damage to civilian and industrial infrastructure that other participants suffered. The U.S. emerged as one of the two [superpowers](#) after the war.<sup>[29]</sup>

#### **Unconditional surrender** [\[edit\]](#)

After the United States entered World War II, [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) declared at [Casablanca conference](#) to the other Allies and the press that [unconditional surrender](#) was the objective of the war against the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan.<sup>[31]</sup> Prior to this declaration, the individual regimes of the Axis Powers could have negotiated an [armistice](#) similar to that at the end of World War I and then a conditional surrender when they perceived that the war was lost.

"Actually [Dresden](#) was a mass of munitions works, an intact government centre, and a key transportation point to the East. It is now none of these things."

Air Chief Marshal [Arthur Harris](#), in a memo to the [Air Ministry](#) on 29 March 1945<sup>[30]</sup>

The unconditional surrender of the major Axis powers caused a legal problem at the post-war **Nuremberg Trials**, because the trials appeared to be in conflict with Articles 63 and 64 of the **Geneva Convention of 1929**. Usually if such trials are held, they would be held under the auspices of the defeated power's own legal system as happened with some of the minor Axis powers, for example in the post World War II **Romanian People's Tribunals**. To circumvent this, the Allies argued that the major war criminals were captured after the end of the war, so they were not prisoners of war and the Geneva Conventions did not cover them. Further, the collapse of the Axis regimes created a legal condition of total defeat (*debellatio*) so the provisions of the **1907 Hague Convention** over **military occupation** were not applicable.<sup>[32]</sup>

## Postwar era [edit]

See also: *War by proxy*, *Coercive diplomacy*, and *Deterrence theory*

Since the end of World War II, no industrial nation has fought such a large, decisive war.<sup>[33]</sup> This is likely due to the availability of nuclear weapons, whose destructive power and quick deployment render a full mobilization of a country's resources such as in World War II unnecessary.<sup>[34]</sup> Such weapons are developed and maintained with relatively modest peacetime defense budgets. In addition the European countries gave up their colonial empires.

By the end of the 1950s, the **ideological** stand-off of the **Cold War** between the **Western World** and the **Soviet Union** had resulted in thousands of nuclear weapons being aimed by each side at the other. Strategically, the equal balance of destructive power possessed by each side situation came to be known as **Mutually Assured Destruction** (MAD), considering that a nuclear attack by one superpower would result in nuclear counter-strike by the other.<sup>[35]</sup> This would result in hundreds of millions of deaths in a world where, in words widely attributed to **Nikita Khrushchev**, "The living will envy the dead".<sup>[36]</sup>

During the Cold War, the two **superpowers** sought to avoid open conflict between their respective forces, as both sides recognized that such a clash could very easily escalate, and quickly involve nuclear weapons. Instead, the superpowers fought each other through their involvement in proxy wars, military buildups, and diplomatic standoffs.

In the case of proxy wars, each superpower supported its respective allies in conflicts with forces aligned with the other superpower, such as in the **Vietnam War** and the **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan**.

During the **Yugoslav Wars**, **NATO** conducted strikes against the electrical grid in enemy territory using **graphite bombs**. Some observers<sup>[who?]</sup> considered this to be an act of total war, owing to the fact that powerplants supported by the electrical grid were essential to water purification and thus the strike represented a direct attack on civilian resources. NATO claimed that the objective of their strikes was to disrupt military infrastructure and communications.<sup>[37]</sup>

## See also [edit]



- [The bomber will always get through](#)
- [Conscription](#)
- [Conventional warfare](#)
- [Economic warfare](#)
- [The end justifies the means](#)
- [Genocide](#)
- [Guerrilla warfare](#)
- [Human extinction](#)
- [Industrial warfare](#)
- [Levée en masse](#)
- [Mutual Assured Destruction](#)
- [No holds barred](#)
- [No quarter](#)
- [Roerich Pact](#)
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- [World war](#)

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## External links [edit]

- [Israel's 1948 War of Independence as a Total War](#)
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