

Relevance of strategy in the 'wars of annihilation' 1939- 1945



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How relevant was the concept of strategy in the “ wars of annihilation”, 1939-1945?

A person is easy to kill, whereas an ideology is hard to destroy. To truly conquer and hold territory you must extinguish any sparks of rebellion. After the horrific aftermath of World War One (WW1) nation states across the world realised that if another great war was to break out, that no aspects of life would be off-limits to war. This is the idea of ‘ total war’, which is defined by the Oxford Living Dictionaries to be “ A war that is unrestricted in terms of weapons used, the territory or combatants involved, or the objectives pursued, especially one in which the laws of war are disregarded.”[1]An extension of total war incorporating a war on ideologies lead to “ wars of annihilation”. Where it wasn’t about capturing the enemies land or ruling the enemy it was a matter of crushing their ideologies to prevent future uprisers. Strategy to convince the German people that this was an acceptable practice to all rally behind the war effort was essential. The use of relentless propaganda as a medium to brainwash the population was met with a great success. This spread of misinformation allowed the for the German commands to successfully manipulate the Wehrmacht and the general population.

Erich Ludendorff’s design of total war was the foundation to allow ‘ wars of annihilation’ to occur between 1939-1945. While Ludendorff died in 1927 and did not see World War 2 (WW2), he had been in support of Adolf Hitler up until his failed coup in 1923. He had left as he did not believe that Hitler would be able to lead the nation to victory[2]. Although before departing Hitler’s company he made it clear that the nation would only win the war if it

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followed the ideas of total war. “ Total war requires enormous things from the commander... that have never been asked for from commanders in the past”[3], from Ludendorff’s book ‘ the total war’ he discusses how the commander must not only control the military but all aspects of the nation with no divide between civilian and military life. This profound ideology was exemplified in Joseph Goebbels speech in the Sportpalast, he asks “ Do you want total war?” then continues to illustrate how total war is necessary to prevent Bolshevism control[4]. Stating “ Jewry has intellectually and politically so deeply penetrated the Anglo-Saxo states” that they lost their ability to acknowledge the threat of communism[5]. Here Goebbels combines Ludendorff’s idea of total war and a strong racist propaganda which was prominent in the German success in the Herero genocide. This was to rally the nation behind a single racially motivated cause. This strategic propaganda is a strong part of what lead Germany to be able to stage a strong war of annihilation. The strategic plan to unite the nation behind one goal of systemic extinction of a race lead to Germany being able to commit to a total war and more specifically a war of annihilation. That is because members of the German war economy could relate to how their work was creating a better world. This inherent buy in, coerced by strategic propaganda, resulted in everyone wanting to contribute to the war effort and supporting the military in their inevitable victory in the war.

Misinformation and shared assumptions developed from racial prejudices allowed Hitler to successfully push a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. Andreas Hillgruber suggests that a joint military system such as the Nazi Wehrmacht is the ideal system.[6]This system combined air power, sea

power, land power along with civilian infrastructure in line with Ludendorff's design for total war. Due to this strategic decision for a joint force values and propaganda would be uniform across the military, unlike some modern-day militaries with very distinct differences in service culture. Due to the cultural similarities, assumptions were often shared across the entire Wehrmacht, Hillgruber suggests that the Wehrmacht was ill-informed about the Soviet Union[7]. Hitler and his generals knew that the soldiers of the Wehrmacht believed that the Russians were simple, primitive people and that the soldiers had a sense of invincibility after beating the French.[8] This knowledge allowed Hitler to push for an inhumane war to be fought against the Russians. Hillgruber argued that due to the assumption held by the German people the command team was able to convince them that the annihilation of the soviet people in an uncivilised fashion while breaking war crimes was necessary and acceptable.[9] The strategic decision to form the Wehrmacht to replace the Reichswehr in 1935 further led to the unification of ideas and ideologies which allowed the 3rd Reich to successfully convince their military to commit war crimes in the war of annihilation against Russia. This is very similar to the approach used by the 3rd Reich to dehumanise Jews to the point that people thought that their genocide was essential. Bankier reflected Hillgruber's ideas that misinformation was used to convince the German population to continue to fight as the rest of society would not accept them. " Germans were fed the knowledge that too many atrocities had been committed ... to allow for an understanding to be reached with the allies".[10] This misinformation convinced the populous that they have gone too far to turn back so the war of annihilation must continue

and that defeat was not an option. With defeat not being an option, the German people would band together to defeat the perceived evil ideologies and the war.

Conquering land is not an effective way to secure control and power, to truly have stable control and power the people must accept your rule and align with your ideologies. “ Fight two worldviews against each other ... If we do not take it that way, we will beat the enemy, but in 30 years the Communist enemy will be facing us again. We are not waging war to preserve the enemy” Hitler had said to his generals.[11]Hitler is suggesting that to truly win and hold the captured territory that the enemy and those who had a different value system to him had to be annihilated. I believe that this is the key strategic difference between total war and wars of annihilation. While in total war the military is the point of the spear whereas the civilisation is the stake supporting the point. Whereas wars of annihilation are both a spear supported by the entire civilisation they are also a bag of salt to ensure the defeated civilisations never rise again. The strategic plan to eliminate the culture through genocide had vastly changed the strategy Germany deployed in WW2. The Nazi propaganda promoted the extermination of Jewish, Bolshevik, Asiatic and many more groups of people[12]meant that rather than following humane acts of war many war crimes were committed by the German forces. This is evidenced by the treatment of prisoners of war (POW). 2. 8 million soviet POWs (which is over 85%) died in 1941.[13]This was due to direct violations of international law[14]. The Barbarossa decree exemplifies how this was encouraged. The decree states “ Every officer in the German occupation ... will be entitled to perform execution(s) without

trial ... on any person suspected of having a hostile attitude towards the Germans ... you are allowed to apply the principle of collective responsibility ... German soldiers who commit crimes against humanity, on the USSR and POWs are exempted from criminal responsibility, even if they commit acts punishable according to German law".[15] This clearly exemplifies how Germany's strategy was designed around completely annihilating the enemy to prevent any future rebellion.

Pursuing the wars of annihilation, the 3rd Reich strategy significantly changed between 1939 and 1945. The need was no longer to only control and capture territory it was to crush and decimate the enemy. This need saw the implementation of strategies which would allow this. One of these strategies was the dehumanisation of specific ethnic groups through extremely graphic and prolific propaganda which was used to brainwash and feed misinformation to the German public and fighting forces. The fact that Germany had been able to align its people behind a single ideology allowed them to unite behind the war front in a total war campaign. Uniting like this would not have been possible without a common goal and a common ideology. Propagandist then went on to tell the public that they had done such horrible things in the eyes of the allies that they must never give up. As a result, this drove an immense lust to continue the war effort and not back down even though life and conditions were tough. This made it much more difficult to break the people of Germany, strengthening the total war effort. Wars of annihilation were deemed necessary by the 3rd Reich, not only due to the undercurrent of extreme racism seen amongst the high leaders but also to ensure a stable and prosperous empire. Hitler had set about to

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replicate an empire such as that of the Romans, one which would stand and last through the ages. To do this he must prevent any future uprisings. The long-term strategy to secure his empire could have arguably lost him the war as he had deluded himself in believing that Jewish-Bolshevik people would destroy him if they weren't stopped. As a result of wishing to secure an empire under a single ideology and belief system, the wars of annihilation were waged upon Europe during WW2. This required clever strategic spread of misinformation to indoctrinate the people that the inhumane and illegal action taken upon the state's enemies were justified.

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