

Kolko, Gabriel. *Century of Total War: Politics, Conflict and Society Since 1914*. New York: New Press, 1994.

Roger Beaumont

Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 1995

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs15_02br09

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Beaumont, R. (1995). Review of [Kolko, Gabriel. *Century of Total War: Politics, Conflict and Society Since 1914*. New York: New Press, 1994.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 15(2), 173–175.

Kolko, Gabriel. *Century of Total War: Politics, Conflict and Society Since 1914*. New York: New Press, 1994.

This critique of Western powers' policies and actions in the Cold War era is an attempt by a veteran critic of American and British military and foreign policy to make sense of the intertwining patterns of ever-greater destructiveness in war, increasing victimization of non-combatants, and the collapse of Marxist-Leninism and discrediting of the Left at the end of the twentieth century. A weighty essay, festooned with lengthy sentences, strong assertions, and broad generalizations, it is not an exhaustive overview of a "century of war," but selective and impressionistic. In seeking patterns and meaning, Kolko focuses on the World Wars and a few other conflicts, steering past the larger array of conflicts, such as the Greco-Turkish, Gran Chaco, and Russo-Finnish Wars, and most colonial campaigns, Western and Soviet. As the title suggests, the preponderance of attention is paid to economic and sociopolitical aspects. In respect to mechanics, much of the statistical data set forth in the narrative would have been better presented in tables or appendices, and maps would have been very useful.

Kolko's central concern is the effect of specific struggles on class dynamics in the major and in some minor European nations. The most carefully crafted sections are those that describe and analyze the interplay of conflict, ideology and economics in World War II in Europe, and subsequent struggles in Greece, China, the Philippines and Vietnam. Some of the historiographical footings are a bit rickety, and are worth considering in some detail. For example, the author claims that: "The twentieth century began with profound self-confidence," despite Britain's humiliation in the Boer War, Kipling's *Recessional*, Kaiserine German fears of the "Yellow Peril," the plight of Spain after 1898, and the after shocks of the Dreyfus affair. (Ivan Bloch's gloomy predictions are noted, but further on.) The Revolutions of 1848, the Communards, and Russia's 1905 Revolution are dismissed in the assertion that World War I was "the first event to pose the fundamental question of how the modern Left would emerge in reality." In setting the stage for World War I, Kolko leaves the Haldane reforms and 1906 secret Anglo-French agreements with France out of view, deems the British infantry of 1914 poor shots, and grants the Germans "great land artillery superiority over the French," rejecting the role of the *soixante-quinze* at the First Marne. The Curragh mutiny and the Kitchener-Curzon feud do not quite mesh with the view that British officers "had no serious desire to influence political power." Russian war organization is described as "utterly disorganized," and incapable of "winning on the battlefield." What then of Sukhomlinov's reforms, the rapid mobilization that unhinged the *Schlieffenplan*, and the Brusilov offensive? French Army mutinies in 1917 are described as "a series of soldiers' demonstrations," and Petain's palliative role is unnoted. In the Russian Revolution — "largely spontaneous events in Petrograd" — Lenin's German sponsors, the Kronstadt sailors, the Lettish Rifles, and Feliks Dzerzhinski are left in the shadows. In the treatment of Weimar Germany, *Reichswehr* officers are portrayed as being unwilling to defend the Republic, despite the thwarting of Hitler's 1923 Munich putsch, and its prohibiting of officers joining Nazi organizations. Hindenburg, described as supporting Hitler, is, along with Mannerheim, Attaturk, Pilsudski, Horthy, and Franco, cast as an anomaly in the assertion that military officers' influence in European politics faded after World War I. In World War II, the Allies' strategic air offensive against Germany is described as both doing "astonishingly little damage" and having caused "enormous dislocation and death." Kolko's generalizing that political indoctrination has never been successful in any army stands in tension with a number of crusades, janissaries, Hussites, Cromwell's Ironsides. Garibaldi's Red Shirts, the IRA, and the impact of Thomas Paine. Nor does the dictum that "those who initiate conflict" have failed to anticipate "the personal or social price they will have to pay" apply in such cases as Lincoln, Lord Grey, Wilson, Chamberlain, Yamamoto, Franklin Roosevelt, and even Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Kolko's post-mortems of Leftist revolutions' defeats in Greece and the Philippines, and triumphs in Vietnam and China are more precisely framed. Nevertheless links between Ho Chi Minh and the OSS are not mentioned, and the model of hunger as revolutionary catalyst is not applied to the famines in Bengal in 1943 or Holland in 1944. If the American officer corps was the only one involved in war on a sustained basis after 1945, what of France's, in Indochina and Algeria, 1946-61, and Britain's, from Malaya to Ulster? Granted evolving military technology has yielded "untold personal hardships," but food and creature comforts are certainly better aboard the *Vinson* than the *Victory*, and medical care, recreation, and length of

tours in Vietnam were vast improvements over those in the Pacific and CBI theaters in World War II.

Beyond such details, Kolko explores several important questions: why have policy makers, leaders, planners, analysts and theorists got it wrong and been surprised so often? Can war's destructiveness be curtailed? Will the Left rise from the rubble left by the collapse of Bolshevism? Beyond the rendering of moral judgments, and such pithy conclusions as: "revolutionaries are created, not born," "powerful Communist parties throughout this century" grew out of the "breakdown of traditional societies rather than (being) their causes," and "in war, normal diplomacy is nonexistent," a theme of ineptitude and error by those in power pervades the study. That is not examined from such perspectives as the behavioral, à la Norman Dixon's *The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, or through other theoretical lenses, like Richardsonian conflict analysis, that might have offered causalities beyond the model of class-struggle. Nor are anomalies addressed, like the peasant origins of many Japanese officers of the Bushido era, and declining upper class representation in the British and American officer corps since World War II. While Kolko is ringingly critical of Stalin and Marxist-Leninism's failed promise and the Soviet Union's stifling and constraining of regional Leftist movements, the British and Americans and capitalism are most roundly indicted, the British as atavism incarnate, and Americans bent on preserving the "essence of the prewar social system" in the Cold War. Capitalism bears "principal responsibility" for the "increasing scope and variation of wars since 1945," driven by its "sanctification of avarice and egotism" and its impetus to expansion and conflict.

In looking forward, Kolko, concerned about the death of military and historical dimensionality in Leftists theoretics, assails "static bias," and calls for a comparative approach. Eschewing tendencies to attributing simplistic causality and toward dogmatism in Marxist theory, he pulls up just short of invoking chaos-complexity theory in calling for more intricate, open-ended models to accommodate unanticipated forces. The work ends with considerations of land reform, a lamenting of the lack of intellectual coherence in the study of war, revolution and social change, and an analysis of the dynamics of successful communist revolutions. Kolko has limited faith in arms control braking the momentum toward further wars, or in the likelihood that a rationale will appear for socially useful public spending that will counterbalance that which has stimulated massive military funding. While he sees socialism as dormant, he leaves open the door to a contingency that ongoing turbulence may allow imaginative Leftists to rouse a Phoenix from the surprises and confusions of wars engendered by capitalism and nationalism. Without referring to the implications of trends toward increased accuracy and non-lethality in weapons and tactics, Kolko concludes with a list of theses, calling for an end to searching for "fallacies and illusions of total explanation," in hopes that more conceptual flexibility might yield some greater degree of peace and stability, and social and economic equity. Skeptical of political processes and lamenting the inertia of the masses, Kolko finishes on a restrained note of Etzionian communitarianism. In this reviewer's estimation, not at all a whimper, but far from a bang.

Roger Beaumont
Texas A & M University